

## A NOTE ON THE 'SHAME' CHAPTER OF *THE RAINBOW*

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It is ironic that 'Shame', the chapter most frequently cited in the court proceedings against *The Rainbow*, should also be the weakest and most artistically dispensable. Few of what we now recognise as Lawrence's characteristic strengths are evident there. The structure of the third generation story is very similar to that of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (though there is no evidence that Lawrence had read it). In Joyce's novel each chapter ends with an epiphany: a moment when all of Stephen's problems seem to dissolve, and a radiant future opens up before him. But each is a false epiphany, betrayed by the inflated language of his vision, and totally exposed by the deflating, often sordid, opening to the next chapter, at the end of which Stephen bounces back with a new vision. Similarly Ursula is seduced by a series of false rainbows, or shining doorways to a radiant future. Clearly Lawrence wanted Ursula to run the whole gamut of possible errors in her 'trial and error' progress. In the 'Shame' chapter she was to meet, to embrace, but finally to reject materialistic science, rational humanism, lesbianism and industrialism. Lawrence believed that there are links between these things, and he attempts to dispose of them simultaneously in one short chapter, in the guise of two exemplary characters, Winifred Inger and Uncle Tom Brangwen; but he jumps into authorial condemnation of them before he has presented us with adequate 'objective correlatives' for their alleged perversity and corruption.

There is some telling description of Wiggiston, where "living human beings must be taken and adapted to all kinds of horrors" (R 322), where life is reduced to a "squalid heap of side-shows. The pit was the main show, the *raison d'être* of all" (R 324), but there is far

too much reliance on jargon. We are told again and again that everything is rigid, sterile, sordid, barren, ugly, dead, inchoate, and, four times, amorphous. Lawrence is concerned to present the Wiggiston experience as nightmarish and unreal for Ursula, but the price he has to pay for this is to make it insubstantial for the reader also. The dehumanisation of the miners is (in comparison with, say, the opening of ‘*Odour of Chrysanthemums*’) merely gestured at:

Like creatures with no more hope, but which still live and have passionate being, within some utterly unliving shell, they passed meaninglessly along, with strange, isolated dignity. (*R* 321)

Winifred Inger is presented to us as sharing some of the characteristics of Ibsen’s *Lady Inger*,<sup>1</sup> a proud, spirited, intelligent and independent noblewoman, who pits herself against the leading men of her time. But her independence leads her to murder and tragedy. Winifred Inger is introduced to us as “a fearless-seeming, clean type of modern girl whose very independence betrays her to sorrow”. She has “a look of nobility” and “a fine, clear spirit ... Her eyes were blue, clear, proud, she gave one altogether the sense of a fine-mettled, scrupulously groomed person and of an unyielding mind” (*R* 311-12). Yet, behind all this, there is “a great pathos”. We wait in vain for a sympathetic account of what is wrong with her life and what is damaging to Ursula in their relationship. We are told that in religious matters she is a humanist, that she is disillusioned with men, and, in one sentence, that she is “interested in the Women’s Movement” (*R* 318). Within a page this has become “the perverted life of the elder woman”! She is even physically transformed to account for Ursula’s sudden nausea: “And sometimes she thought Winifred was ugly, clayey. Her female hips seemed big and earthy, her ankles and her arms were too thick” (*R* 319).

Uncle Tom is similarly sketchy. It is not clear why he should have chosen to become an industrial magnate, nor how he detects in

Winifred "a kinship with his own dark corruption" (R 322). Again Lawrence tries to use physique as a substitute for fuller presentation:

The fine beauty of his skin and his complexion, some almost waxen quality, hid the strange, repellent grossness of him, the slight sense of putrescence, the commonness which revealed itself in his rather fat thighs and loins. (R 322)

This is a far cry from the inwardness and inevitability with which Lawrence conveys the rather similar attraction to one another of Gerald and Gudrun in *Women in Love*.

What unifies Tom and Winifred is, we are told, their worship of the machine:

She too, Winifred, worshipped the impure abstraction, the mechanisms of matter. There, there, in the machine, in service of the machine, was she free from the clog and degradation of human feeling. There, in the monstrous mechanism that held all matter, living or dead, in its service, did she achieve her consummation and her perfect unison, her immortality. (R 325)

What did Lawrence expect his readers to make of this? It is prose devoid of human feeling or common human experience. Nothing here is 'realised'. The single short paragraph in which this is stated is not enough to convince us that what we know of these characters would necessarily lead to machine-worship. Indeed, such phrases as "the mechanisms of matter" seem to be taking for granted in the reader a close familiarity with the theories of Henri Bergson. Whether or not Lawrence had read *Creative Evolution* by this time,<sup>2</sup> he had certainly read, in 1911, an article on it in the *Hibbert Journal*, in which A. J. Balfour had written:

Reason is at home, not with life and freedom, but with matter, mechanism, and space – the waste products of the creative

impulse. We need not wonder, then, that reason should feel at home in the realm of matter; that it should successfully cut up the undivided flow of material change into particular sequences which are repeated, or are capable of repetition, and which exemplify 'natural laws'.<sup>3</sup>

This piece had so impressed Lawrence that he had lent it to several friends.<sup>4</sup>

To measure the failure to incorporate Bergsonian ideas in this chapter as anything more than obscure jargon, we need only compare Ursula's subsequent experience with the microscope, where similar ideas from Bergson are completely, wonderfully, incorporated.

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence had sent a volume of Ibsen plays, including *Lady Inger*, to Louie Burrows in February 1909. He told her that *Lady Inger* was the least good of the three plays. However, he was sufficiently impressed by the Don Juan-like character Nils Lykke to write a poem, 'Nils Lykke Dead' (revised as 'The Bitterness of Death'), which is spoken by one of his female victims grieving over his corpse (he does not die in the Ibsen play). The poem is in the Nottingham University College notebook, Roberts E320.1.

<sup>2</sup> The English translation had been published in 1911, and may have been the book by Bergson sent to Lawrence by Arthur McLeod in April 1913. See *IL* 544.

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Balfour, 'Creative Evolution and Philosophic Doubt', *Hibbert Journal*, x (October 1911), 1-23, 12.

<sup>4</sup> In a letter of 1 February 1912, Lawrence asked Helen Corke whether she or Jessie Chambers had "the *Hibberts*"; he wanted to pass it on to Alice Dax. See *IL* 359.