J·D·H·L·S

Journal of D. H. Lawrence Studies

Citation details

Review: Kirsty Martin, *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy: Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013.

Author: Marco Canani

Source: *Journal of D. H. Lawrence Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2014)

Pages: 206–209

A Publication of the
D. H. Lawrence Society of Great Britain

Kirsty Martin, *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy: Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence*.
Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013.
Pp. 240. £66.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978 0 1996 7408 4

Reviewed by Marco Canani

Paradoxical as it may sound, feelings of hostility and sympathy are not always at odds. Kirsty Martin's book argues that ideas of sympathy were central to modernism, based on a study of three authors who have rarely been examined together – Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence – and who were in fact "ambivalent and sometimes hostile towards each other's work" (10). Martin links Lee's, Woolf's and Lawrence's vitalistic ideas and concerns about sympathy to their fascination with rhythm. She argues that in their writings rhythm helps establish sympathetic relationships in that it connects the individual to something existing outside the body.

Interestingly, Martin places Vernon Lee among the modernists. Lee was profoundly indebted to a generation of Victorians like John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and John Addington Symonds. Much of her writing, however, offers a bridge between the two periods, and so Martin's investigation reassesses works that usually root Lee in the Victorian tradition. The starting point is *Beauty and Ugliness* (1912), where Lee – as scholars reckon – first introduced the word "empathy" into English. In spite of Lee's many contradictions, Martin suggests exploring her work from the point of view of vitalism, and convincingly illustrates that Lee's preoccupation with sympathy emerges in her constant experimentation with literary genres. As the author notes, the sympathetic attitude of the protagonist of *Miss Brown* (1884) suggests that Lee considers sympathy as "an embodied process rather than an act of will" (38), questioning whether it is possible to completely know another person. The fact that Lee refuses a rational approach to sympathising partly explains, in Martin's words, that "resistance to

the realist novel" (60) that one can sense in *Louis Norbert* (1914). In addition to this, Lee's idea that human sympathy may also be directed to the non-human considerably moulded her work as a critic. As Martin points out, collections of essays like *Laurus Nobilis* (1909) – and, I would add, *Euphorion* (1884) and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895) – reveal Lee's desire to record her personal, subjective response to the object of enquiry.

Martin's second chapter argues that in Woolf's novels feelings are explored as both a bodily experience and the product of "intimate transcendence" (85). Woolf's desire to capture feelings results in frequent descriptions of gestures, movements and rhythms. Martin, however, warns against interpreting this focus on individual experience in solipsistic terms. According to Woolf, the individual is in fact "sympathetically entangled with others" (82), responding to external as well as internal patterns of influences. In spite of her well-known interest in life writing, Woolf, as Martin suggests, disavows the possibility of knowing the inner life of people. Thus, her interest is also directed to the way the individual is connected to what is outside oneself, and this, Martin maintains, has moral and epistemological implications. Woolf's idea that feelings are diffused in flesh and expressed in the rhythm of the body translates into a "physiology of feeling" (100), as shown in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) by Clarissa's muscular spasms and Septimus's rhythmical bodily perceptions. The focus then shifts to Woolf's attempts to reconstruct the origins of sympathy in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), demonstrating that in this novel individual feelings are considerably moulded by a collective past. And indeed, whereas in *The Waves* (1931) one feels the influence of Woolf's interest in the physical properties of matter, in *Between the Acts* (1941) she moves "from a sympathy based in blood and fibre to one which emphasized culture" (128).

Similarly, the essay 'We Need One Another' (1930, *LEA* 296–302) gives proof of the centrality of sympathetic and communal feelings in D. H. Lawrence's philosophy. In the third chapter, Martin points out that in Lawrence's fiction sympathy connects

individual feelings and impulses to something which exists beyond the individual. By highlighting the influence of Herbert Spencer, she connects Lawrence's materialistic conception of knowledge with his belief in vitalism – a stance that has long been debated by critics. As Martin notes, whereas York Tindall considered Lawrence a vitalist, in *The Love Ethics of D. H. Lawrence* (1955), Mark Spilka wondered whether it was more appropriate to define him as an organicist. According to Martin, Lawrence's belief in vitalism can be seen in his idea that matter is shaped by energy and infused with spirit. This is a crucial point in her argument, as it helps her to reconcile the erotic aspect of Lawrence's earlier works with the moral element and to posit that sympathy and desire are closely interwoven in much of his fiction. Thus, she suggests that in *The Rainbow* (1915) the erotic tension between Anna and Will Brangwen should be interpreted as a rhythmic form of sympathy. Such a force helps the characters establish a mutual connection, but it also enables them to come into contact with their surroundings, which, in turn, partly governs the "rhythms with which they move" (153). And indeed, in *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) – which, it should be remembered, Lawrence wrote shortly after *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921) and *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922) – the idea of a social community is eventually replaced by a sense of communion which, by means of a centrifugal force, attracts the individual to the natural and non-human.

Notwithstanding its conjoined focus on Lee, Woolf and Lawrence, one might object that the chapters of this book are structured as independent essays. Some passages would benefit from a more contrastive approach, discussing for example Woolf's ideas on sympathy, blood and culture alongside Lawrence's definition of the blood-consciousness. Martin's work, however, offers a fresh perspective in modernist studies, and not only because of an interesting selection of authors. She disputes a critical tradition which, beginning with George Lukács, argued for a long time that modernism was "violently lacking in sympathy" (11) – a misconception that overshadowed a large number of texts. On this

point, Martin agrees with feminist critics like Suzanne Clarke, who argued that the idea that modernist literature was hostile to sentiment and sympathy was grounded on the association of modernism with "a certain type of masculinity" (13). In a way, Martin overshadows a part of these writers' work, too. She focuses on their fiction, leaving out Lee's and Lawrence's travel writings. I would suggest that works like Lee's *Genius Loci* (1899) and Lawrence's *Twilight in Italy* (1916), for instance, reveal a sympathetic, quasi-pantheistic attitude towards landscapes and places. Martin's argument about modernism and the rhythms of sympathy, however, is convincingly and interestingly developed throughout the book.