

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



**TWENTIETH-CENTURY
ENGLISH POETRY**

Edited by Neil Corcoran

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SANDRA M. GILBERT

D. H. Lawrence's place in modern poetry

A visit to Eastwood

One weekend in 1970, during a family vacation cum research summer in London, my husband and I drove up to Nottinghamshire, to explore Lawrence country. I was in the midst of converting my dissertation on Lawrence's poetry into a book, so of course I wanted to see where 'my' writer came from – although, having read Lawrence so intensely for so long, I was pretty sure I knew what I'd encounter in the 'industrial Midlands'. Nor was I shocked when, as we approached Eastwood, we found ourselves facing several large, cone-shaped mountains of darkness: 'slag heaps', we realised. This was grimy mining country indeed, and these bleak black hills were outposts of a waste land shaped by the grim technology Lawrence decried in novels from *Sons and Lovers* to *Women in Love* to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

Yet I was surprised to discover that these huge mounds of debris were surrounded by greenery – by flowery meadows and by the ancient forests of Robin Hood. Even in Eastwood, when we located what we decided was the original Lawrence home, we saw that the 'Backs' he'd so vividly described still sloped down toward open country. Lawrence's Eastwood, I realised now with a certainty no library research could have produced, was a geography of paradox, as marked by the juxtaposition of untrammelled nature and constricting culture as this writer's entire literary oeuvre. In fact, Lawrence's whole body of work might be seen as an effort to drag the substance of nature – the *bodies* of men and women, of birds, beasts and flowers, even of fields and hills – out from under the shadow of those slag heaps reared by the tools of reason.

And Lawrence's on-going struggle to liberate the vital substantiality of nature from the oppressive weight of culture was mirrored in a comparable linguistic struggle that marked this writer's career: an effort to find a style that would be free of what he considered verbal constraints. To this end, he wrote

and rewrote draft after draft of his novels, often beginning each work anew in an attempt to achieve an oxymoronically 'spontaneous' revision. But even more dramatically he fought to find a poetics adequate to his desire for a liberation of substantial being, finally deciding, in an essay on 'Poetry of the Present' (1919), that he longed to write the 'unrestful, ungraspable poetry of the sheer present' because the 'quick of the universe is the *pulsating, carnal self*, mysterious and palpable'. Explicitly identifying such poetry with Whitman's free verse, Lawrence declared that the 'new' poetry must 'break the lovely form of metrical verse' because 'any externally applied law would be mere shackles and death', smothering 'direct utterance from the instant, whole man'. Before he made this claim, he had already begun to eschew rhyme not only in many of the poems he published about his elopement with Frieda von Richthofen Weekley, the woman who was to become his wife, but also in a number of poems he wrote during and about the First World War. Yet even what Lawrence called the 'Rhyming Poems' of his youth were marked by flexible line-lengths, experiments with dialect and straightforward narration.

'The Wild Common', the much revised piece with which this writer chose to open his *Collected Poems*, is key here for several reasons.¹ First, its title reminds us of the rural landscape so closely interwoven with the industrial gloom of the mining country. Here, below slag heaps and surrounding collieries, was a *common* ground that surged with life: 'quick sparks on the gorse-bushes', peewits overhead exultantly screaming their triumph 'o'er the ages', rabbits like 'handfuls of brown earth' leaping so that 'the hill bursts and heaves under their spurting kick', and a 'lazy streamlet' that 'wakes ... and gushes'. Perhaps at the centre of the common and certainly at the centre of the poem there's even a remnant of the pre-industrial agrarian world – 'an old sheep-dip'. But tellingly this former construct of culture has reverted to the wildness that now possesses the common, so the speaker, a 'naked lad' about to take a swim, spies his 'white shadow', a reflection dancing on the surface of the water 'like a dog on a string'.

Yet even while it celebrates the vitality of the common ground on which the protagonist takes his stand, this poem works out a careful argument between his material body and his insubstantial 'white shadow' – that 'dog on a string' which paradoxically suggests the mind or soul. Reversing an old trope in which the body is an animal controlled by bodiless spirit, Lawrence revels in casting aside his insubstantial self as he plunges into the water, proclaiming that he himself is identical with the flesh that possesses and is possessed by the wild common: 'how splendid it is to be substance, here! / My shadow is neither here nor there; but I, I am royally here!' Eventually,

indeed, he declares what will be his creed throughout his career: 'All that is right, all that is good, all that is *God* takes *substance!*' (emphasis added). And by implication, the substance of all that is good is the living matter of the wild that we have in common with all life, or so Lawrence would have us believe. Equally important, once he had understood the nature of the 'direct utterance' that was at the heart of his aesthetic, for Lawrence as a poet the language in which he wrote was itself an analogue of the ground he celebrates in this verse, for the speech he came to admire was 'wild' (unconstrained, 'ungraspable', '*pulsating, carnal!*') and it was common, the shared or common tongue of the people with whom he lived.

D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot and the 'essence of poetry'

Given the credo Lawrence espoused in 'The Wild Common', one of the stranger phenomena in the history of literary modernism was T. S. Eliot's curiously ambivalent obsession with this writer's work. Most notoriously, the magisterial poet-critic focused one of the moralising lectures that he delivered at the University of Virginia in 1933 (and published the following year as *After Strange Gods*) on a castigation of Lawrence's blasphemous ways. Although, he admitted, Lawrence had an extraordinary 'capacity for profound intuition', his was an 'intuition from which he commonly drew the wrong conclusions', no doubt because of an 'insensibility to ordinary social morality, which is so alien to my mind that I am completely baffled by it as a monstrosity'.² Still, Eliot conceded, 'Against the living death of modern material civilization [Lawrence] spoke again and again, and . . . what he said is unanswerable.' Nevertheless, Lawrence had 'an incapacity for what we ordinarily call thinking', and the 'intensity' of his vision was 'spiritually sick'; indeed, as in some Gothic tale of horror, the 'demonic powers found an instrument' of great 'range, delicacy, and power' in this lamentable author.³

Oddly, however, in the same year that he delivered this tirade, Eliot gave another, less well-known lecture on 'English Letter-Writers' in which he quoted a statement that Lawrence made in a 1916 letter to his close friend Catherine Carswell. 'The essence of poetry with us in this age of stark and unlovely actualities is a stark directness, without a shadow of a lie, or a shadow of deflection anywhere', Lawrence had declared there. 'Everything can go, but this stark, bare, rocky directness of statement, this alone makes poetry, today.'⁴ To readers of Lawrence such a definition of poetry comes as no surprise. But it is surprising that Eliot should have been drawn to it, given his revulsion against Lawrence's 'incapacity' for thinking. Yet when he produced his 'primer of modern heresy', Eliot also firmly seconded

Lawrence's view of the 'essence of poetry'. The statement in the letter to Carswell 'speaks to me', he confessed,

of that at which I have long aimed, in writing poetry; to write poetry which should be essentially poetry, with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked in its bare bones, or poetry so transparent that we should not see the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry, poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem *points at*, and not on the poetry, this seems to me the thing to try for. To get *beyond poetry*, as Beethoven, in his late works, strove to get *beyond music*. . . .

Lawrence's words . . . express to me what I think that the forty or fifty original lines that I have written strive towards.⁵

Here is an extraordinary confession, coming from the critic who penned not just *After Strange Gods* but also 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', 'The Metaphysical Poets', and 'What Is a Classic?' From youth an acolyte of the reactionary French theoretician Charles Maurras, Eliot celebrated order, maturity and traditional hierarchies; from relatively early in his career, moreover, he defined himself as 'a classicist in literature, a royalist in politics, and an anglo-catholic in religion'. Such priorities plainly shaped his belief that Lawrence's visions of 'strange gods' were blasphemous. Nonetheless, musing on English letter writers, he confronted with unusual candour his attraction to a poetics quite alien to the literary politics through which he sought to position himself in his career as a man of letters. But perhaps the ambivalence with which Eliot regarded Lawrence further illuminates the place of both poets in the history of twentieth-century English verse. For though the two never met, and though Lawrence showed little interest in Eliot, they were in some ways significantly alike; their careers were at various points intertwined from the start; and as artists they represented modes that were powerfully influential in the first half of the twentieth century, so much so that in 1951, F. R. Leavis opined that 'our time, in literature, may fairly be called the age of D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot'.⁶

Among writers of their generation, to begin with, Eliot and Lawrence were both spokesmen for social metamorphoses, even though for the most part the restructurings Eliot envisioned were diametrically opposed to those Lawrence advocated. But the two men had still more in common. For instance, both moved in and out of the same Bloomsbury sets; and both were initially sponsored by that maestro of Modernism, Ezra Pound. And even some of their earliest poetic publications were entangled, for the June 1915 issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, in which Eliot's startlingly innovative 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' first appeared, carried also a glowing review of *Some Imagist Poets*, an anthology that had been put

together by Amy Lowell but grew out of the Imagist movement Pound had defined. Here Harriet Monroe, the founding editor of *Poetry*, singled out for special praise a group of Lawrence's poems, noting that they 'are some of the finest poetry written in this century [and] of a new kind in that they could not have been written in any other century'. In fact, as if refuting in advance Eliot's argument in *After Strange Gods*, Monroe admiringly observed that 'Mr Lawrence gives us his own fire, *and cares not whether it respects rules or melts them*' (emphasis added).⁷

Close in age, both had begun seriously writing verse by the time they were twenty, and their styles were on the surface strikingly different. Lawrence's juvenilia was sentimental and Victorian in tone, offering such lines as 'the purple dreams of the innocent spring have gone' (from 'Champions', *CP*, 853). Whatever embarrassment Eliot's early efforts evoked was of a different sort. Astringent and sardonic, he presented himself alternately as a composer of *vers de société* and an urban landscapist. His scandals, unlike Lawrence's, were scatological and misogynistic, as in 'The Triumph of Bullshit' ('Ladies, on whom my attentions have waited / If you consider my merits are small ... For Christ's sake stick it up your ass').⁸

But despite their differences, the two aspiring writers shared an important ancestor: the late Victorian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, whose often sado-masochistic intensity gave similar intensity to some of the strongest early poems each produced. Certainly underlying the sexual frustrations of poems from 'The Death of St Narcissus' and 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' to *The Waste Land* was the Swinburnean fervour of the young Eliot's 'Love Song of St Sebastian' ('I would come in a shirt of hair ... And sit at the foot of your stair; / I would flog myself until I bled ...').⁹ And similarly, colouring the erotic battles of Lawrence's fiction from *Sons and Lovers* to *Women in Love* and *The Plumed Serpent*, was the Swinburnean ferocity of such poems as 'Love on the Farm' ('God, I am caught in a snare! / I know not what fine wire is round my throat; / I only know I let him finger there / My pulse of life, and let him nose like a stoat / Who sniffs with joy before he drinks the blood'; *CP*, 43).

That it's appropriate to trace Swinburne's influence not just on Lawrence's poetry but on his fiction while only examining Eliot's verse underlines, however, a major distinction between the two artists. Long defined as, in Leavis's phrase, 'D. H. Lawrence: *Novelist*' (emphasis added), Lawrence began and ended his career as a poet but gained his primary reputation as a writer of fiction, and then secondarily as a travel writer, playwright, essayist, critic – and poet. Although Eliot too produced both critical prose and verse drama, his output was considerably narrower. And with the

'substructure' of prose justifying his verse, he appeared to be a more formally sophisticated artist. Why, then, did Lawrence's poetic of 'stark directness' speak so powerfully to him that he yearned to 'write poetry ... with nothing poetic about it'?

At least in part, Lawrence's vocation as novelist may have shaped both his own poetry of 'stark directness' and Eliot's surprising admiration for such an aesthetic. The novel, Lawrence once remarked, was 'the one bright book of life' and many of his most successful early poems functioned as what Whitman might have called 'sparkles from the wheel' – miniature narratives thrown off, as it were, from the novelist's workbench. Among Lawrence's early novels, for instance, *Sons and Lovers* alone inspired quite a few poems that were direct in formulation, concise, not 'poetic' in articulation – and (like much of Eliot's early work) Swinburnean in erotic energy. With its tight, imagistic focus on the 'terrible whips' of an ash tree slashing the wind outside an otherwise unidentified house, 'Discord in Childhood' examines the parallel between the terror of the tree's weird shrieking and the psychodrama of parental conflict inside the house: 'a slender lash / Whistling she-delirious rage', and 'a male thong booming and bruising' (*CP*, 36). In doing so, the poem summarizes, as if in an uncanny snapshot, the family drama that unfolds in the first third of *Sons and Lovers*.

Similarly, in a glimpse of a single moment in a romance, 'Cherry Robbers' captures the Swinburnean entanglement of the erotic and the sadistic that marks the relationship between Paul and Miriam throughout much of the novel. While succinctly exploring a parallel between the 'blood-drops' of cherries, the 'red dye' on the breasts of three dead birds who have been shot as 'robberlings', and the speaker's feelings towards 'a girl [who] stands laughing at me, / Cherries hung round her ears' and 'Offers me her scarlet fruit', the poem illuminates as in a flash of lightning the dangers implicit in desire: 'I will see / If she has any tears' (*CP*, 36–7). More tender, but marked by the same unflinching candour and the same narrative drive are the elegiac poems in which Lawrence lamented the death of the mother whose decline and demise he charts so brilliantly in *Sons and Lovers*. The very title of that book, of course, acknowledges the scrupulous introspection with which the writer dissected his own Oedipal feelings. From his cosmopolitan German wife, Frieda, he had learned a good deal about Freud, but even before there was a theory on which he could base his analysis of his own emotions he had confronted them frankly, once noting that he had always loved his mother with 'almost a husband and wife love'.¹⁰ Thus, such poems as 'The Bride', 'Sorrow' and 'Piano' offer brief but intense insights into the processes of grieving that Freud was later to discuss from a clinical perspective in 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917).

In the first of these beautiful lyrics, the speaker gazes at the body of the lost beloved, noting the strange dissonance of her appearance in death, and speaking like the 'lover' he knew himself to be. Yet as he gazes, his passion sees through the superficial changes of age (her 'plaits' that are 'threaded with filigree silver, / And uncanny cold') to the 'young maiden' within, the one she once was and now, in one of the paradoxes of death, once more *is*. And at the center of this vision of her, uttered with just the 'stark directness' Eliot was to admire, he embeds a synaesthetic epiphany: as his mother 'sleeps like bride', her 'dead mouth *sings* / *By its shape*, like thrushes in clear evenings' (emphasis added; *CP*, 101).

Continuing to trace the journey of grief, both 'Sorrow' and 'Piano' anticipate the course of loss as Freud was to outline it some years later when he defined 'the absorbing work of mourning' as a task of great magnitude which requires the griever to continually bear witness as 'Reality passes its verdict – that the object no longer exists – upon each single one of the memories and hopes through which the libido was attached to the lost object.' In 'Sorrow', as if backtracking from the vision of his mother in death that he offers in 'The Bride', Lawrence broods on the stages of her dying. The tone of his poem is controlled, even shocked, and interrogatory, beginning

Why does the thin grey strand
Floating up from the forgotten
Cigarette between my fingers,
Why does it trouble me?

Then his gaze at the cigarette smoke triggers a painful memory as he recalls how 'when I carried my mother downstairs . . . at the beginning of her soft-foot malady', he often found 'a few long grey hairs' on his coat, and 'one by one / I watched them float up the dark chimney' (*CP*, 106).

Following the same course of mourning and discovery, 'Piano' also opens with a puzzling psychological experience, a singer at a concert who takes him 'back down the vista of years' till he sees himself as a child, 'sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings / And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings'. Again, the explanation of a troubling event leads further into the heart of mourning: 'my manhood is cast / Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past' (*CP*, 148). And though this poem, like others in the series, attempts the 'lovely form of metrical verse' that Lawrence later resolved to 'break', the common language in which its confessional candour is couched foreshadows what Eliot was to define as poetry 'with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked in its bare bones'.

Poetry standing naked

If even Lawrence's early, rhyming poems often appear to be 'direct utterance[s] from the instant, whole man', his later, self-proclaimed 'Unrhyming Poems' function as at least approximations of the speech of a '*pulsating, carnal self*, mysterious and palpable' – speech, as it were, of the wild common and the common wildness we all share. Interestingly, Lawrence was able to 'break' what he came to consider the chains of rhyme as his poetry grew more distant from the subject matter of his novels. From *Look! We Have Come Through!* to *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* and *Last Poems* – arguably his strongest volumes in this genre – his poems were most deeply marked not by his fiction but by the new self he felt he had achieved in his relationship with Frieda, by the crises associated with the First World War, by his critical work on *Studies in Classic American Literature* (and the travels to America) that brought him into ever closer contact with the writings of Whitman and the country that had fostered those writings, and by his final illness, a crisis in the tuberculosis from which he had long suffered that was to kill him at the early age of forty-four.

To be sure, *Look! We Have Come Through!* is a kind of narrative, 'intended as an essential story, or history, or confession', Lawrence wrote, and he supplied an 'argument': 'After much struggling and loss in love and in the world of man, the protagonist throws in his lot with a woman who is already married [and the] conflict of love and hate goes on between these two and the world around them, till . . . they transcend into some condition of blessedness' (*CP*, 191). Along with a poem titled 'Manifesto' and one titled 'New Heaven and Earth', this prefatory statement suggests a theology of mystical eroticism to which Lawrence became increasingly committed. But as this belief system developed, it brought into focus a parallel poetics that helped shape what the writer was to call 'Poetry of the Present'. Rather than in 'Manifesto', the most resonant statement of this poetics appears in the book's title poem: 'Song of a Man Who Has Come Through' (*CP*, 250). Here, without ever naming the barriers through which he has come, the speaker formulates the aesthetic and philosophical parameters of the 'blessedness' he feels he has attained, noting that he has been brought to this state by an encounter with the radical otherness of the new: 'Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me! / A fine wind is blowing the new direction of Time'.

The metaphor of wind as world-soul or *anima* breathing new life and imaginative creativity is a traditional one, appearing, for instance, as the central trope of Shelley's high romantic 'Ode to the West Wind'. But Lawrence updated it, breaking the glittering chains of Shelley's *terza rima*

and casting his aesthetic in the common language of personal prayer. Confiding that as this 'fine, fine wind . . . takes its course through the chaos of the world', he would be 'keen and hard like the sheer tip of a wedge / Driven by invisible blows' so that 'we shall come at the wonder, we shall find the Hesperides', he prayed to be 'a good well-head' for such wonder, longed to 'blur no whisper, spoil no expression'. But the final insight to which this worshipful incantation brings him leaps back to ancient myth and biblical epiphany. For the poet-speaker imagines that, as the wind carries him towards 'blessedness', he hears an unexpected 'knocking at the door in the night', wonders if it is 'somebody [who] wants to do us harm', and then, with mystical certainty, declares 'No, no, it is the three strange angels. / Admit them, admit them'. Either the three guardians of the Hesperides that he had earlier sought, or the three biblical messengers who visited Abraham in Genesis 18, bearing news of Sarah's marvellous fertility, Lawrence's angels deliver good tidings of great joy to the artist, who experiences himself as having 'come through' the barriers of dailiness to a realm of the visionary, as if – figuratively speaking – he had momentarily left behind the shadow of the slag heaps and re-entered a newly luminous wild common. And that the apparently simple imperative with which he concludes – 'Admit them, admit them' – is richly ambiguous ('admit them' meaning concede that they exist? Or meaning allow them to enter?) suggests the weight of significance that a poetry of 'stark directness' can convey.

If 'Song of a Man Who Has Come Through' drew on the Bible as well as Greek mythology to define the interlocking blessings of love and creative imagination, one of Lawrence's fiercest wartime poems from this period, 'Eloi Eloi Lama Sabacthani', turned to the Bible to use Christ's last words on the cross – 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34) – to represent the desolation of soldiers imprisoned in trenches and forsaken amidst the horror of the Front. Here, in a grotesque parody of the sacred eroticism through which the man who 'came through' gained access to the redemptive mystery of the new, the soldiers engage in unholy acts of intercourse that further alienate them from the possibilities of love. 'How I hate myself, this body which is me; / How it dogs me, what a galling shadow!' begins the speaker, a soldier at the Front, in a revision of the body/shadow dialectic that shaped 'The Wild Common'. Then he describes his bizarrely eroticised killing of an enemy:

Like a bride he took my bayonet, wanting it,
Like a virgin the blade of my bayonet, wanting it,
And it sank to rest from me in him,

And I, the lover, am consummate,
And he is the bride, I have sown him with the seed
And planted and fertilized him. (CP, 742)

The repetitive, conversational-seeming cadences through which Lawrence captured this speaker's despair and rage became central to the style of his later poems, most of which are works in which, as Eliot put it, poetry becomes 'so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem *points at*, and not on the poetry'. For Lawrence, however, such apparently naked poetry depends nonetheless on the linguistic skill for which he had prayed in 'Song of a Man Who Has Come Through'. Most notably, this poet frequently deployed a Whitmanesque strategy of incantatory repetition (for instance, 'Like a bride he took my bayonet . . . / Like a virgin the blade of my bayonet') in which grammatical parallelisms gradually modify the narrative or argument until the work is propelled towards an appropriate, if mysterious, stopping point.

Another apparently effortless technique that the poet also used throughout his later work, starting with *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, was an often combatively conversational tone that allows the speaking voice of the poem to plunge the reader into *medias res*. 'Eloi, Eloi' begins like a casual soliloquy: 'How I hate myself, this body which is me', while a number of poems in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* rudely address a hypothetical reader. 'You tell me I am wrong. / Who are you, who is anybody to tell me I am wrong?' begins the poet in 'Pomegranate', and then he goes on to hymn the crucial fissure in this mythic fruit: 'Do you mean to tell me you will see no fissure? . . . For all that, the setting suns are open. / The end cracks open with the beginning: / Rosy, tender, glittering within the fissure'. The next poem in the collection, 'Peach', opens with an even more truculent question: 'Would you like to throw a stone at me? / Here, take all that's left of my peach', then echoes Blake's 'Tyger' in a series of not-merely rhetorical questions: 'Why the groove? . . . Why the ripple down the sphere? . . . Why was not my peach round and finished like a billiard ball?' As Lawrence noted in 'Poetry of the Present', the 'instant, the immediate self' that shapes 'free verse' is never 'finished, perfected'; a fruit in the form of a perfectly rounded billiard ball would belong to the 'stable, unchanging eternities' out of which this artist could no longer imagine making poetry – and he was prepared to argue with anyone who denied that the 'end cracks open with the beginning'.

Even while debating with hypothetical readers, however, Lawrence also quarreled with himself, most notably in one of his most frequently anthologised poems, 'Snake'. This parable, which once more replays the

characteristic Lawrentian dialogue between conscious human reason (or spirit, 'soul', 'shadow', 'mind') and the ineffable *being* of body (flesh, substantial vitality), begins quietly enough:

A snake came to my water-trough
On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there . . .
Someone was before me at my water-trough,
And I, like a second comer, waiting. (CP, 349)

But soon enough, observing that the snake is 'earth-brown, earth-golden from the burning bowels of the earth', the speaker remembers that the 'voice of my education said to me / He must be killed, / For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous'. And yet, he confesses, 'how I liked him, / How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink at my water-trough'. Nonetheless, the voices of reason are insistent, even taunting, declaiming, 'If you were a man / You would take a stick and break him now and finish him off'.

Finally, therefore, the speaker hurls 'a clumsy log' towards the snake, who writhes 'like lightning' and disappears 'Into the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure' – at which the poet expresses neither triumph nor relief but deep regret: 'how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act! / I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education'. For, like so many other avatars of the 'quick of the universe', the snake seems to the poet a 'king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld / Now due to be crowned again'. Although in traditional Christian iconography as well as in Sicilian herpetology the snake is diabolical and dangerous, Lawrence reverses the usual hierarchy. It is his 'human education' that is 'accursed', while in its majestic otherness the snake is 'one of the lords / Of life' (CP, 351). Thus this brief but resonant dialogue between the teachings of reason and the intuitions of flesh ends, like so many other Lawrentian debates, in a triumph of the substance that enlivens the wild common rather than the reason that would tame, 'civilise' or exploit it.

How does such an impassioned celebrant of the substantial present that constitutes the 'quick of the universe' confront the impending annihilation of the 'carnal self' through which he knows, loves and speaks the life of each moment? This is a problem Lawrence had already begun to approach in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* – in, for example, the richly incantatory 'Medlars and Sorb-Apples', with its evocation of the 'Orphic farewell, and farewell and farewell' of 'final loneliness' (CP, 281). But nowhere is this poet's dialogue with finality more naked than in some of the prayerful verses he wrote as he lay dying in the south of France. 'The Ship of Death',

one of the most famous of these works, is addressed, like a sermon, to a congregation of readers. Here, drawing on Etruscan and Egyptian myths and rituals that imagine a ship bearing the souls of the dead into the unknown, the poet urges his interlocutors to 'build your ship of death, for you will need it' (*CP*, p. 717). A number of other poems in the group, however, reach beyond the immediate world of writer and reader to ask for succour from sacred intermediaries: the moon in 'Invocation to the Moon'; the airy creature in 'Butterfly' who symbolises the soul; the 'Silence' that is the 'great bride of all creation'; and, most strikingly, the paradoxical 'torches of darkness' whose powers Lawrence summons in the greatest of his last poems, 'Bavarian Gentians' (*CP*, 697).

Like 'Snake', 'Bavarian Gentians' begins modestly, with the casual observation that 'Not every man has gentians in his house / in soft September, at slow, sad Michaelmas'. But then, as the poet builds through waves of what he once called the 'continual, slightly modified repetition' that shapes not just his prose but his incantatory verse, the ordinary September gentians gradually metamorphose into magical tokens whose powers he needs to guide his passage from ordinary reality into a different world – or, more precisely, from life into death.

Bavarian gentians, big and dark, only dark
darkening the day-time, torch-like with the smoking blueness of Pluto's gloom,
ribbed and torch-like, with their blaze of darkness spread blue
down flattening into points, flattened under the sweep of white day
torch-flower of the blue-smoking darkness, Pluto's dark-blue daze,
black lamps from the halls of Dis, burning dark blue,
giving of darkness, blue darkness, as Demeter's pale lamps give off light,
lead me then, lead the way.

And as if through some sacramental alternative to conventional Christian theology, the flowers this poet addresses – denizens of the wild common out of which all life blooms – show him 'the way' down into the centre of the earth, where their bulbs will last out the winter and where life will emerge from death: the realm of darkness where 'blue is darkened on blueness' and 'where Persephone goes, just now, from the frosted September'. There, in the sightless realm where (again, paradoxically) 'darkness is awake upon the dark', the poet witnesses, or passionately hopes to witness, 'the passion of dense gloom' – the shadowy space in which 'the lost bride and her groom' will re-engender springtime.

In the nakedly hopeful yet helplessly dark *dénouement* of this poem, T. S. Eliot, along with other readers, would have encountered a poetry of religious mysticism 'able to get *beyond poetry*, as Beethoven, in his late

works, strove to get *beyond music*'. Indeed, this 'poetry standing naked' is so plausibly prayerful that many contemporary thinkers may find it difficult to disagree with Wright Morris's assertion that 'in this world – the one in which we must live – the strange gods of D.H. Lawrence appear to be less strange than those of Mr. Eliot'.¹¹ But perhaps it is more important for students of Lawrence to note that here, in the downward journey of 'Bavarian Gentians', the underground origin of those slag heaps outside Eastwood – the apparently soulless mines into which the poet-novelist's father, along with countless other colliers, had been forced for decades to descend – becomes a source of regeneration whose 'torches of darkness' illuminate both the life and the language of the wild common.

NOTES

- 1 *The Complete Poems*, ed. Vivian de sola Pinto and F. Warren Roberts (1964; New York: Penguin, 1971), pp. 33–4; all further references in the text will be to this edition (CP) and page numbers will appear in parentheses.
- 2 T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy, the Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia, 1933* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), pp. 58–60.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 4 To Catherine Carswell [11 January 1916], *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, Vol. II, 1913–16, ed. George Zytaruk and James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 50.
- 5 Quoted in F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry* (1933; New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 89–90.
- 6 F. R. Leavis, 'Mr Eliot and Mr Lawrence', in Frederick J. Hoffman and Harry T. Moore (eds.), *The Achievement of D.H. Lawrence* (1951; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953).
- 7 *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, VI, 3 (June, 1915), pp. 130–5 ('Prufrock'); p. 151 (Monroe on Lawrence).
- 8 T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Harcourt, 1997), pp. 307, 311.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 78–9.
- 10 To Rachel Annand Taylor, 3 December 1910, in *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, Vol. I, 1901–13, ed. James T. Boulton, pp. 189–90.
- 11 Wright Morris, 'Lawrence and the Immediate Present', in Harry Moore (ed.), *A D.H. Lawrence Miscellany* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1959), p. 8.