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”)

1 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.

2 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” ("Foreword," CP 191). 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. (CP 191)

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.

(CP 203) [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” (CP 191). 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 - (CP 204)

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.2
"The past and the future are the two great bourns of human emotion," Lawrence writes in "Poetry of the Present," "the two great homes of the human days, the two eternities." But he is after the instant which is the quick of all time. The poems in Look! We Have Come Through! try to seize this very instant with a verse that is spontaneous and flexible. But the poems depend more on statement than on suggestion. They are not didactic. They “blur no whisper, spoil no expression” (“Song of a Man Who Has Come Through,” CP 250), even then they sometimes fail to express the wonder that “bubbles” into the poet’s soul.

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,” 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.”

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. (CP 403)

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. 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. (CP 682)
Let there be light and there is light. Darkness yields to light and order evolves out of the “flux of unformed life." God is cosmos. God is light. This is an eternal process. So “there is no end to the birth of God.”

When we read “For a Moment,” from the same collection, we discover that myths are undying and that there is no end to the birth of Hyacinthus or Osiris or Centaur. It only requires that a man in his wholeness should attend wholly to a pagan thought:

For a moment, as he looked at me through his spectacles
pondering, yet eager, the broad and thick-set Italian who works
in with me,
for a moment he was a Centaur, the wise yet
horse-hoofed Centaur
in whom I can trust. (CP 672)

This is a poetry of “pure attention” and “purified receptiveness.”? 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.” 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 curl, 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. (CP 687)

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. 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.” Thus when the poet is able to overcome the “duality” he cries out “They (the Argonauts) are not dead, they are not dead!” (CP 687).

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. 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," CP 689). 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.\(^{12}\)

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).

Holly Laird observes, “He [Lawrence] does not pause to distinguish gods from men.” This is indeed what he manages to do. And she continues, “As in *Etruscan Places*, they converge: ‘man, by vivid attention and subtlety and exercising all his strength, could draw more life into himself, more life, more and more glistening vitality, till he became shining like the morning, blazing like a god’ ” (Laird 224). The passage from *Etruscan Places* quoted by Laird lays emphasis among other things on two important attributes which are essential for a man to emerge as a god: qualities of “vivid attention” and of “subtlety.” While the shaping spirit of imagination is of the utmost importance to a Romantic, for Lawrence, the Modernist, “vivid attention” is the be-all and end-all of poetry. We can argue however that there is no essential difference between them, in this respect, insofar as Romantics and Modernists alike grapple with the mystery of artistic creation.

While looking at the flowery legend decorated on the Grecian urn Keats is struck with wonder. An inevitable question arises in his mind:

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these?\(^{13}\)

For Keats, the figures on the urn are at the same time men and gods shaped by his imagination. For Lawrence, men become gods when as an artist he is able to seize the moment which is the “quick of nascent creation.”

Lawrence’s *Last Poems* marks the glorious "return" of the pagan gods and goddesses. They are dipped in his imagination, they become part of his sensual consciousness, and thereby they are “re-created.” The classic example is “Bavarian Gentians,” where he gives a new and sharply individual treatment of the Pluto-Persephone myth. The poem is steeped in the thought of death. However the thought evokes no feeling of sadness, since the knowledge of death is within him. “There is a great *consummation* in death,”\(^{14}\) Lawrence says. He, therefore, identifies with Persephone, who is going to be united with Pluto in the underworld:

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 (*CP 697*) [Emphasis mine]

This is poetry of the eternal present. This is “direct utterance” from the “whole man.” We can only subscribe to what Keith Sagar points out: “The lustre which the language
imparts is far from being a polish or finish. It is the shimmer of something essentially unfinished, transitory, because alive, and therefore not to be grasped or nailed down” (Sagar 243). The phrase “just now” (which I have emphasized in the lines quoted above) is absolutely revealing. It is the verbal equivalent of an instant when the “living plasm vibrates unspeakably.” Lawrence wrote to Arthur McLeod on 17 December 1912, “To write poetry one has to let oneself fuse in the current.” This aspiration to losing oneself in the “current” of artistic creation seems to be very close to Coleridge’s conception of poetic imagination when Coleridge quotes from Sir John Davies’s words, “Fire converts to fire the things it burns.” In Lawrence’s “Bavarian Gentians,” we find a brilliant illustration of this idea.

Cox and Dyson observe, “The poem [“Bavarian Gentians”] is a supreme expression of Lawrence’s mystical conception of sex. The gods in whom he believed are part of the natural processes of life. In death he will be united with them, and he talks of this with controlled sensuousness. This apprehension of death, calm, courageous and almost joyful, is beyond rational analysis” (Cox and Dyson 69). The observation is indeed a perceptive one and we agree on the point that no critical analysis can do justice to Lawrence’s apprehension of death as expressed in Last Poems. In fact, Lawrence here always speaks of death in paradoxical terms. He wants to sing the song of death, for without it the song of life is pointless. Death is the end, the sweet oblivion. Yet life may still be our “portion” after the bitter passage of dissolution. This is the theme of poems such as “The Ship of Death” and “Shadows.” In “The Ship of Death,” death is represented as a compelling experience: “The grim frost is at hand, when the apples will fall/Thick, almost thunderous, on the hardened earth./ And death is on the air like a smell of ashes!/ Ah! can’t you smell it?” (CP 717).

Graham Hough is convincing in his reading of the poetry when he points out that in poems like “Bavarian Gentians” and “The Ship of Death” Lawrence is “beyond conceptual statement, in a realm to whose existence only symbol and image can bear witness” (Hough 214). The image of “big and dark” gentians darkening the day-time in “Bavarian Gentians” or that of “grim frost” and apples falling to the “hardened earth” in “The Ship of Death” help the reader apprehend death which is close at hand.

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.” 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.” (CP 720)

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.” But Eliot did not like Lawrence’s free verse, “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).

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


The references to "Poetry of the Present are from the same edition of Lawrence’s poems, 181-86


NOTES

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.


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.

Lawrence’s statement may remind one of Shelley’s utterance: “Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” etc. See Shelley’s "A Defence of Poetry," *English Critical Texts: 16th Century to the 20th Century*, ed. and with notes and an appendix of Classical Extracts, by D.J. Enright & Ernest de Chickera, (Oxford UP, Indian Edition, 2007), 233.

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.


19. 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

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