

H.D. AND LAWRENCE: TWO ALLUSIONS

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Much has been made of the intensity and significance of H.D.'s relationship with D.H. Lawrence, both in terms of her emotional attachment to him and in matters of poetic influence. In addition to passages in H.D.'s novels which clearly refer to Lawrence, there are at least two passages in her work which invoke and depend upon intertextual connections between the two.

The first of these passages appears in H.D.'s second collection of poems, *Hymen*, as the title of a poem. The poem given the title "White World" in both the 1925 and the 1983 *Collected Poems* originally carried the title "The Whole White World." This phrase also appears in Lawrence's *Aaron's Rod*, a novel he began in November 1917 while living with H.D. and Richard Aldington at 44 Mecklenburgh Square. H.D.'s poem is an overly-secure vision of "happiness complete" in which bee melds with flower and destructive sexual politics disappear into joy:

Yet not one wearies,
joined is each to each
in happiness complete
with bush and flower:
ours is the wind-breath
at the hot noon-hour,
ours is the bee's soft belly and
the blush of the rose-petal,
lifted, of the flower. (CP 135)

In Lawrence's novel, Aaron, remembering his wife Lottie, understands that she had always seen herself "as woman, and particularly as mother," in the role of "the first great source of life and being, and also of culture," as a kind of great Earth-Mother assuming the efficacy of her fecundity as the generating matrix from which everything positive in the world has sprung. Lawrence's sardonic remark follows: "Sure enough, Lottie had

never formulated this belief inside herself. But it was formulated for her in the whole world. It is the substantial and professed belief of *the whole white world*" (italics mine).¹ Though it is impossible to know who is echoing whom in this intertextual exchange (I suspect it is Lawrence answering H.D. rather than the reverse), it is clear that both passages emerge from a similar context. And, if Lawrence's passage is tinged with his own cynical, misogynist irony even without the support of its intertext, the connection adds an unsuspected irony to an H.D. poem which is otherwise notably innocuous. While Lawrence bitterly denies Lottie's assumption of a woman's power, H.D. reclaims that power as part of a natural order—and a naturally sexual order—bringing together her charged, visionary images of flower and bee into an easy conjunction.

Another passage from H.D. echoing Lawrence depends on a similar reversal, but in a much fuller, more insistent fashion. It comes in the concluding section of "Sigil," part of the (until recently) unpublished collection of poems from the 30's, *A Dead Priestess Speaks*. When Lawrence's *The Man Who Died* was published, Stephen Guest brought a copy to H.D., telling her that she was the Priestess of Isis (TF 141). It is possible that the title *A Dead Priestess Speaks* constitutes an answer to such an identification, shifting the emphasis from the dead man to a woman whose voice of prophecy comes back into life from beyond the grave. In this sense, the final portion of "Sigil" gives voice back to another woman who faced death in the denouement of *Women in Love*. In "Advent," the 1933 notebook of her time with Freud, H.D. notes her inability to come to terms with the Lawrence of an earlier period, when she was quite close to him: "I have carefully avoided coming to terms with Lawrence, the Lawrence of *Women in Love* and *Lady Chatterley*" (TF 134). But the ending of "Sigil," possibly pre-dating Freud but certainly brought into place in *A Dead Priestess Speaks* several years later, is closely tied to this earlier Lawrence; it works exactly as such a "coming to terms" with his work.

"Sigil" echoes *Women in Love* in a number of details—its images of snow, the moon, the "northern gloom"—and it contains at one point a quite Lawrentian plea for oblivion at the hands of the poetic other/lover, recalling the strangulation scene near the end of the novel: "take me, / let your hand / gather my throat." This section concludes:

take me,
 O ultimate breath,
 O master-lyrist,
 beat my wild heart to death. (CP 417)

But in the final section of "Sigil" this Lawrentian hyperbole turns in an exact reversal;

the ecstatic finality of this near death becomes something very different:

“I love you,”
spoken in rhapsodic metre,
leaves me cold:

I have a horror
of finality,
I would rather
hazard a guess,
wonder whether
either of us
could for a moment
endure the other,
after the first fine flavour
of irony
had worn off. (CP 418)

This section opposes the finality of “I love you”—a position similar to the one taken by Birkin (a figure for Lawrence) in the novel—and also precisely reverses the final position of Gudrun, for whom the end of a destructive love-affair is a matter of the bitterest irony. As Lawrence writes,²

But even as she lay in fictitious transport, bathed in the strange, false sunshine of hope in life, something seemed to snap in her, and a terrible cynicism began to gain upon her, blowing in like a wind. Everything turned to irony with her: the last flavour of everything was ironical. When she felt her pang of undeniable reality, this was when she knew the hard irony of hopes and ideas.

In H.D.’s hands, this final irony transforms into the sardonic memory of a mere beginning, a “first fine flavour” rather than a “last flavour of everything.” The mark of the beginning of a lost relationship, the irony is seen as the limitation it is. The attempted strangulation of Gudrun by Gerald near the end of the novel becomes in H.D.’s poem “let your hand / gather my throat”—a recognition of the false and self-destructive ecstasy of the early stage of an ephemeral affair rather than the grimly ironic climax toward which it inexorably moves. Where *Women in Love* ends with the irony of despair,

"Sigil" works as a necessary trivialization; it allows, in a sense, the figure of Gudrun to have the last laugh, to escape the domination of a Gerald. Or—in a political and poetic sense—it allows H.D. to move beyond, to revise the destructive poetics of Lawrence and to create her place through a reading of the underside—the "other-side" as she puts it in an early passage of "Sigil" of that other "master-lyrist."

Both of these passages have in common an adversarial relationship with the misogynist poetics of Lawrence, and they both depend on an implicit reversal of the positions he assumes in his novels. Yet they clearly testify to the power H.D. found in Lawrence's work. In this sense they both work as small examples of H.D.'s life-long effort to come to terms with problematic Lawrence, an effort which is as intense in its manifestations and revisions as the similar attempt to deal with the troublesome figure of Ezra Pound, that effort stretching from the early years of the century until the late memoir *End to Torment*. Now that H.D.'s work is receiving some of the attention it deserves, it is time to pay more detailed attention to these kinds of intertextual moments in her work. I suspect there are many.

NOTES

1. *Aaron's Rod*. London: Martin Secker, 1922.
2. *Women in Love*. London: Heinemann, 1954.