



Title	D. H. Lawrence's Philosophy of Nature in The Man Who Died
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Citation	Osaka Literary Review. 2012, 50, p. 49-65
Version Type	VoR
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.18910/25138">https://doi.org/10.18910/25138</a>
rights	
Note	

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# D. H. Lawrence's Philosophy of Nature in *The Man Who Died*

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## Introduction

This paper seeks to delineate Lawrence's philosophy of nature from *The Man Who Died* (1929)<sup>1</sup> and show how it operates in his fictional symbolism. This is done so as part of an attempt to view the relationship of mind and body as depicted in this work as the premise for a new naturalistic literature which is free from a humanistic point of view.

This is a story about the Resurrection of Christ,<sup>2</sup> but it is quite different from what the Bible says. Lawrence's Christ criticizes the Christian ideal of the everlasting life of the soul in Heaven, because this ideal is based on denying and depreciating life here on earth. Lawrence created his own mythology in order to reverse the teachings of Christianity which are only abstract and logical, and to show his desire to bring about a more naturalistic source of life.

It is often said that Lawrence shares the anti-Christianity and the anti-humanistic sentiment with Nietzsche. In this work, too, the protagonist can be seen as the embodiment of the philosophy of Nietzsche who deplores that with the death on the cross, happiness on earth came to an end. "The very meaning of life is now construed as the effort to live in such a way that life no longer has any point" (Nietzsche 132-3). It is possible to extend a Nietzschean line to a point where a new philosophy of nature is formed and place Lawrence on that line.

At the beginning of the story we can find his naturalistic

desire in "a young cock" has its legs tied by a peasant, and anticipate the sexual implications of the original title of this story: *The Escaped Cock*. Asserting the resurrection of the body with sexual vitality against the intellects which put on airs was his ultimate theme throughout his works. Lawrence wrote in a letter to Gordon Campbell in 1914 that "Christianity should teach us now, that after our Crucifixion and the darkness of the tomb, we shall rise again in the flesh... resurrected in the bodies" (Lawrence, "To Gordon Campbell" 249).

Lawrence also wrote in his essay, "Resurrection",

Since the War, the world has been without a Lord and it is time for the Lord in us to arise. Rise as the Lord. No longer the Man of Sorrows. There is no Lord in Heaven, but the Lord within us, and we need to rise as the Lord (Lawrence, "Resurrection" 737).

Lawrence knew well the distinction between a Lamentation and a Resurrection and needed the latter rather than the former in order to restore the positive vitality of life in the nihilistic atmosphere after the First World War.

Why, however, does a modernist like Lawrence need a revision of the Bible? Virginia Hyde points out that Lawrence "delighted in esoterica," and "welcomed the bible's metaphysical content even when he inverted it" (Hyde 209). This is an important point when we consider Lawrence's works, because it calls our attention to his thought about the relationship between the body as physical and the soul as metaphysical. Few studies have been made on this problem from the viewpoint of his philosophy of nature and his art of fiction corresponding to it. In this paper we will see how his religious impulse is related with a materialistic point of view.

## I. The Inviolable Soul

The protagonist, who is called "the man who died" throughout the story, died at the Crucifixion and awoke from a long sleep in his tomb. He had risen without desire to live.

When he looked nakedly on life, he saw a vast resoluteness everywhere flinging itself up in the stormy or subtle wave-crests, form-tips emerging out of the blue invisible, a black and orange cock or the green flame-tongues out of the extremes of the fig tree. They came forth, these things and creatures of spring, glowing with desire and with assertion.

(9)

Lawrence's description of nature in spring is never static, but dynamic, since everything demonstrates its tremulous desire to exist and to be in spring. This provides a hint of what will happen to the protagonist later. He began to reexamine his mission of salvation in this flame of nature. The cool and abstract characteristics of the words of his mission are contrasted with the warm and concrete ones of life in nature, and we anticipate that the former will never be able to compete with the latter. The protagonist looked around and found that in nature "the destiny of life seemed more fierce and compulsive to him even than the destiny of death" (9). For Lawrence nature is not a background to the story, but the theme itself.

In the famous scene of the reunion with Maria Magdalene, we can see more clearly his remorse for his own mission. This scene can be seen as the transformation of the biblical meaning of the sacred into Lawrence's naturalist one. "The man who died" said to her the same words as were written in the Bible.<sup>3</sup> "Don't touch me, Madeleine, Not yet! I am not yet healed and in touch with men" (11). These words, however, turned out to have a different meaning from the original context. Biblical canons tell

us that this scene shows the transcendental characteristics of the Resurrection. Christ came back to life again in order to tell people the promise of everlasting life in Heaven. The reliability of this promise only depends on whether people believe in transcendental values.

For example, Jean-Luc Nancy associates this scene with the unattainability and the invisibility of God, that is, love and truth, by employing the transcendental interpretation of *touching*. "It is in being unattainable that love and truth touch us, even seize us. What they draw near to us is their distance.... It is the sense of touch that commands not to touch" (Nancy 37). God should not be touched by human flesh and is only accessible through a vision in the mind. Fundamental faith precedes all that are visible and touchable. The risen body should remain untouchable, but not because it is an immaterial one. Despite the presence of the tangible body, men feel God's eternal love and truth without touching it. This vision of fundamental faith in Christianity is absolutely abstract.

In contrast, Lawrence's vision is entirely physical. He thinks that the resurrection in Christianity doesn't mean a return to life. It ignores "a warm body" and remains only logical. We can see this is caused by the privilege of the human mind and results in the betrayal of the human body, when we hear the protagonist say: "I wanted to be greater than the limits of my hands and feet, so I brought betrayal on myself... now I know my own limits" (12). Our reach ends in every end of our body. This is life as immanence. It is not immanence to something such as God or a subject, but the immanence that is itself a life. The body is not "a container of life" (Lawrence, "Why the Novel" 533). The body, an animated material, is life itself. Lawrence stated the same idea as follows:

Whatever is me alive is me. Every tiny bit of my hands is

alive, every little freckle and hair and fold of skin. And whatever is me alive is me. Only my finger-nails, those ten little weapons between me and an inanimate universe, they cross the mysterious Rubicon between me alive and things like my pen, which are not alive, in my own sense. ("What the Novel" 533)

Something that makes us alive is *life*. For Lawrence it is the *soul*. Lawrence calls the vitality of life which lies in the body the soul.<sup>4</sup>

Man is essentially a soul. The soul is neither the body nor the spirit, but the central flame that burns between the two, as the flame of a lamp burns between the oil of the lamp and the oxygen of the air. The soul is to be obeyed, by the body, by the spirit, by the mind (Lawrence, "Man is" 389).

Lawrence's definition of the soul is quite different from that of Christianity. His soul is the instinct which appears in both the material and the spiritual. We cannot but obey the instincts of the soul, because they are connected to nature or "*the primal unknown* from which all are created" (Lawrence, "Life" 695). Obeying his own soul makes his moral. The soul which lies in the body should follow transcendental values not beyond life (Christian moral) but within life (Spinozist ethic).<sup>5</sup>

Among the values beyond life is the Christian love of giving without taking. This excessive giving is "hard and cruel to the warm body" (13). "When we take more than give, we give more than take, that also is woe and vanity" (12). The protagonist criticizes the notion of love by rejecting the idea of self-sacrifice in Christian love. It betrays his own soul, the inviolable part of himself. He calls self-sacrifice "greedy love" (15). It aims at the personal salvation in Heaven greedily. There is, moreover, something negative about self-sacrifice, because it is based on

the depreciation of life on earth, that is, the negation of the instincts, and mortgages life on earth to the promise of everlasting life in Heaven.

Love means "a need of men and women, a fever to have them and to be saved by them" (17). Love makes the individual soul an Ego, which wants to love or be loved. The majority of people seek after an abstract love as salvation by God in order to ease "their egoistic fears of their nothingness, or the ultimate fear of death" (22). In this case love is the value beyond life because it belittles life on earth.

The personal aspect of life began to disappoint the protagonist. He didn't want to touch life enclosed in a little body, together with a subject, an Ego and a greedy love. Now "he must come back, to be alone in the midst" (19), in order to live without any compulsion of love upon all men. Being alone signifies the brightness of his own life which should not be interfered with by anything but himself. This is demonstrated by the cock which "gleams with bright aloneness, though he answers the lure of hens" (19). He is "hot with life" (19). This cock is a symbol of the vitality of life. He keeps his own soul within his body and at the same time this soul is connected to the greater life of nature. Compared with the description of the little personal life of the peasant, that of the cock "is full of life and virtue" (21).

The protagonist begins to realize the importance of following his soul as it is connected to a greater life and seeks something other than love, because the ego cannot build a real relationship. He turned down Madeleine's petition to come back with her because he saw in her eyes the same demand of this greedy and egoistic love as he used to teach people. Now he knew that "he had risen for the woman, or women, who knew the greater life of the body, not greedy to give, not greedy to take, and with whom he could mingle his body" (15-6).

This protagonist wishes a real relationship between independent souls, so he wishes for a woman "who can lure his risen body, yet leave him his aloneness" (19). One's Ego must die to meet such a woman. A real relationship will be completed not by the love of a Christian woman but by the touch of a pagan one.

## II. The Real Relationship

To express a true relationship through something other than love, Lawrence chose a pagan woman. She was a priestess who served Isis. Isis is a pagan goddess who was bereaved and looking for the fragments of the dead Osiris. "Yet she had not found the last reality, the final clue to him, that alone could bring him really back to her" (26). She waits for the touch of the male Osiris in order to be conceived.

Lawrence's expression here is very symbolic. The last reality, the final clue signifies Osiris's phallus. It is "the inward sun that streams its rays from the loins of the male Osiris" (26). A phallus symbolizes a flow of life. For Lawrence "sexual" and "alive" amount to the same thing: the life of forces, because both are flows in a process of nature. His symbolism is related with the natural things and creates a sensuous atmosphere. The sun symbolizes "the creative unknown which is the beginning" (Lawrence, "Life" 696). The lotus which "opens with the expansion to the invisible sun in the night" (27) symbolizes the womb which waits to be warmed by the tender touch of the man. The invisible sun means "the sheer stillness of the deeper life" (30).

The sun is the most important symbol for Lawrence. As we have seen above, we are connected to *the primal unknown*. We are not created of ourselves. Man has on one hand *the primal unknown* form which all creation issues; on the other hand, the whole created universe, even the world of finite spirits. ("Life" 695). The sun is the symbol of this creative unknown which is

the beginning. We shall never know what is the beginning, but we feel the sweetness of its influx enter into us "through the doorways of the spirit and the body" ("Life" 696). *The primal unknown* is a reality to humans just as the sun is. We wait for it to enter and take its place in us. We "rise up to a new achievement of being, a new fulfillment in creation, new heavens on earth" ("Life" 696-97). This is exactly what happened to the protagonist.

"The man who died" and "the woman who serves Isis" felt "in the quick of their soul" "the flame-tip of life" in each other (33). "There dawned on him the reality of the soft, warm love which is in touch" (43). A woman who is not greedy to give, not greedy to take represents nature itself or a gift of nature. In other words she is an embodiment of nature. She expresses herself as nature. She doesn't represent any Ego or subject, because nature is a process behind which there is no subject that is giving the orders. Here we can see Lawrence's anti-subjectivist stance. A subject is not a fixed given, but only an effect of the creation or the process of nature (cf. "Life"). On the other hand, a soul or the vitality of life is a motive that promotes this process. Christian love cannot build "the real human relationship" because it remains abstract and logical. This love is "love with a dead body" (Lawrence "We Need" 189) without the tenderness of touch of the body. It is "the corpse of love" (42).

To express something other than love Lawrence uses such phrases as "the wonderful womanly glow of her," "the mysterious fire of a potent woman," or "her tender desire for him" (39). This should not be regarded, however, as the evidence that Lawrence is a male-chauvinist who asserts that women should be subdued to the desire of men. Lawrence excluded "the men such as Anthony, who is the golden brief day-sun of show, and Caesar, who is the hard winter sun of power" (27) from the

candidates of the role of Osiris. It was those people who are the real male-chauvinists "who can't wait for the bud of the lotus to stir and "will only tear open the bud" (27). The woman of Isis finds "the man who died" her Osiris "in the quick of her soul" (33).

The real human relationship is a reciprocal process. On the part of the woman, "for the first time, she was touched on the quick at the sight of a man" (30). What is needed here is spontaneity, not volition. Both the man and the woman should leave their Egos and be subdued by their own souls spontaneously. The soul is connected with the flows of nature which are the essence of life, but an ego will voluntarily organize life and prevent it from creating a real relationship. This is why the resurrection of the body should be completed by a woman who doesn't interfere with his soul.

Lawrence's opposition to the privilege of the mind appears in the following expression of this relationship. "Then slowly, slowly, in the perfect darkness of his inner man, he felt the stir of something coming," and "the shock of desire went through him, shock after shock" (44). "He crouched to her, and he felt the blaze of his manhood and his power rise up in his loins, magnificent" (45). This is not a rational approach to things but a very sensual one. While the protagonist was returning to the life of the body through the sexual initiation with her, he cried, "Father! Why did you hide this from me? [...] this is beyond prayer" (45). Through sensual expressions we find not bliss of a transcendental value that the mind understands, but bliss of the earthly life that the body knows.

Nature has an ethic of its own based on the material: to give and take ungreedily. The protagonists follow this ethic of nature, not the morals of Christianity. This is why the pregnancy of the woman and the departure of the man should not be

judged by morals which have a humanistic point of view ruled by the mind. The protagonists are not only in human society, but also in "the primary nature of originals". The superimposition of human society on a more primary nature is the main characteristic of Lawrence's philosophy of nature.

Lawrence's journey to Etruria strengthened his conviction in his philosophy, and at the same time gave him a hint for creating this work. An Etruscan view of life and death deeply affected this work. The Etruscans regarded life and death as one and the same process of nature. Their profound trust and affirmation of life can be seen in the wall paintings of their graves. They represented "the natural flowering of life" (Lawrence, *Sketches* 56). Behind all the Etruscan liveliness was "a religion of life, [...] a conception of the universe and man's place in the universe" (*Sketches* 56). Their trust of life is based on physical matters and the inspiration which they carry. "The whole thing was alive, and had a great soul, or anima" (*Sketches* 57).

The Etruscans believed in the continuity of life, because through the animated body, their souls are connected to the cosmos-soul, the process of nature. The continuity of life, therefore, does not mean the immortality of the individual soul in Heaven. On the contrary, this notion includes the discontinuity; the belief that in nature, living things necessarily die. Nature is a self-creating and self-destructive process. Even death is a part of life. "It is the cycle of all things created [...] it saves even eternity from staleness" (Lawrence, "On Human" 209). We are blessed because we are mortal. This is the affirmation of life. Lawrence always expressed this in his works.

A real relationship between living things is based on mortality. When they return to the earth, their individual souls will disappear. Life will continue not as the immortal soul of individuals but as an eternal recurrence of mortal life in nature. Both the

woman's pregnancy (continuity) and the man's departure (discontinuity) are represented as part of the primal process of nature. Here we can see Lawrence's revised salvation as an eternal return in a Nietzschean perspective. He affirms an eternal return as an infinite process of production of nature, and this affirmation of life is the real salvation for Lawrence.

Among the notable features of Lawrence's philosophy of nature is his notion of *fulfillment*. He implies by this word the cycle of nature in which everything is born, fulfills life and dies. The aim of any process of nature is not the perpetuation of that process, but the fulfillment of it. Love, which is tied with the Ego, means a will to perpetuate the self. It is "a will to arrest the spring, never to let May dissolve into June" (Lawrence, "Love" 8). Such love is egoistic, only a prison or bondage. The protagonist, however, doesn't believe in such love any more. He sought for a real relationship with a woman which does not aim at the perpetuation of the process but the fulfillment of it. At last he realized that "a contact was established, they were fulfilled by each other" (48). He knew the time to depart had come. "Give and take" originally means a reciprocal relationship between independent souls, therefore, "between them were two flows of a man and a woman, each of which flows in its own way" (Lawrence, "We Need" 194). The great flow of the relationship goes on all the same, sometimes mingling, then separating again. "The man who died" departs from the woman, because he has already turned to the *primal nature* which cannot be defeated by humanistic morals and will bring him a new process of creation to be fulfilled.

### **III. Against Some Philosophical Critiques**

In this section three critical points are argued to make clear Lawrence's philosophy of nature. The first critique is that which

interprets Lawrence's admiration for nature as romanticism.<sup>6</sup> Lawrence's philosophy of nature has nothing to do with romantic sentimentality. He doesn't insist on going back to nature or juxtapose society and nature. He is always naturalistic rather than sentimental. He represents nature or "the primal unknown" as the reality of humanity, but we cannot reach it through the mind, only through the soul as long as it is understood as the vitality of life which lies in the body. He is a kind of realist in that he regards nature as the foundation of man's existence. The body and the soul are portions of man's being, therefore parts of nature. In this sense Lawrence's philosophy is based strictly on nature.

Second, it is true that Lawrence considered the Ego to be the main culprit for the degeneration of modern society, but it is not because "he was a powerful critique of the inhumanity of industrial capitalist England," as Terry Eagleton insists (see Notes 6), but because he paradoxically criticized the original nature of the human mind for being egoistical and greedy. Lawrence opposed "the domination of mental consciousness over the mystic vitality of the whole human organism" (Levine 322). Lawrence's protest against the mechanism of industrial capitalism is based not on a humanism whose precondition is personality, but on the vitalism of nature whose precondition is impersonality. This is why we can say that Lawrence is free from a humanistic point of view.

Third, Lawrence is sometimes criticized for taking the risk of making the body another transcendental value and asserting the privilege of the body. For example, Anne Fernihough points out this risk, saying that in much of Lawrence's work the body becomes "another privileged anteriority" and accordingly "authoritarian" (Fernihough 4). It is true that Lawrence often brings up "some esoteric region *within* the body" (Fernihough 4), but we should consider it to be a place where the body and the mind

are superimposed. The body belongs to the material world in the first place, but at the same time it is a media in which the soul can appear, in other words, the body is a place through which we can reach the mysteries of life. That is why we can regard Lawrence as both a materialist and an idealist.

The critique of "the privileged anteriority" also holds true for Lawrence's notorious notion of *organism*. This idea was accused of leading to Fascism, but in fact his notion of "organism" has nothing to do with Fascism which aims to organize life into only one direction. Lawrence's notion of life is directly connected to the impersonal cosmos-soul which is open to eternal change. Lawrence insisted that even though we maintain a certain integrity, it would be stupid to fix it, for "we can never know it" (Lawrence, "Why the" 537). He never intended to relate the notion of the *integrity* or *organism* to an ideology of identity.

It is true that even the notion of the eternal recurrence with difference may become another authority. He sometimes takes the risk of incarnating this authority of the cosmos-soul within the personality of the subject. In so doing, some of the characters Lawrence created are given authority only to have dictatorial aspects. This is one of the dangers that Lawrence's works have. In *The Man Who Died*, however, the protagonist escapes such a danger because this is a tale of "escaping" from what forces him to be betrayed and sacrificed. In this work it is the Christian values that have dictatorial aspects.

As we have argued so far, the reference of the impersonal aspect of life is the key to the philosophy of Lawrence. In this respect his philosophy of nature enables him to avoid the humanistic point of view and, in consequence, avoid the dichotomy of mind and body. Humanism is on the part of the mind. More light should be shed on Lawrence's naturalist and inhumanistic point of view.

## Conclusion

Lawrence's philosophy of nature is embodied in *The Man Who Died*, with the fictional symbolism and the texture of his vocabulary. At the core of his philosophy lies the notion of the soul which is situated in the body. Through this notion of the soul, the physical and the metaphysical are superimposed and as a result the opposition of mind and body is annihilated. At the same time his assertion that the personal soul (body-soul) is connected to impersonal nature (nature-soul) is a response to the paradox between continuity and discontinuity.

This philosophy first becomes possible by borrowing forms from the Bible. As Virginia Hyde points out, Lawrence joins history with mythic time (Hyde 208). It is reinforced by his strategy of not giving the proper names to the protagonists. By doing so Lawrence succeeds in connecting the personal aspect of life with the impersonal one.

Lawrence's deep insight into life can be seen in his symbolism too. He makes symbols by picking out the essence of things, their souls, and expresses them with a stream of inspiration, sensation and affect. The readers can receive this tale not through the intellect but through the sensory organs. The texture of the language affects the body directly in a way that it leads us to a new experience. In other words, a new meaning is produced through our sensations. Here we can see the union of the body with the mind at the level of the materiality of language and meaning.

The impersonal aspect of life is reflected in the lives of the protagonists. They don't try to discover what "true self" is, but try to fulfill life, and increase joy in life. They create a real relationship by following not the transcendental values beyond life, but the instinct within life. "Right and wrong is an instinct: but an instinct of the whole consciousness in a man, bodily, mental,

spiritual at once" (Lawrence, "Why the Novel" 538). This is Lawrence's ethic of life.

Lawrence's anti-subjectivist point of view does not mean a negation of a subject or self-consciousness, but the paradoxical co-existence of both a subjective and an anti-subjective point of view. "Anti-subjective" does not signify "objective", because "subjective" and "objective" are the opposite components in the dichotomy. Lawrence's point of view, however, is free from such a dichotomy. This fact gives us the potential to view Lawrence's works as the premise for a new naturalistic literature whose existence can be further argued through the postmodern concepts of "anti-subjective" and "posthuman".

## Notes

- 1 *The Man Who Died*. 1929. London: Dodo, 2010. Print. All references to *The Man Who Died* are from this edition, and page numbers are shown in parentheses.
- 2 T. R. Wright introduces the history of this work: Inspired by a children's toy model of white rooster escaping from an egg, which he and Earl Brewster saw in a shop window on their Etruscan pilgrimage. It was Brewster, apparently, who suggested it would make a good title: 'The Escaped Cock—A story of the Resurrection'. The original short story, when it first appeared in *The Forum*, had its title changed, [...] presumably to prevent its readers seeing crude phallic pun in the title. [...] *The Man Who Died*, the title under which it was published posthumously in 1931. (Wright 215)
- 3 The New Testament says as follows: Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned towards him and said in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (This means "Teacher.") "Do not hold on to me," Jesus told her, "because I have not yet gone back up to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am returning to him who is my Father and their Father, my God and their God." So Mary Magdalene went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and related to them what he had told her. (*Good News: New Testament*, John 20.16-8)

- 4 Lawrence also states his belief in the critique of Walter Whitman: 'There e!' he said to the soul. 'Stay there! Stay there. Stay in the flesh. Stay in the limbs and lips and in the belly. Stay in the breast and womb. Stay there, Oh, Soul, where you belong.' (Lawrence, *Studies* 190)
- 5 The seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Spinoza asserted in his famous parallelism that the mind and the body are different expressions of one and the same being. He intended to demolish the pseudo-superiority of the mind over the body and build the ethic of life according to the instinct of the soul. Lawrence shares this Spinozist ideas. Lawrence wrote: Soul sympathizes with soul. And that which tries to kill my soul, my soul hates. My soul and my body are one. Soul and body wish to keep clean and whole. Only the mind is capable of great perversion. (Lawrence, *Studies* 194)
- 6 Terry Eagleton says: Leavis was right to discern in the acceptable face of D. H. Lawrence a powerful critique of the inhumanity of industrial capitalist England. Lawrence, like Leavis himself, was among other things an inheritor of the nineteenth-century lineage of Romantic protest against the mechanized wage-slavery of capitalism, its clipping social oppressiveness and cultural devastation. (Eagleton 37)

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