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PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATION IN LAWRENCE'S

WOMEN IN LOVE

"True, we must all develop into mental consciousness. But mental consciousness is not a goal; it is a cul-de-sac. It provides us only with endless *appliances* which we can use for the all-too-difficult business of coming to our spontaneous-creative fullness of being. It provides us with means to adjust ourselves to the external universe. It gives us further means for subduing the external, materio-mechanical universe to our great end of creative life. And it gives us plain indications of how to avoid falling into automatism, hints for the *applying* of the will, the loosening of false, automatic fixations, the brave adherence to a profound soul-impulse. This is the use of the mind—a great indicator and instrument. The mind as author and director of life is anathema."

Lawrence, *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*

"If thou rulest now over the creatures externally only, and not from the right internal ground of thy renewed nature; then thy will and ruling is verily in a bestial kind or manner, and thine at best is but a sort of imaginary and transitory government."

Boehme, *Of the Supersensual Life*

"Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things."

Hopkins, "God's Grandeur."

"If Bacon, Newton, Locke

Deny a Conscience in Man & the Communion of Saints & Angels,
Contemning the Divine Vision & Fruition, Worshipping the Deus

Of the Heathen, the God of This World, & the Goddess Nature,
Mystery, Babylon the Great, The Druid Dragon & hidden Harlot,
Is it not that Signal of the Morning which was told us in the Beginning?"

Blake, *Jerusalem*, 93.

THE FOLLOWING REMARKS WERE prompted by a lecture in which a former colleague of mine, an angry Leavisite, expressed displeasure at the poor early reception of Lawrence's novels, and at the fact that even when they were well received they were praised for the wrong reasons. The thesis was that twentieth-century England is in a terrible cultural state, and the implication was that a society in healthy cultural condition would immediately assimilate each new masterpiece it generated—and for the right reasons. This seems naive: it is of the nature of original work that it is intransigent to expectations formed upon the experience of earlier works. It is naive too because Lawrence's fiction for the most part imports a very radical criticism of society; in a "healthy" society (if one can imagine such) it would not have needed to be written. In this paper I shall try to draw attention to one element of Lawrence's originality, and of his criticism of modern industrialized society.

It is true that the early reception of Lawrence included the predictable failures of comprehension; even today most readers find, at any rate after *Sons and Lovers*, that they have to work their way into Lawrence's idiom, both stylistically and in terms of narrative or plot. Many of us come to Lawrence with expectations formed upon those nineteenth-century novels which stem ultimately one supposes from Fielding's *Tom Jones*, which have, through whatever complications, a firm narrative line and which resolve themselves into cash and Christmas pudding for the virtuous, which end, as Henry James puts it, with "a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks."¹ *Women in Love*, having no such firm narrative line, and no such satisfactory conclusion, defeats expectations formed upon Fielding and Dickens and indeed the bulk of earlier fiction. One's first reading of *Women in Love* is apt to be a partially disappointing experience.

It also seems to be a common experience that what upon a first reading seems disorientingly formless comes after a third or fourth to be almost too tidy, too symmetrical. Gerald and Gudrun, Birkin and Ursula, are played off against each other so consistently throughout the book as to account for the disappointment certain critics have expressed over the irresolution of the Birkin theme when contrasted with the very definite resolution of the Gerald theme.

The disappointment seems to imply an assumption that Lawrence intended to tie up both threads of his plot equally neatly and that he was prevented from doing so by technical inadequacy or failure of imaginative insight; it may well be also that Lawrentians are disappointed that the master fails to provide a concretely particularized mode of existence for Birkin and Ursula and, by extension, a gospel to be followed. Both the assumption and the disappointment seem ill-founded, and it seems odd that a school of criticism which insists upon *Women in Love's* status as a prose poem should nevertheless be so naively literalist in its interpretations.

Women in Love raises some complex questions; perhaps some help as to what Lawrence thought he was doing may be found in his non-fictional writings. Before Lawrence wrote his first novel he said to Jessie Chambers, "The usual plan is to take two couples and develop their relationships . . . Anyway, I don't want a plot, I should be bored with it. I shall try two couples for a start."² By *Women in Love*, then, he is still trying two couples, but his boredom with "plot" has hardened into a definite rejection of conventional plotting. In a well-known letter to Edward Garnett, dated 5 June, 1914, Lawrence writes that "that which is physic—non-human—in humanity, is more interesting to me than the old-fashioned human element—which causes one to conceive a character in a certain moral scheme and make him consistent. The certain moral scheme is what I object to."

I want to dwell for a moment on that "certain moral scheme." Lawrence saw the "plot" of the conventional novel (Fielding's, George Eliot's, Tolstoy's) as the projection into literature of the conventional mores of the novelist's society, plotting representing as it were a conspiracy between the novelist and the conventional moralist. It would be naive not to notice that biographically Lawrence was badly placed with respect to such a conspiracy: if life went like art, like Hardy's or Tolstoy's art, he and Frieda were going to be crushed by it. No doubt Lawrence's life-situation did give him furiously to think on such matters, but the product transcends the merely biographical interest. The kind of thinking that Lawrence brought to the relationship between the novelist's characters and the fixed moral scheme is best seen at large in his *Study of Thomas Hardy*. Lawrence venerated Hardy because of his ability to render a sense of the creative unknown from which issue human life and consciousness, and in comparison with which our daily purposes and the society we have built up seem so trivial; he valued Hardy's correlative ability to create characters who carried within themselves the vitality of that unknown life—to create aristocrats of the spirit. When Lawrence protests at Hardy,

in his novels, allowing the established form of life to remain, while the individual, trying to break out of it, becomes crushed; when he protests at Henry James allowing Isobel Archer to return to Gilbert Osmond; when he protests at Tolstoy's failure to conceive of an Anna and a Vronsky sufficient in passion (sufficient, that is, in adherence to a morality deeper and higher, he would say, than that of society's), he is no doubt expressing a concern which was the more urgent for the life-situation in which he found himself; but one too which pushes him on towards a set of questions which have a profound interest in themselves, and which leads him to a view of the novel which had not been previously stated: the view which he put most succinctly in the ninth chapter of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: "The novel can inform and lead into new places the flow of our sympathetic consciousness, and it can lead our sympathy away in recoil from things gone dead Therefore the novel, properly handled, can reveal the most secret places of life."

What is new here is not Lawrence's vision of the novel as having a moral function, but his sense of what that function entailed: previous novelists, in his account, had been essentially conservative moralists; and there seems justice in this if one thinks of Fielding with his Christianity diluted with the Nicomachean Ethics, and of George Eliot, in spite of the life she led, preaching traditional wisdom, and so on. What is new is Lawrence's sense of the *automatism* into which human beings are liable to fall, his sense that living depends upon our ability to release ourselves from these automatisms; his view of the novelist—and the novelist alone, not the preacher, not the philosopher, not the scientist—as the one who can help us rescue ourselves from our automatisms. I find myself wanting to say, under correction, that this is what is new about Lawrence's thinking on the subject of the novel.

Lawrence believed that man's apprehension of the possibilities of life is best served today by the novel; he may have been right, but of course for a long time before the rise of the novel men constructed fictions with which to order reality, and for a long time theology provided those fictions—if one can use the term without being thought to be making a judgement as to the objective truth or falsity of any theological system. It is at least arguable that the state of Western society today is due ultimately, to a greater degree than is realised by most men, to the fictions of the church, and that it is theology which prepared the way for what Blake described as "single vision and Newton's sleep," for the modern sense of ourselves as separate, isolated egos moving within a mechanized society against the background of a dead universe. It

is no accident, I think, that our major literary revivals seem to involve neo-Platonism, hermeticism, pantheism, vitalism.

There was a time when it was permissible to believe that man consisted of body, soul and spirit: the soul being that which was separate to him, the spirit being that which connected him with the creative spirit of the universe and with God himself. Our habit of using the words "soul" and "spirit" interchangeably tends to obscure the fact that orthodox Christian theology, in the West at any rate, abolished the concept of spirit a long time ago, leaving man with a soul which takes its rise at or soon after the body's conception and which over the centuries has dwindled away into the notion of a ghost in the machine, a ghost which positivism and behavioural psychology have done their best to erase altogether from our picture of man: this dwindling seems to be the story of English philosophy from Bacon through Hobbes and right down to Gilbert Ryle. And a large part of the history of heresy, from say 1,000 A.D. to 1600 A.D. or so, is the history of protest against this dualistic view of man, protest in favour of a trinitarian view of man as body, soul and spirit.

The ninth-century philosopher and theologian John Scotus Erigena, one of those men whose thinking was hostile to this dualism, this dichotomizing of man into body and soul, wrote suggestively of the way in which Godhead is manifested in the world: God the Father (*Pater omnipotens*) is manifested in the order, regularity, and predictability of the cosmic machine; the Holy Spirit is manifested in the *vitality* of the cosmos and all that it contains.³ This seems to me suggestive in terms of the way in which Lawrence presents Gerald and Birkin in *Women in Love*.

Gerald and the Arab mare, surely one of the most powerful scenes in Lawrence, represent the human suppression of animal vitality in the face of the machine (the railway trucks) in the service of an imposed order: the sacrifice of the spontaneous instinctive life at the shrine of instrumentality. What Gerald does to the Arab mare he does also to himself, and of course to the miners: "They were all subordinate to him. They were ugly and uncouth, but they were his instruments. He was the God of the machine. They made way for his motor-car automatically, slowly." And "What mattered was the pure instrumentality of the individual. . . . Everything in the world has its function, and is good or not good in so far as it fulfils this function more or less perfectly. Was a miner a good miner? Then he was complete. Was a manager a good manager? That was enough. Gerald himself, who was re-

sponsible for all this industry, was he a good director? If he were, he had fulfilled his life. The rest was by-play" (215).⁴

An Australian colleague of mine once said that the trouble with *Women in Love* for him was that he always found himself identifying with Gerald. As a chess player I notice with some mortification that Gerald and Gudrun are respectively amused and fascinated by the conversation at Breadalby, which Lawrence compares to a chess game: "how known it all was, like a game with the figures set out, the same figures, the Queen of chess, the knights, the pawns, the same now as they were hundreds of years ago, the same figures moving around in one of the innumerable permutations that make up the game. But the game is known, its going on is like a madness, it is so exhausted" (92). The image of the chess game recurs in the chapter "Snowed Up," where the conversations of Gudrun and Loerke about "the achieved perfections of the past" are described as a "sort of little game of chess, all to please themselves." The point is that chess is a finite system; you play it on a board of sixty-four squares with pieces which have fixed values, which can do so and not otherwise, which are instrumental.

The imagery from which we derive our sense of Birkin and Ursula is otherwise. Of Ursula we are told that "Ursula often wondered what else she waited for, besides the beginning and the end of the holidays. This was a whole life! Sometimes she had periods of tight horror, when it seemed to her that her life would pass away and be gone, without having been more than this. But she never really accepted it. Her spirit was active, her life like a shoot that is growing steadily, but which has not yet come above ground" (45). This image of potentiality is one that students of Vaughan will readily—and relevantly—recognise. Birkin is described as being conscious "like a thing that is born, like a bird when it comes out of an egg, into a new universe" (and the metaphor of hatching will also be familiar to readers of Vaughan). Birkin asserts that "you can only have knowledge, strictly, of things concluded, in the past. It's like bottling the liberty of last summer in the bottled gooseberries" (79). This casts its light on Gudrun's interest in "the achieved perfections of the past." There is the beautifully telling little episode of Gudrun and Ursula and the robin (257) illustrating Gudrun's propensity to dispatch people and things in a sentence, to draw two lines under Birkin, for example, and cross him out like an account that is settled, a simile that echoes Gerald's wanting to settle accounts with Minette. There is Birkin's counsel of perfection to Ursula: "You must leave your surroundings sketchy, unfinished, so that you are never contained, never confined, never dominated from the out-

side" (349). We must not allow ourselves, that is, to become pieces on a chess-board, we must not be trapped into the fixed moral scheme. It is unnecessary to quote further; it will be agreed that Gerald and Gudrun are mediated to us in terms of inevitability, of limitation, of abstraction and sterility (Blake addicts will notice that Gerald dies a good Urizenic death in the snow; Bacon, who on Blake's account started it all, died after stuffing a chicken with snow in order to preserve it). Birkin and Ursula are given in terms of tenderness, of potentiality, of an awareness beyond the merely cerebral, of a capacity for change and growth. The contrast, it seems to me, is between man as he accepts a mechanistic *weltanschauung*, and man as he insists (to put it crudely) that the mind is more than a computer and the body more than a machine. Birkin, to return to our philosophic theme, represents the claims of Erigena's Holy Spirit in the world against Gerald's implicit insistence that we must view the world, and live in it, as if it were a finite, regular, orderly mechanism.

The abolition of the notion of spirit (*spiritus*, breath, life) within man is the abolition of the notion that there is a living link between man and everything else there is, *including merely potential existence*. Man becomes separate, fragmented from the totality of things; he confronts a regular, orderly but essentially *mechanical* universe with his separate soul, his ego, an essentially *mechanical* universe because the idea of a soul immanent within the universe is banished at the same time as the idea of a spirit within man. It may well be that man had first to feel himself quite separate and alien from the physical universe before he could see it objectively enough for physical science to get under way; certainly it is right at the beginning of modern physical science that the protests against the notion of separate egos confronting a mechanical universe become most vehement, that is, in Erigena's terms, against seeing in the universe its merely mechanical order (the manifestation of God the Father within it) while ignoring its vitality (the manifestation of the Holy Spirit within it). The world, said Thomas Vaughan, is "full of spirit, quick and living", not dead carpenter-work, as the Aristotelians think.⁵ And the soul of man, he goes on to say, is not infused at or shortly after the body's conception, but is pre-existent to the body, issuing forth out of the unknown. The issue was, as became plain later when the prestige of the church and therefore of theology waned, whether the world is primarily a physical phenomenon from which eventually arises consciousness as an epiphenomenon, or whether it is rather a matter of pre-existing spirit gradually clothing itself with a physical form; and, in practical terms, whether the creation is for man to *use* (Gerald and the Arab mare, Gerald and the mines, indeed Gerald and his

own self, which he conceives of in terms of instrumentality) or whether it is there to be participated. If we see man and the rest of the visible universe as different expressions of the same creative spirit, then we shall not regard nature as being there merely to be used, but will respect the other creatures. That is the essence of Ursula's quarrel with Gerald over the way he treats the Arab mare at the crossing:

"But why inflict unnecessary torture?" said Ursula. "Why make her stand all that time at the crossing? You might just as well have ridden back up the road, and saved all that horror. Her sides were bleeding where you had spurred her. It was too horrible"

Gerald stiffened.

"I have to use her," he replied. "And if I'm going to be sure of her at *all*, she'll have to learn to stand noises." "Why should she?" cried Ursula in a passion. "She is a living creature, why should she stand anything, just because you chose to make her? She has as much right to her own being, as you have to yours."

"There I disagree," said Gerald. "I consider that mare is there for my use. Not because I bought her, but because that is the natural order." (130)

That is why Loerke, the man with whom Gudrun goes off after the death of Gerald, is one step further gone, if anything, than Gerald himself. He is an artist. Art should be a celebration of the creation: there can be no point of contact between art as Lawrence conceives it—and again he speaks through Ursula, in her quarrel with Loerke (422)—and a commercial/technological ethic which conceives of everything, even human beings, in terms of *instrumentality*. Loerke is an artist who has sold out to the machine:

It was very interesting to Gudrun to think of his making the great granite frieze for a great granite factory in Cologne. She got from him some notion of the design. It was a representation of a fair, with peasants and artisans in an orgy of enjoyment, drunk and absurd in their modern dress, whirling ridiculously in roundabouts, gaping at shows, kissing and staggering and rolling in knots, swinging in swing-boats, and firing down shooting-galleries, a frenzy of chaotic motion." (414)

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"And do you think, then", said Gudrun, "that art should serve industry?"

"Art should *interpret* industry as art once interpreted religion," he said.

"But does your fair interpret industry?" she asked him.

"Certainly. What is man doing when he is at a fair like this?" He is fulfilling the

counterpart of labour—the machine works him instead of he the machine.” (415)

The quarrel between these two views of the matter has taken many forms historically. Perhaps one of the simpler for our purpose is the argument about the status of art, and of man's imagination. Can the imagination penetrate beyond the appearances, or is it limited to registering and transcribing the appearances? The quarrel goes back at least as far as Plato and Plotinus. Sir Philip Sidney, in the *Apologie for Poetrie*, thinks of the poet as being able to go beyond the appearances; Hobbes in *Leviathan*, less than a hundred years later, denies any such ability to any human being: all our knowledge, he argues, depends upon sense-impressions, imagination is merely made up of decaying sense-impressions, imagination and memory are essentially the same: and the imagination has no freedom, because it is bound by the order in which sense impressions are received. On this view, man's imagination is merely passive before experience; and the question of his contact with a reality beyond sensuous experience is regarded as closed. Hobbes's philosophy could hardly have been better designed to knock the philosophical ground from seventeenth-century "enthusiasm," with its claim to the possibility of direct revelation. I used the word "closed" a moment ago, and *closed* is right, because, as Blake perceived when he wrote "There is no natural religion," the acceptance of such a limitation as absolute logically entails that man is enclosed in a circularity from which there is no escape: "the desires and perceptions of man, untaught by anything but objects of sense, must be limited to objects of sense." (At this point, one would like to work one's way into Blake, between whose Urizen-theme and Lawrence's Gerald-theme there are important philosophical resemblances which take on very similar imagistic expression. But, beyond reminding ourselves that Blake is there and bears a good deal of thinking about, we should go back to Lawrence and his plot.)

The Gerald-plot and the Birkin-plot represent, I believe (as will be clear by now), dramatizations, projections into fiction, of the two opposed beliefs about the world and about man which I have touched upon. While Lawrence's art in *Women in Love* may be (as it is commonly said to be) profoundly original, it expresses an opposition between two ways of looking at the world which are by no means new. Indeed it is possible that the originality of the creative achievement was necessary because the opposition between those two ways of looking at the world had not found expression in prose fiction before. *Women in Love* has often been called a philosophical novel, but I sometimes wonder if critics who use the expression as a praise-word do in fact realize just *how* philosophical a novel it indeed is.

Now, there is a difference between the closed plot of the Gerald-theme and the closed plot of, say, *Anna Karenina*. It is, so to say, more invented; and in a sense it is also more *objective*. It does not have as a premise anything analogous to society's attitude towards marital infidelity and divorce; there is no traumatic action symbolizing the separation of an individual from his society. It is not in the least a novel about society's revenge upon the deviant, nor is it a novel about the growth of a human being to the stage where he can rightfully take his place within society, though such novels also tend to have closed plots. The salient point about Gerald is that he *represents* society: the death of Gerald is the death of a particular society, our Western technological civilization, which is presumably why Frieda Lawrence thought it should be called *Dies Irae*: day of judgement (and of course one shouldn't forget that it was written against the background of the first world war). This plot does not represent a conspiracy between the novelist and the conventional wisdom of a society; it rather represents the novelist's judgement upon that conventional wisdom; the plot is closed because Lawrence saw that society as being doomed to extinction by its own act: as Blake put it, "if it were not for the poetic or prophetic character, the philosophic or experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things and stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again";⁶ or as Lawrence put it: "the fixed and stable universe of law and matter . . . would . . . disintegrate if it did not rest and find renewal in the quick centre of creative life in individual creatures."⁷ Birkin and Ursula represent the only hope that society has, and the very end of the novel does not pre-judge the issue; as at the end of *The Rainbow*, the protagonists are only triumphant insofar as they are not defeated; but at all events, Lawrence's *Dies Irae* is not Orwell's *1984*.

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Now I recognize that I have implicitly drawn a firm line between Gerald-Gudrun and Birkin-Ursula. But this is the kind of abstraction that one makes in order to see one fact clearly. The dividing line is certainly there, in the novel, in the accumulated masses of opposed imagery, for example, as well as episodically; but it is not an impassable line. In fact the attractions and repulsions between the characters have been fairly described as resembling the dance rather than the straightforward narrative. Lawrence has a double purpose: one part of it is to suggest the *inevitability* of Gerald's fate, given the kind of philosophy he lives by, the kind of person he is. It is necessary for the end of the novel to have the suasive force of myth, and this suasive force is prepared for by the imagery that adheres to Gerald throughout.

Lawrence has been criticized for too heavily applying the imagery of snow, ice, crystals and so on to Gerald earlier in the novel. I suspect that that is the kind of criticism which one formulates after a fourth or fifth reading rather than after a first or second; whether this is so or not it is certainly the case that the inevitability of Gerald's death is essential to Lawrence's conception, and is not merely melodramatic. But it is equally fundamental to his conception that this inevitability is, so to speak, not itself inevitable.

The point is this: Lawrence is implying that if a certain world-view were true, a certain end would result; and, moreover, that if men behave as if that world-view were true, an essentially similar end would result, in the way that predictions do have of validating themselves; but, further, *that it is not true*, and indeed that it takes a real effort of will constantly to act as if it were true (the kind of will that Hermione exerts in curing herself of her bad habits, the kind of will that Gerald exerts when he can perform his work perfectly while doubting the very reality of his own existence). And, conversely, the Gerald-philosophy being predominant, it takes will of a different kind not to acquiesce in it: both Birkin and Ursula do acquiesce from time to time; we have seen in one of the passages I have quoted, how difficult it is for Ursula to feel herself to be anything more than could be defined by reference to her social function as a schoolteacher. Ursula says to Loerke that "art is only the truth about the real world." *Women in Love* is a fiction, but it is beyond that a criticism of a fiction: the fiction by which Gerald organizes his world is the myth, or, if you like, the philosophy of man and of nature, which is implicit in modern industrial society. That myth is, as Blake saw with incredible clarity 150 years ago, the developed product of post-Renaissance philosophy, and that philosophy itself is largely the product of earlier theological thinking. Gerald, like every other human being, is a funnel into which history has been poured.

NOTES

1. Cited by Frank Kermode, *The Sense of An Ending*, Oxford Galaxy Book, p. 22.
2. E.T. (Jessie Chambers), *A Personal Record*, 2nd. Ed., New York, 1965, p. 103.
3. See article, "Erigena", in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th Edition.
4. Page-references to *Women in Love* are to the 1960 reprint of the Phoenix Edition, published by Heinemann.
5. *Anthroposophia Theomagica*, in A. E. Waite (ed) Works, London, 1919, p. 8.
6. The remark quoted is the *Conclusion* of "There is no Natural Religion" (First Series).
7. *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*, Phoenix Edition, 1961, p. 216.