

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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The White Horse

The youth walks up to the white horse, to put its halter on
and the horse looks at him in silence.
They are so silent they are in another world.

D. H. Lawrence¹

Reflections

D. H. Lawrence famously called his poems “acts of attention,” and “The White Horse” is emblematic of what some would call his “method” of writing, centering on a single concentrated and mysterious moment. I once had a writing teacher ask that we write a poem about the quietest thing we could think of. The single quietest thing: it is, to this day, one of the most interesting challenges I attempted.

Lawrence has a complicated and controversial reputation but critics are unified in their admiration of the poet's desire to write against the cultural grain, challenging and exposing what he considered constrictive and oppressive cultural (and literary) norms, norms which involved excessive noisiness, insincerity, performance and distraction. To counter what he called this “mechanical and superficial existence,” Lawrence sought to inspire a heightened awareness of the realities of another kind of existence, another kind of world—which is the world into which these two creatures, youth and horse, lose themselves. The horse's gaze is unmet and its body awaits its burden; who is it that witnesses this moment? Which world have we left, and which did we enter?

Another poet I admire—Jack Spicer—who was writing during the 1950s in what is now known as the San Francisco Renaissance, opened a poetry course he called his Magic Workshop, by saying “We're not going to start out trying to define magic. If we do, we'll spend the whole semester theorizing. Instead, we are going to see if we can make it happen by writing poems.” Though Lawrence predates Spicer by several decades, the two share a remarkable confidence in the work of poetry to inspire a closer attention, thereby a better appreciation, for beauty and for mystery. In fact, Spicer once defined the poet as a kind of radio, capable of collected transmissions from some invisible world.

¹ “The White Horse” by D. H. Lawrence from *The Complete Poems*, Viking Penguin. Used by permission.

There is, of course, more to say about this poem—because there is always more to say about every poem—but I fear my commentary may break the spell, may theorize rather than celebrate, and anyway I quite like whatever world it is into which I occasionally travel if only I can remember to pay attention for long enough.

✧ About the poet

David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930) was an English writer and poet. Lawrence's opinions earned him many enemies and he endured official persecution, censorship, and misrepresentation of his creative work throughout the second half of his life, much of which he spent in a voluntary exile. He is perhaps best known for his novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which was banned in the United States until 1959 and until 1960 in England. He is widely regarded—alongside James Joyce and Virginia Woolf—as one of the most influential and revolutionary writers of the 20th century. He died in France in 1930 at the age of 44.



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