

## The *Last Poems* of D.H. Lawrence : Poetry of the Eternal Present

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There was never any more inception than there is now,  
And will never be any more perfection than there is now

(Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"<sup>1</sup>)

In his Introduction to the American Edition of *New Poems* (1920), D.H. Lawrence advocates a new kind of poetry: the poetry of the "immediate present." In the immediate present, he says, there is neither perfection nor consummation. Everything is in a state of flux. According to Lawrence, life is "ever-present," it knows no "plasmic finality." A rose is "perfect" when it is a "running flame." His poetry therefore attempts to catch the very "instant moment" when the "stream of time" bubbles up "out of the wells of futurity, flowing on to the oceans of the past." Lawrence considers Walt Whitman's as the classic example of this kind of poetry insofar as it captures the ungraspable moment when life heaves itself into utterance "at its well-head." Whitman is thus a model for Lawrence when the latter makes a venture into the world of "rare new poetry": "Poetry gave us the clue: free verse: Whitman. Now we know." All these statements are to be found in the essay entitled "Poetry of the Present," which was originally intended by Lawrence as a Preface to *Look! We Have Come Through!* Some of the representative poems of this collection are a powerful illustration of Lawrence's ideas regarding this kind of poetry although these ideas are also given poetic utterance in other volumes. I believe that *Last Poems* best illustrates Lawrence's idea of the eternal present: a mystical moment when the temporal and the timeless intersect. What I have tried to explore in the present paper is how Lawrence's aesthetic of time evolves through the collections of poems he wrote at various stages in his literary career, finally finding its most revealing expression in *Last Poems*.

We will start our discussion with "Bei Hennef," one of the most characteristic pieces in *Look! We Have Come Through!* a series of poems which throws light on "the intrinsic experience of a man during the crisis of manhood, when he marries and comes into himself. Let us quote the "Argument" that prefaces the sequence of poems:

After much struggling and loss in love and in the world of man, the protagonist throws in his lot with a woman who is already married. Together they go into another country, she perforce leaving her children behind. The conflict of love and hate goes on between the man and the woman, and between these two and the world around them, till it reaches some sort of conclusion, they transcend into some condition of blessedness.

This argument offers a lucid insight into the meaning of the poem "Bei Hennef." It shows how the multi-layered conflict of love and hate at last gives way to an almost stable state, when the man and his bride reach a mutually satisfying awareness of themselves. Let us see how the poem attempts to capture this moment of blessedness:

All the troubles and anxieties and pain  
Gone under the twilight.  
*Only the twilight now, and the soft "Sh!" of the river*  
*That will last for ever.*  
[Emphasis mine]

The evening is solemn and still. The little flickers symbolizing the worries and difficulties are absorbed into the encompassing twilight, which seems "large" and "big" to the speaker. The poet becomes ecstatic, "And at last I know my love for you is here"- a statement which carries a tremendous sense of immediacy. Yet the poem ends on a jarring note ( "Strange, how we suffer in spite of this!"). Even then it remains appealing in its attempt to harmonize the human mood with the natural ambience. At the end of the poem, the reader is left with the rapture of twilight.

In the "Foreword" to *Look! We Have Come Through!* Lawrence states that "These poems should not be considered separately, as so many single pieces. They are intended as an essential story, or history, or confession, unfolding one from the other in organic development". This statement sheds critical light on the

movement from one poem to the other, from "Bei Hennef" to "First Morning," for example, when we consider the central theme of these poems. The twilight was glowing; the experience of love was more or less satisfactory. This is roughly our idea of "Bei Hennef." But the opening line of "First Morning" makes a bald statement, "The night was a failure." The mood of dejection and despair continues in the second stanza: "Our love was a confusion,/ there was a horror./ you recoiled away from me."

The tension, however, melts when the horrid night surrenders to a lovely morning:

Now in the morning  
As we sit in the sunshine on the seat by the little shrine  
And look at the mountain-walls,  
Walls of blue shadow,  
And see so near at our feet in the meadow  
Myriads of dandelion pappus  
Bubbles ravelled in the dark green grass  
Held still beneath the sunshine -  
It is enough, you are near -

The poet thus feels restored to peace. He feels proud even that he has got his bride by his side in the sunshine. This is a moment when they do not have to look before and after, when they do not pine for what is not. They are just satisfied.<sup>2</sup>

The poems in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* are however often successful in arousing a sense of wonder in the reader, when the poet represents "the tremendous *non-human* quality of life,"<sup>3</sup> and through language captures the naked throb of the moment. Poetry for Lawrence is an act of attention. He thus draws our attention to the majestic movement of a snake trailing his "yellow-brown slackness" over the edge of a stone trough or the gorgeous flight of an eagle towards the sun. If the reader is sensitive, the poet will surely ask him/her to watch the going of the goats: "Goats go past the back of the house like dry leaves in the dawn./ And up the hill like a river, if you watch" ("She-Goat," CP 383). The lines describing the movement of the goats are not only pictorial, they have a vivid sense of immediacy as well. The expression "if you watch" can remind us of one of Lawrence's emphatic statement that "The act of attention is not so easy. It is much easier to write poetry."<sup>4</sup>

At this point, we think it worthwhile to refer to another poem from the same collection, "The Red Wolf," which starts thus:

Over the heart of the west, the Taos desert,  
Circles an eagle,  
And it's dark between me and him.  
The sun, as he waits a moment, huge and liquid  
Standing without feet on the rim of the far-off mesa  
Says: *Look for a last long time then! Look! Look well!*  
*I am going.*  
So he pauses and is beholden, and straightway is gone.

The eagle circles over the desert. Twilight is at hand. The sun waits for a moment trying to draw the attention of the sensitive viewers and then goes down. This is how we can paraphrase the lines. However such a flat paraphrase is unable to do justice to the poetry of the "immediate present" which catches a moment of "transcendent loveliness;" Lawrence always believed in oneness with the living cosmos. "I am part of the sun as my eye is part of me," he writes in *Apocalypse*.<sup>5</sup> If we have seen the sun "huge and liquid" before it sets out, if we have felt its tremors running through our veins, we might exclaim with the poet, "We have seen, we have touched, we have partaken of the very substance of creative change, creative mutation" ("Poetry of the Present").

Lawrence's poetry never speaks of the complete and the consummate. It speaks rather of "the incarnate disclosure of the flux." This is evident in *More Pansies* once again. The poem "God is Born" is representative of the collection:

The history of the cosmos  
is the history of the struggle of becoming  
When the dim flux of unformed life  
struggled, convulsed back and forth upon itself,  
and broke at last into light and dark  
came into existence as light.<sup>6</sup>

This is a poetry of "pure attention" and "purified receptiveness."<sup>7</sup> The Romantic poets believed in moments/spots of time, in visionary experiences which often form the basis of their poems. Lawrence's

position is not very different from theirs. He states that "The essential quality of poetry is that it makes a new effort of attention, and 'discovers' a new world within the old world."<sup>8</sup> This observation gives us a clue to the understanding of the opening sequence in *Last Poems*, including the pieces like "The Greeks are Coming," "The Argonauts," "Middle of the World," etc. This is how "The Greeks are Coming" opens up:

Little islands out at sea, on the horizon  
keep suddenly showing a whiteness, a flash and a furl, a hail  
of something coming, ships a-sail from over the rim of the sea.  
And every time, it is ships, it is ships,  
it is ships of Cnossos coming, out of the morning end of the sea,  
it is Aegean ships, and men with archaic pointed beards  
coming out of the eastern end.

The opening lines of the poem thus catch a moment of illumination: "on the horizon/ keep suddenly showing a whiteness, a flash." This is close to Shelley's "visitations of the divinity" as discussed in *A Defence of Poetry*.<sup>9</sup> The poet has a vision of the Greeks with their ancient ships coming out of "the morning end of the sea." This sea will never die. This vision will never depart. However, the "present cannot be overlooked," as F.B. Pinion remarks (Pinion 121). The reference to an ocean liner going east "like a small beetle" and "leaving a long thread of dark smoke" is indeed unmistakable. This hints at the constant battle between temporality and timelessness in Lawrence. As he himself says in "The Crown": "I know I am compound of two waves, I, who am temporal and mortal. When I am timeless and absolute, all duality has vanished."<sup>10</sup> Thus when the poet is able to overcome the "duality" he cries out "They (the Argonauts) are not dead, they are not dead!"

The Greeks are in fact never dead to the Lawrencian imagination. "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not," Keats wrote.<sup>11</sup> So in Keats's aesthetic, beauty becomes truth when it is illuminated by imagination. To a certain extent, this is also true of Lawrence's imagination as it seizes the beauty of the Greek heroes returning from the front: their faces scarlet, like the dolphin's blood! / Lo! the loveliest is red all over." ("For the Heroes are dipped in scarlet." The poem here catches a unique mode of temporality when the "whole tide of all life and all time suddenly heaves, and appears before us as an apparition, a revelation," to quote from "Poetry of the Present."

Wordsworth in "The World is too much with us" mourns over the fact that we see little in nature that is ours and wishes he were a Pagan:

I'd rather be  
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus coming from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.<sup>12</sup>

Lawrence does not need to be anguished since he has a glimpse of Odysseus calling out the commands in the dawn ("The Argonauts"), or of the Minoan Gods or the Gods of Tiryns "softly laughing and chatting, as ever" ("Middle of the World"). This is how the distant mythical figures are "set before us here and now," as we are given access to a vantage-point within language from which to appreciate them in "living detail" (Poole 385).

In "The Ship of Death" the poet seems to take the reader into his confidence and asks him/her: "How can we this, our own quietus, make?" Or we may argue that the poet puts the question to his own immediate, instant self. The poem takes up the archetypal theme of life as a journey. Lawrence writes in "The Crown," "Life is a travelling to the edge of knowledge, then a leap taken."<sup>13</sup> Death is "the edge of knowledge" as envisaged in the poem and it thus concludes on a note of awful urgency: "Oh build your ship of death, oh build it! / for you will need it. / For the voyage of oblivion awaits you."

If death is an immediate experience, as embodied in "The Ship of Death" ("Now it is autumn and the falling fruit"), it is a kind of wish-fulfilment in "Shadows" ("And if tonight my soul may find her peace in sleep"). Death means "good oblivion." Death is a state when one is "healed from all this ache of being." But death is more than that. Death means renewal. And death is the promise of a new morning. Lawrence, in his *Last Poems*, prays to an unknown God that he may send him forth "on a new morning a new man."

The poetical pieces included in *Last Poems* reflect conflicting desires. While they sing of death, they look forward to rebirth as well. Crucially, they grasp a moment which lies between the two. This moment is "the quick of all change and haste and opposition." Lawrence's concept of "quivering momentaneity" probably influenced T.S. Eliot's aesthetic of time as represented in "Burnt Norton": "Quick now, here, now, always - / Ridiculous the waste sad time/ Stretching before and after."<sup>14</sup> But Eliot did not like Lawrence's

free verse,<sup>15</sup> nor did he ever acknowledge his debt to Lawrence's "Poetry of the Present." This remains therefore a question that is part of an inconclusive critical debate. We would like to sum up our discussion by drawing on Richard Aldington's observation, in "Introduction to *Last Poems* and *More Pansies*," which is true of Lawrence's poems in general but has a more acute and more particular pertinence in relation to the *Last Poems*:

There is nothing static everything flows. There is perpetual intercourse with the Muse He adventured into himself in order to write, and by writing discovered himself (Aldington 594).

#### References :

- 1 *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Scully Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett, (New York: Norton, 1973), 30
- 2 "Art," for Arthur Symons, "begins when a man wishes to immortalise the most vivid moments he has ever lived." Symons saw an embodiment of his idea in the poetic figure of Paul Verlaine. Verlaine, says Symons, is a great poet because he "gave its full value to every moment, [...] got out of every moment all that moment had to give him." These ideas are lucidly discussed in S. P. Singha, *Legacy of the Nineties: A Study in Critical Theory and Practice in the Late Nineteenth Century Literature*, (New Delhi: Herman Publishing House, 2001), 60. We may argue at this point that Symons's observations on Verlaine are also true of Lawrence to a fair extent, insofar as the latter also attaches a great value to poetry of the "incarnate moment."
- 3 Lawrence's letter to Gordon Campbell dated 21 September 1914. See *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence: Vol. II: June 1913 – October*, eds. George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981, 218.
- 4 D.H. Lawrence, Preface to *Chariot of the Sun* by Harry Crosby, in *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D.H. Lawrence*, ed. Edward D. McDonald (London Heinemann, 1936), 261.
- 5 See D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, with an Introduction by Richard Aldington, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 126.
- 6 The central idea of the first stanza of the poem runs parallel to Lawrence's statement in "The Crown": There are the two eternities fighting the fight for Creation, the light projecting itself into the darkness, the darkness enveloping herself within the embrace of light. And then there is the consummation of each in the other... See 'The Crown' in *Phoenix II: Uncollected, Unpublished and Other Prose Works* by D.H. Lawrence, eds. Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore, ((London: Heinemann, 1968), 371.
- 7 The phrases are borrowed from Lawrence's Preface to *Chariot of the Sun*, 260.
- 8 Ibid., 255.
- 9 P. B. Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry": "Poetry thus makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world; it arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life [...] Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man." See the essay in *English Critical Texts*, 252.
- 10 See Lawrence, "The Crown," in *Phoenix II*, 377.
- 11 John Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey dated 22 November 1817, in *Selected Letters*, ed. Robert Gittings, revised with a new Introduction and Notes by Jon Mee, (Oxford UP, 2009), 36.
- 12 William Wordsworth, "The World is too much with us," in *Selected Poems*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by H.M. Margoliouth, (London: Collins, 1970), 435.
- 13 D.H. Lawrence, "The Crown," in *Phoenix II*, 374.
- 14 T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," *Four Quartets*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 9.
- 15 The informed reader may have a knowledge of Eliot's caustic observation on Lawrence's free verse: "D.H. Lawrence wrote a kind of free verse, but his poems are more notes for poems than poems themselves. Lawrence did not have the necessity to write in this manner, and so there is no excuse for his having written these poems". See *The Southern Review*, (21.4 Autumn 1985), 969-73. This observation of Eliot is cited and contested in Samir Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *The Poetry of D.H. Lawrence: Modernism without Artifice* (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2002), 191-203.