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David Herbert Lawrence's Poetic Imagery: From
Romanticism to an Existentialist/ Vitalist Stance:

A Study in Development

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Introduction

D.H. Lawrence's reputation as a novelist has done an injustice to his work as a poet—and one of the greatest in the early twentieth century. His reputation has been a little tarnished, no doubt, by the reports of censoring some of his work and the candid handling of sex which offended the traditionalists at the time. He has certainly emerged from these shadows by the rediscovery of the philosophical depths of handling of both human and social questions: one such case is his vitalist tendency or, as recently claimed by a major critic, his significant existential leanings. It is in the poetry of the 1920s that such leanings may be traced, considering that his love of German philosophy and the inclination of central European thought (the Frankfurt School etc) to accept existentialist thought.

It is the purpose of this paper to show that D.H. Lawrence's verse, as newly discovered and appreciated, is worthy of a status equal to those of the Edwardians and early Georgian English poets, as well as the contemporaneous imagists led by Ezra Pound and his group. Especially in the Arab world, I believe it is worthwhile to re-read the poetry of D.H. Lawrence not as a neo-Romantic, but a poet of great talent making the most of the vitalist/ Existentialist tendencies of his day.

The paper will argue that as early as his first published volumes of verse, D.H. Lawrence shows signs of the revolutionary spirit which is highly prized in his novels. Even as early as a poem like "The Wild Common", one may trace the vitalist approach, naturally connected to – if not inherent in—his own brand of existentialism.

Key words: Vitalism, Existentialism, Romanticism, and Being.

Even a cursory look at Lawrence's *The Wild Common* should reveal to us how different his attitude to Nature was from a "Nature Poet" like William Wordsworth. In his poem *The Wild Common*, Lawrence says:

*The common flaunts bravely; but below, from the rushes
Crowds of glittering king-cups surge to challenge the blossoming bushes;
There the lazy streamlet pushes
Its curious course mildly; here it wakes again, leaps, laughs, and gushes.*

*Into a deep pond, an old sheep-dip,
Dark, overgrown with willows, cool, with the brook ebbing through so
slow,
Naked on the steep, soft lip
Of the bank I stand watching my own white shadow quivering to and fro.*

*What if the gorse flowers shrivelled and kissing were lost?
Without the pulsing waters, where were the marigolds and the songs of
the brook!*

*If my veins and my breasts with love embossed
Withered, my insolent soul would be gone like flowers that the hot wind
took.*

As a poet of Nature, Lawrence identifies himself with Nature. The Romantic Lawrence doesn't only find extreme happiness in communion with nature, but he also identifies his being and existence when he sees his own "white shadow" in the water. It is that uncertain "quivering" reflection of himself in the waters of life that makes him aware "how splendid it is to be substance." Outer reflections can be a key to inner identity. Here the super romantic poet is diving in water instead of being only a mere spectator like Wordsworth who says in *Tintern Abbey*:

*Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur.—Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.*

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Here Wordsworth describes how his memory of these “beauteous forms” of nature has worked upon him in his absence from them: he describes the beauty of nature and the murmur of these waters through his mere eyes; without being part of it. However, Lawrence proves his existence only when he becomes part of that nature, through diving in waters, and seeing his own shadow reflected there.

Lawrence's aspiration was to shatter many fixed ideas, which he regarded as dead. He wanted to abandon the known, to explore the unknown, and in doing so, he apparently went to the extreme. Lawrence was a painter more than a poet. In this sense he adopts Romantic ideas where he

synthesizes the naturalism of a scientific age and the supernaturalism of a religious age. He both adhered to the immediate and the actual and aspired to the ultimate and the transcendent (Gordon, p.16).

His belief in the importance of freedom and his tackling of the sexual relationship between men and women were considered by many as inappropriate.

However, as a vitalist,

that is, as a poet not simply willing or able to accept the truths that science has to offer, preferring instead the emotional consolations provided by concepts such as a "principle of life" or "intuition" that can't be verified by scientific means (Mitchell, p.5)

Lawrence succeeded in challenging the age of science and realism where he lived by his own poetry which he employed to state things that he could not tackle in prose, as powerfully and in such memorable imagery.

To achieve the above mentioned aim, the study will scrutinize some of the most acclaimed poems written by Lawrence. It is this goal to create a lively contact with the outer environment that drove Lawrence to uncover the flux of life in the surrounding universe. Most of his poems actually accord with the theory of vitalism, which believed that life is in a continuous state of movement.

In his poem *Snake*, Lawrence explores the relationship between man and animal. Actually there is a significant relationship between religious, ethical, and aesthetic perspectives in concerns with existentialist and vitalist perspectives on the question of the animal. It can be stated that Lawrence creates his own animal philosophy in relation to mankind.

Behind every book is a man, behind the man is the race; and behind the race are the natural and social environments whose influence is unconsciously reflected. (William J. Long p.5).

The complicated inevitable relationship between literature, environment and mankind is an omnipresent aim in Lawrence's poem.

In *Snake*, D.H. Lawrence takes the snake as the subject, but does not draw it allegorically such as in other English animal poems;

readings of Lawrence's popular poem "Snake" offer more sympathetic views of his contradicting attitudes by seeing the author as an artist who shows us the cultural complexity of the human-animal relationship. (Simonetta de Filippis, p. 150).

Snake employs a double voiced "I". The first one perceives the snake as a "king in exile/ uncrowned in the underworld", and the other rejects, in the name of human education, the presence of the snake next to the human being. Anna Barcz states that

snake is a first person perspective spoken monologue , not a dialogue although both the speaker and the animal play a significant part in it (p.75)

Barcz believes that *Snake* is Lawrence's best animal poem written while he was in Sicily. It sheds light on the relationship between humans and one of the most feared realities on earth; a snake. The poem is exactly like the layers of the skin that are liable to peel off, it can be read and analyzed on several levels. The poem actually starts with a common scene where a man meets a snake at a water trough. The poet has to queue for his drink; a typical English thing to do. The narrator is so polite, giving the snake a space to drink first, as the snake is a local and the narrator is only a tourist, so the snake has the priority in his environment.

According to James F. Broderick,

the Snake is a poem with a message, namely that human beings who react viscerally out of disgust to non-human creatures—in this case, a snake—not only dishonor themselves but miss a critical chance to achieve some sort of connection with a fellow planet dweller. (p. 79).

The snake now represents the unconscious forces which are considered life affirming, and the poet's rejection of the snake is part of that hyperconsciousness which the poet despises; the malignant evil of modern civilization. The snake is there just to satisfy a biological imperative that is to drink. The poet, the symbol of common man is impatient, indignant, as he waits for this creature to finish and go. As the man watches the snake, he is attracted and also repulsed; a battle of two contradicting impulses.

Broderick describes the power of the poem saying:

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What Lawrence eulogizes in The Snake is mankind's failure of imagination. The typical response to the unfamiliar is all-too-familiar to Lawrence, and many other writers who have staged cross-species contact with an aim towards exposing humanity's baser instincts. But those fears are largely dispelled by the magisterial "Devil in the Dark", which in essence rewrites "the Snake" to provide a more virtuous and satisfying ending. (p. 80)

The urgent question of life and death is best exemplified in *The Wild Common*. Lawrence affirms his consciousness of his own existence through the theory of vitalism. "what if I were gone" creates a discrepancy between death and the actual existence in the first place. This is a unique type of being; or in other words a special vitalist existentialism. In that life of the common, the speaker sees his own "white shadow". It is that uncertain "quivering" reflection of himself in the waters of life that makes him aware "how splendid it is to be substance". Thus, outer reflections are the true component of inner identity. Like Lawrence, Heidegger despised modern civilization for its dependence on the machine, especially in America. He called for going back to the self so as to achieve its humanity and realize the presence of the other.

Again in Lawrence's poem, life is perceived as a kind of revelation of personal being: "you are here! You are here! We have found you" shout the pewits and the rabbits and the seven larks singing at once." The poet suddenly discovers himself as an integrated whole in nature; body and soul. In commenting on *The Wild Common*, Barbara Hardy says in her book *The Advantage of Lyric: Essay on Feeling in Poetry*, that

Lawrence said that his more youthful poetry often inhibited his demon and the revisions he worked at frequently give that demon a louder and more lucid say. But the gain is not purely one of emotional intensity, for feeling is inseparable from argument.

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The second version establishes satisfactorily the belief in unity of substance and shadow, and shows the poet coming to understand what the first attempt failed not only to achieve, but to see. (p.14)

Unlike many philosophers, Heidegger pays a distinctive attention to death, which he doesn't regard as dreadful. Death becomes a key problem for Heidegger in the philosophical attempt to understand human existence. He confers upon this philosophical attempt a new ontological depth, since it is a problem touching being itself. In this, James M. Damske says:

It follows that the concept of death is especially well suited to serve as a guide through the labyrinth of Heidegger's thought. It belongs to the area of his central concern, which is the problem of being as appearing to man, or seen from the other end of the relation, the problem of human existence in the world of being. Thus Heidegger's philosophy of death can be understood only against the background of his philosophy of man and of being, and conversely his philosophy of man and of being will be appreciated in its full significance and rigorous continuity only in so far as his thoughts on death receive adequate consideration. The problem of death on the one hand, and being and man on the other, mutually illuminate and clarify one another. (p.3)

Exactly like Heidegger, Lawrence's perception of death is that of a believer in the other world, as he deals with death in his two poems *The Wild Common*, and *Manifesto*. These two poems, as admitted by many critics, admired despite their fearful topic. They derive their strength from the power of language and imagery.

Both Heidegger and Lawrence believe that death is an important factor in realizing one's being, as one common basic concept, for both of them, is being towards death. For Lawrence, like Heidegger, death must be remembered as death is a complex fact that philosophy attempts to unravel, and through which man can discover his own being. They believe that one's consciousness of death is part of his consciousness of his own being, because a human being can't achieve a complete or meaningful life, or any other kind of authentic existence, unless he or she comes to terms with temporality; a human awareness that the human soul is mortal and temporal. The awareness of death is an essential beginning for understanding one's being, which is important because it helps one to fulfill oneself. (Stambaugh)

As for Lawrence, vitalism directs him towards self-fulfillment, as he states directly in his poem *Manifesto*:

*Let them praise desire who will,
but only fulfillment will do, real fulfillment,
nothing short.
It is our ratification our heaven,
as a matter of fact.
Immortality, the heaven,
is only a projection of this strange but actual fulfillment,
here in the flesh.*

Then he shifts to the question of being:

*To be, or not to be, is still the question.
This ache for being is the ultimate hunger.
And for myself, I can say "almost, almost, oh, very nearly."
Yet something remains.
Something shall not always remain.
For the main already is fulfillment.*

Here, Lawrence discusses the problem of being through the image of "pain" which he originally attributes to the confusion faced by a person who is preoccupied with the question of being and who feels the need for

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satisfying his own hunger, and this satisfaction is nothing but self fulfillment.

In his book D.H. Lawrence *The Poet Who Was Not Wrong*, Douglas A. Mackey states that:

It is typical of Lawrence to commend the achievement of fulfillment rather than the quest for it. Although we see the major characters in his fiction never achieving it with assumed permanency, they and he never question that there is a meaning to life, that the goal of happiness can be grasped, even if only in moments. Lawrencean heroes or heroines are never found in a permanent state of existential despair—they have too much vitality for that. They share a common drive to find fulfillment in this world, in the flesh wherein lies the real immortality and heaven, "as a matter of fact". (92/93)

According to Mackey, Lawrence makes use of the theory of existentialism to realize his own being mentally and physically through transcending his own being which is governed by time. He succeeds in doing this through engaging with his beloved as a distinct being trying to prove their existence through associating with each other's being. Mackey comments on this saying:

The poet in Manifesto is engaged in the process of coming into being: To be or not to be, is still the question/ This ache for being is the ultimate hunger. It is that and not mere sexual hunger that drives him to seek the woman—or perhaps it would be accurate to say that the sexual urge is a manifestation of that most fundamental appetite. Being, as we have established, is something every one already possesses. Why then is it necessary to find a partner to realize that elusive essence?

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Perhaps because the existence of the other person presents a challenge. The poet becoming aware of his limitations in relationship to the woman, plunges into the unknown field of her otherness.
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The distinguishing thing about this imagery is the paradox: the engagement of two separate, independent beings is in reality liberty, according to him—it allows his soul to transcend the borders of reality and perceive death as a journey towards the world of forgetfulness, which is to be found in the world of truth that is never attained except after death. In other words, it is an oblivion of the life of extinction; therefore, he goes on to build the ship of death, which is the ship of faith.

Lawrence's imagery is characterized by its difficulty. His images are sometimes hard to interpret logically or dialectically. They are sometimes based on paradox, often suggesting meanings that distract the reader from the essential frame of the image due to the use of abstractions and philosophical terms and attitudes. *Manifesto* is one of these poems which baffled most of the critics who tried to discuss it. The poem embodies his vision of the poetry of the present, and it shows his perception of "being".

Lawrence and those major characters of his poems seek the achievement of fulfillment rather than the quest for it. His heroes and heroines never achieve happiness, however, they are "continually questing for it";

They and he never question that there is a meaning to life, that the goal of happiness can be grasped, even if only in moments
(Mackey 93).

The poet confirms the notion of being in the present after confirming the paradox of liberty engagement. Throughout his poem *Manifesto*, readers feel the spiritual existence—or being that is conscious of its
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existence spiritually. In short, Lawrence adds a new spiritual dimension to Heidegger's Being.

Actually, the theory of vitalism is based on the notion that life can't be comprehended in terms of Kantian Idealism.

By presenting vitalism as simply an emotional outlet for cultural anxieties produced by the traumas of modernity, we risk obscuring the commitment to change and transformation that I argue is central to experimental vitalism.
(Mitchell, p. 11)

In fact vitalism developed as a reaction to scientific materialism and Kantian idealism, which dominated philosophical thought. Lawrence's perspective of the relationship between man and his universe suggests a developing belief in Vitalism. He asserts that the relationship between them is in a continuous movement;

for Lawrence, too, life depends on duality and polarity: the north-south dialect mobilizes his imagination. While Delavenay calls his philosophy the passionate quest for unity of a divided man, Janik sheds light on the philosophical relation of duality to wholeness in Lawrence's cosmology.
(Stewart p.140)

Actually Lawrence exemplifies this relationship through a painting by Van Gogh. He says that when Van Gogh paints a sunflower, he creates a relationship between himself and the painting. This painting doesn't actually represent the sunflower, but it represents an eternal relationship between man and the sunflower.

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Vision, as Lawrence uses the term refers to both the faculty of visual perception and to ontological vision activated in the process of writing or painting. His reflections on painting contain some vital ideas on the phenomenology of perception and imagination, both in the visual arts and (by implication) in writing. (Stewart p.1)

For both Van Gogh and Lawrence, passing away from any given moment achieves a kind of transcendence. Things are always changing because they are subject to the flux of time. Both artists are brilliant in their fields. Many of Lawrence's readers and his friends too, have noticed his affinity with Van Gogh. This affinity is actually shaped due to their common interest in vitaism. Jack Stewart affirms that

Lawrence's writings and Van Gogh's paintings share a preternatural intensity of vision and expression". He adds that "while techniques differ from one artistic medium to another, verbal and visual arts share aspects of perception and vision rooted in the unconscious ground of Being. (13)

Applying this to *Manifesto*, "the major part of being" is "this having touched the edge of the beyond, and perished, yet not perished". It is clear that the main aim of the poem is the integration of being for the poet. He is pre-occupied with the process of reconciling the female aspects of his own nature with the male. For both Van Gogh and Lawrence, both sexes are present in a human being. Each human being is a traveler between these two poles, trying to create and maintain the balance between these two forces in oneself.

Mackey says that

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Lawrence sees nature as the Chinese do: things in motion, motion in things. This concept of substance implies activity. Substantially is lively and joyful; it is also a royal state in which one wears the crown (99).

Tracing vitalism in Lawrence's poetry is best understood through deciphering the spell of the affirmation of the majesty, splendor and mystery of the life of nature. He perceives nature as a mixture of horror, elegance and beauty.

D.H. Lawrence provides various attempts to demonstrate the notion of vitalism through enhancing the perception of nature and its relation to animal life. He creates a more comprehensive vision of the animal life that includes birds, beasts, and even flowers. As mentioned before, his connection with the animal life is best seen in his poem *Snake*. Moreover, many other poems enhance this vision.

*Unlike most men, who shirk the authentic encounter with nature, Lawrence encounters contacts with unfamiliar modes of awareness. He tries to be himself as thoroughly as whatever he encounters is itself. We see this frequently in *The Birds, Beasts, and Flowers* poems. In *The Mosquito*, both man and insect are antagonists. He calls the mosquito names "a dull clot of air, / a nothingness, a speck, a Ghoul on wings, a streaky sorcerer, and pointed fiend". (Mackey p.36)*

The Mosquito is actually an example of the poet's visualization of the animal world. Lawrence's perception of the mosquito is different from other people; he sees it as a foe killer of human beings. This is an example of the changing forms of nature in relation to human beings. The poem shows human emotions to animals and inanimate objects. In

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addressing the mosquito as "Monsieur", Lawrence is creating a one sided dialogue, where the mosquito replies through its movements and stings. Although it is weightless, and comes and goes unnoticed, the poet sees a certain aura surrounding it. This aura is an evil one that paralyses the poet's mind beyond thought.

In his book *Essays in Eco Criticism*, Rayson K. Alex says:

again, D.H. Lawrence's Mosquito is brought under wit and humor though it may well find its place under Nature, surely a better fit than Everest. In Mosquito the insect is not merely described in exquisite detail, but also seen in action. (p. 145)

Blood, red blood
Super-magical
Forbidden liquor.

I behold you stand
For a second enspasmed in oblivion,
Obscenely ecstasied
Sucking live blood
My blood.

Such silence, such suspended transport,
Such gorging,
Such obscenity of trespass.

In these lines the mosquito possesses the kind of being that Lawrence wants to recuperate with humans, a being that rejects mechanistic forms of self-consciousness and glorifies the pure natural essence. Lawrence makes this, wishing men to follow this naturalness.

In creating this one sided dialogue with the mosquito, the poet wants to be private as such an animal. This may by mistake lead readers to
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think that Lawrence is lowering humans to the level of animals. Simonetta de Filippis confirms that understanding Lawrence as dehumanizing man to the level of animals is a completely wrong perception of Lawrence's perspective;

the difference between humans and animals , our idea of self is already built upon our idea of animals as both like us and unlike us. The problem is that the similarity and the difference are functioning at once and are often opposed to each other. (p. 155)

Look up, and you see things flying
Between the day and the night;
Swallows with spools of dark thread sewing the shadows together.

A circle swoop, and a quick parabola under the bridge arches
Where light pushes through;
A sudden turning upon itself of a thing in the air.
A dip to the water.

And you think:
"The swallows are flying so late!"

The *Bat* is another medium for an evocation of otherness. In *Bat* the creature is described with clear vividness:

"swallows with spools of dark thread sewing the shadows together. The bat may be a reference to the human beings' suffering or the pain of being part of this world; the poet ends the poem with a description of the bats, "hanging upside down like rows of disgusting old rags/ And grinning in their sleep". This enhances the shift in being in the world. The poem's ending with "Not for me" is a raging at the condition of consciousness; "noting that in

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China bats are the symbol of happiness, Lawrence exclaims "Not for me!" His reaction is self-mocking in its exaggerated tone of disgust." (Mackey p.36)

Like his poems *Snake, and Man and Bat*, *Bat* is a poem of accepting the other's right to exist; another form of Vitalism that leads to existentialism. In *Man and Bat*, Lawrence realizes the Bat's different kind of perception; and he accepts this. The man in the poem recognizes the bat as a unique living thing with its own integrity of awareness.

It was the light of day which he could not enter.
Any more than I could enter the white-hot door of a blast-
furnace.

He could not plunge into the daylight that streamed at the
window.
It was asking too much of his nature.

Worse even than the hideous terror of me with my hand-
kerchief
Saying: _Out, go out_! . . .
Was the horror of white daylight in the window!

So I switched on the electric light, thinking: _Now
The outside will seem brown_. . . .

When the bat dies in the poem, Lawrence comes up with a statement that its death would not resolve the tension of the opposites of blood and mind, animal and man:

Only life has a way out.
And the human soul is fated to wide-eyed responsibility
In life.

The poet realizes that it is the duty of a human being to tolerate other forms of life and allow them to be; or exist. The poet here reaches a solution to the nagging problem in his mind; he realizes that through vitalism, existentialism is achieved. There must be a harmony between self and other in a vital balance where each side accepts the other's right

to exist. However, this acceptance doesn't extend to allowing a bat to stay in a human being's room.

Unexpectedly the poem ends with the triumph of the bat, where he says:

There he sits, the long loud one!
But I am greater than he . . .
I escaped him_

In the three poems *Man and Bat*, *Snake*, and *Bat*, there is a presence of the other. A man, a snake, and a bat all need water and shelter to support life, so all have the right to find a way to ensure their living; a typical tendency to vitalism which enhances existentialism.

The tiny baby tortoise, alone without knowing it, is a living embodiment of what the new Lawrence said he wanted to be, a self invincible fore-runner. Embedded in the shell, however, is the inescapable sign of the cross. (Weekes p.605)

You know what it is to be born alone,
Baby tortoise!
The first day to heave your feet little by little from
the shell,
Not yet awake,
And remain lapsed on earth,
Not quite alive.
A tiny, fragile, half-animate bean.
To open your tiny beak-mouth, that looks as if it would
never open
Like some iron door;
To lift the upper hawk-beak from the lower base

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And reach your skinny neck
And take your first bite at some dim bit of herbage,
Alone, small insect,
Tiny bright-eye,
Slow one.

The Baby Tortoise starts its story by giving a solid impression of independence. Lawrence admires this sense of independence in the baby tortoise; this quality of being alone, with no sense of being alone. This baby tortoise, although too little, but it strikes the poet as a bold adventurer.

A new form of a dialogue Lawrence constructs in *The Baby Tortoise* is the dialogue within himself; the debate between one aspect of himself and another:

Do you wonder at the world, as slowly you turn your head
in its wimple
And look with laconic, black eyes?
Or is sleep coming over you again,
The non-life?
You are so hard to wake.
Are you able to wonder?
Or is it just your indomitable will and pride of the
first life
Looking round
And slowly pitching itself against the inertia
Which had seemed invincible?

These rhetorical questions assert Lawrence's identification with the baby tortoise. He attempts to reach a definition of his own identity and being through associating himself to this oblivion baby tortoise. Lawrence
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depicts the fragile nature of a human being, faced with the horrible risks of outer world. It is the contrast of life against non-life.

Connecting the whole animal poems of Lawrence, it is alluded that all animate creations bear upon their shoulders the risks of the outer life of suffering and misery. Lawrence excels in creating a Lawrencean chain of beings through his poems from a small insect, a small bird, a fearful snake, a baby tortoise, and finally a baby human being. This unique combination of animate creations enable Lawrence to universalize his observations on development in a hostile environment. That's why he never loses sight of characteristic tortoise movements "rowing slowly forward, pausing to yawn, slowly turning your head in its wimple, and slow dragging on your four-pinned toes". Then the poem ends with the tension between the animal's tininess and its "indomitable will and pride".

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