

THE LOST BALANCE: A STUDY OF D. H. LAWRENCE'S CONCEPTION
OF THE SELF AND THE LOVE RELATIONSHIP IN
SONS AND LOVERS, THE RAINBOW, AND
WOMEN IN LOVE

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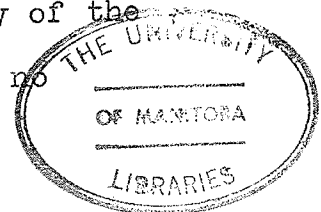
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AN ABSTRACT

In the novels Sons and Lovers, The Rainbow, and Women in Love, Lawrence was primarily concerned with the individual and his possibilities for life and love. However, Lawrence's approach is singular. He firmly rejects orthodox religious tradition with its concentration on spirituality as man's salvation and hope for fulfillment. Instead, he conceives of a new system, which I have called a philosophy, in which sensuality is seen as the true basis of all natural life and expression; mankind being only one part of the unity of creation. Lawrence dignifies and changes the meaning of 'sensuality' by renaming it the 'phallic' or 'blood-consciousness' to contrast it with the 'mental consciousness' or intellect. The blood-consciousness man shares with all living creatures; it is the source of individuation, or 'selfhood.' The mental consciousness, on the other hand, is the purely human faculty, which when used correctly, gives the individual his awareness of selfhood and thereby, enlarged possibilities for fulfillment. Ideally, the individual should achieve a balance in his soul of both the mental and blood-consciousness, with life being lived from the latter and interpreted by the former. Men and women in a love relationship meet on the phallic level of selfhood; each as an independent being apprehends the mystery of the other's independence, or 'otherness'. As there is no



awareness at this level, there can be no 'knowing about', possession, or even 'love' in the traditional sense.

Lawrence believed that the failure of society and most individuals is in the unwillingness to recognize and live by the blood-consciousness. In the novels to be discussed, he explores this personal failure in the most intense human relationships and ruthlessly exposes the consequences of the resulting loss of meaning. It is Lawrence as critic and interpreter on which this paper concentrates. My thesis is that Lawrence keenly perceived the lost balance between the mental and blood-conscious levels in modern man. In the novels I have selected, Lawrence shows that this loss of balance results in man's inability to relate both to himself and to others in a vigorous, humanly meaningful manner. That it is a lost balance presupposes that balance has been known, and can be achieved again; this is the hope that Lawrence seems to conceive in an existentialist mode. It is this hope that establishes Lawrence as an optimist in the midst of his pessimism, and as a prose-poet of exuberant vitality in the midst of a wasteland of death and despair.

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CHAPTER I

LAWRENCE'S PHILOSOPHY OF THE SELF AND THE LOVE RELATIONSHIP

The purpose of this chapter is to come to a definition of terms. Words must convey exact meanings especially when they are being used in new ways. Lawrence's understanding of the fullest realization of human potential is different from the traditional one, but the words he must use to discuss it are the same as those that have acquired meaning in traditional usage. Such words as 'love', 'self', or even 'human' to Lawrence have different meanings, and to discuss Lawrence's philosophy as found in his art we must learn to appreciate this new usage. It is Lawrence's philosophy itself that determines the meanings he gives to words which describe the human condition, so that before an approach to his novels can be attempted, we must analyze in detail his conception of this condition.

Lawrence had a profound respect for the possibilities of human development, yet he also held that most people destroy their own chance for a full life by denying one half of their being. Lawrence formulated his conception of this neglected half of life in the following way:

Now I am convinced of what I believed when I was about twenty -- that there is another seat of consciousness than the brain and the nerve system; there is a

blood-consciousness which exists in us independently of the ordinary mental consciousness, which depends on the eye as its source or connector. There is the blood-consciousness, with the sexual connection holding the same relation as the eye, in seeing, holds to the mental consciousness. One lives, knows, and has one's being in the blood, without any reference to nerves and brain. This is one half of life, belonging to the darkness. And the tragedy of this our life, and of your life, is that the mental and nerve consciousness exerts a tyranny over the blood-consciousness and that your will has gone completely over to the mental consciousness and is engaged in the destruction of your blood-being or blood-consciousness, the final liberating of the one, which is only death in result. Plato was the same. Now it is necessary for us to realise that there is this other great half of our life active in the darkness, the blood-relationship. . . .¹

Although Lawrence calls the blood-consciousness one half of life, its significance in the individual is greater than such a designation would admit. Elsewhere, in other terms, he has explained how the two halves more usually operate:

Man has two selves: one unknown, vital, living from the roots: the other, the known self, like a picture in a mirror or the objects on a tray. People live from this latter. And this latter can only feel known feelings: and its only experience of liberation is in the experience of novelty, which is the clash of sensation and a katabolic process.²

Living from the known self is not fulfilled living, but rather only a prolonged series of sensations of known origin. There can be no surprise in such a life. Once this

¹Harry T. Moore (ed.), The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence (London: William Heineman Ltd., 1962), "To Bertrand Russell . . . 8 December 1915", I, 393.

²Frieda Lawrence, Not I, But The Wind . . . (Toronto: The Macmillan Co. of Canada Ltd., 1934), p. 192.

life has been experienced in all possible variations, forward motion ends and stagnation or perversion begins:

The ordinary Englishman of the educated class goes to a woman now to masturbate himself. Because he is not going for discovery or new connection or progression, but only to repeat upon himself a known reaction.

.....

Sodomy only means that a man knows he is chained to a rock, so he will try to get the finest possible sensation out of himself.

.....

Or, the best thing such a life can do, that knows it is confined, is to set-to to arrange and assort all the facts and knowledge of the contained life. Which is what Plato did. . . .³

Such people, whether they try to make meaning out of their half life as Plato did or merely sink into the perversion that a life lived for sensation will produce, have made a drastic error in their estimation of their human potential.

Lawrence called the intellect a 'bit and a bridle' because its power is exerted to prevent the soul from coming into full bloom. The intellect, either from ignorance or fear of the unknown half of life, forces man to live only through one conscious faculty. Tension is inevitable; the 'dark half' fights for recognition in the soul. The reactions are many. Sodomy is one reaction, cruelty another:

³Moore, op. cit., "To Bertrand Russell . . . 12 February 1915", I, 316-18.

Cruelty is a form of perverted sex. . . . Priests in their celibacy get their sex lustful, then perverted, then insane, hence Inquisitions -- all sexual in origin. . . . And soldiers, being herded together, men without women, never being satisfied by a woman, as a man never is from a street affair, get their surplus sex and their frustration and dissatisfaction into the blood and love cruelty. It is sex lust fermented makes atrocity.⁴

Such expressions of repressed drives are at the end of human endurance of the tension, but nevertheless, all those who sublimate the expression of the blood-consciousness to that of the intellect feel some of the tension of a life torn from its roots. John Keats is at such a moment of tension in his "Ode to a Nightingale," according to Lawrence:

I am sure the sound of the nightingale never made any man in love with easeful death -- except by contrast. The contrast between the bright flame of positive self-perfection in the bird, and the uneasy flame of waning selflessness, for ever reaching out to be something not himself, in the poet!⁵

Thus, it is the pathos of human existence that the faculty which enables man to be aware of himself, and therefore, potentially more perfect, has been twisted into a position that makes it deny man's very self. Seen in these terms, untrammelled intellect can only be destructive, and it is all the more so because a life lived in this manner has traditionally been considered the ideal. It is Lawrence's aim to

⁴Ibid., "To Edward Garnett . . . Autumn, 1912," I, 156.

⁵F. Lawrence, op. cit., quoting from "The Nightingale" by D. H. Lawrence, p. 205.

reestablish the lost balance between the two levels of consciousness. The blood-consciousness or phallic consciousness, as he called it in later life, is as much a source of truly human qualities as is the mental consciousness; when he speaks of it as 'non-human' he means as opposed to that part of life which is 'known' and labelled by the intellect. His aim amounts almost to a mission:

. . . I sincerely believe in restoring the other, the phallic consciousness, into our lives: because it is the source of all real beauty, and all real gentleness. And those are the two things, tenderness and beauty, which will save us from horrors. . . . And in my novel I work for them directly, and direct from the phallic consciousness, which, you understand, is not the cerebral sex-consciousness, but something really deeper, and the root of poetry, lived or sung.⁶

In the blood-consciousness is found the center of existence; it is one half of human life, but it is the first half. From it the other half, the intellect, if it is to be a positive force, must grow. The intellect cannot deny the blood-being and exist in a vacuum without a hideous distortion of the self. Intellect struggling to sustain itself in sterility becomes what Lawrence calls the 'ego'; the self having lost touch with reality. It is inevitable, then, that the great intellectuals of history, by the very term we use to describe them, will have become the victims of their

⁶Moore, op. cit., "To Harriet Monroe . . . 15 March 1928," II, 1046-7.

empty egos:

Your ideas of the grand perverts is excellent. . . . they all did the same thing, or tried to: to kick off, or to intellectualise and so utterly falsify the phallic consciousness, which is the basic consciousness, and the thing we mean, in the best sense, by common sense. . . . Goethe began millions of intimacies, and never got beyond the how-do-you-do stage, then fell off into his own boundless ego. He perverted himself into perfection and Godlikeness. . . . Back of all of them lies ineffable conceit.⁷

To Lawrence, this continual falsifying of the phallic consciousness into 'boundless ego' is the great crime committed by man against life. The basic struggle that the characters in his novels must face is against their own egos. Each one's personal fulfillment is measured by his realization of, and commitment to, the need to maintain the balance between his two conscious levels. To fail to do so means staggering personal defeat because all expression of a soul delivered over to the ego is twisted; there can be no self-respect, no friendship, no knowledge, and no love, only egotism. Even the sexual drives, whose relationship to the phallic consciousness Lawrence compared to the eye's relationship to the mental consciousness, have become divorced from their source and intellectualized. The result of this intellectualization he called 'sex in the head', or what Frieda Lawrence said was 'a theory of loving' and meant only

⁷Ibid., "To Aldous Huxley . . . 27 March 1928," II, 1049.

egotism again:

But there's the trouble; men have most of them got their sex in the head nowadays, and nowhere else. They start all their deeper reactions in their heads, and work themselves from the top downwards, which of course brings disgust, because you're only having yourself all the time, no matter what other individual you take as machine-a-plaisir, you're only taking yourself all the time. . . . 'God enters from below,' said the Egyptians, and that's right.⁸

One cannot be too self-conscious without having become victim to the idea of one's self that is also called the ego. Any 'idea' of human nature is therefore wrong because of its very attempt to justify what it finds:

I could do with Dostoevsky if he did not make all men fallen angels. We are not angels. It is a tiresome conceit. Men want to be Sadists or they don't. If they do, well and good. There's no need to drag in the fallen angel touch to save ourselves in our own sight. I am most sick of this divinity-of-man business. People are not important. I insist on it.⁹

There are not two contradictory sides to human nature, with either one needing justification; human nature is a whole, a balance. There should be no tension in existence and there would not be if people could accept their created selves in their original wholeness. Then people would be no more self-conscious than an awareness of being presupposes; they would be more impersonal, and would stop "for ever fingering over

⁸ Ibid., "To Willard Johnson . . . ? 12 October 1922," II, 726.

⁹ Ibid., "To S. S. Koteliansky . . . 15 February 1916," I, 429.

their own souls," preferring instead to "create a new life, a new common life, a new complete tree of life from the roots that are within them."¹⁰ pride is only justified in these terms: "One's pride should be in one's wholeness, not in an intensification of one's own partiality.

.
The great sin is the trying to destroy the living balance."¹¹

Once man has severed himself from the roots of his being he becomes uncertain and, in the hope of finding mooring for his soul, grasps everywhere for security. The most harmful kind of reaching out for security is the compulsion to dominate, feel in control, and therefore secure. This is the 'will-to-power' that Lawrence represents in his novels. There are many manifestations of this 'will-to-power,' but its effects are always the same; the crushing out of all spontaneous life both in the victim and the perpetrator. The 'will-to-power' is found on the national as well as the personal level:

Everything in America goes by will. A great negative will seems to be turned against all spontaneous life-- there seems to be no feeling at all--no genuine bowels of compassion and sympathy; all this gripped, iron,

¹⁰ Ibid., "To Katherine Mansfield . . . 12 December 1915," I, 395.

¹¹ Ibid., "To Mabel Dodge Luhan . . . 10 February 1924," II, 778-9.

benevolent will, which in the end is diabolic.¹²

Domination can take many forms; it can even come disguised as love. In this most intimate of human relationships it can be the most destructive. In a love relationship two people are so closely bound together that the perversion of one partner will inevitably scar the other. If the ties also include the one of blood, in the name of love, the beloved's very soul can be extinguished. Lawrence reflects the anguish that such relationships can produce:

Muriel is the girl I have broken with. She loves me to madness and demands the soul of me. . . .

.

Nobody can have the soul of me. My mother has had it, and nobody can have it again. Nobody can come into my very self again, and breathe me like an atmosphere. . . . Louie . . . would never demand to drink me up and have me. . . . She will never plunge her hands through my blood and feel for my soul and make me set my teeth and shiver and fight away.¹³

Relationships in which one partner attempts to 'possess' the other in the name of love are self-destructive. Either the 'possessed' partner shrinks to nonentity or, in struggling against being enveloped, breaks the bond. In both cases the would-be 'possessor' is left destitute having achieved only death by his 'love'. Clearly, love is in no way a

¹²Ibid., "To Else Jaffe . . . 27 September 1922," II, 721.

¹³Ibid., "To Rachel Annand Taylor . . . 3 December 1910, I, 70.

'possession' in Lawrence's terms.

To Lawrence, only two complete human beings, satisfied and confident in their own 'being' can come together in a true love relationship. They must have the courage to face the mystery of life in profound respect for its infinite variation. On the human level they must be willing to submit to the acceptance of their own uniqueness and that of their beloved. Each is whole in himself, perfect in his creation, yet with a need to 'know' in full contact and relation with other complete beings. Lawrence often spoke of this kind of knowledge in which a fully balanced soul can apprehend life. In the same way as all true knowledge, these truths enter 'from below'. He held this idea all his life:

Somehow, I think we come into knowledge (unconscious) of the most vital parts of the cosmos through touching things.¹⁴

But what we all want, madly, is human contact. That I find more and more--not ideas;--transference of feeling--human contact.¹⁵

And much later, his view is only more refined:

After all, we shall never again know the heavens as we know the clock. . . . It's life that matters--and the big thing we've lost out of life needs to be recovered, livingly. . . . I know that no knowledge is knowledge unless it has its direct emotional-passional

¹⁴Ibid., "To Blanche Jennings . . . 15 December 1908," I, 40.

¹⁵Ibid., "To Blanche Jennings . . . 28 January 1910," I, 60.

reference. Scientific truth is an illusion.¹⁶

The confidence that comes of self-possession and an awe held for all that is not one's self results in a new kind of perception that will yield this more meaningful knowledge.

Frieda Lawrence describes this process of learning as Lawrence himself experienced it:

When Lawrence first found a gentian, a big single blue one, I remember feeling as if he had a strange communion with it, as if the gentian yielded up its blueness, its very essence, to him. Everything he met had the newness of a creation just that moment come into being.¹⁷

Each individual, then, must maintain a balance in his soul between the mental and blood-conscious levels and live from the latter upward, so to speak. The security of such a life lived by the natural order will eliminate both the tension of the need to justify oneself and the need to control both one's own soul and those of others. The individual will simply 'be'. From this center he will be free to look outward to meaningful relationships and knowledge without any sacrifice of 'self'. However, it is essential that one take pride in one's own uniqueness. One must know one's self to its depths and take pride in this knowledge of that which separates one from the rest of creation. If this is

¹⁶ Ibid., "To Frederick Carter . . . 26 July 1923," II, 748-9.

¹⁷ F. Lawrence, op. cit., p. 35.

not a natural process it must be learned and, as Frieda Lawrence admits, this is not easy to do:

Being born and reborn is no joke, and being born into your own intrinsic self, that separates and singles you out from all the rest -- it's a painful process.¹⁸

Frieda believed that Lawrence himself exhibited this state of 'selfhood' that he conceived of as the ideal:

Another thing I understood: there was no 'God-Almightiness' about him, like the universal 'I-am-everlasting' feeling of Goethe, for instance. He knew 'I am D. H. Lawrence from my head to my toes, and there I begin and there I end and my soul lives inside me. All else is not me, but I can have a relationship with all that is not me in the world, and the more I realize the otherness of other things around me, the richer I am.'¹⁹

The perception of, and respect for, the 'otherness of other things' is essential to Lawrence's understanding of the self in interaction. For the man, this means a recognition of the fundamental difference between himself as a male and the woman as a female, beyond personal differences. Lawrence often wrote to his friends of this difference:

There is another quality in woman that you do not know, so you can't estimate it. You don't know that a woman is not a man with different sex. She is a different world. You do not understand that enough. Your world is all of one hemisphere.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 75.

²⁰ Moore, op. cit., "To S. S. Koteliansky . . . ? 4 December, 1914," I, 295.