

Divine Vegetation: An Analysis of the Spirit and Form of D.H. Lawrence's *Red Geranium and Godly Mignonette*

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This paper is a close reading of D.H. Lawrence's poem "Red Geranium and Godly Mignonette". It examines how Lawrence uses both meaning and form to explore the theme of creativity. It discusses Lawrence's use of the Christian creation story in exploring this theme and looks at how his use of free verse, rhythm, alliteration, and synonymy all subtly serve to reflect and emphasize the poem's sentiment.

To express how he feels about the beauty he senses and perceives in nature, D.H. Lawrence explores the spirit behind God's creative process and implicitly denies that the universe was created piecemeal as in the Book of Genesis. Creation in this manner is likened to parlour tricks:

"Now there shall be tum-tiddly-um, and tum-tiddly-um,
hey-presto! scarlet geranium!"
We know it couldn't be done.

(ll.13-15)

God did not create any particular part of the universe by whim or by calculation. Lawrence's Nature is not one in which particular things were created in, or exist in isolation. Everything is connected in a greater context.

God is not so much a calculating mind issuing edicts, as he is an uncontrollable spirit. Sensuality as a characteristic of God is clearly neglected or denied in Christianity: "You can't imagine the Holy Ghost sniffing at cherry-pie heliotrope" (l.9). Lawrence puts more emphasis on the sensual possibilities of God. Lawrence's God is compelled to create:

But imagine, among the mud and the mastodons
God sighing and yearning with tremendous creative yearning,
in that dark green mess
of, for some other beauty...

(ll.16-18)

Lawrence is best able to communicate the intensity of the beauty of the geranium and the mignonette by indicating that they are natural and inevitable fulfillment of a greater universal force.

While Lawrence uses the creation story to express his feelings, it is not how he literally thinks the world came to be. Rather, this is how he feels it did. The reworking of the creation story is

presented in order to make his feelings communicable. He wishes to attach a vision to his feelings.

As any good poet should, Lawrence wishes to reflect the poem's sentiment in its presentation so as to best communicate and emphasize that sentiment. Lawrence's use of "free" form is apt. The last thing he wants to do is give the impression that "Red Geranium and Godly Mignonette" was a highly calculated poem.

The poem is conversational in tone. Lawrence engages the reader. He repeatedly asks the reader to "imagine". He speaks directly to the reader, "You can't imagine..." (l.9), and he uses the inclusive "we". He is confident of what he knows. He assertively dismisses God as planner in such a way as to suggest he is only speaking common sense: "We know it couldn't be done" (l.15). Lawrence does not propose to know how the universe was created; He presents a highly appealing vision that has come to him in imagination.

In order to give the impression of natural process Lawrence writes in a highly rhythmic style. He creates a rhythm by various means. There is a natural progression to his ideas and emotions. He starts on high with the exclamatory, "Imagine that any mind ever *thought* a red geranium!" (l.1) From there he builds up the sensual nature of our response to the geranium and mignonette, and he begins his argument against a contrived creation.

Lawrence's repetition of key words and near equivalents is obvious in black and white. Together though, with alliteration, rhyme and half-rhyme, Lawrence creates a hypnotic effect with a nearly subliminal working. Lawrence relies heavily upon his repetition of "red" and red-words (ie. "cherry-pie", "scarlet") to communicate the sensuality he wishes in relating to the geranium. It hardly need be said that Lawrence has chosen well in choosing red in a poem discussing sensual experience.

The constant appeal to "imagine" lulls one into a dream-like state. Lawrence introduces tension by contrasting imaginative and sensual experiences. Lawrence is able to create sensual imagery even when he is not appealing directly to our senses. While we "can't imagine the Holy Ghost sniffing at cherry-pie heliotrope" (l.8) we cannot help but inadvertently think of what it would be like to smell the geranium ourselves.

In the first few lines of the poem Lawrence stresses our mind's dependence upon sensual experience for imagination:

...as if sensual experience could take place before there were any senses.
We know that even God could not imagine the redness of a red geranium
nor the smell of mignonette
when geraniums were not, and mignonette neither.

(ll.3-6)

This begs the question, in the process of creation how could those things that are now experienced sensually ever have been conceived before they had ever been perceived?

Lawrence takes us to one climax in trying to answer, in the lines,

“Now there shall be tum-tiddly-um, and tum-tiddly-um,
hey presto! scarlet geranium!”

(ll.13-14)

He builds to it by using leading alliteration. For example:

...straining his mighty mind
to think, among the moss and mud of lizards and mastodons

(ll.10-11)

He uses conjunctions following periods to keep the poem moving forward while allowing for pauses (ie. “And even when they...”, “Or the Most High...”). Individual images are able to affect us, but their continuity is not broken.

Lawrence varies sentence length as well. After a string of longer sentences and conjunction-joined ones Lawrence brings us down from the climax of line 14 with the short, direct, matter-of-fact sentence, “We know it couldn’t be done.” (l.15). Not the end half-rhyme between “geranium” and “done” which subtly strengthens the feeling of proposal and response between lines 14 and 15.

Immediately after the fall in line 15 the poem’s rhythm resumes; Lawrence introduces another conjunction-started sentence of considerable length. It brings us to another climax of sorts. It is not one set off by an exclamation point though. This climax is more satisfying than the one of line 14. Besides rhythmically, the first climax is in a sense, admittedly false. Lawrence says “you can’t imagine” God doing these things.

The blossoming of the red geranium and mignonette is built up through the poem as the great fulfillment of natural process. The repetition of “yearning” in line 17 emphasizes this. Their blossoming is like a bursting. The flowers contrast strongly with the “mud and the mastodons” in their delicacy, especially mignonette, and colours, especially the red geranium against “that dark green mess” (l.17).

Lawrence further indicates how special these flowers are. They are beauty incarnate:

...for some other beauty, some other beauty
that blossomed at last, red geranium, and mignonette.

(ll.18-19)

The flower’s beauty and significance are also indicated in how God is actually belittled in their creation:

We know that even God could not imagine the redness of a red geranium
nor the smell of mignonette
when geraniums were not, and mignonette neither.

(l.4-6)

Actually trying to imagine God with a nose, “to smell at the mignonette” (1.7) is rather humorous. Lawrence actually seems to playfully mock the limitations of (the Christian) God. Lawrence asks us to consider instead, a God that does not merely want to create the flowers, rather one that must, to satisfy his “creative yearning”! In this way, God is portrayed as an artist.

At first glance, it is curious that Lawrence has chosen to attach the adjective “Godly” to mignonette in the poem’s title. Besides for the alliteration, it suggests the flower is special. In retrospect though, it is a fitting description for a fragrant flower in poem that is about far more than common vegetation.

Works Cited:

Lawrence, D.H. “Red Geranium and Godly Mignonette” In *Last Poems*, Richard Aldington, ed. (London: Martin Secker, 1933): 29-30.