

D. H. LAWRENCE



POEMS



SELECTED AND INTRODUCED
BY KEITH SAGAR

D. H. LAWRENCE

David Herbert Lawrence was born at Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, in 1885, fourth of the five children of a miner and his middle-class wife. He attended Nottingham High School and Nottingham University College. His first novel, *The White Peacock*, was published in 1911, just a few weeks after the death of his mother to whom he had been abnormally close. At this time he finally ended his relationship with Jessie Chambers (the Miriam of *Sons and Lovers*) and became engaged to Louie Burrows. His career as a schoolteacher was ended in 1911 by the illness which was ultimately diagnosed as tuberculosis.

In 1912 Lawrence eloped to Germany with Frieda Weekley, the German wife of his former modern languages tutor. They were married on their return to England in 1914. Lawrence was now living, precariously, by his writing. His greatest novels, *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, were completed in 1915 and 1919. The former was suppressed, and he could not find a publisher for the latter.

After the war Lawrence began his 'savage pilgrimage' in search of a more fulfilling mode of life than industrial Western civilization could offer. This took him to Sicily, Ceylon, Australia and, finally, New Mexico. The Lawrences returned to Europe in 1925. Lawrence's last novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, was banned in 1928, and his paintings confiscated in 1929. He died in Venice in 1930 at the age of 44.

Lawrence spent most of his short life living. Nevertheless he produced an amazing quantity of work — novels, stories, poems, plays, essays, travel books, translations and letters . . . After his death Frieda wrote: 'What he had seen and felt and known he gave in his writing to his fellow men, the splendour of living, the hope of more and more life . . . a heroic and immeasurable gift.'

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REVISED EDITION

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INTRODUCTION



THE very scope of Lawrence's achievement in so many other forms – fiction, travel-writing, essays, criticism, letters, and plays – has told against his standing as a poet. We have come to think of his poetry as something of a by-product of, or relaxation from, other more strenuous and important work. Though it certainly came more easily than his fiction, I am sure that, except perhaps in *Pansies*, Lawrence did not think of his poetry in this way. At the outset of his career he devoted much time and care to his poems and cherished them when written. And at three subsequent periods of his life his poetry became the primary channel of his experience and creative energy: the first year of his relationship with Frieda ('*Look! We Have Come Through!*'), the two years in Sicily (*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*), and the last year of his life (*More Pansies* and *Last Poems*).

Lawrence wrote nearly 1,000 poems, and we must concede that an unusually high proportion are unsuccessful. He needs to be read in selection. Reviewing Lawrence's *Complete Poems*, D. J. Enright wrote:

It must be granted that this *Complete Poems* – however grateful many of us will be to have it – makes for oppressive, confusing and blunted reading. There is still room for a critical selection; none of those I have seen conveys a true sense of the fantastic variety and scope of Lawrence's verse.

I have tried to fill this gap. Moreover, I have tried to bring together in one volume all Lawrence's really successful, achieved poems – the poems on which his claim to the status of a major poet must rest.

I believe that on the strength of these 150 poems we can support the claim that Lawrence is a great poet in every sense, including the technical. The technique for making something

out of nothing he had not, nor the technique of highly finished formal craftsmanship. Such technique might have improved some of his early poems. It might equally have prevented him going on to write the great poems, where the form is the perfect incarnation of the content, the perfect vehicle for the liveliness of thought and feeling, the freshness and depth of perception, the wit and wisdom he has to offer.

Many of the early poems printed here are in versions different from those with which the reader may be familiar. Lawrence extensively revised, and in some cases rewrote, these poems when preparing his *Collected Poems* in 1928. In his introductory note to that edition Lawrence says that he has tried to establish a chronological order,

because many of the poems are so personal that, in their fragmentary fashion, they make up a biography of an emotional and inner life.

Yet he goes on to say that some are

a good deal rewritten. They were struggling to say something which it takes a man twenty years to be able to say . . . A young man is afraid of his demon and puts his hand over the demon's mouth sometimes and speaks for him. And the things the young man says are very rarely poetry. So I have tried to let the demon say his say, and to remove the passages where the young man intruded.

The result, even when the poems are improved, which is not always, is a kind of ventriloquism, with the voice of the mature Lawrence speaking, sometimes grotesquely, through the mouth of the dumb young man. How ridiculous, for example, to suppose that the young man of twenty-two, out of his actual virginity, could have written the version of 'Virgin Youth' which appears in the *Collected Poems*. It is a poem by the author of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. It seems to me much more important that we should have what the young man actually wrote at twenty-two than what Lawrence at forty-two (a much better poet, but a different man with a different demon) thought he should have written. I have therefore taken the texts from *Love Poems*, *Amores*, *New Poems* and *Bay* where they first appeared in book form.

The earliest poems date from the period 1906-8 when Lawrence was a student at Nottingham University College. The girl who figures in many of them is his first sweetheart, Jessie Chambers, the Miriam of *Sons and Lovers*. The rest of the early poems were written between 1908 and 1911, when Lawrence was teaching in Croydon. The best of them are distinguished by what Alfred Alvarez has called Lawrence's 'emotional realism'. Candour, truth and power of feeling often burst through the conventional frame in startling imagery: the voices of the parents in his childhood remembered as slender and thick lashes competing with the terrible whips of the ash-tree outside, shrieking in a storm at night; cherries hanging round the ears of a girl seen as blood-drops, thus linking her offer of love with the dead birds under the cherry tree; sex and violence again linked by potent imagery in 'Renascence', 'Snap-Dragon' and 'Cruelty and Love'; striking images of light and dark, colour and movement; images which presage the mature Lawrence - rainbows, dolphins, the long sea journey through 'the grandeur of night' to the amazing newness of dawn, resurrection, and the return to Paradise.

In 1913 Lawrence wrote to Edward Marsh:

I have always tried to get an emotion out in its own course, without altering it. It needs the finest instinct imaginable, much finer than the skill of the craftsmen . . . I don't write for your ear . . . I can't tell you what *pattern* I see in any poetry, save one complete thing.

But Lawrence's instinct, at this stage of his career, worked fitfully, and there was little craftsmanship to fall back on. He had no ear for formal rhythm or rhyme, and when he attempted them was usually inept.

Occasionally, in these early poems, the rhythm briefly frees itself and springs to life:

Rabbits, handfuls of brown earth, lie
Low-rounded on the mournful grass they have bitten down to the
quick.
Are they asleep? - Are they alive? - Now see, when I
Move my arms the hill bursts and heaves under their spurting kick.

Sometimes he achieves the moving colloquial directness and simplicity of Brecht:

But when I meet the weary eyes
The reddened aching eyes of the bar-man with thin arms,
I am glad to go back where I came from.

Particularly impressive are the four dialect poems, on the strength of which Pound proposed Lawrence for the Polignac Prize. Here Lawrence is able to forget Swinburne, Meredith and the Pre-Raphaelites and take his rhythms from the local speech he knew so well.

Lawrence never shied from sentiment for fear of sentimentality. He had the courage of his emotions, whether grief for the dead mother, sexual frustration, nostalgia for childhood, or delight in the baby which ran across the lawn to him. He expressed them all with rare delicacy. But they were the emotions of a man who had not found himself and who was at odds with his life.

Lawrence came to maturity as a poet at the same time that he came to maturity as a man and a novelist, at the time of his marriage. It is as though the new life which he launched with Frieda in 1912 and his departure from England freed him from the pressures which had retarded his development and the conventions which had crippled so much of his verse. *'Look! We Have Come Through!'* is a record of his early years with Frieda, up to the war. It is also an epithalamium, a celebration of love and marriage, not omitting the conflict and occasional misery. Marriage, Lawrence claimed, 'sort of keeps me in direct communication with the unknown, in which otherwise I am a bit lost'. His vision becomes increasingly sacramental. He does not distinguish between the creativeness which brings him and Frieda through to 'some condition of blessedness', and the creativeness which issues in poetry; neither is an achievement of the deliberate self, both are products of the wind that blows through him to which he must open and attune himself:

Oh, for the wonder that bubbles into my soul
I would be a good fountain, a good well-head,
Would blur no whisper, spoil no expression.

The success of his marriage is achieved by breaking through old dead ideas and life-modes. In his art, too, he seeks to break down all the 'artificial conduits and canals through which we do so love to force our utterance', to allow the spontaneous, uniquely appropriate form to emerge. This technique produces, when successful (as it is increasingly to be), 'the perfect utterance of a concentrated spontaneous soul'. It is a far deeper and more demanding discipline than the discipline of the craftsman. Lawrence has no use for the word 'aesthetic'. The discipline is spiritual and emotional as well as linguistic. The poems are a by-product of 'that piece of supreme art, a man's life'. Some of the poems in *'Look!'* are personal in the restricting sense. But it is only through the wholeness and depth of personal experience that Lawrence is to create the impersonally authentic forms and universal meanings of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*.

The horrors of the war, the moral debacle at home, the suppression of his splendid novel, *The Rainbow*, persecution, ill-health and poverty, all combined to destroy in Lawrence, during the war, his faith in humanity and a human future. He turned, to retain his sanity and faith in life, to the non-human world of birds, beasts and flowers.

Lawrence had an almost occult penetration into the being of other creatures. But in several of the best poems, the purpose is to reveal the sheer unknowable otherness of the non-human life and its strange gods. He goes to the very pale of his being, of human consciousness, and looks outward. Creatures, 'little living myths', bring him messages not only from out of the surrounding darkness, but also from the unknown depths of his own being:

In the very darkest continent of the body there is God. And from Him issue the first dark rays of our feeling, wordless, and utterly previous to words: the innermost rays, the first messengers, the primeval, honourable beasts of our being, whose voice echoes wordless and forever wordless down the darkest avenues of the soul, but full of potent speech. Our own inner meaning.

Lawrence is here making his own raid on the inarticulate. And the messengers he comes nearest to understanding are the snake

and the tortoise. *Tortoises* is one long poem in six sections, a metaphysical poem about the tragedy of man's sexuality, with all the suffering, dependence, exposure that implies, and yet, ultimately, the joy, for it is a means, like death, to marriage with the universe.

There is no longer, in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, any sign of formal difficulty. Lawrence's demon, his daring visionary insight, speaks out clear and bold (though somewhat stridently in the less successful poems). Ostensibly about creatures, these poems explore a vast range of experience. They are dramatic confrontations between the human and non-human and potent evocations of the spirit of place. They are brimming with vitality and awareness, humour and wisdom.

Lawrence called his next volume *Pansies* because the poems are little thoughts like Pascal's *Pensées*, and because he wanted them to be thought of as unpretentious flowers blooming briefly, rather jauntily, not as monuments for posterity. He called them 'rag poems'. In the best of them we hear what Richard Hoggart has called 'the voice of a down-to-earth, tight, bright, witty Midlander . . . slangy, quick, flat and direct, lively, laconic, sceptical, non-conforming, nicely bloody-minded'. The less successful are merely 'sketches for poems', or, like the pieces of soft fruit Ibsen gave his pet scorpion, something into which Lawrence could discharge his accumulated venom.

In *More Pansies* and *Last Poems* Lawrence's thoughts become poems much more consistently than in *Pansies*. Thought is 'a man in his wholeness wholly attending' and here the poet strives to make 'a new act of attention' and then give 'direct utterance from the instant, whole man' in language that will make us prick our innermost ear. His primary theme is life's tremendous characterization and man's capacity for wonder. Now, on the brink of death, he gives us the naïve opening of a soul to life. Despite his awareness of the desperate ills of our civilization and of his own impending death, he is no longer, as he often was in *Pansies*, flippant or exasperated or spiteful. His new-found insouciance brings assurance, playfulness, and a new joy in life, in 'the magnificent here and now of life in the