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“To be, or not to be, is still the question”: Identity and “Otherness” in D. H. Lawrence’s Work

Introduction

When I first saw the theme for this conference,¹ the blend of literary (and, in particular, English) elements with some central philosophical and psychological issues was too appealing to me to be resisted. Moreover, the Shakespearian quotation immediately evoked a latter-day writer who, in his work, set out to explore exactly the same type of questions though in a different vein. He addressed them in the name of his commitment to his fellowmen and to life (something that may sound outmoded these days...). That writer is D. H. Lawrence (born in England in 1885 and deceased in 1930) whom most of you may know as a novelist (author of *Sons and Lovers*, *Women in Love*, and of such polemical works as *The Plumed Serpent* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*), but who actually was much more than that: he was a poet too, a playwright, an essayist, a critic, a translator, a travel-writer, a painter, and, I will argue, also a thinker. In his work, taken as a whole, you might say that his main concern is a concern with the fulfilment of the individual self: how to be oneself? How to achieve manhood/ womanhood? How to fulfil one’s deep desires? Throughout his life he tried to answer these basic but momentous questions by means of art: his novels and poems, that he says “come unwatched out of one’s pen”,² try to answer fictionally to these central questions.

¹ The present text corresponds to a paper read at an interdisciplinary conference on “To be or not to be”, to go or not to go, this is the question: Plato – Camões – Shakespeare – Edgar Morin”, held at Instituto Piaget (Viseu, 22-24 April 2002). Talking to a heterogeneous audience, not much acquainted with the work of D. H. Lawrence, I had to adopt a tone and an approach different from those I would have used under more familiar circumstances. Both the theme and the (at times) conversational style reminded me of my dear colleague Margarida Losa and I thought fit that the English version of that paper should be included in a volume devoted to her memory – a suggestion fortunately accepted by the editors. The Portuguese version is presently being printed to appear in the proceedings of that conference.

² In Lawrence’s *Fantasia of the Unconscious and Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*, 1975: 15. Abbreviation: FU. Other abbreviations for Lawrence’s works in this essay are: CP I and II (*The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, 2 vols.); L I and II (*The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, vol. 1 and 2); APLC (“À Propos of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*”); AM (“Art and Morality”); D (“Democracy”); EP (“Education of the People”);

In his essays, always written after the imaginative flights of narrative and lyric, he tries to draw some conclusions (provisional though they may be) and to come to terms (mental and personal terms, that is) with the “passionate experience” (*ibidem*) of his artistic writing. This sort of dialectic or double attitude to art and life defines this writer’s very peculiar stance as someone deeply committed to life (in himself and in those around him) and not totally attuned to the prevalent artistic creeds of his own time. Lawrence rejected all aestheticist orientation and proclaimed, instead of “art for art’s sake”, “art for *my* sake”, something he later qualified in recognisably psychoanalytic terms: “[o]ne sheds ones sicknesses in books – repeats and presents again ones emotions, to be master of them” (L II 90). But in art, his was not a solipsistic stance, as this brief quotation might suggest. Rather, he viewed himself as being deeply committed to his contemporaries believing he could genuinely help them: “I think (...) I have within me a sort of answer to the *want* of today” (L I 511). This conviction sometimes led him into what has been deplored by literary critics as his “preaching” that at times disastrously interferes with his art and makes him subject to various ideological attacks.

Some observations on Method

This very short introduction to the author, may serve as a kind of apology, a way of making manifest the relevance of such subject matter as this in the context of this conference, and I must only excuse myself before those of you who may be familiar with D. H. Lawrence’s work and for whom my paper may bring no great news. My idea was simply to call attention to aspects of his writing that may be of interest to psychologists, philosophers and cultural thinkers even though his thought is very often better embodied in poems and stories than in his essays, and thus, at first sight, may seem, at best, trackless and contradictory or, at worst, irrelevant. Nevertheless, thought it was, if we accept the writer’s own conviction that: “a real thought, a single thought, not an argument, can only exist easily in verse, or in some poetic form” (CP I 423). The reason for this apparently unjustified assertion has to do with the writer’s insistence on a concept of thought that goes well beyond the meaning we usually ascribe to it. For Lawrence, thought transcends the mental or rational activity *per se* and involves the whole of man. And here we should pause briefly to distinguish (as he does) a “bare idea”, an “opinion”, or a “didactic statement” from a “true thought”. The first belong to straightforward mental activity and do not carry with them the intuitive assurance of truth; they lend themselves to doubt and debate, whereas a “true thought” (still according to Lawrence) “comes as much from the heart and genitals as from the head” (CP I 417) and is accepted as incontrovertible even if temporarily. Lawrence’s “true thoughts” are not offered as disembodied everlasting statements, their truth being dependent rather upon the living circumstances from which they spring.

This epistemological relativism is one of the salient features of Lawrence’s philosophy and aesthetics and it is also made manifest in the way in which he conceives of

MN (“Morality and the Novel”); PO (*The Prussian Officer and Other Stories*); PU (*Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*); RDP (“Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine”); TB (“Review” of *The Social Basis of Consciousness* by Trigant Burrow); SCAL (*Studies in Classic American Literature*); STH (“Study of Thomas Hardy”); N (“The Novel”); R (*The Rainbow*); SM (*The Symbolic Meaning*); Wneed (“We Need One Another”); WNM (“Why the Novel Matters”); and WL (*Women in Love*).

the novel – seen as the best example of living “interrelatedness” (MN 172) that can be achieved and therefore the best artistic means to promote “an instinct for life” (STH 198) in its readers. Viewing the novel as a “great discovery” – “far greater than Galileo’s telescope or somebody else’s wireless” (N 179) – and also as a privileged place for reconciling again philosophy and fiction (long ago, pitifully split in our western culture), he believes that the novel, more than any other medium, promotes the kind of experience that for him is central to human beings – a total experience, in that, as he puts it, it “*can* make the whole man – alive tremble” (WNM 195). It is a response that affects the body as well as the mind. It is, after all, a means of triggering thought, thought in the sense Lawrence ascribes to it in the poem “Thought”, where he gives the following “definition”: “Thought is a man in his wholeness wholly attending” (CP II 673).

I have briefly sketched Lawrence’s line of reasoning in relation to thought as a means of justifying what might seem an otherwise heterodox approach to his work considered as the work of a thinker. If thought is to be conceived of in terms that go beyond Cartesian Reason,³ and if, in Lawrence’s proposal, it is better embodied in poems and narrative, than in argumentative prose, then I’ll be surely justified in my option of presenting to you his thought on identity and “otherness” – which is the main aim of my paper – by recurring not only to his essayistic writing, as should be expected, but also to his fiction and verse, considered by him as an even more adequate means of channelling true thought.

Identity

I have taken the sentence in the title of my paper from a poem, “Manifesto”, written by Lawrence in 1916, where he utters a kind of personal creed borrowing from Shakespeare Hamlet’s famous *dictum*: “To be, or not to be, that is the question”. Lawrence, however, gives a new twist to the sentence by a slight change in its wording and also by placing it in the context of a stanza (and of a poem) where the main concern is the fulfilment of the self *in relation* to that which is not itself. I think it is worth reading the couple of lines where Shakespeare is quoted:

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 fulfilment.

What remains in me, is to be known even as I know.
I know her now: or perhaps, I know my own limitation against her. (CP I 265)

³ For the insufficiencies of Descartes’s philosophy and a critique of Enlightenment rationality see, for instance, the poem “Climb down, o Lordly Mind”, namely the last lines: “Only that exists which exists in my own consciousness./ Cogito, ergo sum./ Only that exists which exists dynamically and unmentalised, in my blood./ Non cogito, ergo sum./ I am, I do not think I am” (CP I 475). In virtually all of Lawrence’s essays we find reflections on the insufficiencies of mental knowledge and mental consciousness when taken as exclusive forms of knowledge/ consciousness. See, for instance: “Education of the People”, “Democracy”, “We Need One Another”, “On Being a Man”, “Introduction to these Paintings” as possible sources.

In the first two lines, Lawrence apparently accepts Shakespeare's authority: he admits that Hamlet's question "is *still* the question", but already he formulates it in terms that are no longer Shakespearian. He speaks of being in strikingly bodily terms; he says it is an "*acbe* for being" and an "ultimate *bunger*" (my italics). Already we lose sight of the philosophical and pragmatic issues at work in *Hamlet* and are confronted by a reformulation of the question that introduces a new, distinctly lawrencian ring to it. What makes "to be, or not to be" a question that *still* makes sense, is not so much its understanding in terms of duty and responsibility towards oneself and others but the recognition of an inner compulsion "to be", that is not to be evaded. "To be" is something that is imposed upon you not by deliberate thought and action on your part but by a bodily urge, as real and acute as "hunger". And though this urge can be denied (you can starve your body, if you will), it cannot, however, be ignored, as you can ignore a moral question, for instance. In other words, for Lawrence, to assert one's deepest being is simply (but how difficult this may be for us today...) to answer to a physical urge, following "no laws but the laws of our own being" (CP I 267). To be is to achieve singleness of being unimpaired, by responding directly to the deep desires of your body.⁴

But is it? Is it such a solitary act, concerning solely the individual?

If we attend to the last lines I have just quoted, what comes out more strikingly is precisely the inability of the individual to achieve singleness of being without the full recognition of the other: in any relationship (be it sexual, as is the case here, or other) each partner must acknowledge and confront the other's difference – each has to learn to come to terms with his/ her "own limitation against" the other, have the courage to face and experience "the fearful *other flesh*" (CP I 267) – an experience that is both frightening and exhilarating.

In other words, to be oneself one has to realise and admit the other in its multifarious forms: my singleness of being is the result of the multiple relationships I establish with the world around me all along my life, a continual process that changes from day to day. The recognition that we are human beings lost in the middle of a living cosmos determines that each moment of our lives we are compelled to establish a changing relation to our circumambient universe:

If we think about it, we find that our life *consists in* this achieving of a pure relationship between ourselves and the living universe about us. This is how I "save my soul", by accomplishing a pure relationship between me and another person, me and other people, me and a nation, me and a race of men, me and the animals, me and the trees or flowers, me and the earth, me and the skies and sun and stars, me and the moon; an infinity of pure relations, big and little, like the stars of the sky: that makes our eternity, for each one of us. (...) (MN 172)

In this need of establishing "a pure relationship between ourselves and the living universe" we do no more than follow a universal pattern: the same that determines that a flower, in order to blossom (that is, in order *to be*) has to be able to establish with earth and sky those exchanges that enable it to burst into full blossom.⁵ As the flower

⁴ For the difference between "deep desires" and "impulses", and their mechanical surrogates (namely, "functional appetites" and "ideals") see D 714/ 5.

⁵ One should note that inherent in Lawrence's concept of being is not simply the idea of an organic, physical growth, but also the idea of the excess that accompanies the "spontaneous-creative fullness

relates to the natural elements around it and from this relationship derives what is vital for its natural growth and flowering, so man (belonging to a different order of creation, but still being a part of it) has to follow the same path and learn to relate in order to be. That is why, very often in his writing, Lawrence expresses his concept of full being by means of the flower metaphor.

Simple enough as this challenge may seem it proves very difficult in our stage of civilisation, a stage again and again diagnosed by Lawrence as dominated by idealism, materialism and the machine.⁶ All these "evils" decisively contribute to men's self-enclosure, to sever the links that unite man and nature and to his sense of being absolute in himself and to himself. In the poem "Ego-bound", the poet takes up the flower image again but this time to synoptically describe humanity's predicament:

As a plant becomes pot-bound
man becomes ego-bound
enclosed in his own limited mental consciousness.

Then he can't feel any more
or love, or rejoice or even grieve any more,
he is ego-bound,
pot-bound
in the pot of his own conceit,
and he can only slowly die. (CP I 474/ 5)

This image of imprisonment and of the concomitant need to shatter the iron-bars of the prison and get free (or, to use the last lines of the poem just quoted: to "burst the pot, / shell of his ego / and get his roots in earth again") is a recurrent *topos* in Lawrence's oeuvre. Humanity is seen as "wild things in captivity" (CP I 484) and the nature of the gaol varies: it can be industry, the machine and the social mechanism, it can be mental consciousness, it can be money, it can even be false ideals, as love taken as an absolute. In the novel *Women in Love*, for instance, virtually all the characters are somehow trapped – some, like Gerald, the great industrial magnate, succumb unable to get free from social pressures and human entanglements; others, like Birkin, Ursula and even Gudrun, try to survive even if differently: Birkin and Ursula by a commitment to a new kind of marriage (that allegedly will liberate them from the constraints of conventional bourgeois life), Gudrun by continually withdrawing from any serious connection with others – a sort of survival by systematic denial (a nihilistic strategy). The group of intellectuals that crop up in some of the chapters of this novel are trapped by abstract ideas or ideals and entrenched behind their fierce, blind defence (as is the case with Hermione). The young working-class couple, Birkin and Ursula meet at the fair, enacts yet other types of bondage: to social prejudice (they are going to get married because the girl is pregnant), to domesticity (spending the little money they have on furniture), to their social class (unlike Ursula and Birkin they cannot afford to buy a

of being" (PU 249) an idea that is nowhere more explicitly presented than in the first chapters of *Study of Thomas Hardy* (STH).

⁶ These "evils", however, have not supervened upon man from the outside. As Lawrence recognises in "Education of the People": "the system, after all, is only the outcome of the human psyche, the human desires. (...) The system is *in* us, it is not something external to us" (EP 590).

piece of furniture and then give it away). Moreover, the young man, Fred, is subtly shown to be in a slightly abject bondage to the pregnant woman, her new house and future plans (“she had got his manhood” – WL 359).

All these entanglements (that, most often, have to do with social life and self-preservation) can seriously compromise man’s achievement of his “living, spontaneous individuality” (EP 606); as Birkin says in the same novel: “It’s the hardest thing in the world to act spontaneously on one’s impulses” (WL 32). Social expectations, social roles or accepted standards of behaviour build from early childhood a conceited ego (“an ideal self” – D 710) that can disastrously interfere with your primal, spontaneous reality and dictate from without what should be recognised as an inner imperative of the soul, since “consciousness” (not mental consciousness or “image consciousness”) “should be a flow from within outwards” and “spontaneous action” should follow “spontaneous awareness” (TB 380). Against the tyranny of the ego, living from an outside picture of itself, the only thing to do is to dare shatter the mirror of the worldly self and start anew.

At this point, I would venture to characterise Lawrence’s concept of identity, as I understand it, as:

1. organic and vital
2. dynamic
3. unique
4. relational

Organic and vital

Both the persistent flower *simile* and the “hunger” and “ache for being” referred to in the poem “Manifesto” suggest Lawrence’s deep commitment to the natural body of man as the well-head through which the cosmic vital energies flow. Man’s body (seen as “a living organism” – EP 618) is the bridge to that universe in motion: it is through the body that the “primal desire” of belonging to life and coming into being is felt first and foremost.⁷

Moreover, the body is seen as the seat of real feelings (as opposed to mental feelings) and, as such, should be implicitly trusted. This leads Lawrence to create novelistic characters that are very different from those that appear in the novels of his predecessors or of his contemporaries: their moral and psychological coherence is very often ruptured by “unaccountable” reactions or decisions rendered in bodily terms. As he himself admits, he is no longer interested in the stable ego or personality of his characters but in their inhuman will that emanates from their body (something they are hardly conscious of).⁸

⁷ The body, and not only the mind is, therefore, also seen as a source of knowledge (variously called by Lawrence “blood knowledge”, “dark” or “intuitive knowledge”): “Oh yes, my body, me alive, *knous*, and knows intensely” (WNM 194).

⁸ Cf. Letter to Edward Garnett, where Lawrence explains his new approach to his fictional characters (L II 182-184).

Dynamic

This organic vitalism of the self is intimately linked with its insertion in the universe, and since Lawrence conceives of the universe, as has been already alluded to, as being forever in motion and men as an integral part of it, so he must perforce view human identity as a continually changing adjustment between man and the universe around him: "[t]he universe is like Father Ocean, a stream of all things slowly moving: (...) There is nothing man can do, but to maintain himself in true relationship to his contiguous universe" (AM 167).

This dynamism can be illustrated in fictional terms by the characters in his novel *The Rainbow* (1915). Here they are depicted as fragmentary in themselves and as if carried by a "wave" or a "wind" that makes them act in certain unforeseen ways at decisive moments in their lives. It is as if they derive from the natural world around them a vital force and inspiration that leads them unawares. The main characters in this novel do not entirely belong to themselves (and their free-will is as if temporarily suspended); they give themselves over and are subject to "the greater ordering" that encompasses human beings and the natural world:

As he worked alone on the land, or sat up with the ewes at lambing time, the facts and materials of his daily life fell away, leaving the kernel of his purpose clean. And then it came upon him that he would marry her and she would be his life.

.....
But during the long February nights with the ewes in labour, looking out from the shelter into the flashing stars, he knew he did not belong to himself. He must admit that he was only fragmentary, something incomplete and subject. There were the stars in the dark heaven travelling, the whole host passing by on some eternal voyage. So he sat small and submissive to the greater ordering. (R 39/ 40)

This dynamic interdependence between the self and the world around it makes self-knowledge difficult. This is why, in his poem "Know thyself, and that thou are mortal", we read: "If you want to know yourself/ you've got to keep up with yourself. / .../ and you've got to run, to keep up with it" (CP I 543).

Unique

This dynamism inherent in identity is further complemented by what could seem, at first sight, paradoxical: the notion of the uniqueness of individual identity. This uniqueness of the self is emphasised in his essay "Democracy" where he repudiates the modern democratic ideal for being, according to him, based on the false assumption that all men are equal. It is not that he denies that all men should be treated equally in terms of justice, civil rights and of their basic needs, but he rejects any notion of equality that goes beyond that, because he prefers to radically affirm their difference. To Lawrence all men are different and he repudiates such abstractions as the "Average" as simply convenient tools for the purpose of statistics but irrelevant beyond that.⁹ Therefore the democracy he defends is not the "Democracy of the Average" but a "new democracy" (D 709) in which man's inherent differences from each other are given

⁹ Taken out of context, repudiation of democracy such as this, contributed in part to earn Lawrence the epithet of totalitarian or even fascist thinker.

place. Throughout his work, Lawrence never tires of arguing in favour of man's/ woman's uniqueness: "Each human self is single, incommutable and unique. This is the first reality. Each self is unique and therefore incomparable" (D 714). For him, no social scheme would do that would not accommodate such difference. (I think he would not feel very comfortable with present day globalisation and cloning...)

Relational

However, uniqueness or singularity does not mean, in any way, isolation or apartness. Singleness of being can only be achieved in relation and in contradistinction to what surrounds us because, as Lawrence says in his essay "We need One Another":

We have our individuality in relationship. (...) Apart from our connexions with other people, we are barely individuals, we amount, all of us, to next to nothing. It is in the living touch between us and other people, other lives, other phenomena that we move and have our being. (Wneed 190)

And this emphasis on relationship or connection between human beings and their surroundings leads us to the last (though by no means least important) feature of identity: its relational or dialogic character. I am *in relation to* the other, the not-me, all that is beyond my body and my understanding. The other confronts me as foreign and different and this radical strangeness confirms my individuality. In other words, I realise my humanity when I confront an animal, and my peculiar way of life when I apprehend the life of a tree or a plant, and my womanhood when I touch a man, and so on. I am brought back upon myself when I "lose" myself in the irreducible presence of the other. If I am unable to achieve this awareness of the other, then I will not be able to achieve my being – my life will be a pretence, artificially held together – it will not be rooted in the world. This is Lawrence's position.

"Otherness"

Both the difficulty of apprehending and accepting the other and the vital need of such awareness is what comes out vividly from one of Lawrence's first short stories, "Odour of Chrysanthemums" (written in 1910) where a young wife is suddenly faced by the dead body of her husband brought back to her after an accident in the coal-mine where he worked. She then realises for the first time that their married relationship amounts to nothing because she (at least) has been unable to see and accept his "otherness":

(...) [S]he knew she had never seen him, he had never seen her, they had met in the dark and had fought in the dark, not knowing whom they met or whom they fought. And now she saw, and turned silent in seeing. For she had been wrong. She had said he was something he was not; she had felt familiar with him. Whereas he was apart all the while, living as she never lived, feeling as she never felt.

(...) She looked at his face, and she turned her own face to the wall. For his look was other than hers, his way was not her way. She had denied him what he was – she saw it now. She had refused him as himself. And this had been her life, and his life. She was grateful to death, which restored the truth. (PO 198)

This passage enacts dramatically the central place of "otherness" in Lawrence's thought and art. Let us now look at the way in which he addresses the issue in argument:

"TO BE, OR NOT TO BE, IS STILL THE QUESTION":
IDENTITY AND "OTHERNESS" IN D. H. LAWRENCE'S WORK

When I stand in the presence of another man, and I am my own pure self, am I aware of the presence of an equal, or of an inferior, or of a superior? I am not. When I stand with another man, who is himself, and when I am truly myself, then I am only aware of a Presence, and of the strange reality of Otherness. There is me, and there is *another being*. (...) There is no comparing or estimating. There is only this strange recognition of *present otherness*. (D 715)

The other is here viewed in terms of a presence to be reckoned with, irreducible and incomparable to the subject-gazer: not equal, not inferior, not superior. Also worthy of note in this essay is the emphasis on the fact that both the onlooker and the one before him/ her should retain their identity and integrity (and not be tempted by any sort of mixing and mingling that would destroy the relationship). The relevant difference here is between what Lawrence elsewhere describes as "feeling with" and "feeling for".¹⁰ The first attitude is sympathy in its true sense of com-passion "which is partaking of the passion which" is in the soul of the other. Whereas "feeling for" corresponds to the temptation to merge your identity in that of the other and lose sight of your own position – a sort of self-sacrifice. This Lawrence clearly repudiates.

It is precisely the first attitude referred to that we see at work in Lawrence's book of poems *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* where each poem presents the unmediated encounter (and a coming to terms) with non-human beings, belonging to different species. Here Lawrence transforms animals and plants into interlocutors, whom he questions and observes, gradually trying to grasp their inner nature and modes of life – that is, their "otherness", their difference from him. But he never sentimentalises the relationship and fiercely retains his place as man in a man-made world (with his prejudices and limitations), as will be illustrated in the poem "Bat":

At evening, sitting on this terrace,
When the sun from the west, beyond Pisa, beyond
the mountains of Carrara
Departs, and the world is taken by surprise...

.....

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

.....

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

Swallows?

Dark air-life looping
Yet missing the pure loop...
A twitch, a twitter, an elastic shudder in flight
And serrated wings against the sky,
Like a glove, a black glove thrown up at the light,
And falling back.

¹⁰ This distinction is made in the essay on Walt Whitman in the volume SCAL (cf. pp. 183-185).

Never swallows!

Bats!

The swallows are gone.

.....

Bats, and an uneasy creeping in one's scalp

As the bats swoop overhead!

Flying madly.

.....

Wings like bits of umbrella.

Bats!

Creatures that hang themselves up like an old rag, to sleep;

And disgustingly upside down.

Hanging upside down like rows of disgusting old rags

And grinning in their sleep.

Bats!

..... (CP I 340-42)

Here the poet's eye observes keenly and dispassionately in a kind of acute attentiveness that enables him to see beyond errors of perception and stereotyped vision and accede to a renewed relationship with the animal. However, he never relinquishes his position – notice the repetition of “disgustingly” and “disgusting” near the end and notice also the closing lines of the poem: “In China the bat is symbol of happiness. / Not for me!”

Sometimes in his effort of profound attention he almost gains a certain degree of empathy with the object held in dialogue, as happens in “Fish”, where the subaqueous sensations of a fish being carried by the liquid element are enacted for the imaginative benefit of the reader:

Your life a sluice of sensation along your sides,
A flush at the flails of your fins, down the whorl of your tail,
And water wetly on fire in the grates of your gills;
Fixed water-eyes. (CP I 335)

The poet is momentarily lost in an imaginative rehearsal of being a fish – not to annul the difference and the distance that separates them but better to enhance and capture them. That is why, nearer to the end of the poem, he is led to admit: “They are beyond me, are fishes” (CP I 338).

In other poems in the same volume, Lawrence takes fruits (such as the peach, the fig and grapes) and also trees (for instance, cypresses and almond trees) as interlocutors whose presence is addressed and questioned. These very weird, lively and suggestive dialogic pieces are, by no means, the only examples of this writer's interest for the other.¹¹ Throughout his work we are continually faced with interhuman relations-

¹¹ On the uneven rendering of “otherness” in these poems see, for instance, Sword, 2001: especially pp. 128.

hips where each partner reacts and adjusts in peculiar ways to the challenge posed by the other: either by failing to admit him/ her (as was the case in "Odour of Chrysanthemums") or by gradually learning to come to terms with "otherness" (as happens with Tom and Lydia in *The Rainbow*). But Lawrence ventures into further dialogical encounters, when viewing other cultures and other races, as is the case with the American Indians. Even though we may have momentary misgivings when reading him on such matters, in our times of 'political correctness', yet we cannot fail to notice the honesty and directness with which he registers this encounter. All this comes out in his poem "O! Americans" where an unmistakable commitment to the American Indians' cause is also evident and where the irony inherent in his treatment of the official position towards natives should not go unnoticed:¹²

The American Indian lingers here, ward of the American government.
Now make up your mind about it, he is not as we are.
He lingers on from an old, savage world, that still has its treasures of
consciousness, its subtle barbaric forms of civilisation.
He is, basically, a savage: it is a term of reproach,
but also, it is not a term of reproach.

The American Indian is, basically, a savage.
But be careful how you destroy him.
Because he is so absolutely in your power, that, before God,
you must be careful.
Noblesse oblige!

Be careful before you destroy him.
Be careful how you turn him into a hundred-per-cent American.
He is the one thing that is aboriginally American.
Don't sentimentalise about him.
Realize. (CP II 776)

This last appeal to realisation tells us a lot about Lawrence's position to "otherness" – he refuses to falsify the relationship between whites and Indians in any way: by a spurious sense of superiority, by any sort of idealisation or sentimentality. He argues for "imaginative sympathy" (as Mark Kinkead-Weekes has recently called it).¹³ This appeal asks for a broadening of our sympathies that cannot fail to have ethical and political effects, very much attuned to the way in which questions of ethnical, cultural and sexual identity are now being addressed in the fields of literary and cultural studies and more specifically in Post-colonial and Feminist studies.

Conclusion

Thus what can be viewed and called Lawrence's "ethics of alterity" (Sargent/Watson, 2001: 421) should be put in historical perspective and seen in terms of present-day

¹² On Lawrence's post-colonial positioning see Kinkead-Weekes, 2001.

¹³ Keith Sagar, who has kindly read this paper and made some very relevant suggestions, informed me that he himself had been using the same expression very often in his writings, borrowing it from Walter Stein in a book of 1969, *Criticism as Dialogue*. Kinkead-Weekes may have borrowed it from Sagar's writings.

discussions on the way “otherness” and “difference” can constitute a way-out of Postmodernism’s ethical impasse. This is precisely what Elisabeth Sargent and Garry Watson have done in a recent article on Lawrence and the dialogical principle where they align him with such thinkers as Martin Buber, Mikhail Bakhtin, Emmanuel Levinas and Luce Irigaray and where his “ethics of alterity” is reassessed in the context of the ongoing debate about the place, the status and the philosophical, ethical and political relevance of the concept of the “other” as a positive basis for human agency in the world.¹⁴ Lawrence can be relevant here precisely because the way in which he deals with the concept of “otherness” does not necessarily entail a “radical untranslatability” (Mohanty, 1989: 21)¹⁵ that would lead in the end to a refusal of the “material existence” (Waugh, 1992: 196) of the other and thus to avoid and ignore its actual presence. We can look at Lawrence’s work as a whole as a life-long effort at coming to terms with the material presence of the other, even if we recognise that this effort has not always been uniformly successful. He calls his poetry “poetry of the immediate present” (CP I 182) and I would even venture to describe his artistic endeavour as an “art of the immediate presence”. In it, it is central to capture the living other and to do so he has to register it “in its own rapid, fluid relationship with the rest of things” (CP I 183), *i.e.*, he has to apprehend it in the immediate context of its “material existence” and this relationality is what redeems “otherness” from disembodied abstraction or from becoming the object of suspicious sacralization that would disastrously remove it from the zone of living contact. Stories and poems, as we have seen, are the privileged sites where “otherness” (human or inhuman) is dramatised and given full play and where it enters into a dialogical encounter that can even entail a change in the participants involved.

His is a philosophy based after all on a confident apprehension of life in man and in the universe around him and Lawrence is determined to make of existence a joyful experience both for himself and for others. Thus, his final incitement could not be other but an incitement to life, but one firmly rooted in reality:

Stand up for a new arrangement
for a chance of life all round
for freedom, and the fun of living
bust in, and hold the ground! (CP I 560)

¹⁴ For the difficulties and dangers of a too radical understanding of “otherness” that compromises any serious positive project based on it, see Mohanty, 1989; and Patricia Waugh’s “Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy Theory”, in Waugh, 1992: 189-204, but especially pp. 196/ 97.

¹⁵ Here one should, nevertheless, note that, at certain moments in his work and life, Lawrence sees the other as something forever unknowable, he even uses the expression “untranslatable otherness” (SM 17). But he tries all the time to grasp this “otherness” and accept it in its difference.

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