

A SOURCE FOR LAWRENCE'S 'SNAKE'

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'Snake', Lawrence's best known poem, is a vivid re-creation of an actual scene "on the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking". Yet it is clear that the poem also draws upon a reservoir of ideology which is fleshed out in the drama of the poetic encounter. Harry T. Moore justly points to a passage in Lawrence's essay, 'The Reality of Peace', as "one of the seeds of the poem".¹ Lawrence writes that if there is "a serpent of secret and shameful desire in my soul, let me not beat it out of my consciousness with sticks". Even his 'horror' of the snake 'is a tribute to its reality'. The reptile has its own 'being' and 'righteousness', but must keep to its own ways. It must come in "just proportion, there in the grass beneath the bushes where the birds are".² The poem, with its antithesis between the poet's worship and horror of the snake, the operation of his "accursed human education" and his instinctive recognition of "one of the lords of life", embodies the ideas expressed in the essay.

I believe that both prose and poetic versions of this incident partly derive from an earlier literary source – Richard Jefferies *The Story of My Heart*, which Lawrence was discussing in letters to Edward Garnett in the winter of 1911-12, whilst composing *The Trespasser*.³ In his strange spiritual autobiography Jefferies argues that there are certain creatures "to which use has not accustomed the mind". An example is the toad, which seems "anti-human" in its "designless, formless chaos". The second example may have promoted Lawrence's later reflections even if he was recalling the passage subconsciously:

Or suddenly there is a rustle like a faint hiss in the grass, and the green snake glides over the bank. The breath in the chest seems to lose its vitality; for an instant the nerves refuse to transmit the force of life. The gliding yellow-streaked worm is so utterly opposed to the ever-present Idea in the mind. Custom may reduce the horror, but no long pondering can ever bring that creature within the place of the human Idea. These are so distinctly opposite and anti-human that thousands of years have not sufficed to soften their outline.⁴

REFERENCES

- (1) Harry T. Moore, *The Priest of Love* (Penguin Books, 1976), p. 405.
- (2) Quoted in Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 405.
- (3) *D. H. Lawrence, Letters* selected by R. Aldington (Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 34-36.
- (4) Richard Jefferies, *The Story of My Heart*, Ed. S. J. Looker, (Constable, 1947), p. 53.