QUEER LAWRENCE: READING ‘SNAKE’

HOWARD J. BOOTH

The re-appropriation of the word “queer” from a term of abuse to a broad umbrella term for “other” sexualities is now some twenty years old. The time that has gone by means that we can look back on the founding assertions of queer theory, and reflect on what it has done and what it has not done. Its main claim in the academy was the forceful one that what had preceded it, lesbian and gay studies, was still held in place by the old medical and legal definitions that had come into being with late nineteenth-century sexology, and that those arguing against the pathologising of “deviant” sexualities were in fact still trapped within these founding definitions.¹ The sustained questioning of the legacies of sexology produced work that sought to give space to those who had been silenced; an example of this is the way queer theory has raised the visibility of transgender issues.

However, the achievements of queer theory can be questioned. In the realm of politics, it can be said to have offered little in the way of an analysis of, or resistance to, the increased commercialisation of lesbian and gay identities; “lifestyle” has replaced efforts to build community.² Furthermore, its tendency in art and politics to foreground the supposedly transgressive act has proved a limited strategy, coming just as “the exhaustion of shock” in postmodern culture was being widely observed.³ Perhaps most striking are the things that queer theory said needed to be done which it did not do. In particular there was Joan Scott’s call to address hidden and “lost” lives, the category of experience,⁴ rather than just those who fell bang in the centre of certain sexological categories, or who fully anticipated post-Stonewall sexual identities. Old narratives that saw the history of homosexuality in terms of the emergence of contemporary “out”, Western and metropolitan, gay identities have
remained firmly entrenched. The challenge of producing histories of individual and collective experience that have space for complexity, change and ambivalence is still to be taken up.

D. H. Lawrence makes a fascinating case study for anyone interested in mapping experience in the period of the dominance of sexology and the emergence of new sexual identities. Indeed the argument could – just about – be made that his rejection of sexological definitions makes him a proto-queer writer. Knud Merrild reports Lawrence as saying: “Not something homosexual, surely? Indeed you have misunderstood me – besides this term is so imbedded in its own period. I do not belong to a world where that word has meaning”. That last sentence, if Lawrence really did say it, is both an emphatic rejection of the organisation of an area of human feeling and behaviour – a characteristic attack on Lawrence’s part on a way in which modernity seeks to determine the parameters within which identity is constructed and life is led – and also a very isolating and strange thing to say. It is open to the simple objection that Lawrence surely did live in a world where the word “homosexuality” had meaning.

The history of the consideration of homosexuality in Lawrence studies is, like the policeman’s lot, not a happy one. For many years, there was silence, or there was the “repression model”. From those who knew Lawrence through to Jeffrey Meyers in the 1970s and 80s, it was said that Lawrence “repressed” his desires for other males, and that this was achieved more completely in some periods than in others. There were always a number of problems with this line of argument, including that it borrowed the term “repression” from psychoanalysis while garbling psychoanalysis. “Repression” there is an unconscious process, but Lawrence, for these biographical writers and critics, either knew or did not know what he was doing depending on whichever position helped the person making the argument. A crude view of writing was in play; certain scenes were said to give easy access to the truth of Lawrence’s sexuality.
The opposite view is associated with Mark Kinkead-Weekes, and the second volume of the Cambridge biography. Lawrence is seen as someone who gained a full level of understanding of his desires, and who set about shaping his sexuality. Writing is important to this process as part of an effort to become aware of and to mould the self. While there is much to be said for this position, particularly post-1915, it was always an imperfect process. This means that a nuanced account charting the changes and shifts in position has to be the aim; there can be no easy summary statement. Lawrence’s writing is a particularly valuable resource in the study of homosexual identity and the range of subject positions taken up at this time. It is perhaps assumed that those who did not identify and belong have left few or no traces to examine. However, though Lawrence rejected the newly emergent non-normative sexual identities, his writing captures a strong response to other men. Addressing this issue in Lawrence could be said to fit in with what we might call a recent “phenomenological turn” in queer theory, seen in particular in Didier Eribon’s *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (2004). The sexually dissident subject’s sense of how such desires are seen by others and by the wider culture, and how they then respond, is central to Eribon’s project.

Here I will argue that ‘Snake’ (*Poems* 349-51) can be seen as offering an insight into an as yet unrecognised stage in Lawrence’s developing understanding of desires he did not welcome, and would rather not have experienced. ‘Snake’ stages how, despite self-consciousness and self-awareness of what was happening, desire and strong feeling could still overwhelm the self, albeit temporarily. My reading learns and departs from Keith Sagar’s investigation of the poem in his recent book *D. H. Lawrence: Poet* (2007). He attempts what many Lawrence critics shy away from: an account of Lawrence’s developing use of one of the ancient symbols. His argument is that Lawrence’s changing view of the snake is the result of an understanding of the problems with modern life and its stock responses, where there is a need to go behind them to a way of living more attuned to the natural world. Sagar sees ‘Snake’ as a
turning-point in Lawrence’s output where the chthonic starts to be recognised as transformative and positive. Lawrence is opening what the poem describes as “the dark door of the secret earth”. With ‘Snake’ we are on the way to the Last Poems and a poem such as ‘Bavarian Gentians’ (Poems 697, 960).

Such a reading asserts the constructedness of ‘Snake’, detaching the writer from the “I”-voice. Sagar develops the argument about Lawrence’s Birds, Beasts and Flowers found in his 1985 study D. H. Lawrence: Life into Art. The poems may seek to create the impression that they capture recent experiences set down straight away in verse, but this was not always the case. They were sometimes written rather later, and there is some suggestion that a number of the situations depicted were invented. In his recent study, Sagar reports that he has had to let go of his long held belief that ‘Snake’ was “a supreme example of Lawrence’s ability to render immediate experience into art with unique freshness and vividness”. The fact that the poem seems to have been written in January 1921 rather than in July 1920 changes everything for Sagar. Many would say that the main question here is how it happened that so many critics have failed to think about how the poems in Birds, Beasts and Flowers are made and constructed; perhaps this is a testament to the sense of immediacy Lawrence creates. Sagar is right to draw our attention to such basics as the relationship between form and meaning in Lawrence’s poetry, but I am unable to agree with his further claim about ‘Snake’ that the “I”-voice is a distant English everyman, a conventional figure, full of middle-class squeamishness, deploying “schoolgirl language”. The problem with this aspect of Sagar’s reading is that it threatens to reduce the poem to a rather knowing restatement of a core Lawrentian theme – the need to overcome restrictions on the self imposed by society.

Sagar links the effort to go beyond modernity to the fissure. In the poem ‘Figs’ (Poems 282-4) the fissure is also aligned with the female genitals. The “I”-voice in ‘Snake’ has therefore to be at a distance from Lawrence because, unlike in ‘Figs’, he is horrified by
the fissure. I would argue though that the language of the “scarlet lips” and “bursten fig” in ‘Figs’ is different from the “dreadful hole”, the “horrid black hole” or “the burning bowels of this earth” in ‘Snake’, not because the “I”-voice is a man shocked by women’s bodies, as Sagar argues, but because the opening is more anal than vaginal. The language used to describe the hole in ‘Snake’ is close to the (positive, of course) depictions of heterosexual anal sex found in Lawrence’s fiction.

With this in mind a rather different genealogy of imagery of snakes in Lawrence can be suggested from the one Sagar maps out, where the reptile stands in for desires that Lawrence finds unwelcome, disturbing and often surprising, and for the conscious strategies he developed to deal with them as he recognises that they cannot always be kept at bay. Such a reading does not attempt to displace the broad trajectory of Sagar’s thesis; it builds on the way he asks us to attend to ‘Snake’ as a lyric, in all its made-ness, with a constructed voice and a particular shape. It does, though, find his account heterocentric.

Without reinstating the claim that the “I”-voice somehow is Lawrence, as found in traditional readings of the poem, I would want to argue that ‘Snake’ can be related to his thinking at the time. Such a reading can help extend and give specificity to an observation on the poem made by R. P. Draper more than twenty years ago. He noted that “In its total effect … the poem, qua poem transcends its ‘message’, indispensable though the message is to the poem’s vigour and capacity for arresting our attention”. Draper’s brief reading is similar to that of Al Alvarez in The Shaping Spirit who sees the poem as gaining its effect through bringing together into the space of one poem the twisting, snake-like, incantatory invocation of the unknown and the matter-of-fact language of the everyday human world.14 ‘Snake’ explores the instability of self and ego, staging this for the reader, and doing so at the level of form.

Snakes in Lawrence are particularly associated with his time at Greatham, and the year 1915. It was this period that saw
Lawrence’s negative response to homosexuality, which, as many have noted, was so extreme as to suggest that Lawrence recognised in himself the very thing he was attacking. We find such a response in the letter Lawrence wrote to Bertrand Russell after E. M. Forster’s visit in February (2L 282-6), and, most importantly, after his visit to Cambridge the following month. A visit to the rooms of John Maynard Keynes at King’s was described by Lawrence, in a letter to David Garnett of 19 April, as “one of the crises of my life”, and he observed that “I begin to feel mad as I think of it – insane” (2L 321). I have explored this material at length elsewhere, but it also provides the context for an account of a scene at Greatham which comes as part of a reflection on snakes:

The snake is the spirit of the great corruptive principle, the festering cold of the marsh. This is how he seems, as we look back. We revolt from him. But we share the same life and tide of life as he. He struggles as we struggle, he enjoys the sun, he comes to the water to drink, he curls up, hides himself to sleep. And under the low skies of the far past aeons, he emerged a king out of chaos, a long beam of new life …

One day there was a loud, terrible scream from the garden, tearing the soul. Oh, and it was a snake lying on the warm garden bed, and in his teeth the leg of a frog, a frog spread out, screaming with horror. We ran near. The snake glanced at us sharply, holding fast to the frog, trying to get further hold. In so trying, it let the frog escape, which leaped convulsed away. Then the snake slid noiselessly under cover, sullenly, never looking at us again.

We were all white with fear. But why? In the world of twilight as in the world of light, one beast shall devour another. The world of corruption has its stages, where the lower shall devour the higher, ad infinitum. (RDP 297-8)

Here Lawrence and his readers are left trying to account for the effect witnessing the scene has had. Though the plural pronoun
seeks to widen the response to others, it is clearly, with its violent and extreme quality, the Lawrence of 1915. This account comes from the philosophical text ‘The Crown’, begun just a few days before he went to Cambridge, though mostly written later in the year.\(^{16}\) In the 1915 version of that text, rather than the version published in 1925, homosexuality is specifically seen in terms of experiencing a process of corruption, of moving not forwards but backwards, down a chain of being; relationships are also seen as being between “higher” and “lower” individuals. The other argument deployed in the attack on homosexuality – which may be seen as a textual project to discipline and control these ideas – is narcissism, where there was an old belief that snakes in particular were self-reproducing.\(^{17}\) This incident at Greatham, it is also worth observing, was still in Lawrence’s mind around the time when he wrote ‘Snake’. In late 1920 he revised the short story most associated with his time in Sussex, ‘England, My England’, introducing the material about the snake and the frog to the text, where it is not present in the earlier version, completed by 6 June 1915.\(^{18}\)

A connection between snakes and homosexuality was even more clearly present in the essays that make up ‘The Reality of Peace’, completed in March 1917. At this point Lawrence was trying a different strategy. He no longer made a direct attack, but instead asserted a complete acceptance of “rogue” desires – though in a way that he hoped would allow his sexuality to take the form he wanted. In ‘The Reality of Peace’ there is a rather calculated acceptance that seeks to neutralise what disturbs and disrupts heterosexuality. Like ‘The Crown’ and a text which came close to its final form in 1917, *Women in Love*, it draws heavily on imagery of corruption and dissolution. Using a heightened religious language Lawrence speaks of a split in the self between corruption and that which tends towards new life. Secret desires are described using the imagery of a snake, which Mark Kinkead-Weekes sees as Lawrence’s way of referring, in work he intended for publication, to homosexual desire:\(^{19}\)
If there is a serpent of secret and shameful desire in my soul, let me not beat it out of my consciousness with sticks. It will lie beyond, in the marsh of the so-called subconsciousness, where I cannot follow it with my sticks. Let me bring it to the fire to see what it is. For a serpent is a thing created. It has its own raison d’être. In its own being it has beauty and reality. Even my horror is a tribute to its reality. And I must admit the genuineness of my horror, accept it, and not exclude it from my understanding. (RDP 35)

The desires have to be consciously recognised, as the crude strategy of attacking same-sex desire, attempting to “follow” it into the “so-called subconsciousness”, will not work. Lawrence advocates accepting the snake and what it represents, but the references to “secret and shameful desire” and to “my horror” show that it is still seen negatively.

What is called acceptance, then, is undertaken because it offers a means of control. The snake is kept at a distance:

But keep to your own ways and your own being. Come in just proportion, there in the grass beneath the bushes where the birds are. For the Lord is the lord of all things, not of some only. And everything shall in its proportion drink its own draught of life. But I, who have the gift of understanding, I must keep most delicately and transcendingly the balance of creation within myself, because now I am taken over into the peace of creation. Most delicately and justly I must bring forth the blossom of my spring and provide for the serpent of my living corruption. But each in its proportion. If I am taken over into the stream of death I must fling myself into the business of dissolution, and the serpent must writhe at my right hand, my good familiar. But since it is spring with me, the snake must wreath his way secretly along the paths that belong to him, and when I see him asleep in the sunshine I shall admire him in his place.
I shall accept all my desires and repudiate none. (RDP 37)

The last sentence here needs to be understood in relation to what precedes it. The desire should be accepted, but the move has rendered it inferior, peripheral and, most of all, tractable. A conscious decision is made to choose another course in life, because “it is spring with me”. ‘The Reality of Peace’ develops a strategy of “accept to control”, hoping that once brought to the surface and acknowledged it will cease to be an issue – so acceptance of the existence of desire is not at all the same thing as welcoming it and planning to act upon it. As Sagar notes, too, this section of ‘The Reality of Peace’ anticipates narrative elements of ‘Snake’.  

While it is possible, at a general level, to see the poem as seeking a revised model of masculinity, and bringing out for questioning the internal voice that says “If you were a man”, there is also a reading of the poem at the level of content that finds in it echoes of Lawrence’s earlier responses to homosexuality. There is rapt attention – the “I”-voice “stared with fascination” – and then the snake turning its back on him acts as a trigger event, just as in the visit to Keynes (though quite what the actual trigger event was there is unclear). Though the snake turning its back, and the way it is referred to as “he” throughout, begs a charge of anthropomorphism, it also suggests that the “I”-voice is unsettled when he feels himself to have a dominant relationship with the snake rather than it being one of equals; a relationship of “higher” to “lower” is again present. The supposed corruption of the man who desires his own sex, can perhaps be related to the description of the “slack long body” of the snake, and its “slackness soft-bellied”. Such a reading utilises the repression model. The phallic snake disappearing into an anal “dreadful hole” overwhelms the ego. The wish to destroy and annihilate the snake, to throw the “clumsy log”, results, where trying to kill the snake represents the attempt to repress the desire. But this will not do. There is an awareness of the split between “The voice of my education” and the powerful draw and attraction
the snake exercises. It is an ambivalent response that the poem knows to be ambivalent; the disappearance of the snake after the violent act is soon after followed by “I wished he would come back, my snake”. To note that the poem carries through elements of Lawrence’s experience of 1915, then, is not enough. It is a text of 1920-21, which, I would argue, reflects upon what it is like to be overwhelmed by strong feeling. Just as the snake disappears, we remember, into the “broken bank of my wall-face”, so the poem recognises that attempts to present a consistent face to the world have had to end. Instead, the stress is on finding ways of registering and exploring shifts in feeling and response.

The poem achieves this at the level of form. Lawrence stages being overcome by strong feeling for the first-time reader; after settling into something known and familiar, near to the end there is a jolt. An account of the structure of ‘Snake’ would have to note its doubleness, that it goes round twice: initial encounter with the snake, extended reflection, outburst where the log is thrown at the retreating snake and then concluding brief reflection. Indeed it is not only a double structure but an inversion in many ways of the Romantic lyric (possibly even a queering of it), with an unsettling event near the end, after much of the reflection.

Lawrence does this by working off the lyric form, since the Romantic lyric in particular had been central to his early reading of poetry. Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* of 1861, Jessie Chambers reports, “became a kind of Bible to us”. Lawrence also “pointed out that Book IV comprised nearly half the volume”; this was the book that contained what we would now call Romantic verse, and it was where the volume ended (living authors were excluded). We also know that Lawrence read more Coleridge, whom Palgrave largely omitted, probably for the reason that he retained a commitment to the lyric as song. Lawrence would have followed the more modern understanding of the lyric as assuming the voice of “inward man”, to use a phrase from John Stuart Mill’s 1833 essay ‘Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties’. Lawrence’s poetry of course makes him a bridging figure between the Victorian lyric and the form’s return
to prominence after 1930. The Romantic poem evoked in ‘Snake’ is the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; nearly killing the snake is linked to the death of an albatross in the Coleridge poem. The proximity of homosexuality in Lawrence is once more associated with imminent collapse.\(^24\)

M. H. Abrams, in his well-known 1965 essay ‘Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric’, explores a small set of longer Romantic lyrics. He mentions ten poems, arguing that the form was inaugurated by Coleridge (‘The Eolian Harp’, ‘Frost at Midnight’, ‘Fears in Solitude’ and ‘Dejection: An Ode’) taken on by Wordsworth (‘Tintern Abbey’, the so-called ‘Immortality Ode’ and ‘Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle’) and practised, with variation, by Shelley and Keats (the former’s ‘Stanzas Written in Dejection’ and ‘Ode to the West Wind’, the latter’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’). Of those not by Coleridge, all the rest are in the *Golden Treasury*, except for ‘Tintern Abbey’. Abrams defined the characteristics of the “greater Romantic lyrics” as follows:

They present a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation.\(^25\)
Abrams goes on to point out that these poems were interested in “the process of intellection”, that whatever the state of mind of the poet, the response to nature was registered by a steady, reflective consciousness.

‘Snake’ cannot be claimed as the eleventh poem here, and the way Abrams sets these poems apart from the rest of Romantic verse is clearly open to question. Though the “I”-voice has come to a deeper sense of how ingrained modern attitudes to nature are through the poem – Lawrence is closer to Abrams’s conception of the lyric than Palgrave’s – the stress on the wider landscape and formality of expression does not fit the Lawrence poem; he was writing at a time when there was a different understanding of mental functioning. Instead of the mind always being in control, as in the “greater Romantic lyric”, what is staged for us is the way the calm mediating voice of the lyric may be overwhelmed. And just as a sense of the mind in control has to be let go of, so does perfection in terms of form. In the poem ‘Snake’ there is a shift from the position in ‘The Reality of Peace’; the snake is allowed to go straight into the darkness, dispensing with the wish to put the snake in its place and to establish “transcendingly the balance of creation within myself”.

When Abrams uses the phrase “Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began” he has in mind Coleridge on what narrative and the poem should do, and specifically a letter Coleridge wrote to James Cottle dated 7 March 1815: “The common end of all narrative, nay, of all, Poems is to convert a series into a Whole: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a strait Line, assume to our Understandings a circular motion – the snake with it’s Tail in it’s Mouth [sic]”.26 The structure of ‘Snake’ should be seen as a refusal of attempts to establish perfection and wholeness, a form that represents how efforts to consciously control and order a response – to make it a rounded narrative – may be overwhelmed. The poem thus anticipates Lawrence’s essay ‘Him With His Tail in His Mouth’, written in New Mexico between mid-July and mid-August
1925. That piece reflects on the ancient image of the snake swallowing its tail as a symbol of wholeness, balance and perfection. Lawrence argues against the old philosophical ideal of “equilibrium”, proposing instead the pursuit of a “living relationship” between a changing self and nature (RDP 315-16). The response to homosexuality, then, in time fed into the critique of the West’s pursuit of perfection and equilibrium (where this includes perfection and equilibrium in language, style and form).

By way of conclusion, it is possible to extend what I have said here about ‘Snake’ to other forms Lawrence used and to his friendship in the same immediate post-war period with the homosexual American theatre manager and writer, Maurice Magnus. The later date for the composition of ‘Snake’ means, indeed, that it may be an initial response to Magnus’s suicide in November 1920. It was on a bright sunny day in Taormina in late April 1920 that Magnus appeared at Lawrence’s house. The ‘Memoir of Maurice Magnus’, written between late 1921 and late January 1922 as an introduction to Magnus’s own memoir of life in the French Foreign Legion, represents this eruption into Lawrence’s life as an interruption to the style, as he describes returning to Taormina after a trip to Syracuse:

We came back, and the world was lovely: our own house above the almond trees, and the sea in the cove below, Calabria glimmering like a changing opal away to the left, across the blue, bright straits, and all the great blueness of the lovely dawn-sea in front, where the sun rose with a splendour like trumpets every morning, and me rejoicing like a madness in this dawn, day-dawn, life-dawn, the dawn which is Greece, which is me.

Well into this lyricism suddenly crept the serpent. It was a lovely morning, still early. I heard a noise on the stairs from the lower terrace, and went to look. Magnus on the stairs, looking up at me with a frightened face. (IR 37)
First we have the wonderful set-piece description of Taormina, piling on the clauses to considerable effect. This is then followed by the image evoking the Garden of Eden, and a succession of short, factual statements. Again the description of the encounter involves a relation of higher to lower that unsettles Lawrence.

There are differences between the two full texts, of course. If ‘Snake’ is a response to being unsettled by what society had long condemned, which captures how hard it is to remain open to a range of feelings, then the ‘Memoir’ in its ending swings back towards asserting a normative position with its attack on Magnus’s homosexuality and the same-sex culture Magnus found in the French Foreign Legion. But there are striking correspondences too. For most of the ‘Memoir’ we can perceive a very skilful hand – if we agree with Norman Douglas, we may even discern the “novelist’s touch”28 – carefully shaping the reader’s response to Magnus. For example, one notes that while on the one hand there is the careful development of imagery of whiteness, cold and birds as Lawrence builds towards setting out what was wrong with Magnus, there is, on the other, a very constricted vocabulary for what was attractive about him – the words “wistful” and “winsome” are made to do much work.29 The ‘Memoir’, like ‘Snake’, has a “double” structure, for after this main body of the text comes its closing section beginning “Yesterday arrived the manuscript of the Legion, from Malta” (IR 63). The control gives way in the attack on the homosexuality of Magnus and then the legionnaires, and the denunciation of war. The snake imagery is particularly important here: the supposedly self-involved, narcissistic basis of homosexuality is discussed by reference to snakes not only swallowing their tails, but self-destructively gnashing at them (IR 65). I had always taken this late shift in style, tone and content in the ‘Memoir’ at face value, assuming that Lawrence really was surprised in the act of writing by the late opportunity to re-read Magnus’s Legion memoir. I still cannot see these pages as a wholly staged, calculated effect. But we do have to note that Lawrence allowed the pages with this outburst to stand; there was a long
period in which they could have been withdrawn and recast by him (it was the publisher Martin Secker who censored the text before publication). In both ‘Snake’ and the ‘Memoir of Maurice Magnus’, then, we see someone reflecting on the instability of the self caused by a powerful response, and struggling through to the accompanying form.

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11 Keith Sagar, D. H. Lawrence: Poet, 89.
13 Keith Sagar, D. H. Lawrence: Poet, 97, 89-90.
16 See RDP xix-xxvi.
18 See EME 5, 8, xxxii.
20 Keith Sagar, D. H. Lawrence: Poet, 95.


29 See, for example, IR 19, 22, 64.