

# D. H. LAWRENCE AND “A SHIMMERING PROTPLASM” OF ART

D. H. Lawrence was painfully aware of the Cartesian tendency of his culture to contextualize, in his words to kill, the wonderful diversity of the world. Therefore, he insisted that, to be true to the authenticity of a glimpsed world, a work of art has to shatter ready-made patterns and adventure naked into the unknown. It has to admit its shimmering existence between the imminent and the transcendent. Finally, it has to confess of its unwillingness to systematize, put in order, the wonderful reality of the divine but chaotic otherness.

As per D. H. Lawrence life should be “a leap taken [...] into the beyond, as a lark leaps into the sky, a fragment of earth which travels to be fused out, sublimated, in the shining of the heavens,” (C, 347<sup>1</sup>) to be a whole man alive means to be a thought-adventurer: it means to recognize the presence(s) of the living otherness, unknown other, or chaotic other, of the unreflected life, which, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty says in *Phenomenology of Perception*, has always been the starting, the permanent, and the final aim of a questing man – the lone determinant of real life. Besides, the constructive relationship with the world beyond starts in the moment we experience it not as an object, which should be attained in a linear process of appropriation, but as a subject coming into an immediate, dynamic, emotional, though inarticulate, relation with us. In the “immediate *felt* contact” (STH, 146) with a living presence, which is “the root meaning of religion” (PU, 147) and a mystic experience, as it transcends the inherited thought and linguistic system, an adventuring man starts to fully attend and becomes completely aware of the confusion and dynamism of vitalities that surround and penetrate him.

Art, being vitally connected with life, has one great aim: “to reveal the relation between man and his circumambient universe, at the living moment.” (STH, 171) Therefore, Lawrence claims that “a novel is, or should be, also a thought-adventure, if it wants to be anything at all complete.” (K, 308) An artist, behaving as God, creates his work out of nothing, out of inarticulate confusion of images, words, allusions. But, in a moment of creation, the artist experiences himself/herself also as nothing, as a confusion of physical and chemical forces led by an as yet unknown creative will into a coherent whole,

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as he/she transcends himself/herself and enters a new ontological level. In other words, for Lawrence art has two great functions. "First, it provides an emotional experience. And then, if we have the courage of our own feelings, it becomes a mine of practical truth." (*SCAL*, 8) But the truth has to be dig out from under the layers of the known feelings.

Emotions are things we more or less recognize. We see love, like a woolly lamb, or like a decorative decadent panther in Paris clothes: according as it is sacred or profane. We see hate, like a dog chained to a kennel. We see fear, like a shivering monkey. We see anger, like a bull with a ring through his nose, and greed, like a pig. Our emotions are our domesticated animals, noble like the horse, timid like the rabbit, but all completely at our service. (*STH*, 202)

Therefore, an attentive man does not observe as a camera, but "in a curious rolling flood of vision, in which the image itself seethes and rolls, and only the mind picks out certain factors which shall represent the image seen." (*EP*, 127) The potency of vision, therefore, "depends on [...] the amount of true sincere, religious concentration you can bring to bear on your object." (62) It is a moment of pure attention which brings forth an appearance and the mind opens vaults of symbols until the image gains the form of an emotional, organic and dynamic unit. The artist acts as if carried on the wings of the old dragon of universe, the wild dragon "which leaps up from somewhere inside him, and has the better of him." (*A*, 90) The form of his work crystallizes with bursting forth of this creative energy, as the dragon

stirs green and flashing on a pure dark night of stars it is he who makes the wonder of the night [...] as he glides around and guards the immunity, the precious strength of the planets, and gives lustre and new strength to the fixed stars [...] His coils within the sun make the sun glad, till the sun dances in radiance. For in his good aspect, the dragon is the great vivifier, the great enhancer of the whole universe. (92)

For this reason, a work of art is not a simple combination of ready-made forms, just as an infant is not a simple combination of his parents. This is because there is always "something entirely new, underived, underivable" in the nature of an infant. "And this something is the unanalysable, undefinable reality of individuality." (*PU*, 214) Talking about Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, Lawrence assumes that the painting represents neither "man-in-the-mirror nor flower-in-the-mirror, neither is above or below or across anything. It is in-between everything, in the fourth dimension." (*STH*, 171)

Since its ontological truth is realized only in its dialogical play with its receiver, who is always other and new, the dimension of the other in a work of art could be approached only if the work itself denies its rhetoric status and seeks transcendence. Being a fruit of "pure passionate experience," (*FU*, 15) a "passionate struggle into conscious being," (*FWL*, 486) work of art does not

stand separation between the signifier and the signified. It is like a stubborn amoeba, whose content and form, while gliding around one another and intertwine, always extend and deepen its dialogic relation with its receiver, its reader – flashing its unique meaning while always transcending its spatial and temporal aspects. It has in itself something of “the superb, rich stillness of the morning star, the poignant intermediate flashing its quiet between energies of the cosmos.” (*PS*, 83) Revolving forever round its chaotic inner darkness, it is rebellious, fighting the “things reduced to a norm.” (*EP*, 39) While scientific thought, building upon an appropriated fixed reality, loses the touch and direct knowledge with the living aspects of reality, it is only work of art which is capable of truth – as it constantly changes in its dialogic play always letting the reality gain new forms and images, always opening doors to new meanings and new ways of experience.

Art speech is the only truth. An artist is usually a damned liar, but his art, if it be art, will tell you the truth of his day. And that is all that matters. Away with eternal truth. Truth lives from day to day, and the marvellous Plato of yesterday is chiefly bosh today. (*SCAL*, 8)

Because “the relation between all things changes from day to day, in a subtle stealth of change [...] art, which reveals or attains to another relationship,” Lawrence asserts “will be forever new.” (*STH*, 171) This assumption undermines the position of the omniscient narrator and determines an approach to the text as to a sign always new and different, potential chaos for each individual perceiver to order. In the novel everything is true in its own place and in its own time, says Lawrence, and “relative to everything else,” (179) never definite and final. Not otherwise could it “inform and lead into new spaces the flow of our sympathetic consciousness.” (*LCL*, 104)

A true work of art does not appropriate the reality it has glimpsed, but lives on the dynamism of contradictory impulses that make it. Therefore, it could never be reduced to an idea. “If you try to nail anything, in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail.” (*STH*, 172) Moreover, a work of art produces not an idea or a theory but an emotion, a sensation. As his oxymoronic construction, “blood-consciousness,” suggests – a work of art should insist on representation of the glimpsed presence of the not-verbal, the inexpressible, “some unnamed and nameless flame,” (182) other, unknown realities, dark spaces, of unordered, mentally unarranged spheres – making the receiver feel, but not necessarily understand. Contrary to understanding, which implies an order, feeling means pushing forth, always to the other side. Defying the existing meanings, this sensation appropriates unexpected forms. “Whatever can be felt,” says Lawrence, “is capable of many different forms of expression, forms often contradictory, as far as logic or reason goes”, because, “[e]motion and the robust physical gesture are always fluid and changing, never fixed,” (*EP*, 178) like in the Etruscan chimera: “a lion could be at the same

moment also a goat, and not a goat." (68) It is chaos of impulses, meanings, forms, a never-ending revelation of the inexhaustible well of relations and possibilities; a constant awakening of the reader's imaginative powers that a work of art impels. Some of the images Lawrence finds most suitable for the artistic conveyance of the not-verbal are the old mythic images of human experience: rainbow, phoenix, flying fish, plumed serpent, chimera, crucifixion, etc. These mythic representations of life, teeming with deep religious awareness and witnessing of the intertwining of the cosmic spheres, revolve slowly around themselves and become "cumulative [...] deepening" (A, 50) presences asking for "feeling-awareness," (48) i.e. for an emotional, not logical reading.

Some of the most frequently quoted passages from Lawrence's work gesticulate towards this fruitful play of the known and the unknown, the ordered and the chaotic. The dialogical nature of Lawrence's novel *Women in Love* reads in Birkin's wonder:

How could he tell her of the immanence of her beauty, that was not form, or weight, or colour, but something like a strange, golden light! How could he know himself what her beauty lay in, for him. He said 'Your nose is beautiful, your chin is adorable.' But it sounded like lies, and she was disappointed, hurt. Even when he said, whispering with truth, 'I love you, I love you,' it was not the real truth. It was something beyond love, such a gladness of having surpassed oneself, of having transcended the old existence. How could he say 'I' when he was something new and unknown, not himself at all? This I, this old formula of the ego, was a dead letter. (WL, 323)

Both Birkin and the narrator are determined not to appropriate a meaning or introduce a judgement. In the following part from his novel *Kangaroo*, as Daniel Albright observes (Albright 1978), Lawrence is focusing on his object trying to raise his work beyond the thought, escape the language and enter the sphere of a non-human world, at the same time refusing to give in completely to the futuristic impression of matter.

Richard rocking with the radium-urgent passion of the night: the huge, desirous swing, the call clamour, the low hiss of retreat. The call, call! And the answerer. Where was his answerer. No dark-bodied, warm-bodied answerer. He knew that when he had spoken a word to the night-half-hidden ponies with their fluffy legs. No animate answer this time. The radium-rocking, wave-knocking night his call and his answer both This God without feet or knees and face. This sluicing, knocking, urging night, heaving like a woman with unspeakable desire, but no woman, no thighs or breast, no body. The moon, the concave mother-of-pearl of night, the great radium-swinging, and his little self. The call and the answer, without intermediary. Non-human gods, non-human human beings. (K, 375)

In his physical passion for Clara, Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers* steps out of the ordered world of his “old stable ego” and into the chaotic spheres of impersonal sensual energies.

He became, not a man with a mind, but a great instinct. His hands were like creatures, living; his limbs, his body, were all life and consciousness, subject to no will of his, but living in themselves. Just as he was, so it seemed the vigorous, wintry stars were strong also with life. He and they struck with the same pulse of fire, and the same joy of strength which held the bracken-frond stiff near his eyes held his own body firm. It was as if he and the stars, and the dark herbage, and Clara were licked up in an immense tongue of flame, which tore onwards and upwards. (*SL*, 316)

In the same manner, the first chapter of *The Rainbow* ends in a chaos of passion and fear in front of the other embodied in Lydia.

He went out into the wind. Big holes were blown into the sky, the moonlight blew about. Sometimes a high moon, liquid-brilliant, scudded across a hollow space and took cover under electric, brown iridescent cloud-edges. Then there was a blot of cloud, and shadow. [...] And all the sky was teeming and tearing along, a vast disorder of flying shapes and darkness and ragged fumes of light and a great brown circling halo, then the terror of a moon running liquid-brilliant into the open for a moment, hurting the eyes before she plunged under cover of cloud again. (*R*, 48)

In the same novel, describing meeting of Ursula and Skrebensky, Lawrence personalizes darkness in which the meeting takes place:

The darkness seemed to breathe like the sides of some great beast, the haystacks loomed half-revealed [...] a dark, fecund lair just behind. Waves of delirious darkness ran through her soul. [...] The darkness was passionate and breathing with immense, unperceived heaving. (294)

The unspeakable silence of the unknown potent world is suggested in another chapter from *The Rainbow*. While Lydia is giving birth at home, Tom takes little frightened Anna through the rain and to the barn. The silent, dark world of the barn, the warm and potent life of the beasts, separated by the known world with curtains of rain and night, (as is exceptionally successfully audibly suggested in the following passage) soothes the girl better than any verbal persuasion would. Satisfied, she forgets and falls asleep, “listening to the snuffing and breathing of cows feeding in the sheds communicating with this small barn. The lantern shed a soft, steady light from one wall. All outside was still in the rain.” (79)

Lawrence praised Cézanne because of Cézanne’s intuitive feeling that “nothing is really statically at rest [...] as when he watched the lemon shrivel or go mildew, in his still-life group, which he left lying there so long

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 so that he could see that gradual flux of change." (*LHP*, 158) Following this idea, Lawrence makes his work adopt the organic rhythm between man and universe, be but a modulation he perceives in the nature. Therefore, to respond to the ungovernable waves of desire that rule creation, work of art avoids "the stiffness of the shape. That seems dead to me [...] The shape is dead crust", and appropriates a form of "a shimmering protoplasm." (*SL*, 152) So that the images mix, shimmer, and intertwine, revealing a reality that is no longer a mentally ordered system of material things, but an ever changing rainbow of relations.

As work of art cannot think what it shows – "you might as well try to put a stamp on the rainbow" (*STH*, 175) – and "all rules of construction hold good only for novels which are copies of other novels," (Coombes 1973: 104) Lawrence assumes that life, which is the main aim of his efforts, "doesn't start with a form. It starts with a new feeling, and ends with a form" (*K*, 111). Defying conclusive forms<sup>2</sup>, Lawrence lets his novels grow out as of a "radical incoherence" (Vivas 1961: 23), into a form which he himself defines "like life, but always my theme" and describes as "the development – which is slow like growth." (Boulton 1986: 476)

In *Sons and Lovers*, for example, introducing different genres, Lawrence gathers diverse regions of experience into one point, enabling thus identity in differentiation, transcending the ontologically unsurpassable distance between "man and his circumambient universe". As Jack Stewart remarks, "realism supplies the bedrock, impressionism the atmosphere, symbolism the significance, and expressionism the vision." (Stewart 2001: 201) Lawrence's novel opens in the realistic fashion, but, following his artistic instinct, it develops through a chaos of expressive forms leading at the end his protagonist, "one tiny speck of flesh", into an "immense dark silence [that] seemed pressing him [...] into extinction." (*SL*, 464) As the visualisation grows weaker, Paul becomes "at the core a nothingness, and yet not nothing" (510). The nothingness here, just as in Lawrence's metaphor of flowering, which evolves from a central nothingness, is not an empty sphere, but a sphere pregnant with promise and never-ending potentiality, a sphere always beyond thought. In this way, paradoxes build a codex that enables Lawrence narrate his experience of communication with the transcendent, that which cannot be known, and help developing an organic form, subtle and open, changeable as life is changeable, as a rainbow is changeable, that also "has a body / made of the drizzling rain [...] yet you can't lay your hand on it, / nay, nor even your mind." (*CP*, 691) This codex is a miraculously suggestive impulse, which shapes a flowing contour Lawrence recognizes in the Etruscan painting.

The subtlety of etruscan painting, as of Chinese and Hindu, lies in the wonderful suggestive edge of the figures. It is not outlined. It is not what we call "drawing". It is the flowing contour where the body suddenly leaves off, upon the atmosphere. The Etruscan artist seems to have seen living things surging from their own centre to their own surface. And the curving and contour of the silhouette-edge suggests the whole movement of the modelling within. (*EP*, 123-124)

1 All the references to D. H. Lawrence's works will be abbreviated. The abbreviations are specified in "References".

2 See also Worthen 1979 and Lodge 1985.

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## SUMMARY

### D. H. LAWRENCE AND "A SHIMMERING PROTPLASM" OF ART

The title of this paper is created after the words Paul Morel from Lawrence's first celebrated novel *Sons and Lovers* uses to interpret his still juvenile paintings, the words being prophetic of the still young author's genuine drive to make his art a living thing. For David Herbert Lawrence art exists trembling between the immanent and the transcendent truth. For him, like for his many contemporaries, the greatness of art rests in the inconclusiveness of its form that, in the dialogical process inherent to it, always transcends the immediate present. Therefore, Lawrence argues, creation of a work of art, as well as the experience of art in general, if it be true, is always a "thought adventure". In other words, to be true in a work of art means to consciously deny the inherited patterns of expression so that the final text may testify of its own attempt to reach the other side of language and penetrate into the unspoken spheres of reality.

**KEYWORDS:** form, transcendence, reality, experience, inconclusiveness, immediate present, thought adventure, other.