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Autor:	Forsyth, Neil
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D. H. LAWRENCE'S "BAVARIAN GENTIANS": A MILTONIC TURN TOWARD DEATH

L'importance de la religion dans la tradition littéraire anglaise est telle que même un D. H. Lawrence, qui rejetait avec passion le Christianisme, fut toujours attiré par les langages religieux, surtout à la fin de sa vie quand il mourrait de tuberculose. Un de ses derniers poèmes montre, à titre d'exemple, comment il déploie le mythe classique de Perséphone contre les concepts judéo-chrétiens de Dieu et de l'enfer, mais toujours en s'appuyant sur quelques phrases du poète chrétien John Milton.

So strong is the religious tradition in English literature that even a major modern writer like D. H. Lawrence, who passionately rejected Christianity, could not escape the pull of religious conceptions and religious language. And the form this attraction took is characteristic of a subordinate but powerful English tradition, one which begins, so far as we can tell, with Christopher Marlowe and never really disappears thereafter — a heterodox and anticlerical tradition which sometimes exploits the possibilities of what we might as well call blasphemy. Often there is a quality of youthful rebelliousness about the use of blasphemy, but for the literary writer there is rather more to it: to blaspheme may well be to take language very seriously, to believe almost in the magical power of words. In the current climate created by the appalling Rushdie affair, it is more often the writer's opponents who act as if they believe in this magic, while the writer defends himself by appeal to cool, rational arguments about the importance of a secular role for literature.¹ But in the case of D. H. Lawrence, there was a definite sense, shared by many of the modernists, that the task of the writer was to recover

1. See especially the essay "In Good Faith" by Salman RUSHDIE, reprinted now in his recent *Imaginary Homelands*, London : Granta Books, 1991.

the magic power of language. Lawrence's blasphemies, for which he was often denounced and censored, were not gratuitous insults against Christ or the Christian God, but rather a continual effort, by putting old symbols and myths to new uses, to recover the creative sources, the energy he felt Christianity had tried to repress.

1. Laurence and religion

These efforts became especially concentrated towards the end of his life. In the last two years he wrote a novella about Jesus called *The Escaped Cock*² in which he imagines a newly sensuous Christ as a risen prophet mating with the priestess of Isis: she sees him as the reborn Osiris for whom she has been searching. Lawrence thought that, if Jesus truly rose from the dead, "in the full flesh, He rose to know the tenderness of a woman, and the great pleasure of her, and to have children by her".³ More to the point for the present essay, Lawrence also thought of the risen Jesus as "triumphant and free as a man in full flesh and full, final experience, even the accomplished acceptance of His own death; a man at last full and free in flesh and soul, a man at one with death".

In *Apocalypse*, another late text, a rather angry book which denounces in Nietzschean terms the popular Christianity of his own Congregational upbringing, he finds Christ to have been not a humble or suffering servant but "the Kosmokrator and even Kosmodynamos, the great Ruler of the Cosmos, and the Power of the Cosmos ... He is Lord of the Underworld ... Hermes, the guide of souls through the death-world, over the hellish stream ... master of the future, and the god of the present".⁴ Lawrence claims that this is the Jesus of the first Christian communities

2. The book was partly written at Chexbres, and subsequently published as *The Man Who Died*, perhaps because of the unpleasant pun in the original title. See Keith SAGAR, *Life Into Art*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, p. 317.

3. "The Risen Lord", an essay written in July-August 1929, and published in *Phoenix II*, ed. W. Roberts and H. T. Moore, London: Heinemann, p. 575. This widespread idea was explored a little later by Nikos Kazantzakis in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the film of which provoked similar but less extended reaction among some Christians, especially in the USA, to that which greeted *The Satanic Verses* in Moslem cultures.

4. *Apocalypse*, New York: Viking, 1976, p. 38-40.

and of the early Catholic Church, and there may be some truth in this, but Lawrence here applies to Jesus at least two of the denominations traditionally thought to apply to the devil: the biblical God of this world⁵ (or of the present time, an alternative rendering of the Greek *aion*), and the non-biblical idea of the ruler of the underworld. Of course early Christian mythology saw Christ as vanquishing, and thus in a sense taking over, both these aspects of the devil, redeeming the dead (as in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus) as well as the living, so that Satan's power over this world, the present eon, was no more.⁶ But Lawrence sees the story in more general terms: both John of Patmos, the author of the Christian apocalypse known as *Revelations*, and Christ as risen lord of the cosmos were essentially pagan figures from the old Mediterranean world when men lived in a state of highly developed "sense-awareness and sense-knowledge" only to be expressed in mythic images and symbols.⁷ The way back to these original ideas, Lawrence felt, was through exploring what Christianity had excluded, especially in what it had associated with the devil figure: sexuality and physical power, and the underworld or Hell, the apparent darkness of death.

When Frieda's sister Else looked at Lawrence's paintings, including those that were confiscated in the police raid of July 5, 1929, on the Warren Gallery in London, she called them *Satanisch*. He replied that perhaps she was right:

Lucifer is brighter now than tarnished Michael or shabby Gabriel. All things fall in their turn, now Michael goes down, and whispering Gabriel, and the Son of the Morning will laugh at them all. Yes, I am all for Lucifer, who is really the Morning Star. The real principle of Evil is not anti-Christ or anti-Jehovah, but anti-life. I agree with you, in a sense, that I am with the antichrist. Only I am not anti-life.⁸

5. 2 Corinthians 4. 4. Cf. Galatians 4.1-3.

6. See Gustav AULEN, *Christus Victor*, New York: Macmillan, 1961, and Neil FORSYTH, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth*, Princeton, 1987, p. 248-342.

7. See Sandra M. GILBERT, *Acts of Attention: The Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, Ithaca and London: Cornell, p. 270.

8. Frieda LAWRENCE, *Not I But The Wind*, London: Heinemann, 1935, p. 286 quoted by Sagar, *Life into Art*, p. 299 and p. 335.

This sympathy for the devil involved rather an extension than simply an inversion of conventionally Christian ideas. We may see this clearly in the best known of Lawrence's *Last Poems*, one which imagines a descent into Hell. My analysis of the poem will serve, I hope, to illustrate the general points I have been making — in particular the seriousness of purpose with which these pre- or anti-Christian ideas are put to use.

There is currently some doubt about which manuscript version of this great poem is the latest Lawrence wrote. I hope to help resolve this question here by showing how the poem fits with Lawrence's views and also how it echoes and exploits the powerful tradition of religious verse in English. Here is the version of the poem that has usually been printed.

BAVARIAN GENTIANS

Not every man has gentians in his house
In Soft September, at slow, Sad Michaelmas.

Bavarian gentians, big and dark, only dark
darkening the day-time torch-like with the smoking blueness of
Pluto's gloom,
ribbed and torch-like, with their blaze of darkness spread blue
down flattening into points, flattened under the sweep of white
day
torch-flower of the blue-smoking darkness, Pluto's dark-blue daze,
black lamps from the halls of Dis, burning dark blue,
giving off darkness, blue darkness, as Demeter's pale lamps give
off light,
lead me then, lead me the way.

In spite of the complex ideas, and the increasing complexity of the syntax, the three stanza structure of the poem is fairly simple. We begin with an apparently casual observation about flowers in the world of ordinary things. But the second stanza introduces an important and paradoxical metaphor, the dark flowers as torches, and so quickly we descend through the mysterious blue darkness of the flowers, blue on darker blue, to quite another world, the mythological world of the dead, the kingdom of Pluto/Dis into which, at the end of the stanza, the speaker demands to be led. The third stanza repeats the command, but now the speaker-poet will guide himself into the insistently repeated darkness, just as Persephone regularly goes down in September to meet her bridegroom once again amid the splendour of those torches of darkness. The speaker, like the female figure, surrenders to the darkness, the "sightless realm where darkness is awake upon the dark". The flowers, like the poet's self, are forgotten now, so far have we moved, and so quickly, from the ordinary house at the beginning of the poem. It ends with the rhyme of "gloom" and "groom", aligning two key words in the poem and reinforcing their meaning: the self is lost in the darkness of death as in a sexual encounter, the divine wedding.

This is among the last poems Lawrence wrote. It was begun in September 1929 ("my birthday month that I like so much"⁹): he died the following March. By now he knew he was dying. For a long time his body had known it, since perhaps the return to Europe from Mexico in 1925, certainly since he failed to recover from severe hemorrhaging in July 1927 (in spite of six weeks convalescing in Les Diablerets), although he had refused for a long time to acknowledge it consciously. But in these last poems all is focused upon death as he faces and finds ways to articulate it, and as his feelings are formed to the shape of the words he finds. Before we analyse the poem in more detail, it will help to look briefly at one or two of the key themes in these final acts of language.

9. *The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. H. T. Moore, London: Heinemann 1962, p. 774.

2. *The turn toward death*

Reflection upon and practice toward death are the traditional and perhaps the original province of religion. And in fact the language of these last poems is that of the religious tradition, but shifted or skewed both by modernist reinterpretation and by Lawrence's own highly idiosyncratic views. In the following extract from 'The Body of God', for example, Lawrence's revisionary materialism is clear enough :

God is the great urge that has not yet found a body
but urges toward incarnation with the great creative urge...
There is no God
Apart from poppies and the flying fish,
men singing songs, and women brushing their hair in the sun.
The lovely things are god that has come to pass, like Jesus came.
The rest, the undiscoverable, is the demiurge.

God exists only as incarnate in the form and stuff of what we touch and see. And yet Lawrence as a true romantic cannot take that line very far : god is only in the beauty of the world, "the lovely things". Lawrence was enough of a philosopher to see the problem of selective pantheism here (what about mud ? or evil ?) so he attributes everything else to an unknowable creator, whom he calls dismissively 'the demiurge', a Platonic or perhaps here a Gnostic term. And he set about, indeed he had always been, redefining evil.

The true paradox of this desperate, moving and irreligious religion is best seen in Lawrence's anthropology, if I may so call it, not his theology. What really troubles Lawrence is the relation human beings can have with this god. He had surprised his American friend Earl Brewster, a Buddhist, in the months before his death by claiming that "I intend to find God : I wish to realize my relation with him. I do not any longer object to the word God. My attitude regarding this has changed. I must establish a conscious relation with God". Brewster comments that "These remarks surprised me, remembering how previously he had declared to my Brahmin friend [Dham Gopal Mukerji] that 'God is an exhausted concept'".¹⁰ To see how Lawrence put this revived concept to use, consider the following passage, which

10. *D. H. Lawrence : A Composite Biography*, ed. E. Nehls, Madison : Wisconsin, 1957, vol. II, p. 405.

explains how traditional religious terms have their psychological meaning. The fall, for example, shows how we often make our own deaths before we die them.

It is not easy to fall out of the hands of the living God,
 They are so large, and they cradle so much of a man ...
 And still through knowledge and will, he can break away
 man can break away, and fall from the hands of God
 into himself alone, down the godless plunge of the abyss,
 a god-lost creature turning upon himself
 in the long, long fall, revolving upon himself
 in the endless writhe of the last, the last self-knowledge.¹¹

This above all is what he would avoid, that emptiness at the end. We must bear this other "godless plunge of the abyss" in mind as we re-read "Bavarian Gentians", for the poem provides a way for Lawrence precisely to avoid that kind of empty death.

In a related poem, "The Hands of God", this falling creature is explicitly Lucifer, which reveals a different kind of sympathy on Lawrence's part, a fearful identification even, with the devil.

Did Lucifer fall through knowledge ?
 oh then, pity him, pity him that plunge ! ...
 That awful and sickening endless sinking, sinking
 through the slow, corruptive levels of disintegrative knowledge
 when the self has fallen from the hands of God.¹²

The poem soon turns into a prayer, and concludes :

Save me from that, O God !
 Let me never know myself apart from the living God !

How does this paradoxical and potentially tragic relation to the living god affect the way Lawrence turns toward his death ?¹³

11. "Abysmal Immortality", *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. V. de Sola Pinto and W. Roberts, London : Heinemann, 1957, p. 700.

12. *Ibid*, p. 699. Compare "Only Man", the next poem in this series, beginning "Only man can fall from God". One source of this language is worth quoting briefly, part of the great soliloquy of Milton's Satan on Mt. Niphates (*Paradise Lost* IV 73-78), when he meditates on how he has lost and turned away from God : "Me miserable ! which way shall I fly / Infinite wrath and infinite despair ? / Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell ; / And in the lowest deep a lower deep / Still threatening to devour me opens wide, / To which the Hell I suffer seems a heaven."

13. See the fine discussion of Graham HOUGH in *The Dark Sun*, London : Duckworth, 1956, p. 213-16.

For one thing it makes him write. He has finished with novels now, however poetic they were (*Lady Chatterly's Lover*, poorly received, was the last novel), and writes only short pieces or poetry, rapidly, intensely, driven to find a language beyond what he has known so far — first the collection he published under the title *Pansies*, a punning title combining the allusion to Pascal's *Pensées* with *panser*, to bandage, suggesting the healing power of these new words, and also “Pan’s eye”, the folk etymology of the flower word, just as “daisy” is made of “day’s eye”; then the rest of the poems, some three hundred altogether, posthumously collected as *Last Poems*. For another thing it makes him even more passionate and delighted at transient beauty. A woman wading in the sea provokes

Oh lovely, lovely with the dark hair piled up,
as she went deeper, deeper down the channel,
then rose shallower, shallower ...
lo ! God is one god ! But here in the twilight
godly and lovely comes Aphrodite out of the sea
towards me ?¹⁴

One is somehow in the world, living in it more fully when these momentary perceptions are possible and available to feeling. But there must also be a language for them, as if this double immanence, of God in the world, of woman/man in the world, can exist only in the body of the poem. Apart from the particular and highly Lawrentian sexual emphasis, the language of these poems sometimes proposes but does not dwell on what the poetry of the English religious tradition had long intimated: the seventeenth century metaphysical poets like Herbert, Vaughn and Traherne in particular, reborn in some of Wordsworth’s more attentive verse, and in Blake, had suggested at moments that God or immortality is perhaps here and now, could we but learn to see.¹⁵

Perhaps the chief effect of these various and mystical beliefs on the dying Lawrence is to allow him to find the symbols that fix the mind on the contemplation of what is still unknown, in calm courage. In “The Ship of Death”, the longer poem usually

14. “The Man of Tyre”, *Complete Poems*, p. 692, discussed by Hough, p. 213, and especially Gilbert, p. 279.

15. See for example the best known of these texts, Henry Vaughn’s “The World”, which begins: “I saw eternity the other night,/ Like a great ring of pure and endless light,/ All calm as it was bright”.

paired with "Bavarian Gentians", he sees that the time has come and the words fall out in utter simplicity :

Now it is autumn and the falling fruit
and the long journey towards oblivion.

These stark images allow for the prayer — that is what the poem becomes — to complete itself :

... all we can do
Is now to be willing to die, and to build the ship
of death to carry the soul on the longest journey.

The poems are the articulation of this ship : it is made out of words and what they can do in our minds and our bodies. They are messages, unsanctified but serious, from one who has tried hard to look at what he saw and say it back.

Among these symbols, darkness is the key image. But this and the other images come not as starkly as may at first seem. They come to Lawrence and across to us bearing all the freight of their past, bringing with them the contexts in which they took on their meanings. In particular they all bring the contexts of classical myth in its English and modernist dress. Myth was for Lawrence, as for the other modernists, a way back to ignored or forgotten meanings. Pan's eye, we saw, already suggests the pagan beneath the potentially Christian implications of Pascal's *Pensées*, and the one god is crossed with Aphrodite emerging from the sea, and the soul on its long sea-journey is mythical, classical, Irish, by now universal in its modernist Frazerian dress. Like many of his contemporaries, Lawrence had read and been smitten by Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*,¹⁶ a book which has dated and now inspires no new followers, but which offered that earlier generation the key to all mythologies, and above all the mythological reading of the central symbols that Christianity shares with other religions, the dying and rising god, the communion feast, the cosmic combat and (in attenuated form) the divine wedding.

Lawrence had also been recently fascinated by the Etruscans, and they functioned as a screen onto which he projected his

16. According to Keith Sagar, *Life into Art*, p. 163, he embarked on his reading of Frazer and other books about primitivism in 1915. John VICKERY speculates in *The Literary Impact of the Golden Bough*, Princeton, 1973, p. 285 that he may have known about it earlier.

deepest longings, activated also in the language of myth. When he visited an Etruscan necropolis at Tarquinia in 1927, a long-planned expedition, he described it with joy : "It is all small and gay and quick with life, spontaneous as only young life can be. If only it were not so much damaged, one would be happy, because here is the real Etruscan liveliness and naturalness. It is not impressive or grand. But if you are content with just a sense of the quick ripple of life, then here it is". In one part was a scene of a man banqueting in the underworld, and it confirmed Lawrence's sense that the underworld of the Etruscans must have been gay, "for the life on earth was so good, the life below could not but be a continuance of it".¹⁷ The idea of the Ship of Death itself was partly Etruscan for Lawrence saw their kings as life-bringers and death-guides who "show the way into the dark of death, which is the blue burning of the one fire" by which they had lived so vividly.

The chief contribution of this mythological thinking to the meaning of "Bavarian Gentians" is the idea of the descent of Persephone every "frosted September" to the underworld. But in a more general sense it also allowed the world of the dead to be conceived at all, for in Virgil, the main point of reference for this tradition and the source of the golden bough itself, the underworld is indeed a dire place of shadows, the realm of Pluto or Dis, but it is also a world from which the poet, like his great model Orpheus and like his own hero, Aeneas, may return to tell the tale. Whatever the origins of this widespread mythological theme, perhaps in shamanic or oneiric visions, it holds out the promise of poetry to be a way out of the dark, as well as into it. The language of poetry functions as do the gentians in the text, as a guide, a torch for the reader.

3. *The language of Milton*

The language of poetry, but here of one poet in particular. For beside the Frazerian and classical ideas in these words stands another English poet, and one who had also imagined a Satanic darkness, who lived it in his blindness, John Milton. The best

17. *Mornings in Mexico and Etruscan Places*, Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1967, p. 134.

way to see the impact of Milton on the poem is to follow through in the manuscript versions the process of writing. There were, I think, two decisive stages of the poem's growth, the first the discovery of the mythological language, the second the alignment with Milton. Four drafts survive. At the end of August, Lawrence and Frieda went to Rottach in Bavaria to be near Max Mohr, a friend who was also a doctor. Frieda recalled placing an enormous bunch of gentians on the floor by Lawrence's bed. Their physical presence suggested the first lines of the poem, and the earliest draft, called "The State of Grace", does little more than describe the flowers.¹⁸ They are not torches, in spite of the final rhyming image of a "dark-blue gloom / in the sunny room", nor is there a journey. Flowers had fascinated Lawrence since his youth as we see in the remarkable flower scenes of *Sons and Lovers*, and he had already associated flowers and death in his earliest published story, "Odour of Chrysanthemums" (1911). In an essay "Life" of 1916 he had imagined his own death :

do I fear the invisible hand of death plucking me into the darkness, gathering me blossom by blossom from the stem of my life into the unknown of my afterwards? I fear it only in reverence and with strange satisfaction. For this is my final satisfaction, to be gathered blossom by blossom, all my life long, into the finality of the unknown which is my end.¹⁹

He had also written of turning to the adventure of death, in eagerness :

I have always wanted to be as the flowers are
so unhampered in their living and dying,
and in death I believe I shall be as the flowers are.
I shall blossom like a dark pansy, and be delighted
there among the dark sun-rays of death.
I can feel myself unfolding in the dark sunshine of death
to something flowery and fulfilled, and with a strange sweet
perfume.²⁰

And so in the new poem "The State of Grace" he enters the god-head of the flower by recognizing it as a miracle :

18. Keith SAGAR, *Life into Art*, p. 341-350, using the analysis of Gail Porter MANDELL, *The Phoenix Paradox*, Northern Illinois, 1984, p. 228-29.

19. *Phoenix*, Harmondsworth : Penguin, p. 698.

20. "Gladness of Death", *Complete Poems*, p. 677.

How deep have I gone
 dark gentians
 in your marvellous dark-blue godhead.

This rather conventional romanticism had been commonplace since at least the wonderful opening of William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence":

To be see a world in a grain of sand
 And heaven in a wild flower
 Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
 And eternity in an hour.

A hundred years later Lawrence needed to do something more as he brooded on the image.

In the first (interlinear) revision in the manuscript he abandoned the Christian language of the title and called the poem "Glory of Darkness", he cancelled the line about the dark-blue godhead and substituted "since I embarked on your dark-blue fringes", and he changed "What a baptism for my soul" to "What a journey... ". And then, in the margins of this version, Lawrence pencilled in his discovery of the first decisive step in the growth of the poem, the mythological idea of the gentian as the door into Hades, the door through which Persephone has just gone (it is September now)

to her bridegroom in the dark
 and all the dead
 and all the dark great ones of the underworld
 down there, down there
 down the blue depths of mountain gentian flowers
 cold, cold
 are gathering to a wedding in the winter dark
 down the dark blue path.

In this version the theme of the journey of the poet's soul into darkness has been lost in the imagination of the underworld itself ("cold, cold"; "down the dark blue path") and in the idea of a divine wedding among the dead. Lawrence now left the draft aside while he worked at the other great poem of his final days, the Whitmanesque "Ship of death", in which he fully explored the idea of "the long journey towards oblivion". This long, complex poem grew quickly out of the Etruscan idea of "the death-journey, and the sojourn in the after-life". This idea to all the "peoples of the great natural religions" was but "a continuing

of the great wonder-journey of life²¹". The idea continued to work on his mind, along with the important idea of gates or doorways into the other world which recurs in many of these last poems. He moved with Frieda to Bandol on the Mediterranean for October, and there returned to the poem that was still called "Glory of Darkness".

What brought him back and enabled him to finish the poem? Keith Sagar's excellent biography does not really explain it, although his account of the way the poem now took on its final form is exemplary²². What is missing, the key ingredient or catalyst by which the poem could reach its final form is Milton. For it was in Milton that Lawrence's mind found the necessary images of darkness, in Samson's blindness ("dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon"²³) and in the Hell of *Paradise Lost* that Milton had described in the memorable phrase "darkness visible".²⁴ These phrases, I suggest, functioned as a kind of mid-wife for the Lawrence poem, enabling it to be born. Presumably these phrases brought with them something of their original context, Samson's long agony before his inspired death and the Miltonic Hell, which inherits and gathers up Virgil's and Dante's, the world of "gloomy Dis".

Lawrence's first step toward this paradox of darkness as light is to be seen in the phrase "smoking blueness of Pluto's gloom" with which he now endorsed the gentians. In the next efforts the flowers became "sheaves", then "cups":

many cups, sharp-lipped, erect, oh very erect
long and erect and fathomless, dark sharp cups of pure blue
darkness,
and burning with dark blue power

And there finally he had seen what he needed, for not only had he hit upon the idea of "burning"²⁵, he had heard the Miltonic

21. *Etruscan Places*, p. 150, 174.

22. Keith SAGAR, "The Genesis of 'Bavarian Gentians'", *The D. H. Lawrence Review*, Spring 1975, p. 47-53.

23. *Samson Agonistes*, line 80.

24. *Paradise Lost*, I 63: "At once as far as Angels ken he views / The dismal situation waste and wild, / A dungeon horrible, on all sides round / As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames / No light, but only darkness visible / Served only to discover sights of woe".

25. This is Keith Sagar's excellent point, *Life into Art*, p. 250.

language. He could drop the embarrassing insistence on the masculine quality of the flowers (though he was to reinstate the word “erect” less flamboyantly later), and he could drop the “cups”. He could now insist as much as he wanted on the dark, repeating and varying the linguistic form, creating an incantation of darkness to produce and control what is named. He went back over these lines and wrote :

Bavarian gentians, big and dark, only dark
 darkening the day-time torch-like with the smoking blueness of
 Pluto's gloom
 ribbed and torchlike, with their blaze of darkness spread blue...

The key phrase here is “blaze of darkness”, for it combines the paradox of Milton’s “darkness visible” from *Paradise Lost* with Samson’s great cry about his blindness : “dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon”. And in the third stanza, Lawrence went on to write that

Persephone herself is but a voice
 or a *darkness invisible* enfolded in the deeper dark
 of the arms Plutonic, and pierced with the passion of dense
 [gloom...

No doubt Lawrence also recalled that Milton had told his story of Eve and the serpent, of the loss of the garden of Paradise, as a variant of, or in contrast with, the rape of Persephone (Proserpine) by Dis or Pluto. Milton’s Eden is

Not that fair field
 Of Enna, where Proserpin gathering flowers,
 Herself a fairer flower, by gloomy Dis
 Was gathered...²⁶

Effective as it is in its context, however, referring as it does to Persephone, Lawrence’s phrase “darkness invisible” unfortunately abolishes the obvious paradox of the Miltonic Hell, its “darkness visible”. One is tempted to accuse Lawrence of a lack of respect for his poetic predecessor, so crassly to ignore the essence of the image. But Lawrence did change it, as we shall now see.

26. *Paradise Lost* IV 268-71.

4. *The final version*

The version of the poem we have been discussing was long thought to be the last Lawrence wrote, but Keith Sagar has now shown that the version from another manuscript is almost certainly the latest. So Lawrence corrected the poem again. Among other things he changed the ending, finally abandoning the rhyme of "gloom/groom" in favour of completing the idea of the speaker's journey that had been left behind in the earlier version. The poem now ends

Give me a flower on a tall stem, and three dark flames
 For I will go to the wedding, and be wedding-guest
 At the marriage of the living dark.

He also cut the phrase "darkness invisible" — so lame next to its Miltonic model — and changed it to "a gloom invisible", adding "as a bride" for explicitness. He also abandoned that awful "arms Plutonic" (more appropriate in Gilbert and Sullivan), and indeed he made the rape itself active again, rather than something merely suffered by the bride :

And Persephone herself is but a voice, as a bride
 A gloom invisible enfolded in the deeper dark
 Of the arms of Pluto as he ravishes her once again
 And pierces her once more with his passion of the utter dark.²⁷

And the Miltonic paradox is now reborn in that remarkable new conclusion which replaces the "gloom/groom" rhyme — the words "living dark". So if it was a movement toward Milton's language that enabled the poem to find its principle theme, it was by burying the Miltonic allusion a little more deeply that it achieved its final satisfying form.

Here then, so that the reader may compare the two versions for herself, is the complete poem in the form we now think Lawrence finally gave it.

27. Cf. *Paradise Lost* I 71-5: "here their prison ordained/ In *utter darkness*, and their portion set / As far removed from God and light of heaven / As from the centre thrice to the utmost pole."

BAVARIAN GENTIANS

Not every man has gentians in his house
 In soft September, at slow, sad Michaelmas.
 Bavarian gentians, tall and dark, but dark
 darkening the day-time torch-like with the smoking blueness of
 Pluto's gloom,
 ribbed hellish flowers erect, with their blaze of darkness spread
 blue
 blown flat into points, by the heavy white draft of the day.

Torch-flowers of the blue-smoking darkness, Pluto's dark-blue
 blaze
 black lamps from the halls of Dis, smoking dark blue
 giving off darkness, blue darkness, upon Demeter's yellow-pale
 day
 whom have you come for, here in the white-cast day ?

Reach me a gentian, give me a torch !
 let me guide myself with the blue, forked torch of a flower
 down the darker and darker stairs, where blue is darkened on
 blueness
 down the way Persephone goes, just now, in first-frosted
 September.
 to the sightless realm where darkness is married to dark
 and Persephone herself is but a voice, as a bride,
 a gloom invisible enfolded in the deeper dark
 of the arms of Pluto as he ravishes her once again
 and pierces her once more with his passion of the utter dark
 among the splendours of blue-black torches, shedding fathomless
 darkness on the nuptials.

Give me a flower on a tall stem, and three dark flames,
 for I will go to the wedding and be wedding-guest
 at the marriage of the living dark.

In this version the poem has quite a different, more rhetorically clear structure from the one we analyzed above. It now follows the three basic English sentence types : statement, question and command²⁸. The simple declarative beginning establishes a pattern of sound repetitions through alliteration and the quiet,

28. Allan INGRAM, *The Language of D. H. Lawrence*, London : Macmillan, 1990, p. 152.

halting rhythm of those three adjectival phrases after the main clause: "in his house", "in soft September", "at slow, sad Michaelmas". But soon, with the next sentence, the pattern of sound comes to dominate the pattern of syntax, since the sentence merely accumulates phrases without offering the main verb the reader waits for. We have to correct our reading, to go back and account for this long development grammatically as perhaps in apposition to the gentians of the first line: "gentians..., Bavarian gentians". But the punctuation will not let us do this; rather the insistent sound repetitions of words like "dark, but dark/darkening" and "blueness... blue" outweighs the syntactic possibilities and introduces us to a world not of logic but of incantation.

The second stanza begins as if it continued the pattern: alliterations extend (blue/blaze/black), phrases accumulate, as in the earlier version. But now there is a surprise: the stanza suddenly transforms these heaped-up phrases into modes of address, for it poses a direct question to the flowers: "Whom have you come for, here in the white-cast day?" And the return to the present daylight now gives sense to the earlier version's reference to "Demeter's pale lamps", which become "Demeter's yellow-pale day". The contrast between darkness and daylight is now quite radical, and leads, after an intake of breath to the bold command of the third stanza: "Reach me a gentian, give me a torch!" The command is now repeated at the beginning of the next and concluding stanza, as the personality of the poet presents himself forcefully at the divine wedding. The renewed presence of a "me", an "I", at the end of the poem has now validated the implied claim of exclusive status at the opening, that he is "not every man".²⁹ By placing himself there with "the living dark", that final marvellous phrase in the poem's sequence of underworld images, he is present, as it were, at his own death.

As if to confirm the power derived from this act of Miltonic imagination, in his very next poem Lawrence imagines the figure of the devil himself in the midst of these "dark-blue depths". The poem begins from a line of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (IV iii 22), but the image borrows Milton's picture of Satan waking to consciousness on the "burning lake" of hell, and moving over these

29. Ingram, p. 157, who has a good analysis of the poem.

waters, treading the burning marl, to dry land. And the informing idea of the poem is a kind of incipient and creative quarrel with Milton³⁰, who had repeated the traditional assertion that the fallen angels, even Lucifer himself, had lost some of their shine. In Lawrence's poem, we see Lucifer in that Miltonic darkness, his age come round at last, approaching :

LUCIFER

Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell.
 But tell me, tell me, how do you know
 he lost any of his brightness in the falling ?
 In the dark-blue depths, under layers and layers of darkness
 I see him more like the ruby, a gleam from within
 of his own magnificence
 coming like the ruby in the invisible dark, glowing
 with his own annunciation, towards us.³¹

Clearly, then, Lawrence was rethinking his relation to the religious tradition by exploring the Miltonic language afresh. From all the evidence accumulated by biographers and critics previously, Milton had never meant much to Lawrence in spite of their spiritual affinities. Lawrence was closer to the mystical-romantic tradition, which passed through the seventeenth century poets Henry Vaughn and Thomas Traherne and that ran on through William Blake and Walt Whitman. But here in facing his death Lawrence turned rather to Milton, himself heterodox and anti-clerical (though in the special context of the struggle against the established church) : in particular, he turned to his tormented heroes, Samson and Satan, who had figured his blindness and invented the language of darkness.

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30. The quarrel is extended in "When Satan Fell" (*Complete Poems*, p. 710), which asserts that it was God who rose too high, so Satan righted the cosmic balance.

31. *Complete Poems*, p. 697. The poem revises and expands one that appears in *More Pansies*, which lacks the Miltonic calque. See *Complete Poems*, p. 614.