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ANNA GRMELOVÁ

'THE PRUSSIAN OFFICER' IN THE CONTEXT OF D.H. LAWRENCE'S SHORT FICTION

In contrast to most of D.H. Lawrence's long fiction and some of his short stories 'The Prussian Officer' could be perceived as almost a self-contained entity in the neo-critical sense.¹ For thematic reasons gender criticism has never taken issue with this beautifully imagined story and, now, when the tide seems to be turning against deconstructive theorizing, we can tentatively conclude that apart from the insights recent critical theory has brought to the discussion of literature in general (the introduction of multiple perspectives, awareness of the nonexistence of any timeless essence and therefore no definitive studies) one can discern three major issues in Lawrence criticism.

Firstly, identification of those issues where Lawrence can be found as a precursor of poststructuralism (inconclusiveness, his attacks on idealism and logocentrism, heteroglossic discourse, the concept of 'the Other', etc.). Secondly, further contextualization of Lawrence by identifying those previously marginalized writers or theoreticians who are now seen as an inspiration for Lawrence's ideological assumptions (e.g. Jane Harrison²). Thirdly, a radical revision of the term 'organic' which was the shibboleth of F.R. Leavis's reading

¹ The temporal, biographical and cultural context of this short story is connected with Lawrence's second stay in Germany in the spring and early summer of 1913. When the story first came out in *The English Review* (Lawrence called it „Honour and Arms“) to Lawrence's exasperation it was heavily cut by Norman Douglas. In summer 1914 Lawrence revised a number of his short stories for a volume to be published by Duckworth in the same year (*The Prussian Officer and Other Stories*) to make them compatible with his rapidly developed new artistic vision. „The Prussian Officer“, however, did not require any „thematic updating“, as Lawrence's original 1913 text (unlike the rest of the stories) carried both the philosophy and visionary intensity of the mature author. See Cushman, Keith, *D.H. Lawrence at Work: The Emergence of the Prussian Officer Stories*. University of Virginia Press, (Charlottesville), 1978.

² C.f. Torgovnick, Marianna, „Discovering Jane Harrison“. In *Seeing Double: Revisioning Edwardian and Modernist Literature*. (ed. Carola M. Kaplan and Anne B. Simpson, Macmillan (Houndmills, London), 1996, pp. 131–147.

of Lawrence and which with the impact of poststructuralism, led to the decline of Lawrence's critical reputation.

While Peter Widdowson in his important Lawrence critical reader of 1992³ is still sceptical whether Lawrence can 'reemerge', it is studies such as Anne Fernihough's, with its explication of Lawrence's organicism,⁴ which have led in the late 1990s once again to a more balanced critical view of Lawrence.⁵

'The Prussian Officer' (Lawrence called it 'Honour and Arms'), the focus of this paper, is chronologically Lawrence's first short story in which ethnic distinctions⁶ have far reaching cultural implications while they — at the same time — nourish his dualistic Weltanschauung which was emerging at the time of its writing. In highlighting ethnicity 'The Prussian Officer' prefigures not only the vision of *The Rainbow* but, in different forms, ethnicity resonates throughout most of his subsequent writings.

Although the original impetus for writing this short story may have been a short anecdote related by Frieda's father this is a fully imaginary story. It is not only a break with Lawrence's imitative early period but, in contrast to his immediately preceding works, Lawrence does not come to terms with his personal experience here either.

Lawrence's well-known, irritated comment on learning that his advisor and the publisher's reader, Edward Garnett, had changed the title of 'Honour and Arms' to 'The Prussian Officer' ('Garnett was a devil to call my book of stories *The Prussian Officer* — what Prussian officer?')⁷ had at least two reasons. The captain in the story is a Prussian aristocrat but a Bavarian officer, while the other, more profound reason was that the new title focuses attention on only one side of this disturbingly polarised relationship, while in the story equal attention is paid to both sides, the Prussian aristocrat and the Bavarian peasant, the new title somewhat distorts or at least obscures the message.⁸ In another well-known

³ See Peter Widdowson, ed., *D.H. Lawrence*. Longman (New York), 1992.

⁴ See Fernihough, Anne, *D.H. Lawrence: Aesthetics and Ideology*. Clarendon Press (Oxford), 1993, esp. pp. 20–60. Anne Fernihough draws attention to the role of context in Lawrence's treatment of the organic metaphor which is not — contrary to deconstructive assumptions — a „stable entity“.

⁵ E.g. Paul Eggert and John Worthen, eds., *Lawrence and Comedy*. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge), 1996 and Poplawski, Paul, *Language, Art and Reality in D.H. Lawrence's St. Mawr*, The Edwin Mellen Press (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter), 1996. Most recently, see Tony Tanner's conclusion of his review of the final volume of the CUP biography of D.H. Lawrence in which he calls him „a strangely English genius“. Cf. Tanner, Tony, „Struggling into Fullness: the Restlessness, Discontent and Tenacity of Lawrence's Last Years“, *The Times Literary Supplement*, (January 9, 1998), pp. 3–4.

⁶ The other stories situated in Germany at this time („The Thorn in the Flesh“, „Once“ and „The Mortal Coil“) do not highlight ethnicity.

⁷ Zytaruk, John and Boulton, James T., *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*. Vol II. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge), 1981, p. 241.

⁸ Lawrence's original title „Honour and Arms“ was taken from Handel's oratorio „Sampson“, and the text of the aria was meant to resonate against his own story. Harapha, the giant of

letter where Lawrence proclaims the high artistic quality of the story he also implies the importance of both characters, 'I have written the best short story I have ever done — about a German officer in the army and his orderly'.⁹

The Prussian origin of the officer has far reaching cultural and psychological implications. (The author refers to him as 'the Prussian'.) He is self-conscious, tense, cold, dedicated to military discipline, outwardly suppressing any instinctive emotional life to the point of being unable to form an enriching relationship with anybody. In the writer's emerging dualism the Prussian clearly stands for Apollonian values which Lawrence will from now on associate with 'Northern' abstraction and with mental consciousness. It is not difficult to infer Lawrence's general condemning attitude to such a human type. Yet, what is significant and yet at the same time disturbing is the understanding, on the part of the author, with which he conveys the rise of the extreme and sinister form of the captain's obsession with his orderly. The Bavarian servant who unwittingly exerts a hypnotic effect on the officer is his polar opposite in all significant respects: he represents Dionysian values.

Parallels and contrasts with the highly self-conscious and tense Aschenbach in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) and his relationship to the Polish aristocratic boy come to mind at this point and will continue to reverberate for the reader throughout the story. The parallels concern even such details as the revelation that this 'haughty and overbearing' officer had a (implicitly warmer) Polish mother, analogically to Aschenbach's Czech mother with her more 'fiery impulses'.¹⁰ In *Death in Venice* otherness is also associated with ethnicity (c.f. the foreign-looking man in the vicinity of the tram station in Munich, the illegal gondolier in Venice, and the street musician who comes to Aschenbach's hotel at the end of the story). Although Aschenbach's relationship to the Polish boy is, in the ancient Greek artistic associations of his homoeroticism, closer to Basil Hallward's relationship to Dorian Gray, in its Dionysian challenge to Apollonian values Thomas Mann's novella is much closer to Lawrence's story. However, philosophically, as will be demonstrated below, Lawrence is certainly on the side of the Dionysian here whereas Thomas Mann — in his analytical rather than visionary style — sees Aschenbach's embracement of sensuality as a manifestation of his moral disintegration.

Lawrence's orderly is instinctive, sensual and irrational and also physically different, apart from being the captain's inferior in class and military rank. The officer unwillingly finds himself under the compulsion of his own unconscious when he comes to be perversely fascinated by the physical and sensual presence

Gath, taunts the blind Sampson that he would not stoop to conquer such a broken enemy. See Worthen, John, *D.H. Lawrence: The Prussian Officer and Other Stories*. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge), 1983, p. 249, note 1:2.

⁹ Zytaruk, John and Boulton, James T., *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*. Vol. II. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge), 1981, p. 21.

¹⁰ See „*rascheres, sinnlicheres Blut*“ Mann, Thomas, *Der Tod in Venedig: Erzählungen*. Aufbau-Verlag (Berlin, Weimar), 1989, p. 202.

of his orderly. Lawrence is developing here a conception of the unconscious as man's link with the powers of nature, with the mystery of life, with the 'unknown'. The fascination is therefore a compulsion to establish contact with life energies which find resonance in his unconscious and which he mentally, consciously repudiates. As a result of this strenuous suppression, the unconscious passion finally manifests itself in an inverted form.¹¹

His orderly's presence effects his unconscious (in Lawrence's emerging Heraclitean-cum-Futuristic imagery) as a 'warm flame',¹² while initially his 'light blue eyes ... were always flashing with cold fire' (PO, 2). His conscious self resents this development: 'h/e did not choose to be touched into life by his servant' (PO, 3).¹³

The Prussian feels threatened by this culturally and socially unacceptable otherness, by forces which leave his self-perception and his social considerations completely out of account. The implications are therefore wider than homosexuality: they are social (a servant) and they carry a potentially new attitude to life in general ('to be touched into life') – the 'vitalistic challenge' as E.W. Tedlock aptly calls it.¹⁴ Therefore to interpret the relationship of the officer to his orderly strictly in psychoanalytical terms as a manifestation of homosexuality is as reductive as to argue that the story is merely a criticism of Prussian militarism.

It is in fact both of these, but as a part of a more complex argument. The issue which argues against the assumption that the problem may be reduced to the wilfulness of military superiority, is the very attitude of the orderly: 'the orderly even more that the officer wanted to be left alone, in his neutrality as a servant' (PO, 3). It was convenient for him that his military duties 'did not implicate him personally' (PO, 3). The tension arises and the conflict is fought entirely on the unconscious level — a level which is normally beyond the military province. When the orderly is forced into an extremity of feeling by the officer, when he

11 In a letter to Edward Garnett Lawrence proclaimed after reading Garnett's *Joan of Arc* that „Cruelty is a form of perverted sex....I want to dogmatize. Priests in their celibacy get their sex lustful, then perverted, then insane, hence Inquisitions — all sexual in origin. And soldiers, being herded together, men without women, never being satisfied by a woman, as a man never is from a street affair, get their surplus sex and their frustration and dissatisfaction into the blood and love cruelty. It is sex lust fermented makes atrocity“. James T. Boulton, ed., *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*. Volume I. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge), 1979, p. 469.

12 Worthen, John, *D.H. Lawrence: The Prussian Officer and Other Stories*. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge), 1983, p. 3. Henceforward „PO“.

13 Lawrence will later argue in the *Apocalypse* that „/e/verything that puts us into connection. into vivid touch, is religious“. Kalmns, Mara, *D.H. Lawrence: Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation*. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge), 1980, p. 155
Interestingly, Visconti's adaptation of *Death in Venice*, in which Aschenbach is a composer rather than a writer, has Aschenbach's German friend criticize him in a flashback . „You are a man of avoidance“, „You are a keeper of distances“ and further, „You are afraid to have direct, honest contact with anything“ (emphasis mine).

14 See Tedlock, E. W., *D.H. Lawrence: Artist and Rebel*. University of New Mexico (Albuquerque), 1963, p. 79.

realizes the officer's perverse obsession and is beaten by him, at the point when the older man cannot control his irrational urges and falsely rationalises them as stupidity on the part of his peasant orderly, then the younger man himself gradually becomes separated and alienated from the human community. This will from now on be a common point of departure for any extreme feeling in Lawrence (whether its eventual outcome is personal redemption as in such stories as 'The Thorn in the Flesh' or 'Daughters of the Vicar' or destruction of the self) which always for a time suspends social or other considerations.

The orderly realises the extremity of the situation: 'There were only the two people in the world now, himself and the captain' (PO, 10), and irrevocably forms a way out of the alienating situation: 'He clung to this sensation — that the captain did not exist, so that he himself might live' (PO, 10). This new situation disintegrates him and annihilates him as a human being to the point of being 'a gap', 'a shadow', 'empty shell'. His habitual, natural self is suspended, as his integrity is violated. As George Ford argues, the protagonists to some extent exchange roles.¹⁵ On the march, when the orderly feels disintegrated, and is in the shadow, the captain is associated with the sun and feels surprisingly self-assured and at one point even relaxed.

A destructive power-play takes place here, a kind of vampirism. The murder of the captain thus comes as something inevitable even though it will finally definitively alienate the Bavarian servant from humankind and as a result bring his own death. In fact the story opens precisely as the tension culminates, and there is a kind of mystical connection between the servant and the officer which is the outcome of the intensity of feeling: 'The orderly felt he was connected with that figure moving so suddenly on horseback: he followed it like a shadow, mute and inevitable and damned by it' (PO, 2). Accordingly, the structure of the story does not allow for any gradual development of tension. The intensity is there from the beginning and it is from a flashback that we learn of what this state of affairs is a consequence. Lawrence will later use the same structural device in 'England, My England'.

The physical setting in which the story takes place is a lush Bavarian valley on a hot day with radiant mountains glistening with snow in the background which shape from the beginning the image pattern which is meant to help state the theme. At the beginning one is invited to associate the hot valley with the orderly. But the contrast of valley and mountain is not meant as a simple antithesis of the two principles, sensuality and spirituality, with appropriate relation to the polarity of the protagonists. The image of the mountains is introduced with a 'but' and it is meant to contrast with the inner state of the orderly which, as we realise with the benefit of hindsight, is at that point no longer, kind of prelapsarian ease, but total disintegration.¹⁶ Judith Wilt and Janice H. Harris

¹⁵ Ford, George, „*Double Measure*“ *A Study of the Novels and Stories of D.H. Lawrence*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston (New York), 1965, p. 78.

¹⁶ The Jungian concept of integration is pertinent here (*pace* Lawrence's attitude to Jung). There is no cooperation of consciousness which would help him to achieve wholeness,

alert us that in the story a more complex view of the mountains gradually emerges as they are 'half-earth, half-heaven' as they rise 'out of the land,' and not insignificantly, the orderly's girl lives there.¹⁷ This is an important revelation, and as Harris plausibly argues, the mountains must represent an ideal of integration as they stand for what is missing in both the protagonists.¹⁸ This reading also throws light on the last reappearance of the mountains in the story at the time of the orderly's death: 'He stared till his eyes went black and the mountains as they stood in their beauty, so clean and cool, seemed to have it, that which was lost in him' (PO, 20). Nature is here an ethical norm against which characters are implicitly judged, and at the same time a means for the visualisation of the theme. While the mountain image is a sign of synthesis and integration, the death of the captain and the orderly, to borrow Alan Friedman's observation about Hardy's Tess, 'cannot and does not „contain“ or synthesize /their/ disintegrated experience'.¹⁹

The extremity and intensity of feelings indeed changes into an 'almost expressionist' (Keith Cushman)²⁰ narrative when the disintegrating consciousness of the dying orderly is rendered. Distorted consciousness rendering the outside world is another affinity between 'The Prussian Officer' and later the 'England, My England'.

In Lawrence's treatment of the theme of the analyzed short story 'ethnic distinctions' between the two protagonists contribute in an important way to their individual psychology. The social, cultural, temperamental polarity of the protagonists is enhanced (or conditioned) by their ethnic polarity. The above noted characteristic features of the Prussian aristocrat identify him as a northern man, 'steely blue-eyed', while the Bavarian peasant orderly is a southern man with brown eyes and 'swarthy' skin. 'The Prussian Officer' is clearly the first of a long sequence of Lawrence's writings in which the ethnicity of his characters is relevant for their thematic development.

therefore disintegration follows. See Laszlo, Violet S. de, *Psyche and Symbol: a Selection from the Writings of C.G. Jung*. Doubleday Anchor (New York), 1958, esp. pp. 113–148.

17 Judith Wilt argues: „But between the sun and the dark, between the sky, the earth, stand the mountains, 'blue, cool and tender'..." *Ghosts of the Gothic Austen, Eliot and Lawrence*. Princeton University Press (Princeton), 1980, p. 282. See also Harris, Janice H. *The Short Fiction of D.H. Lawrence*. Rutgers University Press (New Brunswick, New Jersey). 1984, p. 95.

18 See Harris, op.cit., p. 93–98.

19 Friedman, Alan, *The Turn of the English Novel: The Transition to Modern Fiction*. Oxford University Press (London, New York), 1970, p. 63.

20 Cushman, op.cit. p.172.

Cushman's lower-case „expressionist“ seems apt, especially if we realize that German Expressionism drew on Kantian idealism and his distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal, privileging the latter (the *Ding-an-sich*). Both Lawrence's fiction and expository writings bring ample evidence of Lawrence's dissociation from such premises. Yet, if in Lawrence's fiction we still perceive some affinity with German/Austrian Expressionism, it is yet another manifestation of his pluralistic aesthetics going against his sometimes authoritarian assumptions.