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Lawrence's response to Futurism in the letters vis-à-vis his representation of "what the woman *is*" in *The Rainbow*

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Abstract
D.H. Lawrence was a great English novelist and a conscious artist who was acquainted with contemporary art movements. A close study of his letters shows that Futurism as an artistic/literary movement appealed to him when he was passing through a transitional phase in his career as a novelist. The attempts of the Futurists to purge emotions of "the old forms and sentimentalities" was appreciated by Lawrence although he did not like their "ultra scientific" ventures to represent mental states. The present essay seeks to analyse two letters of Lawrence written in 1914 where he gives his response/reaction to Futurism, and at the same time it attempts to explore how this avant-garde art movement shaped the imagination of the author in conceiving the major women characters of *The Rainbow* (1915).

Keywords: Ego, Futurism, Marinetti, Modern, Self, Woman

> "Your terrible and dreadful picture [*The Merry-Go-Round*] has just come. ...it is the best *modern* picture I have seen. I think it is great and true. But it is horrible and terrifying."
>
> D.H. Lawrence's letter to Mark Gertler, 9 October 1916

> "Magnelli has lovely colour, and design – but underneath it is all empty, he pins all his beauty on to a dead nothingness. ... I'm afraid I am more modern even than these artistic anarchists."
>
> D.H. Lawrence's letter to Achsah Brewster, 19 January 1927

D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930) was a great English novelist of the Modern Period and a conscious artist. A close study of his letters reveals that he was acquainted with contemporary art movements.[1] In the year 1914 Lawrence wrote two letters (the first one addressed to Arthur McLeod on 2 June and the second to Edward Garnett on 5 June).These letters offer Lawrence's discourse on Futurism, an artistic and literary movement which was centred originally in Italy and the chief advocate of which was the poet and publicist Emilio Filippo Marinetti. Lawrence's letter to McLeod shows his keen interest in the Futurists, "I got a book of their poetry – a very fat book too – and – book of pictures – and I read Marinetti's and Paulo Buzzi's manifestations and essays – and Sofficis essays on Cubism and Futurism".[2] Lawrence in this connection also made it clear why he liked the movement, "I like it because it is the applying to emotions of the purging of the old forms and sentimentalities" (II 180). It may be noted that Lawrence was then passing through a

transitional phase in his career as a novelist. After completing *Sons and Lovers* (1913) he was determined not to write in the style of that novel any more. To Garnett on 22 April 1914 he wrote, "All the time, underneath, there is something deep evolving itself out in me" (II 165). Futurism as an avant-garde art movement thus appealed to his deeper artistic sensibility. He, however, had a grave reservation against the movement, "it *isn't* art, but ultra-scientific attempts to make diagrams of certain physic and mental states". The attempt of the Futurists "to deny every scrap of tradition and experience" was "silly" to him (II 180-1). But it is important to note that in the letter to Garnett dated 5 June 1914 Lawrence made a more detailed discussion on Futurism and he even requested the former to keep the letter "because I want to write on futurism and it will help me" (II 184). This letter which is time and again quoted by critics and scholars makes explicit references to *The Wedding Ring* from which developed *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. The present paper basically attempts to explore how Futurism shaped the imagination of Lawrence in conceiving the major women characters in *The Rainbow*.

Let us make a brief synopsis of the novel at the outset. *The Rainbow* (1915) narrates the lives of three generations of the Brangwen family in Nottinghamshire. Marriage is a predominant theme of the novel. In the first generation we have Tom Brangwen who marries a Polish widow, Lydia Lensky, and thereafter lives with her at the Marsh Farm. Lydia has her daughter Anna by her first marriage and the novel unfolds Tom's deep attachment to Anna: "Tom Brangwen never loved his own son as he loved his step-child Anna"(119). Anna is at once "shy" and "wild" and she has an ideal of "a free, proud lady absolved from the petty ties, existing beyond petty considerations" (139). Anna marries Will Brangwen, Tom's nephew, and thus the story of the second generation starts. We read in the Chapter VI titled "Anna Victrix" how "the two took their honeymoon in full hands" (184). But with the passage of time Anna realizes that her husband is "a dark opposite" to her and they are "not complements" (210). She grows weary of her husband and starts believing that the "only tangible, secure thing was the woman" and her husband "must depend on her" (228). She gives birth to a baby whom she calls Ursula. In the Chapter X entitled "The Widening Circle" we are introduced to Ursula's siblings including Gudrun, Theresa, Catherine, William and Cassandra. The novel thus proceeds to narrating the story of the third generation. However, only Gudrun among the siblings of Ursula is portrayed in some detail and the novel's focus shifts towards Ursula as she "passed from girlhood towards womanhood" (328). Ursula falls in love with Anton Skrebensky, the young Sapper officer, and she is "thrilled with a new life" (339). But the relation is shattered as she asserts her "indomitable gorgeous female self" (349). Thereafter she slips into a lesbian relationship with Miss Inger, her class-mistress, but even that frustrates Ursula and she breaks the relationship. Ursula matriculates and starts teaching at a school in Ilkeston. But teaching embitters her soul when the children force her to the beatings. The question haunts her, "Why had she become a school teacher, why, why?" (456). She pursues her BA degree and "in her last year of college, when Ursula was twenty-two years old, that she heard again from Skrebensky"(488). With Anton she experiences the "Bitterness of Ecstasy" (the title of Chapter XV). Anton proposes marriage to her and begs her to settle with him in India but Ursula declines for she feels that their relation contains "a developing germ of death" (514). Towards the end of the novel she appears to suffer a miscarriage. She waits in pain for a "new liberation" (547). The novel ends with her vision of the rainbow representing "a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heaven" (548).

In the present essay we would mainly concentrate on Lawrence's letter to Edward Garnett dated 5 June 1914 where he discusses Futurism at length, and our purpose would be to explore how Lawrence's idea/understanding of Futurism contributes to the conception of the major

women characters in *The Rainbow* including Anna and Ursula. Let us quote from the opening portion of the said letter:

> I think the book is a bit futuristic – quite unconsciously so. But when I read Marinetti – 'the profound intuitions of life added one to the other, word by word, according to their illogical conception, will give us the general lines of an intuitive physiology of matter' I see something of what I am after. …I don't care about physiology of matter – but somehow – that which is physic – non-human, in humanity, is more interesting to me than the old-fashioned human element – which causes one to conceive a character in a certain moral scheme and make him consistent. (II 182)

Lawrence thus acknowledges his debt to Marinetti and affirms that his novel "is a bit futuristic". But it is important to note that he makes a guarded observation, "quite unconsciously so". He states that he does not attach much importance to "physiology of matter" but he is interested in "that which is physic – non-human, in humanity … than the old-fashioned human element". Jack Stewart in "Futurism and Mechanism in *Women in Love*" observes,

> There follows a striking case of creative convergence. Lawrence who translates the neologism *fisicilogia* as physiology, missing the hybrid sense of physiology/psychology, comes to see his own expressive means more clearly through Marinetti's "obfuscated" Italian. Out of the critique of Marinetti's supposed "physiology of matter" he forges his own theory of "allotropic states". (1999, p. 118)

Stewart thus draws our attention to Lawrence's misreading of *fisicologia* as "physiology" while translating a passage from Marinetti's "Manifesto Tecnico". However, Lawrence's own admission that he translates Marinetti "clumsily" is also worth noting. Lawrence's objection to "a certain moral scheme" in the conception of a character may remind an informed reader of a statement made in his celebrated essay titled "Why the Novel Matters" that in the novel, "the characters can do nothing but live". In Lawrence's words, "If they keep on being good, according to pattern, or bad, according to pattern, or even volatile, according to pattern, they cease to live, and the novel falls dead."[3]

Let us in this context read that section from "Girlhood of Anna Brangwen" where Anna violently reacts to Tom Brangwen's opposition to the question of her marriage with Will:

> "What's this about wanting to get married?" he said.
> She stood, paling a little, her dark eyes springing to the hostile, startled look of a savage thing that will defend itself, but trembles with sensitiveness.
> "I do", she said, out of her unconsciousness.
> His anger rose, and he would have liked to break her.
> "You do – you do – and what for?" he sneered with contempt.
> The old childish agony, the blindness that could recognise nobody, the palpitating antagonism as of a raw, helpless, undefended thing came back on her.
> "I do because I do", she cried, in the shrill, hysterical way of her childhood. "You are not my father – my father is dead – you are not my father."
> She was still a stranger. She did not recognise him. The cold blade cut down, deep into Brangwen's soul. It cut him off from her. (165)

The passage quoted above brings home the "illogical conception" of a character in which the "physic – non-human, in humanity" takes the upper hand. It is interesting to note that in 1914 Lawrence wrote a letter to Gordon Campbell where he appreciated the "tremendous *non-human*

quality of life" that he saw in the Egyptian and Assyrian sculpture in the British Museum. Lawrence in this connection emphasized, "It is not the emotions, nor the personal feelings and attachments, that matter" (II 218). So it appears that during the composition of *The Rainbow* the artistic representation of everything that is "non-human" attracted Lawrence's attention. To Anna, personal attachments do not matter when Tom refuses to give her permission to marry Will. In her "old childish agony" she becomes possessed by a "blindness that could recognize nobody", and in her "palpitating antagonism" she refuses to accept Tom as her father. But if we closely read the opening section of "Girlhood of Anna Brangwen" we come to see that "the only man she knew was her father … he embraced all manhood for her, and other men were just incidental" (144). It is true that Lawrence does not wholly dispense with "the old-fashioned human element" in the conception of Anna. We read that she "cried for a whole day, sobbing her eyes out" after that episode and made a kind of surrender to Tom (166). But the readers, as they move through the narrative, very well sense that the character of Anna does not follow any "moral scheme" whether in the question of love or in the principle of religion.

The chapter titled "Anna Victrix" reveals that Anna is scarcely consistent in her attitude to religious beliefs although she is "a regular attendant at morning service". She wants to "fulfil some mysterious ideal, always to listen to the sermon and to try to gather suggestions" but after a while her "soul was in quest of something, which was not just being good, and doing one's best". The quest of Anna thus involves the "self" and is not merely confined to "social duty". Anna wants something more from the Church than the talk on "the welfare of mankind". But the questions remain unanswered: "who was she to affirm it? And what was she doing with unsatisfied desires?" (197-8). Lawrence thus throws light on the inner recesses of the mind of a woman who wants to be "decently satisfied" like other people but who does not know wherein lies her peace and happiness till she gives birth to Ursula.

The chapter bearing the title "Anna Victrix" is significant for another reason as it brings to our focus the dark aspect of the relation between Anna and Will, "She wanted him. When he was oblivious of her, she almost went mad with fear." The question seems to nag her, "who was he? What was he?". It appears to her that Will is a "blind thing, a dark force, without knowledge." And she "wanted to preserve herself." Here Will Brangwen is an embodiment of "the inhuman will" – a phrase that Lawrence uses in his reference to Futurism. While speaking about "The Wedding Ring" Lawrence wrote to Garnett, "I don't think the psychology is wrong: it is only that I have a different attitude to my characters" (II 182). The major characters in *The Rainbow* are in some way or other the expressions of an "inhuman will". Anna and Will experience "no conscious intimacy, no tenderness of love" when they are united, and they are after the "maddening intoxication of the senses, a passion of death" (280). These words used by the author in narrating the horrid and sensational aspect of the relation between Anna and Will speak volumes about the points of similarity between Lawrence and the Futurists regarding their respective artistic representations of violence and sensationalism. Mary Freeman in her essay titled "Lawrence and Futurism" writes that Lawrence and the Futurists adopted a number of similar steps in representing sensationalism and "self-inflicted sadism"[4] in their own works:

> First, their effort to accept pain as pleasure, ugliness as beauty, death as life, proliferated into a general obsession with the obscure relations of apparent opposites. Both disparaged conventions that inhibited these associations and their assimilation of them. Both distrusted the mind with its rational procedure since they required what appeared to be an irrational synthesis. (1955; 2012, p. 74)

The observation of Freeman is insightful and it throws light on Lawrence's "obsession with the obscure relations of apparent opposites" and his passion for "an irrational synthesis" of contradictions which he shared with the Futurists. In this context we may take into consideration the title of Chapter XV of the novel – "The Bitterness of Ecstasy" – a phrase that yokes by violence together contrary ideas and feelings– pain/pleasure, death/life etc. and gives us a clue to the appreciation of Lawrence's understanding of Futurism.

The relation between Ursula and Skrebensky like that between Anna and Will is based on an assimilation of "apparent opposites" but it seems to be more violent and sensational than the latter. In "First Love" we read, "Daring and reckless and dangerous they knew it was, their game, each playing with fire, not with love" (348). The relation between Ursula and her lover is thus described as a "game". And Lawrence uses three adjectives, "daring", "reckless" and "dangerous", in order to give the readers an idea about the spirit of that game. The word "fire" suggesting recklessness/destruction is an opposite of "love". And Lawrence thus implies the terrible fate of this relation at an early stage of the narrative. Ursula obviously is a dominant character here. Her passion is to know her "own maximum self, limited and so defined against him [Skrebensky]". She would, therefore, assert her "gorgeous female self". The "great white moon" with which she wants "communion" and "consummation" symbolizes this indomitable female self. And by being overwhelmed by the "luminosity of the moon" Ursula wants to lay hold of Skrebensky "and tear him and make him into nothing". We may quote the passage at length where Ursula dominates over her lover with a purpose to destroy him:

> Her hands and wrists felt immeasurably hard and strong, like blades. He waited there beside her like a shadow which she wanted to dissipate, destroy as the moonlight destroys a darkness, annihilate, have done with. She looked at him and her face gleamed bright and inspired. She tempted him. (367)

James Twitchell in "Lawrence's Lamias: Predatory Women in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*" shows how "the dominant character" in each of these novels "remains the man-devouring female".[5] According to Twitchell,

> Biographically Lawrence knew the most constant of his character types firsthand from his mother, but in his artistic reconstruction of her, Hardy's females seem to provide the literary template. By the time Lawrence was ready to cast this *femme fatale* into *The Rainbow,* he had already etched in his own mythic overlay (perhaps with the help of Poe) – the female as vampire. (1979, p. 25)

Twitchell sounds persuasive in describing Ursula as the *femme fatale*/female vampire whose soul "crystallized with triumph" in annihilating Skrebensky, her victim: "So she held him there, the victim, consumed, annihilated" (368). But we have to remember the author's words in "Why the Novel Matters" (which we have already quoted) that if a character in a novel keeps on "being good, according to pattern, or bad, according to pattern, or even volatile, according to pattern" he/she ceases to "live". Ursula as represented by Lawrence in *The Rainbow* is never a stereotype and she does not keep on being the *femme fatale* according to "pattern". After the departure of Skrebensky she "had her blind agonies" and all her "roused torment and passion and yearning she turned to him". In her diary she writes, "If I were the moon, I know where I would fall down" (379). This element of contradiction in the being of Ursula is indeed fascinating and it prevents the readers of the novel from appreciating Ursula's character in rigid terms.

In his letter to Garnett under review Lawrence wrote, "I don't care so much about what the woman *feels* – in the ordinary usage of the word. That presumes an ego to feel with. I only

care about what the woman *is* – what she *is* – inhumanly, physiologically, materially – according to the use of the word". In Lawrence's view, the Futurists are "crassly stupid" for instead of looking for "the new human phenomenon" they look for "the phenomenon of the science of physics to be found in human being" (II 183). In *The Rainbow* Lawrence indeed attempts to represent Ursula "what she is" – as a woman, "inhumanly, physiologically, materially".[6] For this purpose he does not trust "the old stable ego of the character". He speaks of "another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognisable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states ... of the same single radically unchanged element". Garrett Stewart in his essay titled "Lawrence, 'Being', and the Allotropic Style" describes this as "the eccentric chemistry of lexicon and syntax in Lawrence's style" (1986, p. 173). According to *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "allotropy" (chemical term) is the existence in the same state of more than one form of the same element with different properties. At this point one may quote a few sentences from "The Bitterness of Ecstasy", the penultimate chapter of the novel, where Ursula interrogates her own being, her own identity: "In every phase she was so different. Yet she was always Ursula Brangwen. But what did it mean, Ursula Brangwen? She did not know what she was" (487).

So Ursula by her own admission "did not know what she was". Mark Kinkead Weekes comments, "The Ursula story is strongly structured, enacting his [Lawrence's] new 'allotropic' sense of character shaped (after 'Hardy') by opposite forces" (1991, p. 201-2). This comment sounds compelling for the life of Ursula is full of awful contradictions. The chapters specially "Shame", "The Bitterness of Ecstasy" and "The Rainbow" contain enough of passages which bear witness to it. In "Shame" the class-mistress Winifred Inger, who initially appeared to Ursula "proud and free as a man, yet exquisite as a woman" (384), is finally rejected by her when she is possessed by "a sort of nausea" (391). To Winifred's proposal, "Come with me to London ... I will make it nice for you", she flatly retorts, "No, I don't want to go to London, I want to be myself" (391). In "The Bitterness of Ecstasy" Skrebensky who wanted to renew his love-relation with Ursula after the devastating experience in "First Love" and who was even accepted by the latter as "the new life, the reality" (492) is at last rejected by Ursula when she realizes, "He would go to India. But that was not her road" (494). So Ursula refuses to be limited to individuality. Her goal is to achieve "the whole of Woman in the human order" (495).

At the beginning of the last chapter titled "The Rainbow" we discover a new dimension of Ursula's character. She is now full of self-reproach. She considers herself "arrogant" and "wicked" in wanting "that fantastic freedom, that illusory, conceited fulfilment which she had imagined she could not have with Skrebensky". Her "ideal" is now to "marry and love her husband and fill her place simply". Thus she sees her mother "in a just and true light" by raising a question, "what had a woman but to submit?". She realizes that at last "she was a woman" (536-8). But after her confrontation with the robustly galloping horses on her walk towards Willey Green she suffers a miscarriage and Anton now belongs to the past. The question of whether she actually meets flesh and blood horses, or whether the horses are visionary, is irrelevant. And that is the substance of John Worthen's argument as put forward in *D.H. Lawrence and the Idea of the Novel*, "Whether the horses are real or not, her experience at this juncture makes them matter internally, emotionally, psychologically, psychically". Following Worthen we may comment that the significance of the encounter with the horses lies in the fact that "it serves to challenge her decision" (1979, p.71).The wild agents of nature help Ursula arrive at the realization that she has "no allocated place in the world of things" and she must break out of all social entanglements "like a nut from its shell" (545). In the "Study of Thomas Hardy" Lawrence calls for a leap out of bud into flower and challenges any tight convention that cuts an individual off from one's own vital self. Lawrence writes, "The final aim of every living thing, creature, or being is the full

achievement of itself. … Not the fruit … but the flower is the culmination and climax".[7] The "static will" (a phrase from Lawrence's essay) which makes Ursula a submissive woman and demands that she should "fill her place simply" dissolves and she looks forward to a "new liberation". The "culmination and climax" happens when she has a "full achievement" of herself in the vision of the rainbow.

This brief survey of the protagonist's life shows that as an individual Ursula is fairly "unrecognizable". In search of her authentic self Ursula passes through various phases of life and involves herself in manifold experiences. Sheila Lahiri Choudhury in her essay "Ursula's Carpaccian Dream" observes, "Her entire life is set out in a series of tableaux; a collection of canvasses depicting the history of her evolution on the path of self-awareness" (2008, p.90). The observation is fascinating. Ursula is a passionate pilgrim on the face of the earth and she always looks forward to a shining doorway ahead. Lawrence in *The Rainbow* thus chooses to deal with an archetypal theme – life is a journey, a quest. But another question remains unanswered: What is "the same single radically unchanged element" in the character of Ursula? The answer to this question may be found in Lawrence's letter to Garnett on 22 April 1914. While speaking about "The Wedding Ring" Lawrence shared with Garnett, "In the Sisters was the germ of this novel […] *woman* becoming individual, self-responsible, taking her own initiative" (II 165). So by echoing Lawrence's statement one might assert, "This is carbon" (II 183) – "the radically unchanged element" in the protagonist's character. Throughout her life Ursula wants to remain "her own responsive, personal self" (427). She experiences failure and disillusionment but her quest for the "maximum self" never discontinues. To quote the words of Jacques Berthoud from his essay titled "*The Rainbow* as Experimental Novel":

> She fails, but she is not defeated, for she continues to cling to the belief that the divergent strains in her nature can be harmonized. She does not relinquish the inherited visionary goal, which the metaphors and symbols in the novel as a whole consistently advance: that the essential self, rooted in the dark of nature, will blossom into the light of further fulfilment: that the horizontal of desire and the vertical of aspiration will blend into the rainbow arch of reconciliation. (1978, p.53)

Berthoud thus offers a lucid and insightful perspective on the "visionary goal" of Ursula by integrating that to the metaphors and symbols scattered all over the novel, and finally attempts to justify the significance of the novel's title.

The Rainbow was described by Lawrence as "a magnum opus with a vengeance" (II 173). We may say that the author had the novel's futuristic style in mind when he made that statement. Lawrence actually wanted to break away from the tradition of writing a well-made novel and he was confident that *The Rainbow* "is really something new in the art of the novel" (II 395). While commenting on *The Rainbow* John Galsworthy wrote, "I think it's aesthetically detestable. Its perfervid futuristic style revolts me".[8] We are not sure whether Lawrence was aware of Galsworthy's comment on his novel but being a conscious modern novelist he never wavered from the path of experimentation with his fictional art for he believed that "a work of art is an act of faith".[9]

References

[All references to *The Rainbow* are from the Penguin edition (Harmondsworth: Reprinted in Penguin Books, 1989), edited with an Introduction and Notes by John Worthen. All references to Lawrence's letters (if not

otherwise stated) are from *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence, Vol.II: June 1913- October 1916,* ed. George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton, Cambridge University Press, 1981]

Notes:

1. While speaking about Alberto Magnelli (1881-1971), a famous Italian painter who was acquainted with the Futurists, though not one of them, Lawrence wrote to Achsah Brewster on 19 January, 1927,

> These modern artists, who make art out of antipathy to life, always leave me feeling a little sick. It is as if they used all their skill and their effort to dress up a skeleton.

See *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence, Vol.V: March 1924 – March 1927*, ed. James T. Boulton and Lindeth Vasey. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989, p. 627. The footnote no.1 gives the details about Magnelli.

2. See the details about Filippo Marinetti, Paulo Buzzi and Ardengo Soffici in *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence, Vol. II,* footnote no. 3, p. 180.

3. D.H. Lawrence, "Why the Novel Matters", *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D.H. Lawrence,* edited with an Introduction by Edward D. McDonald, London: Heinemann, 1961, p. 537.

4. The phrase "self-inflicted sadism" taken from Lawrence's "The Crown" is quoted by Mary Freeman in her essay, "Lawrence and Futurism", p. 74.

5. Twitchell in his essay "Lawrence's Lamias" (p.25) draws our attention to the "female as vampire" in Lawrence's novels and observes that this female "becomes almost a stereotype – from Gertrude Morel to Miriam Leivers, then to Anna, Ursula, Hermione, and finally to Gudrun".

6. Mary Freeman in her essay "Lawrence and Futurism" (p. 77) succinctly argues that Lawrence in his novels "tried to give the essence of human individuality, to describe an individual as a whole and unique being". In her view, Lawrence "used the same kinds of ambiguous symbols to suggest whole individuality that he used to suggest whole perception. References to Ursula's 'dangerous helplessness', apotheosized in her experience with the horses, evoke the essence of her character, her potentiality, her 'deeper ego'".

7. D.H. Lawrence, "Study of Thomas Hardy", *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D.H. Lawrence,* edited with an Introduction by Edward D. McDonald, London: Heinemann, 1961, p. 403.

8. The statement of Galsworthy is taken from his letter to J.B. Pinker, autumn 1915. See the letter in *D.H. Lawrence: A Critical Anthology,* ed. H. Coombes, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, p.101.

9. Lawrence used the statement twice in his letters: first in his letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell on 7 April, 1916 (II 593) and next in a letter to Barbara Low on 1 May, 1916 (II 602).

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