



NAIVE AND CRITICAL VITALISM IN D.H LAWRENCE SELECT WORKS

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ABSTRACT

The movement of the living is caught in the duality between a "native" vitalism and a "critical" vitalism that pits intellectuals at the turn of the 20th century. In his introduction to *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy*, Frederick Burwick explains their difference. What he calls "naive" vitalism seeks to reconcile the Christian faith and the biological discoveries of the nineteenth century, and supposes that an external intervention, in the form of a flow, for example, comes to animate the inert matter. "Critical" vitalism based on the theories of evolution, considers that vital energy is inherent in things, and not infused into them by a divine authority. D.H. Lawrence's deliberate aesthetic of oscillation explores the Vitalism of human relationships. While D.H. Lawrence's interest in the "vitality" of the human body could be read as an idiosyncratic response to the political problems of the era, his enduring attention to the mechanizing forces of industrial society is in fact typical of modernist literary practice. For Lawrence and his contemporaries, the relationship between embodiment and mass politics was crucially important to literary practice. For Lawrence, vitalism offered a way of solving the intractable problem of collectivism in the era of mass habituation. This political project can be seen most clearly in *The Plumed Serpent*, a novel that extends the problem of modern automatism to the political body as a whole. Lawrence's vitalism would seem incompatible with a political solution to the idealism of modernity.

Kew Words: D.H Lawrence- Naive Vitalism- Critical Vitality- Politics

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Introduction

Naive Vitalism and Critical Vitality: Naive vitalism recognizes the perfection of living forms and deduces from it the intervention of "dominant factors" independent of the laws of physics in that they are conscious and tend towards perfection. Burwick summarizes the postulate of naive vitalism as follows:

In producing the shape of a plant or animal, we see numerous outer and inner causes or conditions come into play, which depend on energetic activity. Since these energies are unitarily regulated, as the plan regulates the building of a

house, we have to infer to superior agencies, which we need to think of as dominant¹

As for critical vitalism, taken up by Bergson, he seeks to resituate these "dominant factors" no longer in a religious dimension, but simply parallel to the laws of physics. Thus, naive vitalism only looks at the organism in its perfection, and it deduces a global vision of the movement of life, simply towards ever more perfection, whereas critical vitalism is interested in all the forms that life takes and does not attribute any generalizing intention to the developments that an organism undergoes under classes of his life. In the poems, it will be seen that naive vitalism is generally illustrated by a movement

of pure creation, the image of a unified breath bringing life, while critical vitalism is illustrated by movements related to procreation, and even to proliferation, or adaptation, to survival.

Lawrence takes this picture in "Michelangelo" (this version was written between 1907 and 1911):

God, lonely, put down His mouth in a kiss of creation,
He kissed thee, O Man, in a passion of love and left
The vivid life of His love in thy mouth and thy nostrils ; (CP 918)

Lawrence refers to the Christian God because he comments, in this poem, a reproduction of The Creation of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. We also know that at that time, he has already moved away from Christianity. In fact, he addresses his professor of botany in a letter of December 1909:

Life seems to me barbarous, recklessly wasteful and destructive, often hideous and dreadful : but, on the whole, beautiful... I owe you a debt. You were my first live teacher of philosophy : you showed me the way out of a torturing crude Monism, past Pragmatism, into a sort of crude but appeasing Pluralism... (L I 147, 5 December 1909)

To a certain extent, Lawrence seems to have adopted an evolutionist conception of life. It would be a force that creates, transforms and selects without an intention necessarily being present, which is consistent with critical vitalism. However, this letter also betrays Lawrence's fascination with the cruelty and mystery of life, so beautiful ("beautiful"): life continues to harbor a mystery, probably of a religious nature, that would bring Lawrence closer to naïve vitalism. As will be seen, this coexistence of the two theories will always be problematic in Lawrence.

The disappearance of the name of God, replaced by a doubt (-who? ||), That Vivian de Sola Pinto considers inspired by "The Tyger" by William Blakeⁱⁱ, does not prevent the image of the vital breath from continuing, because vitalism expressed here remains naïve. Indeed, the vital breath is still an intervention external to the creature, and the poet deduces his beneficent presence from the perfection of the form of Adam, which stands upright and whose

graceful curves are the sign of the existence of an applied creator. However, this second version already shows the limits of naïve vitalism. The breath becomes a real breath: a "dim breath" has replaced the ideal "vivid life" breathed by God, and the breath has taken such a thickness that it is difficult to pass into the lungs of man, which is recognized in the sibilants of the last verse. The vital impulse has henceforth flaws, it knows dysfunction: this "hastening hiss", for example, describes the vital breath as trying to escape the creature rather than to give life to it. From then on, for Lawrence, the movement of life is no longer a movement tending only towards a direction, perfection. A critical vitalism, which would take into account all the avatars of the vital breath, its changes of direction, its reversals, seems to have emerged in Lawrence.

The representation of this generalized proliferation which would be an illustration of critical vitalism poses a second problem: we may end up losing a unified vision of the movement of life, which is a naïve vitalism, but still dear to Lawrence. Indeed, he says: "The creative mystery, which is life itself, always was and always will be. It unfolds itself in pure living creatures" ("The Two Principles", 1919, P II 227). Certainly, in "Come Spring, Come Sorrow", Lawrence also describes "living creatures", but through these, the movement of life does not operate the unveiling movement that Lawrence calls "unfold": on the contrary, with the idea of intermingling, it is less and less easy to distinguish.

Indeed, Lawrence does not completely abandon the vision of the naïve vitalism of a single movement, tending only to creation. In "Craving for Spring", he insists on the purity of the flow of life:

I want the fine, kindling wine-sap of spring,
gold, and of inconceivably fine,
quintessential brightness,
rare almost as beams, yet overwhelmingly potent,
strong like the greatest force of world-balancing.

We have seen that Lawrence, despite a certain fascination with naïve vitalism, who accepts a vital impulse towards perfection and uniqueness, comes to replace this conception with a critical vitalism to the glory of the proliferation and the absence of

finality in the movement of life. If these two kinds of vitalism imply two visions of the breath of life, they also imply two conceptions of matter. In the case of naive vitalism, the matter that constitutes the bodies is inert in itself, but animated by the vital flow. In critical vitalism, life is inherent in the matter that constitutes the body of creatures. As for the conception of matter, the evolution of Lawrence's thinking Through the poems is the following: Lawrence begins by considering matter as inert and animated by a vital flow reminiscent of naive vitalism. Then, the vital impulse is found both inside and outside the creatures, which gives rise to tensions that are central to many poems. Finally, at the end of Lawrence's life, images of the dissolution of matter in the great vital breath, unique and deprived of all its avatars, seem to devote a return to naive vitalism.

Although Lawrence's vitalism evolves within his work, we note that the relation of this breath to matter that constitutes the non-human (and also human) world is always problematic: the material often seems to stifle the vital breath and whether it is inert, in conflict with the vital breath in a will of condensation, or invited to dissolve in the great breath of life, its relation to the living is always marked by a form of opposition. Moreover, the term resistance, which is at the center of our latest analyzes, bears witness to this. The concept of living matter, then, poses a problem: if, in Lawrence's vitalist conception, the living being is characterized above all by a breath and a movement, to what extent can matter, outside of this movement, be able to be alive, and to what is the living character of matter recognizable? To be concerned about the materiality of the living also distances Lawrence from vitalism because it brings him closer, by definition, to a certain scientific "materialism". Indeed, vitalism, by posing a vital principle existing outside the laws of physics, and therefore of matter, seeks above all to escape what is still called, at the turn of the twentieth century, the "materialists" ¹ that is to say, proponents of the theory of evolution, who consider that all life is conditioned by matter, and therefore that life does not exist outside matter. To speak of living matter, Lawrence must combine a form of materialism, of scientific discourse, with the vitalism to which he is inclined.

D. H. Lawrence, Vitalism, and the Political Body

Across the disciplinary spectrum, renewed attention to the body's role in shaping thought is dramatically recasting our understanding of the origins of subjectivity, the conditions of personal agency, and the logic of political modernity. Recent critical interest in the politics of the material world has hastened a return to such twentieth century thinkers as Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch, as well as the scientific contexts of early psychology, sociology and pragmatism. In the fervor of the moment, however, we sometimes forget that recent critical theory is hardly the first intellectual attempt to wrestle with the implications of cognitive science and new theories of embodiment. Modernism followed a century during which Cartesian speculations about the mechanistic basis of human behavior found experimental validation in the work of Lamarck, Loeb, von Helmholtz and others, who argued that the milieu of a given organism played a primary role in shaping and delimiting its range of possible development—a fact that applied as well to humans as to caterpillars. By the late nineteenth century, as physiologists like Ivan Pavlov worked to establish the rules by which the physical environment conditions reflexes and creates the neural patterns of behavior we call habits, questions central to scientific materialism had begun to enter the mainstream of cultural and political life. From pragmatism to public relations, the physiological discourse of an automatic, conditioned body became fundamental to the most diverse accounts of political modernity.

Lawrence and the Politics of Vitalism

At once critical of scientific materialism and deeply invested in the material body, Lawrence's work persistently exposes the political stakes of embodiment in the twentieth century. The language of physiology appears throughout both his fiction and non-fiction as a marker of distinctly modern forms of political and cultural "automatism." Such language was a natural extension of his own readings as a young man; familiar with a variety of post-Darwinian analyses of material embodiment, including the work of Herbert Spencer, T. H. Huxley, and William James, Lawrence was acutely aware of ongoing debates about the new scientific discourses of embodiment and the consequences of such thinking for modern

culture at large. As Jeff Wallace has suggested, exposure to these thinkers put Lawrence fundamentally “in tune with contemporary, post-Darwinian science in its critical interrogation of all aspects of the ‘human’” (2005: 18). However, as Lawrence understood it, scientific materialism posed a significant problem for modern political life. By treating the human as an endlessly tractable machine, as physiologists theorized, the institutions of twentieth century modernity threatened to render life “automatic” in the worst possible ways. While, as we shall see, the equation between institutional modernity and automatism was common among his literary contemporaries, Lawrence associated scientific materialism with a particular kind of automatism, one that put him fundamentally in accord vitalist thinkers like Bergson and Sorel. Throughout his non-fiction of the 1920s, Lawrence links the rise of positivist sciences with a new historical episteme in which organic life and community were increasingly defined by the automatic repetitions of a codified set of culturally amenable ideas. This ideology he termed “idealism.”ⁱⁱⁱ In a series of non-fiction books published after WWI, including *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921) and *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922) Lawrence represents scientific materialism as a total epistemic system in which thought in its objective character gains priority over feeling, affect and the vicissitudes of the body. To live according to our ideas rather than our “passional” selves, Lawrence suggests, is to be forever in thrall to the ready-made habits and ideas we acquire through social conditioning, thereby sapping us of the spontaneity inherent in life itself. As he describes in *Fantasia*, “The ideal mind, the brain, has become the vampire of modern life, sucking up the blood and the life. There is hardly an original thought or original utterance possible to us. All is sickly repetition of stale, stale ideas” (2004a: 105-6). Rather than see the habits of social life as the product of an unthinking mass, as did many of his modernist contemporaries, Lawrence understands modernity as characterized by an excess of thought that renders life a series of premeditated, automatic repetitions, bereft of organic creativity.^{iv} Guided by the logic of materialist cause and effect, modernity becomes, in the words of the narrator of *Kangaroo* (1923), mere

“mechanical repetition of given motions—millions of times over and over again— according to the fixed ideal” (1994: 295). It is, in short, a world of “pure automatism” (ibid.: 295).

The most useful parallel for Lawrence’s alternative materialism is to be found not in the literary discourse of his contemporaries, however, but in the philosophical critique of scientific materialism in vitalist thinkers, such as Henri Bergson. Though critics have often casually suggested that Lawrence’s work harbors a “vitalist” undercurrent, they have only rarely made this connection explicit.⁸ This can be explained in part by the ambiguity of the term itself, which has traditionally encompassed a variety of “spiritualist” theories from Antiquity to the Enlightenment. However, in the context of the twentieth century, vitalism constituted a specific school of philosophical and political thought dedicated to combating the “radical mechanism” implicit in much of scientific thought. As Sanford Schwartz explains, “Whereas the positivist applies the mechanistic assumptions of the physical sciences to the study of human thought, feeling, and action, the vitalist maintains that the organic nature of ‘life’ is irreducible to mechanistic explanation, and that the methods appropriate to the investigation of the physical world lead only to a distorted understanding of human nature” (1992: 278). Vitalists like Bergson and Driesch rejected the radical mechanism of physiology as both a philosophical and practical matter. For them, matter itself exhibited a deep intransigence to the total domination of conditioned reflex. Jane Bennett has called this aspect of vitalism “a commitment to the indeterminacies of material causality—a philosophical faith in indetermination” (2010: 53). Such an understanding of vitalism would certainly square with the traditional reading of Lawrence as a radical individualist, whose work forecloses the possibility of political action at a systemic level. For if we are freest when least captivated by our ideas, when the primary cognition of the body overtakes the conscious mind, what room is left for collective action of agents? Lawrence’s vitalism would thus seem incompatible with a political solution to the idealism of modernity. But, as we shall see, by transforming the notion of agency along these vitalist

lines, Lawrence worked to rethink the tension between collective and individual life. His critique of human automatism took the form of a social vision in which the body could liberate subjects from the disciplinary apparatuses and cognitive habits of twentieth century life.

Based on D.H Lawrence criticism of psychoanalysis and the alternative perspectives he hold, a view that can be called vitalist is established. Since vitalism is a concept that has a somewhat unclear usage practice, this is sought to be clarified through its biological, philosophical and more idea-historical characteristics. Through this, an overall perspective emerges that can tie together general questions about the theory's relation to literature and life, as well as projections to a peculiarly vitalistic theme. This is further elaborated through an analysis of the text *Chaos in Poetry* by D. H. Lawrence, which describes the relationship between orderly representations and an external chaotic domain, a domain that the poet is believed to have to deal with in his work. This text is then, based on its metaphoric, thematic, and idea-historical placement in the context of the language-critical texts of Nietzsche and Freud's thoughts on human cultivation through order, repetition and ego-formation. The connection between the linguistic and the organization of the psyche structure is pointed out in connection with Lacan's theories, and the relationship between linguistic communication and immediate experience is linked to Sjklovkji. Lawrence's work is then examined in the function it plays with Deleuze and Guattari in their general understanding of the relationship between the structured and the unstructured. In this context, the critique of psychoanalysis is deepened and the poet's relationship with chaos remains as a prerequisite for creativity and life in a wider sense. Based on all this, four fictional literary texts are read by Lawrence, the novels *The Blind Man and None of That*, as well as central scenes in the novels *Women in Love* and *Kangaroo*. The focus of these readings is the play between mediation and immediacy as a theme in Lawrence's texts. The reading is also done with a look at how psychoanalytic interpretive keys can be thought of to close the problems of the texts, and how the texts can, by contrast, be opened through a

reading on their own. Sub-problems in the readings are identity problems in relation to mediated identity, the relationship between the physical-physical and the mental-verbal, between representation and dramatization, as well as a theme of the longing for the immediate in relation to the points of appeal against such longing in relation to regression and fascistic utopianism.

For Lawrence, vitalism offered a way of solving the intractable problem of collectivism in the era of mass habituation. This political project can be seen most clearly in *The Plumed Serpent*, a novel that extends the problem of modern automatism to the political body as a whole. While Lawrence's novels regularly invoke the language of automatism, the novels he wrote immediately following WWI, including *Aaron's Rod* and *Kangaroo*, explore the possibility of non-habituating social arrangements. In *The Plumed Serpent* this matter is given its most explicit treatment as structural problem of modern life. As Jeff Wallace has noted, "With more conviction than either of its predecessors, *The Plumed Serpent* adheres to the notion of a religious-political programme and all its attendant paraphernalia—hymns, rituals, the appropriation of churches, the letters to clergy and politicians—in order to bring about a 'new conception of human life'" (2005: 226). Although it represents Lawrence's most fully realized effort to imagine a non-habituating social order, *The Plumed Serpent* has long been the object of criticism among even Lawrence's most dedicated champions.

In *The Plumed Serpent*, the anti-dogmatic potential of revolutionary myth enables a social system in which the primary cognition of embodied life serves as the core of a new collectivity. Contrary, then, to critics like Anne Fernihough, who concludes that "Lawrence's stance is, in the final analysis, apolitical, if by politics we implicate large, controlling organizations" (1993: 187), a consideration of Lawrence's vitalism shows him imagining structural catalysts to new modes of political affiliation. Lawrence's novel emphasizes embodiment and spontaneity over the idealisms of both capitalism and communism. During a century in which social, cultural and political experience was increasingly viewed as a means of habituating human behavior, vitalist embodiment offered Lawrence a genuine way

of escaping the categories of left and right with their ready-made models of collectivity. But, as we shall see, Lawrence's vitalism runs deeper than mere plot, raising questions about aesthetic form itself.

A Vitalist Aesthetic

Vitalist thought suffers from a constraint unique to modern philosophical schools. Bergson, Sorel and Lawrence recognized that the central tenets of vitalism could easily devolve into the dogma of idealism. Bergson explained this problem in *Creative Evolution*: "Our freedom, in the very movements by which it is affirmed, creates the growing habits that will stifle it if it fails to renew itself by a constant effort. It is dogged by automatism. The most living thought becomes frigid in the formula that expresses it. The word turns against the idea" (127). In order to counter the "automatic" as a social and scientific category, vitalist philosophy re-imagined not just the content of philosophical discourse, but its form as well by placing new emphasis on the affective plane of readerly experience. By this I mean to suggest that the work Bergson and Sorel self-consciously refuses ideational

closure in order to prompt what Bergson called "integral knowledge," knowledge grounded in embodied intuition rather than intellect alone. As Judith Shklar has explained, Bergson's thought is essentially "aesthetic" in nature (1958: 656); this element of his work is "not an accidental feature, a matter of careless expression. His method was an integral part of his thought" (1958: 635). In attempting to elicit an intuitive response to his philosophy, Bergson rejected the idealisms of traditional philosophical discourse.

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Notes

- ⁱ Moritz Schlick, *Philosophical Papers Vol.II* (1925-1936), 79. M. Schlick proposed a biologist J. Reinke dance introduction to theoretical biology.
- ⁱⁱ (...) this poem seems to be inspired by a reproduction of Michaelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel, with some reminiscences of Blake's *The Tyger* in *Songs of Experience*. » (note au poème —Michael-Angelo, CP 979)
- ⁱⁱⁱ While Lawrence had a deep and abiding attachment to Nietzsche, a virulent critic of German idealism, his critique of the "ideal" is a relatively idiosyncratic formulation that closely associated with positivism. His use of the term "idealism,"

then, should in no way be confused with the idealism of thinkers like Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling.

- ^{iv} Though I have given only one example here, throughout his non-fiction of the 1920s Lawrence consistently links idealism to notions of human automatism. Idealism is variously called "the fall into automatism, mechanism, and nullity" (2004a: 152), "the little, fixed machine-principle which works the human psyche automatically" (2004b: 14), and "a superimposition of the abstracted, automatic, invented universe of man upon the spontaneous creative universe" (1988a: 69)