D. H. LAWRENCE'S 'SNAKE': A READING AND COMMENTARY

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D. H. Lawrence's novels have achieved such immense recognition, it is often unremarked that he wrote poetry throughout his career, publishing ten volumes of verse. His Complete Poems, in 3 volumes, contain over a thousand separate poems, not counting revisions and variations.[1] Among these, the collection which has received the most critical acclaim indisputably remains *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923).[2] The first six sections of this book were written in Taormina, Sicily, where Lawrence and his wife Frieda lived for two years, 1920-21; visits to Ceylon and Australia in 1922 supplied 'Elephant' and 'Kangaroo'; and the final three sections, dealing with American nature, were written in New Mexico the following year. *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* is unique among Lawrence's verse in that it does not explicitly depict his love life nor pontificate on everything under the sun. It contains sharp, clear focuses upon the natural world in all its multifaceted variety. Major poems are devoted to fruits (pomegranate, peach, fig, apple, grapes), trees (cypress, fig, almond), flowers (anemone, cyclamen, hibiscus, salvia), insects (mosquito), fish, reptiles (snake), birds (turkey, hummingbird, eagle, blue jay), amphibians (six acclaimed poems describing the life cycle of the tortoise), and a wide variety of mammals (ass, goat, elephant, kangaroo, dog, mountain lion, wolf), plus manifold references to other animals and plants. It is the quality of perception which is admired in these poems, not merely their unique subject matter. If we examine one of the most successful poems from the book, the much-anthologized 'Snake,' many of the strengths and weaknesses not only of Lawrence's poetry but also of his entire oeuvre may also be evident.

In the following essay, I propose two objectives. First, we will read 'Snake' *as a poem*, ignoring its authorship insofar as that is possible. Does it succeed, in terms of its own images and language? Is it credible? Can it stand alone, regardless of the massive weight of the novels lurking in the background? Secondly, we will turn to Lawrence's prose work as a commentary upon his own poem to illuminate the larger implications and consider whether *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* is indeed worthy of the critical acclaim it has achieved.

I: A READING OF THE POEM

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

A simple beginning: two strangers are drawn by a common need for water, on an intensely hot July day in Sicily. Suddenly and unexpectedly, two different species meet. The man's casual pyjamas contrast with the snake's regal nudity, giving a dream-like, surreal quality to the scene.

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.

An antimony of sun and shadow is established in the narrator's position paralleled by the snake who likewise descends from "the gloom." Both emerge from their natural homes to this half-way meeting place, drawn by a mutual imperative. But the snake is there first; the unspoken etiquette of the waterhole maintains that he has priority, suspending Darwinian competition.[3] The man must "stand," a forked animal somewhat ludicrous in pyjamas, immobile and observant, waiting his turn in a subservient position.

In contrast, the snake in stanza 3 ripples and undulates in unison with Lawrence's rhythmic free verse which uses many alliterative sibilants — *slackness, soft, stone, small, sipped, straight, softly, slack, silently.* The long sentence of the entire third stanza replicates the snake's sensuous, quicksilver presence. The snake conjoins two qualities: complete and utter alienness, a visitor from another dimension (as epitomized in the exquisite phrase "yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down," surely echoing Whitman);[4] yet possessing compellingly human anatomical features. The spellbound, pulsing poetic line comes to rest with the snake's head bending to touch the water in silence:

He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the gloom
And trailed his yellow-brown blackness 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.

The stunning intimacy of this act--both snakes and humans drink water, with tongue and gums and mouth--makes it impossible for the man to perceive the snake as either a mere beast or conventional evil. Suddenly we are in existential territory. From the very beginning, the snake is not an "it" but rather "he," a personal being. "*Someone* was before me at my water-trough, / And I, like a second-comer, waiting" [italics mine]. Man as the "second comer" must attend this ancient presence. And if the second coming here alludes to the Christian Apocalypse (which is likely, considering an entire section of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, 'The Evangelistic Beasts,' is devoted to an examination of the four emblematic animals of the Gospels), conjoined with the snake personifying the origin of existence, then the implication is that the end of time is now confronting the beginning.[5]

Stanza 5 deepens the hallucinatory atmosphere with almost cinematographic clarity:

He lifted his head from 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.

Here the snake's reptilian consciousness is recognized as sharing kinship with the rest of the animal kingdom, including man. To compare a poisonous snake with a placid domesticated cow is a brilliant metaphor based upon keen observation. The man concentrates intensely upon the snake, using the highly developed optical powers of human vision; the snake, on the contrary, barely acknowledges the man, has minimal eyesight, and instead depends upon more elemental senses atrophied in humans--snakes 'smell' with their tongues, and exist in a tactile tube of flesh. We might say that the man exists as a kind of dream-image on the periphery of the snake's consciousness, which remains an unknown. The man is the snake's hallucination. The heat of noon joins the inner heat of the invisible earth from which the snake has emerged. The core of the earth has turned inside out for a timeless instant, just as the active volcano of Etna suffuses the background of the poem, reawakening its ancient gods. Inner confronts outer. The moment is fraught with significance.

Stanza 6 initiates the second part of the poem: a debate within the man's mind on precisely how he should deal with this situation.

The voices of my education said to me
He must be killed,
For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous.

The weight of cultural training dictates that the snake should be killed, based presumably

on self-survival. Furthermore, these "voices" strike at the man's personal sense of male identity:

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

A conflict begins within the man from which the snake significantly is absent. For it is a struggle of the homo sapien mind torn between the dichotomy of Western civilization and the nondiscursive instincts of the body:

> 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 ?

By now the poem which began in a strictly naturalistic setting has become an interior monologue along the lines of, say, Browning, Frost, or even Hamlet's indecision. A simple matter of how to relate to a snake has expanded into an ethical dilemma. The Western — especially Italian ! — ethos of macho virility insists that *a real man* would kill a poisonous snake — ostensibly to protect family and community, but more essentially to prove his manhood. Violence becomes an initiation rite, a litmus test of masculinity, the strength of the male body pitted against an opponent, be it animal, other men or, we may presume, woman. Moreover, as Sandra M. Gilbert aptly points out, at this juncture in the poem Lawrence "turns to the reader to include him too (though as judge rather than adversary) in the dialectical process."[6] His questions implicitly demand our inclusion in his dilemma.

The man has three options. First, he could obey the voices of cultured education and kill the snake, or at least try. This is the 'proper' response sanctioned by society, what in fact many people all over the world automatically do whenever they see a snake. A second option, which he never even considers, is to get down on his hands and knees and drink with the snake, an act of apparent insanity, yet still a theoretical possibility representing the path taken by the shaman in pretechnological societies, which Lawrence admired.[7] The third option is simply to wait, a quality which all animals except man are very good at. Wait until the snake finishes drinking; wait and see what happens next, the natural sequence of things; be still, observant and present, a part of the landscape. Don't touch, don't think: just be there, an amanuensis, recording the actual as it enter's one's skin and senses.

The poem portrays an increasing tension whereby the shared wordless rapport developed in the first part comes under pressure from several sides at once, including the man's ambivalent desire to establish a more articulate, i. e. conscious and semantic, relationship with the snake. Now the fluid, interwoven lines are replaced by short, staccato sentences: [8]

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.

The man's ethical framework, his notions of what constitutes humanity, his diurnal consciousness, begins to disintegrate. He has become a repository of questions.[9] He admits his fear ("truly I was afraid, I was most afraid"), for the unspoken ground rule of this confrontation must be absolute honesty with oneself and with whatever one is encountering, in this case a deadly poisonous snake — yet he gropes toward a more holistic ethic which would accommodate a reverence for life (to use Schweitzer's phrase). In what is an obvious inversion of the Biblical prototype — the temptation scene of Genesis' Eden — it is the man's *human* voices which whisper in his ear to tempt him, not a snake's scripturally sonorous voice. This snake is mute, a pure molten silence. The choice is whether to condemn it as conventionally evil or to create a new paradigm of mutual coexistence. In this sense, the man is reenacting the most significant archetype of Western civilization. He is peering through the cracks of original sin, bequeathed a rare opportunity to regain primal innocence, as in Genesis the beasts of Eden and the newly created humans on the seventh day of Creation understood each others' language and rested together in perfect equipoise, neither hunter nor hunted, perceiver nor perceived. The split between creation conceivably can be healed.

Perhaps the man's internal debate could extend indefinitely. But by withdrawing into his ratiocinative mind, he has abstracted himself from what is occurring in front of him. By thinking, he has lost focus. The snake — more precisely, his image of it — has become blurred with conceptualizations. Suddenly he is snapped back to the present by the snake finishing drinking and moving once again into action. Just as the snake came naturally to the water, it now naturally departs:

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.

Here the epistemological quality of time and space alter, slowing so infinitesimally that they almost stop altogether, signifying that the man has become drawn at least partially into the snake's modality. He is wrenched away from discursive thought back into the overwhelming

reality of the snake's physical presence. The snake has become a kind of blind god or seer, like Rilke's Angels in *The Duino Elegies*. By repeating the word "slowly" and by emphasizing the dream-like quality of the snake's movement, Lawrence comes as close as he ever does to achieving a fusion between subject and object. The snake and the man seem one entity.

But this slow, inexorable movement is ironically away from the man, like an actor exiting the stage. In stanza 13, the third part of the poem begins. The man abruptly breaks the spell:

> 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.

It is now obvious that the poised balance of the previous interlude was partly caused by fear on the man's side, for he is able to act only when the snake is withdrawing. After all, he chooses the first easy option, in a knee-jerk reaction. By reverting to violence at this penultimate point, he fails on two counts: in terms of the macho voices, it's not 'cricket' to strike an enemy when his back is turned, even if it's a despicable snake; the unspoken law of the waterhole has been violated. Moreover, he betrays his previous fragile and precious communion with the snake.

> I think I did not hit him,
> But suddenly that part of him that was left behind convulsed in undignified haste,
> Writhed like lightning, and was gone

The lightning image links with the same association in stanzas 5 and 12. Just as the man loses status, so too the snake seems to abdicate its nobility, reduced from a mysterious King of the Underworld to a squirming reptile. Each participant in the drama slips back into its conventional role. All that's left is to pick up the pieces, arrange the incident into a nostalgic memory, draw a moral.

And what indeed happened ? Why did the man so abruptly throw a log ? The vivid description of stanza 13 indicates that he breaks the truce not merely in belated obedience to his sociocultural voices, but rather for other reasons. The poem advances two possible explanations.

The first is simply the fact that the snake leaves. The man isn't trying to kill it, but rather protest its departure. The snake's quicksilver Hericlidean flux[10] has been entered for a timeless instant of pure empathy. Both entities have shared awareness of each other in a continuum of tangibles: sun, shadow, water, breath, stillness. But now the snake returns to its own existence, oozing back into its own incomprehensible snake-existence where it originated. The mystical raptus is over, thank you. By disappearing — entering another dimension — the snake becomes more purely snake. Infuriated by it ignoring him, the man sees only one recourse to make his presence known: violence, which is what the voices dictated all along. Throwing "a clumsy log" with "a clatter" is a perverse form of communication to prove to the snake — and to himself — that he exists. He cannot endure the strain of sharing a mutual consciousness and then having it dissipate. After all, in the natural course of things it would now be his own turn to drink: the poem could end by him walking down to the water, filling his pitcher and returning home as naturally as did the snake to the earth, as calmly and majestically. But he is not capable of such a profoundly simple act, evidenced by his general clumsiness, broken mindedness throughout the interrogation, and sense of shame at the end. He resents the snake's departure; he desperately needs and yet is terrified of the snake-consciousness which now slowly leaks away into the unknown, outside his control. In short, he wants the snake to become part of his conscious mind, not merely a "king in exile," and throws the log to protest his own alienation from the whole of nature. It isn't fair — he can't follow the snake. The only burrow he can retreat into is his own mind, which we have seen from the conflicting questions is quite a mess.

However, a second interpretation must also be considered. Throughout the poem, the man is obsessed by the snake's burrow, which he calls a "fissure," "the dark door of the secret earth," "that dreadful hole," and finally

> the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure in the wall-front
> At which, in the intense still noon, I stared with fascination.

It is impossible to ignore that what is rather blatantly alluded to here is the man's inability to confront the erotic implications of the incident, when it reaches an explicit flashpoint.[11] The old truism of concave objects symbolizing female, and convex male, ignites anew. The man cannot tolerate the message which the snake has given him, tied up in some inarticulate way with the snake's relationship with its earthen home and its precise mode of navigating that entrance. In fact it is not the snake which bothers him so much as the hole into which it withdraws. Shattering the tableau, he is left staring at merely an empty symbol. Living flesh has been replaced by an image.

> 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.

Lawrence of course here alludes to Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner,' where the mariner kills an albatross and must undergo penance until he comes to experience even water-snakes as "God's creatures of the great calm."[12] This penance of wearing the dead albatross around his neck is further echoed in the poem's final stanza:

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

One wonders how the man will expiate himself. Perhaps by writing this poem?

II. COMMENTARY

THE SNAKE

Throughout his prose work, Lawrence repeatedly uses the snake as a living embodiment of pre-conscious, instinctual and spontaneous life which in modern man is largely repressed. By examining its recurrence we can explore a deeper reading of 'Snake.'

In the poem, the snake is at the water-trough before the man who is a "second comer" though he 'owns' the territory. That is, the snake as a species evolved prior to *homo sapian*: yet, since it obviously still very much exists, it embodies a still viable part of the human brain which later evolutionary layers are built around. This ancient consciousness persisting in the present is also portrayed in the poems 'Fish' ("born in front of my sunrise"), 'Humming-bird' ("in some other world / Primeval-dumb, far back / In that most awful stillness...") and the 'Tortoises' group ("Invincible fore-runner," its heartbeat "the first bell sounding / From the warm blood, in the dark-creation morning"). The man staring at the snake may be considered representative of "the upper mind losing itself in the lower first-mind, that which is last in consciousness reverting to that which is first."[13] In *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine*, Lawrence affirms the simultaneity of these two dimensions:

> We revolt from him [the snake], but we share the same life and tide of life as he. He struggles as we struggle, he enjoys the sun, he comes to the water to drink, he curls up, hides himself to sleep. And under the low skies of the far past aeons, he emerged a king of chaos, a long beam of new life.[14]

This echoes "a king of exile" of the poem, rejected from surface consciousness because it is a

part of ourselves which the civilized "voices of education" would rather not admit. In the above passage, Lawrence emphasizes the common ground between man and snake. It is clear that we are relatives, long-lost and distant. In the poem the fire of the burning earth emerges in the form of the snake to seek cool water, "for in the fusion of opposites all things have their being," as Lawrence's prose preface to 'Reptiles' states.[15] The snake has emerged from the interior to testify what is at its center. In intrapsychic terms, it has crawled out of the man himself to inform him what he truly is, as opposed to what he only thinks he is.

In the collection of travel essays, *Etruscan Places*, Lawrence elaborates on the snake as an emblem of chthonic energy:

> In the old world the center of all power was at the depths of the earth, and at the depths of the sea, while the sun was only a moving subsidiary body ... the serpent represented the vivid powers of the inner earth, not only such powers as volcanic and earthquake, but the quick powers that run up the roots of plants and establish the great body of the tree, the tree of life, and run up the feet and legs of man, to establish the heart ... [16]

That a rapport between man and this ancient power can be established even in our mechanistic twentieth century is documented by *Mornings in Mexico*, which describes a Hopi snake-dance in Arizona. The dancers hold snakes in their mouths in a relationship far more intimate than that related by Lawrence's poem (we remember the man was afraid to venture close to the snake). In doing so, they unite the two severed parts of human consciousness: "The snakes seemed strangely gentle, naive, wondering and almost willing, almost in harmony with the men."[17] To complete the ritual, the Hopis release the snakes to carry their prayers back to the "vast dark protoplasmic Sun from which issues all that feeds on life."[18] As a manifestation of that source, the snakes are "the source of potency ... of isolated being, round which our world coils its folds like a great snake."[19] The same symbolism is elaborated at length by Ramon in *The Plumed* Serpent, which uses the Quetzalcoatl legend. Lawrence admired pretechnological cultures such as Mexican and Amerindian for being keenly perceptive to this 'pre'-consciousness. Considering these larger mythological implications, the narrator of 'Snake' loses a vital source of potential power by rejecting the snake, which accounts for his chagrin and bitter realization of failure.

In the poem the snake is of the earth, a creature of darkness, almost blind, "like a god unseeing." The man observes intellectually, standing upright, through his eyes; the snake feels kinetically, on its belly, through its skin. If we tentatively sidestep Lawrence's attempts at a coherent and systematic cosmogony (almost as elaborate as Yeats), we find in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* that man carries this animal consciousness specifically within his solar plexus, of which the snake is a distillation because it is almost totally spinal cord. "Below the waist, we have our being in darkness. Below the waist we are sightless."[20] Our true consciousness, Lawrence asserts, is in the loins and belly, not the head: "Vision is perhaps our highest form of

dynamic upper consciousness. But our deepest lower consciousness is blood-consciousness."[21] Lawrence's novels constantly reiterate this insistence on blood-consciousness integral to the very biological cells which form living tissue.

The crucial tactical problem, however, remains: how can one integrate blood-consciousness? The snake comes and goes of its own accord, independent of the man's will. Can the man in some sense assimilate it, without being poisoned?

THE VOICES OF EDUCATION

"*If you were not afraid, you would kill him!* — " — "If you were a man —". In the poem these mocking internal voices prevent a liaison with the snake. In his novels Lawrence presents this conflict with savagely realistic detail in several different aspects: idealized romantic love destroying physical passion; the adult interfering with the child's process of natural growth, stunting for life; the horrors of industrial urban society severing our roots with nature and our own instincts; and perhaps most insidious, the nominal psychology of the mind itself torn between what may simply be called the conscious and subconscious. Instead of living from our spontaneous centers and vivified senses, supported by our environment, we live solely in our heads, at odds with the exterior, estranged from the roots of our own being.

Essentially this is the age-old antimony of body and mind. In *Apropos of Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lawrence states, "The mind's terror of the body has probably driven more men mad than ever could be counted."[22] In 'Snake' we see how a delicate balance is destroyed. Throughout Lawrence's work, the male protagonist especially evidences fear of the mystery of the Other; therefore he interjects a barrier which comfortably explains it away, be it the presence of authority, education, rules, morality, stultifying British gentility, science, or institutionalized religion. This isn't a strict opposition of reason versus intuition, for a wide gamut of mental voices compete for attention, some of which question (for example, in stanza 9 of the poem) their own validity. We fear the snake because it is exiled, and exile it because we fear it. Our alienation forms a doomed circle, the Ouroboros consuming its own tail, in contrast with the natural snake calmly entering its burrow. As Jan Todd puts it, "The snake has achieved its full potential as a life form moving freely above and below ground; the man divided between the voice of education and his blood instinct is still struggling to fulfill himself."[23]

Ironically, education should permit the confrontation with otherness:

> The supreme lesson of human consciousness is to learn how not to know. That is, how not to interfere ... how to live dynamically, from the great Source, and not statically, like machines driven by ideas and principles from the head.[24]

But instead it does the exact opposite, desiccating the imagination and deadening the senses. Lawrence considered this crime of civilization so great that most of his creative life was en-

gaged in fighting it. In fact he went so far as to insist that the vast majority of people should never learn to read or write, which evokes his own illiterate miner father.

If the voices hadn't interfered, the poem might end somewhat as envisioned in stanza 8, with the snake leaving "peaceful, pacified, and thankless." This actually did happen to Lawrence once, as he relates in a letter of 1916; it contains the same elements as the poem, yet here the voices of education are conspicuously absent:

> I saw a beautiful brindled adder, in the spring, coiled up asleep with her head on her shoulder. She did not hear me till I was very near. Then she must have felt my motion, for she lifted her head like a queen to look, then turned and moved slowly and with delicate pride into the bushes. She often comes into my mind again, and I think I see her asleep in the sun, like a Princess of the fairy world. It is queer, the intimations of other worlds, which one catches.[25]

The difference is: this is a letter, written casually to a friend, quite lovely and quite forgettable; whereas 'Snake' is a consummately crafted poem which continues to reverberate 75 years after it was written. One wonders whether the presence of dramatic conflict is necessary for Lawrence's verse to achieve its optimum form.

"THE EXQUISITE FRAIL MOMENT OF PURE CONJUNCTION": THE PRESENCE OF THE OTHER

> How marvellous is the living relationship between man and his object! be it man or woman, bird, beast, flower or rock or rain: the exquisite frail moment of pure conjunction which, in the fourth dimension, is timeless.[26]

So Lawrence states in *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine.* We have seen one such epiphany in the poem 'Snake.' To be sure, it cannot be maintained; but does that matter if it is, in essence, timeless ? A conjunction results when two separate entities unexpectedly become aware of each other, as if for the first time.[27] Each brushes against the original mystery which the other embodies. We note that this must occur *outside* the central perceiver for him to recognize it as being buried also deep *within.* Man meets snake; the potential danger intensifies the collision, strips the man down to his core. Again Lawrence's letters are helpful:

> We want to realize the tremendous *non-human* quality of life ... it is wonderful. It is not the emotions, nor the personal feelings and attachments, that matter. These are all only expressive, and expression has become mechanical. Behind in all are the tremendous unknown forces of life, coming unseen and unperceived ... [28]

Throughout his work, this emphasis on the Other recurs vividly in three basic formulations: between man and woman, human and creative art, and human and animal.

The conjunction between man and woman, extensively analyzed in Lawrence, is perhaps the most precipitously available method to encounter the absolute, but also invariably doomed to defeat. "Sex is our deepest form of consciousness. It is utterly non-ideal, non-mental. It is pure blood-consciousness."[29] In our poem the snake personifies woman (despite its pronoun "he") by its supple fluid movement, attributes of earth and passivity and darkness, its eerie hypnogogic state ("and mused a moment" — "very slowly, as if thrice adream"). It recalls Lawrence's description of a woman after love, in his essay *On Being a Man*: "the strange, slumberous, serpentine realization, which knows without thinking."[30] In order to connect with the feminine polarity, the man must establish a shared rapprochement with her snake-nature, while at the same time — and this is the tricky part — retaining his separate identity: "being alone in peace means two people together ... Me in my silence, she in hers, and the balance, the equilibrium, the pure circuit between us."[31]

But the snake is venomous, and man is the planet's most vicious killer. Both can maim or destroy the other. This danger also is inherent within the conjunction of man/woman. The sheer unknown quality of otherness is terrifying; yet it must be permitted if any fruitful interchange is to occur. To blunt or deny the lethal implications of the confrontation is to nullify each participant. Lawrence constantly raged against the modern equation of sexuality with "smarmy" sentimental idealisms which emasculate; and more essentially, the draining-away of nocturnal blood-awareness in favour of diurnal egocentricism. Sexuality joins us to a common protoplasmic stream flowing through all the creatures of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It is inherently volatile.

> We have to meet as I meet a jaguar between the trees in the mountains, and advance, and touch, and risk it. When man and woman actually meet, there is always terrible risk to both of them. Risk for her, lest her womanhood be damaged by the dark dark stone which is unchangeable in his soul. Risk for him, lest the serpent drag him down, coiled round his neck, and kissing him with poison.[32]

And in the poem 'She Said as Well to Me,' the narrator rejects a lover's banal familiarity with his body with the following animal metaphors:

> Don't touch me and appreciate me.
> It is an infamy.
> You would think twice before you touched a weasel on a fence as it lifts its straight white throat.
> Your hand would not be so flig and easy.
> Nor the adder we saw asleep with her head on her shoulder, curled up in the sunshine like a princess;
> when she lifted her head in delicate, startled wonder
> you did not stretch forward to caress her

though she looked rarely beautiful
and a miracle as she glided delicately away, with such dignity.[33]

Here the miracle of conjunction between human and snake is not shattered by interference; whereas the relationship between the man and woman is destroyed by routinism and idealisms as deadly as any weapon.

The second major type of conjunction which Lawrence considers is the nexus of human/art. In the preface to his collected poems (1928), he speaks of the demon behind all real poetry, echoing Plato's remarks in *The Republic* that all true poets are mad and should obey their *daimon*:

> A young man is afraid of his demon and puts his hand over the demon's mouth sometimes and speaks for him. And the things a young man says are very rarely poetry. So I have tried to let the demon say his say, and to remove the passages where the young man ... interfered with his demon.[34]

This explanation of his revising practise — the poems of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* remained unrevised — refers to his early use of formal poetic forms such as rhyme, fixed meter and stanzaic units, at which he was atrocious, influenced by the Georgian poets and Hardy. But if we substitute "snake " for "demon," we see how the immature poet destroys the wellsprings of his own creative power by the intervention of control and orthodoxy.

One might well ask, however, whether the demon snake truly has his say in Lawrence's verse, revised or not ? To answer this question, it is necessary to turn to Lawrence's third basic conjunction between the human and non-human: the encounter between man and animal, the basic structural principle of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. The book has been almost unanimously praised as containing the best of Lawrence's verse. Commentators repeatedly emphasize his uncanny ability to project himself into the skin of an animal — a type of pure mimesis — returning with (smuggling back, as it were) a poem. As Huxley observes:

> he seemed to know, by personal experience, what it was like to be a tree or a daisy or a breaking wave or even the mysterious moon itself. He could get inside the skin of an animal and tell you in the most convincing detail how it felt and how, dimly, inhumanly, it thought.[35]

Critics across the board have fallen into line and repeat the same refrain. Graham Hough sees an increasing ability in Lawrence to talk with his animal subjects as the book progresses: the poems are "so independent of literary tradition that the ordinary categories will hardly serve us ... They begin with close and delicate observation — an observation so intent and so submissive to the real nature of the external object that all mere subjective effusion is burned

away."[36] M. J. Lockwood describes the book as "Lawrence's best and most sustained achievement in verse" and supports his claim by detailed analysis.[37] W. H. Auden states, "Lawrence's writing is so transparent that one forgets him entirely and simply sees what he saw."[38] John Lucus maintains that Lawrence invented a new genre of poetry: "Such language is *absolutely* about what it sees, is wholly attentive. John Clare apart, there is no English poet who can match Lawrence's entire responsiveness to, his complete absorption in, the otherness of life to which he attends in these poems."[39] Keith Sagar, supporting his claim for Lawrence as a great poet, points to "almost occult penetrations into the being of other creatures ... He goes to the very pale of his being, of human consciousness, and looks outward."[40] We could extend these citations at length, for literally hundreds of books discuss Lawrence's poetry,[41] remarking on the uniqueness of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* in English literature — with Rilke representing the European counterpart — in that it eschews focus upon the subjective self as the measure of all things, and turns instead to the non-human world.

It is undeniable that a handful of the poems in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* succeed brilliantly along these lines. Our reading of 'Snake' has illustrated how skillfully Lawrence can write free verse. Yet what is generally overlooked in the hubbub of critical acclaim is the sheer amount of embarrassingly bad poetry which could never stand on its own unless we knew its author was the famous D. H. Lawrence and therefore the poems must ipso facto be significant. What is most disturbing from my point of view is the predominance of poems in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* which depict a *failure* to communicate with their subject. The "voices of accursed human education" which compel the narrator to throw a log at the snake and send it ignominously fleeing recur again and again in these poems which purportedly are models of animal empathy. 'Mosquito' ends with the speaker crushing the audacious insect who has sucked his blood. The much-praised 'Fish,' after entertaining flippant musings on fish psychology for several pages, reveals that it is a fish dying of suffocation that he is examining, caught with a rod and writhing in his hand. We murder to dissect. One cannot help comparing this premise with the exquisite description in T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* of Arthur's apprenticeship to Merlin where 'Wart' is transformed into a fish and learns its ways. One of the most successful poems in Lawrence's collection, 'Mountain Lion,' describes the corpse of a cougar killed by Mexicans. It is so much easier to eulogize a dead specimen — the living animal has a tendency to wiggle away, keep a low profile, understandably in view of human animosity toward it. In 'Man and Bat,' Lawrence makes little attempt to understand the bat's unique being, but rejects it outright in disgust at its ugliness and "obscenity." The same distorting voices of education intrude, repelling the bat ("*But no. / Out, you beast*" is hardly an apposite phrase for a book exploring the interface of man and animal). Fortunately the bat escapes with its life, though Lawrence chases and clubs it around the room until it almost dies of exhaustion. Lawrence's mock-heroic tone deliberately ridicules himself, of course, and is intended to be funny, but the effect for this reader at least is alienation from such obtusity, downright meanness and cruelty. Again, we could compare this pathetic scene to a corresponding work, Randall Jarrell's *The Bat Poet*, with its lovely central poem ("A bat is born") entering the bat's mind with sensi-

tivity and acceptance of the variants of creation.[42] A new genre ? One wonders how much contemporary 'nature poetry' Lawrence critics have read, let alone John Clare or Christopher Smart's 'In Praise of My Cat Geoffery.' One need only point to the superb work of Theodore Roethke, W. S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, Gary Snyder, Pablo Neruda, Denise Levertov, William Stafford, Charles Simac, John Haines, Robert Hass, Wendell Berry, Hayden Carruth, A. R. Amons, and scores of others whose explorations of the unknownness of the non-human make Lawrence's collection seem ludicrously amateur.

Perhaps more destructive to his avowed purpose, Lawrence uses unabashedly anthropomorphic images and a constant barrage of extraneous commentary to describe his menagerie. One is never quite sure whether one is looking at an animal or a metaphor. The elephant, for example, is never presented as a breathing presence with its own authenticity, but rather as a grab-bag for political ruminations: "the little, cunning pig-devil of the elephant's lurking eyes, the unbeliever" goes on to read like a ranting propaganda tract. We could quote passages in this connection at length, from the tortoise so cute as "the first mathematical gentleman / Stepping, wee mite, in his loose trousers," to the goat walking "like a woman going to mass," to the straining for humour in the Ass's translated voice. These animals are humanized out of existence; they serve merely as emblems for fableaux, like *Aesop's Fables*, undoubtedly a major influence upon the work. They provide convenient coathangers for Lawrence to hang his polemical exhortations about society, relationships, politics, ad infinitum. Invariably the poems of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* take the form of direct apostrophe, addressing the subject as "you," which automatically locks it into a rigid subject/object dichotomy, then mocking it as pompous and ridiculous. Lawrence's characteristic voice is strident, dogmatic, coy, glib and loquacious, a kind of precocious schoolboy-turned-teacher, with always too much to lecture. Contrary to the critics' admiration, he seems incapable of pure observation except — and here is the saving grace — in brief, frenetic snatches; his mind works furiously behind the scene, regurgitating the animal into dogma. Needless to say, this is the opposite of mimesis.[43]

One is reminded of Yeats' remark that rhetoric is formed of quarrels with others, whereas genuine poetry is formed of a quarrel with oneself. There is nothing wrong with publishing bad poems, if they serve as stepping-stones to good ones, and certainly a handful of poems in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* contain the ineluctable, glittering edges of solid perception from which language itself originates and is not merely applied as a lacquer. 'Snake' succeeds because its focus remains recognizably a snake, not merely an emblem. We can see the snake lifting its head and pausing as it shares a concatenation of awareness with the watching man in his pyjamas, as freshly now as when it first occurred. It first occurs here, in this poem, because it is tangible and impervious to the voices of education which attempt to possess it by turning it into an explicit object of literary contemplation. Rhetoric cannot net this snake; it is too powerful, and the narrator is obviously in too much awe to inflict his customary whitenoise of commentary. The fact that it is poisonous cuts through Lawrence's chatter. He cannot afford the luxury of sitting back and ruminating on its sociological significance because it might just

start moving toward him when it finishes drinking, and then he would really have a problem. The speaker *must* be aware, or he may die. Therefore he sees clearly, and the poem flows directly from this lucid vision. In the final analysis, we conclude that the poet's responsibility is simply to perceive, altering nothing, above all not through words. When this occurs, the requisite vital language may or may not flow from the fusion of perceiver and perceived — in a way, it doesn't matter, because silence and language at this penultimate level are one — but if it does, it will be a poem.

NOTES

1) *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (London: Heinemann, 1964, rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

2) *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (London: Secker, 1923). The edition I use for this paper (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1992) reproduces Lawrence's first edition, with the restoration of quite a few lines expurgated in 1923 as indecent. The six poems of 'Tortoises' were originally published as a separate chapbook and added to the European edition. Lawrence continued sporadically to write several poems which belong generically to *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, such as 'Whales Weep Not !,' 'Swan,' 'Andraitx — Pomegranate Flowers,' 'Butterfly,' "The Elephant is Slow to Mate,' and 'Bavarian Gentians.'

3) For descriptions of how animals interact peacefully while sharing a precious water source, see Laurens Van der Post's books on the Kalahari desert, particularly *The Heart of the Hunter* (London : Hogarth P, 1961). There is also an essay by Lwelyn Powys, the brother of the more famous John Cowper Powys, which describes a hare drinking water, watched by a man. I'm unable to document this reference, read long ago, but wonder if perhaps Lawrence may have been aware of it.

4) Whitman was fond of multiple adjectives, for example, "blind loving wrestling touch, sheath'd hooded sharp-toothed touch" (*Song of Myself*, 29). Lawrence revered Whitman as he did few peers, and many critics remark on Whitman's obvious influence. *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* was written just after the Great War when Lawrence, embittered by the slaughter, withdrew into the vibrant nature of the Mediterranean in contempt for what he regarded as the stupidity and colossal waste of Western civilization. In this sense, the following lines of Whitman's *Song of Myself* (32), composed after the American Civil war, are equally germane to the genesis of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*:

> I think I could turn and live with the animals, they are so placid and self-contained,
> I stand and look at them long and long.
>
> They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
> They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
> They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
> Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
> Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
> Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

5) See John 4. 4-42, where Jesus rests at Jacob's well and meets a woman of Samaria who has come to draw water. She is astonished that he speaks to her, as Jews and Samaritans normally are enemies. Lawrence may be referring to this biblical passage, as his snake too is a prophet.

6) *Acts of Attention: The Poems of D. H. Lawrence* (Ithaca: Cornel UP, 1972) 134.

7) For a vivid description of shamanic initiation into the animal world, see Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan : A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Berkeley : U of Calif. P, 1968) where the apprentice literally gets down on hands and knees and drinks with a dog, in a brilliant kaleidoscopic fusion.

8) The rhythmic vitality of Lawrence's free verse in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* has been recognized as a powerful achievement by many commentators. See, for example, Vivian de Sola Pinto, who observes how 'Snake' "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 sensuous 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" (Introduction to *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, 14). I suspect that Lawrence was able to write better with the long rhythmic cadential line, rather than short traditional metric, because it was closer to prose.

9) In the Socratic sense, to pose an increasingly focused cycle of questions originating from and pointing back to the pure substratum of ignorance constitutes the beginning of authentic knowledge. See Joyce Carol Oates: "Questions, and not answers, are Lawrence's real technique, just as the process of thinking is his subject matter, not any formalized structures of art." (*The Hostile Sun: The Poetry of D. H. Lawrence*, Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1973) 21.

10) The snake with its combination of stillness and motion is an excellent embodiment of flux. As long as the narrator doesn't attempt to transfix its fluidity, the instant stretches timeless; the present isn't chopped apart into the pseudo-scientific chronology of cause-and-effect which Lawrence despised.

11) In his prose-preface to 'Fruits,' added to the Cressnet Press edition (1930), Lawrence states the obvious: "The fig has been a catch-word for the female fissure for ages." Again, in 'Fig,' "the fissure, the yoni ..."

12) Coleridge's vivid description of the fiery water-snakes may be a deliberate analogue behind Lawrence's poem. Coleridge describes the Mariner's pivotal moment of redemption as follows:

> Beyond the shadow of the ship,
> I watched the water-snakes:
> They moved in tracks of shining white,
> And when they reared, the elfish light
> Fell off in hoary flakes.
>
> Within the shadow of the ship
> I watched their rich attire:
> Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
> They coiled and swam; and every track
> Was a flash of golden fire.
>
> O happy living things ! no tongue

Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware ...

The word which the Mariner uses to describe his penance, "expiate" (Pt. VI, stanza 10, gloss) is also used by Lawrence: "And I have something to expiate." Other parallels are the intense heat and suspension of time encountered at the equator in Coleridge's ballad, plus the positive emphasis given to silence in the Mariner's final vision of angelic spirits: "No voice; but oh! the silence sank / Like music on my heart." The snake likewise exists in crystalline silence. It's interesting to compare the Mariner's fate of "ever and anon throughout his future life an agony constraineth him to travel from land to land" echoed in Lawrence's perpetual exile, traveling between continents and living in countless rented houses.

Commentators usually cite the popular hymn 'Now the Day is Over' as the origin of Laurence's title for *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, but perhaps Lawrence got it from the Mariner's final admonition, "He prayeth well, who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast."

13) *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1921) 52. Lawrence's two books on psychology — this and *Fantasia of the Unconscious* — were both written during his stay in Sicily, where most of the poems of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* were also written. They provide both a helpful commentary and an explanation why so many of the poems veer toward psychonalytical musings which, in my view, distort their lens of pure attention.

14) *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine* (London, 1934), in *Phoenix II*, ed. Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore (London: Heinemann, 1968).

15) Perhaps Lawrence was referring to Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, where "Without Contraries is no progression" (pl. 3).

16) *Etruscan Places* (London: Heinemann, 1965) 107.

17) *Mornings in Mexico* (London: Seckner, 1927, rpt. Heinemann, 1965) 74.

18) Ibid, 76.

19) Ibid, 68.

20) *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (Seltzer, 1922) 65. The kangaroo in the poem of that name in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* also possesses this attribute of earth-centered hara-energy: "Leap then, and come down on the line that draws to the earth's deep, heavy centre."

21) Ibid, 265.

22) *Phoenix II*, 491.

23) D. H. Lawrence: *Selected Poems* (Oxford UP, 1993) 121.

24) *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, 98.

25) *The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, 2 vols. ed. Harry T. Moore (New York: Viking Press, 1962) 486. "Intimations of other worlds" recalls Keats' famous letter of Oct. 1818: "The roaring of the wind is my wife and the Stars through the window pane are my children ... I feel more and more everyday, as my imagination strengthens, that I do not live in this world alone but in a thousand worlds." In both writers, otherworldly presences are refracted in the manifold consciousnesses surrounding one at any single instant in this world when it is observed with the pure senses, from spider to trees to animals.

26) *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine*, in *Phoenix II*, 434.

27) The American paleontologist Dr. Loren Eisley, in *The Immense Journey* (67), attributes this heightened sense of perception of the Other to a "shift" from frontal to peripheral vision, experi-

enced by both sides. "To see from an inverted angel, however, is not a gift allotted merely to the human imagination. I have come to suspect that within their degrees it is sensed by animals, though perhaps as rarely as among men. The time has to be right; one has to be, by chance or intention, upon the borders of two worlds. And sometimes these two borders may shift or interpenetrate and one sees the miraculous."

28) *The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, 291.

29) *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, 256.

30) *Phoenix II*, 620.

31) *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, 197.

32) *Phoenix II*, 620.

33) *Collected Poems*, 255.

34) Preface to *Collected Poems*, in *The Collected Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, 28.

35) Quoted by William Cole in his introduction to *D. H. Lawrence* (New York: Viking Press, 1967).

36) *The Dark Sun: A Study of D. H. Lawrence* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co.,, 1956, rpt. 1968) 205-06.

37) *A Study of the Poems of D. H. Lawrence: Thinking in Poetry* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).

38) *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963. rpt. 1975) 291-2. Auden's essay was influential in rescuing Lawrence's reputation as a credible poet, but both writers are essentially discursive, more at home in the world of ideas than the outdoors or the sharp incisive images and music of lyric poets.

39) *D. H. Lawrence: Selected Poetry and Non-fictional Prose*, ed. John Lucus, 'Introduction' 19.

40) *D. H. Lawrence: Poems*, selected and introduced by Keith Sagar (London: Penguin, 1972, rev. 1986) 'Introduction' 15.

41) For a comprehensive listing, see the appendix "The Criticism of D. H. Lawrence's Poetry: A Bibliography," in M. J. Lockwood's *A Study of the Poems of D. H. Lawrence: Thinking in Poems*, 214-30.

42) *The Bat Poet* (New York: Macmillan PC, 1963). This and *The Animal Family* are the last works that Jarrell wrote before his death, generally regarded as suicide.

43) One could go further and note that throughout Lawrence's novels as well, he oscillates between a lyric receptivity to the spirit of place, as opposed to polemical outrage and social analysis. This quieter side of Lawrence — evidenced by brief, sharp, vibrant interjections of landscape and the natural world — is almost buried beneath the violent emotions of the characters. It is given full expression only in his travel essays, a situation similar to Lawrence Durrell.

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