

Painting and Ontology: D. H. Lawrence as an Art Historian

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More than any other twentieth-century writer, D. H. Lawrence developed a profound understanding of painting and evaluated this art form through the prism of his idiosyncratic ontological scheme. In allegiance to his polaristic philosophy, in which everything is created by the opposition of static and dynamic, mind and body, optical and tactile, "Will-to-Motion" and "Will-to-Inertia," light and darkness, Lawrence conceived the history of visual arts as a mirror of this universal opposition of ultimate metaphysical forces. Despite his general view that Western art was entirely under the dominion of idea, mind, and light, Lawrence pointed to several examples in which dark, bodily, and haptic experiences were processed pictorially. This essay intends to introduce Lawrence as an art historian who understood works of art and art historical periods as constituted out of a never-ending power struggle between the corporeal and the spiritual, and who always sought and called for their reconciliation and balance in his literature.

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For D. H. Lawrence, the writer who auscultated with subtle sensitivity a dim pre-conscious and pre-mental throbbing, images were a form of the expression of the deepest physical and intuitive experiences upon which verbal statements could not cast light. Our initial contact with the world is through images that, held intact by intellectual consciousness of sharp contours, clear-cut shapes, and objective representations, address our most primal feelings: they "fulfill a certain state of feeling-awareness" (Lawrence, *Apocalypse* 91) and evoke the abyssal vibrations of physical knowledge. The paintings are perhaps the only images, in times when imaginative thinking is suppressed by cogitation and utilitarian reason, that still can "arouse the deep emotional self, and the dynamic self, beyond comprehension" (49).

This is the reason why Lawrence, throughout his life, had a consistent “blood-relationship” with the painting: the strong affinity towards pictorial art is traceable in most of his writings, while his alertness to visual phenomena, attentive perception, and penetrating intuition reveal a writer who possessed, as it were, the painter’s eye. Although allusions to actual and fictive artworks and artists often complement his narratives, for this writer painting was less a means to supplement or enrich a narrative than a distinct creative activity that must always articulate “the background or structural skeleton of some theory of being, some metaphysics” (Lawrence, *Study* 87). With a deeply ingrained aversion to an aesthetic attitude of detachment and disinterest and obstinately faithful to his *art for my sake* credo (Lawrence, *Letters I* 491), Lawrence always looked at painting through the lens of his peculiar metaphysical outlook. For this philosophically minded *littérateur*, who did not shrink away from plunging into the depths of speculative thought, the history of painting was charged with the same aporias that at all times occupied and defined metaphysical reflection.

Thus, his view of painting, like his notion of literature, is inextricable from his general ontological attitude. While Lawrence thought that the philosophical beliefs of a writer must not be explicitly enunciated in their “art-speech,” he still overtly developed his doctrine and expressed his worldview—one might even say his cosmology—not just in his philosophical treatises but also in his novels and poems. Yet the intricate *Seinstheorie* of this writer—that often oddly veers into mythic, religious, pantheistic and animistic ideas, thereby deviating from the systematic academic philosophy—is not easy to untangle, even though a set of *idées fixes* looms throughout his writing and sets a foundation for his peculiar metaphysical constructions.

The vision of human beings in the modern industrial world as mechanized and automatized creatures devoid of feelings, passions, physical touch, and sexuality, as egoistic monads fatally deprived of warm-hearted connection with each other and natural and cosmic forces, induced Lawrence to relentlessly dissect and expose, as he saw them, the harmful ideas in which modern society had indulged. Through a piercing analysis that goes to the very nucleus of Western civilization, Lawrence decided that the root of all evil was the disastrous idealist conception inaugurated by Plato that reduced the whole universe to mental formulas and cerebral clichés. “We insist over and over again,” he gravely warned,

on what we know from one mere centre of ourselves, the mental centre. We insist that we are essentially spirit, that we are ideal beings, conscious personalities, mental creatures. As far as ever possible we have resisted the independence

of the great affective centres. We have struggled for some thousands of years, not only to get our passions under control, but absolutely to eliminate certain passions, and to give all passions an ideal nature. (Lawrence, *Reflections* 130)

Hence Lawrence repeatedly urged the reinstatement, or more precisely, the rehabilitation of the reality of physical existence and a balanced relationship between the corporeal and the spiritual. He pointed out that apart from mental knowledge that scans things in their sharp isolation and separation, reducing the inexhaustible abundance of rapport to the trifling and dry subject-object relation, there is also the type of knowledge whereby man intuitively experiences beings and things in their emotional unity and togetherness and thus connects with the entire universe. Lawrence emphasized the difference between what he called “blood,” “primal,” or “physical consciousness” operating in the unfathomable and inexhaustible depths of visceral, bodily, tactile sensuality and sexual experience, and “mental consciousness,” that, depending on “the eye as its source or connector” (Lawrence, *Letters II* 470), abstracts realities and reduces them to bloodless ideas, representations, and mental images. Considering modernity as irreparably corrupted by the harmful activities of reason and spirit, Lawrence tried to restore the “blood-knowledge”—the only mode of apprehension that makes possible “a subtle, perfected relationship between me and the entire universe that surrounds me” (Lawrence, *Study* 150). Moreover, he recognized this “quick,” deeply emotional, sanguineous relationship in the dynamic structure underlying the whole universe: the cosmos consists of an eternally changing and living bloodstream of many distinct yet mutually influencing vital and active flows, of which human being is just one particular instance. For the world, as Lawrence elsewhere spelled out, is “a great complex activity of things existing and moving and having effect” (Lawrence, *Apocalypse* 95), and “each thing, living or unliving, streams in its own odd, intertwining flux” (Lawrence, *Study* 147).

Despite the frequent critical placement of Lawrence, due to his emphasis on the intimate, interpenetrating relation between all existents, among the nineteenth-century thinkers who conceived beings and objects as attributes of an all-unifying, undifferentiated substantial force, he broke with such monistic conceptions at a young age, endorsing heterogeneity and distinctness as necessary principles of universal activity. He wove into his ontological system the “inexorable law of life,” according to which each entity is a unique, incomparable, self-realized whole, yet maintaining its integrity and unity only through interaction with other entities to which it transmits its force and by

which it is likewise affected (Lawrence, *Reflections* 358). In such an unusual scheme that combines two opposite metaphysical conceptions—static and dynamic, absolutist and relativistic, homeostatic and allostatic—there is at play, at the same time, a stubborn subsistence, the self-conservation of an entity in its realized integrity—its impenetrable being—and the inexorable craving of that entity to expand and outpour itself and establish a responsive contact with other entities and the entire universe. “Everything that exists, even a stone,” declared Lawrence, “has two sides to its nature. It fiercely maintains its own individuality, its own solidity. And it reaches forth from itself in the subtlest flow of desire” (343).

Since everything consolidates, condenses, and realizes itself only through intense relationship and in mutuality with other things, Lawrence turned to a notion that can be traced back to the pre-Socratic sages and later became a buzzword among numerous thinkers employed to emphasize the contrasting structure of the material world: *polarization*. According to this law of dual attraction and repulsion, “the individual is never purely a thing-by-himself” and “cannot exist except in a polarized relation to the external universe,” since life, as Lawrence said, “is one long, blind effort at an established polarity with the outer universe, human and non-human” (Lawrence, *Psychoanalysis* 39, 41).

Among all types of entities and in all domains of experience, Lawrence recognized this concerted action of obstinate singularity and fluctuating relativity—expressed in terms of the polarity of centrifugal and centripetal movement, expansion and contraction, self-maintenance and self-giving—as the fundamental principle of cosmic functioning. To describe this dynamic duality, he resorted, on different occasions, to antonyms such as Law and Love, Will-to-Inertia and Will-to-Motion, voluntary and sympathetic, flesh and spirit, physical and mental, darkness and light, South and North, etc. The preponderance of one of the opposing terms inevitably leads to discordance and decomposition: remaining locked or nestled in the cocoon of one’s own voluntary, all too isolated self, leads to stagnation and putrefaction, while excessive flowing out of oneself and sympathetic interfusion with otherness bring about irreversible dissolution and demise. The reasons for Lawrence’s vehement resistance to Christianity lay precisely in the belief that due to the yearning to merge into other beings—which means to submit oneself to the notion of sacrificial, spiritual love—each pristine, wholesome individual loses its incomparable integrity and ceases to exist. On the other hand, a self-devouring wallowing in immutability, as a process of slow but inevitable destruction of life, encouraged Lawrence to see

the creative flow, transformation, and never-ending renewal as a crowning existential principle. Between these two ultimate tendencies—involution and evolution, solipsistic and participative—a balance must be established leading to a blissful and pure state wherein each entity, living or non-living, simultaneously pulsates in its singleness and opens itself up, realizing its unicity in contact with other things and the whole environment. In a polarized relationship of entities, simultaneously joining and sundering from each other, in this “mutual unison in separateness” (Lawrence, *Women* 264), one can find the basis of Laurentian ontology. Birkin’s appeal to Ursula in *Women in Love* illuminates Lawrence’s idea of polarized balance, his *discordia concors*: “What I want is a strange conjunction with you [...] not meeting and mingling [...] but an equilibrium, a pure balance of two single beings.” (148)

For Lawrence, the history of civilization conforms to this polar scheme: there are periods when stagnation and torpor reign, when everything falls into sameness and stability, locking itself into unbreakable self-contentedness, and periods when the human beings expand and unfold, unselfishly exchanging their energy with other living and non-living entities. Ideally, there are occasional moments when those opposing tendencies effectuate a dynamic, polarized harmony. The history of painting—which, to Lawrence, always echoes the broader spiritual situation—is also marked by this ontological polarity.

In *Study of Thomas Hardy*, his *confessio fidei* and the first composition containing theoretical considerations of the correlation between metaphysics and painting, Lawrence describes two underlying forces that “cause the whole of life, from the ebb and flow of a wave, to the stable equilibrium of the whole universe” (Lawrence, *Study* 55) and calls them Will-to-Inertia and Will-to-Motion: the first he identifies with the (female) principle of withdrawal, self-maintenance, and immanence; the second with the (masculine) principle of unfoldment, growth, and transcendence. When converted into the language of art, the two wills correspond to the tendency of particular artistic periods or styles to be either closed in a static and fixed form or to be opened out in a dynamic and protean relation. Convinced that medieval art in its motionless, stable, and bounded figures reflected the theological doctrine of the all-encompassing, sempiternal God, Lawrence wrote that the architecture of the period was marked by “utter stability, of movement resolved and centralized [...] that has no relationship with any other form, that admits the existence of no other form, but is conclusive, propounding in its sum the One Being of All” (61). Tightly enclosed individual shapes distinguish medieval artistic expression as

a whole, so the movement embodied in the architecture and painting was centripetal, immuring every figure or object in their uncomfortable outlines: “The Cathedrals, Fra Angelico, frighten us or bore us with their final annunciation of centrality and stability. We want to escape.” (65) If in the Middle Ages there was a prevalence of the Will-to-Inertia, imposing a static, rigid appearance on artistic form, then in the Renaissance, the centrifugal principle was shattered and alleviated by the burst of “relative movement [...] movement driving the object” (62), and through the balance of the two tendencies a perfect and complete expression was temporarily realized. A particular instance of such viable synthesis of passive and active forces was the work of Sandro Botticelli, in whose paintings the inflexible compositional armature was broken and polarized with pulsating and rhythmic elements. Describing *Primavera*, Lawrence emphasized how around the female figure who “stands there [...] as the naked, almost unwilling pivot, as the keystone which endured all thrust and remained static,” still transpire vibrant motions—“living, joyful forces” opposed to the general steadiness (65).

Yet shortly after Botticelli, the dynamic relatedness of loose flowing and static firmness begins to be disrupted, and due to the pendulum swinging towards the Will-to-Motion, painting increasingly retreats from objective density and formal integrity: “Ever there is more and more vibration, movement, and less and less stability, centralization.” (Lawrence, *Study* 64) The waning of the centripetal force, the female principle associated with immanence and enstatic compactness, is caused by the unbridled and insatiable male urge towards transcendence and ecstasy, by the unrestrained activity of the mind. The Will-to-Inertia, due to which man intuitively and sensually feels each entity as a real and resistant mass, was substituted by the Will-to-Motion, with such an effect on human beings that, having lost the immediate contact with tangible substances and physical experience, they begin to perceive realities visually and cerebrally, in clear consciousness, transforming them into disembodied mental representations. If the medieval painting, therefore, was based on sharply defined contours indicating the palpable qualities of the depicted figures, then the Renaissance, breaking the density and solidity of circumscribed forms, started to appreciate only their observable, untouchable traits. According to Lawrence, this shift was the natural outcome of the growing ascendancy of the rational and subjective mind, which does not meet things in blood-intimacy but as cold and distant visual representations arbitrarily worked out and combined in the brain. Hence, in painting after

the Renaissance, shapes were either devitalized and geometricized, wedged in strictly linear perspective constructions, as in Raphael and all later so-called classical artists, or disintegrated and sacrificed to the all-pervading ripples of optical light-and-shadow, as in Correggio and all the subsequent “luminous” painters. In both instances, pictorial art relied upon an ocular way of attending to the world and experiencing reality as a remote panorama, thereby neglecting all the bulbous and physical attributes that stir the sense of touch.

The history of painting in Europe reflected this shift in the human psyche when it ceased to feel things through the sense of touch and began to contemplate appearances through the sense of sight. With a growing accent on optical qualities, fluidity, and interweaving of forms, in post-Renaissance art, physicality and solidity gradually etherized and dispersed. Characteristically, Lawrence clarified that:

Since the Renaissance there has been the striving for the Light, and the escape from the Flesh, from the Body, the Object [...]. In painting, the Spirit, the Word, the Love [...] has appeared as light [...]. It is light, actual sunlight or the luminous quality of day, which has infused more and more into the defined body, fusing away the outline, absolving the concrete reality, making a marriage, an embrace between the two things, light and object. (Lawrence, *Study* 78)

At the same time, “the old desire, for movement about a centre of rest, for stability, is gone, and in its place rises the desire for pure ambience, pure spirit of change, free from all laws and conditions of being” (79). Painting then started to deal with pure forms and colors and by their interplay objects were melted into smooth, optical images, relieved of their opaque qualities. Indeed, after the invention of central and aerial perspective, artists usually strived to subordinate distinct figural values to the homogeneity of the overall composition. The stability, delineation, and palpability of definite objects thawed into a uniform visual whole. As soon as the inert, deep-glowing essence of touchable things ceased to be depicted, and everything merged into a pictorial totality, a path was anticipated, leading through Rembrandt and other painters of light-unity to the “perfect glowing One-ness” of William Turner, in whose works the corporeal, inert substance was so aerified that what only remains of it was “a mere bloodstain [...] a ruddy stain of red sunlight within white sunlight” (82). It was Turner who inspired heliophilic and retinal impressionist painters to blot out the contour as the fundamental guarantee of corporeal integrity and transmute realities with pure colors into a diaphanous *enveloppe* and dazzling light. Thus, they brought to an end the dynamic tendency that broke with

the primitive and medieval concept of form as motionless and rigid. Arnold Hauser cogently noted that “in the dialectical process represented by the history of painting, the alternation of the static and the dynamic, of design and color, abstract order and organic life, impressionism forms the climax of the development in which recognition is given to the dynamic and organic elements of experience and which completely dissolves the static world-view of the Middle Ages” (Hauser 111). The idea that, since the Renaissance, European art had endured the gradual triumph of pure dynamics and volatility, interfusion and merger, over discrete, self-sufficient, substantial form, was also shared by Lawrence.

If his conception of polarity required the compresence of stability and animation, no wonder that Lawrence so resolutely asseverated the rebirth of bodily life and denounced the ocularcentrism of Western thought: “I’m sure life is all wrong because it has become much too visual—we can neither hear nor feel nor understand, we can only see.” (Lawrence, *Women* 78) Undoubtedly, the utilitarian and functionalist will to live “entirely in the light of the mental consciousness” (Lawrence, *Reflections* 135) and to “*think there are only the objects we shine upon*” (Lawrence, *Letters I* 503–504), subdued the dark palpitations of visceral life, blood-knowledge and flesh-awareness, and put all accent on optical perception. The habit of visualization, as Lawrence argued, marked the “development of the conscious ego in man,” and since the Greeks “first broke the spell of ‘darkness’” (Lawrence, *Study* 145), everything has been seen in the all-pervading light of self-consciousness. Plato already defined sight as the noblest sense since it guarantees clear perception of things and, therefore, access to universal truths. So it is hardly surprising that “the majority of Western philosophers have used optical analogies to provide terms for the essence of cognition and the foundation of cognizability” (Sloterdijk 50). Due to the focus on vision and clear-sightedness, Western philosophy had constantly shrunk away from bodily knowledge, striving to suppress and subject to mind all the dark processes of instinctive life. And sight, as “the ideal distance-sense,” enabled “this complete neutralization of dynamic content in the visual object, the expurgation of all traces of causal activity from its presentation” (Jonas 149, 146–147), creating the preconditions for a theoretical, purely conceptual view of reality devoid of affects, passions, and physical influences. Due to such optical levelings, every cosmic force impacting the human body becomes “a calmed abstract of reality denuded of its raw power” (148). Visual perception, the main instrument for the constitution of the ego and the perception of reality

through a dispassionate subject-object relation, was also the reason why painted figures were deprived of their singularity and delicate relatedness and wedged into an impeccable optical continuum.

To draw attention to the significance of touch in a mechanized, lifeless, mind-obsessed civilization so corrupted with self-consciousness and “optical idealism” (Sloterdijk 50), Lawrence referred to the intuitive, physical consciousness of ancient cultures, to their emotional involvement with the cosmos. The Egyptians “fumbled in the dark, and didn’t quite know where they were, or what they were,” Lawrence wrote, “they only *felt* their own existence surging in the darkness of other existences” (Lawrence, *Study* 145). Africans, too, possessed “dim eye-vision and the powerful blood-feeling” (147). Even a child never looks purely visually, yet always “from his breast and his abdomen, with deep-sunken realism,” and when he sees an animal, he sees it not as a “correct biological object” but “a big living presence of no particular shape” (Lawrence, *Psychoanalysis* 121). The trouble with sight is that it involves “objective curiosity” (102), so one discerns things as strictly atomized, unable to create any deep connection with and among them. Touch, on the other hand, constitutes a tight physical bond between the toucher and the touched, not the distal, optical relation of the knower and known, but the clasp of two bodies enhancing their singularity and integrity. Lawrence loved to write about the sanctity of touch, the “spark of contact [...] spark of exchange” (Lawrence, *Mornings* 92), as the only mode of relation that preserves the integrity of interacting beings. “This constancy is preserved by intimacy of contact, physical immediacy,” he said, “but this physical immediacy does not make the two beings any less distinct and separate. It makes them more so” (Lawrence, *Reflections* 124).

The last utterance adumbrates the peculiar logic of Laurentian ontology: our singleness increases the more closely we are coupled with the universe, the more we embrace otherness: in a word, the more we are subtly polarized. So, if in literature and painting we want to convey the polarized relationship of things beating in the very heart of the universe—which for Lawrence is their sole task—we must count much more on the closeness of touch than objectifying optical perception. Since the plastic arts “depend[s] entirely on the representation of substantial bodies, and on the intuitional perception of the *reality* of substantial bodies” (Lawrence, *Late* 193), it is of the utmost importance for painting, after the centuries-old reign of light and the complete optical rationalization of the world, to renew itself through a profound appreciation of real entities and their mutual relationships.

In an essay accompanying his London exhibition of 1929, Lawrence interpreted the history of Western civilization through the millennia-old struggle of mankind to subject carnality and sexuality to the entrenched mechanisms of the mind and reason. “The history of our era,” he declared,

is the nauseating and repulsive history of the crucifixion of the procreative body for the glorification of the spirit, the mental consciousness [...]. Art, that handmaid, humbly and honestly served the vile deed, through three thousand years at least. The Renaissance put the spear through the side of the already crucified body [...]. It took still three hundred years for the body to finish: but in the nineteenth century it became a corpse, a corpse with an abnormally active mind ... (Lawrence, *Late* 203)

Lawrence believed that fear of the body shaped the entire tradition of European painting and that due to the persistent urge towards spirituality, the Will-to-Motion, and dematerialization, “the most joyous moment in the whole history of painting” was the escape of the Impressionists from “the tyranny of solidity and the menace of mass-form” (197) into luminous infinity and all-pervading radiance. Yet amidst the irresistible impulse towards complete disembodiment and dissolution, a French artist, Paul Cézanne, indicated the possibility of recovery by evoking the haptic lumpiness of things. It is an art-historical cliché that this painter aimed to substitute the Impressionist idea of the world as transient and fluid with a painterly conception that reinstates stability and density. He gave reasons for such conclusions by often saying that he wanted to “render the cylindrical essence of objects,” “the weight of things” and their “solid appearance” (Doran 87, 89). But what other critics saw as the painter’s formal idiosyncrasy, Lawrence understood as an unprecedented perturbation in the human psyche, with far-reaching implications—so significant that he will see in Cézanne’s work the only attempt in the modern era to break with the suppression and denial of physicality and substance. Rendering such prosaic objects as an apple or a jug, the painter becomes a rescuer and a restorer of bodiliness:

The actual fact is that in Cézanne modern French art made its first tiny step back to real substance, to objective substance, if we may call it so [...]. But Cézanne’s apples are a real attempt to let the apple exist in its own separate entity, without transfusing it with personal emotion [...]. It seems a small thing to do: yet it is the first real sign that man has made for several thousands of years that he is willing to admit that matter *actually* exists. (201)

Yet, as Lawrence further explicates, Cézanne succeeded in reestablishing mass in painting precisely because he “wished to displace our present mode of mental-visual consciousness [...] and substitute a mode of consciousness that was predominantly intuitive, the awareness of touch” (211)—or, to put it ontologically, because he awoke the Will-to-Inertia and an attitude that allows to every single thing its secretive substantial integrity. It would be misleading, however, to assume Lawrence wanted to make a mere reversal and stress matter instead of the spirit: to potentiate either of them means stagnancy and dissolution, for “nothing is or can be created save by combined effort of the two principles” (Lawrence, *Study* 121). Accordingly, he dispraised both the primitive artworks that, like the African sculpture in *Women in Love*, are arrested in their constricting Will-to-Inertia, as well as the modern artworks disintegrating in their utter kineticism, their unremitting Will-to-Motion. Simultaneously obtaining permanence and change and joining absolute contour with relative color, Cézanne’s works involve the rare but requisite balance or lively contrast of the two wills. From numerous sayings of the artist, it is possible to gather that he strove to convey at once the *stability* of the form and the *lability* of its becoming: i.e., to engender outlines and forms through overlapping and intertwining strokes. Cézanne often used to say that “drawing is the relationship of contrasts or, simply, the rapport of two tones, white and black,” and that “the secret of drawing and modeling” lies in “the contrast and connection of colors” (Doran 17, 188). What differentiates him from other modern painters is precisely the conjugative brushwork that helped him to paint objects as self-standing *and* mutually correlated. Kurt Badt admired Cézanne’s ability to evoke or produce solid and tangible objects employing active chromatic relationships, and through agitated chromatic plasma make the objects stay in “‘mutual self-preservation’ in the togetherness” (Badt 172). He said that the substance of Cézanne’s pictures had “acquired such an enormous wealth of shades and relationships that it appeared to vibrate in the interplay of these combinations, or to undulate gently,” yet “the world of objects which was being evolved out of this substance was still” (169). The coexistence of kinesis and stasis in Cézanne’s compositions inspired Lawrence to similarly describe the effect of his paintings as *calm tension* and *tense calm*: “It was part of his desire: to make the human form, the *life* form, come to rest. Not static—on the contrary. Mobile but come to rest. And at the same time, he set the unmoving material world into motion.” (Lawrence, *Late* 213) However, to achieve both solidity and vibrancy as inimitably as Cézanne, what Lawrence calls

“intuitive awareness of forms” and “*physical* awareness” (207) is necessary, which is a pre-mental, pre-cognitive mode of consciousness making no separation between spiritual and carnal knowledge, and “which alone relates us in direct awareness to physical things and substantial presences” (192). Such “physical intuitional perception” (191) allows us to simultaneously feel the inherent power of entities and their gravity, as well as their flickering streaming in the dynamic togetherness. Lawrence called for the polarized equilibrium of animation and rest in artistic expression as early as the *Study of Thomas Hardy*: “The artistic form is a revelation of the two principles of Love and the Law *in a state of conflict and yet reconciled* [...] active force meeting and overcoming and yet not overcoming inertia. It is the conjunction of the two which makes the form.” (Lawrence, *Study* 86, emphasis mine)

The form wherein the two tendencies essential for the life of the universe come together, Lawrence will detect in only one more artistic tradition: Etruscan. In the tomb paintings of this ancient civilization a living bond of interflowing and interanimating entities is pictorially conveyed, with the use of contours not created mechanically and cold-eyed, and a mellow composition that is not, as in dry, European expression, “merely a contact of surfaces, and a juxtaposition of objects” (Lawrence, *Sketches* 54). Such *disegno connettivo* reflects the vision of cosmic relatedness where all things are married and in closest physical affinity: “Here, in this faded etruscan painting,” Lawrence wrote, “there is a quiet flow of touch that unites the man and the woman on the couch, the timid boy behind, the dog that lifts his nose, even the very garlands that hang from the wall.” (54) If design is “a recognition of the relation between various things, various elements in the creative flux” (Lawrence, *Study* 147), then the “wonderfully suggestive *edge* of the figures,” and the “flowing contour” of Etruscan art (Lawrence, *Sketches* 123–124), allowing each shape to softly exchange its force with the energy of the environment, was a formal embodiment of the tender, the warm bond they felt with the whole universe. Again, here are at play the two underlying forces of Lawrence’s ontology, as well as the two principles of his notion of art: each thing retains its assertiveness and stability, its unfathomable quiddity, while at the same time pouring out of itself and openly sharing its “quick” with the milieu; each thing is a dense mass whose integrity is the outcome of its correspondence with other entities. Of course, Lawrence once again underlines the necessity of a polarized balance between those two different directions, as exemplified in the Etruscan worldview:

It must have been a wonderful world, that old world where everything appeared alive and shining in the dusk of contact with all things, not merely as an isolated individual thing played upon by daylight; *where each thing had a clear outline, visually, but in its very clarity was related emotionally or vitally to strange other things*, one thing springing from another, things mentally contradictory fusing together emotionally ... (124, emphasis mine)

All these utterances demonstrate that Lawrence's notion of pictorial form and his vision of art history stemmed from his general philosophical position. Since "life is so made that opposites sway about a trembling centre of balance" (Lawrence, *Study* 151), the picture in its formal arrangement must attain the equilibrium of polar forces of inspissation and dissipation, inertia and motion, constancy and change, that underpins the universe itself. Illuminating sources confirming that the twofold, contrastive pictorial form is obtainable only through concerted workings of stabilization and agitation, solidification, and effluence could be found not only in Lawrence's discursive writings but also in his novels. At one point in *Sons and Lovers*, Paul Morel, a painter, and the novel's main character, describes his picture as a vague and wavering organic mass whose light is both inside and outside the shapes, or rather in-between, begetting, in turn, permeable and palpating painterly tissue:

It's because there is scarcely any shadow in it—it's more shimmery—as if I'd painted the shimmering protoplasm *in* the leaves and *everywhere*, and not the stiffness of the shape. That seems dead to me. Only this shimmeriness is the real living. The shape is a dead crust. The shimmer is inside, really. (Lawrence, *Sons* 183, emphasis mine)

And how can we escape the impression that Lawrence's account of Birkin's copying of a Chinese drawing of a goose in the water reminds us of the balance between static centrality and dynamic fluidity the writer had previously recognized in Botticelli's works: "I know what centres they live from—what they perceive and feel—the hot, stinging *centrality* of a goose in the *flux* of cold water and mud." (Lawrence, *Women* 89, emphasis mine) Centrality and flux, Will-to-Inertia and Will-to-Motion, self-maintenance and self-giving—these are the ultimate laws of *ontologia laurentiana* whose interaction makes reality. The writer tried to realize such an ever-changing balance of concentration and emanation, centrifugal and centripetal forces, absolute contour and relational color even in his own paintings. His intention to preserve in painting not only the body of things and their intensive power but also

their extensive capacity to get in touch with other things was attested by an invaluable reminiscence of Brewster Ghiselin. Trying to portray fish in the water, Lawrence complained to Ghiselin that he had painted them “isolated in the midst of bare space in a way that deprived them of their actual relation to other things, to water,” adding that this was the result of his “spiritual will [...] refusing to admit and to express the relatedness, the vital interchange, between them and all other things, each in their special quality and degree” (Nehls 295). For that reason, the writer made every effort, as Ghiselin conveys,

to find some expression in paint for the relations of things [...] perhaps by means of the touching and mingling of colors flowing from different things [...]. Later, in his room, he showed me a black and white drawing he had been doing of a nude man and woman in a kind of complicated electric field [...]. In it he had tried to show the special rhythms of the different parts of the body, the head, the breast, the belly, the loins, *as they subsisted in themselves and in a pattern of relations.* (295–296, emphasis mine)

However, to consider that the ontological polar scheme, the universal play of two contrary forces is embodied in the formal constitution of artworks as well as in the historical course of art is not an idea peculiar to Lawrence, since similar conceptions amused many art historians at the beginning of the last century. His reasoning that the history of painting was shaped by the gradual suppression of “blood-consciousness” focusing on the reality of tactile, bodily experience in favor of an aloof optical perception and rationalized knowledge, is irresistibly reminiscent of the opinion of Alois Riegl, who described the history of art as a transition from an objective, tactile ancient art into a subjective, optical art dominant after the late Roman period. The Viennese art historian believed that “the art of all of antiquity can be characterized as a fundamental objectivism, for it has aimed at the clearest possible delineation of the individual figure in all dimensions” (Riegl, “Late Roman” 181), and that such manner of depiction is a consequence of the fact that ancient people experienced the world through the sense of touch. What he calls “haptic objectivism” (185)—that is, the experience of things as physically opaque, tangible, and impenetrable—is what Lawrence calls the Will-to-Inertia. On the other hand, when, in Hellenistic high relief, encapsulated forms were melted by the excessive use of light and shadow, Riegl concluded that the late art of antiquity, by emphasizing pure optical qualities, “broke free of the objectivism of the classical conception and paved the way for modern subjectivism,” so that “all later art since the Middle Ages aimed at representing

the subjective aspects of the appearances” (177). This assertion exactly matches Lawrence’s thesis that after the medieval period there was a rise of the Will-to-Motion in painting that diminished the self-standing value of figures by submitting them to either strictly geometrical, optically unified structures or to vibrant compositions made of luminous values. Yet the analogies do not end there, for both Riegl and Lawrence thought that two primordial poles—tactile and optical, static and dynamic, immanent and transcendent—corresponded, respectively, to southern, Roman plastic art, which strived to present bodies as insulated and inert forms, and northern, German optical art, which accentuated incorporeal and form-breaking qualities. Even though nothing suggests that Lawrence ever read Riegl, their similarity becomes striking, given that the latter also maintained that “the extreme isolation of individual natural things from each other,” just as much as “the extreme connection among them,” produced sterile, lifeless forms: in the first case by their “atomization,” in the second case by their “evaporation in the infinite” (Riegl, *Gesammelte* 60). Hence for Riegl, the synergy of the *plastisch-nahsichtige* and *optisch-fernsichtige* is required, for “each direction, if pursued one-sidedly, inevitably leads to weariness and torpor, while in mutual, albeit often antagonistic interpenetration, they have brought about the fruitful development to this day” (59).

Lawrence’s Will-to-Inertia and Will-to-Motion found an even more apparent counterpart in the conceptual antinomies on which Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin based his theory. He was known for the argument that, in the history of Western art, there are two fundamental manners of expression, reflecting two different modes of human understanding of reality: a linear, tectonic style, characterized by a closed form and embodying a tactile sense of things; and the painterly, a-tectonic style, characterized by an open form and representing a retinal approach to the world. The linear style involves “the solid figure” and “the enduring form” which reveal “the thing in itself,” while the qualities of painterly style are “changing appearance” and “movement” that render “the thing in its relations” (Wölfflin 27). When translated into Laurentian terms, the closed form is the plastic manifestation of the Will-to-Inertia, a linear enclosure evoking the stability and immutability of things; the open form is a painterly embodiment of the Will-to-Motion where everything looks “as vibrating” and where “picturesque movement-effects” blur surfaces and outlines (26). Not only that, Wölfflin shares Lawrence’s conviction “the most decisive revolution which art history knows” occurred during the Renaissance when the “tactile picture” (*Tastbild*) was replaced with the “visual

picture” (*Sehbild*) (21): namely when the linear style of isolated shapes was superseded by the painterly style of loose and connective strokes. Again, not unlike Riegl and Lawrence, Wölfflin claimed that the delimited, inert form is peculiar to Southern cultures, while in the Nordic regions prevails the beauty of “the boundless and infinite” (148).

Finally, what Lawrence might have thought about post-World War II painting, if his life had not ended prematurely in 1930, seems no less intriguing to imagine. Given his repudiation of Cubism and Futurism, his incapacity to conceive painting beyond a figurative framework, and his general stance that modern society was ensnared in the mechanism of abstract thought and therefore deprived of the eros essential for genuine creativity, one could hardly expect that he would have accepted what we call gestural painting. For him, this kind of painting would be just another cerebral exercise of bloodlessness, the product of all too mental beings bereft of the power to instinctively feel and depict real entities, transforming them, instead, into thick coats of paint and flat surfaces and making formless and contrived configurations.

However, numerous testimonials and statements obliquely evince that this writer might have appreciated pictures where physical and material, tactile and manual qualities are stressed: i.e., works wherein the actual materiality of the subject become viscous and thick painterly facture. “Play with the paint [...] forget all you learned at the art school” (Nehls 22), Lawrence urged his stepdaughter, pointing out the importance of a spontaneous, unpremeditated painterly gesture. Several times he spoke of the hand as a part of the body that “flickers with a life of its own,” an organ that “has its own rudiments of thought” (Lawrence, *Study* 167) and does not require the mediation of the brain to perform its meaningful actions—whether writing or painting. Modern paintings, even of those artists and movements which Lawrence steadily devalued, relied heavily on the autonomous working of the hand, on its instinctive and unpredictable dance across the picture plane, and its close contact with the support. It seems Lawrence himself recognized the physical charge of the accentuated brushwork, explaining why oil painting is much closer to him than watercolor: “One can use one’s elbow, and in water it’s all dib-dab.” (Lawrence, *Letters VI* 329) And when he expressed in a letter his abhorrence of matte surfaces, adding instead that he loved “to paint rather wet, with oil, so the color slips about and doesn’t look like dried bone” (Lawrence, *Letters V* 637), this writer-painter seems to embrace the paint-eroticism that distinguished post-war artists such as Willem de Kooning. After all, did not de Kooning comment that “flesh is the reason oil paint

was invented”; and was not he an artist who “handled his hands as if they had an aesthetic life of their own” (Shiff 66, 56)? It is hard not to notice a close resemblance between Lawrence’s notion of the painting process as a physical operation with the gestural style when, in “Making Pictures,” he stated that the essential part of creation is to lose oneself in a picture which must come “out of the *instinct, intuition and sheer physical action*” (Lawrence, *Late* 228, emphasis mine) or when we read the following lines from the poem “The Work of Creation”:

Even an artist knows that his work was never in his mind,
 he could never have *thought* it before it happened.
 A strange ache possessed him, and he entered the struggle,
 and out of the struggle with his material, in the spell of the urge
 his work took place, it came to pass, it stood up and saluted
 his mind. (Lawrence, *The Complete* 577)

Moreover, Lawrence’s belief that a picture must “hit deep into the senses [...] hit down to the soul and up into the mind,” and that “the meaning has to come through direct sense impression” (Lawrence, *Letters VI* 505–506), corresponds to the desire of modern painters to forge palpable and often impasted surfaces that would directly affect not just the eyesight but also the sense of touch. What chiefly connects Lawrence to such artists, despite insurmountable differences and disagreements, is precisely the importance of touch. The word *touch* designates, at the same time, physical, bodily contact, and the pictorial mark, the trace of the painter’s hand. So, if Lawrence often spoke, as his friend Earl Brewster informs us, about the tactile qualities of his pictures and that “instead of a brush he frequently painted with his thumb” (Nehls 126), it is not unreasonable to extrapolate that he might have recognized in gestural painters a devotion to physical intuition, which is revealed in the picture through palpable facture and the blind somatic absorption of the artist in the creative act. This accent on the manual gesture, loosening into an unpredictable painting procedure, and the touchable mass of paint might have appeared to Lawrence—who could not have imagined how monstrous the tomb of “ghosts” and “replicas” technical, mechanized society would become—as an artistic attempt to escape from the global tyranny of disembodiedness and anemia. Indeed, in the work of these artists, too, one can identify the Laurentian desire to assert carnal reality through the haptic values of the picture and immediate painterly action.

If nothing else, in this gravitation of modern painters towards a blind awareness pivoting on the actions and deep knowledge of the

body, one could recognize the working of the Will-to-Inertia that still preserves the unshakable ipseity amidst the unbridled Will-to-Motion unable to stop its centripetal drive towards total disembodiment and dissipation—*le grand néant*.

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Slikarstvo in ontologija: D. H. Lawrence kot umetnostni zgodovinar

Ključne besede: filozofija kulture / literatura in slikarstvo / angleška književnost / D. H. Lawrence / ontološka polarnost / Cézanne, Paul / Riegl, Alois / Wölfflin, Heinrich

D. H. Lawrence je bolj kot katerikoli drug pisatelj dvajsetega stoletja razvil globoko razumevanje slikarstva in to umetniško zvrst ovrednotil skozi prizmo svoje povsem samosvoje ontološke sheme. V zvestobi svoji polaristični filozofiji, v kateri je vse ustvarjeno z nasprotjem statičnega in dinamičnega, uma in telesa, optičnega in taktilnega, »volje-do-gibanja« in »volje-do-inercije«, svetlobe in teme, je Lawrence pojmoval zgodovino vizualnih umetnosti kot zrcalo univerzalnega nasprotja med temi vrhovnimi metafizičnimi silami. Lawrence je kljub splošnemu prepričanju, da je zahodna umetnost v celoti podrejena ideji, umu in svetlobi, opozoril na več primerov, v katerih so likovno obdelana tudi temačna, telesna in taktilna doživetja. Namen prispevka je predstaviti Lawrencea kot umetnostnega zgodovinarja, ki je umetniška dela in umetnostnozgodovinska obdobja razumel kot večni boj za prevlado med telesnim in duhovnim, in ki je v svoji literaturi vedno pozival k njuni medsebojni spravi in ravnovesju.

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