

D.H. LAWRENCE, DISTANCE AND PROXIMITY

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Title of the Workshop: Modernity as attraction and repulsion for Lawrence

Title of the Paper: Lawrence, the Futurists, and the conception of “the new human phenomenon”: Ursula in *Women in Love*

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Lawrence’s oft-quoted letter to Edward Garnett on 5 June 1914 reveals his attraction for as well as his bitter reaction to the Futurists in the transitional phase of his career as a novelist. The “Wedding Ring”, from which later developed *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, marked a significant point in this phase when the author wrote, “there is something deep evolving itself out in me” (II 165). Marinetti’s idea of “an intuitive physiology of matter” appealed to Lawrence’s artistic sensibility and inspired him to find the “non-human in humanity” and dispense with the “moral scheme” in the conception of a character. But the tendency of the Futurists to locate “the phenomena of the science of physics” in human beings provoked a strong criticism from him and he described them as “crassly stupid”. Lawrence was actually in search of a “new human phenomenon” that would refuse to conform to “the old stable ego” and represent an alternative ego that would pass through “allotropic states”. He wanted to discover “the same pure single element” in a character which he described as “carbon” (II 182 -83). The present essay intends to explore the representation of Ursula in *Women in Love* in the light of this modernist theory of Lawrence.

Ursula whom we met in *The Rainbow* was a woman who was after her “own maximum self” (349). Throughout the journey of her life she wanted to remain “her own responsive, personal self” (427). That constitutes the “carbon” element in her character. In spite of failure and disillusionment, her search for an authentic self never discontinued. Finally, she was able to achieve her vision of the rainbow. The Ursula whom we meet in the early section of *Women in Love* suffers from a state of despair. She feels that she is “at the end” of her “line of life”. If there is any next step, it is “the step into death” (260-61). She had already gathered “purely sensual, purely unspiritual knowledge” but her life remains “unfulfilled” (326-30). She wants “to be together” with Birkin in “happy stillness”. But Birkin’s “warm breath” in intimate moments kindles “the old destructive fires” in her (329). One may remember how in *The Rainbow* she annihilated Skrebensky when she was overwhelmed by the “luminosity of the moon” (367). In *Women in Love*, impelled by her “inhuman will”, she wants to drink Birkin down “like a life draught” (343).

She finds “release” only when in her union with Birkin she goes beyond love and passion and finds in the latter a representative of “the strange inhuman sons of God who are in the beginning” (395). Lawrence devotes vivid passages to the description of Ursula’s sensual encounter with her partner: “She traced with her hands the line of his loins and thighs, at the back, and a living fire ran through her, from him, darkly. It was a dark flood of electric passion she released from him, drew into herself. She had established a rich new circuit, a new current of passional electric energy, between the two of them ... ” (396). The description reveals that it is Ursula who takes the dominant role in this “inhuman” encounter. The loaded expressions like “electric passion”, “rich new circuit”, “a new current of passional electric energy” all speak of Lawrence’s fascination with Marinetti’s idea of “an intuitive physiology of matter”. The rhetoric is heavily futuristic. It struggles to express the “element of carbon” in the individual, “what she *is* – inhumanly, physiologically, materially” (II 183).

In Huxley’s observation, Lawrence’s characters (when we analyse their behaviour) “cease to have characters and reveal themselves as collections of psychological atoms.” Huxley believes that Lawrence “who could always perceive the otherness behind the most reassuringly familiar phenomenon” adopted “the un-commonsense view of psychology” (xxii-xxiii). To a certain extent, this argument is true. Because Lawrence is in search of a “new human phenomenon” that always represents the other – the “unrecognizable” (II 183). To echo his words from “Why the Novel matters”, this phenomenon seems to be “a strange assembly of apparently incongruous parts, slipping past one another” (536). But the idea that Lawrence’s characters represent themselves “as collections of psychological atoms” sounds problematic. Because Lawrentian characters have their own aesthetic “integrity” (536). Mary Freeman lucidly observes that Lawrence did not wish to “split apart” his characters into “psychological atoms”, rather “the conventional ‘moral scheme’” (77). This sounds very much persuasive. Lawrence, in fact, is always opposed to the idea of a scheme or pattern in envisioning his characters. In his idea, in the novel that offers “the one bright book of life”, the characters have “got to live” (535-37).

The character of Ursula in *Women in Love* is alive because it refuses to fit into in a deliberate “pattern” or conform to an “old stable ego”. While commenting on *The Rainbow* Mark Kinkead Weekes observes, “The Ursula story is strongly structured, enacting his [Lawrence’s] new ‘allotropic’ sense of character shaped (after ‘Hardy’) by opposite forces” (201-2). To a great extent, this is true of Ursula’s story in *Women in Love*. Contradictory forces seem to pull apart this character. Thus Birkin is “so attractive, and so repulsive at once” to Ursula. Even when her impulse is to “repel” Birkin “violently”, she wants to “submit”, to “know” him (505). Does submission lead to knowledge then? *Women in Love* addresses this question which is central to the discourse on sexual politics in the novel.

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