
D.H. Lawrence's poetry and the senses

*The Chatterton Lecture on Poetry given by Dr Santanu Das in December 2010
was formally published earlier this year. In the following essay, Dr Das pays particular
attention to the poem 'Bavarian Gentians'.*

IN HIS BEST-KNOWN POEM, written in Sicily in 1920, Lawrence's lord of life – his 'Snake' – softly slips into our view:

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.

('Snake', *Complete Poems*)¹

We read again, to be freshly startled. The strangeness of this single sentence lies only partly in the celebrated kinaesthetic shiver it sends across its own slack long body, with the free verse rhythms lengthening and tightening over the seven lines. More intimate, almost prehensile, is the way individual words are felt round, slightly shifted. 'Slack' is not just introduced as a noun ('slackness'), but placed in such a way that an attribute becomes a visual shape and an object, lending body to the burst of colour and touch in the second line. Aurally, the word palpitates with its linguistic neighbours as Lawrence delves into the heart of prosody, the relation between sound and sense. Equally delicate is his handling of the word 'soft'. In a narrative drama between reptilian softness and stony hardness, 'soft' in its passage from adjective to adverb moves within the field of tactile vision from body texture ('soft-bellied') to physical action ('Softly drank'). Lawrence uses repetition to play on both sameness and difference. 'Soft' is a word that he, like Keats, would turn to and turn round repeatedly, from the opening word of 'Piano' to describe his mother singing, to its incantatory use in the short story 'The Blind Man', to the 'softness of deep shadows' that he feels envelopes him as he lay dying in

1929.² The word cuts not just across the five senses in Lawrence. It reveals his peculiar talent for articulating the submerged world of emotion that clings around colour, shape and movement. 'Softly drank': is 'softly' the imagined sound of the snake drinking or a glimpsed movement of its forked tongue or the tenderness of the observer's mood? 'It is the hidden *emotional* pattern', Lawrence wrote, 'that makes poetry, not the obvious form'.³

'I paint as I see as I feel' noted Paul Cezanne who, among the modern painters, most engaged Lawrence. If Lawrence admired Cezanne's ability to make our imagination 'curve', as he once noted, 'to the back of presented appearance', such moments abound in his own poetry. As the snake leaves, he writes: 'And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and entered farther'. Phrasal or rhythmical parsing cannot get us the full distance. 'Snake-easing his shoulders' is an act of linguistic inspiration. The shape-shifting shows a relish as much for reptilian movement on the ground as for how words curve around the hyphen, the line and our mental retina. Such moments abound in his poetry. A mosquito sails like a 'dull clot of air'; 'the night still hangs like a half-folded bat'.⁴ In the last simile, Lawrence plays with Keats's 'soft incense [that] hangs upon the boughs', but Keatsian synaesthetic intensity is evolved into a perceptual expansiveness. If Keatsian music seduces us to receive, Lawrentian imagery startles us into perceiving. In a letter to Edward Marsh on 18 November 1913, he wrote that he read his poems as 'a matter of movements in space [rather] than [as] footsteps hitting the earth'.⁵

D.H. Lawrence the novelist needs no introduction, but Lawrence the poet seems to have largely disappeared. But he started and ended his career with verse, writing some 750 poems. While such bulk necessarily makes for great unevenness, his successful pieces remain among some of the most remarkable poems of the 20th century, with admirers ranging from Auden and Larkin to Hughes and Plath. Just two years after his death, Anais Nin noted that 'Lawrence in his poems closes all his human senses, in

¹ 'Snake', *Complete Poems*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (London, 1964), p. 349. Page references in the text are to this edition (abbreviated as *CP*).

² 'Shadows', *CP*, p. 727.

³ Letter to Edward Marsh, 18 November, 1913, in James T. Boulton (ed.), *The Selected Letters of D.H. Lawrence* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 68.

⁴ 'Mosquito', *CP*, p. 332; 'Twofold', *CP*, p. 129.

⁵ Letter to Edward Marsh, 18 November, 1913, *Letters*, p. 67.

order to live for one moment in the senses of the animal'. Even T.S. Eliot – his most famous detractor – conceded that he had 'a descriptive genius second to no writer living': 'he can reproduce for you not only the sound, the colour and form, the light and shade, but all the finer thrills of sensation'. What will concern me here is this 'sensuous' Lawrence of Nin and Eliot. However, rather than viewing his poems as near-transparent envelopes of sense experience or palimpsests of synaesthesia, I see his nature poems as providing some of the most playful and elaborately *staged* investigations into what he called 'sense awareness' of the natural world. What is the literary shape of such awareness, as it brushes against the materiality of language, and what is its relationship to poetic form? There is a related query. Does the sensuousness of the lyric enable this frequently unhappy man to do things – both artistically and psychologically – not possible for the novelist or the critical thinker?

Lawrence's celebration of the senses has been too grand for its own good. To him, they were the only antidote to the excessive self-consciousness of modern times. He wrote about them all his life: from the pseudo-scientific solar plexus and lumbar ganglions of *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922) to the celebration of touch in the posthumously published *Etruscan Places* (1932). But he never gave us any coherent theory. For him, 'sense' is seldom sensuousness or even the five senses. It is more of a restless, almost promiscuous verb, lunging forward like the long, naked arm of his blind hero Maurice to 'know' a man, woman or flower with what he called 'intuitive touch'. In spite of his gospel of 'blood-consciousness', the ultimate object of his touch is not the body, as it is often with Keats or Owen, but 'vibrations', the 'vital flow' between people and their surroundings in a 'circumambient universe'.⁶ Grope, grasp, reach, stroke are verbs he uses obsessively, perilously, as if their repeated handling would give him access to some secret knowledge. For what he wants to touch is human feeling; 'Tenderness' was his initial title for *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. 'Sense-awareness' to Lawrence, is that 'great depth of knowledge arrived at direct, by instinct and intuition, not by reason':

Instinct makes me sniff the lime blossom and reach for the darkest cherry. But it is intuition which makes me feel the uncanny glassiness of the lake this afternoon, the sulkiness of the mountains, the vividness of the near green in thunder-sun, the young man in bright blue trousers lightly tossing the grass from the scythe, the elderly man in a boater stiffly shoving his scythe-strokes, both of them sweating in the silence of the intense light.⁷

The consciousness here is acutely phenomenological – consciousness *of* the world and its objects – but it is inseparable from the inner world of emotion. The palpability of the prose seems to be the linguistic equivalent of the art of Cezanne who, according to

Lawrence, tried to displace 'our present mode of mental-visual consciousness' with the 'intuitive [consciousness], the awareness of touch.'⁸

The above description also suggests an intensity of absorption in the landscape that goes beyond the prevalent discourses of organicism. 'There seemed no flower nor even weed' wrote Jessie Chambers – his teenage sweetheart and the Miriam of *Sons and Lovers* (1913) – 'whose names and qualities Lawrence did not know.' Nature provided this deeply unhappy adolescent a refuge from the turbulence of his family-home and the tensions of the coal-mining society. Like Paul Morel's attempts to capture the 'shimmering protoplasm in the leaves',⁹ the description is not just an overdose of Victorian aestheticism or French impressionism but an act of defiance against the slag-heaps and ash-pits of his native Eastwood.

Lawrence would often mention 1912 – the year when, having met Frieda Weekly, he left Nottinghamshire for Europe – as marking a distinct break in his life and writing career. But it was the publication of *Birds, Beast and Flowers* in 1923 that signalled a new direction for his poetry. The volume comprises a loosely connected sequence of poems he wrote between 1920 and 1923 during his travels in Europe, or in Ceylon, Australia and New Mexico, about the natural world – the pomegranate, the grape, the turkey-cock or the kangaroo. The volume has attracted some distinguished writing, often from critics who are poets themselves. Joyce Carol Oates and Sandra Gilbert read these poems as late romantic quests for 'otherness', while the novelist Amit Chaudhuri finds in them a more modernist 'jazz-like' quality.¹⁰ While such readings are powerful and suggestive, they tend to polarise Lawrence as the Orphean visionary or the postmodern bricoleur. Moreover, within Anglo-American modernism, there is often a curious reluctance, almost an embarrassment, in admitting what makes *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* so immediately thrilling: its exuberant delight in the sensuous plurality of the natural world, heaving with living, growing, moving things. But what makes the volume so difficult to grasp is Lawrence's equally exuberant delight in the sensuous world of myth, symbols and language. His creatures are hybrid creations who have their one foot firmly planted in the natural world, while the other strides the imaginary universe; there is often a frisson between a perceptual delicacy and a performative excess. The romantic/textual debate is played out in the poetry itself through the constant shiftiness of his images and metaphors: if the underlying impulse is an epistemological quest, Lawrence takes equal pleasure in the linguistic performance of knowing.

In his celebrated essay, 'Poetry of the Present', Lawrence speaks about the need to break the 'lovely form of metrical verse' and get away from the 'gemlike lyrics of Shelley and Keats'. For unlike those poets of eternity, he wants to capture 'the insurgent naked throb of the instant

⁶ 'Morality and the Novel', *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers*, ed. Edward D. McDonald (1936; Harmondsworth, 1978), p. 527.

⁷ 'Insouciance', in Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore (eds), *Phoenix II* (London, 1978), p. 534.

⁸ 'Introduction to these Paintings', *Phoenix*, p. 579.

⁹ *Sons and Lovers*, ed. Blake Morrison (Harmondsworth, 2006), p. 176.

¹⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, *Hostile Sun: The Poetry of D.H. Lawrence* (Los Angeles, 1974); Sandra Gilbert, *Acts of Attention: The Poems of D.H. Lawrence* (1975; Carbondale, 1990); Amit Chaudhuri, *D.H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* (Oxford, 2002).

moment'.¹¹ But the throb of the moment is always complex, fusing sense experience, thought and feeling, as he elaborates in his introduction to the translation of Giovanni Verga's *Cavalleria Rusticana*:

When we are thinking emotionally or passionately, thinking and feeling at the same time, we do not think rationally: and therefore and therefore and therefore. Instead, the mind makes curious swoops and circles. It touches the point of pain or interest, then sweeps away ... [It] stoops to the quarry, then leaves it without striking, soars, hovers, turns, swoops, stoops again, still does not strike, yet is nearer, nearer, reels away again, wheels off into the air, even forgets, quite forgets, yet again turns, bends, circles slowly, swoops and swoops again, until at last there is the closing in and the clutch of a decision or a resolve.¹²

The imagination here is remarkably physical. The motion described is very different from that described by his poetic forebears: it is neither that of Shelley's skylark nor that of Whitman's eagles 'in turning twisting clustering loops'. Instead, it describes the movement of Lawrence's bat: circular, repetitive, prehensile. The verbal drama is accretive rather than conjunctive, as the verbs swoop and circle through the nervous procession of commas.

Such movement is perfectly captured in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* through the expansiveness of free verse and the technique of what he called 'continual, slightly modified repetition'.¹³ The sensuousness of his early verse is extended into a lingering act of sensing. In poem after poem, a word, an image or a metaphor is repeated as the free verse gropes, stanza after open-ended stanza, around an object, trying to tease out the manifold ways in which it changes in the field of perception or unfolds in our consciousness. It is a poetry of halts, jerks and fresh beginnings. Formlessness becomes the form of this sort of investigation. Lawrence's loose stanzas, fractured syntax, fresh beginnings, and repetition seem to convey a mind feeling and sensing through language rather than finished thought or sensation. A typical example is 'Bare Fig Trees':

Fig-trees, weird fig-trees
 Made of thick smooth silver,
 Made of sweet, untarnished silver in the sea-
 southern air –
 I say untarnished, but I mean opaque –
 (CP, p. 298)

Or, in the poem 'Humming-Bird' – 'In that most awful stillness, that only gasped and hummed,/Humming-birds raced down the avenues' (CP, 372) the sound of 'hummed' seems to produce the visual object – 'humming bird' – so that imagination and rhythm can now race ahead. But such 'unfinishedness', such verbal humming or hammering, is also a cultivated style. Rather than a variation of a late-Romantic visionary quest or a textual

strategy, his nature poems provide some of the most elaborate and intricate *stagings* of sensing how to sense through the folds of language. This is strikingly evident when Lawrence is most palpably Keatsian, as in 'Grapes':

Look now even now, how it keeps its power of
 invisibility!
 Look how black, how blue-black, how globed in
 Egyptian darkness
 Dropping among his leaves, hangs the dark grape!
 (CP, p. 286)

With Lawrence, repetition with variation is not a stylistic tic, but an infinitely receptive tuning-fork he sets up to sense the vibrations between the natural object, our affective consciousness and the linguistic world. The intimacy in the above lines is very different from the synaesthesia of Keats, whose 'globed peonies' and 'Joy's grape' hover in the background. Instead, we have a drama of deferral, in the way 'invisibility' takes on colour and shape through the blue-black 'globed' darkness to the 'dark grape'. Such 'close-up' views of fruits and flowers are often complemented by very precise description: 'four-sepalled calyx' ('Figs'), medlars with crowns ('Medlars and Sorb-Apples'), 'many-cicatrised frail vine' ('Almond Blossom'), 'rose-red, princess hibiscus, rolling her pointed Chinese petals' ('Hibiscus and Salvia Flowers'). A look at some hitherto unknown sketches in his college notebook is revealing: the biological drawings of different fruits and flowers such as the horse chestnut, artichoke, tulip or the pea pod show his intimate familiarity with these items (Figure 1). It is from this precise biological knowledge that Lawrence usually proceeds so that the dozens of flowers, fruits, seeds and leaves that populate his verses never really lose their materiality in spite of their various symbolic associations. An example is 'Pomegranate', the very first poem in the volume; for Lawrence the fruit is both sexually suggestive ('Rosy, tender, glittering within the fissure') and a critique of perfection, and yet stickily, stubbornly it remains a pomegranate.

Phenomenology, it is often said, begins in a sense of wonder. Elaborating on Edmund Husserl's theory of 'imaginary variations' in her foreword to *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature* (1998), Judith Butler notes that what the phenomenologist seeks to know of an object is not 'a list of its features' but rather to tease out 'the variety of perspectives' by which it might be constituted or known in the field of perception. What we have in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* is a dual process, as Lawrence presents us with the 'actuality' of natural objects as well as with a web of possibilities – perceptual, symbolic, mythic – through which they enter our consciousness and acquire meaning. But there is another dimension too: the sensuous world of poetic language. In poem after poem, an adjective, an image or a metaphor is repeated, rolled, slightly shifted, as he feels and thinks through its shape, sound and texture as carefully as around a peach, an almond-tree, a turkey-cock or a mountain lion. Throughout the volume there is a

¹¹ 'Preface to the American Edition of New Poems' in Richard Ellis (ed.), *The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence* (Ware, 2002), pp. 615, 618.

¹² *Phoenix*, pp. 249-50.

¹³ 'Prologue' to David Farmer et al. (eds), *Women in Love* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 486.

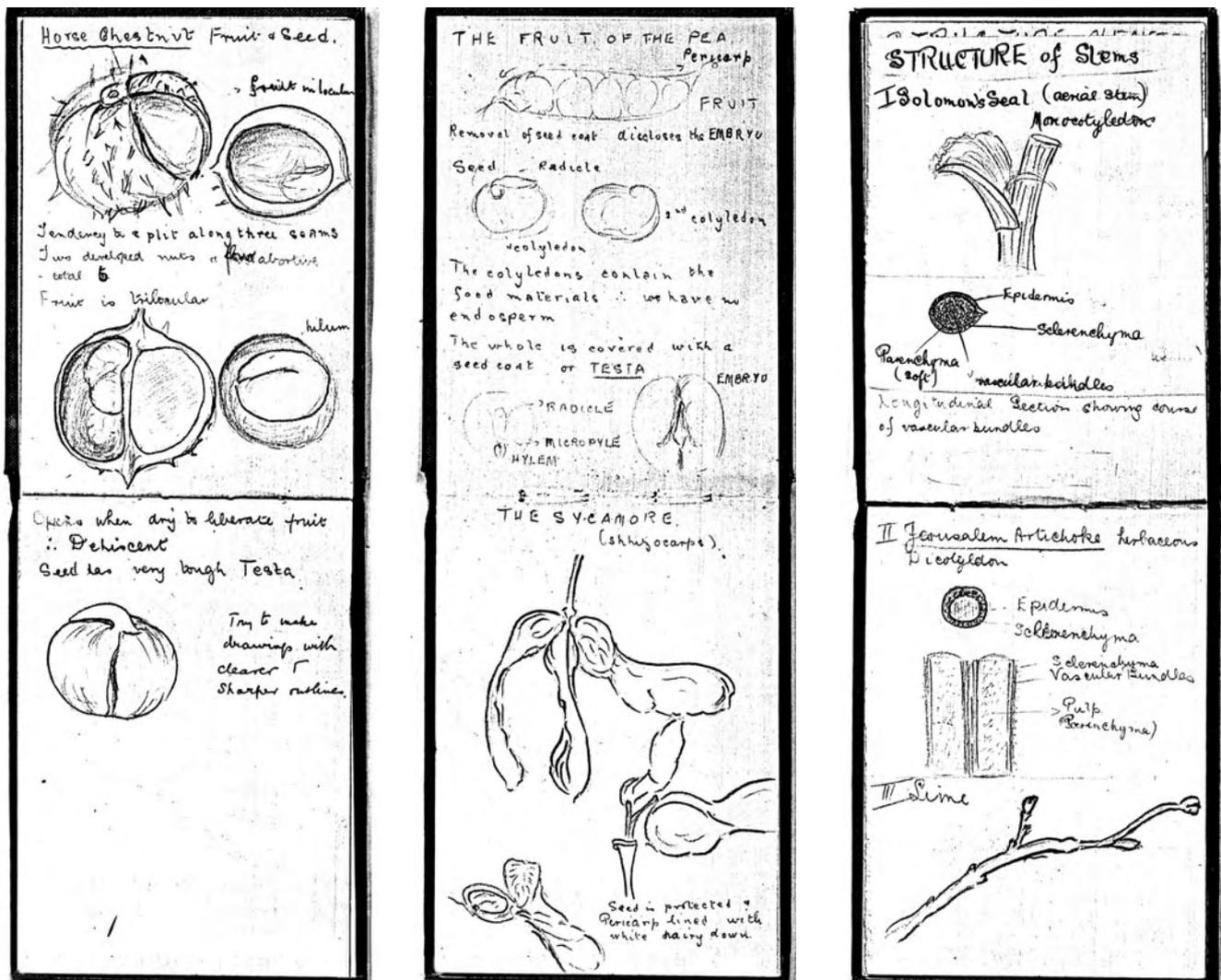


Figure 1. Sketches from Lawrence's 'University Notebook', Manuscript and Special Collections, University of Nottingham, La B 224. Reproduced with the kind permission of Manuscripts and Special Collections, University of Nottingham.

double movement as words and objects circle around each other and images breed fresh images.

Throughout *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, there is a sense of exuberance and delight that we do not find even in his greatest novels. Why? In *Sons and Lovers*, Paul chastises Miriam: 'I do not talk to you through the senses'.¹⁴ The problem actually lies more with Paul than with Miriam, but it is also a function of the genre: can the form of the novel, enmeshed in the human, ever solely speak through the senses? *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* allows Lawrence the privilege denied by his novels. Published just one year after *The Waste Land*, the volume had so much to forget: the nightmare of the First World War, the banning of *The Rainbow* in 1915 or the expulsion from Cornwall in 1917. The lyric enables Lawrence to talk through the senses without the 'emotional rut'¹⁵ created by human relationships and the social world of novel; living with and writing about birds, beasts and flowers become acts of

psychic reparation. If critics have noted the intensity of historical and political thinking that goes on in the poems, what equally interests me is what happens to such discourses when fitted into lyric form and stripped of their narrative context? The ideal companion that Birkin desires in *Women in Love* becomes the kangaroo, the he-goat or the turkey-cock; the fraught wrestling match between Gerald and Birkin becomes the light-hearted horse-play between Lawrence and the mosquito. If Lawrence's misanthropy affects the quality of the novels in 1920s, his poems explore a range of issues playfully and lightly, without the psychic mess. Female sexuality, the site of such ambivalence in *Aaron's Rod*, is celebrated with warmth through the imagining of a fig or a peach. In his fiction, descriptions of sex are often turgid but in the poetry, sex produces a lyric magnificence comparatively rare in early 20th-century poetry as he imagines sea-whales making love: 'And they rock, and they rock, through the sensual ageless ages/ on

¹⁴ *Sons and Lovers*, ed. Blake Morrison (Harmondsworth, 2006), 285.

¹⁵ 'Future of the Novel' in *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, ed. Bruce Steel (Cambridge, 1985), 155.

~~It starts of grace.~~ Glory of darkness

Blue and dark

Oh ~~the~~ Bavarian gentians, tall ones
 make
 making a ~~magnificent~~ dark blue gloom
 in the sunny rooms

~~It is so~~
 Depth of colour They have added blueness to blueness to blueness, until
 it is darkness; Oh you, ^{beauty} ~~glory~~ of darkness Oh, it is dark
 and the door is open
 to the depths

blue joy
 and the glory of my soul
 is in you, ^{Savarian} ~~dark~~ gentians
 your dark blue gloom is so noble!

How deep I have gone
 dark gentians
 since I embarked on your dark blue fringes,
 in your ~~marvellous~~ dark blue godhead to Hades.

how deep, how deep, how happy!

What a ~~baptism~~ journey for
 how happy to sink my soul
 in the blue dark gloom
 of gentians here in the sunny room!

Flowers and men.

Flowers achieve their own ~~godhead~~ floweriness, and it is a miracle.
 Men don't achieve their own manhood, ^{alas, oh alas! alas!} ~~and it is a disaster.~~
 to his bridegroom
 in the dark

Oh, I know -
 Persephone has just gone
 back
 down the ~~trickem~~
 trickem gloom
 of dark-blue gentians
 to Pluto

Figure 2. Manuscript version of 'Glory of Darkness', Notebook 1 (9.3). Reproduced with the kind permission of Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.

Bavarian Gentiains

Not every man has gentians in his house
in Soft September, at slow, sad Michaelmas.

Bavarian gentians, big and dark, only dark
~~darkening~~ ^{at the day-time, for} ~~and~~ ~~sharp~~ ~~like~~, ~~sharp~~-like ^{with the} ~~for~~ smoking blueness of Pluto's gloom,
ribbed and torch-like, with their ^{blaze} ~~blaze~~ of darkness spread blue
~~many~~ ~~only~~ ~~sharp~~ ~~pointed~~ ~~erect~~ ~~in~~ ~~very~~ ~~erect~~
~~long~~ ~~and~~ ~~erect~~ ~~and~~ ~~father~~ ~~leaf~~ ~~dark~~ ~~sharp~~ ~~cofes~~
~~of~~ ~~pure~~ ~~blue~~ ~~darkness~~, ^{of} ~~day~~, white day
torch-flower ^{of} ~~the~~ blue-smoking darkness, Pluto's dark-blue ^{days,} ~~days,~~
and burning ^{with} ~~dark~~-blue power,

black lamps from the halls of Dis, burning dark blue,
giving off darkness, blue darkness, as Semeter's pale
lead me them, ^{Lamps give off light,} ~~lead the way.~~

Reach me a gentrain, 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

^{to} ~~to~~ where Persephone goes, just now, ^{from} ~~to~~ the frosty September
to the fightless realm where darkness is ^{upon} ~~awakened~~ the dark
and Persephone herself is but a voice
or a darkness invisible unfolded in the deeper dark
of the arms Platonic, and pierced with the passion
of dense gloom,

^{among} ~~in~~ the splendour of torches of darkness, shedding darkness in the
the cold bride ⁱⁿ ~~the~~ ~~dark~~ ~~room~~ ~~the~~ ~~gloom~~.

Figure 3. Manuscript version of 'Bavarian Gentiains', Notebook 2, Folder 9.4. Reproduced with the kind permission of Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.

the depths of the seven seas,/ and through the salt they reel with drunk delight.' ('Whales Weep Not!', *CP*, 694)

Many of these issues come together in his late, celebrated poem 'Bavarian Gentians'. It belongs to a group of poems, referred to as *Last Poems* that Lawrence composed in two notebooks a few months before his death on 2 March 1930. By 1925, Lawrence knew he had tuberculosis, and by 1929, when 'Bavarian Gentians' was written, he knew he was dying. The poem went through several drafts, the first begun in September 1929, when Lawrence was very ill, in the Bavarian Alps. Lawrence's sister, who came to visit him, writes of how 'Lorenzo lay in a bare room with some pale blue autumn gentians as the only furnishing'. The initial draft, now housed in the Harry Ransom Research Centre, University of Texas, Austin, consists of two poems, one in ink and the other in pencil (Figure 2). It almost records him in the act of sensing, moving from visual impressions in the ink version on the left ('Blue and dark / Oh Bavarian gentians, tall ones') to sensuous and mythic intensification in the pencil version on the right ('Oh, I know - / Persephone has just gone back / down the thickening thickening gloom / of dark-blue gentians to Pluto') (*CP*, 958-9) – to the thickening of language itself in the final version.

Let us first consider the final, revised version of the poem (Figure 3):

Not every man has gentians in his house
in Soft September, at slow, sad Michaelmas.

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

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.¹⁶

In *Apocalypse*, written in the same year, Lawrence notes how he had the Bible 'in his bones' for he was sent every week to Sunday school and to chapel: 'Language has a power of echoing and re-echoing in my mind. I can wake up in the middle of the night and hear things being said. The sound itself registers'.¹⁷ If the Harvard-educated Eliot, with his High Church snobbery, had patronised Lawrence's 'hymn-singing mother', her son would powerfully demonstrate what Eliot, some 10 years later, would describe as the 'auditory imagination' in poetry, that reaching for sound and syllable below conscious levels of thought. For the 'darker and darker stairs' down which the reader is led here is an auditory staircase, as Lawrence obsessively feels round the word 'dark', not just as noun, adjective, symbol, metaphysic but as a charm. Language becomes tactile, just as Persephone becomes a voice 'enfolded' in the deeper dark.

The heavily revised version shows that, rather than a shaman chanting his death-chant, Lawrence can also be *il miglior fabbro*. One crucial change is from 'sheaf-like' to 'torch-like': it is the fulcrum on which the poem turns. The imagery of the torch has powerful biographical resonances. As he imagines his own death as an underground descent, he would have remembered his actual descent into the Etruscan tombs in 1927. In *Etruscan Places*, he recalls how 'the lamps [shone] and guided the way'.¹⁸ And in September 1928, he imaginatively revisits the underground world of his collier-father in his painting 'Accident in a Mine' (Figure 4), which shows three naked miners crowding around an injured comrade with a lamp. It is rather heartbreaking to think of Lawrence drawing these muscular, naked men just two years before his death as his own body started wasting. In both poem and painting, death, darkness and lamps come together in an underground drama. But, within the poem, 'torch' is a sensory switch-point, connecting the dark-ribbed flowers to the mythic splendour of the lamps. Consider how this sense-word 'torch' proceeds – from a twice-repeated simile for the flower ('torch-like') through the lyric urgency of 'Reach me a gentian, give me a torch' to a twice-repeated metaphor (torch-flower) to suddenly become the most vivid object – torches of darkness – inscribing a visual paradox at the heart of the poem. Similarly, under the rhythms, there operates a complex pattern of sounds: from assonance to extended spondees (dark-blue daze) to intricate negotiations with his poetic forbearers. For the

¹⁶ Quoted from *Last Poems*, ed. Richard Aldington and Giuseppe Orioli (Florence, 1932), p. 21. There is critical controversy regarding the 'final' version of the poem. The version reproduced below is the one regarded as final by Aldington and Orioli, and also by Vivian de Sola Pinto in *CP*

(p. 697).

¹⁷ *Apocalypse*, ed. Mara Kalnins (Cambridge, 1995), p. 54.

¹⁸ *Mornings in Mexico and Etruscan Places* (London, 1956), p. 131.

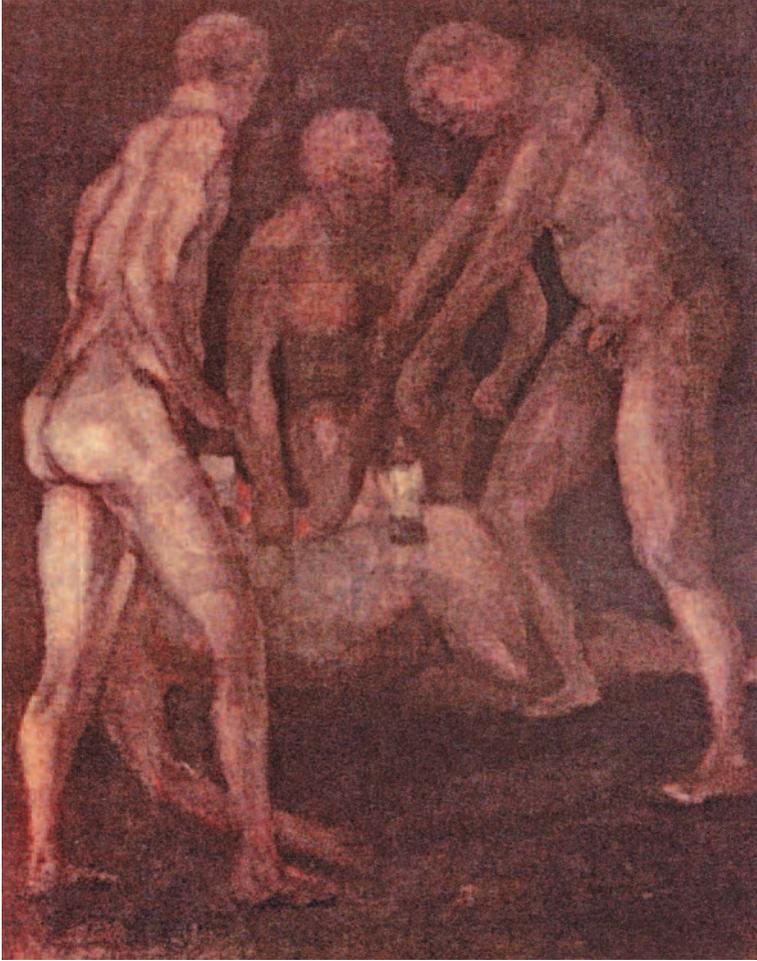


Figure 4. *Accident in a Mine* (September 1928), oil on canvas, 40.6 x 33.1 cm.

poem is also a hushed echo-chamber. If the sibilance of 'Soft September' brings in the autumnal Keats, can Milton be far behind? But Samson's lament for the 'blaze of noon' is turned into the celebratory 'blaze of darkness' as blindness is turned into insight, Miltonic 'fall' into an underground quest for his dark god. But the most intricate negotiation is with Whitman whom Lawrence called 'that great poet, of the end of life'. If 'Bavarian Gentians' is often compared with 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed', there is a deeper, aural connection with Whitman's 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking'. There, the sea lisps to the poet 'the low and delicious word, death': 'And again death, death, death, death.' Lawrence, facing death itself, cannot face the word and would instead repeat 'dark'. In his biography, *D.H. Lawrence: The Life of an Outsider* (2005), John Worthen notes how Frieda one day heard Lawrence saying to himself: 'I can't die, I can't die, I hate them too much'.

His mother similarly hated the thought of her death, even when she was in great pain. As her son imagines his death, he would have been thinking of his mother's and

colour gives us a poignant textual clue. The gentians are 'dark-blue'. If critical ink has been spilt over the colour of flowers in Lawrence's room, more striking is the fact that the first time the words 'dark' and 'blue' come together is in his elegy 'Bereavement':

My mother had blue eyes,
They seemed to grow darker as she came to the
edge of death

And I could not bear her look upon me

(*CP*, p. 868)

If, taking an established biographical approach, we link Lawrence's Pluto to his coal-darkened father, and following the textual lead, connect Persephone to the mother, is Lawrence revisiting the primal scene? What excites Lawrence about the Pluto-Persephone myth, as some critics have noted, is the narrative of marriage and sexual violence. In a different version of the poem, Lawrence writes: 'Pluto as he ravishes her once again / and pierces her once more' (*CP*, 960). Does this sexual antagonism and violence go back to 'Discord in Childhood', to memories of parental fight, only to be repeated in his own relationship with Frieda? '[Our marriage] has been such a fight' Lawrence writes in 1916. Or is there a more immediate explanation? The great irony in Lawrence's life is that he had put all his belief in the body, and yet it is his body that had failed him. There are biographical suggestions that, from 1926, Lawrence was impotent. 'I have no desire any more' he writes in the poem 'Desire goes down into the Sea' (*CP*, 454), and from around 1927 Frieda turns to the young handsome Italian officer Angelo

Ravagli. Is sexual crisis here being turned to a fantasy of sexual violence, the linguistic thrust of 'pierces her once more'? Or, given Lawrence's occasional longing for death in the *Last Poems*, is there a masochistic *jouissance* as, Persephone-like, he imagines himself being ravished by his dark god? Or is it a comment on artistic form, his idea of Heraclitean strife and reconciliation lying at the heart of the creative process? In 'Study of Thomas Hardy' (1914), he writes: "It is most wonderful in poetry, this sense of conflict contained within a reconciliation ... the resistance and response of the Bride in the arms of the Bridegroom".¹⁹ The phrase returns at the end of the poem: 'shedding darkness on the lost bride and her groom'. The conflicts are gathered into sensory paradox: 'torches of darkness shedding darkness'. Is 'shedding' not another sense-word? It combines with darkness through alliteration and visually as homonym ('shade') and works metaphorically as touch. More importantly, it makes our imagination curve, from sense to feeling, from myth to elegy, through that one, desolate adjective: 'lost'.

¹⁹ *Study of Thomas Hardy*, pp. 90-1.

Loss is what Lawrence's 'Last Poems' are about, as he writes one self-elegy after another. In these poems, Lawrence does not take refuge in organised faith or abstract mysticism, but in the two things he loved most all his life: the sensuous world of nature and the sensuousness of language. They come together in his penultimate poem – the magnificent 'Shadows' – as he imagines again his death:

And if tonight my soul may find her peace
in sleep, and sink in good oblivion,
and in the morning wake like a new-opened flower
then I have been dipped again in God, and
new-created.

...

And if, as autumn deepens and darkens
I feel the pain of falling leaves, and stems that
break in storms
and trouble and dissolution and distress
and then the softness of deep shadows folding,
folding
Around my soul and spirit, around my lips
so sweet, like a swoon, or more like the drowse
of a low, sad song
singing darker than the nightingale, on, on to
the solstice
and the silence of short days, the silence of the
year, the shadow,
then I shall know that my life is moving still
with the dark earth, and drenched
with the deep oblivion of earth's lapse and renewal.

(CP, pp. 726-7)

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On 9 December 2010, Dr Das gave the Chatterton Lecture on Poetry, on "'Where the night still hangs like a half-folded bat": The Poetry of D.H. Lawrence'. An audio recording of the lecture can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/events/2010/

A longer article based on this lecture, on 'Lawrence's Sense-Words', was published in *Essays in Criticism*, 62:1 (January 2012), 58-82.
