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Keith Sagar

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Keith Sagar

Lawrence's Debt To Whitman

I believe that Lawrence became a great poet. I say 'became' because if he had died or given up poetry before 1920, he would not have been one. Of course there are good poems from the earlier period, but all the great ones were written in the last decade of his life. And I believe that he could not have become a great poet without the influence of Whitman. I do not know of any great poet with a deeper debt to an earlier poet than Lawrence's to Whitman.

Ted Hughes described the English Poetic Tradition as a 'maternal octopus'—a phrase wonderfully suggesting both the richness and nourishment of that tradition, and also its ability to stifle any budding poet unable to find and assert his own voice against that choir.¹ The young Lawrence, force-fed on Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, where the emphasis fell heavily on Romantic lyrics, took for granted that poetry should be written in rhyming regular verse. Whitman produced a few bad rhyming poems in the 1840s; but in the several hundred poems of *Leaves of Grass* there is, as far as I can remember, only one rhyming poem—'O Captain, My Captain'. At the age of twenty-three Whitman wrote an uncollected poem called 'Ambition'. Here an obscure youth wonders (in blank verse) whether he will ever be famous. There appears to him 'a shape / Like one as of a cloud' which reproves his vanity in lofty rhymed verse stanzas, admonishing him to compare his own puny powers with those of the night sky and of death.² It seems that Whitman already associated rhyme with a

1. Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen* (London: Faber, 1994), 213.

2. Walt Whitman: *Complete Poetry & Selected Prose and Letters*, ed. Emory Holloway (London: Nonesuch Press, 1938). All quotations from Whitman are from this edition.