



THE WRITING OF THE NON-HUMAN IN THE POETRY OF D.H LAWRENCE

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ABSTRACT

In D.H. Lawrence, the non-human corresponds both to a primordial form of vitality and to the vegetable and animal creatures that this vitality animates much more than men, stifled by a modern civilization that makes them inert. The non-human appears as the repository of a pure presence existing before or outside the culture. Lawrence is therefore confronted with the difficulty of representing this pure presence by an intrinsically "human" means, poetic language. It does not arise then simply anti-humanist: his poetic writing of the non-human proceeds from a permanent conflict between the will to free oneself from the human yoke and the need to remain in the human sphere, even to re-establish the limit between human and non-human. This conflict is already expressed in the non-human as mere living matter, in the form of a tension between a conception of matter as pure presence external to all human discourse and a vision of matter as a scientific object par excellence. In the evocation of the creatures, the conflict encourages Lawrence to reinvent specifically for them relations with the world (emotions, perception, and gentility) that allow them to preserve their presence. In Lawrence's report to non-human creatures, the conflict remains because Lawrence questions the boundary between him non-human but also reaffirms it. Finally, the dialectic between the desire to grasp the presence of the non-human and the fear of abstracting it completely by including it in language seems particularly present in what we try to define as a poetic language peculiar to the non-human, beyond its simple use in Lawrence.

Key Words: D. H. Lawrence, Non-Human Literature, Ecocritic, Twentieth Century Poetry, Twentieth Century British Literature, Modernism.

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INTRODUCTION

For W. H. Auden, this affinity with the non-human has repercussions on the quality of his texts:

Lawrence possessed a great capacity for affection and charity, but he could only direct it toward non-human life... Whenever, in his writings, he forgets about men and women with proper names and describes the anonymous life of stones, waters, forests, animals, flowers, chance travelling companions and passers-by, his bad temper

and his dogmatism immediately vanish and he becomes the most enchanting companion imaginable, tender, intelligent, funny, and above all, happy¹.

The "non-human" that Lawrence evokes is associated with "something non-vocal": one could at the same time take it for something intensely corporal, which exists outside of the language, and for something very abstract, which does not manifest itself, or more precisely does not make itself heard. Therefore, this non-human might seem less tangible than the "non-

human life" mentioned by Auden, composed of flowers, plants, animals and even men, provided they have no identity. However, Lawrence himself, a few lines later, while contrasting the vitality of the working class with the lack of attention paid to the body in the bourgeoisie, associates what he called "something non-human" with the landscape:

I cannot make the transfer from my own class into the middle class. I cannot, not for anything in the world, forfeit my passion consciousness and my blood-affinity with my fellow-men and the animals and the land, for that other thing, spurious mental conceit, which is all that is left of the mental consciousness once it has made itself exclusive. ("Autobiographical Sketch", P II 596)

The object of the Lawrencian texts that we are going to study, that is to say the non-human as vital impulse and its incarnation in animals, as well as the genre of these texts, poetry, call especially a question on the presence of a material, of a being out of culture. This is true of poetry because it is the place where presence can be manifested without the hindrance of linear temporality and the will to realism of many narratives; the same goes for the non-human because it exists above all for Lawrence outside of a culture which he considers as the main attribute of humanity. The question of presence is therefore essential in the study of non-human writing in the poetry of D. H. Lawrence. It is not a question of knowing if the poet manages to make us really feel the presence of non-human in his texts: we will leave each reader of Lawrence responsible for answering this question. However, one can rightly wonder how, in Lawrence's poetry, the conflict plays out between this will, or even this imperative of presence, and the abstraction, the disappearance the non-human that entails all human activity concerning it, and among them the writing. If we consider with Lawrence that the "non-human" is the vital quality of things, we realize that the problem of the presence of this quality, that is, of materiality, of how it is incarnated in matter while being abstracted from human perception, is at the heart of the subject. In our first part, which examines what Lawrence appeals the non-human, we will see that the presence of this non-

human, whether in the form of a movement, a matter, or a quality, is precisely problematic. Because it opposes forces that make it abstract. Among these forces, we can mention the inertia that the a matter opposed in the first poems to the vital impulse, and the power of science, which, deducing from the observation of living matter laws and a natural history spread over several thousand years, does not stop at the presence of it at a given moment.

This presence may find a refuge within the non-human world of the Louvre (the principal museum and art gallery of France), that is to say in what we will sometimes call, even if the term is problematic, "non-human individuals", as they are represented in Lawrence's poetry. In our second part, where we will look at non-human creatures as individuals, and related to the specific world, it will appear that Lawrence imagines a non-human world within which the relations between creatures are such that they do not prevent, contrary to human relations, the expression of their presence. Indeed, creatures do not seem to make other creatures with which they interact objects, that is, they do not abstract from their present and material existence, nor are they abstract by them. Precisely because their individuality, their bodily presence is immediately problematic, the non-human creatures reconfigure relationships with the world such as emotion, the perception of oneself or others, and the capacity to act (agentivity) to be able to evolve in a world without object, a world, therefore, where nothing is made abstract by contact with others. If non-human creatures have a relation to the world so specific, are they truly "other" for the poet? To consider the non-human as another, elusive, is it not already to take away any value from its material presence? On the contrary, to think that it is completely perceptible and representable, is it not to take away its pure presence, by inscribing the poems in a perfectly human economy? In a third part we will see how the presence of the non-human and the authority of the poet interact and influence: the presence of non-human creatures is not necessarily always respected. The question of respect for this non-human presence and its existence or not out of the language will allow us to place Lawrence in contemporary debates on the

place of non-human nature in a world that has become essentially human.

Finally, even if the otherness of the non-human is questioned, language is a barrier that separates the human from the non-human. To the extent that summoning into language the presence of a non-human who is thought to be out of the culture causes necessarily tensions, we will ask ourselves if there exists, in Lawrence and in later Anglophone poetsⁱⁱ, linguistic features common to all the non-human writing, which would arise precisely from this particularly intense conflict between the presence and the representation. The linguistic nature of our approach will add a new dimension to this study by expanding our methods of analysis. Moreover, such an approach imposes because in a study on the writing of the non-human, it seems to us necessary to approach the possibility of a poetic language peculiar to the non-human with a certain rigor. Ellenous will allow us to focus on the following question: if poetry and the human-lenon both call attention to presence, is it better, when writing about the non-human, to give in to the illusion that it is possible to render this presence by placing it as close as possible to the non-human, or to construct, as Heidegger observes on the subject of the Greek temple, an artefact that can give an idea, by its own presence, of the presence of the non-human?

Discussion

Our first part concerns the conception and representation of living things by D. H. Lawrence. As we will see, what Lawrence describes as "non-human" refers in the first place to what is common to all living things. Insofar as this quality applies to all that has a living body, it may, in spite of its name, also apply to men. Moreover, from 1914, Lawrence is interested in a "non-human" element that is found in men:

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. (...) 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: but for me, what she is as a phenomenon (or as representing some greater, inhuman will) instead of what she feels according to the human conception. (*Letter to Edward Garnett*, June 5, 1914, L II 182-183)

This element is associated with what is physical, physiological in man, or body. This body, which refers man to what Lawrence calls the non-human, is the most fascinating for the writer. In a letter to Gordon Campbell, a few months later, Lawrence expands the non-human to all that is alive:

We want to realise the tremendous *non-human* quality of life – it is wonderful.

It is not the emotions, nor the personal feelings and attachments, that matter.

These are only expressive, and expression has become mechanical. Behind us

all are the tremendous unknown forces of life, coming unseen and unperceived

as out of the desert to the Egyptians, and driving us, forcing us, destroying us if

we do not submit to be swept away. (L II 218, September 21, 1914)

The non-human, in the form of quality or "strengths," is now the essence of "life" in general. It is no longer just the body, still less only the human body, but the laws that govern the bodies, and the quality that makes the matter of the body so worthy of attention. Henceforth, the non-human is distinguished from the human not by the exclusion of any form of humanity (since there is a non-human in humanity) but by the exclusion of a certain idea of humanity. 'human. On the side of the human, we find in the two letters of Lawrence it is a question of feeling ("what she feels", "personal feelings") as well as culture, insofar as it feeds on representations, since it states: "expression has become mechanical". The human being is, in a way, a building that man has built to raise himself towards the sky, towards a certain ideal, forgetting by the same token that his roots are in the ground and that by this process he is denaturing himself. This idea of construction is illustrated in "The Revolutionary" (*The Complete Poems* 287), where Samson, blind,

addresses the "human pillars" that somehow support the vault of an idealistic civilization:

I do not yearn, nor aspire, for I am a blind Samson.

And what is daylight to me that I should look skyward?

Only I grope among you, pale-faces, caryatids, as among a forest of pillars that hold up the dome of high ideal heaven

Which is my prison,

And all these human pillars of loftiness, going stiff, metallic-stunned with the weight of their responsibility

I stumble against them.

Stumbling blocks, painful ones.

To keep on holding up this ideal civilisation Must be excruciating : unless you stiffen into metal,

When it is easier to stand stock rigid than to move.

Lawrence here uses the term "human" ("human pillars") in a proper sense: what is human is what is rigid and mechanical, which obeys, supports, or establishes an immutable framework of moral and social conventions against which the vital, non-human principle, embodied here by Samson's first-person voice, is dead. In *What is Nature?*ⁱⁱⁱ, the British philosopher Kate Soper distinguishes three grand types of discourses on nature. First of all, as a metaphysical concept, it would simply be that in contrast to what humanity defines itself:

Employed as a metaphysical concept, which it mainly is in the argument of philosophy, nature' is the concept through which humanity thinks its difference and specificity. It is the concept of the non-human, even if, as we have seen, the absoluteness of the humanity-nature demarcation has been disputed, and our ideas about what falls to the side of nature' have been continuously revised in the light of changing perceptions of what counts as human'. But in a formal sense, the logic of nature' as that which is opposed to the human' or the cultural' is presupposed to any debates about the

interpretations to be placed on the distinction and the content to be given to the ideas (...)^{iv}

Kate Soper notes that in a metaphysical discourse, nature is what opposes man. Nature, when it is evoked in a philosophical discourse, always corresponds from the outset to the non-human ("it is the concept of the non-human"), whatever the conception of the human presupposed by this speech. But this "non-human" is not exactly that of Lawrence, because Lawrence does not seek to describe by the "non-human" a metaphysical concept, but rather a quality, the quality of what is alive. Indeed, if Lawrence assumes no doubt the polemical or even political nature of the evocation of the "non-human" substratum of a female character (we have seen that Lawrence, during and after the first world war, goes through a long period of despair and misanthropy), he does not use this category as a hollow concept to refine his definition of the human, but to focus on what transcends the distinction between the human and the non-human. In this sense, the non-human to which Lawrence refers more closely matches Kate Soper's second definition of nature:

Employed as a realist concept, nature' refers to the structures, processes, and causal powers that are constantly operative within the physical world, that provide the objects of study of the natural sciences, and condition the possible forms of human intervention in biology or interaction with the environment. It is the nature to whose laws we are already subject even as we harness them to human purposes, and whose processes we can neither escape nor destroy.

Like this definition of nature, the non-human lawrencian is the object of *lascience*, for example of botany, which we will see that Lawrence was passionate. The non-human lawrencian figure also the forces with which men compose, and the physical drives that sometimes direct them. Moreover, Lawrence, maintaining, as we shall see, a vitalist conception of the world, the "processes" and "powers" by which Kate Soper characterizes this conception of nature are thought in her work of flow

and vital elk, which form both the movement and the material substrate of the living.

The living as matter, as movement and as quality, thus takes the name of non-human in Lawrence, and this is why we include it in this study on the humanenon. Lawrence does not distinguish between the two categories of nature (we will speak later about the third definition of nature established by Kate Soper), probably because it cannot escape the centrality then occupied, and still today, the man in Western thought. Lawrence, born in 1885, is, as we have seen, deeply influenced by the "human crisis" that follows the popularization of the theories of evolution. The human species as a result of chance, the individual as "accident" and man caught in a natural history that does not necessarily bring progress, arouse in him strong reactions, if they are not uniformly negative. It is, moreover, revealing that it is precisely this natural history, that is to say the whole of the laws governing living species, human or non-human, which under the pen of Lawrence is called the "non-human". By this gesture, the author may have left talk of an almost unconscious anxiety towards the human, often hidden behind the proposals. It is also possible that he used the term "non-human" for polemic sapuissance, in order to overthrow the traditional humanistic perception that places man at the center of his system. In any case, the amalgamation of nature as vital power and nature as opposed to man could be explained by the "crise of the human" which then shook and shakes Western civilization.

The "non-human" lawrencian does not seem to carry the negativity that could be read in this formulation. Indeed, in Lawrence, what is non-human does not suffer from a lack of quality, but on the contrary, it is what can bring us all together, provided we live with enough intensity. It is, moreover, among other things, this function of compartmentalization of the "non-human" Lawrencian makes us speak, within this study, of "creatures" alive rather than animals, men or plants, categories that Lawrence does not always consider separately. It should also be noted that this denial, which Lawrence does not seem, at first reading, to take into account when he uses the terms "inhuman" and "non-human", prevents us to follow him and to

call ourselves "non-human", or the living character that fascinates him and wishes to celebrate. This is why we describe this "non-human" lawrencian as "the living" throughout our first part.

The adjective "non-human" misleads us, because what it covers in Lawrence does not correspond to a lack; however, the ambiguity of its use by the writer perfectly reflects his hesitation as to the stage of differentiation to which a creature must have come to be qualified as "non-human". Indeed, this adjective first refers to Lawrence in the first stage of living beings, before his humanity is defined or not, whereas it is traditionally only once the form of a decided being that he can be described as human or non-human. Moreover, although referring to an undifferentiated stage of the living, this adjective qualifies a woman, that is to say, a being already differentiated, in the first extract quoted above ("that which is non-human (...) inhumanity ", " What she is (...) inhumanly "). It seems that the non-human as Lawrence conceives it is both the undifferentiated matter of the living and what still characterizes it in differentiated forms, human or non-human. The non-human (which we will call, for our part, the living) would be located on both sides of the differentiation, the survivance of the undifferentiated in the differentiated.

An aesthetics of peculiarity: adjectives in Lawrence's poetry

Although most titles of Lawrence's non-human poems are names, notably in *Birds*, *Beasts and Flowers*, where each poem bears the name of a non-human creature, one of the most striking aspects of the language that Lawrence uses to represent the non-human is the use of the adjective and idiosyncratic adjectives. As we will see, one of the reasons why adjectives are so prevalent in what might be called non-human poetry is the fact that semantically and syntactically adjectives are lexical units that are not very constraining.

In *DH Lawrence: Aesthetics and Ideology*, Anne Fernihough argues that in his writings on art, Lawrence claims an "anti-imperialist" aesthetic, that is, an aesthetic that refuses to impose its own logic on nature. It represents. As she points out in *Etruscan Places*, Lawrence condemns Roman works of art, which serve the imperialism of the Roman people and

damage the earth and the material on which they are erected:

It is better to keep life fluid and changing than to try to hold it fast down in heavy monuments. Burdens on the face of the earth are man's ponderous erections (...). Why this lust after imposing creeds, imposing deeds, imposing buildings, imposing language, imposing works of art? (*Sketches of Etruscan Places and Other Essays*, 32-33)

He prefers for example the Etruscan temples, "unimposing", which express a form of vitality parallel to that of the cosmos, instead of grasping and exhausting the vitality of the world:

(...) terra cotta plaques fitted neatly, and alive with freely modelled painted figures in relief, gay dancing creatures, rows of ducks, round faces like the sun, and faces grinning and putting out a tongue, all vivid and fresh and unimposing. The whole thing small and dainty in proportions, and fresh, somehow charming instead of impressive. (*Sketches of Etruscan Places and Other Essays*, 32)

It can be said that in his poems, and particularly when it comes to the non-human, Lawrence develops an aesthetic that tends to undo the language of his potential power over the material world. This aesthetic also tends to release the language of power that would exert on him reason and realism. When Lawrence, in the passage quoted above, mentions the act of "imposing the language" on nature, or when he condemns, while he refers to the practice of Mussolini to rename certain places, "The Fascist power to name and unname" (*Sketches of Etruscan Places and Other Essays* 31), he himself uses the image of an imperialist language. Without necessarily spinning the metaphor of imperialism, one might wonder what parts of language, for Lawrence, are likely to appear harmful to non-human reality, and why.

Intransitivity thus expresses an idea of the non-human world that seems to be common to many poetic representations: the idea that for the creature, action is the realization of a potential already

inscribed in it. Therefore, the object does not need to be mentioned, since it is inherent to the action in question. Thus, displacement verbs, which constitute a large part of the actions attributed to non-human creatures, seem to express only the realization of the capacity of their bodies to occupy space. "Fish" is a good one example of this effect of intransitivity in Lawrence:

As the waters roll
Roll you.
The waters wash,
You wash in oneness
And never emerge.
Never know.
Never grasp.
(...)
Himself,
And the element.
Food, of course!
Water-eager eyes,
Mouth-gate open
And strong spine urging, driving ;
And desirous belly gulping.

The poem does not cease to insist, as we have already seen in an earlier analysis, on the autarcic dimension of fish life, which depends only on the water that surrounds it. Therefore, it is not surprising to find in this poem many intransitive jobs transitive verbs, as in "never know / never grasp", "desirous belly gulping", etc. Indeed, it is to make us think that the actions of fish and their objects could not be different from what they are: in particular, the environment affected by these actions can only be the aquatic world around it. Thus, what the belly of the fish engulfs, for example, does not even need to be mentioned ("and desirous belly gulping"). The use of intransitive verbs or transitive verbs from which the object has been omitted almost makes the poem's events mere fish properties, as if the whole poem consisted in deploying the potentialities of that body. However, this body is very different from ours, and the actions that are inherent in the fish experience do not have the same obviousness for us: we do not know exactly what the fish could "grasp" ("never grasp") or what he swallows. From then on, what constitutes the reality of the environment and the scope of non-human actions seems to exist above all

outside the poem. The poet tries to situate us in a perspective that would be that of the fish and therefore not to explain what is inherent in the experience and the environment of the creature, even though for us the suppressed object is not obvious. Thanks to this form of intransitivity, it is rather here a lack of words than an excess of language that gives the impression that non-human reality exists in parallel to the poem, precisely in what he does not mention.

Conclusion

A more in-depth study of the contextual context of Lawrence poetry, as well as the use of contemporary non-human thought, qualifies the thesis of previous critics for whom Lawrence demonstrates an intense and constant desire to represent the non-human. In his pure presence, at the end of this study, it seems to us that Lawrence is not simply an anti-humanist. In fact, to the study of the position of the human poem vis-à-vis the creatures it evokes (which was the subject of our third part), and after having made in our fourth part the outline of a typology of the language of the non-human, it appears that the representation of the non-human in Lawrence's poetry makes a permanent tension between this anti-humanist desire to free oneself from the human straitjacket and the assumed need to remain in the human sphere, even to reinstate the limit between human and non-human. This tension explains many aspects of poetry Lawrencian of the non-human: the presence of a rather subtle anthropomorphism to be forgotten, the expression of a mode of perception not non-human, as Jillian de Vries¹ but reciprocal, the notion that the excess of presence on-human allows a form of meaning in the non-human world, and the double will to be closer to the non-human and let live outside the poem. This double will explains the common traits found in a form of poetic language of the non-human when one compares Lawrence's poems with those of later poets. Therefore, to answer Douglas Mackey, for whom poetry is the most appropriate vehicle that Lawrence has found to merge the concrete and the abstract, the relative and the absolute, we could say that this is the subject of this poetry that is to say, often, the human-human, and not simply the poetic genre, which imposes this fusion.

In the context of such a project, should we leave the presence of the non-human in the poems in the state of hypothesis? This is what we have done so far, arguing that only a subjective judgment on the part of the reader could affirm the capacity of a poet to give the impression that the non-human creature is present in all its materiality in the poem. We maintain this opinion, but this judgment of the reader, which rests not on objective criteria but on a more personal feeling, may not be excluded from a more general study of the poetics of the non-human. Indeed, the attention that the poet and the critic give to the non-human for himself, and not in order to redefine the human, is opposed to traditional humanist principles, for which man is the measure of everything. ; but these principles proscribe, in the name of objectivity, the inclusion of a personal judgment in a rigorous analysis. To restore some value to this subjective judgment might be a means of developing a more attentive critique of the non-human in itself.

Ideally, any reading of a poem about the non-human should be able to measure itself to the effect it produces on the reader: one remembers that for Gumbrecht, "something that is present (...) can have an immediate impact on human bodies". Moreover, it could be the same for the criticism of the poetry of the non-human; it could be measured by the fact that James Urpeth, in his comments on the texts of Deleuze and Guattari on the "becoming-animal" hopes in the reader:

If, upon completion, the reader remains none the wiser concerning the contents of the extracts included here but feels oddly feral, perhaps inclined to whinny, bark, or howl joyously, then an understanding more profound than that which can be conceptualized will have been gained.^v

We also hope to have snatched our roar from equally joyful roars.

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Notes

ⁱ W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, 289.

ⁱⁱ The language and the period are chosen to facilitate a linguistic comparison between these poets

ⁱⁱⁱ Kate Soper, *What is Nature ? Culture, Politics and the non-Human*, 1995.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 155.

^v James Urpeth, "Animal Becomings", in Matthew Calarco, *Animal Philosophy*, 110.