HELEN CORKE’S COPY OF LOVE POEMS AND OTHERS

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Love Poems and Others, published on 20 February 1913, was D. H. Lawrence’s third book and his first book of poetry. Helen Corke’s copy of the book has recently turned up. On the front flyleaf she dated her purchase “March ‘13” and signed it “H. Corke.” Considering her complex, intense relationship with Lawrence and the fact that three poems in the book are addressed to her, it is hardly surprising that she bought Love Poems so soon after its publication. On the rear flyleaf of Love Poems and Others she wrote out a two-stanza poem about her relationship with Lawrence, dated 2 March 1930, the day of his death. This poem, which has never before been published, adds an intriguing footnote to the biographical record and makes the book a very special Lawrentian artifact.

Lawrence’s romantic life during this period was extremely tangled. He had considered becoming engaged to Agnes Holt, but by January 1910 he found her “utterly ignorant and old-fashioned,” not to mention guilty of judging “by mid-Victorian standards” (IL 153). He ended his intense eight-year platonic relationship with Jessie Chambers after Christmas 1909 and began—at his urging—a brief, unhappy sexual relationship with her in spring 1910. As his mother lay dying in early December 1910 he suddenly asked Louie Burrows to marry him. Louie became his fiancée. Helen Corke, who first met Lawrence in the winter of 1908-09, was “undoubtedly his most important woman friend in Croydon” (IL 10). I will sketch in their relationship before (at last) presenting and discussing Corke’s unpublished poem.
Helen Corke was a teacher at the Dering Place Mixed School. She first met Lawrence at a musical evening at Agnes Mason’s, when Corke “had played violin solos to Agnes’s accompaniment”\(^1\). She and Lawrence shared intellectual interests, but their evolving relationship was fraught with complication and soon became profoundly frustrating. In late January 1910 in a letter to Blanche Jennings he mentions “a new girl – a girl who ‘interests’ me – nothing else ... call her Helène – she is very interesting” (\(IL\) 154). Lawrence’s insistence that Helen Corke only interested him conceals his sexual attraction to her.

By the middle of March he was sounding a little like an unhappy lover. He asked Corke, “Are you greatly offended with me? If so, I will wear a becoming humility in your presence” (\(IL\) 157). If Lawrence was falling in love with Helen Corke, that love was also filled with hate: “I feel often inclined, when I think of you, to put my thumbs on your throat” (\(IL\) 160). As James T. Boulton has observed, “Helen Corke was at times a focus for Lawrence’s extremes of feeling – passionate physical desire or bitter irony verging on hatred” (\(IL\) 10).

Helen Corke’s most important impact on Lawrence’s writing career was of course his transformation of the story of her tragic affair with her violin teacher, Herbert MacCartney, into his second novel, *The Trespasser* (1912). MacCartney, a married man, committed suicide in August 1909 after he and Corke had spent five days together on the Isle of Wight. As John Worthen has pointed out, Corke was “that exceptional thing in the respectable professional classes, a single woman with a sexual history”\(^2\). As Lawrence worked on *The Trespasser* he found himself identifying with MacCartney – and getting “very much closer”\(^3\) to Helen Corke. But, much to Lawrence’s sorrow, although she was a respectable woman with a sexual history, she was repulsed by sex.

Lawrence attempted unsuccessfully to persuade Corke to begin a sexual relationship:
After all, Helene – what difference is there between your arrangement and mine? You say – let us be together, because it stimulates you. – You know you would take my arm when we were alone: you know, when I was a bit tormented, you would put your arms round my neck. Now if you can tell me any difference between this and the ultimate, I shall thank you. (IL 238)

Such sophistry did not convince Helen Corke to engage in the “ultimate.”

By 12 July 1911 Lawrence had thrown the condoms his landlord had given him over St James’s railway bridge. Bitterly, he vowed to Corke never to “ask for sex relationship again, never, unless I can give the dirty coin of marriage: unless it be a prostitute, whom I can love because I’m sorry for her” (IL 286). Helen Corke last saw D. H. Lawrence on 3 February 1912. On 5 February, the day after he broke his engagement with Louie Burrows, he was staying with Edward Garnett at his house in Kent. He invited Corke to take a walk with him one evening and even suggested that she might “stay the night” at the Cearne. After all Garnett was “most beautifully free of the world’s conventions” (IL 362). She declined Lawrence’s invitation. His letter “only [made] more clear the division of our ways”4. Six weeks later Lawrence met Frieda Weekley.

Helen Corke played an important role in Lawrence’s writings of the Croydon years. She and Lawrence had “long discussions relative to the revision”5 of The White Peacock (1910), and Corke, Agnes Mason, and Agnes Holt wrote out many pages of the fair copy of the novel that Lawrence sent off to the printer.6 In The Trespasser Helena Verden is the fictional version of Helen Corke. As Lawrence wrote the novel, he brought the manuscript to her “chapter by chapter”. She had “little to say and nothing to condemn. Her reaction was, above all, wonder at the power and wealth of symbolism characterizing the work”7. In her autobiography Corke describes Lawrence’s story ‘The Witch à la Mode’ (unpublished until 1934) as “a skillful blend of fact and
fiction, with an entirely imaginary dénouement,” based in part on a musical soirée at the “little villa” where MacCartney’s sister Laura and her father lived. Lawrence’s description of Winifred Varley in the story is unmistakably a portrait of Helen Corke:

She was of medium height, sturdy in build. Her face was white, and impassive, without the least trace of a smile. She was a blonde of twenty-eight. . . . Her throat was solid and strong, her arms heavy and white and beautiful, her blue eyes heavy with unacknowledged passion. (LAH 58)

Lawrence’s frustration is visible in his discernment of “unacknowledged passion” in Winifred’s eyes.

Lawrence’s “Helen” poems can be found in all three of the books that collect his earliest poems: Love Poems and Others (1913), Amores (1916), and New Poems (1918). Love Poems and Others includes three of these poems: ‘Return’, ‘The Appeal’, and ‘Repulsed’. ‘The Appeal’ and ‘Repulsed’ both address Helen by name. None of the three is among Lawrence’s best early poems, but the frustration and anger found in all three are both disturbing and powerfully authentic.

In the two-quatrain ‘Return’ the poet asks,

Now I am come again, you who have so desired
My coming, why do you look away from me?

The poet does not identify the capricious woman by name, but the fact that she is playing the violin (“Ah, here I sit while you break the music beneath / Your bow”) makes it clear that she is Helen. ‘The Appeal’, another two-quatrain poem, dramatizes the poet’s plea to have his kisses returned. But, as the second quatrain makes clear, he appeals in vain:

Helen, you let my kisses steam
Wasteful into the night’s black nostrils; drink
Me up I pray; oh you who are Night’s Bacchante,
How can you from my bowl of kisses shrink!10

‘Repulsed’, a much more ambitious poem, consists of eight stanzas of irregular length. The poem’s title makes it clear that frustration will once again be the keynote. The outdoor setting and the “nightly heavens” above seem to add a cosmic dimension. The poet and Helen “stand on this hill, with the whitening cave of the city beyond” as the poet’s “soul turns fond.” The “night is immense and awful, Helen,” while the poet is no more than an “insect small / In the fur of this hill.” His frustration and anger give way to an even stronger emotion:

And I in the fur of the world, and you a pale fleck from the sky,
How we hate each other to-night, hate, you and I,
As the world of activity hates the dream that goes on on high,
As a man hates the dreaming woman he loves, but who will not reply.11

On 1 April 1912 Lawrence suggested “The Man and the Dreaming Woman” as a possible title for *The Trespasser* (IL 378). Lawrence’s dreaming woman “is an untainted Sleeping Beauty figure, who fails to awaken to her sensual physicality at the man’s kiss”12. In her repulsion of the poet’s advances, the dreaming woman becomes a destructive force. The woman becomes even more destructive in Lawrence’s revision of the poem for *Collected Poems* (1928). Now “this Helen” is identified as “the female whose venom can more than kill, can numb and then nullify”13.

Helen Corke’s poem about the death of D. H. Lawrence, entered on the rear flyleaf of her copy of *Love Poems and Others*, is devoid of hatred, frustration, even intensity. The poem quietly and sadly emphasizes the failure of understanding and of relationship between the two of them. The poem, obviously not meant for publication, expresses the way Corke wants to remember (and simplify) her
time with David Lawrence (her name for him) before he “emerged into a wider world”\(^{14}\):

March 2\(^{nd}\) 1930.

And you also, David, Little Brother, are gone into the Silence.

The great Silence that waits outside our short span of speaking

To ourselves or to one another.

Is it more profound – is it dimmer,

that strange oblivion -

Than the belt of impenetrable stillness

that rose between us

Twenty years ago?

Corke fixes the dead Lawrence in her memory as “Little Brother,” an epithet he had grappled with while alive. On 11 May 1910 at the time he was writing *The Trespasser* he wrote Corke that:

Somewhere I have got the ballad of ‘Sister Helen’ – Rossetti’s – beating time. I couldn’t repeat it, but yet I beat and beat through the whole poem, with now and again a refrain cropping up:

‘Nay of the dead what can you say

Little Brother?’

or again

‘O Mary, Mother Mary

Three days today between Hell and Heaven’

and again
'What of the Dead between Hell and Heaven
Little Brother.'  (IL 159-60)

Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote his lengthy, pseudo-medieval literary ballad ‘Sister Helen’ in 1851 or 1852. He subsequently revised the poem for the famous edition of his poems he published in 1870. The poem consists of a dialogue between Sister Helen and her worried little brother. Sister Helen is melting a wax effigy of the fiancé who abandoned her for another woman in order to kill him and also to deny his soul passage to heaven. Lawrence “beat and beat through the whole poem” as he was writing The Trespasser because he believed that his own Helen had destroyed Herbert MacCartney. Meanwhile this destructive woman was repelling his own advances. In Lawrence’s imagination Corke was reducing him to her “little brother.” But he also identified with the man whose effigy Sister Helen was burning.

In D. H. Lawrence: A Personal Record Jessie Chambers remembered Lawrence’s obsession with ‘Sister Helen’ at the time. As Lawrence, Jessie, and Jessie’s brother Alan walked up the hill from the train station after a concert in Nottingham, “Lawrence kept asking”:

‘Why did you burn your waxen man,
Sister Helen?’

Notice that the lines he obsessively repeated were the lines about the burning of the waxen man, a passage he identified with. Jessie also remembered that Lawrence “had read Rossetti’s poem to me, but I disliked its spirit of revenge. For hate and revenge lay definitely outside my orbit”15. The Cambridge Edition notes Lawrence’s “interest in the poem” (IL 160). Obviously something much stronger than “interest” was involved.

Helen Corke’s novel, Neutral Ground, includes her own version of her disastrous relationship with Herbert MacCartney. In Neutral Ground she appears as Ellis, Lawrence as Derrick Hamilton (as in
“D. H.”). Remarkably Corke includes almost verbatim the portion of Lawrence’s letter to her of 11 May 1910 that quotes three bits from ‘Sister Helen’—as if D. H. Lawrence and Derrick Hamilton are the identical person. Later in the novel Ellis writes a note to Hamilton saying that they “had better not meet again. It’s no longer any use.” She closes the note with “Laissez-moi tranquille, Little Brother”\(^{16}\). There is every reason to believe that Corke inserted the text of an actual note—or at least a remembered version of it—into her novel. There is also reason to surmise that after Lawrence’s pained allusion to the Rossetti poem, she in some way thought of him as her “little brother” or at least wanted to.

Corke’s personal poem on the death of Lawrence is quietly resonant but hardly distinguished. But at the least it is infinitely better than her pompous, attitudinizing poem titled ‘To D. H. L.’, published in 1960 in *Songs of Autumn and Other Poems*. Corke notes that most of the poems in this volume “range between 1910 and 1921”\(^{17}\). Surely she wrote ‘To D. H. L.’ sometime after she last saw Lawrence in February 1912:

Heaven’s stars are still—
  Wake not. O restless slumbering Sea!
Only a path for the Dead
  the Moon treads out on thee.

Foam-light her tread—
  Shrink not! the mother of phantoms she—
mist-gold along thy bed
  the sand she strews on thee.

Nay, if she bend,
  rouse not! faint flame her fingers be—
quenched ere the tracing end,
  the name she writes on thee.\(^{18}\)
A woman who could write a poem like this was not the woman for D. H. Lawrence.

Helen Corke, who outlived D. H. Lawrence by nearly half-a-century, remembered that “once David ... had made directly the suggestion that we might marry, but so tentatively that his own words would seem to surprise him”. She also confessed in her autobiography that sexually she stood “at the half-way house, looking both ways, partaking of both masculine and feminine sex values”. In 1951 Corke published D. H. Lawrence’s ‘Princess’: A Memory of Jessie Chambers. She enjoyed a long friendship with Jessie, and at one time she was in love with her. Helen Corke never married. In late October 1913 Lawrence wrote A. W. McLeod, his closest friend at Davidson Road School, from Fiascherino, telling him not to “mind what Miss Corke says”: “If one is more or less in love with a woman whom one knows one can’t love altogether, not really, then what shall one do but take the moment – Carpe diem.” (2L 91). This is the last time he mentioned Helen Corke in his correspondence. For Lawrence, she had already “gone into the Silence”.
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3 Ibid., 78.
6 This fair copy, owned for many years by George Lazarus, is one of the treasures of the University of Nottingham Libraries.
7 Corke, ‘The Writing of the Trespasser’ 234.
8 Corke, In Our Infancy 210.
10 Ibid., xxix.
11 Ibid., xxx-xxxi.
14 Corke, In Our Infancy 216.
18 Ibid., 35.
19 Corke, In Our Infancy 204, 211.