

Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

D. H. Lawrence's The Rainbow



Rainbow

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The Rainbow

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Harold Bloom

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Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best critical interpretations of D. H. Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Scott Durham and Henry Finder for their assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction is an overview of Lawrence's apocalyptic vitalism, of which *The Rainbow* is a strong representation. Alan Friedman begins the chronological sequence of criticism with a study of Lawrence's deliberate "resolution in openness" of his closure-refusing novel.

A questioning of Lawrence's vitalism, ambiguously seen as a reductive mode of energy, is attributed to *The Rainbow* itself by Colin Clarke. A more traditional dialectic, of nature against society, is traced in a different kind of ideological reading by Scott Sanders.

Evelyn J. Hinz interprets *The Rainbow* as an anti-evolutionary vision, so that eternal recurrence of an almost shamanistic kind becomes the narrative's way of belief. Lawrence's ambivalent view of marriage, desolate yet not without ultimate hope, is depicted by Robert Kiely as a crucial element in *The Rainbow*.

Daniel J. Schneider concludes this volume by investigating the unique form of *The Rainbow*, which he describes as "a psychological mimetic allegory" and as an achievement of true excellence. Certainly *The Rainbow*, for all its defects, is one of the few novels in English literature that seems worthy of comparison to the epic narratives of Tolstoy and Melville.

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Introduction

Art was too long for Lawrence; life too close.

—R. P. BLACKMUR

I

As a judicial critic, R. P. Blackmur approximates the Arnold of our day. He *rank*s poets. His essay "Lord Tennyson's Scissors: 1912-1950" creates a new scriptural canon out of modern poetry in English. Class I: Yeats, Pound, and Eliot. Plenty of other classes, but all their members standing below Pound and Eliot. In a rather sad class, the violent school, lumped in with Lindsay, Jeffers, Roy Campbell, Sandburg, etc., are D. H. Lawrence and Hart Crane. Lawrence and Crane "were outside the tradition they enriched. They stood at the edge of the precipice which yawns to those who lift too hard at their bootstraps."

Presumably, Blackmur bases this judgment upon two of his own more influential essays: "D. H. Lawrence and Expressive Form" and "New Thresholds, New Anatomies: Notes on a Text of Hart Crane." Both essays will be sizable relics when most specimens of currently fashionable analysis are lost. But because they attempt so little *description* and so much value judgment they will be relics at best. By their documentation we will remember what illusions were prevalent at a particular moment in the history of taste.

Blackmur is a critic of the rhetorical school of I. A. Richards. The school is spiritually middle-aged to old; it is in the autumn of its emblematic body. Soon it will be dead. "Lord Tennyson's Scissors" is only an episode in the school's dying. But, as criticisms die so grudgingly, the essay is worth clinical attention.

Northrop Frye has recently said that all selective approaches to tradition invariably have some ultracritical joker concealed in them. A few sentences from Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* are enough to place Blackmur's pseudodialectics as false rhetoric:

The dialectic axis of criticism, then, has as one pole the total acceptance of the data of literature, and as the other the total acceptance of the potential values of those data. This is the real level of culture and liberal education, the fertilizing of life by learning, in which the systematic progress of scholarship flows into a systematic progress of taste and understanding. On this level there is no itch to make weighty judgments, and none of the ill effects which follow the debauchery of judiciousness, and have made the word critic a synonym for an educated shrew. Comparative estimates of value are really inferences, most valid when silent ones, from critical practice, not expressed principles guiding its practice.

What I propose to do here is to examine Blackmur's "debauchery of judiciousness" in his criticism of Lawrence, and to suggest where it is inadequate to the poetry.

Poetry is the embodiment of a more than rational energy. This truth, basic to Coleridge and Blake, and to Lawrence as their romantic heir, is inimical to Blackmur's "rationally constructed imagination," which he posits throughout his criticism. Eliot's, we are to gather, is a rational imagination, Lawrence's is not. Eliot is orderly; the lines beginning "Lady of silences" in *Ash-Wednesday* convey a sense of controlled hysteria. Lawrence is merely hysterical: the concluding lines of "Tortoise Shout" are a "ritual frenzy." The great mystics, and Eliot as their poetic follower, saw their ultimate vision "within the terms of an orderly insight." But Lawrence did not. Result: "In them, reason was stretched to include disorder and achieved mystery. In Lawrence, the reader is left to supply the reason and the form; for Lawrence only expresses the substance."

The underlying dialectic here is a social one; Blackmur respects a codified vision, an institutionalized insight, more than the imaginative Word of an individual Romantic poet, be he Blake or Lawrence or Crane. In fairness to Blackmur one remembers his insistence that critics are *not* the fathers of a new church, as well as his quiet rejoinder to Eliot's *After Strange Gods*: "The hysteria of institutions is more dreadful than that of individuals." But why should the order of institutions be more valid for poetry than the order of a gifted individual? And why must order in poetry be "rational," in Blackmur's minimal sense of the word? Lawrence's poetry, like Blake's, is animate with mental energy: it does not lack *mind*. For it is precisely in a quality of mind, in imaginative invention, that Lawrence's poetry excels. Com-

pared to it, the religious poetry of Eliot suggests everywhere an absence of mind, a poverty of invention, a reliance upon the ritual frenzy of others.

Blackmur, who is so patient an exegete of verse he admires, will not even grant that Lawrence's poetry is *worth* descriptive criticism:

You cannot talk about the art of his poetry because it exists only at the minimum level of self-expression, as in the later, more important poems, or because, as in the earlier accentual rhymed pieces written while he was getting under way, its art is mostly attested by its badness.

Neither half of this confident judgment is true, but Blackmur has a thesis about Lawrence's poetry that he wants very much to prove. The poetry does not matter if the essay can be turned well to its despite. For Lawrence, according to this critic who denies his fatherhood in a new faith, is guilty of the "fallacy of expressive form." Blackmur's proof-of-guilt is to quote Lawrence external to his poetry, analyze the quotation, and then to quote without comment some fragments of Lawrence's verse ripped from context. But the fact is that Lawrence was a bad critic of his own poetry. Lawrence may have believed in "expressive form"; his poetry largely does not.

Blackmur quotes the final lines of "Medlars and Sorb Apples":

Orphic farewell, and farewell, and farewell
And the *ego sum* of Dionysos
The *sono io* of perfect drunkenness.
Intoxication of final loneliness.

Here, for Blackmur, "the hysteria is increased and the observation becomes vision, and leaves, perhaps, the confines of poetry." We can begin by restoring the context, so as to get at an accurate description of these "hysterical" lines. For the tone of "Medlars and Sorb Apples" is very quiet, and those final lines that Blackmur would incant as "ritual frenzy" are slow with irony, if that word is still available in the discussion of poetry. The Orphic farewell is a leave-taking of a bride left in the earth, and no frenzy accompanies it here.

"Medlars and Sorb Apples" might be called a natural emblem poem, as are most of the *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* sequence; one of the signatures of all things. In the "brown morbidity" of the medlar, as it falls through its stages of decay, Lawrence tastes the "delicious rottenness" of Orphism, the worship of the "Dionysos of the Underworld," god of isolation and of poetry. For the retorts of medlars and sorb apples distill the exquisite odor of the

autumnal leave-taking of the year, essence of the parting in Hades of Orpheus and Eurydice. The intoxication of this odor, mingled with Marsala, provides that gasp of further isolation that imaginatively completes the loneliness of the individual soul. The poem is an invocation of this ultimate loneliness as the best state of the soul. The four final lines are addressed directly to medlar and sorb apples as an Orphic farewell, but different in kind from the Eurydice-parting, because of Lawrence's identification of Orpheus with Dionysos. This Orphic farewell is a creative vivification, a declaration of Dionysiac being, a perfect, lonely, intoxicated finality of the isolated self of the poet. What smells of death in the autumnal fruit is life to him. Spring will mean inevitable division, crucifixion into sex, a genuine Orphic farewell to solipsistic wholeness. The poem is resolved finally as two overlapping cycles, both ironically treated.

"Tortoise Shout" is Blackmur's prime example of "the hysteria of expression" in Lawrence, where "every notation and association, every symbolic suggestion" possible is brought to bear upon "the shrieking plasm of the self." In contrast, Eliot's *Rose Garden with Virgin* is our rational restorative to invocatory control.

Eliot's passage is a simple, quite mechanical catalogue of clean Catholic contradictions, very good for playing a bead-game but not much as imaginative meaning. The Virgin is calm and distressed, torn and most whole, exhausted and life-giving, etc. To Blackmur, these ritualistic paradoxes inform "nearly the same theme" as "Tortoise Shout." Unless *Ash-Wednesday* takes all meaning as its province, I am at a loss to know what Blackmur thinks he means. He invites us to "examine the eighteen pages of the poems about tortoises" with him, but as he does not do any examining, we ought perhaps to read them for ourselves.

The Tortoise poems, a continuous sequence, communicate a homely and humorous, if despairing, love for the tortoise, in itself and as emblematic of man and all created nature involved in sexual division and strife. The Tortoise-Christ identifications have throughout them a grim unpretentious joy, which Blackmur, on defensive grounds, takes as hysteria.

"Baby Tortoise," the first poem, celebrates the infant creature as Ulyssean atom, invincible and indomitable. The best parallel is Whitman, in his praise of animals who do not whine about their condition. "No one ever heard you complain." The baby tortoise is a life-bearer, a Titan against the inertia of the lifeless. But he is a Titan circumscribed by a demiurge like Blake's Urizen; this is the burden of the next poem, "Tortoise Shell," which seems to me closer to Blake than anything else by Lawrence or by Yeats. Blake's Urizen,

the Old Man of the Compasses, draws horizons (as his name and its derivation indicate). The Nobodaddy who made the Tortoise in its fallen condition circumscribes with the cross:

The Cross, the Cross
Goes deeper in than we know,
Deeper into life;
Right into the marrow
And through the bone.

On the back of the baby tortoise Lawrence reads the terrible geometry of subjection to “the mystic mathematics of the city of heaven.” Under all the eternal dome of mathematical law the tortoise is subjected to natural bondage; he exhibits the long cleavage of division. An arbitrary division, a Urizenic patterning, has been made, and the tortoise must bear it eternally. Lawrence’s earlier tone of celebration is necessarily modulated into a Blakean and humanistic bitterness:

The Lord wrote it all down on the little slate
Of the baby tortoise.
Outward and visible indication of the plan within,
The complex, manifold involvedness of an individual creature
Plotted out.

Against this natural binding the tortoise opposes his stoic individuality, his slow intensity. In “Tortoise Family Connections” his more-than-human independence is established, both as against Christ:

He does not even trouble to answer: “Woman, what have I to do
with thee?”
He wearily looks the other way.

and against Adam:

To be a tortoise!
Think of it, in a garden of inert clods
A brisk, brindled little tortoise, all to himself—
Adam!

The gentle homeliness that follows, in “Lui Et Elle” and “Tortoise Gallantry,” is punctuated by a purely male bitterness, in preparation for the great and climactic poem of the series, “Tortoise Shout.”

This last poem is central in Romantic tradition, deriving ultimately as

much from Wordsworth as from Whitman. Parallel to it is Melville's enigmatic and powerful "After the Pleasure Party":

For, Nature, in no shallow surge
 Against thee either sex may urge,
 Why hast thou made us but in halves—
 Co-relatives? This makes us slaves.
 If these co-relatives never meet
 Self-hood itself seems incomplete.
 And such the dicing of blind fate
 Few matching halves here meet and mate.
 What Cosmic jest or Anarch blunder
 The human integral clove asunder
 And shied the fractions through life's gate?

Lawrence also is not concerned with asking the question for the answer's sake:

Why were we crucified into sex?
 Why were we not left rounded off, and finished in ourselves,
 As we began,
 As he certainly began, so perfectly alone?

The subject of "Tortoise Shout" is initially the waking of the tortoise into the agony of a fall into sexual division, a waking into life as the heretofore silent creature screams faintly in its arousal. The scream may be just audible, or it may sound "on the plasm direct." In the single scream Lawrence places all cries that are "half music, half horror," in an instructive ordering. The cry of the newborn, the sound of the veil being rent, the "screaming in Pentecost, receiving the ghost." The ultimate identity, achieved in an empathy dependent upon Wordsworthian recollection, is between the tortoise-cry in orgasm, and Christ's Passion on the Cross, the connecting reference being dependent upon the poem "Tortoise Shell."

The violence of expression here, obscene blasphemy to the orthodox, has its parallels in Nietzsche and in Yeats when they treat the Passion. Lawrence structures this deliberate violence quite carefully. First, a close account of the tortoise in coition, emphasizing the aspects of the act beyond the tortoise's single control. Then a startling catalogue (the form from Whitman, the mode from Wordsworth) of memories of boyhood and youth, before the major incantation assigned by Blackmur to the realm of the hysterical.

The passage of reminiscence works by positing a series of similitudes

that are finally seen as a composite identity. The cries of trapped animals, of animals in passion, of animals wounded, animals newborn, are all resolved on the human plane as the infant's birth pang, the mother singing to herself, the young collier finding his mature voice. For all these represent:

The first elements of foreign speech
On wild dark lips.

The voice of the solitary consciousness is in each case modified, usually by pain, into the speech of what is divided, of what is made to know its own separateness. Here, as in Wordsworth's great "Ode," the awareness of separateness is equated to the first intimations of mortality.

The last protesting cry of the male tortoise "at extremity" is "more than all these" in that it is more desperate, "less than all these" in that it is faintest. It is a cry of final defeat:

Tiny from under the very edge of the farthest far-off horizon of life.

One sees why Lawrence has chosen the tortoise; the horizon of separateness-in-sexual-division could not be extended further and still be manageable in a poem of this kind. From this extreme Lawrence carries us to the other pole of human similitude, Christ or Osiris being divided, undergoing ultimate dismemberment:

The cross,
The wheel on which our silence first is broken,
Sex, which breaks up our integrity, our single inviolability, our
 deep silence,
Tearing a cry from us.

Sex, which breaks us into voice, sets us calling across the deeps,
 calling, calling for the complement,
Singing, and calling, and singing again, being answered, having
 found.

Torn, to become whole again, after long seeking for what is lost,
The same cry from the tortoise as from Christ, the Osiris-cry of
 abandonment,
That which is whole, torn asunder,
That which is in part, finding its whole again throughout the
 universe.

Much of the meaning of this is conveyed through rhythmical mastery; the

scattering and reuniting of the self is incanted successively, now widening, now narrowing.

The cross here is the mechanical and mathematical body, the fallen residue of Blake's Human Form Divine. It is also the circumscribed tortoise body, as adumbrated in "Tortoise Shell." As such, the cross is a demonic image, symbolizing enforced division (into male and female, or *in* the self, or self kept from another self) and torture (tearing on the wheel, crucifixion). The tortoise, torn asunder in coming together, and perpetually caught in that cyclic paradox, utters the same cry as the perpetually sacrificed Osiris in his vegetative cycle. Christ's cry of forsakenness, to Lawrence, is one with these, as the divine nature is torn apart in the Passion. The sexual reduction in this last similitude is imaginatively unfortunate, but as interpretation does not issue from Lawrence alone.

Blackmur, defending Eliot as a dogmatic critic and poet, has written that "conviction in the end is opinion and personality, which however greatly valuable cannot satisfy those who wrongly expect more." The remark is sound, but Blackmur has been inconsistent in its application.

Lawrence, as a Romantic poet, was compelled by the conventions of his mode to present the conceptual aspect of his imagery as self-generated. I have borrowed most of this sentence from Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, where it refers to Blake, Shelley, Goethe, and Victor Hugo. What Frye calls a mode of literature, mythopoeia, is to Blackmur "that great race of English writers whose work totters precisely where it towers, collapses exactly in its strength: work written out of a tortured Protestant sensibility." We are back in a social dialectic external to criticism being applied to criticism. Writers who are Protestant, romantic, radical, exemplify "the deracinated, unsupported imagination, the mind for which, since it lacked rational structure sufficient to its burdens, experience was too much." This dialectic is out of Hulme, Pound, and Eliot, and at last we are weary of it. Under its influence Blackmur has tried to salvage Wallace Stevens as a late Augustan, while Allen Tate has asserted that Yeats's romanticism will be invented by his critics. That the imagination needs support can perhaps be argued; that a structure properly conservative, classical, and Catholic enough is its necessary support is simply a social polemic, and irrelevant to the criticism of poetry.

Lawrence himself, if we allow ourselves to quote him out of context, can be left to answer his judicious critic:

What thing better are you, what worse?
What have you to do with the mysteries

Of this ancient place, of my ancient curse?
 What place have you in my histories?

Lawrence, whom the older Yeats so deeply and understandably admired, is in much of his poetry and many of his novels and polemical writings another prophet of irrationalism, but his central poems and novels are well within the most relevant aspects of the Romantic tradition and make their own highly individual contribution to the Romantic vision of a later reason. The insights of his finest novels, *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, are condensed in the relatively early and very Blakean *Under the Oak*, while the blind vitalism and consequent irrationalism of the later novels like *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *The Plumed Serpent* are compensated for by the sane and majestic death-poems, like "Bavarian Gentians" and "Ship of Death," and particularly by the poem called "Shadows," which moves me as much as any verse of our century.

The speaker of *Under the Oak* is experiencing a moment of vision, a moment so intense and privileged that the whole natural context in which he stands becomes a confinement set against him, a covering that must be ripped asunder though his life run out with it. He speaks to the reader, the "you" of the poem, his rational, his too-rational companion underneath the sacrificial Tree of Mystery, and his impatience chastises our rationalizations and hesitations, our troubled refusal to yield ourselves to a moment of vision. Like Balder slain by the mistletoe, the poet is sacrificed to the chthonic forces, and struggles against a Druidic adversary, as in Blake's tradition. We are excluded, unless we too can break the barrier of natural and rational confinement:

Above me springs the blood-born mistletoe
 In the shady smoke.
 But who are you, twittering to and fro
 Beneath the oak?

What thing better are you, what worse?
 What have you to do with the mysteries
 Of this ancient place, of my ancient curse?
 What place have you in my histories?

At the end, Lawrence felt the full strength of that ancient curse. The marvel of his death poems is that they raise the ancient blessing of the Romantic Later Reason against the curse, the triumph over it. So, in the sublime opening of "Shadows":