

# Birds, Beasts and Flowers: Poems of D.H. Lawrence

by John Wareham



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### SCOPE OF TOPIC

This Bookmark is an introduction to a selection of the poems in D.H. Lawrence's volume, *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1920-1923). The poems considered include 'Humming-Bird', 'The Mosquito', 'Cypresses', 'Almond Blossom', 'Baby Tortoise', 'Sicilian Cyclamens', 'Snake' and 'Fish'.

### BOOKS TO READ

*D.H. Lawrence: Selected Poetry*, ed. Keith Sagar (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986): pp.83-182.

### NOTES

Lawrence remarked that 'The poems of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* were begun in Tuscany, in the autumn of 1920, and finished in New Mexico in 1923, in my thirty-eighth year' (Preface to *Collected Poems*, 1928). During these years Lawrence travelled in Italy where most of the poems were written, Ceylon, Australia and New Mexico. On this 'savage pilgrimage' he sought less developed countries as an antidote to life in advanced, 'mechanised' Western society. The unfamiliar vistas and perspectives prompted in him new insights and perceptions of animals and plants. Natural imagery had always been a staple of his verse but now he began to write poems taking a specific creature as subject, exploring its emotional, spiritual and ethical significance for him as well as its appearance and biology. In these poems living things are seen in the context of human life but on their own, rather than on human terms, for Lawrence realises that evolution implies both the genesis of difference as well as of empathy. The poems are in free form, improvisatory, speculative and exploratory. As Keith Sagar writes 'Lawrence is interested in making discoveries, not artifacts. What he hopes to discover cannot be fixed like a fly in amber. Each poem...does not seek to be gem-like, self-contained, finished, outside time. It exists in the dimension of time and process, and that is its life...'

Here is 'Humming-Bird' (p.85):

I can imagine, in some otherworld  
Primeval-dumb, far back  
In that most awful stillness, that only gasped and hummed,  
Humming-birds raced down the avenues.

Before anything had a soul,  
While life was a heave of Matter, half inanimate,  
This little bit chipped off in brilliance  
And went whizzing through the slow, vast succulent stems.

I believe there were no flowers, then,  
In the world where the humming-bird flashed ahead of creation.  
I believe he pierced the slow vegetable veins with his long beak.

Probably he was big  
As mosses and little lizards, they say were once big.  
Probably he was a jabbing, terrifying monster.

We look at him through the wrong end of the long telescope of Time,  
Lucky for us.

The poem travels back in geological time to the origin and predominance of the humming-bird whose force and energy is represented by 'raced', 'chipped off', 'whizzing', 'flashed', 'pierced' and 'jabbing'. These vital words contrast with the 'awful stillness' and 'slow' vastness of the surrounding plant life, close growing and leaving only 'avenues' between them. In 'brilliance' there is probably some word-play: half-inanimate themselves, these New World birds are like brilliants in their colours, and many are so-named: sapphire, topaz, sun gem. In a primeval world without flowers such creatures would provide a flash of colour. That flowerless habitat would also deprive today's humming-bird of its nectar: its monstrous antecedents resort to sap-sucking. Today's humming-birds are all small and, the telescope metaphor implies, we see them in inappropriate scale and perspective. The colloquial 'Lucky for us' half-humourously leaves the reader to decide how a proper scale and perspective might be detrimental to our human well-being and status.

The reader of traditional verse reads in vain here to find a regular number of stresses, a repetitive rhythm, a set length of stanza, or rhyme at line-endings. Line lengths vary. There is no fixed pattern of stresses. The rhythm fluctuates with, and expresses, content in a much more fluid way than conventional verse. There are no stanzas but rather verse-paragraphs of different lengths each of which present a new and enlightening facet of the poem's subject. Rhyme is absent but not conspicuously so. 'Humming-Bird', like other poems of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, is in free-verse, and Lawrence is a master of free-verse. In 'Humming-Bird' the rhythm alternates between the shorter, blunter lines of 'Primeval-dumb, far back' and 'Before anything had a soul' and the longer, free-winging lines associated with humming-bird flight: 'And went whizzing through the slow, vast succulent stems' and 'In the world where the humming-bird flashed ahead of creation'. Again the short 'Probably he was big' is dwarfed by another hypothesis that is closer to the disturbing reality of the bird itself: 'Probably he was a jabbing, terrifying monster'. The 'long telescope of Time' - the image magnified by the capitalised 'T' - mimetically occupies a long line whereas 'Lucky for us' brings us up short with the implication of human smallness and limitation. Besides their sensitive handling of rhythm, Lawrence's lines employ sound-patterns which are often mimetic in effect and engender an emotional intensity greater than the "chopped-up prose" which they are sometimes mistakenly accused of being. Reiteration and recapitulation too are features of this verse. 'Humming-Bird' is propelled forward and held together by such repetitions as 'in some other world...In that most awful stillness...', 'I believe...I believe', 'Probably he was...Probably he was...' from which the final two lines of the poem emerge with greater effect for being quite unrepentive.

In 'The Mosquito'(p.86), man confronts insect. The opening verse-paragraphs emphasise the mosquito's diminutive size and its apparent threat and malevolence. Its high legs are

characterised as 'shredded shrank' calling attention to their threadlike, brittle thinness, while the insect as a whole is 'weightless' and has a 'translucent phantom shred/Of a pale corpus'. Airborne it is 'a dull clot of air/A nothingness' and yet it is a 'phantom' full of 'devilry' and with an 'evil little aura'. In an almost Metaphysical conceit (where, as Dr Johnson observed, the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together) the insect is compared repeatedly with the 'Winged Victory', the Greek statue of the Nike from Samothrace: the ominous connection is that the malaria-transmitting mosquito, winged itself, can boast its own past conquests of mankind. The poet adopts a knowing attitude to the insect's behaviour, its 'tricks':

But I know your game now, streaky sorcerer.

Queer, how you stalk and prowl the air  
In circles and evasions, enveloping me,  
Ghoul on wings.

The repeated words 'me' and 'my' throughout personalise the growing relationship between the man and the insect in 'this sly game of bluff'. Which one will have dominance? Though the poet seems confident that he will triumph, the mosquito irks him with its 'hateful little trump' (trumpet). That 'small, high, hateful bugle' is surely a warning to the potential victim. But the insect 'can't help it' and this leads a wry Lawrence to muse that perhaps by it Providence is protecting him. Drawing blood is bliss for the mosquito yet 'obscenity of trespass' to the man, whose deepest privacy has been invaded. In asking

Am I not mosquito enough to out-mosquito you?

Lawrence admits to some admiration for its wit and strategy but not enough to prevent himself finally swatting it, reducing the Winged Victory to an 'infinitesimal faint smear', a 'dim dark smudge'. Throughout the poem the colloquial tones are modulated as the action progresses from threat to contest, bloodshed and death.

'**Cypresses**' (p.89) is, at one level, a lament for and homage to the Etruscan people. The great ancient Etruscan civilisation of Etruria, in Italy, reached its height in the 6th century BC and was eventually conquered by the Romans but not before they absorbed many of its art-forms and institutions. The vigorous Etruscan culture comes down to us mainly through the trappings of graves and the paintings and carvings of cemeteries; and their tongue is known mainly through epitaphs, the language of the tomb. Aptly, then, Lawrence chooses the phrase 'Etruscan cypresses' to be tolled out at intervals throughout this poem of a lost peoples. Indeed, Lawrence's description of 'The long-nosed, sensitive-footed, subtly-smiling Etruscans' with their 'fanciful long shoes' is probably derived from the illustrations on pottery and tomb-walls. The dark, flame-like trees, reminiscent of Van Gogh's restless cypresses, embody Etruscan energy and vitality. They 'embalm' a people who once seemed to possess 'the delicate magic of life' and whose 'aroma of lost human life' is preserved in the trees' fragrant resins. Though the Romans called them vicious, 'we have only Roman word for it' and perhaps the Etruscan way was 'only evasive and different, dark like the cypress-trees in a wind'. At another level, the poem's many rhetorical questions imply that both cypresses and Etruscans keep their secret. Nevertheless the rhythms evoke the movement of the trees and the visually-based imagery recreates something of the Etruscan soul: poetic means have been employed to breathe their meaning back into life again. For 'There is only one evil, to deny life' as the over-intellectual Romans denied the Etruscans, and 'mechanical America' the vanquished Aztecs. That sense of life-giving is surely in the poem despite its self-admitted limitations in penetrating the ultimate mystery of things.

In **'Baby Tortoise'** (p.112) Lawrence contemplates and imitates the first few faltering steps of the 'tiny, fragile, half-animate bean' faced with the almost insuperable odds of inertia and an inhospitable universe, 'the vast inanimate'. It is the contest of life against non-life. As if to stress that it bears 'All animate creation on [its] shoulder' the tortoise is by turns other phases in evolutionary sequence, at first not even animal but 'bean', then 'small insect' 'small bird' and finally a human 'baby', thus allowing Lawrence to universalise his observations on development in a hostile environment. At the same time he never loses sight of characteristic tortoise movements 'Rowing slowly forward', pausing to yawn, slowly turning 'your head in its wimple' (that is, the shape the shell makes at the neck), and 'slow-dragging on your four-pinned toes'. But Lawrence broadens out from this realistic base to consider the tortoise, 'No bigger than my thumb' as the Homeric hero, Ulysses, rowing on his wanderings and a Titan, or courageous giant god, sheltering under his shell as battle-shield. From 'the slow passion of pitching through immemorial ages', from distant past and enormous scale in physical and moral terms, the poem finally shrinks to the real scale of the tortoise's venture 'Over the garden earth'. The tension between the animal's tininess and its 'indomitable will and pride' is exploited throughout. As in 'Cypresses' the poem, above all, affirms life. 'Baby Tortoise' is the opening poem of an impressive sequence of six ostensibly about tortoises from birth to maturity.

**'Sicilian Cyclamens'** (p.127) opens with a man and woman, whether of the present or the distant past it is difficult to say. To them is revealed - 'they felt the light of heaven brandished like a knife at their defenceless eyes' - their first sight of

Cyclamen leaves  
Toad-filmy, earth-iridescent  
Beautiful  
Frost-filigreed  
Spumed with mud  
Snail-nacreous  
Low down.

Lawrence's images - sensuous, primitive, proto-biological - have lines to themselves to emphasise the force and individuality of the separate perceptions; in this he was a pioneer, influencing such later poets as Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney. Here the age-old, primeval nature of the cyclamen leaves is being recreated. The buds have the pent-up energy and potential speed of greyhounds and wild hares. The flowers seem to hark back to the dawn of civilisation in the Mediterranean, to the ancient Pelasgian peoples, to 'Greece and the world's memory'. Yet, like the cypresses, they keep their meaning, 'Whispering witchcraft/ Like women at a well'. They pre-date, the poem concludes, even the carved marbles of Parthenon and Acropolis (the Erechtheum). It is this sense of enormous antiquity, of energy and of persistence that reveals itself to the man and woman of the poem's opening as they see for the first time the cyclamens growing at their feet.

**'Almond Blossom'** (p.131) is a metaphor for the blooming and prospering of the natural world from apparently unpromising 'iron' circumstances:

This is the iron age,  
But let us take heart  
Seeing iron break and bud,  
Seeing rusty iron puff with clouds of blossom.

Iron represents the dormant or vegetative state; the poem is a semi-pagan hymn or fugue to the metamorphosis of this state to one of sexual realisation. At first sight the blossom appears 'like rose-pale snow' coming 'not from the sky' but 'storming up' miraculously from within. Christian imagery stresses the blossom's association with a rising from the dead:

Sweating his drops of blood through the long-nighted Gethsemane  
Into blossom, into pride, into honey-triumph, into most exquisite splendour.  
Oh, give me the tree of life in blossom  
And the Cross sprouting its superb and fearless flowers!

The poem, largely grounded in the physical reality of the blossom itself, concludes with floating images of knots, redness and sore-heartedness which may relate, Keith Sagar suggests, to resurrection following crucifixion. Though the writing becomes wordy and abstruse, 'Almond Blossom' is a forceful poem of the relationship between man and plant.

'Snake' (p. 134) is perhaps the most famous of the poems in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. The conflict at the core of the poem occurs within the speaker-poet: the voice of human education telling him to kill the snake vies with an unsentimental sympathy for the snake ('I liked him') and a feeling of being honoured by its presence. These voices are responses not to an abstract idea but to a very real snake: Lawrence effectively establishes its physical reality within the poem. Partly this is a matter of the sound and rhythm of the long, slithering lines: 'And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied, over the edge of the stone trough' and 'Softly drank through his straight gums, into his long slack body'. Partly it is a matter of expressive diction, of choosing for their contexts such words as 'reached...straight...drinking cattle...flickered his two-forked tongue'.

Partly too it is a matter of association, the snake, 'earth-brown, earth-golden' as Etna, sharing the volcano's potential forcefulness and vigour, or, 'writhing like lightning', being charged with electric energy. The snake is native to the locality, a fore-runner, whereas the man is a visitor, a second-comer, torn between a life-denying education and an instinct to empathise with 'one of the lords/Of life'. The voice of education wins: the throwing of the log is 'a sort of protest against his withdrawing into that horrid black hole'. It is as if the rational voice cannot stand any longer to see the phallic snake disappearing into 'the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure', mysterious, primal and fascinating:

And immediately I regretted it.  
I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!  
I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.

As he wishes the snake would return, he thinks of Coleridge's albatross whose life was denied by the Ancient Mariner, the bird falling off his neck and the drought ending only when he has blessed the water-snakes. He welcomes back the snake too as a Satanic

king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld  
Now due to be crowned again,

a lord of life whose manifest loveliness, liveliness and dignity have been rejected by the 'petty' man.

'Fish' ( p.143) opens with a number of short, flat, hesitant, negative lines:

Fish, oh Fish,  
So little matters!

All one to you.

Never know,  
Never grasp

which suddenly bloom into rich, vigorous, physical description:

Your life a sluice of sensation along your sides,  
A flush at the flails of your fins, down the whorl of your tail,  
And water wetly on fire in the grates of your gills;  
Fixed water-eyes.

It is as if the poet were at first struggling without much effect to capture the fish's nature and then suddenly finding an insight into his subject. It is a pattern throughout the poem: doubt as to whether he can really know the fish and sudden, darting perception of it. For the fish is certainly not like the warm-blooded:

No fingers, no hands and feet, no lips;  
No tender muzzles,  
No wistful bellies,  
No loins of desire,  
None.

The fish seem to be driven solely by

Food, and fear, and joie de vivre,  
Without love.

yet the poet again finds empathy with it:

Slowly to gape through the waters,  
Alone with the element;  
To sink, and rise, and go to sleep with the waters;  
To speak endless inaudible wavelets into the wave;  
To breathe from the flood at the gills,  
Fish-blood slowly running next to the flood, extracting fish-fire;

Lawrence has put his biological knowledge of gas exchange at the gills to good poetic effect, creating a fiery-watery natural history. But the fishes, though they 'swarm in companies', remain resolutely non-human:

They exchange no words, no spasm, not even anger,  
Not one touch.  
Many suspended together, forever apart...

A magnetism in the water between them only.

The poem now considers fish Lawrence experienced on the Zeller lake:

I said to my heart, *who are these?*  
And my heart couldn't own them...

Faced with the incomprehensibility of fish, he is briefly tempted to dress them in human clothes:

A slim young pike, with smart fins  
And grey-striped suit, a young cub of a pike  
Slouching along away below, half out of sight,  
Like a lout on an obscure pavement...

but to no effect:

I didn't know him...

I didn't know his God,  
I didn't know his God.

As Blake questions whether lamb and tiger share the same maker, so Lawrence questions whether he and the fish share the same maker. On another occasion, seeing a large pike, he concludes that '*Fish are beyond me*'; yet this is belied by a later encounter:

Unhooked his gorging, water-horny mouth,  
And seen his horror-tilted eye,  
His red-gold, water-precious, mirror-flat bright eye;  
And felt him beat in my hand, with his mucous, leaping life-throb.

The vision does not last, however. It is not that fish are felt to be horrific creatures, but simply that their being is totally alien to the human mind and body: 'They move in other circles'. While Lawrence's blunt 'I don't know fishes' is contradicted by his brilliant descriptions of them, that is yet another means to make us examine these astonishing creatures in a non-human perspective. Man is a limited measure of all things.

## FURTHER READING

The reader is invited to explore further in the sequence: for instance, the section entitled 'Fruits' (p.91), 'Man and Bat' and 'Bibbles'. For Lawrence's early rhymed poems 'Snap-dragon', 'The Best of School' and 'Piano' are compelling starting-points, for the later *Pansies* (thoughts) 'Sea-Weed', 'Lizard' and 'Give Us Gods'. No reading of Lawrence is complete without acquaintance with the great poems of death: 'Bavarian Gentians' (both versions) and 'The Ship of Death' (longer version, p.254).

D.H.Lawrence, *The Complete Poems* ed. V. de Sola Pinto and F.W.Roberts (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977).

Keith Sagar, *D.H. Lawrence: Life into Art* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985).

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