

Mara Kalnins - *D.H. Lawrence: Selected Poems*, Dent, London, 1992,
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Mara Kalnins's selection of D.H. Lawrence's poetry is an authoritative and scholarly edition, incorporating an extensive amount of thoroughly researched material. Ranging beyond the limitations of previous editions (usually restricted to a general, cursory introduction followed by the chosen printed texts) Kalnins includes a summary of Lawrence's life, textual and explanatory notes, a comprehensive critical bibliography and two appendices in which she prints early drafts of some poems, as well as seven of Lawrence's significant essays on poetry. She accounts for her own selection procedure, explaining (for example) why she includes a disproportionate number of late poems, which she feels have been previously neglected: 'If an emphasis has been placed on the later poems, this expressed the editor's view that these poems may have been undervalued by critics in the past and that they are among the author's finest literary achievements'.⁽²⁴⁾ Kalnins acknowledges the inevitable element of subjectivity involved in the process of selection while providing the necessary information for further research and the exploration of wider perspectives.

The introduction merits specific consideration through its scope and range of reference: again in striking contrast to earlier selections in which the prefatory comments are often simplistic or wildly speculative. Kalnins considers the poem in relation to Lawrence's life and his fiction, adopting a chronological approach and exploring the ways in which ideas and preoccupations relate to key stages in Lawrence's development. She quotes widely not only from Lawrence's essays specifically concerned with poetry, but also from *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, early versions of *Studies in Classic American Literature* and *Apocalypse*; while also highlighting analogies with short stories and novels, such as 'Odour of Chrysanthemums', *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow*. She considers influences on Lawrence's poetic development, emphasising the significance of the English Romantic poets (in particular Blake and Coleridge) and Walt Whitman; but also referring to Cézanne, Jung and pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus. Her analyses of poems and verse-books are firmly placed in the context of Lawrence's reading, thus providing a literary as well as a biographical context.

Kalnins's literary and biographical contextualisation is both interesting and illuminating; the only limitation being the inevitable over-simplification arising from the vastness and complexity of the subject. A lucid, coherent nineteen-page introduction cannot afford to engage with the full implication of the paradoxical 'spontaneous revision' which characterised Lawrence's process of writing and re-writing his poems. In her book *Self and Sequence* (the only significant omission from Kalnins's bibliography), Holly Laird adopts an analogously sequential approach to Lawrence's poetry, but explores in great depth the problematic, elusive

nature of the poet's attempt to reorder and redefine his past. Kalnins engages cursorily with this problem when discussing Lawrence's division of his early poems into the 'Rhyming' and 'Unrhyming' sections of *Collected Poems*: 'In fact, many of the *Look!* poems are crafted in traditional rather than free verse form and many of them do rhyme, but Lawrence placed them in the 'Unrhyming' section to emphasise the difference between the verse of his youth and that in which he achieved the rhythmical spontaneity of free verse thenceforth characteristic of his poetry'⁽⁶⁾. Implicit in this assertion is a recognition that Lawrence is retrospectively defining (perhaps distorting) his past, imposing categories on his youthful artistic self. This is evident in his choice of the terms 'young man' and 'demon' to describe the duality that he retrospectively identified as inherent in his early poetic voice. Yet Kalnins employs the term 'demon' unquestioningly in her analysis, without exploring the implications of the particular context in which Lawrence adopted this formulation.

She also tends (as Laird does, at times) to assume that the difference verse-books represent clear-cut phases in Lawrence's poetic development, and that these phases are a direct result of biographical events: 'The importance of the next period, beginning with the devastating impact of his mother's death in December 1910, followed by his own serious illness with pneumonia in the autumn of 1911, and then his meeting and elopement with Frieda Weekley in the spring of 1912, is impossible to exaggerate'.⁽⁴⁾ Undoubtedly these events were crucial to Lawrence as man and artist: yet such a division of his literary life into periods falsifies the shaping process involving the constant, unconscious assimilation of influence. Critics often consider the *Last Poems* (for example) as an inspired, 'visionary' body of poetry occasioned suddenly and blindly by Lawrence's close proximity to death and the unknown. Yet an in-depth consideration of the poems results in an acknowledgement that the imagery, style, form and many of the ideas can be tracked back to childhood influences and poetry of a much earlier 'phase'. The wider contextualisation necessary to explore such links is inevitably beyond the scope of a short introduction, which would probably become bafflingly ambiguous and multi-directional.

Following the 'Introduction', Kalnins's 'Note on the Texts' sets out clearly the sources from which the printed poems are derived: namely the first editions of *Collected Poems* (1928), *Pansies* (unexpurgated, 1929) and *Nettles* (1930). The *Last Poems*, rather than simply being transcribed from the inaccurate 1932 text edited by Richard Aldington and Giuseppe Orioli, have been checked against the two manuscript notebooks held in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. Consequently, as Kalnins claims, her edition provides 'the most authoritative texts available, until the Cambridge edition of *The Poems of D.H. Lawrence* is completed'.⁽²⁴⁾ Nevertheless, the edition is not entirely free from errors, as is evident in the text of the 'The Triumph of the Machine' (Kalnins's *Last Poems*, 210-11). In the manuscript notebook (and also in *Complete Poems* edited by Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts), line 20 reads: 'The trilling lark in a wild despair will trill down arrows from the sky'. In

Kalnins's edition the word 'arrows' is omitted, thus losing the effect of the powerfully incongruous juxtaposition in which the blithe lark must forfeit its natural music in order to 'trill' down the 'arrows' of human destruction.

Such a textual error seems trivial, however, when the logic and coherence of the edition is considered, particularly as previous editions have often falsified and misrepresented the nature and sequence of certain verse-books. W.E. Williams's 1950 Penguin edition oddly places its *Last Poems* group between the poems taken from *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* and *Pansies*, so that 'Trust' (rather than 'Prayer' or 'Phoenix') is the last poem in the book. Furthermore, in that edition no distinction is made between the headings previously used as verse-book titles (such as *Look! We Have Come Through!*) and the sub-headings used to separate sections in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (this general heading is, in fact, left out entirely). Conversely, Kenneth Rexroth's 1959 American edition (New York: Viking Press) adheres to a roughly chronological development but does not give any indication of the verse-books from which the poems have been taken. His list of contents is alphabetical, so a sense of chronology depends on a perusal of the printed texts from the first poem through to the end of the volume.

Keith Sagar's 1972 Penguin edition stands out from these two unsatisfactory precursors, clearly stating the verse-book from which each group of poems derives, and offering a date so that the chronological progression is apparent. Interestingly, Sagar amalgamates the 1929 *Nettles* with the poems found in one of the two posthumously published manuscript notebooks (Aldington's MS.B), thus creating the category '*Nettles and More Pansies 1929*'. By so-doing he implicitly adheres to Aldington's decision to emphasise the difference in character between the brief, epigrammatic poems which continue the *Pansies* collection, and the pondered 'soigné' poems of *Last Poems*, concerned with death and the afterlife. Mara Kalnins consciously rejects this division, referring in her introduction to its arbitrary nature, and asserting that 'since no authorial evidence for such a division exists the poems in this selection are simply grouped under the heading 'Last Poems'.'(24)

It is true that Lawrence did not at any time state either verbally or in writing that he wanted the poems in the two MSS to be separated; yet this is not necessarily an indication that in a published edition the material from the two notebooks would have been amalgamated. Achsah Brewster, in *D.H. Lawrence: Reminiscences and Correspondence*, recalls that when sorting through the 'More Pansies' notebook in the interests of creating the *Nettles* volume, Lawrence referred specifically to the 'verses about death' that were situated later in the notebook:

One afternoon we were with him and Frieda at Villa Beau Soleil, he began selecting some of his 'Nettles' for a small volume [...] He turned the pages of his notebook, adding that he had been writing some verses about death and would read them; then, shaking his head wistfully, he closed the book, saying: 'I can't read them now'.

This quotation highlights the crucial difference between the poems which have already been afforded a group-identity or group-status at this stage in the preparation of a verse-book, and those which had not yet been subjected to an editorial process of selection. Any suppositions regarding Lawrence's intentions for the publication of the death-poems must be merely speculative.

However, the existence of a separate notebook containing revised drafts of 'Butterfly', 'Bavarian Gentians' and 'The Ship of Death' as well as several mythological poems does suggest that Lawrence was writing verse that would remain distinct from the *Pansies* (and *More Pansies*) which he felt were 'meant for pensées, not poetry, especially not lyrical poetry'. Holly Laird argues convincingly for the coherence of MS.A. as a potential verse-book in itself; thus adhering to Aldington's sense that this notebook may well have formed the base text for a printed volume, to which certain poems from MS.B. might have been strategically added. Certainly Aldington's division was not merely wilful and arbitrary; and it is only necessary to consider the rigorous revisionary process to which *Apocalypse* and *Assorted Articles* were subjected in the process of publication in order to justify a sense that Lawrence would have been equally discriminatory in creating the volume that might perhaps have become *Last Poems*.

The title *Last Poems*, posthumously imposed by Aldington is, however, in itself a problematic label, as it suggests a process of cumulative development that has reached summation in the last years of Lawrence's life. Kalnins's selection seems to adhere to this sense of a development in poetic proficiency resulting in pre-death visionary revelation. This approach gives her edition unity, coherence and a sense of progression; yet also seems to contradict Lawrence's sense of poetry in constant flux; poetry that is never 'fixed, set, static'. It is dangerous to attribute perfection to poetry of the present - to assert that 'these late poems represent the perfect fusion of the poet as craftsman with the poet as visionary and prophet'(19)- when Lawrence differentiated his own poetry from the gem-like lyrics of Shelley and Keats by saying: 'In the immediate present there is no perfection, no consummation, nothing finished. The strands are all flying, quivering, intermingling into the web, the waters are shaking the moon'(267). Yet significantly this quotation is taken from an essay included in Kalnins's 'Appendix II': revealing that the edition incorporates material that will at times contradict its own assertions, thus demanding an 'act of attention' from a reader who is prepared to be wholly attentive in responding to the texts.