THE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AS A COSMOVISION IN *WOMEN IN LOVE*

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D. H. Lawrence's novel, *Women in Love,* can in a way be considered a continuation of *The Rainbow*.[1] Two of its main characters, the sisters Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen, are common to both works, although obviously their capacity and function are different. The reason for this is that both works come from the one common plan: a novel which Lawrence intended calling *The Sisters* and which finally took the form of the two novels mentioned. Like the rest of his literary work, *Women in Love* is a partly autobiographical work both in the theme and in the characteres. One of these, Birkin, is at times used by the author as a mouthpiece for his own ideas, although this does not imply a judgement of the literary value of this character. We will return to this point later.

In *Women in Love* Lawrence explores, perhaps in greater depth, a problem which had already been dealt with in other novels, that of the relations between a man and a woman, in a search for a full and ideal marriage. In this sense, it is significant that the first chapter of the novel begins with a conversation between Ursula and Gudrun in which are reflected their attitudes towards the subject, which will otherwise be recurrent throughout the novel. But, although we could briefly summarize the plot as dealing with four characters, two men and two women, and the relationships established between them, we cannot nonetheless

(1) D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978). Further references to this edition are included in the text. On the relationship between the two novels Lawrence himself indicates that *Women in Love* «is a potential sequel to *The Rainbow,*» in «Foreword to *Women in Love,*» in D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix II,* ed. Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore (London: Heinemann, 1968), p. 275.

talk of a plot in the sense of the traditional novel. The structure of *Women in Love* develops in a series of separate episodes, often with a marked symbolist tone, which progressively accumulate the intensity of the relationships between the characters until the final climax of Gerald's death in the snow. And yet the structural isolation of the episodes does not bring with it an absence of solid organization ot the novel round a determined scheme.

Enough has been said about the function of one character or another in the structure of the novel. Some, such as F. R. Leavis, think that the central axis of the novel is Gerald.[2] But Birkin may also be considered as the character around whom the novel revolves. To support this last position it is possible to argue the fact that in a first version of this work Lawrence focussed all the attention, in the beginning, on Birkin's character and on his homosexual attraction for Gerald,[3] while in the definitive version he gives the opening scenes to Ursula and Gudrun. And yet, the interest of the novel later comes back to rest on Birkin, to whom is also given the last word to express a new and final «no» to the «regular sanity» of society.

Another characteristic feature of this novel, in contrast with the previous naturalist novel, is the liberation, as it were, of the characters from a real society. Birkin, for example, is essentially a person without roots, without a clear social or family origin. We know that he is a schools-inspector but his feelings about his work are not revealed to us, and in any case they do not appear to have any influence on his private life. Gudrun thinks that she and Ursula are different from other people, since they do not feel conditioned in any way by their social class and since they can establish a relationship on equal terms with any other person. What is underlined throughout the novel is the personality and character of each individual rather than their position and origin. So we can see that in the relationship between Birkin and Ursula and later between Gerald and Gudrun such a question does not arise, and in the latter case that it is finally the clash betwwen two different personalities which determines the course of their relationships.

The characters are no longer tied to a specific, concrete time and situation. They believe in the freedom of their actions and they feel that they alone are responsible for their consequences. Moral values and historical co-ordinates disappear in favour of a world created by and for them and which excludes others. The real world, which ties down the lives of the miners, becomes nothing more

(2) See his extensive analysis of this novel in F. R. Leavis, *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 173-236.

(3) See «Prologue to *Women in Love*,» in D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix II*, pp. 92-108.

than an object of aesthetic contemplation in the chapter entitled «Coal-dust».[4] Also in this chapter we can appreciate how, if at some time one of these characters manages to appreciate the reality of another world different to the one which they themselves have created, it occurs using a superficial vision, such as before something exotic and alien, and to the extent that that other reality offers satisfactions of an individual and intimate nature. At other times, they rebel against the ugliness and cruelty of that industrial world but they do it with a reaction based exclusively in their feelings and in the contrast between this world from which they want to flee and the one which they create for themselves. But there is no authentic desire to analyse it in depth and in its own terms.

This withdrawal of the characters of the novel from a real society has its motivation in Lawrence's own ideology. The scorn and rejection which Lawrence felt for industrial and bourgeois society is well known, not only because of his family origin but also because he considered that it limited the individual's possibilities to a great extent. In this sense, Lawrence is another case among the writers who, like Sherwood Anderson and André Gide, follow the example of Rimbaud, according to the analysis which Edmund Wilson makes on writers at the beginning of the 20th century.[5] That is, in view of the impossibility of facing up somehow to contemporary society, the writer flees to a world of primitive sensations, where the emotion and the instinct dominate over reason and will. We find much of this in Lawrence's own biography and specifically in the novel which concerns us here. Thus, for example, in the chapter entitled «Totem» or in the relationship between Birkin and Hermione, we can clearly appreciate the confrontation between the primitive, physical sensation and intelectualized feelings, between the spontaneous and the calculated. On this level, the role played by nature throughout the novel is primordial, not only as almost the only aesthetic object, but also as a safe refuge to which to be able to flee. Birkin does so after the violent break with Hermione at the end of «Breadalby». Here nature is really Birkin's adopted home. Now it is the world, that is, society, which is the setting for

(4) As in the following example:

> The girls descended between the houses with slate roofs and blackish brick walls. The heavy gold glamour of approaching sunset lay over all the colliery district, and the ugliness overlaid with beauty was like a narcotic to the senses. On the roads silted with black dust, the rich light feel more warmly, more heavily, over all the amorphous squalor a kind of magic was cast, from the glowing close of day.
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> «It has a foul kind of beauty, this place,» said Gudrun, evidently suffering from fascination. «Can't you feel in some way, a thick, hot attraction in it? I can. And it quite stupefies me.» (p. 128)

(5) See especially the chapter «Axel and Rimbaud» by Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), pp. 257-98.

more or less artificial social relations. His taking off his clothes is a significant symbol of what is happening. Values have been reversed. His place is in nature, in his perfect communion with it, in an attempt to recreate the moment in which man and nature were in perfect harmony, when madness was not the pre-requisite for finding freedom.

The relationships between the four main characters can be analysed in the light of the emotion / reason, instinct / will duality. It is obvious that the novel is partly organised around the contrast which can be noted between Gerald and Gudrun, on one hand, and Birkin and Ursula, on the other. Whilst one of these relationships is negative and finally becomes destructive, the other is positive and creative, except for the limits which Birkin continues to find until the last minute. This contrast is used by Lawrence to convey his own ideas about what man's existence must be and what it must not be, through particular situations and deeds. The will, the desire for power and domination, predominate in Gerald, while Gudrun, although different from Hermione, is basically intellectual and rationalist. Both try to achieve that physical and sensual passion which Lawrence advocates through Birkin, but in Gerald that passion is pervaded by his desire to dominate –exemplified in the symbolic incident with the mare and the train in «Coal-dust»–, and in Gudrun by her desire to control her emotions, so that what leads them to find an at times perfect love and relationship is in the end what finally destroys them: their rationalism and their desire to end up intellectualizing all the emotions. Lawrence expounds their sexual failure as a symbol of a more general failure.

Gerald seems to be fated in some aspects. The accidental death of his brother, that of Diana and young Brindell in the lake in «Water-party,» for which he feels himself responsible, his comments about his own family, reveal a certain air of inevitability and justify his own death, announced in a way in the deaths of the young people in the lake and in his personal opinion: «She killed him» (p. 212). Lawrence also achieves this effect by using the resource of associating with this character images related to death.

But Gerald's death is also the logical consequence of an earlier spiritual death, when he fails in his desire for power and domination, or when there is no longer anything left to desire or to dominate. There is a certain symbolism, in the form of an insinuation by Lawrence, in the fact that Gerald re-organizes and modernizes the mines to the point where he himself is no longer ncessary, as can be seen at the end of «The Industrial Magnate»: «The whole sytem was now so perfect that Gerald was hardly necessary any more» (p. 261). Nature, a little romantic, adds to the general effect. Gerald evolves perfectly in the dark landscapes where day after day the miners extract the coal from the black depth of the mines. This is the world he understands and can dominate. There is something more than chance in the fact

that his death should actually take place in the mountains, in a landscape completely white with snow. In this sense, the industrial man has lost his ability to assimilate nature, to recover it, linking that spiritual death with his physical death.

It is obvious that this whole set of ideas and attitudes stems from Lawrence's own ideology and his rejection of anything connected, more or less directly, with the industrial, bourgeois society,. Therefore, the contrast between Gerald and Gudrun, on the one hand, and Birkin and Ursula, on the other, becomes more significant in the climax of the work, the stay in the mountains where Gerald's death will take place. While his relationship with Gudrun moves towards break-up and destruction, towards the coldness of death in the snow, the relationship between Birkin and Ursula grows stronger and takes a firm hold on life in its symbolic move towards the warm south. The inevitability of Gerald's death arises partly from the character's own choice and partly from Lawrence's own thought.

Gerald's failure is the failure of the conception of man as an «industrial man» to achieve that «wholeness» so insistently alluded to in the work. By affirming Gerald's incapacity to become a complete man –paradoxically in the author's descriptions of him the word «complete» appears frequently– Lawrence seems to be condemning the process of history which Gerald serves, and he is implicitly denying the possibility of an industrial society, to which Gerald so well adapts himself, which can permit man's full realization.

In contrast with the failure of Gerald and Gudrun we have the relative success of Birkin and Ursula. At this point it is necessary to point out the autobiographical aspect of the novel, at least with respect to the identification between Birkin-character and Lawrence-author. This identification –otherwise, commonplace in criticism on this author– represents another break with the traditional canons of structure and method in the preceding narrative. Any attempt at objective presentation is abandoned and a determined character, in this case Birkin, is turned into a mere mouthpiece for the author's own ideas. At times the text acquires a strong didactic tone, which is derived more from the autobiographical aspect than from the actual movement of the narrative. The identification between Birkin and Lawrence himself is used by the author to express his disillusion at the useless and destructive horror of the First World War –*Women in Love,* let us remember, was written in 1916.[6]

(6) But the first idea for the novel is earlier. Michael Bell compares Lawrence's novel to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain,* pointing out:

> The two novels have also a parallel genesis in that both were conceived before the Great War and by the time they were completed they had assimilated into themselves the consciousness of a historical catastrophe which the original conception had already in some sense anticipated.

See Michael Bell, «Introduction: Modern Movements in Literature,» in Michael Bell, ed *1900-1930* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 22.

And yet, the relationship between Lawrence and his character is not so simple. Birkin is not limited to being a spokesman for Lawrence. The incident of the letter, in «Gudrun in the Pompadour,» shows that Lawrence can achieve a certain objectivity, critically analysing Birkin as a character and as a spokesman for the author himself. Lawrence uses the incident, although based in fact, as a means of distancing him from his character Birkin. The latter generally becomes the spokesman for Lawrence throughout the novel and the author, using the above-mentioned resource, tries to break that character-author relationship and establish a balance in the character, who at this point of the novel already appears too moralistic. The same could be said about some comments by Ursula about Birkin which achieve the same effect, for example, in some passages in «Moony» and «Excurse.»

In spite of this, the identification persists throughout the novel. Therefore, it is logical to infer that the ideas which Birkin expresses are to a great extent the ideas of Lawrence himself at the time of writing the novel. In the chapter titled «A Chair» a simple incident, as the buying of a chair is, becomes highly revealing and significant for understanding Birkin in his capacity as Lawrence's spokesman. For Birkin, the chair is a work of art, and he describes it in terms which would be more appropriate for a painting or a Gothic cathedral. Below we can find out what motivates such lyrical sentiments in Birkin:

> ...When I see that clear, beautiful chair, and I think of England, even Jane Austen's England –it has living thoughts to unfold even then, and pure happiness in unfolding them. And now, we can only fish among rubbish-heaps for the remnants of their old expression. There is no production in us now, only sordid and foul mechanicalness. (pp. 400-01)

So, it is not so much the beauty of the chair in itself as the fact that it is a relic, a symbol of a better past, in comparison with the present, which has been destroyed and supplanted by mechanization. The rejection of the past by Ursula, also reflected in the breaking away from her parents, and Birkin's desire to possess nothing, cause them finally to give the chair to another couple. What is, according to Ursula, adequate for that working-class couple, with a markedly dialectal English, on the other hand is not enough for Birkin. But it must be added that if Birkin and Ursula finally agree upon getting rid of the chair, they do so for different reasons. Ursula does not like it because it reminds her of the past and Birkin because he associates it with having a home and family as the only goal, in an artificial, and therefore restrictive, stability.

This difference in motives is frequently seen throughout the novel in the relationship between Birkin and Ursula. Both appear to agree in the rejection of

some determined thing, which unites them and pushes them forward, but the reasons for that rejection are different and provokes not a few problems in their relationship. Ursula has a series of values to which to cling when she begins her new life. She knows what she wants and she is capable of conforming to it once it is achieved. On the other hand, Birkin is not sure of what he is really looking for. In the face of Gerald's will and Gudrun's rationalism, he proposes his sensuality and instinct. The idea that the individual can feel at sub– or pre-conscious levels without being fully aware of it, without reason playing any part in these feelings, permeates his words and his actions. Birkin's attempt to have a full relationship with Gerald is something which Ursula will never understand. Birkin wants to go beyond love in the sense in which Ursula understands it, a love beyond the sexual, which embraces man in his totality, towards something which almost inevitably acquires a mystical tone. Birkin's blind search is overwhelming and he sometimes ends up giving in to Ursula's values, much more conformist in this sense.

The feeling of loneliness and lack of understanding, his dissatisfaction and despair, especially in the failed attempt to achieve a full relationship with another man, are maintained, nonetheless, to the end. This is more significant if we compare it to the optimistic ending of *The Rainbow*. In *Women in Love* not only does there exist a disillusionment before the perspective of humanity in general but a failure in the individual and personal solutions is also indicated. And returning to the incident mentioned previously in «A Chair,» we can compare what awakens Birkin's admiration for the chair, the fact that it evokes the past, with other words by Lawrence himself:

> I sat on the roof of the lemon-house, with the lake below and the snowy mountain opposite, and looked at the ruins of the old, olivefuming shores, at all the peace of the ancient world still covered in sunshine, and the past seemed to me so lovely that one must look towards it, backwards, only backwards, where there is peace and beauty and no more dissonance.(7)

When contrasting the two fragments, the affinity of ideas between Birkin and Lawrence becomes evident, reinforcing the autobiographical interpretation of this character. The words quoted, on the other hand, will lead to a more complete understanding of what was earlier noted following the analysis of Edmund Wilson.

In effect, Lawrence seems to show three possibilities of action before the contemporary industrial society which restricts and impoverishes the individual through mechanization. On the one hand is Thomas Crich, Gerald's father, who

(7) D. H. Lawrence, «The Lemon Gardens,» in his *Twilight in Italy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 60. This collection of travel pieces was first published in 1916.

tries to put into practice an impossible ideal which brings him into confrontation with his own family and the miners. Divided between his Christian love and duty, on one hand, and the historical situation in which he is living, on the other, he directs the matters of the mine with a great deal of paternalism mixed with certain reminiscences of feudal nature. As a significant fact which announces the failure later on, Gudrun can really establish a friendship and communication with Mr. Crich but not with Gerald. This would embody the second possibility mentioned. Gerald represents and possesses a clear ideology of an individual belonging to the industrial bourgeoisie. His position is one of maximum development to the final consequences of industrial society. He puts these ideas into practice in the complete re-organization of the mines.

And finally we have Birkin as an *alter ego* of Lawrence. One certainly cannot speak of Lawrence's thought as something coherent which may be completely systematized without contradictions. But as far as *Women in Love* is concerned some clarifying ideas can be noted. Lawrence offers us a character without roots and without family or social origin. The first especially is part of the autobiographical element. In Birkin we find a preference for a society of the past whose attraction lies in the fact that supposedly, through a simplistic, superficial and optimistic vision, it was not as full of tensions as modern society. This, along with the desire to regain the union with nature, his primitivist attitude, his individualism and the preponderance of the sentiments, the natural impulses and instincts over reason as a solution to the contradictions of modern life, bring to mind the attitudes of some Romantic English poets. To this must be linked the flight towards mysticism with its share of pagan elements and the exaltation of sex as a vital, primordial element in man, which is reflected in Lawrence's work and which is also found in the earlier Romantic movement, as a reaction to the bourgeois society which, on the other hand, is seen as the only society possible.

There is no doubt that Lawrence's attitudes, integrated in a cosmovision which is ultimately pessimistic, are at times contradictory as they veer from utopic idealism to disillusionment, and they are to a certain extent marked by his family situation and specifically by the influence his mother had over him. But it also should be pointed out that the historical moment –the First World War– in which Lawrence writes the novel determines Lawrence's appreciation of reality, likewise revealing the author's pessimism with respect to the problems which arise in this work.