

Terry Gifford

[Published in *Études Lawrenciennes*, No 12, pp.7-16, 1996]

When Anne Fernihough points out that Lawrence’s ‘aesthetics bring him close to some contemporary ecofeminist writers’ (*Aesthetics* 171) by his working against the mind-body split towards what he called ‘sentient non-knowledge’ (172), she invites critiques of ecofeminist theory to be conducted through the medium of Lawrence’s texts. *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* would be ideal for this purpose with its provocatively gendered language and its pushing the boundaries of so many different constructions of nature from the patriarchal hegemony of Italy, New Mexico and ‘the pussy-foot West’ (*Poems* 235) in general. But I want to avoid this temptation, at least in part, by examining just one notion from a recent ecofeminist critique by Patrick Murphy. In *Literature, Nature, and Other* he observes that the concepts of ‘other’ and ‘otherness’ (so essential to Lawrence criticism) ‘have been dominated in contemporary critical theory by psychoanalytic rather than ecological constructs’ (23). He recognises the ‘thisness’ of the other, but also wants to acknowledge ‘the corollary notion of anotherness, being another for others’, which he derives from ‘the ecological processes of interanimation - the way in which humans and other entities develop, change, and learn through mutually influencing each other day to day, age to age’. This is part of Murphy’s feminist dialogics which values decentering, differentiating and innovating as strategies for moving beyond ideological constructions of individualism and autonomy. In considering the range of very different constructions of nature -both inner and outer, human and non-human - in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, is ‘anotherness’ a useful concept?

I want to begin by examining some of the ways Lawrence loosens boundaries, conflates dualities, unsettles constructs in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* before asking whether distinctions between otherness and anotherness are viable here. The book begins, and ends, by challenging false notions of nature that emanate from a patriarchal hegemony. In the final poem the appropriation of the American eagle symbolises for Lawrence, not just a nation of ‘overweening men’, but one in which Liberty has bred a competitive individualism that is happy to ‘leave a few bones’ as the price of thinking it is ‘lifting the rabbit-blood of the myriads up to something splendid’ (*Poems II* 1072-3). But the collection opens with a series of confrontations. Listen to the opening lines of three of the first poems: ‘You tell me I am wrong’ (‘Pomegranate’, *Poems I* 231. All further references are to this volume.). ‘Would you like to throw a stone at me?’ (‘Peach’ 232). ‘I love you, rotten, /Delicious rottenness’ (‘Medlars and Sorb-Apples’ 235). The positioning of the reader is a particularly telling technique in the poems of this book (usually more subtle than it is here). In these opening poems the reader is positioned to view nature firstly with sexual prurience (‘Do you mean to tell me you will see no fissure?’ 231), secondly with a comfortable view of completeness in nature (‘Why was not my peach round and finished like a billiard ball?’ 232), and thirdly with a reluctance to see creativity in ‘orgasm’ and ‘intoxication’ coming out of ‘decay’, ‘autumnal excrementa’ and ‘the fibres of the heart parting one after the other’ by constructing them as images of hell (236). Against these dominant cultural constructions of nature Lawrence immediately posits in these three poems some of the key concepts of the collection: ‘The end cracks open with the beginning’, he writes in the poem with which he begins; secondly, a sexual dynamic is implied in ‘the suggestion of incision’ in the peach’s ‘voluptuous heavy’, ‘lovely bivalve roundnesses’; thirdly, an ecological interdependence is brilliantly caught in the mythmaking ex-biology student’s ‘Orphic’ experiences of the fruits of autumn:

A kiss, and a spasm of farewell, a moment’s orgasm of rupture,
Then along the damp road alone, till the next turning.
And there, a new partner, a new parting, a new unfusing into twain. (236)

Lawrence's reference to 'Orphic' in 'Medlars and Sorb-Apples' (236) indicates his consciousness that he is writing his own songs out of a long tradition of mythic constructions of nature. Several times in this book Lawrence looks 'over the edge of all things', not to the underworld of the death process as in this poem, but to the 'otherworld' (239), 'crossing the fern-scented frontiers', as he writes in 'Grapes',

Of the world before the floods, where man was dark and evasive
And the tiny vine-flower rose of all roses, perfumed,
And all in naked communion communicating as now our clothed vision can never
communicate. (238)

Since we are now clothed in language, there can be no naked communication with each other about our naked communing with the vine-flower. Our 'sentient non-knowledge' can only be sought, evoked and communicated through an 'artspeech' that is inescapably clothed in personal and cultural associations, constructs and ideologies. One form of language in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* that destabilises these constructs is the conflation or reversal of dualities. This is the language of Blake's 'Proverbs of Hell', the language of the underworld, the strategic use of the vision from, as Keith Sagar puts it, 'the world under the world' ('Open' 50). 'Cypresses' concludes:

Evil, what is evil?
There is only one evil, to deny life
As Rome denied Etruria
And mechanical America Montezuma still. (251)

This counter voice rises again in 'Bare Fig-Trees' to construct a 'wicked tree' that has been laughing through so many ages

At man and his uncomfortableness,
And his attempt to assure himself that what is so is not so. (252)

In 'Almond Blossom' a tree is constructed in a subversive folkloric image that anticipates the tortoise poems: 'Oh give me the tree of life in blossom / And the Cross sprouting its superb and fearless flowers' (260). Just as the ass's cry is a conflation of 'Everlasting lament in everlasting desire' (332), so the poem 'Tortoise Shout' concludes a meditation upon the loss of self and the enlargement of self in the *extemis* of orgasm with an amazingly wide-reaching four lines:

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. (367)

No wonder that the man of the four 'Evangelistic Beasts' is given by Lawrence both bat wings and lark wings: St Matthew says, 'I can no more deny the bat-wings of my fathom-flickering spirit of darkness / Than the wings of the Morning and Thee, Thou Glorified' (277). For Lawrence, to be true to human nature is to have constructed from 'new efforts of attention' (*Phoenix* 429) such as 'Tortoise Shout' a profound learning: 'I, Matthew, being a man / Am a traveller back and forth' (278).

Sandra Gilbert was surely right to observe that ‘the natural world as it emerges throughout *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* is itself a world of processes rather than appearances, of inexorable motion rather than stillness’ (*Acts* 135) and that this is reflected in the forms of these unconcluded enquiring poems that ‘travel back and forth’. Their poetic strategy is to intensely observe, question and reflect upon the tensions between decay and creation, suffering and joy, dark and light, the unconscious and the consciousness, mind and body, the human and the non-human, self and other. But there is an impulse in critics to value one side of these tensions above the other, to construct a transcendent unconscious or underworld. Exactly twenty years later Keith Sagar followed Sandra Gilbert in this, based upon exactly the same text, ‘Medlars and Sorb-Apples’ (‘Open’ 50). Christopher Pollnitz reads the same poem as ‘rejoicing at a potential escape from the body and the female principle!’ (‘Raptus’ 53). David Ellis values the otherness in the collection without considering where that leaves the relationship with the self (*Non-Fiction* 154). However, Mara Kalnins’ essay on the influence of Heraclitus reasserts that construction of nature in Lawrence’s writing that is the dynamic of harmony in tension which he calls ‘flux’: ‘Lawrence argued that the physical and the spiritual, the phenomenal and the imaginative, were and must be fused for the greater life...’ (‘Symbolic’ 639). ‘Fusing’ is, of course, not a static state held in an epiphany or a climactic image as I might have been in danger of suggesting, but a continuous process of negotiation which the poems explore with the available language and its constructs to make discoveries of ‘a new world within the known world’ (*Phoenix* 429). The fusing of the phenomenal and the imaginative is a reciprocal process that is more subtle than is suggested by the notion of dialectics deployed by Sandra Gilbert. It is a fundamental distortion of Lawrence’s radical discourse of unified dualities to argue that a dialectic between conscious and unconscious, or self and other, results in an enhanced valuing by the texts of the unconscious or of the other. Here the notion of otherness may be of use in reading the project of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*.

Kalnins reminds us that Heraclitus said, ‘All things are an exchange for Fire, and Fire for all things, even as wares for gold and gold for wares’ (‘Symbolic’ 641). Gary Snyder says that ‘most of humanity - foragers, peasants, or artisans’ have always understood the ‘gift-exchange quality of our give and take’ (*Practice* 19) with the non-human world. Lawrence gives his most alert and fully integrated attention to birds, beasts and flowers, and they give him the encounters that become the dramas of his poems. Sagar points out that the narrator of ‘Snake’ is not Lawrence, ‘who long ago rejected the voice of his education’ (‘Open’ 52). It is a drama apparently structured as a dialectic that is ultimately resolved against the hegemonic constructions of ‘man’ and ‘snake’. If the fruit poems construct an integrated notion of nature, sexuality, death in life, against the hegemony of the ‘pussyfoot West’, the poems about beasts seem to deal with human alienation from the other creatures by focussing closely upon their otherness. Certainly the narrator’s guilt at the end of ‘Snake’ has been caused by his alienation from its otherness that derives not just from his education, but also from his alienation from his own sexuality that it has symbolically enacted. This poem seems to me to be a *critique* of alienated otherness that has triumphed in the drama over the observation, honouring, mythologising of ‘a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld’ (305) who should have been ‘crowned again’ as another by the narrator.

In discussion of a passage from Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* Patrick Murphy clarifies the difference between other and another:

Griffin seems to be utilizing a conception of unconscious similar to that employed by Jaques Lacan in positing that ‘the unconscious is the discourse of the Other’, but with a crucial difference. For Lacan this Other is absolutely alienated, a lack incapable of

being remedied until death, but for Griffin this Other is *Another*, another part of ourselves just as we are another part of nature. (41)

Many critics of *Birds, Beasts And Flowers* want to treat the fruit poems as if they were the final poems in the book because they make explicit the possibility of a holistic construction of nature whilst exposing the falsity of hegemonic constructions. In my view the fruit poems are so placed in order to establish the integrated conception of nature that is put to the test in the later encounters with creatures. Otherness can only be recognised if humans are secure in a notion of nature that has healed the hegemonic splits. Another strategy for healing alienation is to ask questions as though splits did not exist. This is most explicit in the poems about trees which follow the fruit poems. These tree poems establish a mode of enquiry that is implicit in the later encounters with the most culturally alienated creatures and reptiles. ‘Tuscan cypresses / What is it?’ (249). What kind of a question is this? ‘Are our words no good?’ asks the seventh line of this long poem. Not if their cultural constructs emphasise only separateness. The search for inter-relatedness in poetry may demand breaking conventions of language usage so that the poet can ask of the bare almond tree ‘What are you doing in the December rain?’ (253) and in answering evoke a ‘sentient non-knowledge’ of the sound of ‘the chemical accents of the sun’ in the ‘wandering electricity that prowls so constantly round Etna’ (253). Such unconventional questions can open up what Peter Redgrove calls a mode of ‘extra-sensuous perception’ (*Goddess* 110) that can cross conventional constructions of nature.

‘Man and Bat’ is clearly a drama that tests the conventional perception of the otherness of bats that is doggedly held to through most of the encounter in the poem. But after a long travail there comes an opening into otherness:

Ah death, death
 You are no solution!
 Bats must be bats.
 Only life has a way out.
 And the human soul is fated to wide-eyed responsibility
 In life. (299-30)

As a result of this acceptance of human responsibility by the narrator he hears the reciprocal voice of the bat revealing to him that he has read the incident from a homocentric point of view. Paradoxically, anthropomorphism is used by the poet to subvert the homocentric in the poem’s final twist as the bat says: ‘But I am greater than he ... / I escaped him ...’ (300). One is reminded of the decentering idea in David Attenborough’s TV series *The Secret Life of Plants* that corn is the most successful of the grasses because it has found an ecological niche in which humans not only plant it widely, but also develop its genetics!

‘Fish’ would appear to be a poem of insistent alienation: ‘I didn't know his God’ (292). ‘Fish are beyond me’, says the narrator with witty ambivalence. But the discipline of attention in this poem, shying away from anthropomorphism when it creeps in, allows the fish its beyondness, its otherness, that is not to be measured by homocentric criteria: what is first seen as ‘all without love’ life comes to be constructed as a ‘more-than-lovelessness’. Again human responsibility for fellow inhabitants of the planet is arrived at through the anecdotal drama and meditation of the text, but the poem's final point (one cannot call it a conclusion) is that the fish has given the narrator a deeper sense of beginning and end, of the Alpha and Omega of biodiversity, as well as cosmic time, because the fish as a species has been given its otherness. Behind both these uses of ‘given’, of course, lie the texts testing its writer’s construction of nature in the process of its making. What I hope I have been

demonstrating here is the achievement of Lawrence's ecological interdependence in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* that can be revealed through the distinction between otherness and anotherness in these innovating, differentiating, decentering poems that struggle, negotiate and search for a healing, holistic construction of nature.

Works Cited

- Ellis, David and Howard Mills, *D.H. Lawrence's Non-Fiction: Art, Thought and Genre*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1988.
- Fernihough, Anne, *D.H. Lawrence: Aesthetics and Ideology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Gilbert, Sandra, *Acts of Attention: The Poems of D.H. Lawrence*, London: Cornell University Press, 1972.
- Kalnins, Mara, 'Symbolic Seeing: Lawrence and Heraclitus', in *D. H. Lawrence: Critical Assessments Vol IV*, ed. David Ellis and Ornella De Zordo, Mountfield: Helm Information. 1992, 636-649.
- Lawrence, D. H., *The Poems*, II Vols, ed. Christopher Pollnitz, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Lawrence, D. H., *A Selection from Phoenix*, ed. A. A. H. Inglis, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.
- Murphy, Patrick D., *Literature, Nature, and Other*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1995.
- Polnitz, Christopher, "'Raptus Virginis': The Dark God in the Poetry of D.H. Lawrence', in *D. H. Lawrence: Critical Assessments Vol IV*, ed. David Ellis and Ornella De Zordo, Mountfield: Helm Information, 1992, 38-59.
- Redgrove, Peter, *The Black Goddess and the Sixth Sense*, London: Bloomsbury, 1987.
- Sagar, Keith, 'Open Self and Open Poem: The Stages of D. H. Lawrence's Poetic Quest', *The D. H. Lawrence Review*, 24:1, Spring 1992.
- Snyder, Gary, *The Practice of the Wild*, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990.