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The Forbidden Fruit: Aestheticism and Sexuality in D H Lawrence's essay '*Fantasia of the Unconscious*'

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Abstract

D H Lawrence presents his concept of the aesthetic as a "lapsing out" of the conscious self in his essay *Fantasia of the Unconscious*. What Lawrence advocates is the secular, non-dogmatic yet strangely religious "wisdom of the soul" which is at once the source and the consequence of the true experience of beauty - that is, an emotional logic of knowledge through feeling rather than understanding. He reiterates that the unconscious is not, of course, the clue to the Freudian theory. The real clue is sex. A sexual motive is to be attributed to all human activity.

Keywords: Self, Sexuality, Aestheticism

Introduction

The semantic range of the term 'self' as used by Lawrence in his works is considerably large. Beginning with the simplest reference to the individual person as A or B, the word gains in profundity, as its meaning moves towards the individual's whole, integrated being. In the question of self-identity of the human being, besides other divisions and splits in the individual being, there are also two major conflicts. One is the 'eternal' opposition between the body and the soul and the other is the conflict between mental consciousness and spontaneous being. While speaking in favour of the body and the spontaneous being, Lawrence neither negates the soul nor belittles the power and usefulness of the mind. All that he wants is a wholeness of being and a fullness of life in which the creative spontaneity is not thwarted by the intervention of mental consciousness or any dry concept of the soul. And this conception of the wholeness of self excludes all divisions and internecine conflicts between different aspects of the individual being and includes everything vital to its being, from the bodily consciousness to the unconscious. However, in Lawrence's concept, the individual self, even as it realizes its fullness of being, is

vitality connected with the entire "circumambient universe".

Lawrence described *Fantasia of the Unconscious* in a letter as "not about psychoanalysis particularly—but a first attempt at establishing something definite in place of the vague Freudian Unconscious" (*The Letters* 40). Indeed, he uses a discussion of Freudianism merely as a pretext for expounding his own views about the unconscious—which are central to Lawrence's philosophy. In pursuit of that central root of human consciousness he proposed to elevate the sexual theme, to show that it had the dignity of any other human or "spiritual" relationships. From the time he was young until he was a mature man and even in his last phase as a writer, he tried to emphasize sex as a means to improve the relationship between man and woman. Because of this he was prosecuted several times and his books were banned. He was censored all his life, even by men of such literary excellence as T.S. Eliot who talked of Lawrence's "sexual morbidity" (Prasad 203). Lawrence speaks of a greater impulse that is more religious or spiritual thus:

And what is this other, greater impulse? It is the desire of the human male to build a world: not "to build a world for you, dear"; but to build up out of his own self and his own belief and his own effort something wonderful. Not merely something useful. Something wonderful.... And the motivity of sex is subsidiary to this: often directly antagonistic. That is, the essentially religious or creative motive is the first motive for all human activity. (9)

One of the major conflicts that Lawrence sees in men and women, especially in modern times, is the tug-of-war between the mental consciousness directed by the

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will and the driving force of living and being called spontaneity. This conflict is often treated as a complex dimension of the mind-body opposition by Lawrence. In an integrated being these conflicts are resolved and there is harmony between the working of the ratiocinative powers and the desires of the body. In Lawrence's handling of this conflict, words like 'will', 'mind', and 'head' fall within the semantic range of 'mental consciousness', and words such as 'passion', 'organic life', 'sensuality', 'blood', and 'body' are within that of 'spontaneity'.

Lawrence's Encounter with the Self

The individual's world, by the very nature of the individual's being, cannot remain static. As Rabindranath Tagore says, human life is like a river, which strikes its banks not to find itself closed in by them, but to realise anew every moment that it has its unending opening to the sea. The world widens from the individual's core self, and draws into itself, in a dynamic manner, one by one or in groups, several other individuals, resulting in numerous kinds of relationships, which, to all those interested in discovering structures, would present an amazing parallel with linguistic structures. Like the Richardsian "interanimation" between words in different "contexts of situation," the individuals in different contexts of relationship have several kinds of interactions, and move up, as the words do, to enter into relationships in "higher" structures (Dawes26). Through an interesting analogous process, individuals enter into familial, societal, racial and other relationships in a wide variety that could be seen in the phonological, morphological and syntactical processes of the languages of different climes.

Lawrence begins *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* by claiming that "the whole of modern life is a shrieking failure" (41) and denouncing psychoanalysis as "a huge slimy serpent of sex, and heaps of excrement, and a myriad repulsive little horrors spawned between sex and excrement" (9). He rejects Freud's definition of the unconscious as "repressed incest impulses" (10-11). For him, "incest is normal and neuroses result from inhibiting this incest craving"(10-11). As he explains: "the incest motive is in its origin not a pristine impulse, but a logical extension of the existent idea of sex and love. The mind, that is, transfers the idea of incest into the affective - passionate psyche, and keeps it there as a repressed motive" (12). This attack is based upon Lawrence's abhorrence of idealism, defined by him

as the "motivizing of the great affective sources by means of ideas", which is "the final peril of human consciousness" (14). By initiating life through ideas, Lawrence is saying "we deny our essential unconscious, which is non-mental" (15). For Lawrence, "knowledge should not be interpreted in terms of ideals or ideas, but symbolically: it is mythical and dynamic" (*Fantasia*, 111).

All his life, Lawrence wrote passionately against what he called the cerebralization of feeling. In *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, to convey his concept of the aesthetic as a "lapsing out" of the conscious self, he describes some of the ways in which selfhood and self-awareness may be damaged by utilitarian "understanding" in childhood: "The warm, swift, sensual self is steadily and persistently denied, damped, weakened throughout all the period of childhood. And by sensual ... we mean the more impulsive reckless nature" (117). Lawrence's attempt is to show that much of the problem of our failing to experience what Paul Morel calls the "real, real flame of feeling" with anyone arises out of a nihilistic impulse towards either utilitarian logic or pure, abstract "knowing" (Ross 5). It can stem from an excessive idealization of everything while perversely rejecting that idealization. Hence he argues in *Fantasia* that this idealization is a result of our over-rationalizing everything on a purely mental plane, in favour of a limited or unilateral perspective that appeals to us, thereby closing out our consideration of the possibilities of ugliness and aberration in the world, and denying us the possibilities of infinite potential.

What Lawrence advocates is the secular, non-dogmatic yet strangely religious "wisdom of the soul" which is at once the source and the consequence of the true experience of beauty - that is, an emotional logic of knowledge through feeling rather than understanding. He acknowledges in *Fantasia* that his position is not devoid of difficulties: "The goal is *not* ideal. The aim is *not* mental consciousness. We want *effectual* human beings, not conscious ones. The final aim is not to *know*, but to *be*. There never was a more risky motto than that: *Know thyself*" (68). And in the same book he asserts, "Do not ask me to transfer the pre-mental dynamic knowledge into thought. It cannot be done. The knowledge that *I am I* can never be thought: only known" (34). In other words, selfhood can only be apprehended and achieved instinctively and intuitively, not arrived at through a

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progression of conscious thought or through the logical application of an intellectual process. Hence Miriam in *Sons and Lovers* and Gudrun in *Women in Love* can think and ponder and be active intellectually, but they cannot act upon their thoughts. Such people, Lawrence suggests, only have the reductive power of false knowledge that comes through excessive “thought” and cerebral or abstract “understanding.” They can be “conscious” but not “effectual” human beings.

In the “Introduction” to *Fantasia* Lawrence presents his concept of a “subjective science” as “the science which is as yet quite closed to us ... the science which proceeds in terms of life and is established on data of living experience and of sure intuition” (*Fantasia* 12). The use of the oxymoron “sure intuition” reinforces the essential dualism inherent in his concept. Hence, he attempts to comprehend, rather than transcend this dualism by referring back to the ancient “science in terms of life” that the modern world recalls “only in its half-forgotten, symbolic terms. More or less forgotten as knowledge; remembered as ritual, gesture and myth-story” (13). Therefore, like Schiller, Lawrence identifies twin, co-existent and opposite impulses in the desire for creativity. He calls these the religious (primary) motive and the sexual (secondary) motive, between which “there is a great conflict between the interests of the two, at all times”. Both have to be considered together, “like man and wife, or father and son,” in order to trace the source of artistic and aesthetic creativity in the individual human being. According to Lawrence, moreover, this inquiry begins with the acceptance of what we do not know, rather than with the enumerating of what we know. “The first business of every faith is to declare its ignorance,” and this maxim holds good for the aesthetic faith of the artist as well (18-20).

In *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*, Lawrence, while criticizing Freud’s concept of the unconscious, appreciates Triggant Burrow’s argument against the depiction of sex as “a mental object” in the Freudian unconscious. According to Burrow, “it is knowledge of sex that constitutes sin, and not sex itself. Adam and Eve fell, not because they had sex, or even because they committed the sexual act, but because they became aware of their sex and of the possibility of the act” (qtd. in Burden 206). As Burden concludes from it, for Lawrence and for Burrow, “the Freudian unconscious

is nothing other than repressed ideas about sex, only a mental consciousness of sex” (53).

Lawrence begins his essay *Fantasia of the Unconscious* by “making a little apology to psychoanalysis”. He reiterates: “The unconscious is not, of course, the clue to the Freudian theory. The real clue is sex. A sexual motive is to be attributed to all human activity....What Freud says is always *partly* true. And half a loaf is better than no bread. But really, there is the other half of the loaf. All is *not* sex” (8).

In the second and third chapters of *Fantasia*, “The Holy Family” and “Plexuses, Planes and so on”, Lawrence attempts to identify and define different types of will – as the mental, spiritual, psychical/intuitive, instinctive and physical. He emphasizes that all the different types must be brought together under a broad rubric of opposite categorization as “mental” versus “instinctive” consciousness. These opposites need to work together, not against or over one another, in order to achieve a harmonious, co-operative relationship within all realms/spheres of human life and activity. And the first step toward attaining this harmony begins with the establishing and acknowledging of each individual as unique: “The quality of individuality cannot be derived. The new individual, in his singleness of self, is a perfectly new whole. He is not a permutation and combination of old elements transferred through the parents. No, he is something underived and utterly unprecedented, unique, a new soul” (30-31).

This is not to say that an individual human being, like an individual work of art, does not contain the elements of its creators, the “father-germ and the mother-germ,” which retain their identities or are identifiable in the individual. However, he warns that “the moment the mystery of pure individual newness ceased to be enacted and fulfilled, the blood-stream would dry up and be finished. Mankind would die out” (*Fantasia*31-32). In other words, if all that could be achieved by mankind was endless repetition or imitation (“cloning” so to speak), based on rationale alone, the impulse to create would die out. The true emotional logic depends upon the promise of renewed individuality to exist and to create.

An important aspect of the body which other writers have not thought about is the centres of consciousness or great nerve-centres situated in the

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human body that Lawrence conceives to be the places of origin of “all spontaneous life, desire, impulse and first-hand individual consciousness.” He discusses them briefly in “Education of the People” and at length in *Fantasia of the Unconscious*. Lawrence, still participating in the mind-body conflict, says these centres are located in the body and *not* in the brain. These four centres, the solar plexus, the lumbar ganglion, the cardiac plexus and the thoracic ganglion, which “establish the first field of our consciousness,” are “the four corner-stones of our psyche” (159).

In terms of Lawrence’s description of consciousness, “actual sex connection means bringing into connection the dynamic poles of sex in man and woman” (*Fantasia* 193). As “every existence is relative to other existences” (188), it is sex that provides the essential connection between individuals. During sexual intercourse the four “fields of touch” (99), relating to the senses, are in harmony, two acting in sympathy with the other partner, two resisting. That is, the solar plexus of the lower subjective consciousness acts sympathetically towards the object, whilst the lumbar ganglion acts antipathetically. This is matched by the sympathetic cardiac plexus and the resistant thoracic ganglion of the upper, objective plane. In the upper consciousness the positive flow from the cardiac plexus flows out the self to the other person, whilst the negative flow of the ganglion results in “transferring to itself the impression of the object to which it has attended” (*Psychoanalysis* 34). In this way, the two beings involved in the sexual act are united, whilst remaining separate. Sex affirms one’s own being through the upper consciousness.

An all-encompassing awareness is the foundation and the source of a true understanding of the beautiful. So Lawrence considers the emotional logic of confronting the unknown and the unknowable. For instance, trees, for Lawrence, are a symbol of the “savage”, the “preconscious” and the “sacred” elements in beauty. They also emanate a sense of “profound indifference,” particularly towards events in the human world. They are “altars” of “primeval individuality” on which “You can sacrifice the whole of your spirituality....But they will live you down” (46) because they possess a vastness of life that art shares in, but which eludes human categorization and definition. Lawrence reiterates the importance of “individual human integrity” which he regards as the basis of emotional logic that leads to true education and he deplores the persistent lack of

balance in different aspects of identity: “We either love too much, or impose our will too much, are too spiritual or too sensual. There is not and cannot be any actual norm of human conduct” (47).

Speaking of the sense of wonder in the child’s consciousness, Lawrence says, “The sheer delight of a child’s apperception is based on *wonder*.” “Knowledge and wonder counteract one another : as knowledge increases wonder decreases”. According to him , “all our wonderful education and learning is producing a grand sum total of boredom,” because the educational systems insist on knowledge but fail to see that “even the real scientist works in the sense of wonder” (*Lawrence :Late essays* 132). Lawrence’s concept of education is very much connected with his concept of the individual and his direct relationship with life. As Raymond Williams says, “his arguments about education are inseparable from his arguments about life and society.” For Lawrence, education is “a set of active decisions about how we shall live” (*On Education* 7).

Lawrence, as a writer, is very much alive to the great possibilities of interrelationships in the family. The very survival and continuity of human kind on earth depend on the care and love the adult world shows towards the child. Any civilization that ignores the well-being of the child only marches towards extinction. It is true that sexual pleasure is independent of the desire to have children; men and women engage themselves in sex not merely because they need their progeny. But it is children who bring meaning to the institution of marriage. As Lawrence’s one-time friend Bertrand Russell defines it, “marriage is something more serious than the pleasure of two people in each other’s company; it is an institution which, through the fact that it gives rise to children, forms part of the intimate texture of society, and has an importance extending far beyond the personal feelings of the husband and the wife.” In Russell’s view, “but for children, there would be no need of any institution concerned with sex, but as soon as children enter in, the husband and wife, if they have any sense of responsibility or any affection for their offspring, are compelled to realize that their feelings towards each other are no longer what is of most importance” (Russell 63-64).

Chapter 6 is entitled “First Glimmerings of Mind” and constitutes Lawrence’s detailed analysis of the meaning and “true goal” of education as “the full and

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harmonious development of ... consciousness, always with regard to the individual nature of the child” (68). The modern system of education is at fault because it devises and imposes a limited intellectual education, suppressing the spontaneous impulse towards wisdom and operating by a crude and relentless application of limited formulas to the great questions of life. In short, Lawrence considers the modern system of education as a forcing of growth at the cost of an individual’s natural and spontaneous development—“at the expense of life itself.” The result is stunted growth or distorted development and an incapacitation in achieving one’s full potential. It has become “the leading forth of the primary consciousness, the potential or dynamic consciousness, into mental consciousness, which is finite and static” (69-70). Intuition, wherein resides man’s capacity to respond spontaneously to beauty, intuition that is indeed the defining characteristic of being human and the basis for infinite possibilities of human imagination and achievement becomes subjugated to the limited, mundane and “static” realm of fixed communal ideas and mass regimentation.

For a true logic of emotion to exist and operate, education like art must resist finality and closure, because “the nearer a conception comes towards finality, the nearer does the dynamic relation, out of which this concept has arisen, draw to a close. To know is to lose” (71-72). Thus, for Lawrence, although “knowledge and death are part of our natural development,” (72), any knowledge that imposes finality is by implication a leading into death. Only as long as the dynamic interactions between the individual and the world of sensual experience remain open-ended and ongoing does life continue: “When I have a finished mental concept of a beloved, or a friend, then the love and the friendship is dead. It falls to the level of an acquaintance. As soon as I have a finished mental conception, a full idea even of myself, then dynamically I am dead. To know is to die” (72).

According to Lawrence, then, an individual human being’s life should be lived from the deep, self-responsible core of his or her being, not according to superficial ideas imposed from the outside, by an external authority. When our natural instincts and capacity for spontaneous action become sublimated into our conscious ideas and conceptual ideals, we are “bound to experiment and try one idea after another” (85). Even passion and

desire become mental ideals in us. We end up by getting “our sex in our head” and the most basic, natural sensual attraction becomes a mental experiment, “to the rage and horror” (85) of both men and women.

Lawrence makes an impassioned appeal for the rejection of abstract ideas in favour of real individual that is firmly rooted in the physical world. To this end he rejects the leadership of ideas and, much like Schiller, reposes his faith in the aesthetic leadership of the artist. Indeed he appears more in consonance with the Kantian concept of a leadership collective, where every rational being must so act as if he were through his maxim always a legislating member in the universal kingdom of ends. It was a concept put into practice by M.K. Gandhi in India’s independence movement, and echoed in the idealism of Rabindranath Tagore’s poems of the same period, such as “Where the mind is without fear, and the head is held high” (Paul 162) .

Lawrence too, rejects pure abstractions that are, after all, excessively refined, sterile mental ideas, and extreme positions in any line of thought. The natural competence for achieving and maintaining a balance between “knowledge,” “understanding” and wisdom is found only in the artist. For him, it follows that the natural capacity for leadership also resides in the aesthetically capable individual who can operate through emotional logic. Clearly, in making such a commitment, Lawrence is not only situating himself against ideas and theories that, imposed upon ordinary people, turn the living individual into an automaton or abstraction. He is, indeed, situating himself on the side of the “fullness of life” itself, a fullness that comes only through the acknowledgement and acceptance of a logic based on emotion rather than intellect.

Conclusion

Lawrence’s conception of the real self is connected with his belief in the deepest consciousness in blood or the unconscious. Lawrence strongly criticized the Freudian unconscious, seeking support from the American psychologist Trigant Burrow, who considered the Freudian unconscious as “merely the representation of *conscious* sexual life as it exists in a state of repression.” In Lawrence’s concept, “the true unconscious” is not a site of repressions, but “the well-head, the fountain of real activity” (*Psychoanalysis* 207). Lawrence believes that

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self-realization is possible through spontaneous living. One has to go beyond the *conscious* self to reach the *deepest whole* self. Even as he believes in the wholeness of the individual, he has his own misgivings about the concept of oneness and wholeness of humanity.

Hence, for Lawrence, out of “all the wild storms of anxiety and frenzy” comes our realization that “It isn’t our business to live anybody’s life, or to die anybody’s death, except our own. Nor to save anybody’s soul, nor to put anybody in the right” (*Fantasia* 148). Our responsibility is to ourselves, and for ourselves, alone, and it is a goal difficult enough to achieve. Like his contemporaries, Lawrence too affirms the modernist imperative of combating the fragmentation of the human persona by withdrawing from, and ignoring the “false, fine frenzy of the seething world. To turn away, now, each one into the stillness and solitude of his own soul” (148). Here is his equivalent of Eliot’s poetic “still point in a turning world” (Graves 237) with the difference that Lawrence deploys the philosopher’s method of logic and definition to arrive at this conclusion. As he affirms again and again, in his definition of the aesthetic principle, “It is life we have to live by, not machines and ideals. And life means nothing else, even, but the spontaneous living soul which is our central reality. The spontaneous, living, individual soul, this is the clue, and the only clue. All the rest is derived” (*Fantasia* 152).

It is by following this “clue” that we arrive at “the very centre” of the maze of the contradictions of personality and human life, “there to be filled with a new strange stability, polarized in unfathomable richness” (149) that is the gift and the reward of the truly emotional logic. His final urging to his reader is a call to leave off fence-sitting, “temporizing,” and to make a decisive effort towards what he calls “genuine action,” towards implementing our capacity for emotional logic in the real world.

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