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Report: LAWRENCE AND THE CORNISH SNAKE

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For those familiar with Lawrence’s time in Cornwall, there is an irresistible temptation to see Lawrence’s encounter with an adder in Zennor as sowing the seed of inspiration for his well-loved poem ‘Snake’, which was written in Taormina in the early 1920s. Yet there are many passages in ‘Snake’ that could only appertain to the experience of seeing a snake in Sicily, and it is worth remembering that Lawrence saw many other snakes on his journeys; indeed, he wrote about some of them in ‘The Hopi Snake Dance’ in Mornings in Mexico (1927). Nevertheless, the similarities between the poem and Lawrence’s description of seeing the adder in Zennor are intriguing.

Whilst living in Zennor Lawrence drew his water from a water trough situated at the foot of a stone hedge beneath a spring close to his cottage. Local inhabitants have suggested to me that is where Lawrence saw the adder that first inspired the poem. Yet it is possible that they are conflating Lawrence’s experience with the poem because I have not found any evidence to support that claim. In a letter to Mark Gertler dated 26 April 1916 Lawrence states that the snake was on the grass and does not mention a water trough:

Yesterday I saw an adder sleeping on the grass. She was very slim and elegant, with her black markings. At last she was disturbed, she lifted her slender head and listened with great delicacy. Then, very fine and undulating, she moved away. I admired her intensely, and liked her very much. If she were a familiar spirit, she was a dainty and superb princess. (2L 599)
However, this chance meeting with an adder did make a lasting impression on Lawrence, as is shown by looking at some later letters that refer to this episode. The following month, writing to Lady Cynthia Asquith, Lawrence hopes he has not caused any offence by questioning her about what to do about military service and remarks, “there seems to be a little adder of offence under every bush. But adders are slim and princess-like things in reality – there are many here” (2L 607). More revealingly, in a letter to S. S. Koteliansky on 25 November 1916, we can see how Lawrence has developed his thinking about the snake over those seven months, which he now elevates to the status of a queen:

I saw a most beautiful brindled adder, in the spring, coiled up asleep with her head on her shoulder. She did not hear me until I was very near. Then she must have felt my motion, for she lifted her head like a queen to look, then turned and moved slowly and with delicate pride into the bushes. She often comes into my mind again, and I think I see her asleep in the sun, like a Princess of the fairy world. It is queer, the imitation of other worlds, which one catches. (3L 40)

Here Lawrence attributes the snake with emotions; she has a “delicate pride”. He clarifies how this encounter has haunted him and, importantly, makes a firm connection between this creature and a different psychic realm. In these passages Lawrence creates an imagery that has a strong resonance with that he later uses in his poem ‘Snake’. In both the letters and the poem Lawrence states his admiration and affection for the venomous snake. Lawrence is also fascinated by the snake’s undulating movements, although these are described more fully in the poem. In the first letter Lawrence describes how the snake lifts her head and “listens with great delicacy”, whereas in the poem the snake lifts his head and “looked around like a god” (Poems 304). But perhaps most striking is the surprising status Lawrence accords this feared and despised creature; that of a regal being. The letters describe the snake as “a
dainty and superb princess” and as “lifting her head like a queen”; in the poem the snake is “a king” who is “one of the lords / Of life” (Poems 305).

This signals that Lawrence is not just writing about his confrontation with a wild creature, but using that experience to think about human consciousness and, more specifically, the differences between mental consciousness and blood-consciousness. The shift in gender Lawrence makes between the letters and the poem indicates the important development in his thinking about blood-consciousness that resulted from his experience of Zennor. Prior to his visit to Cornwall, Lawrence associated blood-consciousness with the female and the “sexual connection” – as in his letter to Bertrand Russell (2L 470). Whereas following his stay in Zennor, Lawrence linked blood-consciousness to the primitive and the landscape that he associated with the male. Paul Poplawski suggests one possible source for this change in his observation that Zennor presented Lawrence with “another kind of culture rooted in its place in farming and blood-consciousness that links people to the soil and blood sacrifice. He was getting back beyond Christianity and Jewishness”.¹

In both the letter and the poem, the snake is consistently presented as a visitor from a different psychic realm; the letters suggesting the snake could be a “familiar spirit” that came from “the fairy world”. Whereas the poem indicates the snake comes from the darkness of the underworld and overtly pits mental consciousness – “the voice of my education” (Poems 303) – against the natural world and the instinctiveness of blood-consciousness. The snake becomes the embodiment of blood-consciousness that challenges established ideas of human consciousness.

Whilst we can never know for certain the process of Lawrence’s creative composition, his letters from Cornwall do give cause for speculation about the original inspiration for his poem ‘Snake’, but, perhaps more importantly, they hint at the significance of the adder he saw in Zennor. I suggest that, for Lawrence, the snake becomes an important connection between Cornwall and Sicily in terms of
blood-consciousness. This is clarified by the other links he made between these two places. In 1920, indicating a connection between blood-consciousness and Celticity, Lawrence wrote “There are many devils, little people, Tuatha De Danaan, dark influences, in Sicily. This is the Celtic land of Italy – with the old fear in it” (3L 480).²


² Tuatha De Danaan are the ancient Irish gods, who were driven from their land and remain sleeping under the western sea awaiting a return to fight for a just cause. In Kangaroo Lawrence depicts Somers calling down Tuatha de Danaan from the hills around his cottage at Zennor and records, “And it was as if he felt them come” (K 226). In The Plumed Serpent Lawrence explored the links between the myths of Tuatha De Danaan and Quetzalcoatl (PS 248, 415–7), which Michael Ballin attributes to Lawrence’s reading of Lewis Spence’s book The Gods of Mexico which “traces the ultimate origin of Quetzalcoatl to the legends of the Irish Celts”: Michael Ballin, ‘Lewis Spence and the Myth of Quetzalcoatl in D. H. Lawrence’s The Plumed Serpent’, D. H. Lawrence Review, vol. 13.1 (1980), 63–77, 68.