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Transitional States and Psychic Change: Thoughts on Reading D. H. Lawrence

Barbara Schapiro

One of my favorite scenes in literature occurs in D. H. Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow* (1915). Tom Brangwen's Polish wife Lydia is upstairs in their home giving birth. Tom is downstairs with Anna, Lydia's four-year-old child by her first marriage. Anna is panic-stricken, screaming in terror for her mother, and Tom is responding to her with irritation and mounting anger. Like the child, he too is feeling shut out and abandoned by Lydia. Tom is made particularly furious by the "blind" and "mechanical" nature of Anna's crying.

"I want my mother," rang automatically from the wincing, panic-stricken child, that felt cut off and lost in a horror of desolation.

. . . Brangwen sat stiff in his chair. He felt his brain going tighter. He crossed over the room, aware only of the maddening sobbing.

"Don't make a noise," he said.

And a new fear shook the child from the sound of his voice. She cried mechanically, her eyes looking watchful through her tears, in terror, alert to what might happen.

"I want--my--mother," quavered the sobbing, blind voice.

A shiver of irritation went over the man's limbs. It was the utter, persistent unreason, the maddening blindness of the voice and the crying.

"You must come and be undressed," he said, in a quiet voice that was thin with anger.

And he reached his hand and grasped her. He felt her body catch in a convulsive sob. But he too was blind, and intent, irritated into mechanical action (pp. 72-73).

Tom undresses the resistant child, and as he lifts up her rigid body, the narrator tells us, "Its stiff blindness made a flash of rage go through him. He would like to break it" (p. 74). A moment later, however, Tom experiences what the narrator calls "a new degree of anger"; his consciousness or self-state shifts. He thinks,

What did it all matter? What did it matter if the mother talked Polish and cried in labour, if this child were stiff with resistance, and crying? Why take it to heart? Let the mother cry in labour, let the child cry in resistance, since they would do so. Why should he fight against it, why resist? Let it be, if it were so. Let them be as they were, if they insisted.

And in a daze he sat, offering no fight. The child cried on, the minutes ticked away, a sort of torpor was on him.

It was some little time before he came to, and turned to attend to the child. He was shocked by her little, wet, blinded face (p. 74).

Tom's voice now becomes "queer and distant and calm" as he gently wraps Anna in a shawl that once belonged to his mother and carries her out to the barn. There he continues to hold her in one arm while, calmly and methodically, he prepares food for the cows with the other. "They were in another world now," we are told: "Outside there was the driving rain, inside, the softly-illuminated stillness and calmness of the barn." Anna is soothed--"A new being was created in her for the new conditions" (p. 75). The description of this scene in the barn is luminous in its sensuous detail, in its evocation of an exquisitely real, yet profoundly dreamlike state.

In a sort of dream, his heart sunk to the bottom, leaving the surface of him still, quite still, he rose with the panful of food, carefully balancing the child on one arm, the pan in the other hand. The silky fringe of the shawl swayed softly, grains and hay trickled to the floor; he went along a dimly-lit passage behind the mangers, where the horns of the cows pricked out of the obscurity. The child shrank, he balanced stiffly, rested the pan on the manger wall, and tipped out the food, half to this cow, half to the next. There was a noise of chains running, as the cows lifted or dropped their heads sharply; then a contented, soothing sound, a long snuffing as the beast ate in silence.

The journey had to be performed several times. There was the rhythmic sound of the shovel in the barn, then the man returned, walking stiffly between the two weights, the face of the child peering out from the shawl. Then the next time, as he stooped, she freed her arm and put it round his neck, clinging soft and warm, making all easier.

The beast fed, he dropped the pan and sat down on a box, to arrange the child.

"Will the cows go to sleep now?" she said, catching her breath as she spoke.

"Yes."

"Will they eat all their stuff up first?"

"Yes. Hark at them."

And the two sat still, listening to the snuffing and breathing of cows feeding in the sheds communicating with this small barn. The lantern shed a soft, steady light from one wall. All outside was still in the rain. He looked down at the silky folds of the paisley shawl. It reminded him of his mother. She used to go to church in it" (pp. 75-76).

Tom sits "in a sort of trance" as the child falls asleep in his arms. When he comes to, the narrator says, "as if from sleep, he seemed to be sitting in a timeless stillness" (p. 76). He then remembers his wife, that he must return to her. He carries Anna back to the house and puts her to sleep in the room in which he spent his youth. He then visits Lydia in childbirth, and after an initial resistance, ultimately experiences a deep, primal connection with her. The chapter ends with Tom back outdoors: he "lifted his face to the rain, and felt the darkness striking unseen and steadily upon him. The swift, unseen threshing of the night upon him silenced him and he was overcome. He turned away

indoors, humbly. There was the infinite world, eternal, unchanging, as well as the world of life" (p. 77).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, perhaps the most striking feature of the scene in the barn is its obvious womb-like nature--the characters are enveloped in a rhythmic, warm and secure space, a place of animal satiation and mindless, bodily contentment. What interests me most about the episode, however, is the abrupt shift in the character's consciousness and the reconfiguring of identifications and relational responses that the narrative so beautifully chronicles. The scene begins with both Tom and Anna reacting "blindly" and "mechanically" in their rage towards woman/mother. (Lydia, by the way, was also the name of Lawrence's own mother.) The child's wrath mirrors the man's. Faced with this reflection of his own helpless fury, Tom experiences an even more intense upsurge of destructive rage--he "would like to break" the child's resistant little body. Then his self-state alters; he stops resisting; he decides he can simply "let them be." He can allow the woman to be her separate self in her suffering which excludes him, and he can allow the child her anger without having to destroy it. This shift out of a mechanically defensive mode, the collapse of a habitual pattern or framework, permits what Robert Langan has called "the emergence of the present" (1993, p. 638). Tom is indeed "shocked" by Anna's suffering face when, in this altered state, he comes to look at her again. It is as if she has only now become real to him--distinct from himself, unentangled from his projected relationship with his own pain--and he is shocked by this recognition of her stark reality. The present emerges in the concrete detail, in the vibrant "thereness," in the stillness and timelessness of the barn description as well.

The scene in the barn conveys a vivid actuality and realness while it simultaneously represents an inner fantasy, a dream of prenatal harmony and fulfillment. Tom recognizes Anna in her real suffering while still identifying with her as a projection of his own child-self. The entire episode, the narrator tells us repeatedly, is experienced in a sort of "daze" or "trance." External and internal, reality and fantasy, as Winnicott (1971) has argued, are not mutually exclusive realms but are interrelated in highly complex, often paradoxical ways. Lawrence's art, and literature in general, can help us appreciate this intriguing interrelationship.

The artist creates in what Winnicott calls a transitional, holding space in which the boundaries between self and not self, and between the inner fantasy world and the external object world are relaxed. It is "an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. . . . a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated" (p. 2). The external world, according to Winnicott, must be discovered, but it will be felt and acquire meaning only as it is invested with the stuff of our internal world. Marion Milner (1987) has written about the artist's particular capacity for "fusing, or con-fusing subject and object. . . . By suffusing, through giving it form, the not-me objective material with the me--subjective psychic content, it makes the not-me 'real', realizable" (p. 228). Wordsworth gives poetic expression to this transitional mode of

experience in a famous passage of *The Prelude* (1805) where he compares the infant's mind to that of the poet. The baby, he says, is

creator and receiver both,
Working but in alliance with the works
Which it beholds (p. 27)

Indeed Winnicott, when this passage was pointed out to him, responded, "He seems to have read my books" (Dinnage, 1978, p. 371). Literature involves us in the writer's own transitional state of creativity, drawing us into that intermediate area of experience--a heightened and fluid space--in which inner and outer reality interrelate. In writing about Milner's work, Michael Eigen (1993) compares the clinical space in psychoanalysis to the artist's creative, transitional space. "Psychoanalysis," he says, "can provide a safe setting for the feared yet courted con-fusion of me and not-me to occur in fruitful ways" (p. 163).

Lawrence's favorite mode of narration--what is called free indirect style--also reinforces a transitional state of consciousness. This narrative convention blends the characters' direct, personal thoughts with the narrator's indirect reporting. Boundaries or distinctions between the inner consciousness of the individual characters and the outer consciousness of the narrator are blurred. In a variation on Winnicott, I would say that the question, "Does this thought belong to the character or to the narrator?" is not to be asked. The reader is thus invited into a fluid mental space in which borders seem permeable and the internal and external interpenetrate.

The transitional state, Winnicott stresses above all, is one where paradox is accepted, not resolved. Besides the paradox of the barn scene in *The Rainbow* presenting at once an inner fantasy and a heightened perception of external reality, it also depicts another interesting paradox. It is only after Tom stops fighting against the woman's separate subjectivity that he is paradoxically able to experience a deep, internal identification with her. Once he is able to "let her be" in her singleness and otherness, he discovers the maternal within himself and assumes the role of soothing nurturer. This new-found identification creates fresh possibilities in his relationship with the child and with his own anger and aggression. The phallic threat of the cows' horns pricking out of the obscurity in the barn, for instance, is acknowledged and contained. Destructiveness and uncertainty, both within and without, can now be tolerated. The final image of Tom lifting his face to the night rain and feeling "the darkness striking unseen and steadily upon him" suggests such acceptance.

Jessica Benjamin (1994) has discussed this form of positive identification with the female other in contradistinction to a defensive merging or assimilation of the other to the self. "Identification," she states, "can serve as a means for bridging difference without denying or abrogating it, but the condition of this form of identification is precisely the other's externality" (p. 240). Lawrence's fiction repeatedly enacts a struggle to discover the female other's externality and to maintain faith in it. The periodic breakdown or failure of such discovery, however--what Winnicott would call failed object

use--can help us understand the fierce sadistic fantasies that are also peculiar to his writing. In a much-discussed scene in *Sons and Lovers* (1913), Lawrence's alter ego character, Paul Morel, accidentally breaks his sister Annie's doll, Arabella. Afterwards he conducts a strangely sadistic doll-sacrifice ceremony:

He made an altar of bricks, pulled some of the shavings out of Arabella's body, put the waxen fragments into the hollow face, poured on a little paraffin, and set the whole thing alight. He watched with wicked satisfaction the drops of wax melt off the broken forehead of Arabella, and drop like sweat into the flame. So long as the stupid big doll burned he rejoiced in silence. At the end he poked among the embers with a stick, fished out the arms and legs, all blackened, and smashed them under stones.

"That's the sacrifice of Missis Arabella," he said. "An' I'm glad there's nothing left of her."

Which disturbed Annie inwardly, although she could say nothing. He seemed to hate the doll so intensely, because he had broken it. (pp. 82-83)

Psychoanalytic critics have generally interpreted the doll in this episode as representative of the mother and the ritual sacrifice as a reflection of Paul's enraged and destructive feelings towards her (Dervin, 1984, Storch, 1990). A distinction, however, needs to be made between the original breaking of the doll and the sadistic ritual which follows. Annie's observation that Paul hates the doll so intensely because he had broken it is key. Paul does not necessarily break the doll out of hate; rather, the doll gets broken in the wake of a Winnicottian destructiveness--a furious, assertive physicality, an unrestrained "letting go." (The doll, hidden under a cover, breaks when Paul is jumping excitedly on the sofa.) The doll's failure to survive, however, leaves the boy horrified and turns fury to hate. A sadistic fantasy of omnipotent control follows.

In his discussion of object use, Winnicott explains that the child needs to "destroy" the object psychically and the object must survive in order for the child to "use" or discover the real object--an object whose existence is independent of and outside the child's mental control. The breakdown of this discovery process, as Emmanuel Ghent (1990) has discussed, can lead to the development of a sadistic fantasy life; if the other fails to survive, then destructiveness, both the self's and the other's, will seem limitless. Feminist criticism of Lawrence has focused primarily on the fantasy of maternal omnipotence and the vindictive misogyny it provokes in his work, but his writing also reveals just the opposite experience of the mother--an experience of her acute vulnerability and fragility. The mother's psychic brittleness cannot withstand the child's furious assertion of his bodily, passionate being, and Lawrence's fiction creatively plays out the consequences.

Lawrence's art thrives on oppositions and paradoxical states, on conflicting fantasies and competing voices and positions within the writer's self. It supports the current emphasis in psychoanalytic relational theory on the multiple and discontinuous nature of self-experience. "Discontinuities in self-organization," Stephen Mitchell (1993) says, "are part of what enriches life, enabling conflicted domains of experience to be developed

without the pressure of continual moderation and integration" (p. 105). Philip Bromberg (1996) describes this view of the psyche as "a configuration of shifting, nonlinear, discontinuous states of consciousness in an ongoing dialectic with the healthy illusion of unitary selfhood" (p. 512).

Normally, according to Bromberg, we dissociate those self-states that threaten our illusion of unity or self-integrity in any given experience or moment. "Health," he believes, "is the ability to stand in the spaces between realities without losing any of them--the capacity to feel like one self while being many" (1993, p. 166). Artistic creativity, I would argue, always occurs in those spaces. The transitional or potential space is a safe area, much like the analytic space, for playing out multiple, often conflicting identifications and self-states. Hanna Segal (1952) maintains that the "unconscious reliving of the creator's state of mind is the foundation of all aesthetic pleasure" (p. 500). Much of our delight in imaginative literature may in fact lie in our feeling immersed in a state of mind that encompasses the vital multiplicity of self-experience, one in which normally split-off states are reclaimed and voiced.

Segal also believes that art has an essentially reparative function. Drawing on Melanie Klein's paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, she sees artistic creativity as fueled by depressive anxieties over lost or ruined internal objects destroyed by the sadistic fantasies of the earlier stage. This brings up another way in which aesthetic experience, and particularly reading literature, can involve us in altering states of mind. All literature of any depth, I believe, contains fantasies emanating from both paranoid-schizoid and depressive states. The thrust, however, may not always be towards repair and integration. Thomas Ogden (1989) has redefined the relationship between the Kleinian positions as more dialectical than strictly developmental, with both modes serving as "essential negating and preserving contexts for one another" (p. 29). We can often experience this dialectic in the dynamic play of unconscious fantasies and opposing self-states in a literary text.

Lawrence again provides a good example. Psychoanalytic critics have had a heyday pointing out the abundant fantasies of omnipotent, devouring mothers in his work. A terror of merging, of maternal engulfment, along with defensive, stridently masculine idealizations indeed characterize his fiction. In his best work, however, these fantasies represent only one "position" or state, and they consistently play off of another, more complex, intersubjective state of consciousness. Through shifting empathic authorial identifications, the characters, particularly the female characters, are granted their own subjective authenticity. They are endowed with elaborate and compelling inner lives that compete with, and ultimately withstand, the polarized narcissistic fantasies that are also projected onto them.

After the barn episode in *The Rainbow*, for instance, Tom finds himself, once again, enraged at Lydia and jealous of the new baby. In literature, as in life, the battles of the inner world are never absolutely won. In the midst of a heated argument with Lydia, however, he experiences another abrupt shift in consciousness: "Suddenly, in a flash, he saw she might be lonely, isolated, unsure. She had seemed to him the utterly

certain, satisfied, absolute, excluding him. Could she need anything?" (pp. 88-89). Such intersubjective recognition continually competes with narcissistic demands and omnipotent fantasies in Lawrence's fiction; it is again the tension between these modes that distinguishes his most interesting work. In *Sons and Lovers* Paul is repulsed by what he perceives as his girlfriend Miriam's absorbing, fusing love. When he complains to another character, Clara Dawes, about Miriam's wanting a self-obliterating "soul union," Clara responds:

"But how do you know what she wants?"

"I've been with her for seven years."

"And you haven't found out the very first thing about her."

"What's that?"

"That she doesn't want any of your soul communion. That's your own imagination. She wants you."

He pondered over this. Perhaps he was wrong.

"But she seems--" he began.

"You've never tried," she answered. (p. 321)

Clara's comments reflect an awareness that Paul's problems with Miriam are more likely due to his own fantasies and projections than to Miriam's actual character. Paul is oblivious, Clara suggests, of Miriam's real desires, of her separate subjectivity apart from his fantasies and fears. Paul momentarily considers this possibility, just as the narrative dialogue has made the reader aware of it as well. An intersubjective consciousness temporarily interrupts Paul's more habitual narcissistic projections in relation to Miriam. As Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) has argued about the dialogic nature of a Dostoevsky novel, so Lawrence's novel too is "constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other" (p. 18).

Bromberg and Benjamin have discussed the psychoanalytic project in similar terms, as a playing out of competing voices, identities, and stories without any one voice, identity, or story subsuming the others. "The capacity to disidentify with any one version as the whole story and suspend identity," Benjamin claims, "is the very premise of the analyst's work" (p. 249). The end of *Sons and Lovers* displays the paradoxical tensions and simultaneous conflicting positions so distinctive of Lawrence's art. Paul's mother is dying, slowly and excruciatingly, from cancer, and Paul directly hastens her death by feeding her morphine-laced milk. The act, the critic Margaret Storch (1990) suggests, reverses and vengefully attacks the original oral relationship between mother and child: by "denying life to his mother at the fundamental level," Paul is "making a statement of violence against the mother-child bond itself" (p. 107). Yet here again, of course, the sadistic fantasy is only one story, not the whole story. The act is also done in an attempt to relieve the mother of her real suffering; it is equally an act of almost unbearable empathy. While watching his mother die, "It was almost as if he were agreeing to die also" (p. 436).

For Paul, his mother's death on the one hand liberates or releases him and on the other relegates him to a deathlike state of horrifying nothingness and unreality. "The real agony was that he had nowhere to go, nothing to do, nothing to say, and was nothing" (p. 456). Yet towards the novel's end, in one of Lawrence's most moving passages, Paul looks up at the night sky and experiences something different:

On every side the immense dark silence seemed pressing him, so tiny a speck, into extinction, and yet, almost nothing, he could not be extinct. Night, in which everything was lost, went reaching out, beyond stars and sun. Stars and sun, a few bright grains, went spinning round for terror and holding each other in embrace, there in a darkness that outpassed them all and left them tiny and daunted. So much, and himself, infinitesimal, at the core a nothingness, and yet not nothing (p. 464).

The paradox of "at the core a nothingness, and yet not nothing" captures an emotional reality that acknowledges loss without annihilation, aloneness without disintegration. Paul discovers that he can go on "being" in his mother's absence, and that discovery paradoxically implies her presence. Without some internalization of the loving, good mother, Paul would indeed have succumbed to the darkness. Lawrence's oft expressed religious sensibility, his faith (like Tom's at the end of the barn scene) in an infinite, eternal reality beyond the self, reflects a hard-won battle within the self, the dynamics of which repeatedly energize his fiction.

As we read and enter into the play of shifting psychic positions, identifications, and self-other configurations intrinsic to good literature, we experience the potential fluidity of psychic life. Habitual frames can be broken and rigid structures dissolved (even if only to be erected again). We hear the many voices within the self, including, in Benjamin's words, "the voice of the other within" (p. 250). Literature engages us in the active tensions of psychic and relational life, tensions between self and other, inner and outer, paranoid-schizoid fantasy and depressive concern. It is precisely the absence of such tension that distinguishes the art of schizophrenics from that of non-psychotic artists. Lawrence indeed believed that "Life is so made that opposites sway about a trembling centre of balance," and that "Morality in the novel is the trembling instability of the balance" (1936, pp. 528, 529). I think again of Tom in *The Rainbow* maintaining a precarious balance--the child on one arm, the panful of cow feed on the other--carefully negotiating his way in that trance-like, real yet magical scene in the barn.

Eigen suggests that just as the artist explores the tension between what he calls "divine-demonic ideal images" and the "hard facts of life" (p. 95), so therapy can help the individual "become aware of the play of 'divine-demonic' ideal images in his life" (p. 103). Once the patient is no longer enslaved by the divine-demonic state, he becomes free, like the artist, to draw on its power. The reader too, by empathically participating in the subjective world of the text, can enjoy the freedom of moving between poles and experiencing these magnetic tensions. That movement or mental freedom is part of the exhilaration of reading literature.

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