



LAST POEMS OF D.H. LAWRENCE "THE JOURNEY TO THE EDGE OF ETERNITY"

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ABSTRACT

DH Lawrence was an artist of young instinctive love, pains, natural pleasures, stillness and warmth with the same mellowness that we can find in the pastoral chapters of *'The White Peacock'*. Lawrence wrote about thirty volumes in eighteen years; besides travelling all over the world and living astonishingly full life. But the poems that he wrote in the last years of his life under the title *'Last Poems and More Pansies'* throw light on his originality of sensibility. They are the most significant achievements of Lawrence's account of their form and thought and remind us of John Keats who contemplated about death that he saw during the death of his brother, Tom, in *Hyperion*. And both Lawrence and Keats exhibit a control over despair. These poems are seeded with religious thoughts in which Lawrence propagates as an upside down version of Christianity, a rejection of Christianity and an acceptance of a primitive religion of wonder.

Some of the most beautiful poems like *'Violets of the Dead'*, *'Dreams Old and Nascent'*, *'Invocation to the Moon'*, *'Last Words to Miriam'*, *'Michael Angelo'*, *'Deeper Than Lov'*, *'What's Same and What Is n't'*, *'Ship of Death (Appendix II)'*, *'Bavarian Gentians'*, *'The Wild Common'*, reveal the intrinsic experience of a man during the crisis of growing manhood. So in all later poems one gets the stage when a man is able to speak about his whole mind in verse with complete ease and without any sort of inhabitation.

Though he wrote these poems in rhyme and regular metre, but he found the constraint of formal verse, a hindrance to expression of his feelings. Therefore, these are mostly religious poems and somehow reveal the philosophy of life.

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There can be a little doubt that these 'Last Poems' embody Lawrence's most fervent religious expression as well as the final significance of his religious quest in the last days of his life. But there is no proof how Lawrence wished these poems to be published.

This research article is an attempt to explore and examine the poems that he wrote in his

last days, in which we can feel "the insurgent naked throb of the instant moment"¹ as his poetry is "neither star nor pearl but instantaneous like plasm".² To convey such sort of experience with the greatest delicacy and the finest intelligence, his aim was honest, in expression. After many attempts and partly successful efforts Lawrence achieved such acumen in his 'Last Poems'.

Through this paper, I want to show the importance of these poems as they give us the naive opening of a soul to life—pure jets and bubbling of unthinkable newness. These poems that Lawrence wrote in the last years of his life are mostly religious poems and somehow reveal the philosophy of life. In fact 1929, the year of their publication, was an agonizing year for Lawrence as he was suffering from advanced tuberculosis, and mostly he was confined to bed.

we admire these poems for the quality and depth of the vision they spring from. Lawrence often agrees with R. P. Drapper's View:

..... like a house on fire when his genius burns exhaustively, or rather a conflagration which spreads and gets brighter and more unmanageable - the longer it burns. For a long time, now the fire-brigade has stood in an aesthetic trance, admiring the flames, their water-hoses quite forgotten in their hands. All the winds of the earth fan the flame: the Sirocco of Italy, balmy breezes from India, a cold wind of the Rockies, Lawrence at the centre of the conflagration, keeps on puffing lustily and shouting hoarsely to encourage the fire. As it does leap higher and costs up more smoke and ashes than ever.³

Lawrence, no doubt, is more widely read as his work—how fluid, how personal, how imperfect, a series of inconclusive adventures only related because they all happened to the same person. There is nothing static about this - everything flows. There is perpetual intercourse with the Muse, but the progeny is as surprising to the parent as to anybody else. Lawrence adventured into himself for writing and by writing discovered himself, and this is not a conscious confession, but an instinctive revealing.

Lawrence realizes that Christianity destroys the strength of an individual. Therefore, Lawrence broke away from Christianity earlier. The doctrines hold good for every individual in a mechanical way and God appears as a machine. But Lawrence discovered new Gods who came from nature and entered the life of man intuitively and not rationally.

In the real sense, it was his instinctive response to life that threw light on morals and religion which he developed in this section of the 'Last Poems'.

In these 'Last Poems' God appears sometimes as the creative urge in nature which does not follow any formula of 'being' or 'non-being'. It is forever becoming, is fluid not static, incarnated in the flesh. God is an evolutionary life force, an urge:

God is the great-urge that has not yet found a body
but urges towards incarnation with the great creative urge.⁵

At other times Lawrence feels the presence of the Gods in the colours and shapes of the visible world which is related to Wordsworthian pantheism as it occurs in the following lines from 'More Pansies':

But all the time I see the gods the man who is mowing the tall white corn suddenly, as it curves, as it yields, the white wheat and sinks down with a swift rustle, and a strange, falling flatness ah! the gods, the swaying body of god!⁶

Lawrence, here is a mythological poet, but his mythology is no elegant fiction or learned reconstruction. The Gods are realities to him as they were to a Greek poet and to Keats, the only English poet. In almost Keatsian language Lawrence intuitively repeats that man falls out of the hands of God through ungodly knowledge, that is self-centeredness, self-analysis and self-will. And this thing Lawrence explains in his poem, 'The Hands of God':

Save me. O God! From falling into the ungodly knowledge of myself as I am without God. Let me never know, O God let me never know what I am or should be
When I have fallen out of your hands, the hands of living God. That awful and sickening endless sinking, sinking through the slow, corruptive levels of disintegrative knowledge when the self has fallen from the hands of God.⁷

It becomes clear after reading his 'Last Poems' that his sense of utter enclosure of death was his last connection with reality and he strove to remain

aware of the experience he endured. He was conscious of the deliberate moral exercise required—the need for prayer—to see that death still linked him to the principle of life. In minor meditative poems—‘The Islands of God’, ‘Abyssal Immortality’, ‘Only Man’, - his prayer is the same in each:

“Let me never
know myself apart from the living God”.⁸

He presented his deterioration into complete solipsism that would separate him from even the symbolic cosmos:

For the knowledge of the self-apart-from-God is an abyss down which the soul can slipwrithing and twisting in all the revolutions of the unfinished plunge of self-awareness, now apart from God, falling fathomless, fathomless, self-consciousness wriggling writhing deeper and deeper in all the minutiae of self-knowledge, downwards, exhaustive, yet never, never coming to the bottom, for there is no bottom.⁹

He escaped none of the woe of dying, not-even when he could look confidently at his death as part of the universal process of growth, decay and new generation. Written in the prosaic spontaneous manner of his Pansies the poem ‘Difficult Death’ expresses a moment’s fear misery:

It is not easy to die. O site not easy to die
the death.
For death comes when he will not when we
will him.
And we can be dying, dying, dying and
longing utterly to die
yet death will not come.¹⁰

Lawrence, in this poem characteristically refers to death as a journey to a ‘dark oblivion’. But there is no feeling of futility or irremediable grief as he says:

So build your ship of death, and let the soul
drift to dark oblivion. Maybe life is still our
portion after the bitter passage of
oblivion.¹¹

In another poem, ‘All Souls Day’ the same thought is expressed and the poem contains a deep sense of tender compassion:

Be kind. Oh be kind to your dead and give them a little encouragement and help them to build their little ship of death.¹²

The poet goes on to describe the dead, who have departed from “the walled and silvery city” of the “now hopeless body” lingering for a time in the shadow of the earth:

For the soul has a long, long journey after death to the sweet home of pure oblivion. Each needs a little ship, a little ship and the proper store of meal for the longest journey.

Oh, from out of your heart
Provide for your dead once more, equip them like departing mariners, lovingly.¹³

In the first of Lawrence’s death poems, ‘Bavarian Gentians’ (originally entitled ‘Glory of Darkness’ and written in Baden-Baden in 1929) with its mythological framework, is one of his finest poems. The poem arises directly from the deepest part of the soul, from simple, sensuous passionate life. In it, the poet shows that death is a continuing part of mystery, transcending limitation of formal definition and academic exploration. Pinto, in the ‘Introduction’ to the ‘Complete Poems’, gives its genealogy:

The immediate suggestion for this poem seems to have come from some gentians which he saw at Rottach in Bavaria, where he was staying in September 1929, just before he left for the South of France, where he died in the following March. The sight of the dark blue flowers seems to have evoked the memory of his exploration of the Etruscan tombs, in April 1927, as described by his friend Earl Brewster who accompanied him on that occasion: “From the jewelled splendour of these dark tombs we came forth into the brightness of an April day and a blue sky broken by hurrying clouds: the fields through which we walked were gay with red poppies: our guide unlocked the door leading to another tomb and we would descend again to behold the joyous scenes with which the Etruscans of such a

distant world chose to adorn the homes of their dead."¹⁴

Even the physical act of entering these tombs... had become for Lawrence a symbol of death with that noble lack of bitterness or protest which is so lovely an element in his Last Poems:

Reach me a gentian, give me a torch!
me guide myself with the blue, forked torch
of this flower down the darker and darker
stairs, where blue is darkened on blueness
down the way 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 of 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.¹⁵

The poem begins with masterful and majestic restraint:

Not every man has gentians in his house
in soft September, at slow, sad
Michaelmas.¹⁶

We see the lovely but resolute figure of the religious seeker finding his way into that sightless realm where darkness is awake upon the dark. Lawrence's reference to Michaelmas along with reference to Pluto, Demeter and Persephone shows Lawrence's characteristic synthesis of Christian and Pagan symbols. The religious seeker's impassioned appeal becomes symbolic of his journey into the dark and unknown realm of death:

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 flattering into points,
flattened under the sweep of white day
torch-flower of blue-smoking darkness,
Pluto's dark-blue daze, black lamps form 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.¹⁷

One cannot define the mystery of death like the mystery of life in the absolute terms, as he explains in 'The End, The Beginning':

If there were not an utter and absolute dark at the core of everything, how ghastly it would be to strike a match, and make a light.¹⁸

Death, therefore, is not only a kind of utter and absolute dark, a 'silence', a 'sheer oblivion', 'a silent sheen cessation of all awareness', but also a form of sleep in which there is a hint of 'lovely oblivion', 'the sleep of God' in which 'the world is created fresh' and:

Once dipped in dark oblivion
the soul has peace, inward and lovely
peace.¹⁹

In the process of death Lawrence, therefore, sees the death of the old, knowing self, and the birth of a new man. This, he explains through the poem 'Gladness of Death':

I shall blossom like a dark pansy, and be
delighted there among the dark sun-rays of
death. I can feel myself unfolding in the dark
sunshine of death to something flowery and
fulfilled, and with a strange sweet perfume.
Men prevent one another from being men
but in the great spaces of death the winds
of the afterwards kiss us into blossom
of manhood.²⁰

The concept of decay and corruption followed by rebirth and renewal can be seen in the beautiful poem 'Shadow', which begins with a longing for peace in the sleep of death and 'The Hands of God'. 'Shadow' is a lyrical poem with Keatsian overtones when the poet expresses:

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.²¹

Again, the lines that follow are endemic to most of Lawrence's death poetry, with reference to autumn to 'the pain of falling leaves' to 'dissolution and distress'. Death is not some new experience in remote isolation, but one that is closely associated with Lawrence's vital and

magnificent 'God' whose presence is a crucial one in the process of death:

I feel the pain of falling leaves, and stem that break in storms and trouble and dissolution and distress and then the softness of deep shadows folding, folding around my soul and sprit, 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 the drenched with the deep oblivion of earth's lapse and renewal.²²

Another most instinctive poem in this series is 'The Ship of Death' which presents the pinnacle of achievement of Lawrence's poetic language when the imminence of death stirred the poet's imagination and captures a vivid splendour. The longest and most ambitious of the Last Poems was written when Lawrence lay dying in the opening months of 1930 in the South of France. The poem begins in a perfect elegiac tone:

Now it is autumn and the falling fruit
And the long journey towards oblivion.²³

Nevertheless, it is the triumph of Lawrence's poetic art, combining a wonderful grandeur and tranquility with that free-breasted naturalness and spontaneity which he found in Etruscan art. By using simple unadorned language, he is able to talk above the grimmest facts of life in a natural way:

And it is time to go, to bid farewell
to one's own self and find an exit
from the fallen self.²⁴

As during severe frost, apples rot on the ground and leave seed for new germination, a new life, just as the soul is released from the body after death, though this is preliminary. The couplet brings in the central idea:

Have you built your ship of death? O Have you?
O build your ship of death, for you will need it.²⁵

Therefore, the poet advances us to build the "Ship of Death" in order to take the longest

journey to oblivion. But the ship he advises must be furnished with food and little cakes and wine:

Already, the dark and endless ocean of the ends washing in through the breaches of our wounds.

Already, the Hood is upon us.

Oh build, your ship of death, your little ark and furnish it with food, with little cakes, and wine

for the dark flight down oblivion.²⁶

The ending couplet once again optimistically repeats the concept of the renewal that has taken place as the sea-worn soul has emerged into new life. Here, the image of the "thread separates itself", presents dawn and:

The little ship wings home, faltering and lapsing on the pink flood, and the frail soul steps out, into her house again filling the heart with peace. Swings the heart renewed with peace even of oblivion.²⁷

Here death remained an absolute-unbreakable mystery that can be experienced, but is inexplicable and Lawrence re-instates death which has become nasty and pervasive in the present world. The ship represents "the ship of courage, the ark of faith" which provided "oars and food, and little dishes and all accoutrements. Ship is ready to sail, in the ocean of life:

upon the sea of death, where still we sail darkly, for we cannot steer, and have no port.²⁸

The tiny ship of death that the Etruscans placed in their tombs for the soul's journey to another world was an entrancing symbol to Lawrence. Such image recurs in many of his last works, and it provides the controlling metaphors in his death poems. In "The Ship of Death" he encompasses all his conflicting feelings about death and he connects his experience with his lifelong, complex vision of man's place in the natural world. The poem instinctively crystallizes his sense of the delicate balance between man's freedom in conscious action and his dependence on biological and psychic forces greater than his deliberate will. The subject of death enters the

poem as a heavy gravitation drawing all of nature downward:

Now it is autumn and the falling fruit and the long journey towards oblivion. The apples falling like great drops of dew to bruise themselves an exit from themselves. And it is time to go, to bid farewell to one's own self, and find an exit from the fallen self. Have you built your ship of death. O have you? O build your ship of death, for you will need it. The grim frost is at hand, when the apples will fall thick, almost thunderous, on the hardened earth.²⁹

Another beautiful poem 'Invocation to the Moon' which is like a prayer to the goddess who soothes and heals the spirit and it reflects Lawrence's views on death. She is the:

..... Great lady of the nearest heavenly mansion, and last!³⁰

The poet implores the great good lady to open her gate, although her mansion is at the nearest distance where soul can rest before death in the need of hour. She is the "far-off lingering lady who looks over the distant fence of the twilight".⁹⁸ Together with Mars, Jupiter, Mercury, Venus, Saturn and the Sun has given her gifts and wished her 'good speed'.

Therefore, he implores her to open her gate:

..... of your silvery house and let me come past the silver bells of your flowers, and the cockle-shells into your house.³¹

Lawrence never had visited India nor is there any record of his having read any of the Indian philosophical texts but it is often acknowledged that he was not unfamiliar with the Indian thought. But his sensitive thought reflects the Indian world view — happiness is not just pleasure and the material comforts do not lead to real happiness which in fact has to be looked from within. This is an integral part of Lawrence's ethos as well.

In the history of world literature, Omer Khayyam is an enigma. Khayyam is still loved in the world, and we remember his passionate praise of wine, love and beauty and he offers a more delightful nectar of enlightenment and divine ecstasy which has the power to obliterate his woes

forever. Similarly, Lawrence provides us nectar of spiritual love which removes our pains and miseries: such Divine Love is what Omar advises as a panacea for all woes and questioning through his "Rubaiyat" (referred as the inspired Sufi scriptures) or the quatrains.

Out of many we can take one for example:

Look to the Rose that blows about us "Lo Laughing", she says, "into the World I blow: At once the silken Tassel of my Purse Tear, and its Treasure on the Garden throw".³²

Spiritual Interpretation: Fragrant and short lived as the rose, the pleasure of materiality mock human beings who do not understand their ephemeral nature. Delay-not that understanding, lest you be trapped in the enfolding pleasure petals, entombed like the bee that carries too long in the lotus closing at sunset. Tear asunder with wisdom the stem of attachment that holds together your prison of passing pleasure petals. Fling them underfoot and press forward through the garden of life on your pathway to infinity.

We can see such divine touch of poetry in Lawrence and Khayyam. So, not only this but pages and pages are flooded in Indian mythology who agree to Lawrence's theory of death and love — a work of his suffering and agony of departure of soul which turned into music and reconciliation as an essential part of his poetry. They reflect his emotions which are "instant and quick". This is the real instinctive material of his poetry, which cannot be set in any form. This inner logic is quite as difficult as its older formal counterpart. If any poet attempts he does not find himself writing in Lawrence's style, as his emotions are transparent and undisguised. Lawrence thus, confesses himself:

To this day, I still have the uneasy haunted feeling, and would rather not write most of the things. I do write-including this note. Only now I know my demon better, and, after bitter years, respect him more than my other, milder and nicer self. Now I no longer like my "compositions". I once thought the poem *Flapper* a little master piece:

when I was twenty: because the demon isn't in it. And I must have burnt many poems that had the demon fuming in them. The fragment *Discord in Childhood* was a

long poem, probably was good, but I destroyed it. Save for Miriam. I perhaps should have destroyed them all. She encouraged my demon. But alas, it was me, not he whom she loved. So, for her too, it was a catastrophe. My demon is not easily loved: whereas the ordinary me is so poor Miriam was let down. Yet in a sense, she let down my demon, till he howled. And there it is. And no more past in me than by blood in my toes or my nose is past.³³

Lawrence was too weary to build his ship of death. But it is interesting to learn that the great and lovely spirit had always been there and it worked when he faced the great reality of life i.e. death which enriched his poetry with a new voice of grandeur and dignity.

In brief, his last poems that he wrote before starting the journey to the edge of Eternity have a great instinctive response to life which makes him a distinctive poet, seer, genius and philosopher of English literature. After the death of Lawrence Frieda wrote:

What he had seen and felt and known he gave in his writing to his fellow men, the splendour of living, and the hope of more and more life.... a heroic and immeasurable gift.³⁴

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