THE ANNEX-METAPHOR AND THE NATURE OF THE “BLIND SELF” IN D. H. LAWRENCE’S “ENGLAND, MY ENGLAND”

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Abstract

The article explores D. H. Lawrence’s technique of portrayal in the short story “England, My England” (1921) by applying the key terms *annex-metaphor* and “blind self” to Egbert, the central male character. The former term is coined by the author of the article as a means of understanding Lawrence’s treatment of his protagonist’s inner life. With the help of the daughter figure, the British author manages to shape the abstract character of notions, and to produce a figurative, volatile version of the father’s psyche. The latter concept, “blind self,” belongs to Lawrence himself, and can be transferred, the paper argues, from one character to another in the process of uncovering Egbert’s metaphorically shaped responses to different types of environment: the mystical, the social, the political. The idea of blindness is materialized as attraction towards nature, as denial of society or, on the contrary, as denial of the self, and, last but not least, as automatic response to the whims of history and national politics.

Keywords: *metaphor, self, character, war, disability, modernism.*

This article deals with D. H. Lawrence’s metaphorical approach to fiction in the short story “England, My England” (1921) by detailing some of the author’s stylistic peculiarities. In this analysis I coin and propose the term *annex-metaphor* as a means of exploring Lawrence’s techniques of character construction, namely his view on the father-daughter relationship. Additionally, Egbert, the central male character, is discussed in the light of a multifaceted “blind self,” a term that Lawrence himself used in relation to another fictional figure in the same work. This stylistics-based examination touches upon such cultural perspectives as phenomenology or psychoanalysis.

“England, My England” belongs to Lawrence’s early career, its first version being written in 1915. The author revised the story years later, in 1921, when he was in Taormina, Sicily—a place that apparently helped him to gain a new perspective on the war years. For this analysis I have used the last version of the short story, considering that time has lent it a quintessential character in the light of the main adjustments: the extension of the pre-war account and the reduction of the battlefield episode.

The analysed work relates the story of Winifred and Egbert, a young couple whose marital life is marked by two major traumatic events: the laming of their eldest daughter on account of the father’s negligence, and Egbert’s death on the battlefield. Characterized as an exploration of “the old cultured leisure days” (Leavis 322), as “Lawrence’s version of the myth of the dying god” (Vickery 235) or, simply, as one of his “Modernist Tales” (Harrison 11), “England, My England” remains primarily “an acid little story” (Moore and Roberts 47), expressing Lawrence’s disapproval of the effete behavior of a young man that he met during the Great War. Percy Lucas was the brother-in-law of Viola Meynell, the generous poet who offered the Lawrences a cottage at Greatham, in Sussex, while the writer and his wife were struggling with bad housing conditions in a bleak Buckinghamshire. Apart from Lawrence’s own confession in a 1915 letter to Lady Cynthia Asquith that “England, My England” is a “story about the Lucases” (*Letters II* 386), Lawrencian critics found it rather easy to read the story biographically by identifying correspondents of Viola’s parents, Wilfrid and Alice Meynell, and of the members of the family colony that they were patronizing. Thus, it goes without saying that one can easily detect the fictional embodiments of the married couple—Madeline and Perceval Lucas—or of their children, Sylvia, Christian, and Barbara. As Keith Cushman usefully reminds us (“I wish that story...”), one can also immediately recognize the moment when, in the summer of 1913, Sylvia fell on a sickle left by a visitor in the grass, and suffered a severe wound in the leg.

THE FILIAL METAPHOR

Beyond the biographical research on Lawrence, a particularly productive line of study can be the focus on the text itself, in accordance with the British author’s own tenet: “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.” (*Studies* 8) In this perspective, Lawrencian fiction can offer a rich and unique display of literary craft. Some critics have repeatedly emphasized the dynamic character of Lawrence’s stylistic register. In 1960 Eliseo Vivas highlighted the unstable and complex nature of the Lawrencian symbol, defining it, through the prism of F R. Leavis’s criticism, as a synthetic, creativity-based entity evolving within philosophical-psychological

parameters (273-291). Along comparable lines, Fiona Becket remarks, in 1997, Lawrence's preoccupation with the poetic paradigm in his attempt "to put the wordless into words" (*Thinker as Poet* 2). The critic pertinently postulates that "it is metaphor which becomes a new mode of understanding in Lawrence, distinct from other modes of enquiry, like psychoanalysis for instance, which belong to a rational and positivist tradition disliked by Lawrence because, from his viewpoint, they limit the adventure of thought" (2). In this sense, one should not expect the one-for-one type of correspondences in Lawrencian exegesis, but one should indulge in the ludic euphoria of the author's texts instead. We have, with Becket, the confirmation of David Lodge's 1977 reading of Lawrence in the light of "a poetic, prophetic mode of utterance" (202) issued from the metaphorical revaluations of a basically metonymic narrative. It is thus worth remembering that Lawrence's typical work should be read as a stylistic continuum situated outside the stationary (and reductive, to Lawrence) similarity mechanism (197).

The traditional definition of a metaphor is outlined by such notions as the vehicle-tenor couple (Richards 120) or the interaction between "some thing or action X" and "a property Y which it could not literally possess in that context" (Childs and Fowler 139). From I. A. Richards's 1936 explanations to relatively recent approaches by, for instance, John Searle, Mark Turner or Jacques Derrida, one can notice a growing awareness of the degree of subjectivity and mobility involved by this trope. In this sense, a key notion remains its adaptability to "the perspective of a distinctive worldview" (Abrams 158). D. H. Lawrence's protean stylistics seems to provide the best illustration of this idea. In "England, My England" the author's metaphorical mood is translatable thanks to the peculiar relationship between the characters. Here Lawrence puts metaphor to special use by patterning it on the dimensions of a dynamic community of thought and feeling. Stylistically speaking, the father-daughter relationship is depicted by means of the *annex-metaphor*, the key-element of a conflated entity where one character is rendered as the externalization of another's inner world. Such abstract notions as thoughts, opinions, projections, expectations acquire a concrete dimension thanks to a fictional addition whose role is to complete the protagonist's portrait.

In an analysis of *Women in Love*, Carola M. Kaplan deduces that, in highly symbolic chapters like "Coal-Dust", "Mino" or "Moony", "the totemic animals or objects are extensions of individual characters, serving to reveal their true natures or essential selves" (124). Similarly, one can read Joyce in "England, My England" as an *annex-metaphor*, that is as an extension of her father's obscure self. In this sense she appears as a fictionalized facet of what Lawrence defines, in a 1914 letter to Edward Garnett, as the diamond-like nature of the character. Accordingly, in this particular story, the little girl illustrates the

“allotropic states” that a fictional figure can assume simultaneously, beyond the limits of “the old stable ego of the character” (*Letters II* 182-183). Not only does Egbert live individually, in a quasi-Romantic environment, but he also evolves in tandem, being crayoned by his relationship to the daughter figure.

The character named Joyce can be read as a trope that was attached to the male protagonist Egbert in order for his subjectivity and social standing to be concretized. She can stand for a metaphor for her parent’s unseen thoughts and emotions, in keeping with Lawrence’s tendency “to dramatize them [characters’ feelings] in symbolic episodes” (Stevenson 33). With Joyce, “his favourite” (“England, My England” 393), the young father develops a relationship of personality completion. The “tacit understanding” (401) and the “weapon-like kinship” (401) between Egbert and his daughter describe a behavioural mirroring placed outside the traditional, dominance-based paternal contract:

There was a tiny touch of irony in his manner towards her, contrasting sharply with Winifred’s heavy, unleavened solicitude and care. The child flickered back to him with an answering little smile of irony and recklessness: an old *flippancy* which made Winifred [the mother] only the more somber and earnest (401; emphasis added).

The notion of “flippancy” is entirely applicable to Egbert in the terms of the societal code highlighted by Lawrence. The “limping” (401) child becomes symbolic of the way in which the father figure must be perceived by the community in which he evolves—family, village, city. The man who avoids constant salaried work, and who abhors the fixity of social norms is visibly embodied by another character: Joyce, the one who is able to assume her father’s outsider condition more freely. Acting “like members of some forbidden secret society” (401) and sharing “the same secret of life” (401), Egbert and Joyce compose a coherent, yet dynamic tableau of the same consciousness.

From the snakes haunting Crockham Cottage to such similes as “like some slow, torpid snake” (400) or “as a harmless snake” (400), Lawrence makes excessive use of the reptilian image in an attempt to render the intensity of the characters’ inner life. Moreover, Joyce contributes to the visualization of her father’s psychology by her matter-of-fact connection to snakes. “If you don’t come quick, nurse, I shall run out there to where there are snakes.” (381) she declares threateningly before the laming incident. The little girl’s recklessness seems to translate Egbert’s muted idiosyncrasies into perceivable—and thus judgeable—acts, offering yet another fictional version of the father. Thus one can view the triad *male character-snake-female character* as an interpretation pattern superior, with Lawrence, to the ordinary, individualistic approach to character construction.

The daughter as an externalization means is also visible thanks to her association with the leg image. The sentence “And Joyce so lame!” (405) appears to crystallize Egbert’s gradual journey into ordeal and dissolution. First, there is the image of the child’s disabled body. Next, once the war arrives, the young father comes to experience horror in a Conradian manner, and muses metonymically on military life at “the sight of his own legs in that abhorrent khaki” (405). The child’s cripple leg, the doomed soldier’s uniformed leg, and finally, at the moment of death, the “legs of a horse colossal– colossal above him” (409) seem to be the metaphorical landmarks of Egbert’s adventure into the realm of the uncontrollable. The hero’s interiority is exposed, made palpable and credible.

Through Joyce, psychology acquires a concrete character. The child is so often and so visibly discussed in relation to her father’s tribulations that it is impossible to dissociate her from the paternal figure. Be it the counterpart of desire, carelessness, inadequacy or inner anarchy, the image of the little girl acts permanently as *a metaphor annexed* to the male protagonist, Egbert. It is Lawrence’s fictional way of dealing with the abstractness of human nature.

VERSIONS OF THE SELF

In “England, My England”, the connection between characters appears to be achieved not only by means of their consanguineous evolution on the metaphorical territory, but also on a larger scale, in the light of some all-encompassing notions spread into the fabric of the narrative: nature, life, death, communication. One can notice that such a concept is blindness, the poetic common denominator of some characters’ responses to the milieus that they have to face. Echoing Lawrence’s conception of character allotropy (*Letters II* 182-183), the image of the “blind self” (“England, My England” 391) is somehow complementary to Joyce’s lameness. Given its figurative nature, it similarly works towards dismantling the reader’s “automatism of perception” (Shklovsky 12), thus confirming the contention that “disability is made to work primarily as a metaphor” (Barker and Murray 2). Technically speaking, the notion belongs with Lawrence’s dynamic stylistic macrostructures of the type described by John B. Humma as, for instance, “extended metaphor” and “a complex of metaphorical imagery” (3-4) or, at a narratological level, by Gerald Doherty as metaphor-based plots (48-61).

Let us take a look at the fragment where the author makes explicit use of this term. In the context of a Lawrencian Nietzscheanism pertinently described by Michael Bell as “a matter of parallel rather than influence” (7), the notion of blindness substantiates the British author’s “popular conception” (7) of the will-

to-power, being most visibly applied to Egbert's father-in-law, Godfrey Marshall:

But he had a certain acrid courage, and a *certain will-to-power*. In his own small circle he would emanate power, *the single power of his own blind self*. With all his spoiling of his children, he was still the father of the old English type. He was too wise to make laws and to domineer in the abstract. But he had kept, and all honour to him, a *certain primitive dominion* over the souls of his children, the old, almost magic prestige of paternity. There it was, still burning in him, the old smoky torch of paternal godhead ("England, My England" 391; emphases added).

Marshall's conduct celebrates inner energy as a given, relying on the mystical, empirically felt prescriptions of his species and his sex. He almost exclusively deals in the world of money, property, and welfare. Lawrence does not have him preach industry and responsibility; Marshall only seems to give positive answers in regard to financial matters. We can hear a silent reproach, at the most. This could stand for a sample of the moralistic discourse whose remnants were apparently still viable a few years after the chronological death of Victorianism. But Lawrence's omniscience manages to preserve the impression of an objective treatment of the fictional material.

The narrative perspective is extended thanks to the concept of blindness, which is not only an existential attitude, but also, as suggested above, an authorial technique. Mirroring the old patriarch's muted condition and his actional implacability, the concept of the "blind self" can also be seen as the key to reading other characters in the story. Egbert, the hapless son-in-law, is one case in point.

To a certain extent, Egbert's actions are evocative of the phenomenological thought, which was crystallizing, like Lawrence's own fictional voice, in the first decades of the twentieth century. "England, My England" exudes echoes of the "kinship of method and concern between modernism and phenomenology" (Mildenberg 2-3), exploring "the pre-reflective and therefore taken-for-granted dimension of experience" (3). Egbert seems to exist outside the traditional definition of consciousness as a driving force. He lives by virtue of what his own temperament dictates, and, occasionally, in the light of what society describes as the right way. He moves within the existential parameter designed for him by uncontrollable agents, but he paradoxically tries to enjoy the flow of existence. As one can deduce from the short story in its entirety, his blindness of living centres around three components of his self: the mystical, the social, the political.

Egbert's *mystical self* communicates with the "spirit of place" ("England, My England" 381), being repeatedly attracted to Crockham Cottage. The young man's psyche is attuned to the "secret, primitive, savage" (384) countryside where he cumulatively enjoys the spiritual-organic dimension of nature. Through the prism of his "delightful spontaneous passion" (383), Egbert can fully experience a family life mainly set against the pre-industrial background of a Paradise on the verge of Fall. The leitmotif of the snake is used to describe most of Egbert's states, reaching up to "the passion of the cold-blooded, darting snakes" (400). Moreover, ophidian imagery is apparently employed by Lawrence not only in order to recall myth and human psychology, but also to provide a sense of movement and fallibility to the rather predictable character pattern inherited from pre-modernist literature.

The rural world witnesses all the phases of the young couple's marriage—"the story of most men and women who are married today—of most men at the war, and wives at home" (*Letters* II 386). The house, the garden and all the surroundings draw Egbert when he is a happy bridegroom, but also an alienated husband or a soldier. The ups and downs of Egbert's marriage are, to a significant extent, foreseeable; they are rather banal, repetitive, their protagonists being a mere link of the intergenerational chain. The couple lead the existence of their animal kingdom and become aware of it.

To a significant extent, Crockham can be regarded as an authentically Darwinian setting of the survival of the fittest, if one considers only the flower-bed episode with the snake that heard the human voice, "released the frog and slid angrily away" (384). Nature is there to be invoked and to respond—to ensure the "rhythmic mimesis" (Rydstrand 19) of the short story. It is a mystical, almost instinctual man-environment communication biologically doubled by the "hot blood-desire of by-gone yeomen" ("England, My England" 384)—the genetic inheritance that controls the mechanism of people's present lives. Moreover, the rural setting borrows elements of the supernatural, "cast[ing] a spell on the two young people" (384). Genes perpetuate themselves, and so does "the mythico-ritualistic life of ancient man" (Vickery 234), who still indulges in "a certain slumbering flame hard to understand" ("England, My England" 384). Species fight one another; humans seem to come off victorious; life continues and repeats itself. Existence is blind by its own clockwork mechanism; the sightlessness that conducts Egbert to the pastoral area combines the biological with the quasi-religious unknown.

More visible, Egbert's *social self* is comparably blind to such communal requirements as "[to come] to grips with life" (388), to "take the responsibility" (393) or to "provide the money" (393). With the dissipation of the Victorian sense of growth and family comfort, the individual may come to experience a motivational void during the first years of the twentieth century. As an

instinctive response to the awareness of new kinds of conceptual death—in the line of Darwin, Nietzsche, Frazer or Freud—the ordinary citizen may sense the possibility of expressing new freedoms. To Godfrey Marshall, “the shelter of the social establishment” (391) makes the exercise of power linear and intelligible; to Egbert, the social engagement comes in an aleatory fashion: “Perhaps he should not have married and had children. But you can’t stop the waters flowing.” (390) To Joyce’s father, freedom means “attraction across social classes” (Becket, *Critical Guide* 94), denial of social conventions, and obedience to the laws of inexorability. In “England, My England” Lawrence’s sense of destiny is Hardiesque, being rendered by frequent images of nature like, for instance, the parallel between “the fate of human beings” and “the fate of clouds” (389) or, in a different connection, the simile “a blind acrid faith as sap is blind and acrid” (390).

The concept of social blindness is identifiable with Winifred, too. We see her “in her frustrated and blinded state” (393) of motherhood or isolated “into the shadow of the Church” (399), repudiating nature in order to protect her children or saluting the socially induced order of religion. The young woman mostly defines her social persona by adjusting instinct to societal demarcations and prescriptions. Yet, within the same trope of blindness, Lawrence uses antagonism. While, to Winifred, the annulment of one’s own self means reassuring conformity, to her husband, Egbert, it connotes the illicit deviation from the norm. Society can be valued or ignored; the metaphorical lack of sight can describe both cases.

In modernist discourse, physical blindness calls forth “life after blindness” on account of finding out new sensorial and expressive means (Linett 27-28). Similarly, in “England, My England,” metaphorical sightlessness brings about new ways of exploring the world, offering Egbert an interesting insight into his own *political self*. In spite of its negative connotation, on a narrative-philosophical plane, military experience is productive, the character being confronted with the existence of new geographical and psychological boundaries. Winifred’s husband joins the army almost mechanically, despite his conviction that “[t]here was nothing national about crime” (“England, My England” 403). Family, society and nationality are the external factors that artificially cause Egbert to go to the front. The young man’s death in Flanders cannot be judged by the standards of heroism, but as a possible authorial barometer of the difference, as noticed by Kim A. Herzinger, between the Victorian Marshall and the Georgian Egbert (qtd. in Granofsky 134). Though Egbert’s “whole instinct was against it [war]” (“England, My England” 402) and the “distinction between German and English was not for him the distinction between good and bad” (403), the character does not adopt the stance of a

declared *révolté* or of a peace campaigner. To a significant extent, he offers a mechanical answer to an impassive societal mechanism, and he implicitly comes to experience the limitations of a politically prescribed moral code.

A double orientation of blindness can thus be derived from the political context in which Egbert finds himself. On the one hand, there is the Victorian inheritance of sobriety, recommended faith and implied patriotism—that is, a whole country, a whole empire could close its eyes to an individual’s particular needs. On the other hand, one can contemplate Egbert’s post-Edwardian present with its new awareness of the possibility of new centres: individuality, woman, labour, race. Thus, conversely, a minority can become blind to the signals of the certified national majority. In this sense, Egbert-the-citizen, a curiosity in his family, has no inclination to respond to the England of the past or to the war of the present. Here Lawrence may be calling attention, as Youngjoo Son reminds us, to “the dangerous impulse lying behind the idea of nation and home” (100), with security, conformism, nationalism or war as notions prone to dangerously liminal interpretations. Individuality can run counter to the politically prescribed good, the short story seems to imply.

As generally agreed by critics, the title of Lawrence’s short story “England, My England” proposes an ironic reworking of a central leitmotif in William Ernest Henley’s 1900 homonymous poem whose lines declare a rhetorical patriotic creed. With the Lawrencian version of England, the old home is no longer home. Egbert’s death “is symbolic of the exhausted condition of the English culture” (Koh 161), equally signifying that the concepts of time and value require new definitions. According to modernist tenets, “history is a story of decline” (Whitworth 12) that gives shape to “the emerging view of history as detritus and shored ruins, in the world of Charles Baudelaire and then Franz Kafka, of Eliot and Joyce” (Childs 15). Lawrence’s short story partially confirms the apocalyptic dimension of modernist discourse, but it also outlines the contours of a new (possibly prevalently urban) civilisation. Ryck Rylance’s observation that Lawrence, by describing Egbert’s London life, is “anatomizing very early a distinctive English phenomenon of the twentieth century: the commuter countryman” (18) is suggestive in this sense. In addition, as intimated by the young man’s lonely existential ordeal throughout the story, a new order may entail the accent on the individual, not on the crowd. Situated amid a series of discontinuities and of new continuities, Egbert’s metaphorical blindness can thus function multifariously, isolating either the past from the present, or the individual’s self from the voice of the community.

CONCLUSIONS

With D. H. Lawrence, fictional actors can be seen as accumulations of different states and manifestations evolving under the umbrella of certain unifying ideas. As demonstrated in “England, My England”, the British author conceives of his characters globally, viewing them as dynamic, interdependent narrative structures. The male protagonist’s relations to the other figures in the short story are mainly defined by means of the metaphor of disability, a trope that Lawrence extends from the individual to the community, from abstract interiority to concrete exteriority. As we have seen above, the mode of character construction is basically achieved, in the short story, either by the extension of a single character into another fictional figure (an annex-metaphor), or by the dispersal of a key-notion (“blind self”) into the structure of certain portraits and situations.

One should also remember that Lawrence’s style cannot be judged outside the background of chronological British modernism (1890-1930) against which he emerged as a writer. By such technical elements as the annexed metaphor of filiation, and the multiple, metaphorically externalized self, Lawrence’s art of representation is evocative of the tension between content and form, a trait typical of the modernist movement. In a literary world that entertained such techniques as stream-of-consciousness or epiphany, the plasticity of the metaphor and of the character seems to be the British writer’s response to the need that fiction should encompass the new, differently perceived reality at the beginning of the twentieth century. By and large, the metaphorically modulated use of disability can reveal Lawrence’s preoccupation with a highly protean rhetoric, being illustrative of one of his major stylistic strengths: “the continual, slightly modified repetition” (*Women in Love* 486).

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