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## The "White Peacock" Reconsidered

Lawrence's first novel, *The White Peacock*, represents a thematic embryo of his entire novelistic oeuvre. It announces a number of significant Lawrentian themes in a more or less articulate form and thus finds itself on the central line of development of Lawrence's novelistic work. This has been noticed by the critics. Graham Hough, for instance, says:

Many of the classic Laurentian motives which he was later to drag out into consciousness and expound and comment on here appear unanalysed and unaware of their own significance. We need only enumerate them briefly: the relationship with Jessie Chambers, to be elaborated and finally exorcised in *Sons and Lovers*; the hostility of the father, and hence to the principle of authority in general; he conflicts for a woman between a self-conscious, civilized man and an earth-bound, inarticulate one; the degeneration of the man who denies his own potentialities; the gamekeeper, with his violent hatred of modern women and their standards; the lady who gives herself to a more primitive kind of man; the love-relation between man and man, almost overtly homosexual in the «Poem of Friendship» chapter of *The White Peacock*, later concealed and distorted in *Women in Love*, *Aaron's Rod*, *Kangaroo*, and *Plumed Serpent*.<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to note the richness of themes which poured forth from the young author.<sup>2</sup> They appear in abundance

<sup>1</sup> Graham Hough, *The Dark Sun*, Penguin Books, Harmondworth, Middlesex, 1961, pp. 40—41.

<sup>2</sup> About the genesis of this novel see Harry T. Moore, *The Intelligent Heart. The Story of D. H. Lawrence*, Penguin Biography, 1960. See also Jessie Chambers-Wood (E.T.), *A Personal Record*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1935. Cf. Lawrence's statement: "I had been tussling away for four years, getting out *The White Peacock* in inchoate bits, from the underground of my consciousness. I must have written most of it five or six times, but only in intervals, never as a task or a divine labour, or in groans of parturition". "Autobiographical Sketch", D. H. Lawrence: *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. by Anthony Beal, Heinemann, London, pp. 2—3.

in his first novel, jostling each other, suppressing each other, striving for priorities. As Proust's Combray with all its streets, squares, inhabitants and numerous details and particularities came out of a tea cup Lawrence's later novels can be traced to *The White Peacock*.

But in spite of this thematic richness which the young author does not know how to deal with and how to integrate into a firm structure the central theme can be perceived quite clearly. It leads us directly into the very centre of Lawrence's novelistic inspiration and of his system of thought. The central theme is represented by the author's concentration on the decisive moment in the life of Lettie Beardsall and George Saxton when they choose between two life possibilities, two ways of development of their own personalities and thus by an act of deliberate choice determine their own future. This theme represents a nucleus around which cluster a number of significant Lawrentian questions. They raise this theme upon the level of far-reaching significance and with more or less success transform a drama of sentiment into the problem of disintegration or integration of personality. The author's fundamental attitudes towards the human condition are defined by implication.

Naturally, in Lawrence's first novel this germinal theme is not accompanied by a later complex cluster of problems nor is it placed in a complex network of social and historical determinants. The very theme of choice determining the integration or disintegration of personality is not tackled with the profundity of insight which characterizes Lawrence's later work. The significance which this thematic cluster acquires in Lawrence's mature phase cannot be conferred so easily upon the terrain of idyllic courtship and light love skirmishes on which the major part of the novel centres and on to which the young author dares to tread in his first novelistic attempt.

The central characters of the novel, Lettie Beardsall and George Saxton, who are drawn to each other by a strong instinctual attraction, are faced with the necessity of a choice. This act represents the central turning-point of their lives and determines their whole future. Naturally, they are not fully aware of the importance of the moment, of the repercussions of their acts and decisions. Yet, in a clairvoyant moment, both of them become aware of the essential meaning of their situation and come to feel that what is being irrevocably decided in this drama of sentiment is their own destiny in the most crucial sense of the word.

I shall briefly interpret two such moments in the novel which relate to Lettie and George respectively.

The first scene takes us into the spring wood together with two young couples, Lettie and Leslie Tempest (the rival suitor) and Emily and Cyril (the narrator). In the course of their walk they climb down into a deep dell where they see clusters of snowdrops among the dense undergrowth of the spring wood. The description which follows is highly significant.

There was a deep little dell, sharp sloping like a cup, and white sprinkling of flowers all the way down, with white flowers showing pale among the first inpouring of shadow at the bottom. The earth was red and warm, pricked with the dark, succulent green of bluebell sheaths, and embroidered with grey-green clusters of spears, and many white flowerets. High above, above the light tracery of hazel, the weird oaks tangled in the sunset. Below, in the first shadows, *drooped the hosts of little white flowers, so silent and sad; it seemed like a holy communion of pure wild things, numberless, frail, and folded meekly in the evening light.* Other flower companies are glad; stately barbaric hordes of blue-bells, merry-headed cowslip groups, even light, tossing wood-anemones; *but snowdrops are sad and mysterious. We have lost their meaning. They do not belong to us who ravish them. The girls bent among them, touching them with their fingers, and symbolising the yearning which I felt. Folded in the twilight, these conquered flowerets are sad like forlorn little friends of dryads* (128).<sup>3</sup>

In this description of the snowdrops Lawrence recreates for the reader his authentic poetic experience of the mystery of nature which like an invisible fluid surrounds the vividly presented details of the landscape. The multitude of these frail, white, bowed flowers ("a holy communion of pure, wild things", "sad and mysterious"), refracted through Lettie's consciousness, take on a special significance and make her, in some indefinable way, look into her soul. At the same time these lost strayed flowers which so mysteriously glimmer in the spring dusk appear to keep a secret of the wisdom of a long-bygone civilization. ("We have lost their meaning... They do not belong to us, who ravish them... these conquered flowerets are sad like forlorn little friends of dryads").

The conversation which follows translates into fairly explicit terms what the description of the landscape dimly hints at.

"What do they mean, do you think?" said Lettie in a low voice, as her white fingers touched the flowers, and her black furs fell on them.

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<sup>3</sup> References are to page numbers in D. H. Lawrence, *The White Peacock*, Heinemann, London, 1969.

"They are not so many this year," said Leslie.

"*They remind me of mistletoe, which is never ours, though we wear it,*" said Emily to me.

"What do you think they say — what do they make you think, Cyril?" Lettie repeated.

"I don't know. Emily says they belong to some *old wild lost religion*. They were the symbol of tears, perhaps, to some *strange-hearted Druid folk before us.*"

"More than tears," said Lettie. "More than tears, they are so still. *Something out of an old religion, that we have lost. They make me feel afraid.*"

"What should you have to fear?" asked Leslie.

"If I knew I shouldn't fear," she answered. "Look at all the snowdrops" — they hung in dim, strange flecks among the dusky leaves — "look at them — *closed up, retreating, powerless. They belong to some knowledge we have lost, that I have lost and that I need. They seem like something in fate. Do you think, Cyril, we can lose things off the earth — not mastodons, and those old monstrosities — but things that matter — wisdom?*"

"It is against my creed," said I.

"*I believe I have lost something,*" said she.

"Come," said Leslie, "don't trouble with fancies. Come with me to the bottom of this cup, and see how strange it will be, with the sky marked with branches like a filigree lid."

She rose and followed him down the steep side of the pit, crying, "Ah, you are treading on the flowers."

"No," said he, "I am being very careful".

"They sat down together on a fallen tree at the bottom. She leaned forward, her fingers wandering white among the shadowed grey spaces of leaves, plucking, *as if it were a rite, flowers here and there*. He could not see her face.

"Don't you care for me?" he asked softly.

"You?" — *she sat up and looked at him, and laughed strangely. "You do not seem real to me," she replied, in a strange voice.* (128—129)

"The old, wild lost religion", "something we have lost", "the strange-hearted Druid folk", "They belong to some knowledge we have lost, that I have lost and that I need". — Lettie's shy, ill-defined attempts at explaining what she felt indicate that Lawrence's later vision dimly flickers through this scene. It already contains a germ of the conviction that the context of contemporary civilization denies a possibility of harmonious growth to the human personality and that a number of historical determinants favoured a development of disproportions in the human personality so that the "social" being denied the »organic« and the intellectual and conscious superstructure of personality suppressed or entirely denied the instinctual-sensuous fundamentals of being. It is interesting to note that in this early novel the posing of the problem of the instinctual-sensuous is linked with the evocation of the pre-Christian religions and civilizations whose myths will later powerfully attract Lawrence. However, even if we do not

place this scene in the perspective of Lawrence's later novels, especially *The Plumed Serpent*,<sup>4</sup> we cannot avoid the impression that something of extraordinary importance takes place here. In spite of its imprecision this scene plays an important role in the development of the central action of the novel which centres on Lettie Beardsall and George Saxton. It suddenly discloses to Lettie herself, and to the reader, the fundamental meaning of her situation. Suddenly the narration plunges below its usual level and we sense how much is at stake beneath the surface of love skirmishes, idyllic courtship and an innocent pastoral taking place in lovely, translucent, colour-vibrant landscapes. This scene represents Lettie's brief moment of lucid insight into her own personality and destiny, her clairvoyant though indefinable glimpse of the stakes at play, life possibilities which she will throw away, values that she will renounce, the part of her own personality that she will deny. ("They belong to some knowledge *we* have lost, that *I* have lost and that *I* need. They seem like something in fate.") Lettie chooses between two suitors, George Saxton, an intellectually inarticulate farmer towards whom she is drawn by a powerful instinctual attraction and Leslie Tempest, a landowner and industrial magnate whom she likes, with whom she shares many interests and habits of thought and who offers her a social status and middle class comfort. Renouncing George Lettie denies the most vital part of her own nature. From the moment of her wrong choice a slow and long-drawn-out process of inner disintegration of both of them starts.

The snowdrops scene is not done realistically in the traditional sense of the term. It is poetically suggestive, woven with half-formed intimations and foreshadowings. This novel already bears witness to a characteristic movement of Lawrence's art towards an indirect presentation of the characters' states of mind which are projected upon some detail of external reality. In later novels complex and not fully articulate states of mind and turbid emotional moods of characters which defy rational comprehension acquire sensuous concreteness owing to this indirect presentation. The landscape plays an extraordinarily important role here. It often becomes an interpreter of the characters' states of mind. Lawrence uses this technique masterfully so that the landscape keeps its sensuous concrete-

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. E. M. Forster: "*The Plumed Serpent* blares out explicitly what the snowdrops in *The White Peacock* shyly hinted at, yet, exquisite as were those early woodlands, they droop towards unreality beneath the sunlight of Mexico." A Letter of 22nd April, 1930, to *The Nation and Athenaeum*, XLVII (№ 4, from 26th April, 1930, p. 109).

ness but at the same time possesses an inner spiritual dimension because of the projection of the character's inner dynamics upon it. Thus the landscape becomes a powerful medium in the indirect concretization of the characters' states of mind. Owing to the overtones of meaning of the language used to build up this scene, the snowdrops in the dell in the wood in the spring dusk shadow forth a reality beyond the concrete and the actual, suggest the moment of insight of a particular character (Lettie) into her fundamental problem, and at the same time the author's glimpse of a long-vanished civilization with a different patterning of human existence.

The snowdrops scene is not fully worked out but it has a certain poetic suggestiveness and the reader does not feel he has been imposed upon and is not irritated by a literary cliché as it so often happens in this novel.<sup>5</sup>

In a brief moment of intuitive insight Lettie recognized her destiny. For George Saxton this moment of insight took place earlier. The characters and the atmosphere of this scene are entirely different from the snowdrops scene and these two approaches define the two poles of Lawrence's art. Cyril, who is George's friend, comes to tell George about Lettie's engagement to Tempest. George is in the barn and is just going to milk the cows. The ambiance in which he finds himself is vividly rendered and indicates Lawrence's gift for vivid presentation of characters and milieus. Here is the introductory description:

The lamp hung against the barn-wall, softly illuminating the lower part of the building, where bits of hay and white dust lay in the hollows between the bricks, where the curled chips of turnip scattered orange gleams over the earthen floor; the lofty roof, with its swallows' nests under the tiles, was deep in shadow, and the corners were full of darkness, hiding, half hiding, the hay, the chopper, the bins. The light shone along the passages before the stalls, glistening on the moist noses of the cattle, and on the whitewash of the walls. (88)

George sits with a pail between his knees and is just about to milk a cow. Cyril unexpectedly starts talking about Lettie and announces to him that she has got engaged to Tempest.

He did not turn his eyes away, but he ceased to look at me. As one who is listening for a far-off noise, he sat with his eyes fixed. (89)

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. F. R. Leavis: "There is a great deal of the literary and conventional in the style and the treatment"; *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1964, p. 19.

At this moment when George sits immobile staring vacantly into space as if he were listening to some far-off future events he is fundamentally aware of his own failure and of his irrevocable loss. He is aware of the fact that out of inertia and lack of confidence he has allowed his life chance to slip by. Shortly afterwards he mechanically resumes his job, the milk rhythmically flows into the pail as Cyril notes with a sense of relief, George represses his sorrow and puts up a brave front. The talk flows on and in the course of it George defends himself as best he can from Cyril's objections that by his hesitation and inaction he has forfeited his chance to act.

In this scene Lawrence's realism comes to the forefront (fidelity to the surfaces of everyday life, vivid rendering of an ambiance and of characters functioning in it, naturalness of dialogue and gestures etc.) This scene and many more similar to it which mainly centre round George Saxton<sup>6</sup> highlights the quality of *The White Peacock* by which this novel anticipates *Sons and Lovers*, the greatest achievement of Lawrence's early phase. By the thematic cluster which grows out of the author's crucial experiences and by the partially successful use of the realistic stylistic mode this novel leads directly into *Sons and Lovers*.

Naturally, *The White Peacock* is only a beginning and the scenes which I have quoted are important not because they are fully realized but because they serve as pointers on the way to future developments. But, generally speaking, these two approaches, a combination of these two basic techniques is to be found at the very centre of Lawrence's novelistic inspiration. On the one side realism, standing for authenticity, life-like veracity, vividness of presentation of concretely rendered milieus, convincingness of characters and their relationships, and on the other side symbolistic techniques suggestively bodying forth the characters' states of mind and their complex moods, where concrete details of external reality, natural phenomena especially, take on new meanings and become suggestive metaphors for the character's psyche or for the whole thematic cluster of a particular novel.

*The White Peacock* bears the stamp of an early, youthful work in all its aspects. But although it does not weigh much and only represents Lawrence's first attempt at mastering the

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. G. Hough: "It is in this part of the book that Lawrence approaches most nearly to George Eliot or Hardy — to the traditional novel of English provincial life — and it is in the Saxton family that all the rich, solid evocation of character and background is concentrated"; *op. cit.*, p. 41.

requirements of a complex literary form it takes on a special importance when put in the perspective of Lawrence's future development. Thematically, *The White Peacock* stems directly from the centre of Lawrence's novelistic preoccupations as regards the patterning of individual destinies on a deeper existential plane. Technically, although it appears to be a fully conventional novel it heralds the future. It contains some anticipatory hints of the narrative procedures which will be used by Lawrence later in a more highly developed form, some of which will play a crucial role in Lawrence's re-structuring of the novelistic form. What is, in fact, the structure of *The White Peacock*? Basically, as is only natural, this novel conforms to the tradition of the Victorian realistic novel. *The White Peacock* has a well-defined plot which is concerned with the destinies of the two main characters, Lettie and George. The main action spans the period of the early youth of all the main characters and ends with Lettie's marriage. The action taking place within this period constitutes the central and the most important part of the novel. The last part of the novel consists of a number of vignettes affording us brief glimpses into the lives of all the main protagonists at different points in time. These vignettes work out the implications and the consequences of the earlier turning-point in the lives of Lettie and George on which the central part of the novel has been focussed. Besides the main plot there are several bulky episodic digressions which lead the reader's interest away from the central line of development and are all thematically important for Lawrence's later development. These are the well-known episode of the father's return and death, the story of Annable, the gamekeeper, and the »Poem of Friendship« chapter, which depicts George's and Cyril's youthful friendship without having much relevance to the body of the novel.

The objections raised by the critics are relevant and just. The above-mentioned episodes represent undesirable digressions from the central action of the novel, introduce new thematic nuclei and are one more proof that the young author has not yet mastered the requirements of his craft. In spite of a certain charm *The White Peacock* is an immature work and the lack of maturity reflects on all aspects of the novel's structure. Yet, the uncertain composition of the novel hides some anticipatory hints of Lawrence's future novelistic structures. The reason why the author introduces subsidiary episodes into his novel does not lie in the desire to complicate the plot and make it more colourful by introducing a multitude of charac-



ters and events nor in the young author's ambition simultaneously to deal with a variety of his experiences from various spheres. The episodes of the father's return, Annable, the gamekeeper, Cyril's relation to George are technically unintegrated with the main body of the novel but they all, directly or indirectly, *deal with the same theme*. The reason why the writer introduces them into his novel lies in his *vital obsession with this theme*.<sup>7</sup> From the depth of his creative imagination as well as from the most painfully intimate personal experiences based on family life irrepressibly gushes forth the central theme of Lawrence's novelistic *oeuvre*. The relationship between the sexes through which Lawrence refracts the problem of integration or disintegration of personality, the fundamental problem of man's relation to his destiny and to his own being constitute the central thematic cluster of this novel. (Naturally, the problems are not thrown into full relief, the young author does not yet know how to document his theme on a deeper and psychologically more significant level.) The main vehicle of his theme is the story of Lettie and George but this theme is worked out in all the subsidiary episodes. The disharmonious marriage of Cyril's parents ends in a psychical ruin and death of one of them. The extremism and misanthropy of the gamekeeper Annable, who is in spite of his exuberant nature a disbalanced personality ("Be a good animal, true to your animal instinct," was his motto. With all this, he was fundamentally very unhappy — and he made me also wretched") are provoked by traumatic experiences with a woman. Annable dies a violent death. Lettie's wrong choice determines the whole later life of both herself and George, causing the physical and psychical ruin of one of them, and the life failure of both. Cyril's strong impulse of sympathy for Annable ("But he had a great attraction for me; his magnificent physique, his great vigour and vitality, and his swarthy, gloomy face drew me"), and the establishing of the father-son relation between them, explicitly mentioned by the writer in one place ("He treated me as an affectionate father treats a delicate son") is motivated by Cyril's subterranean sympathy

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<sup>7</sup> I am much indebted here to Robert Gajdusek's article "A Reading of *The White Peacock*" published in *A. D. H. Lawrence Miscellany*, ed. by Harry T. Moore, Heinemann, London, 1961. He argues convincingly that all individual fates in *The White Peacock* reveal the same fundamental problem which can be ultimately traced to Lawrence's autobiographical situation. Yet, while Gajdusek's thematic explorations are extremely interesting the thesis he offers concerning the novel's structure seems to me arbitrary. "An experiment in form, *The White Peacock* is tightly organized, overlaid with an intricate multi-levelled symbolism, and co-ordinated by a complex stream of allusions"; p. 188.

with the father, namely the man in conflict with the woman who is stronger, superior, and who carries a victory over him in a marriage which is rent by conflicts. (We have to bear in mind that what is at stake is not only a conflict between the sexes but a conflict of values. As in Lawrence's later novels the woman is the bearer of "idealistic" and "rational" values while the man is the bearer of sensuous and instinctual values.) The same feeling is an ingredient of Cyril's strong impulse of sympathy for George. Even in the "Poem of Friendship" chapter which is the most remote from the central action of the novel and represents a self-enclosed unit a reflection of the narrator's preoccupation with the central theme is to be found in a direct association of George's and Annable's personalities and destinies.

For he knew how I admired the noble, white fruitfulness of his form. As I watched him, he stood in white relief against the mass of green. He polished his arm, holding it out straight and solid; he rubbed his hair into curls, while I watched the deep muscles of his shoulders, and the bands stand out in his neck as he held it firm; *I remembered the story of Annable.* (222)

The episodes are unintegrated with the central narrative line of the novel but in all of them the same theme is sounded. By this aspect of its structure, by the fact that the novel works out the manifold variants of the same theme *The White Peacock* which remains within the conventional structural scheme contains a germ of Lawrence's future techniques. Distantly and shyly it heralds the structural rhythms of *The Rainbow*, which throughout its vast span works out a single theme whose allotropic modifications richly co-exist. The structure of *The Rainbow* rests upon the circling movement which always returns to a well-defined motivic cluster, symbols, details, on the allotropic modifications of a number of elements whose connotative values are enriched by passing through new variants. *The Rainbow* can be viewed from two perspectives: as a modern variant of the traditional family chronicle novel which traces the life of a family through generations as historical time flows on and, spacially, as a comprehensive working out of a single theme where each variation throws into relief a different aspect of the theme. In a less determinate way, *The White Peacock* also heralds *Women in Love*, which rests on the unity of a rich thematic complex whose multiple aspects are refracted through one another and where in all layers of the novel and at all levels of meaning sound the essential Lawrencean questions: how to live, how to achieve the integrity of being and the fulfilment of our human destiny.