"Snake": A Moment of Consciousness

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D. H. Lawrence's unique poetry has received new recognition; some of the old criticisms seem feeble. Many of them revolve around his lack of conventional poetic form. It has been said that Lawrence's poetry quite misses being customary free verse, that he produced inferior poetry akin to some of Whitman's lesser pieces. T. S. Eliot considers Lawrence's poetry in reality unfinished preparation for poetry: he had created a beginning, a sort of prose outline with his writing, but had not bothered to carry through and produce an artistic work—an organic whole. A. Alvarez in his fine essay "D. H. Lawrence: The Single State of Man"[1] counters the criticisms of the lack of form in Lawrence's poetry. He explains that Lawrence was not an indifferent craftsman: he was attempting to record his insights—his feelings—as they were experienced; he endeavored to be intense enough in his poetry to transmit his feelings with verity. His struggle to gain "a complete truth to feeling"[2] could not be hindered by conventional poetic form. It does appear that the more form Lawrence imposed upon his thought the less successful his poetry is: close rhyme, regular beat seem to cut off circulation from his poetry. And in his own interpretation of free verse Lawrence explains that those who err in their understanding of his free verse fail to comprehend that the style follows no cut pattern but is a law of its own: one might write and the impression captured with honesty would make the free verse; the verse would not be imposed upon the recorded perception, though Lawrence's Frieda stated that Lawrence as artificer worked and reworked his poetry after it was written from initial impulse. Lawrence essays, then, to catch what he calls "The instant; the quick," understanding flowing from an instant of pure consciousness —a perception which flows sensitively from the soul and will

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[1]Alvarez, "D. H. Lawrence: The Single State of Man," *A. D. H. Lawrence Miscellany,* ed. Harry T. Moore (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1959), p. 343.

[2]*Ibid.,* p. 342.

not stand being tamped immediately into a framework and whittled at severely. But we are not merely excusing Lawrence, stating that getting away from sanctioned poetic form is justifiable on any pretext. His struggle to snare "The instant; the quick" is not easy; working up enough poetic intensity in the writing to transfer a feeling which is with one for a moment as part of his deep inner self is no simple task.

The form of a poem is not the only criterion by which it may be judged; this may not be, in fact, the most important aspect for judgment, although without other strengths to offset or to explain, say, peculiarities or deficiencies of form one might certainly discard a poem because of the writer's ineptness regarding form—sloppy rhyme, inadequate meter, common speech. To make a poem succeed, causing the reader to respond, the poet must manage to create a mutual feeling or understanding between himself and the reader. This might be called a kind of compassionate agreement which is based upon feeling arising from reading and comprehending the poet's intentions. If the reader can enter into sympathetic agreement with the poet; that is, if he can concur with the author's attitude toward his subject in the poem—if the reader can also agree that the tone of the poem is appropriate to the subject, then he will be satisfied regarding the poet's honesty and sincerity. On the other hand, if it appears that the author's bearing or posture behind his poem differs from the tone of the poem, one would conclude that—unless the poet has some secondary motive for pretending an emotion—the poet is being hypocritical. For example, a reader who considered the tone of a poem tragic but who also suspected the author's attitude toward the subject to be one of mere frivolity might justifiably feel furious for such hypocrisy. What we are attempting to say, then, is that a poem may seem wanting in form—Lawrence, again, has been criticized for this—but succeed because of its impact upon the intelligent reader, an impact stemming from the author's intense desire to convey the truth. Though we ignore the fact that A. Alvarez defends Lawrence, saying that there is indeed form in his seeming formlessness, we may justify his poetry from this other angle, the aspect of esthetic honesty. If Lawrence is nothing else, he is profoundly earnest in his attempt to capture and convey an insight which he experiences in, for example, "Snake."

Admittedly, "Snake" is lacking in conventional form. It is written in free verse in which the rhythmic pattern seems faltering and uncertain. The images appear strewn planlessly through the poem. It is cluttered with clichés like "undignified haste," "dreadful hole," "finished him off," "writhed like lightning," "stared with fascination." Hence, if one were to judge this poem solely on form, one might, despite Alvarez's defense, look askance at it. Yet the poem is a remarkable achievement. We hesitate to say that it is an accomplishment in spite of its faults, for with Lawrence's intense effort to catch his "instant," the deceptive carelessness of form is hardly a fault after all. Supposing that Lawrence did not know what he was doing in "Snake" would be another matter; the scattered images, the clichés, the free verse would indicate a poet hardly in control of his medium. This is not the case with Lawrence; he is exerting power over his material all the way. And being in control he is able to arouse the reader's sympathies, causing him to enter into sympathetic agreement with Lawrence through his poem.

Pursuing Lawrence's "Snake" further, let us try to determine what he perceived in his "instant." "Snake" is from Lawrence's collection entitled *Birds, Beasts and Flowers,* a group of poems which have been thought of by some as mere vivid fragments of description falling considerably short of the conventional ideal because of carelessness of form. They are much more than this, and one reason they are we have mentioned: Lawrence struggles intensely to relate honestly the feelings which well up in him in an acutely conscious moment; he labors to get as close as possible to what he really feels. In 1923 Lawrence finished this collection in New Mexico. The collection belongs to a larger group of "unrhyming" poems which he began after his marriage and continued until his death. Some critics—Kenneth Rexroth, for example—consider these poems representative of the mature Lawrence in masterful control, or, as Lawrence himself might say, under the control of his demon.

Lawrence, as the story goes, living temporarily in Taormina, Sicily, arose one morning and went outdoors to the water trough for a drink. As he arrived he noticed a snake gliding from a hole in the garden wall. He stood, pitcher in hand, watching the long, yellow snake sip from the basin. The reptile

lifted his head, looked at Lawrence, then drank again. Lawrence recognized the snake as poisonous, felt afraid, and upon overcoming his fear picked up a log and, as the snake returned to its hole, threw the log at it. He missed, but caused the snake to lose its dignity and hurry from sight. The emotion Lawrence had succeeding that of fear was shame for having tried to destroy it. His feeling was that, though the creature was indeed venomous, it was beautiful: kingly. This is, then, essentially Lawrence's experience which resulted in "Snake." But there is more to be appreciated in the poem than the vivid description of an autobiographical incident.

Running through Lawrence's prose works is a theme which might be summed up as conflict between excessively mental man and Lawrence's idea of his counterpart, vital, earthy man. He had in mind that a man or woman functioning only as part of an artificial society dependent upon mind could not fulfill himself. Lawrence discusses in his criticism, for example, the degeneration of the sexual act between man and woman into something dirty as the result of sex being mentalized and not kept (as he might say) in the loins where it belongs. Making an act which should be a natural and beautiful part of the human function something shamefully covert takes from it the joyous spontaneity which it deserves. Our civilization has made intercourse an action to be dwelled upon mentally, nastied, played with to stimulate eroticism. This state, Lawrence would say, is the result of a mechanized civilization in which ultracerebral man has made sex a "dirty little secret." In this modern attitude toward sex there is falseness; for the very naturalness of the act, making of it something mentalized neither before or after, but an instinctive physical function is its truth to nature. And such an acceptance by a man and a woman helps fulfill their relationship. Agreement between Lawrence and T. S. Eliot concerning the degeneracy of man's point of view concerning sexual relations is evident here. Eliot points in "The Wasteland" to the nonexistence of meaning or fulfillment for people because this creative function has sunk to dirty talk and passive boredom. The perversion of this natural act contributes to Lawrence's theme. He rejects the synthetic, sterile modern culture and pleads for fidelity to a living and primitive culture, in which man follows his natural emotions and instincts rather than the machinations of a mind

imbued with the doctrines of contemporary civilization. Lawrence is convinced that the man is not really alive who follows the dictates of his mind alone and represses his natural desires —instincts which filter up from his lower consciousness. He thought the conflict between the cerebral consciousness and natural man could be resolved only by one's following what he called "blood consciousness." In opposition to the mechanized, synthetic society of Lawrence's era as well as today, then, is the natural world in which man following his blood consciousness will become more acutely sensitive to the natural world and the creatures in it as he follows his instincts, forgetting his mental indoctrination.

Now we begin to see in "Snake," as in other of Lawrence's successful poems, why in form they are seemingly careless. In the endeavor to identify himself more closely with the natural world that man is really a part of, Lawrence must, to achieve such an association, write with as much naturalness as possible, getting away from what he would consider man's artificial structuring of words to fit some preconceived goal. Since, as we mentioned, Lawrence was in control of his material and knew what he was about, a poem like "Snake" does not fail from a formal point of view. Lawrence is striving to feel deeply enough to attain some realization from out of an identification through blood consciousness with the world of nature to which Lawrence believes we belong and through which we can fulfill ourselves as, for example, we have discussed in connection with the sexual act. To transfer the received intuition to us, Lawrence forsakes purely formal poetic method and keeps close to his natural feelings, essaying to capture that perception of the moment—and in its securing lies Lawrence's power in, for instance, "Snake."

Now in speaking of Lawrence's identification with nature, we are indeed saying that he is a nature poet. In a sense he is related to a nature poet like Wordsworth, who celebrates nature and man's potentiality for getting close to nature; he is kin also to Emerson and Thoreau, who extolled man's possibility for getting nearer his creator by affiliation with Nature, which is the incarnation of God the Over-soul. In the poems of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* he often presents the encounter between animal and man in nature, subject matter presenting the opportunity for the usual extension of normal sympathetic

affections creating a bond between poet and reader. However, Lawrence goes beyond the nature poets or the transcendentalists in respect to what he sees in such a meeting in nature: Lawrence discerns not only common ground in such an encounter, but also a conflict between man and nature; he sees that there is an antagonism between man and nature as there is between man and man or man and woman, an effect of man's mental set in the modern world. Lawrence sees further yet: he perceives that man is part of the natural world and that though there is an irreconcilable difference creating conflict, say, between a man and a snake there is also a profound relationship between the two which hearkens back to origins which are mistily antediluvian. In "Snake" Lawrence recognizes that a man and a snake are in some ancient sense related, that there is something to be intuited from this acknowledgment which will help man fulfill himself.

Let us go back to that morning in Taormina when Lawrence kept his rendezvous with the snake. In the poem Lawrence says this of the meeting:

> In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob-tree
> I came down the steps with my pitcher
> And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the trough before me.

These lines set early a direct, unadorned, dignified mood, giving a reader the awareness that the author is dealing with a large theme. We refer especially to the initial line of the preceding quotation which helps set an atmosphere both intense in its nearness and color, and timeless with that impression engendered by "deep, strange-scented," and gives also the feeling of hot, humid air through which one sees the "great dark carob-tree," a locust tree with brilliant red flowers. And this feeling of dignity and timelessness is augmented by Lawrences description of the snake.

> 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, . . .

In the hot, quiet, vivid atmosphere the snake moves fluidly as in a dream; for Lawrence—and the reader—it seems as

though there is no motion or time as the snake comes kinglike out of nature to the trough. Lawrence feels deeply as though there is something significant in this moment out of time in which there is felt some mutual relationship between him and this antagonist. The poisonous snake can leave him something for his fulfillment. For the moment the snake is as human as he. And Lawrence, feeling this, personifies the reptile in his poem.

> He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,
> And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,
> And flickered his two-forked tongue from his lips, and
> mused a moment,
> And stooped and drank a little more, . . .

It is as though at this instant Lawrence could also say that the carob-tree itself was not an "it" but a "thou," so completely is he in that breathless, timeless moment a part of the natural world through his blood consciousness. Here it seems that Lawrence in that spot of time is an anachronism to modern man, being hylozoistic in his intense perception, giving life to matter, identifying the tree as a living entity, the snake as an equal, even animating the earth: "burning bowels of the earth."

But what with all this is the recognition that Lawrence has which contributes to his fulfillment? Man in his mechanistic, scientific progress has lost his unity with the natural world from which Lawrence would say he has sprung. His "progress" has alienated him from the natural world and from his own natural emotions, drives, instincts so that he is a synthetic creature leaning upon his scientific, mechanically oriented achievements which have become blown out of proportion in their importance insofar as they have reference to a complete life. A line from E. E. Cummings's "Pity This Busy Monster Manunkind" sums this idea up succinctly as he says that "manunkind," a victim of the "comfortable disease" of progress

> plays with the bigness of his littleness
> —electrons deify one razorblade
> into a mountainrange; . . .

Thus we see how one-sided we are, rendering adulation to the artificialities of our progress, ignoring nature from which we have sprung. We hardly realize it now, but we are still at the mercy of the seasons despite our technological advancements,

awaiting with blind assurance the coming of a spring allowing crops to be planted, giving us food to sustain life. But how far removed we are from this world of which we are a natural part! We use, for example, a calendar to tell us when spring is coming. Our experience does not tell us, for we are not that closely associated with nature—we must have a synthetic means for reckoning, a calendar. The ancient Aegeans who preceded the "enlightened" Greeks were thought to be hylozoistic: they worshipped inanimate objects, endowing them with life. A tree was to them as alive as the next man. This is to us a crude belief, but these people were as artless as the nature with which they identified themselves. The Periclean Greeks made tremendous strides in cosmology, learning of the intricacies of the heavens, but they were not so natural as the Aegeans, having forgotten somewhat their origins. They could predict eclipses, but they were very mistaken about natural phenomena, believing, for instance, in spontaneous generation. These Greeks must have felt in some degree as we do even today: a man standing at night under the cold, starry sky may shiver in his aloneness, but sitting at the edge of Walden Pond he may feel undisturbed, for here he has the company of living things which are closely related to him. The man will realize that he and perhaps a snake have aspects which are different, inconceivably so, from each other. Yet they both belong to something more comprehensive than themselves. Again, the man Lawrence and the snake have something unfathomably antediluvian in common, and this in that timeless instant is realized by Lawrence: this is a comforting fact, that though the snake be poisonous he is united somehow with Lawrence in that immense class of living things. There is with this the perception that this base—perhaps hylozoistic in a sense—is broad: all living things are on one side of the scale and the stars and missiles are on the other. Man is not the only being endowed with life; he is a creature who has in fact not always been here and who may not always be here. We are not even the only custodians of life; we have to recognize that there are other life forms in this broad base, and in some respects we are akin to them in the sense of misty antediluvian time. A recognition of this kinship as Lawrence knew it at that rendezvous can help man to truly view himself in his rightful place upon this earth. But, as we have said, man's development in this mechanistic, scientific age has taken

him further away from an association with natural phenomena which would help him to know himself, to live more fully. Rather, man is coming more and more to think in terms of abstractions—to insist upon poetry being constructed according to some conventional abstract form. Man is living less and less in the world of experience, of sights, sounds, blood consciousness.

Men are becoming complete time-clock punchers, walking with eyes upon feet; they are becoming adding machines, efficiency automations, not so much like the animals from among whom they sprung. Even the chair a man sits in he recognizes as a collection of speeding atoms and not as the solid object which it appears to be.

One wonders if all of that which we have developed as the poet himself might, struck Lawrence as he and the snake gazed at each other. No doubt Lawrence at that instant was hardly intellectualizing to himself upon the experience. But the important thing is that the realization was there "On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking, . . ." That impression which we have been elaborating on passed, and

The voice of my education said to me
He must be killed,
For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous.
And voices in me said, If you were a man
You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.
But I must confess how I liked him,
How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink at my water-trough
And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankless,
Into the burning bowels of the earth.
Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?
Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him?
Was it humility, to feel so honoured?
I felt so honored.

The perception was there but so was the conflict, built up out of Lawrence's indoctrination—that intellectual idea that a man is unalterably opposed to the reptile, an enemy to it. And in conflict with this indoctrination is the feeling that here is an equal, even a king: Lawrence felt honored to have him at his water-trough. To Lawrence the broad base to which both he and the snake belong matters more than people moving about

upon the face of the earth; the first moment in which he and the snake face each other there is some recognition in his consciousness of *that mysterious life existing far below the level* of the surface vicissitudes of each day.

The poem, then, is built around a profoundly earnest instant of visionary experience through which Lawrence divines the kinship of himself and the snake, perceiving man's true position in relation to the rest of animate nature—that man is a part of this nature and cannot fulfill himself in the artificial cosmos which he has created for himself, in which he draws further and further from his beginnings. And it is because of this recognition that Lawrence cannot attempt to transfer the experience he had by the use of a structured kind of conventional poetry seeming to him a part of the synthetic life that man has drawn himself into: his poetry must be natural and free to catch that deathless moment which he experienced. After repeated readings of "Snake" one feels that Lawrence succeeded in transferring his recognition to the reader.

And when he had thrown at the snake and had made the reptile depart "in undignified haste" Lawrence felt ashamed.

> 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.
>
> And I thought of the albatross
> And I wished he would come back, my snake.

So that he could reaffirm in some way that marriage which he felt so briefly—but deeply—Lawrence wishes the snake to come back. He considers the albatross a symbol in the sense of his having committed a crime against nature of which he will not rid himself until he can somehow exhibit his love and his connection with the animate creature from out of nature that came to meet him and somehow affirm their relationship.

> And I have something to expiate;
> A pettiness.

Lawrence's concern was for fulfillment of one's life. A consummation of life does not come through a withdrawal from the world of nature of which man is a part into the world of nonrepresentational design. Fulfillment comes, rather,

through humble recognition that we are a part of the natural organic world—we are not aloof from it. With this recognition comes a greater awareness of one's place and purpose in the world. Such an instant of real, intelligent awareness may come in a moment out of time as one may experience when he is in complete correspondence with the nature to which he belongs. The awareness was with Lawrence upon meeting the snake that morning in Taormina. When one comes closer to understanding Lawrence's purpose in his writing, he no longer rejects such a work as *Lady Chatterly's Lover* because it is obscene. Lawrence's endeavor was certainly not to shock or to stimulate the emotions: his attempt was to show how a life may be fulfilled through realization that man is ultimately a part of nature and that as such he should follow his instincts, his blood consciousness, ceasing to withdraw from the natural world of which he is a part into the inanimate, synthetic, mechanistic world of which we are becoming so much a part.