

Birds, Beasts And Flowers: The Unexplored World of Experience: Quest for Poetic Experience

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Abstract

Lawrence was an artist of young instinctive love, pains, natural pleasures, stillness and warmth with the same mellowness that we can find in his about thirty volumes that he wrote in eighteen years, besides travelling all over the world and living astonishingly full life.

His unrhyming poems under the section *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* that he started at San-Gervasionear, Florence in Sept. 1920 (and completed it by the end of Feb. 1923) throw light on his originality of instincts. Lawrence wrote these poems in free verse which became popular in New Mexico, Italy, Sicily, and in several other countries.

The poems in this section are divided into nine groups and are based on John Burnett's famous book, *Early Greek Philosophy*, which was given to Lawrence by Bertrand Russell. These poems are by-products and through these poems, Lawrence, for the first time has expressed his poetic genius which can hardly find its place in the prose. The mystery and originality of these poems represent the intuitive behaviour of the creatures either when they attack or retire, and establish Lawrence as a prolific seer poet. 'Snake', 'Turtle', 'Mosquito', 'Bat', 'Eagle' and many other poems have sensuous and darting lines and reveal the ancient embodiment of the life force principle and explore indomitable sacred embodiment of the element energy that man must find in himself. Lawrence's perception of man is a part of nature in which man as biological species is different from the other species only on basis of certain frailty and imperfect contrivances such as language, instincts of lust or aggression which stirred inside him. He feels himself as a scarcely civilized creature capable of surviving only if he acknowledges and reconciles the best within.

These poems bring out Lawrence's impatience with formal principles of poetic composition. It is a bursting intensity, a heat of emotions, which simply overflows through these poems.

Lawrence is an innovative and intuitive poet who is different from the Romantic tradition of nature poets. To him, nature is a source of reality but not a source of morality. His genius as a poet makes him a milestone of English poetry. He is of the view that the non-human world can teach us much about the dignity of life or the naturalness of behaviour. He enters the non-human world of birds, beasts and plants and his growing sympathy for them becomes more marked by his awareness of the 'Unknown Forces' or 'the creative mystery' symbolized by them. The dark mysticism verging on the erotic mysticism is abundantly manifest in his poems. He understood the predatory instincts in all living beings and as for trees and flowers, he encompasses even them in his principle of animism. After a long struggle Lawrence is successful in achieving 'the hidden emotional pattern' in his poetry. A sense of objectivity is discernable in the poet's concentration in observing a particular creature or plant.

To Lawrence, we live in a strange and surging world of chaos, and we try to safeguard ourselves against such chaos. But Lawrence sees a vision of life through such chaotic conditions which are inevitable conditions for existence. He believes that true poetry bursts all the bubbles and umbrellas of reality and gives us a breath of the live chaos. Poetry is neither an expression of sound and image, nor it is made of words, forms or techniques, but it consists of the live chaos which makes the poetry distinguished. Therefore, a true poet cannot accept the imposed restrictions of standard poetic forms. A true poet is a liberator of soul and spirit beyond the superficial formal limitations of the world. According to Lawrence, true poetry deals with the 'present' which is still unconquerable. He rejects the sense of completeness, consummation and finality in art. He adopts the concept of becoming rather than being. His purpose is to project a powerful emotional conviction and the ever-changing tide of emotions in life. Lawrence's sole concern is to wake up the emotions in many people as much as possible. All the emotions of love emerging from our belief in flesh and blood can only lead to reality.

Through this paper I have tried to introduce the readers with expressions of more astonishing strokes of his natural genius. Images come one after another, which reflect Lawrence's brain in their original splendor and without ornament. Lawrence definitely, is one of the most comprehensive poets who does not care whether he hits the nail on the head or swings the hammer more and more lustily in the sky, still people admire his curve of expressing emotions as a powerful weapon of poetry. He is also a powerful thinker and his really great

power embodies his imagination. One can find passages of splendid beauty which confronts the readers with the savage magnificence of nature and gives a vivid sense of personal experience in abundance and roughness of natural life when he glorifies the intuitive description of the lioness:

So, she will never leap up that way again, with the yellow

Hash of a mountain lions long shoot!

And her bright striped frost-face will never watch any more, out of the shadow of the cave in the blood-orange rock.

Above the trees of the Lobo dark valley-mouth! ¹

It would be hard to beat such realizations and Lawrence frequently uses them in his poetry.

In fact, Lawrence was a prolific and instinctive poet even in his treatment of nature. His close description of flowers (Bavarian Gentians) or animals (Snake, Kangaroo, Bat, Mountain Lion, Fish) penetrate into the essence of living things and are among the most carefully observed depictions of nature in English poetry. He ranged from descriptive poetry to love poetry, from light satirical verse to philosophical meditation (The Ship of Death). Had his reputation not been made by his novels, Lawrence would be remembered as an important poet of the 1920's even beyond the poetic currents of his times.

Though there is no argument or any Introduction given to this Collection yet this Collection, as a whole, is very carefully organized which begins with 'Fruits' moving through 'Trees', 'Flowers', 'Evangelical Beasts', 'Creatures', 'Reptiles', 'Birds' and 'Animals' to 'Ghosts'. The Collection manifests the same energy and the same urge as in men. Lawrence, through 'Birds, Beasts and Flowers' by presenting psychological processes in terms of natural ones, produces a fundamental connection. Viewing man from the perspective of nature as one manifestation of the life process through myths, Lawrence tries to point out that the intercourse between sun and seed, man and soil is analogous to the intercourse between man and women - including the seasons of moods, the cycles of fertility, the periods of gestation and the terms of birth. So, human sexuality miniatures the cosmos in Lawrence.

Lawrence through these poems narrates his dangerous unorthodox attitude in the religious sense. The title 'Birds, Beasts and Flowers', seems to be taken from S. Baring Gould's 'Evening Hymn', the second stanza of which reads as such:

Now the darkness gathers.
Stars begin to peep.
Birds and beasts and flowers
Soon will be asleep.²

On the basis of Burnett's *'Early Greek Philosophy'*, Lawrence in 1930 prefaced the section *'Birds, Beasts and Flowers'* with the title *'Fruits'* as such:

For fruits are all of them female, in them lies the seed. And so when they break and show the seed, then we look into the womb and see its secrets. So, it is that the pomegranate is the apple of love to the Arab, and the fig has been a catch-word for the female fissure for ages. I don't care a fig for it! men say. But why a fig? The apple of Eden, even, was Eve's fruit. To her it belonged, and she offered it to the man. Even the apples of knowledge are Eve's fruit, the woman's. But the apples of life the dragon guards, and no woman gives them....

No sin is it to drink as much as a man can take and get home without a servant's help, so he be not stricken in years.³

In this section, the poems range from short lyrics like *'Peach'* to long quasi-philosophical, reflective poems such as *'Fish'* and from humorously autobiographical encounters such as *'Mosquito'* to the poignant evocations of sexuality in the *'Tortoise'* poems. Combining all together, they form one of the most individual and exciting volumes of English poetry of the present century.

Though the first section is called *'Fruits'* yet it includes the poems like *'The Revolutionary'*, *'The Evening Land'* and *'Peace'* which make the section paradigmatic. The first poem of this beautiful section is *'Pomegranate'* that starts with an important statement of Lawrence when he enquires:

You tell me I am wrong
Who are you, who is anybody to tell me
I am wrong? I am not wrong".⁴

The *'You'* in the poem stands for the Victorian English Society in which the poet was grown up. But the same society has now exiled him out because he is not fit for the present society and is somehow wrong. But through next verse Lawrence is determined to challenge the society which itself is unmistakably wrong as it refuses to see the dangerous suggestive sexual fissure, the crack in the surface of the phenomenal world:

Do you mean to tell me you will see no fissure?
Do you prefer to look on the plain side?
For all that, the setting suns are open.
The end cracks open with the beginning:
Rosy, tender, glittering within the fissure.
Do you mean to tell me there should be no fissure?
No glittering, compact drops of dawn?
Do you mean it is wrong, the gold-filmed skin, integument,
shown ruptured?⁵

The Christian society of Lawrence insists on looking at the plain side of life from where there is no nourishment and no entrance into the mysteriously flaming realm behind the 'setting sun'. His heart is broken while eating the fruit:

For my part, I prefer my heart to be broken,
It is so lovely, dawn-kaleidoscopic within the crack.⁶

The poem like few other poems of 19th century poets like Keats's *'La Belle Dame Sans Mercy'*, Christina Rossetti's *'Goblin Market'* etc. that tells stories of eating of strange fruits or roots etc. connects partially to the same tradition of eating the fruit. He thus revises the myth of the fall of Persephone, the queen of the underworld.

In fact, his poems turn to be as an essential story or history, or confession, unfolding one from the other organic development in an organized way. He believes that the resurrection of an individual's soul is within the living body. He recognizes the law of nature and considers man in terms of love and sex. He is a love revolutionary and a rebel. He also recognizes the entity of soul: the 'naked footed' soul. Sex is the flame of life which should not be put off by a man. Lawrence hopes that our civilization must not extinguish this divine flame. It is noteworthy to quote the famous poem *'Figs'*. Every fruit, Lawrence says in this poem, has its secret. It seems to be male but for romance it is female:

The fig is a very secretive fruit.
As you see it standing growing, you feel at once it is symbolic:
And it seems male.
But when you come to know it better, you agree with the
Romans, it is female.⁷

The flowering of the fruit is all 'inward' and womb-fibrilled. Now there is a fruit like a ripe womb:

The flowering all inward and womb-fibrilled;

And but one orifice.

The fig, the horse-shoe, the squash-blossom.

Symbols.

There was a flower that flowered inward, womb-ward;

Now there is a fruit like a ripe womb.⁸

In the '*Bare Fig-Tree*' the way the twigs bud sideways and then turns vertically upwards is seen as the effort by each twig to assert its individual identity:

to hold the candle of the Sun upon its socket-tip⁹

This gives rise to some reflections on fig-democracy with analogical sidelights on human democracy:

Oh weird Demos, where every twig is the arch twig,

Each imperiously over-equal to each, equality over-reaching itself

Like the snakes on Medusa's head.

Oh naked fig-tree!

Still, no doubt every one of you can be the sun-socket

as well as every other of you.¹⁰

Through the next poem '*Grapes*' Lawrence would return to the last world of unadulterated experience. What the poet seeks to sing is a world of 'tactile sensitiveness' that existed before the laser-like eyes of visionaries:

Of which world, the vine was the invisible rose,

Before petals spread, before colour made its disturbance,

before eyes saw too much.¹¹

Lawrentian myth of renewal and discovery is the central point to '*Grapes*'. His recognition of the blood-knowledge or the intuitive vision unfolds the poet's yearning for a life of senses. The intuition is exalted to underrate the intellect because the latter is a source of dryness. The restoration of the whole man is possible only through the resurrection of the body. He alludes to the glaciers and Noah's flood in the poem and these elusions clearly indicate that the ideal Lawrentian world is ante-diluvian. Through the ending lines of this beautiful poem, Lawrence

enters the other world with grim determination. Here, intoxicated with loveliness, tired with heavy sleep, shrouded in secrecy he seeks his own lost powers:

And we must cross the frontiers, though we will not,
Of the lost, fern-scented world:
Take the fern-seed on our lips,
Close the eyes, and go
Down the tendrilled avenues of wine and the otherworld.¹²

The horror and the necessity of blindness are like curses which are the insurmountable obstacles for the downward journey which is the subject of the present narrative section. Lawrence, here revises the story that is told through the fables or in the John Milton's Samson Agonists. Lawrence's Samson is strong enough and does not mourn upon his blindness, whereas Milton's Samson complains that he has been exiled to a living death. But Lawrence's Samson makes plot which necessities the mystical virtues. As revolutionary he sets himself sardonically against the 'yellow authority of those pillars of the society, who hold up 'the high and super gothic heavens' and thus yelled:

I do not yearn, nor aspire, for I am a blind Samson.
And what is daylight to me that I should look skyward?
Only I grope among you, pale-laces, caryatids.¹³

Lawrence's Samson is imprisoned in the 'living grave' of his body that he feels intuitively:

To me, the earth rolls ponderously, superbly
Coming my way without forethought or afterthought.
To me, men's footfalls fall with a dull, soft rumble,
ominous and lovely,
Coming my way.¹⁴

But Milton's Samson is 'eyeless in Gaza' at the will of slaves while Lawrence's Samson is a revolutionary who seems to take pride in his work only. He firmly believes that his hero unlike the Bible's and Milton's will certainly survive and is intent on bringing down the rigid pillars that support the dome of such lofty idealism:

See if your skies aren't falling:
And my head, at least, is thick enough to stand it, the smash.
See if I don't move under a dark and nude, vast heaven

When your world is in ruins, under your fallen skies.

Caryatids, pale-faces.

Sec if I am not Lord of the dark and moving hosts

Before I die.¹⁵

The poem '*Snake*' that comes under the '*Reptiles*' section is one of the finest poems. The style of this poem is simple, the diction mostly colloquial, the word-order that of common speech and above all, the effect is one of grandeur and dignity. There is no fake poetic language. The natural description is synergic, amounting to more than some of its parts. The poem justifies its place in the anthologies simply as a definite realization of the appearance and distinctive life mode of a snake. The water trough in the poem is the natural meeting-point of two worlds; the snake descends the earth-wall from his fissure: the man descends the steps from his doorway. Each is in need of water: the snake has priority because it arrived first at the trough and it asserts priority in the very quality of its being. It looks straight through the man without recognizing his existence. The man feels glad and honored and the images he chooses to describe the snake reveals his growing appreciation of its stature and significance:

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.....¹⁶

The poem is based on the complete truthfulness to the facts of common experience that Lawrence shares with Wordsworth and Hardy, but the common experience is transformed and invested with mythical grandeur, which is a rare and memorable achievement. In '*Resolution and Independence*', Wordsworth did something alike. In the poem, the common place meeting with old leech-gatherer is transmuted into a myth of overwhelming majesty. The '*Snake*' which Lawrence saw one hot morning drinking in his water-trough at Toormina remains in the poem as 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, which 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,¹⁷

So, the superb '*Reptile*' series is probably the most sustained attempt to penetrate the mysterious life of a remote part of the brute creation in literature. The motive of these poems is to present the encounters between animal and man.

The concluding poem of the sequence, '*Tortoise Shout*', is a moving poem in so far as it contains the Lawrentian theme of resurrection. It draws on all the sources of meaning tapped in the earlier poems. Lawrence follows the tortoise, 'On The End', under 'the very edge of the farthest, far off horizon of life'. Through the extremity of crucifixion to the resurrection, Lawrence, therefore associates sex with death, and he has consistently done so for with a purpose. Death, after all, must precede rebirth, the fruit must not rot before the seed can emerge. S. M. Gilbert here remarks:

Lawrence reminds us in '*Tortoise Shout*', one of his major statements on the subject that makes us aware of our loveliness, our finiteness.¹⁸

Keith Sagar remarks that 'the abandonment to life' is the celebrated idea in these poems with touch of clarity and splendour that we find in '*The Ship Of Death*' and '*Bavarian Gentians*'.¹⁹

The next section '*Trees*' again has its introductory note from John Burnett's Early Greek Philosophy translated by Burnett from the Greek account of *Empedokles* by Aetius :

Empedokles says trees were the first living creatures to grow up out of the earth, before the sun was spread out and before day and night were distinguished; from

symmetry of their mixture of fire and water, they contain the proportion of male and female: they grow, rising up owing to the heat which is in the earth, so that they are parts of the earth just as embryos are parts of the uterus. Fruits are excretions of the water and fire in plants.²⁰

In the '*Flowers*' section, Lawrence deals with the theme of resurrection through death. The poems under this section reveal Lawrence's ability to apprehend life essences swiftly and almost mystically. '*Almond Blossom*' is the most triumphant poem. The poem is a work about the wonder of natural process and the poet animates the tree with the consciousness of the world. In Tom Marshall's words:

Like Lawrence himself the trees are in exile.

They suffer through the long ages like wandering Jews.²¹

Like '*Cypresses*' the poem '*Almond Blossom*', belongs to world of another order that we normally experience. The '*Almond Tree*' is transformed into symbol of energetic and vigorous life which is:

Life-divine

Fearing nothing, life-blissful at the core

Within iron and earth.²²

Since renewal is possible only through the blossoming of the Almond Tree, the process of unfolding assumes great significance in the poem.

In the next section '*Evangelistic Beasts*' the poet transforms biblical creatures into animals imbued with human qualities. '*Fish*' for Lawrence is a symbol of primordial non-human otherness, more than the mosquito, the bat or the tortoise. In '*Fish*' poet observes a creature whose consciousness is 'comprehensible' for man. Since, fish has a sensuous life, blood knowledge; it poses a difficult problem for the poet to experience an occult penetration into its being. The sexuality of the fish, like its sheer unknowable otherness, is unique and the poem achieves a subtle mockery of animal sexuality by humorously emphasizing the contrast between the sex lives of fish and animals.

In '*Spirits Summoned West*' Lawrence entreats his mother to come and join in the Rocky Mountains as now she is free from her husband and that of the burden of morality. Lawrence wrote this poem within two months after his arrival in Taos. Lawrence is yearning for reunion

with his dead mother and implores that his heart is the proper long prepared home for her, unfulfilled virgin soul which only he saw and loved her:

Come back then, mother, my love, whom I told to die.

It was only I who saw the virgin you

That had no home.

The overlooked virgin.

My love.

You overlooked her too.

Now that the grave is made of mother and wife.

Now that the grave is made and lidded over with turf:

Come, delicate, overlooked virgin, come hock lo me

And he still,

Be glad.

I didn't tell you to die, for nothing.

I wanted the virgin you to be home at last

In my heart.

Inside my innermost heart

Where the virgin in woman comes home to a man.

The homeless virgin

Who never in all her life could find the way home

To that difficult innermost place in a man.²³

So, the section '*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*' represents Lawrence's farthest movement from his earlier poetic self and from the human world to the world of creatures. He sought to explore the mysticism in this section. He struggles to know the unknown flora and fauna that becomes Lawrence's life affirming vision. He makes an energetic and intuitive attempt to penetrate into the being of natural objects. Through his exploration of non-human world of animals and vegetation, Lawrence tries to show what they are in themselves, not how they can sustain our moral nature. At the same time Lawrence presents an encounter between man and the non-human and that of the perpetual mystery of animal and vegetable creation. In this venture, the visionary always accompanies the mystic, and Lawrence vindicates the purity and instinctual being of animals and plants as a contrast to the evils of modern mechanical

civilization. He envisions a new world, a world entirely different from this world of mechanization and gross materialistic pursuits.

In fact, these poems present and possess poetic quality of high degree. They begin with close and delicate observation. When a poem begins it seems that these aspects are arbitrarily chosen fragments, but when the poem ends, they seem to be the visible imaginative whole. These poems, independent of literary tradition, are described intuitively and their ultimate mode of existence is the timeless contemplation. To penetrate the mysterious life of the brute creation like tortoise, the series is probably the most sustained attempt in literature. From the naked solitary independence of the baby tortoise to the weird cry of the male tortoise in the extremity of coition a small organic unit of non-human existence is brought as it is the human imaginative apprehension.

At the end of this section we may quote a letter written to the Brewsters in 1921, where much disgusted Lawrence describes with great gusto, how he would like to reverse the process and have the cowards hunted down by his brightly burning tigers:

But I don't want the tiger superseded. Oh, my each she-tigress has seventy-seven whelps. And may they all grow in strength and shine in stripes like day and night; and may each one eat at least seventy miserable featherless human birds and lick red chops of gusto after it leaves me my tigers, leave me spangled leopards, leave me bright cobra, snakes and I wish, I had poison fangs and talons as good. I believe in wrath and gnashing of teeth and crunching of coward's bones.²⁴

References:

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- ². *Ibid.* p. 995.
- ³. *Ibid.* p. 277.
- ⁴. *Ibid.* p. 278.
- ⁵. *Ibid.* p. 278.
- ⁶. *Ibid.* p. 279.
- ⁷. *Ibid.* p. 282.
- ⁸. *Ibid.* p. 282.
- ⁹. *Ibid.* p. 299.
- ¹⁰. *Ibid.* p. 300.
- ¹¹. *Ibid.* p.p. 285-286.
- ¹². *Ibid.* p. 287.
- ¹³. *Ibid.* p. 287.
- ¹⁴. *Ibid.* p. 288.
- ¹⁵. *Ibid.* p. 289.
- ¹⁶. *Ibid.* p. 349.
- ¹⁷. *Ibid.* p. 350.
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- ¹⁹. Keith Sagar, *The Art of D.H. Lawrence:* Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. (1977) p. 128.
- ²⁰. Vivian de Sola Pinto and FW Roberts, *DH Lawrence: The Complete Poem: op. cit.* p. 295.
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- ²². Vivian de Sola Pinto and FW Roberts, *DH Lawrence: The Complete Poem: op. cit.* p. 307.
- ²³. *Ibid.* p.p.411-412.
- ²⁴. H.T. Moore, *The Collected Poems of D.H. Lawrence,* (ed.) with 'Introduction' by H.T. Moore, (William Heinemann Ltd. 1962) p. 651.