# D. H. LAWRENCE

# THE COMPLETE POEMS

COLLECTED AND EDITED
WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY
VIVIAN DE SOLA PINTO AND F. WARREN ROBERTS


# THE COMPLETE POEMS OF D. H. LAWRENCE

David Herbert Lawrence was born at Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, in 1885, fourth of the five children of a miner and his middle-class wife. He attended Nottingham High School and Nottingham University College. His first novel, *The White Peacock*, was published in 1911, just a few weeks after the death of his mother, to whom he had been abnormally close. At this time he finally ended his relationship with Jessie Chambers (the Miriam of *Sons and Lovers*) and became engaged to Louie Burrows. His career as a schoolteacher was ended in 1911 by the illness which was ultimately diagnosed as tuberculosis.

In 1912 Lawrence eloped to Germany with Frieda Weekley, the German wife of his former modern languages tutor. They were married on their return to England in 1914. Lawrence was now living, precariously, by his writing. His greatest novels, *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, were completed in 1915 and 1916. The former was suppressed, and he could not find a publisher for the latter.

After the war Lawrence began his "savage pilgrimage" in search of a more fulfilling mode of life than industrial Western civilization could offer. This took him to Sicily, Ceylon, Australia and, finally, New Mexico. The Lawrences returned to Europe in 1925. Lawrence's last novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, was banned in 1928, and his paintings were confiscated in 1929. He died in Vence in 1930 at the age of forty-four.

Lawrence spent most of his short life living. Nevertheless he produced an amazing quantity of work—novels, stories, poems, plays, essays, travel books, translations and letters. . . . After his death Frieda wrote: "What he had seen and felt and known he gave in his writing to his fellow men, the splendour of living, the hope of more and more life . . . a heroic and immeasurable gift."

Vivian de Sola Pinto made a lifelong study of Lawrence's works and was Professor of English at the University of Nottingham, England, from 1938 until his retirement in 1961. He died in 1969.

F. Warren Roberts is Director of the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas. He is the editor of a *A Bibliography of D. H. Lawrence*.

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Vivian de Sola Pinto

and

Warren Roberts

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# INTRODUCTION

## D. H. Lawrence: Poet without a mask

By V. de S. Pinto

SAMUEL PALMER in a well-known passage called William Blake "a man without a mask".* D. H. Lawrence might well be described as a poet without a mask. Nearly all the famous poets of the past have worn a mask of some sort. It may be a very grand and dignified one like Milton's, a gentlemanly one like Tennyson's, one with an ironic smile like the mask of Pope or grotesque like that of Burns or Skelton. Of course, all these poets drop the mask occasionally, for a line or two, or perhaps for a whole poem. Shakespeare dropped it altogether in the best of his sonnets and gave us a glimpse of the most enigmatic personality in the whole of literature.

R. P. Blackmur in his essay on "Lawrence and Expressive Form" makes a carefully reasoned attack on Lawrence's poetry exactly because it is poetry without a mask. Although he does not use this image, his argument is in effect that the use of the mask is necessary for the production of good poetry. He quotes the following passage from Lawrence's Note prefixed to the two-volume edition of his *Collected Poems* (1928): "A young man is afraid of his demon and puts his hand over the demon's mouth sometimes. . . . And the things the young man says are very rarely poetry." Commenting on this passage, Blackmur writes: "I take the young man in the quotation to be just what Lawrence thought he was not, the poet as craftsman, and the demon exactly that outburst of personal feeling which needed the discipline of craft to become a poem." [1] This seems to me to be a travesty of Lawrence's meaning. By the "demon", Lawrence certainly did not mean a mere "outburst of personal feel-

*A. Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, Everyman Library (London, Dent 1942), p. 301

ing". He meant what he calls in the Foreword to *Fantasia of the Unconscious* "pure passionate experience",[2] or experience at a deeper level than the personal. In the original Introduction to the *Collected Poems* (1928) he tells us that "the demon is timeless". "The demon" is what Blake calls the fourfold vision and what the Greeks called the Muse. The interpretation of "the young man" as "the poet as craftsman" is equally misleading. By "the young man", Lawrence means the immature writer who wants to make himself a mask to appear before the public by means of the imitation of fashionable verse-forms.

Blackmur's essay, however, is an important piece of criticism; like Johnson's criticism of Milton, it is one of those important wrong-headed pieces of criticism that contain valuable elements of truth. Blackmur's main contention is that Lawrence's poetry, in spite of certain great qualities which he admits that it possesses, is vitiated by what he calls "the fallacy of the faith in expressive form", which he defines as the belief "that if a thing is only intensely enough felt its mere expression in words will give it satisfactory form, the dogma, in short, that once material becomes words it is its own best form".[3] No English writer of note ever held this dogma in the crude form as stated by Blackmur, though Wordsworth, in some passages in his Preface of 1800, came dangerously near to it, and was rightly castigated for those passages by Coleridge in the seventeenth chapter of *Biographia Literaria*. Some of Lawrence's own statements about his poetry, which Blackmur does not quote, are relevant here. In an early letter (18 August 1913) to Edward Marsh, who had objected to the rhythms of some of his poems, he wrote:

> ". . . I think, don't you know, that my rhythms fit my mood pretty well, in the verse. And if the mood is out of joint, the rhythm often is. I have always tried to get an emotion out in its own course, without altering it. It needs the finest instinct imaginable, much finer than the skill of craftsmen. That Japanese Yone Noguchi [4] tried it. He doesn't quite bring it off. Often I don't – sometimes I do. Sometimes Whitman is perfect. Remember skilled verse is dead in fifty years. . . ." [5]

It is a pity that Lawrence used the word "craftsman" in this passage. What he is really pleading for is not a rejection of craftsmanship but a different kind of craftsmanship from that of the user of tradi-

tional forms. This is not, to use Blackmur's phrase, a matter of "mere expression in words". Lawrence realizes it is something very difficult, which "needs the finest instinct imaginable, much finer than the skill of craftsmen". He means "finer than the skill of craftsmen in traditional forms". Of course, his sweeping statement that "skilled verse is dead in fifty years" needs a great deal of qualification. If he meant "carefully wrought verse in traditional forms", hundreds of examples from Horace to Pope give him the lie. What he probably meant was skilled mechanical imitations of traditional verse-forms.

Lawrence's Introduction to the American edition of his *New Poems* ("Poetry of the Present", see below, pp. 181–6) though written in a rather florid style, is a much clearer and more mature statement of his poetic theory than the rather crudely phrased letter to Marsh. In this important essay he distinguishes between two kinds of poetry. One kind he describes as "the poetry of the beginning and the poetry of the end". "It is," he writes,

> "of the nature of all that is complete and consummate. This completeness, this consummateness, the finality and the perfection are conveyed in exquisite form: the perfect symmetry, the rhythm which returns upon itself like a dance where the hands link and loosen and link for the supreme moment of the end. Perfected bygone moments, perfected moments in the glimmering futurity, these are the treasured gem-like lyrics of Shelley and Keats."

Here Lawrence is recognizing the validity of the best sort of "skilled verse", all of which he had too hastily condemned in his letter to Marsh. His second kind of poetry he calls "poetry of that which is at hand: the immediate present. In the immediate present there is no perfection, no consummation, nothing finished. The strands are all flying, quivering, intermingling into the web, the waters are shaking the moon. There is no round, consummate moon on the face of running water, nor on the face of the unfinished tide. There are no gems of the living plasm. The living plasm vibrates unspeakably, it inhales the future, it exhales the past, it is the quick of both, and yet it is neither." Lawrence is here distinguishing between traditional form on the one hand an expressive or organic form on the

other. "Expressive form" is what Coleridge called "organic form". He contrasted "organic form" with "mechanical regularity" and wrote that it "is innate; it shapes, as it developes itself from within, and the fulness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form".[6] To use Lawrence's image, it attempts to reproduce "the unspeakable vibrations of the living plasm". Blackmur is surely wrong in his wholesale condemnation of organic or "expressive form". It is true that there are great dangers in this kind of writing, and, as Lawrence wrote, it needs the finest instinct imaginable, or it can easily lapse into empty rhetoric or mere disorder. It is, however, the kind of poetic form which is likely to have the most vitality in the modern world. The real contrast is not, as Coleridge said, with mechanical form but with what I would call traditional form. When traditional form is alive, it expresses the poetic sensibility which the poet shares with his audience – in the great ages of poetry with the whole of his nation or linguistic group. In such periods traditional form is a mask which fits the poet's face perfectly; indeed, like the mask of Lord George Hell in Max Beerbohm's parable, it may be said to become identical with the face. Ever since the Renaissance it has been increasingly difficult to use traditional poetic forms successfully. The mask tends no longer to fit the face. Hence in all European languages in the last three hundred years we can trace the progressive loosening of poetic rhythms, the mingling or abandonment of the traditional "kinds" of poetry, the movements towards free verse, the production of epic dramas and dramatic lyrics and forms that fall under none of the ancient classifications. In the twentieth century the poet is more isolated, perhaps, than he has ever been in the whole of human history. The mask, that invaluable means of communication in other ages, is now often felt to be a hindrance rather than a help to the poet. "Masked" poetry in traditional forms of real value indeed can and will be produced by skilled and sensitive craftsmen on suitable occasions; but there is always a danger today that the use of the mask may degenerate into a kind of game based on the pretence that there is a society which shares the sensibility embodied in traditional forms when no such society actually exists. The game may be a learned and esoteric one, as in much of the poetry of the Franco-American school of Ezra Pound, or a popular one, as in the writings of Mr Betjeman. A major prophetic poet like Blake or

Lawrence solves the problem by abandoning the mask altogether. He has to create an organic or expressive form to express his naked, passionate experience in a world where no one shares his poetic sensibility, and this is a task of enormous difficulty, requiring both heroic self-confidence and technical skill of the highest order.

It may be argued that the only possible form for great poetry in this age of science and realism is the novel or prose story, and there can be no question that Lawrence's poetic genius finds its fullest expression in prose works like *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, *St Mawr* and *The Man Who Died*. Nevertheless, his work in verse is a very important part of his literary achievement. He said something in his verse that he could never have said in prose, and his best poems are among the most valuable and significant in the English language written in the twentieth century. Indeed they may be described as examples of the only kind of great poetry that can be written in the world in which we live. The Blake of *Songs of Experience* and the Wordsworth of "Resolution and Independence" are the prophets of this kind of poetry, which Lawrence has well described as "poetry of this immediate present, instant poetry . . . the unrestful, ungraspable poetry of the sheer present, poetry whose permanency lies in its windlike transit".

Lawrence's early poems are mostly autobiographical, and are written in the form that was fashionable in the England of the second decade of the twentieth century, the short "nature poem" in rhyming verse, which the Georgians inherited from Hardy and Wordsworth. Lawrence uses this form clumsily enough, and much of the experience that lies behind these early poems is expressed more successfully in the early novels and stories. He himself was quite aware of the inadequacy of his early verse. In the Introduction to his *Collected Poems*, he writes, with a modesty that recalls that of the young Keats, that these poems were "struggling to say something which it takes a man twenty years to be able to say". This, by the way, is not the kind of remark that is made by a young man who, in the words of Blackmur, was "wilfully careless of craftsmanship". Nevertheless, in spite of their shortcomings, these early poems are full of interest to the student of English poetry. They show us a young poet of genius, struggling with an inadequate mode of expression, like the Blake of *Poetical Sketches* and the Wordsworth of "The Evening Walk". In them, however, we can already see the

notable qualities which Blackmur admits that Lawrence's poetry possesses, and which he describes admirably. The first is "a kind of furious underlying honesty of observation",[7] and the second a religious quality, for, as Blackmur rightly argues, Lawrence is a religious poet and his poetry is an attempt "to declare and rehearse symbolically his pious recognition of the substance of life". To these should be added a third quality, a mixture of tenderness and reverence, a sort of cosmic piety.

The first two qualities are well illustrated in the poem called "Love on the Farm". This might be described as a "nature poem" and it certainly arises out of a keen-sighted observation of the "life of nature" on a Midland farm. Nature here is not the quiet landscape vision which found elegant expression in numerous Georgian poems. It is compounded of terror, beauty and cruelty, full of contradictions, something at once disturbing and mysterious, lying behind the commonplace facts of English country life. The middle of the poem shows us a man going to kill a rabbit caught in a snare:

> Oh, water-hen, beside the rushes
> Hide your quaintly scarlet blushes,
> Still your quick tail, lie still as dead,
> Till the distance folds over his ominous tread!
>
> The rabbit presses back her ears,
> Turns back her liquid, anguished eyes
> And crouches low; then with wild spring
> Spurts from the terror of *his* oncoming . . .

When the rabbit is killed, the man with "fingers that still smell grim of the rabbit's fur" goes into the house to embrace a woman. We are made to feel the terror of the rabbit, the large, kindly presence of the man and the woman's identification of herself with the trapped animal:

> 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.

Lawrence does not tell us in this poem that sex and death are close

together in nature, but he makes us feel the numinous quality of their closeness, its terror and mystery. It cannot be said, however, that the commonplace rhythms, the awkward rhymes and crudely melodramatic language help Lawrence in this poem. Already he is making us feel, to use his own phrase, "the living plasm vibrate unspeakably".

The best expression of the qualities of tenderness and reverence in Lawrence's early poetry is, perhaps, the poem called "Piano":

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
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.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

This poem has found its way into a number of anthologies, probably because the compilers think it an expression of sentimental nostalgia. It is nothing of the kind; it is an honest record of emotion, which, it is important to note, is *controlled* emotion. The feelings awakened by the song that brings back the scenes of his childhood to the poet are recognized as "insidious", and, although he yields to them, he is aware that in some sense they are a betrayal. "Piano" provides a complete refutation of Blackmur's charge that Lawrence was careless of craftsmanship in his poetry. The original draft of the poem, called "The Piano", survives in a manuscript now in Nottingham University Library.[8] This early version is diffuse, nostalgic and overcrowded with detail. The words "insidious" and "betray" do not occur in it. It contains five stanzas, as opposed to the three of the printed version, and it describes the concert singer whose song

brought back to Lawrence the memory of his childhood as a "full throated woman . . . singing . . . a wild Hungarian air" with "her arms, and her bosom, and the whole of her soul . . . bare". All this is suppressed in the final version and the impression rendered in the concentrated phrase,

> . . . to burst into clamour
> With the great black piano appassionato. . . .

The poem in its final form is an early example of Lawrence's use of the controlled imagination which Blackmur denies to him. It is something rare in modern poetry, a successful rendering of unsentimental tenderness, worthy to be placed by Cowper's lines on his mother's picture and Wordsworth's "Poor Susan".

Lawrence wrote that many of his poems were "so personal that, in their fragmentary fashion, they make up a biography of an emotional and inner life". Actually, like Byron, he was a poet who could only reach his full maturity when he had got rid of the autobiographical preoccupation. The last phase of his autobiographical poetry, the conclusion of the saga of the young Lawrence, is to be found in the famous sequence *Look! We Have Come Through!*, which is at once a kind of poetical record of his early married life and something far more ambitious. It is an attempt to give expression to the drama of the psychological relationship between a newly-married husband and wife, a kind of duel of sex, where, in Lawrence's own words, "the conflict of love and hate goes on . . . till it reaches some sort of conclusion, they transcend into some condition of blessedness". This is a great subject and, whatever else it may be, the sequence is certainly a psychological and autobiographical record of the highest interest. Amy Lowell is said to have thought that the sequence "made up a great novel, greater even than *Sons and Lovers*". This, of course, is an exaggeration, but there is a grain of truth in it. The sequence contains the material for a notable novel or autobiographical work, and I believe Lawrence would have been well-advised to take a hint from Dante's *Vita Nuova* and cast it into the form of a prose narrative with interspersed lyrics.

At this stage of his development, Lawrence was seeking an escape from the conventional rhythms of early twentieth-century English poetry, which, he rightly felt, were hampering his poetic expression.

The logical outcome of the search for expressive form, as far as metre is concerned, was some kind of free verse, but the difficulty was to find the right kind. He was looking for a sort of verse in which he could make the individual quality of his voice heard, and which would enable him to express in appropriate form that "pure relationship with the living universe", the eternal flux of life, which he believed to be the supremely valuable human experience. His immediate guides in the period 1914–16 were the Italian Futuristi, the Anglo-American Imagist group of Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, and Walt Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* had been "one of his great books" since the Eastwood days.[9] When he was living at Lerici in the early summer of 1914, he read with interest and admiration, the anthology called *I Poeti Futuristi* published at Milan in 1912.[10] In the *proclama* or manifesto of F. T. Marinetti prefixed to this volume (first published in February 1909), he would find the following sentences,[11] in which, perhaps, we can see the germ of Lawrence's conception of "poetry of this immediate present, instant poetry":

> "Il verso libero futurista, perpetuo dinamismo del pensiero, corrente ininterotta d' immagini e di suoni, è il solo mezzo per esprimere l'effimero, instabile e sinfonico universa che si fucina in noi e con noi. Il verso libero futurista è il dinamismo della nostra coscienza malleabile, interamente realizzato; *l'io* integrale cantato, dipinto, scolpito indefinitamente nel suo perpetuo divenire aggressivo."*

Lawrence read in the same volume Paolo Buzzi's essay on free verse, and, in Buzzi's poems and others in the anthology, he would find a kind of free verse which combined, with some success, lyricism with conversational ease, tough-minded directness of speech and freedom from traditional poeticism. With his usual shrewdness he saw the weakness of the Futuristi, their brashness and their childish worship of the machine, but he praised them for

*Translation: "Futurist free verse, a perpetual dynamism of thought, an uninterrupted stream of images and sounds, is the only medium to express the ephemeral, unstable and symphonic universe which is being created in us and with us. Futurist free verse is the dynamism of our malleable consciousness fully realised: the integral ego, sung, painted, sculptured indefinitely in its perpetual aggressive evolution."

their honesty, their vitality and their "revolt against beastly sentiment and slavish adherence to tradition and the dead mind".[12] With the Imagists he had a temporary connection and contributed several poems to their anthologies.[13] Together with the Futuristi they helped him to escape from the vague romanticism, the excessively literary diction, the saccharine rhythms of the Georgians. At the back of his mind there was certainly a deeper and more vital influence in his memories of the majestic rhythms of the poetic prose or near-verse of the King James Bible, in which he had been steeped in his childhood and which he never ceased to study. Lawrence was far too big a man to be absorbed by the Futuristi, the Imagists or any other literary clique. Whitman was another matter. Lawrence was both attracted and repelled by him. In his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, he shows that he was well aware of Whitman's weaknesses: ". . . this awful Whitman," he calls him, "this post-mortem poet. This poet with the private soul leaking out of him all the time." Yet he hails him as a master and a liberator: "Whitman, the great poet, has meant so much to me. Whitman, the one man breaking a way ahead." [14] And in "Poetry of the Present" he praises him because ". . . his heart beats with the urgent, insurgent Now . . . He is so near the quick." [15] He was right; Whitman was a great liberating influence for Lawrence, but he had to absorb and digest that influence before he could derive real benefit from it. Whitman showed him how to use large, free rhythms based on those of common speech yet filled with a music which is not to be found in common speech; but he also encouraged Lawrence's tendency to preach and orate, to *talk* about experience rather than express experience. The famous culminating poems in *Look! We Have Come Through!* – "New Heaven and New Earth", "Elysium" and "Manifesto"– contain many examples of the bad, undigested influence of Whitman on Lawrence. No one can doubt that these poems record intense and moving experiences with complete honesty and integrity, but they fail to turn those experiences into aesthetic experience for the reader. As Sir Herbert Read has written, in these poems "Lawrence is expressing a wish for a wonder to happen, a wonder that is not intrinsically present in the verse itself".[16]

The best poetry in *Look! We Have Come Through!* is certainly in the lyrics. Such a poem as "A Doe at Evening" shows how the Imagists helped him to "strip off the tinsel":

As I went through the marshes
a doe sprang out of the corn
and flashed up the hill-side
leaving her fawn.

On the sky-line
she moved round to watch,
she pricked a fine black blotch
on the sky.

I looked at her
And felt her watching;
I became a strange being.
Still, I had my right to be there with her.

Her nimble shadow trotting
Along the sky-line, she
put back her fine, level-balanced head.
And I knew her.

Ah yes, being male, is not my head hard-balanced,
antlered?

Are not my haunches light?
Has she not fled on the same wind with me?
Does not my fear cover her fear?

Here, surely, the wonder is intrinsically present in the verse. The lightness and delicacy of the vision of the doe find perfect expression in the lightness and delicacy of the texture and movement of the language, and the changes in rhythm in the last two stanzas convey the elusive suggestion of sex in the relationship of the man to the animal, and the dream or myth of his transformation into a stag. Jessie Chambers in her memoir wrote that "a living vibration passed between" Lawrence and "wild things".[17] Here, at last, Lawrence has found a sort of verse that makes us feel that vibration.

This poem points the way to Lawrence's mature poetic achievements of his middle years in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. Here he found a new theme which freed him from the trammels of autobiography. It was a subject-matter that he was particularly well-

qualified to treat: the immediate apprehension of the flux of life, especially of sexual life, in non-human organisms. In Lawrence, as Blackmur rightly stresses, this was a religious apprehension: "The love of God for him was in the declaration of life in the flux of sex." [18] In his Preface to *The Grand Inquisitor*, Lawrence wrote that ". . . *life** is the great reality . . . true living fills us with vivid life, the 'heavenly bread' ".[19] In the best of the poems he conveys the experience of immediate contact with this "vivid life", the actual taste of the "heavenly bread". Here he is carrying forward the work of the great Romantics, especially that of Wordsworth, in the exploration of what may be called the divine otherness of non-human life. The Romantics neglected the animal world and the sexual element in nature, and tended to confuse the apprehension of the life of nature with the quiet contemplation of landscape. Lawrence aims at a more complete nature poetry which will include birds, beasts, fishes and even insects as well as vegetable life. Blackmur complains that Lawrence's "pious recognition of the substance of life" is "tortured", and that he lacks "the ultimate vision" and "orderly insight" of "the great mystics".[20] Surely there is a confusion of thought here. Lawrence was not a mystic but a poet, and a poet's business is not necessarily to convey "an orderly insight", but to give artistic (i.e. orderly) expression to his own experience and the sensibility of his age. Sometimes Lawrence's apprehension of the mystery of life was tortured, and his complete honesty as an artist compelled him to exhibit this tortured apprehension as part of his own sensibility and that of his age. But the word "tortured" has been used far too freely with reference to Lawrence's poetry. *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* is an extremely varied and uneven collection. There are poems in it that may fairly be described as representing tortured states of mind, and passages that, perhaps, deserve the epithet "hysterical" that Blackmur has applied far too glibly to the whole of Lawrence's poetry.[21] Too often Lawrence succumbs to the worst part of Whitman's influence and mistakes strident statement for poetic expression. The best poetry in the collection, however, is neither tortured nor hysterical nor strident. It is an affirmation of the grandeur and mystery of the life of nature which perhaps Wordsworth alone has equalled among English poets, and it is expressed in an entirely original and un-Wordsworthian

*Lawrence's italics

idiom. Such an affirmation is to be found in the famous poem "Snake". This poem is based on that complete truthfulness to the facts of common experience that Lawrence shares with Wordsworth and Hardy, but here the common experience is transformed and invested with mythical grandeur. This is a rare and memorable achievement. Wordsworth did something similar in "Resolution and Independence", where the commonplace meeting with the old leech-gatherer is transmuted into a myth of overwhelming majesty. The old man, while remaining a poor leech-gatherer, is seen at the same time as a gigantic natural force and the embodiment of transcendental strength and majesty. Similarly, the snake which Lawrence saw one hot morning drinking in his water-trough at Taormina remains, in the poem, an ordinary "earth-brown, earth-golden" Sicilian snake, but at the same time becomes a mythical, godlike lord of the underworld, an embodiment of all those dark mysterious forces of nature which man ignobly fears and neglects:

Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?
Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him?
Was it humility, to feel so honoured?
I felt so honoured.

And yet those voices:
*If you were not afraid, you would kill him!*

And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid,
But even so, honoured still more
That he should seek my hospitality
From out the dark door of the secret earth.

He drank enough
And lifted his head, dreamily, as one who has drunken,
And flickered his tongue like a forked night on the air, so black;
Seeming to lick his lips,
And looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air,
And slowly turned his head,
And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice adream,
Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round
And climb again the broken bank of my wall-face. . . .

This poem surely provides the answer to Blackmur's argument that

Lawrence's use of expressive form excludes craftsmanship and the control of the rational imagination. There is no empty rhetoric or fake poetic language here. The style is very simple, the diction mostly colloquial, and the word order that of common speech, and yet the effect is one of grandeur and dignity. The verse, though free and rhymeless, moves easily from the rhythms of common speech to formal iambics and back again, but, nevertheless, has a subtle pattern expressing with curious felicity in its alternation of short and long lines the relationship between the poet's nagging thoughts and the sinuous majesty of the snake's movements. "Snake" is a triumph of style and idiom, one of the very few English poems in free verse where perception is embodied in rhythms that are an essential part of the poem's meaning.

There are other triumphs of a different kind in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. Blackmur speaks about a condition of "ritual frenzy" in some of the poems that "carries them beyond the confines of poetry".[22] This may be true of some passages in the collection, but, if by "ritual frenzy" he means an ecstasy of praise and adoration, there are poems in which this ecstasy controlled by the rational imagination produces memorable poetry. Such a poem is "Almond Blossom", a hymn to the miracle of renewed life as revealed in the blossoming of the almond tree:

. . . the Gethsemane blood at the iron pores unfolds, unfolds,
Pearls itself into tenderness of bud
And in a great and sacred forthcoming steps forth, steps out in one stride
A naked tree of blossom, like a bridegroom bathing in dew, divested of cover,
Frail-naked, utterly uncovered
To the green night-baying of the dog-star, Etna's snow-edged wind
And January's loud-seeming sun.

Think of it, from the iron fastness
Suddenly to dare to come out naked, in perfection of blossom, beyond the sword-rust.
Think, to stand there in full-unfolded nudity, smiling,
With all the snow-wind, and the sun-glare, and the dog-star baying epithalamion. . . .

Here the poet is not using images as illustration or decoration but is thinking in images, "recreating thought into feeling", to use T. S. Eliot's phrase. There is wit here, too, as well as magnificence. The image of the "dog-star baying epithalamion" is a conceit at once witty and imaginative, worthy of the seventeenth-century masters, Donne and Marvell. As Mr Alvarez has written in his admirable study of Lawrence's poetry, this kind of wit is "not a sparkle on top of intelligence; it is a manifestation of intelligence".[23]

The poems that Lawrence wrote at the end of his life have a peculiar quality of freshness and directness. The Whitmanesque rhetoric and the "ritual frenzy" that Blackmur condemns have now disappeared. We hear in these poems the voice of a very wise man who is also humorous, completely disillusioned yet never cynical, a man who loves life, but is saddened and embittered at the way in which it is being fouled and violated by mass "civilization". It is also, as Richard Hoggart has aptly described it in a notable broadcast, "the voice of a down-to-earth, tight, bright, witty Midlander . . . slangy, quick, flat and direct, lively, laconic, sceptical, nonconforming, nicely bloody-minded". In some of the poems, especially those written in the last months of his life, the voice is that of a seer with a majestic vision of God and life and earth. The two voices, to quote Professor Hoggart again:

> "at bottom are . . . one voice . . . each reinforces and makes valid the other. We trust the visionary more because it's rooted in the solid and down-to-earth. We know that the down-to-earth is a genuine rootedness, not a cynicism, because the visionary can grow out of it".[24]

In all these later poems of Lawrence one gets the impression of a man who, like the Byron of *Don Juan*, is able to speak out his whole mind in verse with complete ease and without any sort of inhibition. Of the satiric poems in this last group Richard Aldington wrote that "nearly all these Pansies and Nettles came out of Lawrence's nerves, not out of his real self". This seems to me a gross exaggeration. Some of the pansies and nettles are written in a mood of exasperation, but many of them are brilliant and incisive satiric commentaries on Western civilization, like the poem called "Wages":

The wages of work is cash.
The wages of cash is want more cash.
The wages of want more cash is vicious competition.
The wages of vicious competition is – the world we live in.

The work-cash-want circle is the viciousest circle
that ever turned men into fiends.

Earning a wage is a prison occupation
and a wage-earner is a sort of gaol-bird.
Earning a salary is a prison overseer's job,
a gaoler instead of a gaol-bird.

Living on your income is strolling grandly outside the prison in terror lest you have to go in. And since the work-prison covers almost every scrap of the living earth, you stroll up and down on a narrow beat, about the same as a prisoner taking his exercise.

This is called universal freedom.

This poem has the quality of great satire: it is at once witty and humorous and profoundly serious. The image of the gaol is the perfect symbol for industrial society, and that of the man with the private income strolling grandly outside "in terror lest you have to go in" is, like all the best satire, at once very funny and rather terrible. Some of the pansies and nettles are in rhyming doggerel, very like the doggerel that Blake used to send in his letters to his friends, with a similar mixture of mocking humour and penetrating insight. Blake would have delighted in "Modern Prayer", surely a prophecy of the affluent society of the nineteen-sixties:

> Almighty Mammon, make me rich!
> Make me rich quickly, with never a hitch
> in my fine prosperity! Kick those in the ditch
> who hinder me, Mammon, great son of a bitch!

In the poems that Lawrence wrote in the last months of his life his preoccupation is no longer with the flux of life but with God and death. In a recent memorable lecture[25] the late Christopher Hassall drew attention to the close connection between these *Last Poems* of Lawrence and his study of the remains of ancient Etruscan

civilization which produced the last, and perhaps the most beautiful, of his travel books, *Etruscan Places*, well described by Mr Hassall as "a prose poem on a theme of literary criticism". Indeed, as Mr Hassall has pointed out, what Lawrence writes concerning the Etruscan paintings can be applied to his own poetic art in its final development: "The subtlety of Etruscan painting, as of Chinese and Hindu, lies in the wonderfully suggestive *edge* of the figures. It is not outlined. It is not what we call 'drawing'. It is the flowing contour where the body suddenly leaves off, upon the atmosphere." With admirable insight, Mr Hassall has written that, in Lawrence's mature poems, "It is this 'suggestive *edge*' of his own verse, which at first gives the appearance of a rough sketch, and instead of exhibiting formal shape suggests a state of flux, a flowing contour, where the body 'suddenly leaves off, upon the atmosphere' ". The *Last Poems* are religious poems and the religion which lies behind them is that primitive religion of wonder which Lawrence ascribed to the Etruscans:

> "The natural flowering of life! It is not so easy for human beings as it sounds. Behind all the Etruscan liveliness was a religion of life, which the chief men were seriously responsible for. Behind all the dancing was a vision, and even a science of life, a conception of the universe and man's place in the universe which made men live to the depth of their capacity.
>
> "To the Etruscan all was alive; the whole universe lived; and the business of man was himself to live amid it all. He had to draw life into himself, out of the wandering huge vitalities of the world. The cosmos was alive, like a vast creature. . . . The whole thing was alive, and had a great soul, or *anima*: and in spite of one great soul, there were myriad roving, lesser souls; every man, every creature and tree and lake and mountain and stream, was animate, and had its own peculiar consciousness."

For Lawrence, as for the Etruscan and the early pre-Socratic Greek of whom he read in two of his favourite books, John Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy* and Gilbert Murray's *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, there was no contradiction between belief in God and belief in the gods. In the *Last Poems* God is sometimes the creative urge in nature:

God is the great urge that has not yet found a body
but urges towards incarnation with the great creative urge.

And becomes at last a clove carnation: lo! that is god!
and becomes at last Helen, or Ninon: any lovely and generous woman
at her best and her most beautiful, being god, made manifest,
any clear and fearless man being god, very god.

At other times, as in the following lines from *More Pansies*, he feels the presence of the gods in the colours and shapes of the visible world:

But all the time I see the gods:
the man who is mowing the tall white corn,
suddenly, as it curves, as it yields, the white wheat
and sinks down with a swift rustle, and a strange, falling flatness,
ah! the gods, the swaying body of god!
ah! the fallen stillness of god, autumnus, and it is only July
the pale-gold flesh of Priapus dropping asleep.

Lawrence is a mythological poet here, but his mythology is no elegant fiction or learned reconstruction. The gods are realities to him as they were to a Greek poet, and as they have been, perhaps, to no other English poet since Keats.

The greatest of his mythological poems is certainly "Bavarian Gentians". The immediate suggestion for this poem seems to have come from some gentians which he saw at Rottach in Bavaria, where he was staying in September 1929, just before he left for the South of France, where he died in the following March. The sight of the dark blue flowers seems to have evoked the memory of his exploration of the Etruscan tombs in April 1927, as described by his friend Earl Brewster who accompanied him on that occasion:

> "From the jewelled splendour of these dark tombs we came forth into the brightness of an April day and a blue sky broken by hurrying clouds: the fields through which we walked were gay with red poppies: our guide unlocked the door leading to another tomb and we would descend again to behold the joyous scenes with which the Etruscans, of such a distant world, chose to adorn the homes of their dead." [26]

As Mr Hassall has written: "Even the physical act of entering these tombs . . . had become for Lawrence a symbol of death with that noble lack of bitterness or protest which is so lovely an element in his last poems".[27]

Reach me a gentian, give me a torch!
let me guide myself with the blue, forked torch of this flower
down the darker and darker stairs, where blue is darkened on blueness
even where Persephone goes, just now, from the frosted September
to the sightless realm where darkness is awake upon the dark
and Persephone herself is but a voice
or a darkness invisible enfolded in the deeper dark
of the arms Plutonic, and pierced with the passion of dense gloom,
among the splendour of torches of darkness, shedding darkness on
the lost bride and her groom.

Here Lawrence does not, as in his early poems, try to give the reader an immediate apprehension of the life of the flowers; he uses them mythologically, turning them into miraculous torches from the halls of Dis, lighting us down stairs that lead to the underworld, where the spring goddess goes to the embrace of Hades, the "arms Plutonic", and we are made to feel that she is the *anima*, the soul of man going to the embrace of death, which is not terrible but august and godlike. This is a use of mythology not as decoration or allegory, but, like that of Keats in *The Fall of Hyperion*, as a means to lead the reader to "a world of wonder and reverence".[28]

In the tomb of an Etruscan lucumo or prince, Lawrence tells us in *Etruscan Places*, he saw "the sacred treasures of the dead, the little bronze ship of death that should bear him over to the other world, the vases of jewels for his arraying, the vases of small dishes, the little bronze statuettes and tools, the armour . . .".[29] This "little bronze ship of death" became the central image of the longest and most ambitious of the last poems, "The Ship of Death", on which he was working as he lay dying in the opening months of 1930 in the South of France. The poem exists in three drafts; it is fragmentary and unfinished, and critics have pointed out that there is some confusion in the imagery, but, nevertheless, it is the final triumph of Lawrence's poetic art, combining a wonderful grandeur and tran-

quillity with that "free-breasted naturalness and spontaneity" which he found in Etruscan art:

> O build your ship of death, your little ark
> and furnish it with food, with little cakes, and wine
> for the dark flight down oblivion.
>
> * * * *
>
> We are dying, we are dying, so all we can do
> is now to be willing to die, and to build the ship
> of death to carry the soul on the longest journey.
>
> A little ship, with oars and food
> and little dishes, and all accoutrements
> fitting and ready for the departing soul.

Nothing, perhaps, that Lawrence ever wrote in verse or prose is more moving than the vision of resurrection at the end of the poem:

> Wait, wait, the little ship
> drifting, beneath the deathly ashy grey
> of a flood-dawn.
>
> Wait, wait! even so, a flush of yellow
> and strangely, O chilled wan soul, a flush of rose.
>
> A flush of rose, and the whole thing starts again.
>
> * * * *
>
> The flood subsides, and the body, like a worn sea-shell
> emerges strange and lovely.
> And the little ship wings home, faltering and lapsing
> on the pink flood,
> and the frail soul steps out, into her house again
> filling the heart with peace.

Blackmur calls Lawrence's poems "ruins", though he admits that they are ruins which we may admire and contemplate.[30] The word "ruin" implies that Lawrence aimed at great constructions in verse and failed. This is, surely, a misconception. To aim at "great con-

structions" would have meant assuming the mask of a master-builder in verse and Lawrence saw that the age of masks (i.e. traditional form) in poetry was over. In his poetry we must look for "the insurgent naked throb of the instant moment", a poetry that is "neither star nor pearl but instantaneous like plasm". To convey this sort of experience with the greatest delicacy, the finest intelligence and the most complete honesty was his aim, and, after many unsuccessful and partly successful efforts, he achieved it in such poems as "Snake", "Almond Blossom", "Bavarian Gentians" and "The Ship of Death". Like Wordsworth he wrote a good deal of bad poetry, but, like Wordsworth's, even his bad poems are important, because they are the experiments of a major poet groping his way towards the discovery of a new kind of poetic art.

## REPTILES

"HOMER WAS wrong in saying, 'Would that strife might pass away from among gods and men!' He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the universe; for, if his prayer were heard, all things would pass away—for in the tension of opposites all things have their being—"

"For when Fire in its downward path chanced to mingle with the dark breath of the earth, the serpent slid forth, lay revealed. But he was moist and cold, the sun in him darted uneasy, held down by moist earth, never could he rise on his feet. And this is what put poison in his mouth. For the sun in him would fain rise half-way, and move on feet. But moist earth weighs him down, though he dart and twist, still he must go with his belly on the ground.—The wise tortoise laid his earthy part around him, he cast it round him and found his feet. So he is the first of creatures to stand upon his toes, and the dome of his house is his heaven. Therefore it is charted out, and is the foundation of the world."

## SNAKE

A snake came to my water-trough
On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there.

In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob-tree
I came down the steps with my pitcher
And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the trough before me.

He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the gloom
And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down, over the edge of the stone trough
And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,
And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small clearness,
He sipped with his straight mouth,
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body,
Silently.

Someone was before me at my water-trough,
And I, like a second comer, waiting.

He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,
And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,
And flickered his two-forked tongue from his lips, and mused a moment,
And stooped and drank a little more,
Being earth-brown, earth-golden from the burning bowels of the earth
On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking.

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 voices in me said, If you were a man
You would take a stick and break him now, and finish
him off.

But must I confess how I liked him,
How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink
at my water-trough
And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankless,
Into the burning bowels of this earth?

Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?
Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him?
Was it humility, to feel so honoured?
I felt so honoured.

And yet those voices:
*If you were not afraid, you would kill him!*

And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid,
But even so, honoured still more
That he should seek my hospitality
From out the dark door of the secret earth.

He drank enough
And lifted his head, dreamily, as one who has drunken,
And flickered his tongue like a forked night on the air, so
black,
Seeming to lick his lips,
And looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air,
And slowly turned his head,
And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice adream,
Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round
And climb again the broken bank of my wall-face.

And as he put his head into that dreadful hole,
And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and
entered farther,
A sort of horror, a sort of protest against his withdrawing
into that horrid black hole,
Deliberately going into the blackness, and slowly drawing
himself after,
Overcame me now his back was turned.

I looked round, I put down my pitcher,
I picked up a clumsy log
And threw it at the water-trough with a clatter.

I think it did not hit him,
But suddenly that part of him that was left behind con-
vulsed in undignified haste,
Writhed like lightning, and was gone
Into the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure in the wall-
front,
At which, in the intense still noon, I stared with fascination.

And immediately I regretted it.
I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!
I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human
education.

And I thought of the albatross,
And I wished he would come back, my snake.

For he seemed to me again like a king,
Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,
Now due to be crowned again.

And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords
Of life.
And I have something to expiate;
A pettiness.

*Taormina.*

## XI

## [THE LIVING QUETZALCOATL]

I am the Living Quetzalcoatl.
Naked I come from out of the deep
From the place which I call my Father,
Naked have I travelled the long way round
From heaven, past the sleeping sons of God.

Out of the depths of the sky, I came like an eagle.
Out of the bowels of the earth like a snake.

All things that lift in the lift of living between earth and sky, know me.

But I am the inward star invisible.
And the star is the lamp in the hand of the Unknown Mover.
Beyond me is a Lord who is terrible, and wonderful, and dark to me forever.
Yet I have lain in his loins, ere he begot me in Mother space.

Now I am alone on earth, and this is mine.
The roots are mine, down the dark, moist path of the snake.
And the branches are mine, in the paths of the sky and the bird,
But the spark of me that is me is more than mine own.

And the feet of men, and the hands of the women know me.
And knees and thighs and loins, and the bowels of strength and seed are lit with me.
The snake of my left-hand out of the darkness is kissing your feet with his mouth of caressive fire,
And putting his strength in your heels and ankles, his flame in your knees and your legs and your loins, his circle of rest in your belly.
For I am Quetzalcoatl, the feathered snake.
And I am not with you till my serpent has coiled his circle of rest in your belly.

And I, Quetzalcoatl, the eagle of the air, am brushing your faces
with vision.
I am fanning your breasts with my breath.
And building my nest of peace in your bones.
I am Quetzalcoatl, of the Two Ways.

## XII

## [WELCOME TO QUETZALCOATL]

We are not wasted. We are not left out.
*Quetzalcoatl has come!*
There is nothing more to ask for.
*Quetzalcoatl has come!*

He threw the Fish in the boat.
The cock rose, and crew over the waters.
The naked one climbed in.
*Quetzalcoatl has come!*

Quetzalcoatl loves the shade of trees.
Give him trees! Call back the trees!
We are like trees, tall and rustling.
*Quetzalcoatl is among the trees.*

Do not tell me my face is shining.
*Quetzalcoatl has come!*
Over my head his noiseless eagle
Fans a flame.

Tie my spotted shoes for dancing,
The snake has kissed my heel.
Like a volcano my hips are moving
With fire, and my throat is full.

Blue daylight sinks in my hair.
The star comes out between the two
Wonders, shines out of everywhere,
Saying without speech: Look you!

Ah, Quetzalcoatl!
Put sleep as black as beauty in the secret of my belly.
Put star-oil over me.
Call me a man.

## XIII

## [THE MID-DAY VERSE]

The sun has climbed the hill, the day is on the downward slope.
Between the morning and the afternoon, stand I here with my soul,
and lift it up.
My soul is heavy with sunshine, and steeped with strength.
The sunbeams have filled me like a honeycomb,
It is the moment of fulness,
And the top of the morning.

## XIV

## [THE DAWN VERSE]

The dark is dividing, the sun is coming past the wall.
Day is at hand.
Lift your hand, say Farewell! say Welcome!
Then be silent.
Let the darkness leave you, let the light come into you,
Man in the twilight.

## XV

## [THE SUNSET VERSE]

Leave off! Leave off! Leave off!
Lift your hand, say Farewell! say Welcome!
Man in the twilight.
The sun is in the outer porch, cry to him: Thanks! Oh, Thanks!
Then be silent.
You belong to the night.

## XVI

## [METAL FOR RESISTANCE]

Metal for resistance.
Drums for the beating heart.
The heart ceases not.

## XVII

## [FIRST SONG OF HUITZILOPOCHTLI]

I am Huitzilopochtli,
The Red Huitzilopochtli,
The blood-red.

I am Huitzilopochtli,
Yellow of the sun,
Sun in the blood.

I am Huitzilopochtli,
White of the bone,
Bone in the blood.

I am Huitzilopochtli,
With a blade of grass between my teeth.

I am Huitzilopochtli, sitting in the dark.
With my redness staining the body of the dark.

I watch by the fire.
I wait behind men.

In the stillness of my night
The cactus sharpens his thorn.
The grass feels with his roots for the other sun.