

“I am many men. Which of them are you going to perfect?” – D. H. Lawrence’s authorial distance.

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D.H. Lawrence supplements his individualistic notion on aesthetics as “art for my sake” (Huxley 199) with an encouragement to readers to trust in the narrative rather than the narrator (SCAL 14). By art for ‘his sake,’ he implies an aesthetic experience that would nurture his soul, and his encouragement to readers is based on his favouring an art form through which they can partake in the enlightening process of being. It appears therefore, that Lawrence’s fiction occurs from an aesthetic distance that offers a two-fold consummating and enriching experience.

Though there is no tangible connection between Lawrence and his contemporary Bakhtin, both have written a critique of Dostoevsky and formulated comparable theories that insist on a non-didactic novelistic aesthetic. I will, however, approach this connection from the angle of authorial distancing, the position from which dialogism can function to ultimately lead to what Bakhtin refers to as authorial consummation (22). In the process, it will be possible to determine the extent to which the polyphony of voices can prevent readers from engaging in intentional fallacy.

To begin with, the process of aesthetic consummation develops from the narrator’s suspension of external reality, which involves drawing a line between fact and fiction. From among Lawrence’s fiction, it is in *Women in Love* that this technique acquires magnitude. Regardless of the realisation that most characters are drawn from real life with Hermione reflecting Lady Ottoline Morrell, Halliday and the Pussum adopted from Heseltine and Minette, Gudrun and Gerald based on Mansfield and Murry, and of course Birkin and Ursula as Lawrence and Frieda respectively, the novel retains its independent artistic quality and engages readers in a discursive space of interrogating, analysing voices in search for existential balance. Accordingly, Mark Kinkead-Weekes states, “Lawrence preserves the autonomy of the characters by dramatizing them and having them speak out and act out their inner being in ways readers can respond to for themselves” (xiv).

It should be stressed that the world of WL is isolated from the author’s social environment, existing in a remote time and place, set apart from the war taking place at the time it was written. With one distance determined, Lawrence further detaches himself from his characters’ polyphonic spaces, their open-ended dialogues, and in so doing invites readers to interact with them mentally and emotionally. Interestingly, the dialogic relation is not restricted to characters only, as both author and reader, drawn into the meditative path to knowledge, experience a transient aesthetic consummation. According to Bakhtin, what occurs through a dialogic interaction and involvement with others, is a “unique and unified event of being” (14) subject to further development through one’s continuous interaction with co-beings.

Thus, distancing allows the writer to see and know himself as wholly other. When Lawrence mentally steps away from his social context, his aesthetic gaze falls on another horizon into which he projects a spatial form endowed with emotion and dialogue, what Bakhtin refers to as “a verbal portrait” (96). Lawrence creates, moulds and transmits characters from the real world and further distances himself from them to acquire an objective view of their wholeness. The heated exchange between Ursula and Birkin in the “An Island” chapter is one occasion in which the narrator predominantly expresses Ursula’s emotional reactions thereby witnessing himself, as Birkin, from the eyes of a female other. What Lawrence has done is rise above himself, in a sort of transcendence; he endows his consciousness with an external form populated with different souls with whom he engages meditatively. Unto Birkin especially, he projects his inner soul and allows him to exist on the boundary “at the point where the soul is

inwardly turned ("adverted") to the outside of itself" (Bakhtin 101) where he experiences his life, his desires, inner conflicts, ailing health, and prospective death, from the mouth of another.

Moreover, the pre-conceived setting unto which Lawrence transmits his characters plays a significant role in stimulating the numerous verbal exchanges. They are subjected to what Lawrence refers to as "the spirit of place" (SCAL 12) as is evident from the chapter titles, which generally point to places, to situations or to objects of philosophical speculation. Characters therefore, interact and respond to the atmosphere and mood of their environments irrespective of their real life models.

Basically, the characters' state of ambiguity and uncertainty within the open-ended, dialogic space points to the potential risk that they will eventually have to face the consequences of their inability to develop through dialogic interaction. Gudrun and Gerald are two characters who fail to change, who remain eternally fixed and passive in comparison to Ursula and Birkin. As observed, the former couple's debates ultimately end in misery and death compared to the latter's. Furthermore, while expressive techniques or dialogism generally sees characters taking no effective physical action, in Birkin's case there is an indirect change. True to the dialogic style, we indirectly learn about his marriage to Ursula. As for Gerald and Gudrun's chaotic relationship, the industrial magnate he is and the creative artist she is, are unable to meet on a level beyond the physical. His tragic end and her misery are their redemption, what Bakhtin refers to as "aesthetic salvation" (71).

Broadly speaking, when the world outside was waging its battles, there was Lawrence constructing a setting and characters preoccupied with verbal conflicts whose outcomes are, from a Bakhtinian point-of-view, either Unidirectional or vari-directional. That is, some characters ultimately agree and connect harmoniously while others deviate and are at odds with each other. Metaphor, sarcasm and parody are therefore the dialogues' driving forces, and the narrative is endowed with a unique delicate rhythmic quality as utterances and tones rise and fall in speculation, in accord and in discord. This is especially evident in several dialogic scenes, particularly the "Mooney" chapter, the clash between Ursula's father and Birkin, between Ursula and Hermione, and Gudrun in the Pompadour.

Thus, in spite of the characters' proximity to real life, authorial voice and textual space keeps them at a certain distance, allowing for a universal appreciation and interaction with their paths to self-discovery. Nevertheless, Lawrence's tone is condescendingly sceptical of his characters' lived experiences. More importantly, for all of his detachment, he never ruptures the soul connection he has with his protagonist; just as Birkin retains his 'blood tie' with Gerald, so does Lawrence preserve his sentiment for Birkin. Ultimately, it is in this "living relationship of two consciousnesses" (Bakhtin 92) that aesthetic value is achieved in each of the real and fictional space.

References

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