

GREEK GODS AND OTHER OLD BELIEFS ACCORDING TO D. H. LAWRENCE'S POEMS

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ABSTRACT

For the D. H. Lawrence, the anthropomorphic deities led to a higher valuation of man, and "encouraged man to worship the universe with his whole body, rather than with only his spiritual part." Anyone reading the stories of Zeus, Dionysus and Hermes immediately notices their strongly physical character. In addition to the stress on physicality, Tracy says that Lawrence attempted to recapture the worshipful attitude towards nature of archaic man by returning to a mythical consciousness. He sought to regain "the conception of the vitality of the cosmos" lost in the other-worldly religions like Judaism, Christianity and others. The thoughts and lives of men of ancient cultures were firstly an irrational mass, an undeliberated force of nature, like the currents of a river, and secondly they found their natural expression in stories and symbols. This aspect of the Last Poems has been called the "return of the Olympians".

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Clearly, the gods have symbolic ties with enduring aspects of nature and human psychology, like fatherhood, power, sexuality, intellect, and creativity. Symbols are more than metaphors, for the latter include images which may be ephemeral and created to convey any meaning. The symbolic dimensions of Zeus, Dionysus, Aphrodite and Hermes are much more profound and multi-layered (as is well known, Nietzsche was able to find the whole development of tragedy in the contrast of the chaotic, joyous Dionysus and the bright, intellectual Apollo). The Greek gods are similar to personifications, a kind of symbol close to allegory. The *Last Poems* are characterized by sequences and a variation of symbols and their related themes, especially the divine and human, death, and a moral preoccupation with the problems of evil and modern life.

The poet places at the beginning the three-stanza poem "The Greeks Are Coming". When he writes of "something coming" we should take this to refer to the greater influence of ancient thought upon him. The poem is an introduction to the collection:

Little islands out at sea, on
the horizon

.....
.....
.....
..... of
something coming, ships a-
sail from over the rim of the
sea (lines 1-3).

The poet welcomes the sight of ships from "Cnossos" and the "Aegean", as also the return of the Olympian gods, which is a key theme of the *Last Poems* as described by Sandra Gilbert. "Cnossos" refers to the ancient city of northern Crete, the traditional palace of King Minos, one of the old king-gods who "fulfill[ed] the double role of magistrate and leader in the sacred mysteries". The archaic men are again described in the poem, "Middle of the World", where Lawrence says:

I see descending from the
ships at dawn
Slim naked men from
Cnossos, smiling the
archaic smile
.....
.....
and speaking the music of
lost languages." (Lines, 11-
17).

The reference to coming back brings us to the other strong theme, the eternal nature of this true expression of life.

Lawrence depicts the Mediterranean sea filled with ships as "every time, it is ships, it is ships" ("The Greeks Are Coming", line 4) which keep memories of the past alive. The sailors are "men with archaic pointed beards" (line, 6), and they are sailing "out of the eastern end" (line,7). This image and other traditional images, as argued by Hagen, are "establishing that life is energy in motion and that openness is the defining feature of living entities". For Lawrence "the men of the old world are godly, heroic, and he wishes through the use of these people, to explore the nature of their heroism."

These positive images of ships, sea, sun, the lion, and dynamic Greek figures are used again in the second poem, "The Argonauts". Again it is the Mediterranean which keeps ancient ways alive: "They are not dead, they are not dead!" (line 1). The heroes now are "the Argonauts", who in the years before the Trojan War went together with Jason to Colchis to bring the Golden Fleece, source of mystical power for the Greeks. However, the time is now night, "now that the moon", and this shows us that the subject of death, key to the *Last Poems*, is being introduced. The sun sets like "a lion" which "goes down the hill", as the "moon" rises, representing the continuation of life after death. As so frequently in the technique of his *Last Poems*, he uses couples of contrasted words and meanings, a paradoxical duality. In "The Argonauts" it is in words such as: death and life, old and modern, day and night, sun and moon, rising up and falling down, and natural features that represent the contrasting of images.

The Greek gods of the afterlife are particularly present in the poem "Bavarian Gentians". The poem revolves around the gentians image, and around the myths of Persephone, Demeter and Hades. The persona uses this kind of flower, which reminds him of the shape of the torch used by Persephone's mother Demeter, but this time the torch is in the underworld, in the darkest place. He wants to be guided to the place where Persephone lives, the place of "blue darkness", but he cannot go there without Bavarian Gentians to be his torch. Lawrence enables the reader to feel the "blue", which seems to come from the gentians like light, and their "darkness", by means of his powerful repetition of these words.

Lawrence starts his poem telling us that "Not every man has gentians in his house", thus immediately drawing attention into this plant, out of which he creates a new and striking image. Lawrence draws his readers into his slow journey into the underworld, with the blue torch flowers to light the way. Not everyone has the spiritual quality to sense the uniqueness of this guidance.

The poem plays on two images: darkness/light and the need for a torch. In the second line we learn that it is "September", the month when plants start to die, the month of the Michaelmas celebration, which is 29th of this month. From the very beginning of this poem he makes an image of decline and death. The Bavarian Gentians mean two things: they have the shape of a torch, which is for guiding man, and they are dark. In contrast to a bright torch, which may show us the way in life, the dark blue torch is chosen as a symbol of guidance through the unknown world of death. Here, Bavarian Gentians are compared to torches, "torch-like", as they are big and dark and trumpet-shaped.

In the stanzas of the poem which follow, the journey in the afterlife brings to mind those who made the journey in mythology: above all Persephone, wife of Pluto. There is a contrast between the mother, Demeter, who has a bright torch as she searches through the world of the living for her daughter, and the dark torch which guides to the depths of darkness. The underlying story is that of the love and loyalty of the mother goddess for her lost child, the disappearance and then eventually the discovery of her daughter's whereabouts, and her return to the upper-world, at least for part of each year. For all ages (and especially in the Elusian mysteries) this means that Persephone became a symbol of coming back after death, i.e. the resurrection.

This is an optimistic point that Lawrence used in order to reconcile himself with his coming death. This is the attitude he wants to be in, to die and come up again from death as his soul continues to live. He wishes to assert that there is nothing to worry about for those who prepare themselves in a right way; death is a new starting point of the new life. The central symbol is the symbol of the flowers, Bavarian Gentians, and we can consider this to be one of the key symbols in Lawrence's *Last Poems*. He used this kind of flower to set two opposite things in contrast, absolute death and the coming back of life.

"Bavarian Gentians" emerges "the beginning of the crucial strain in the Last Poems of the ambiguous death

by presenting death in metaphors of sexuality and immortality which simultaneously suggest regeneration". The sexuality represented by Persephone and Pluto, (Hades). And the regeneration represented by Persephone's appearance, giving life to the world and Spring and Summer fertility, and the disappearance that leaves death and darkness to the world through Fall and Winter.

The third poem of D.H. Lawrence's *Last Poems* is "Middle of the World", another of the "Mediterranean poems", which refer to Greek mythology. Its title refers to the sea in the middle of the world, as the word Mediterranean means in Latin. In this poem the importance of memory is particularly apparent. The nature-image of "the sea" is the medium for these recollections, so similar to the process of recollection (anamnesis) familiar in Greek religion: "This Sea will never die, neither will it ever grow old\nor cease to be blue, nor in the dawn\cease to lift up its hills" ("Middle of the World", lines (1-3). As Sandra Gilbert says in her *Acts of Attention*: "In Lawrence's last years this old Mediterranean world, its geography, its mythology, its very light and shade became the vital cradle of thought, a shrine to which he brought all his religious imaginings." Lawrence refers to the sea to show, first of all the 'sea-power', which is parallel to the natural power of the archaic civilizations, then to use the Mediterranean as a symbol to remind him of the past time, for the Greeks, the Argonauts, the Minoans still cross and re-cross the sea. As Gilbert continues: "the old ways of thinking are still implicit in the sun and the water, simply waiting to be revived". A more natural and healthier is still possible allows the old places to unfold the memories they retain:

And the Minoan Gods, and
the God of Tiryns
Are heard softly laughing
and chatting, as ever;
And Dionysos, young and a
stranger
Leans listing on the gate, in
all respect. (Lines 18-21).

It is notable that Dionysus is 'young and a stranger' (line, 20). "Dionysus" is here and always "young". Dionysus' name means "Zeus-young" or "Zeus-the-son". His mother is the mortal woman "Semele", who is always persecuted by Hera but rescued by her son. The ever-young god, bringer of fertility to the earth, is the

savior of the earth and of mankind from all kinds of evils, and is the source of a new era to the world.

The whole drama of this poem, and of the *Last Poems*, is a return to the united world which does not divide mind and body, or life and death. Such a man will not grow old, just like Dionysus, who renews everything, including himself, by accepting sacrifices of animals like lambs, young bulls, horses or fawns, or by going to and from the Underworld to rescue the mortal mother-figure.

The poem "Return of Returns" also features the ancient Greek gods, with a different emphasis. The poem is from a sequence directly concerned with scientific ideas, and ancient science was never far from mythology. The poem recalls the style of prayers to the Greek gods, such as those found in the "Homeric Hymns":

By the great seven, by
Helios the brightest
And by Artemis the whitest
.....
.....
By Hermes and Aphrodite,
flashing white glittering
words,
By Ares and Kronos and
Zeus. (lines, 7-12).

Here the poem refers to "seven" important gods: "Helios, Artemis, Hermes, Aphrodite, Ares, Kronos, and Zeus". This reflects Lawrence's rereading of the books of Burnet in 1929, Burnet writes:

Instead of the old division
of the month into three
periods of nine days, we
find gradually establishing
itself the week of seven
days [. . .] named after its
planet, the Sun, Moon,
Ares, Hermes, Zeus,
Aphrodite, Kronos. . . It
was the old week of
Babylon, the original home
of astronomy and planet-
worship. (Murray, 1925, pp.
175-76, quoted by Bethan
Jones).

Here the focus is on the number seven, stressing the original divine importance of the number. Lawrence

notes that, according to the old cultures, the week was rather nine days than today seven-day week.

The poem is illuminated by references to passages in *Apocalypse*. In this book Lawrence refers to the "times and a half" which means, according to *Apocalypse*, "the magical number", and "three-and-a-half years" and it is hypothetical to symbolize the half of a sacred week all that is ever permissible to the princes of wickedness, who are never known the full run of holy week of seven days. In the book Lawrence also says the Greeks by the sea had a nine-day week. But the sense of hope in this poem is announced by the Greek when they return.

The seven-day week is portrayed in the last stanza as very old river week. In *Apocalypse*, he admits that the beginning of our era corresponded with "the dying of the old era of true pagans or in the Greek sense, barbarians". The "ancient river week" refers, according to *Apocalypse*, to "the great river civilizations of the Euphrates, the Nile and the Indus with lesser sea-civilization of the Aegean".

It is clear that the idea of a connection between, and even unity of, science and religion was dear to Lawrence. The characteristic modern divide between the arts and sciences is part of a modern malaise. Lawrence, in *Apocalypse*, says that :

Today, it is almost impossible for us to realize what the old Greeks meant by god, or *theos*. Everything was *theos*; but even so, not at the same moment. At the moment, whatever *struck* you was god. If it was a pool of water, the very watery pool might strike you: then that was god; or a faint vapour at evening rising might catch the imagination: then that was *theos*; or thirst might overcome you at the sight of the water: then the thirst was god . . . Even to the early scientist or philosophers, the "cold," "the moist," "the hot" the dry," were things in

themselves, realities, gods, *theoi*, and they *did things*.

Lawrence attempts to bring back the worshiping attitude of the archaic man. Billy T. Tracy says that "the vitality of this religion seemed to Lawrence more desirable than later religions", because it encourages man to worship the world, the universe, or creation with his whole body, rather than only spiritual ideas.

In "They Say the Sea is Loveless", Lawrence rejects the idea of Plotinus, for whom love is always directed to the bodiless ideas. Lawrence says that the sea is alive through the many creatures that live in it, like the "dolphins" and the "small and happy whales". One god mentioned in relation to the sea is Dionysus, the most attractive mythological hero in Lawrence's works, who renews nature and takes his power from the sea, woods and mountains. As Gilbert Murray writes:

In the Greek mythology, he appears during the Anthesteria feasts, to conduct a sacred marriage for the purpose of being born again, to begin a new life during the great spring festival.

Lawrence ends "They Say the Sea is Loveless" by saying: he is the sea. Bethan Jones on this subject describes it as one of "the mana poems", in other words a nature poem where the poet acquires the power of what he describes. She writes that these poems seem to put forward the dominance of the living, prolific cosmos in which the most important realization is that of aliveness of the natural world. The poet wants to say that he has become unchanging and elemental like the sea.

CONCLUSION

The *Last Poems* set out religious beliefs, which Lawrence claims were related to ancient beliefs, but his views sometimes appear to present a new religious perspective. In fact two tendencies are found in the *Last Poems*. The ancient gods are symbols of abstract concepts, and this way of thinking is found in many authors. But Lawrence towards the end of his life went

further. He finds and celebrates the wisdom of ancient science and nature mythology, preferring it to the intellectual and sceptical modern approach to science.

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