

Chapter IX

POSTMODERN LAWRENCE

After a brief lull during the later thirties and early forties, the revival of Lawrence studies began in the late forties mainly through the initiative of Mark Schorer in his "Technique as Discovery" (1948), Leavis in his *Scrutiny Essays* (1950-52), H.T. Moore in his biography, *The Intelligent Heart : The Story of D.H. Lawrence* (1954), revised in 1962 as *The Priest of Love* and Leavis in his *D.H. Lawrence : Novelist* (1965). That revival got a further impetus from the famous trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960. Much of the work on Lawrence upto the early seventies was celebratory "either receiving its charge from F.R. Leavis's view of Lawrence as the modern continuator of the English 'great tradition' passionately articulating life values in a destructive industrial materialistic civilization" or "from the sixties" view of him as a radical mystic, or visionary rebelliously challenging and subverting, as a free individual spirit, the repressions and conventions of bourgeois society" (Widdowson, 1992, 4). *The Twentieth Century Views* edited by Mark Spilka (1963) and the Macmillan Case book on *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* edited by Calin Clarke (1963) represent the celebratory tone as well as the critical directions of the period. Spilka, in his book, tried to emphasize the necessity to establish a connection between the New Criticism and the Lawrence revival but enthusiastically declared that "Leavis's spirit haunts the whole anthology" (Spilka, 14). To begin with, Leavis's 'morally committed formalism' has released younger British and American New critics into a situation where "intelligently

sympathetic criticism can concentrate on Lawrence's achievement without blinking at his faults and which is formally imaginative and acute yet amenable to the prophetic possibilities of art." (Widdowson, 4). Spilka's anthology mostly represents that 'moral formalism' established by Leavis and finds Lawrence's works 'mature, serious, complex' evincing "his fierce engagement with wasteland culture, his urgent sense of modern death-drift and his creative attempt to transcend it" (Widdowson, 4). On the other hand, Colin Clarke's anthology which includes S.L.Goldberg, Wilson Knight, Moynahan, H.M. Dalesky, George H.Ford, Ronald Grey, Frank Kermode and Cloin Clarke himself, sets itself in opposition to Leavis's unitary conception of Lawrence's celebration of positive life-forces by bringing out another 'demonic Lawrence' ambiguously fascinated by corruption, disintegration and dissolution. But this new emphasis is not, however, a negative one. It is "a more complex evidence of Lawrence's ability to tap into the psycho-history of twentieth century civilization" (Widdowson, 5). Besides, a number of apparently diverse approaches to Lawrence in the seventies tried to establish the sense of the individual as Romantic hero; the artist as Man of Passion not merely as a tribute to Lawrence but as a potent ideology in the post-war period. But Lawrence's dualistic understanding or vision of life, both positive and negative, are meaningfully and categorically synthesized by Spilka, when he comments on Vivas's approach to Lawrence :

If as Vivas holds that vision enables us to grasp 'the specific process of disintegration of which we are victims', it may also help us individually if not collectively to reverse that process. The moral formalists, those who have rescued Lawrence from comparative oblivion, suggest that it will. More important, the works themselves

suggest it through images of quickness, aloneness, wholeness, balance, tenderness, communion, resurrection and restoration - through images, that is, of promise. (Spilka, 12, quoted from Widdowson, 6).

D.H.Lawrence abhors dogmatism and metaphysical absolutism and nowhere is it more apparent than in his novels that represent one of the century's most powerful critiques of industrial capitalism. Although he upholds the notion of free spirit and integrity, contradicting and rejecting the collective political thoughts and actions, his vision ultimately works on behalf of those very forces it so bravely challenges. And perhaps it is for this unorthodox approach to life, love, sex and politics that Lawrence, an immensely popular figure in the sixties, was severely attacked by the feminists and Marxists of that period. Sex and sexuality, the key issues of the sixties were later reinflected as gender; and Lawrence "who had been perceived as a guru of sexual liberation, became the phallocratic oppressor of gender politics" (Widdowson, 10). Similarly from 1968 onward, the liberal/socialistic interest in class-relations was subverted by the hard class-politics and theories of ideology of the new left, and "Lawrence, the proletarian writer hero and prophet of life, became the deracine intellectual and proto-fascist mythologer of cultural politics" (Widdowson, 10). Now, in the nineties, as consensual agreement about Lawrence gradually becomes a far cry, he is the victim as well as the source of 'postmodern depolitisation'.

However, before getting into the depth of postmodern Lawrence-study, a brief sketch of the general tendency of postmodernism is perhaps necessary. As a fundamental effect of Marxist and feminist criticism, there develops a new turn called 'postmodern' in both literature and literary criticism. Although the term postmodern

was used by a number of writers in the 1950s and 1960s, the concept of postmodernism may be said to have taken shape around mid 1970s. At that time, an atmosphere of openness prevailed, fostering a mentality to accept plurality in all respects. It is said to be in the nature of things, cultures, language and texts. The legitimacy of this stance was established in two directions : first, "each discipline produced more and more conclusive evidence of the existence of postmodernism with its own area of cultural practice; secondly, each discipline drew progressively upon the discoveries and definitions made in other disciplines" (Connor, 1989, 6; Hereafter by page number). This new tendency is a great stride forward on the line of Lawrence who wished synthesis of philosophy and fiction, past and present, and reality and imagination in art. In his assumption of the future novel, 'the monster with many faces', Lawrence said :

If you look into the past for what next books, you can go back to the Greek philosophers. Plato's dialogues are queer little novels. It seems to me it was the greatest pity in the world, when philosophy and fiction got split. They used to be one, right from the days of myth. Then they went and parted, like a nagging married couple with Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and that beastly Kant. So the novel went sloppy and philosophy went abstract dry. The two should come again - in the novel." (*Phoenix*, 520).

To some postmodernism in literature is break or a break through, but for many it is "a selective intensification of certain tendencies within modernism itself"(109). Fiedler's influential essay "Cross That Border - Close That Gap" (1969) provides "an early definition of postmodernism as a movement of merging a deliberate complication of the idea of generic integrity"(109). The gap evoked in the title above symbolically defines the gap between high culture and mass culture. Fiedler argues that the

contemporary writing contradicts the generic integrity of high culture either purging or repudiating all contaminations by internal parody. He approves of the sense of a new hospitality to the popular demand in fiction. Baudrillard says that postmodernism is always a "question of proving the real by the imaginary, proving the truth by scandal, proving the law by transgression, proving work by strike, proving the system by crisis and capital by revolution" (quoted in Connor, 58). He describes postmodernism as a system that energizes itself by the consciousness of decay and disaster to be de-energized at the same time by the relentless dominion of the code of simulation. The real, he comments, is hyperrealized, but "the hyper-real is the abolition of real not by violent destruction but by its assumption, elevation to the strength of the model"(60-61). Ihab Hassan observes a new tendency, the eloquence of silence with its two contradictory accounts : the negative, autodestructive, demonic and nihilist one, and the other, positive, self-transcendental, sacramental and plenary. Alan Wilde observes that in postmodernism "a world in need of mending is superseded by one beyond repair"(116), and the fiction, he admires does not aim to abstract the world through structures of imaginative control but is modestly engaged in experiencing the world modifying the disorder of appearances through a generous absorption in them. This view contradicts Hassan's which describes the postmodern era as "a radical decomposition of all central ideas about authorship, audience, the process of reading and criticism itself"(113). Brian Machale on the other hand points up ontological concern of postmodernism as against the epistemological one of modernism. This reminds us of Lawrence' ontological/elemental/vital preoccupation as against his abhorrence of

abstraction/dogmatism :

We know too much. No, we only *think* we know such a lot We are Hamlet without the prince of Denmark. We cannot *be*. 'To be or not to be' — it is the question with us now. And nearly every Englishman says, 'Not to be'. So he goes in for Humanitarianism and such like forms of not being. (Moore, H.T. (ed) *Letters* Vol.I, 180).

This idea is further incarnated in another remarkable letter where Lawrence says : "I don't so much care about what the woman feels --- in the ordinary usage of the word. I only care about what woman is - what she IS, inhumanly, physiologically, materially" (*Letters*, 282). Lawrence here rejected the 'old stable ego' of his characters and hinted at another ego, according to whose action "the individual is unrecognisable and passes through as it were, allotropic states — states of the same single radically unchanged element" (*Letters*, 282). It is this concern with the radical state of being problematized in his novels, that gives them a postmodern turn in the sense that they proclaim to be non-metaphysical, non-teleological and non-totalitarian.

Machale calls postmodern fiction to be a 'carnavalesque interweaving of styles, voices and registers which allegedly disrupts the decorous hierarchy of literary genres" (Connor, 126). He enthusiastically defines literary postmodernism as "a riotous cacophony of conflicting discourses or 'heterotopia' of incompatible geographics"(126). What Machale speaks of fiction corresponds to what Frederic Jameson speaks of theory : "The blurring of all disciplines and discursive styles of history, philosophy, social theory and literary criticism into an undecidable amalgam that must simply be called 'theory' as one of the prime features of the postmodern intellectual scene"(202). The most influential formulation of this new turn is, however, found in the works of Ludwig

Wittgenstein and Mikhail Bakhtin both of whom “deny that language has any abstractly essential nature and argue that it must be thought of instead as a diverse range of social games and practices” (203).

In the light of the above ideas, Lawrence studies received further impetus. The prevalent idea that ‘Lawrence’s text is dynamically contradictory’ (Widdowson, 20) is interpreted now in terms of postmodern concept of indeterminacy. Garret Stewart, in his thought-provoking article “Lawrence ‘Being’ and the Allotropic Style” observes some kind of ambiguous intricacy as “the essence of Lawrentian narrative at the level, at least of situation and psychology (Spilka, M., 1977, 332). Ambivalence and imprecision are generally termed as failures in art, but in Lawrence, they are part of a radical enterprise that thrives by “distorting conventional verbalization in order to render pre-conscious and unconscious material” (Spilka, 334). Lawrence, with the intention to lead us elsewhere into his own particular area of preoccupation, “distorts not words, not grammar, but the conventional signals for emotions” (Spilka 334). But the distortions do not operate sub-stylistically eluding linguistic analysis, on the contrary, there is a “natural latitude within both definition and syntax, a plasticity of usage and ligature that promotes, whether deliberately or not for a given writer, what we call ambiguity, that Lawrence definitely frees up and maximizes and exploits” (Spilka, 334). Stewart asks us to consider Lawrence’s language from the psychological standpoint rather than from rhetorical one because it would not be adequate enough to convey the erotic imagination that is at the heart of his work. Lawrence’s language remains rhythmic, often half inarticulate, as if a pulse and not an expression. In Stewart’s opinion, Lawrence has

produced a literary style that contests its own rules and that itself is “the most graphic test case of the self-critique of verbalisation” (Spilka, 339).

According to Daniel J. Schneider, Lawrence knew the central point of Nietzschean thought that language is a network of arbitrary signs and conventions and that all language is metaphorical. When Lawrence says that one can go wrong in the mind, in words, but not in ‘the blood’ or in the intuitive wisdom of the ‘Holy Ghost’, he echoes the postmodern view of language’s indeterminacy and rejects logocentrism. Schneider observes that Lawrence exploits three alternative ways to overcome logocentric falsification : first, he attempted to invent a new type of language and a new kind of narrative structure that would lay bare the realities which conventional language obscures or falsifies; secondly, he insisted on wordless physical communion, that is, the ‘civilisation of touch’; and thirdly, he tried to be sure that the language acquired by conscious ego is “put into its true place in the living activity of men”(*Fantasia*, 76). Lawrence believed that one can escape the prison house of language, provided one knows the true place of mind and knowledge in one’s life, for “no words, no ideas can convey the breath of life” (Widdowson, 168).

As far as the individual novels are concerned, critics upto 1960s generally looked for evidences of coherence, growth and moral wisdom, but “recent criticism emphasizes not the integrity of the text but ambiguities, eddies of meaning and disturbing subtexts” (Rylance, Rick, 1996, 1). Frank Kermode observes that Lawrence developed a new style in *Sons and Lovers* capable of embodying his new theme. The novel, Kermode argues, is shaped not so much by an unfolding narrative but by a pattern of symbolic and

structural variations from episode to episode. Lawrence's method of 'over-painting' is also well adapted to his way of depicting reality which stresses uncertainty, flux, repetition and plurality often at a psychological level below consciousness. Literature, in the postmodern era, is no more in need of systematic meanings; it is uniquely able to articulate diverse ideas and therefore unsettle all conclusions. Critics shift their attention to the "narrative's textual or political unconscious" (Rylance, R., 8). Terry Eagleton (1983) observes that the narrative point of view in *Sons and Lovers* is predominantly that of Paul; it must be read as coloured by his particular interests, defences and convictions. For the story given in *Sons and Lovers* from Paul's perspective has important gaps and distortions, most obviously in the presentation of Walter Morel. So, below the apparent text, there is a 'sub-text' "visible at certain symptomatic points of ambiguity, evasion or overemphasis --- which we, as readers are able to write even if the novel itself does not" (Rylance, R. 47). This line of argument explores mainly the unacknowledged biases and repressions which, in shaping the narrative, produce, as Louis Martz observes, "the portrait of Miriam that lies beneath the over-painted commentary of the Paul narrator" (Rylance, R. 57). Paul's point of view about Miriam is full of confusion, self-deception and desperate self-justification, and the image of Miriam "is constantly being cleared and fogged and cleared again" (Rylance, 57). This search for concealed principles of organisation, for the text's blind spots, omissions and biases "is one of the main innovations of recent criticism" (Rylance, 9). Again, post-structuralist thought stresses the precariousness of all truth claims and pay attention to the instability of language in which they are produced. Paul,

in *Sons and Lovers*, does not reveal the truth about Miriam, rather he imposes it on her and perhaps on the readers too by an act of powerful conscious or unconscious will; for careful attention to the detail reveals contradictions. In Daine S.Bond's opinion, the story of the novel that the narrator undertakes to tell, "deconstructs the belief in an unambiguous relation between language and truth"(Rylance, 107). Like Paul's story, the narrator's quest for truth dramatizes an exile from a world of clarity, immediacy and presence to one of obscurity, deferment and absence, suggesting no closure in the traditional sense. Where classic Victorian fiction closes with a marriage settlement, the novel ends "in uncertainty without any clear step towards, either a new family or individual independence" (Rylance, 4).

Roger Fowler finds *The Lost Girl* an interesting text for discourse analysis for its self-consciousness about speech. In this novel, the narrator refers to speech mannerisms when he introduces a character commenting on or implying their social significance. He tries to interpret the meaning of personal forms of speech and significance for a person's attitudes and social position. Values and beliefs in the novel, Fowler comments, are carried by discourse because, "discourse is an interaction between an addressor and an addressee within a specific socio-cultural context" (Brown, 1990, 54). In *The Lost Girl* the modes of discourse carrying different sets of belief can be recognized by characteristic structural differences in the language, differences between styles and registers and the "characteristic linguistic forms for gothic, romance, news reporting, travelogue, scientific report etc." (Brown, K. 54). Paying attention to the "post-structuralist democratization of fiction" where "the author is banished, the reader is

ascendent, the characters are respected as subjectivities, not objectivised" (Brown, 65), Fowler says that *The Lost Girl* is a polyvocal text or *heteroglossic*, to use a Bakhtinian term.

Gamini Salgado, on the other hand, directs our attention to what he calls 'radical in determinacy' — a term ambiguous but appropriate to Lawrence. *Women in Love*, Salgado observes, is a novel that not only accommodates contradictory readings but positively invites and even compels them. The novel is radically indeterminate in its effect on readers in three aspects of Lawrence's language; first, "the persistent tendency of the prose to hanker for an idea or an attribute and its opposite at the same time"; secondly, "a pervasive contrast between vehemence of tone and something which appears variously as either tantativeness or cloudiness of utterance"; and thirdly, 'as an argument that figures so prominently but at the same time is "so persistently devalued, summerised, parodied, dismissed, interrupted and trivialised" (Widdowson, 1992, 138-39). This discursive argument in the novel exists mainly to show its inadequacy as a mode of ordering experience that highlights the problem of finding a suitable language that can "communicate the incommunicable" (Widdowson, 141). The message, if there be any in the novel, is 'snares and delusions' and "the final effect is --- one of having the experience and missing the meaning" (Widdowson, 143). Lawrence's novel, Salgado comments, does not merely deploy a series of paradoxes and contradictions in the service of a larger unity, it is centrally paradoxical because it is shot through with the continuous and continuously felt tensions between the necessity of articulating a vision and its impossibility and sometimes its undesirability. Daniel O'Hara comments that

through the wondrous power of negative Lawrence smashes 'the old idols of ourselves' and its structure is a process of 'repetitive self-cancellation' (Widdowson, 157). David Lodge categorizes the novel as a philosophical adventure story, open-ended but self-defeating. In *Women in Love*, Birkin, the spokesman of Lawrence, is not allowed to win in his arguments and the exiguous plot exists merely to bring the protagonists into contact and conflict. The issues raised here are neither resolved nor contained within the history of their relationships. Consequently, the reader is "bounced bewilderingly, exhilaratingly from one subject position to another and (is) made to feel the force of each" (Brown, K. 1990, 99). Here little attention is given to the practical problems and the plot is so arranged as to leave the protagonists free to choose their own fates.

What we see is a changing pattern of the reception of Lawrence. His fiction established him as a continuator of the great Western tradition in the 1960s; he was found to be a male chauvinist and even a fascist in the seventies; and finally in the late 1980s and 1990s a postmodernist. This contradictory pattern of Lawrence reception is reflected in what Raymond Williams says in his foreword to a volume of essays commemorating the novelist's birth centenary in 1985 :

Quite apart from the deep-rooted attachments to the general positions which underlie the alternative presentations, there is the special problem that Lawrence is taken, again and again, not simply as an exemplary but as a campaigning figure. Indeed, he is often taken as in effect the private possession of this or that tendency. He is at once their justification, their promotional instance and, where necessary - which can produce the most curious results - the stick to beat others with -" (Salgado, G. & Das, G.K., 1988, vii-viii).

Kingsley Widmer refers to three areas in which Lawrence has called forth

ranging and intense responses which go beyond usual literary legacies : “the feminist-misogynist disputes, the obscenity-censorship conflicts and the problematic role as a prophet of enlarged eroticism” (Meyers, J., 1987, 156). Widmer observes that the disputes appear to be based on single-minded proposition that one cannot be both sensitively sympathetic to women and an extreme male-chauvinist. But Lawrence was obviously both and “contributed to a different, a more conflicted awareness of man-woman relations” (Meyers, J., 163). This ambivalence that his essay smacks of is caused perhaps by Lawrence’s text itself. Let us have a look at the concluding line of *Women in Love* where Birkin appears sceptic : “I don’t believe that”. With this utterance Birkin seems to reject the whole ideology of the novel hitherto built up. He desired an additional relationship with Gerald, the representative of the western society, symbolising Birkin’s acceptance of the western society. But Gerald’s death makes it impossible. Finally, Birkin realizes that his thesis of man-to-man relationship is perverse. Again, if we consider Birkin’s conclusion as a reply to the penultimate line, where Ursula says : “you can’t have it, because it’s false, impossible”, then he is rejecting Ursula’s view about his own thesis which is “an obstinacy, a theory, a perversity” (W.L. 444). What this double rejection suggests is that *Women in Love* at once implies “the propagation and the negation of its philosophy of life” (Widdowson, 1992, 23). The novel effectively deconstructs itself in the recognition that the ideology of the novel although it itself is fatally flawed, cannot be avoided.

However, although Lawrence becomes “more complex, more unstable, more

unfinished as the range and sophistication of attention paid to him increases (Widdowson, 24), it is only a sign of his importance as a cultural figure who was out to subvert the tradition he found and recreate it. The vastly differentiated cultural reproduction of Lawrence's work means that "we can make less and less sense of it in any absolute way" (Widdowson, 24). He remains a great cultural figure in his unorthodox and undogmatic way. Postmodern critics succeeded in proving as much.

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