



English Studies in Latin America

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Source: *White Rabbit: English Studies in Latin America*, No. 2 (November 2011)

ISSN: 0719-0921

Published by: Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

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“Never Trust the Artist, Trust the Tale”: D.H. Lawrence’s “A Modern Lover” as an Aesthetic Autobiography

Camila Rojel Gallardo¹

The British writer D. H. Lawrence developed a particular manner of intertwining his life experience with the tools that fiction offered him, embodied in Modernism. In his short story “A Modern Lover”, this writer was able to unravel what the theorist Suzanne Nalbantian characterizes as the “aesthetic autobiography”, consisting precisely in the systematic transformation of raw biographical material into fictionalized scenes that build up a literary work.

“A Modern Lover”, the “aesthetic autobiography” in which Lawrence hid the autobiographical treasures of his intense youth with his close friend Jessie Chambers, works at different levels. The central autobiographical elements represent the deep workings of fiction at the level of characters, especially the protagonist, Cyril Mersham. The peripheral autobiographical elements represent a subjective, personal view on time and space, and how the same affects the narrative stream and the characters involved in the story.

An analysis of the short story in question allows us to regard D. H. Lawrence among the modernist writers—Virginia Woolf and James Joyce—that changed the classical notions of autobiography and fiction, as well as opening new fields for literary criticism to expand.

KEYWORDS: D. H. LAWRENCE, AESTHETIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY, MODERNISM, “A MODERN LOVER”

Crossroads between life-writing and fiction have always been a controversial ground for theorists: the nature of the role and place given by critics to biographical information is ever-changing. Nevertheless, a major transformation has been accomplished by modernist writers, who separated from the traditional notions of autobiography and fiction to embrace new conceptions through their works and characters.

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The theorist Suzanne Nalbantian analyzes this modernist revolution of fiction through the concept of “aesthetic autobiography”, a term that refers to the manner in which writers develop a transmutation of their life facts through particular literary techniques to reach “higher truths” of fiction. It is the transformation of the very particular, the intimacies of writers, into universal experiences through fiction, crossing the threshold of pure account of facts, as traditional autobiography does. It is a reworking of real people, not of personality, an idea already proposed by T.S. Eliot when declaring that poetry “is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 6). Writers such as Proust, Woolf, and Joyce, according to Nalbantian, can be found among the writers who experimented with this new aesthetics. In sum, as the critic remarks: “an autobiographical style developed in this period of modernism which went well beyond the circumstantial identification of the author in the work.” (*Aesthetic Autobiography* 44).

For many theorists, such as Tony Pinkney and Paul Poplawski, the English writer D. H. Lawrence was also part of the modernist movement.² Even though there are critics—Frank Kermode for an example—who claim that Lawrence is a writer impossible to label, his literary works do present modern characteristics, such as multiple focalizations in narration, stream of consciousness, and new modern conceptions on life writing. These new conceptions entail, according to Max Saunders, the conscious and artistic interplay between autobiography and fiction, erasing genre boundaries and challenging the literary tradition on narration and authorship (*Self Impression* 293). A reading of Lawrence’s work without taking into account the new views on autobiography versus fiction will result on an incomplete understanding of some of the author’s complex short stories such as “A Modern Lover”, which is not merely part of modernist short fiction with autobiographical elements, but also a living body of life experiences and fictional artifacts.

An analysis of Lawrence’s short story “A Modern Lover” will be done under the light of Suzanne Nalbantian’s description of the “aesthetic autobiography”. Her ideas will be complemented and contrasted with Max Saunders’s views on the development of modern literature regarding life writing. In addition, the author’s biographical background as seen in selected Lawrence’s works as well as biographical material provided by different biographies will be included. The analysis will also consider views on personality and identity in fictional writing, and also perspectives on the

²See Tony Pinkney, *Lawrence and Modernism* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1990) and Paul Poplawski, *Encyclopedia of Literary Modernism* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2003).

modernist treatment of space and time in order to reveal how these elements work within the short story, serving the purposes of the “aesthetic autobiography”. The analysis will be directed in order to cover the main axes of the short story from the point of view of an “aesthetic autobiography”, considering the autobiographical events and characters involved. Several points corresponding to the main elements in the short story are separated in order to improve the analysis: the central autobiographical elements (the narrative event and characters), and the peripheral elements (the special treatment of space and time in this short story).

The modernist era developed a close relationship between the autobiographical facts and the fictional devices, reflected in an awareness of an aesthetic product while transforming raw biographical material into fiction. Moreover, even though this transformation is seen throughout all literary history, modernists aimed to a total revolution in the way of presenting the same reality using novel literary devices that changed the apparent autobiography into something beyond fiction. In *Self Impression*, Saunders claims that modernist writers related with the formal views on autobiography in such manner that they were “engaging with it, reinventing it, playing formal games with it, criticizing it”, thus changing the traditional notions of art and literature (how fiction, narrative and authorship used to be regarded traditionally) (293). It was the era of art for art’s sake, and what modernism did was exploring the limits of human creativity when human institutions—like established Church—were questioned. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce is a paradigmatic example of the degree of experimentation achieved by modernism. As Saunders explains, it presents a fictional character as the author of a work and narrator, who somehow takes Joyce’s history and voice: a fact that certainly defies the common notion of authorship, which is one of the ways modernists reworked literature and life writing. D. H. Lawrence, as part of modernism, shares this concern with art and the transformation of life writing forms.

Lawrence’s constant preoccupation for the artistic manifestation is revealed all throughout his works and personal writings, and “A Modern Lover” is an example of that interest. The writer himself expressed in his correspondence that he wanted to treat his life only in regards to art (Sultan, “Lawrence the Anti-Autobiographer” 226). In doing so, he transfixed elements of his experience into his literature, in order to detach as much as possible from the mere autobiographical anecdote, but panoramically revealing parts of his life in a subtle manner—an assumption that could be seen as a contradiction. But, as Lawrence himself expressed: “Never trust the artist, trust the tale” (*Studies in Classic American Literature* 14). This transfixion can be explained under the light of what Nalbantian

calls “aesthetic autobiographies”, a sub-genre developed during the first years of the twentieth century, which “reclote the personal facts in poetic relations, in a representation of the person, not of the personality” (45). This sub-genre reveals a modernist “fascination with the fictional possibilities of life-writing forms” (Saunders 11).³ Consequently, the “poetic relations” established in the work of art are the living body of life writing as developed by modernism, and especially by Lawrence. Writing becomes the port of myriad experiences and ideas distilled from the writer to the tale, as an analysis of the short story “A Modern Lover” reveals.

“A Modern Lover” tells the story of Cyril Mersham, a man in his twenties who decides to return to the cottage where he spent his days as a teenager. The property belongs to a family close to Mersham’s, where Muriel, a woman he used to court, lives. His visit will signify a confrontation of the feelings of both, since they still keep a strange relationship with their pasts and with each other, even though the woman is engaged to another man. Their special relationship, then, is revealed. Nonetheless, the confrontation once seen as a simple discussion of ex-lovers becomes a confrontation of idiosyncrasies, gender and intellectual backgrounds.

The autobiographical event and the characters that construct the plot of “A Modern Lover” are the main elements into which modernist life writing drifts. They represent the central autobiographical elements that are capable of sustaining the whole of the fictional artifacts of life writing in the way Lawrence did (the “recloting” of personal facts, as Nalbaltian claims). Lawrence developed this short story by a translocation of particular events in his personal life into the short story, externalizing facts and giving those events the universality pertinent to literature and fiction. These autobiographical events were actually a recreation of Lawrence’s youth experiences which, as Sultan comments, had a great impact on his life to the extent of motivating the replication of the same scene in some other of his short stories. These events involve Lawrence’s close relationship with a woman, Jessie Chambers, who was for several years not only his best girlfriend, reader and intellectual partner, but also a serious candidate to become Mrs. Lawrence. During his days as a teenager, Lawrence shared considerable time in the Chambers’s residence, to the point that “his

³ Max Saunders in *Self Impression* discusses Nalbaltian’s use of this term, explaining that it is incorrectly applied. He clarifies that the “aesthetic autobiography” was developed by the aesthetic movement previous to modernism, which developed the genre of autobiography as commonly known. Moreover, he exposes that due to the novelty of what Woolf, Proust, Joyce and Nin did, it is not possible to call it “autobiography” anymore. He prefers to use different neologisms in order to refer to their particular achievements in life writing, such as auto/biografiction and the like (Saunders 76-77). However, I preferred the term “aesthetic autobiography” in order to avoid confusing neologisms and in order to keep the focus on the aesthetic purpose of writing that modernists uphold.

relationship with her developed in the most significant of his young life” and the closeness between them made Jessie believe he would finally marry her (Poplawski, *D.H. Lawrence: A Reference Companion* 13). Their relationship was intense to the extent that Lawrence proposed Chambers having an affair without marrying—affair that included sexual intercourse with contraception and at the same time denying believing in love (Sultan 230). Lawrence’s contradictory actions and thoughts ended in their separation. The young author finally went to London, away from her family, which had previously given him an ultimatum: he had to decide whether marrying Chambers or stop seeing her (Poplawski, *Companion* 15). The experience resulted in the creation of a story pattern which Lawrence developed not only in “A Modern Lover”, but also in other pieces of short fiction. In *D. H. Lawrence: The Early Fiction*, Michael H. Black suggests that this story pattern is motivated by Lawrence’s search of a way out of his own “emotional block”, produced by the memories that “baffled him”; thus he imagined a fictional encounter with Chambers (112). The story pattern explained by Sultan and based on Lawrence’s relationship with Chambers, is about a London intellectual who encounters a woman and a stranger (episode that appears at the end of Lawrence’s novel *The White Peacock*), in addition to five points that Sultan claims are part of Lawrence’s life in relation to the events involving Jessie Chambers as they appear in their correspondence.⁴ Narratively, this pattern involves a young man returning from London to the place where he spent his youth, visiting a woman with whom he had an intense, celibate, emotional involvement as well as sharing their intellectual development together. The protagonist is confronted with the woman’s new fiancé, at the same time that he confronts the woman. Some conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the story’s plot and the pattern established by Sultan: diverse events that were part of reality were taken and positioned to build a single fictional scene; it was possible to document an “autobiographical” path by tracking the events that built the story, and there was actually a process of “scene making”, a term used by Virginia Woolf to refer to the creation of representative scenes in the life of the author (Nalbantian 52). This creative process can be translated into an aesthetic transformation of the events and an interplay between fiction and reality.

⁴ The five points that are relevant in the description of the story pattern are: A question Lawrence made to Chambers about a possible episode in his novel *The White Peacock* concerning marrying Emily to Tom (a reading of their correspondence suggests a parallel between those characters and the couple). Second, a letter Lawrence sent to Jennings, his friend, declaring that he had married Emily to a stranger and himself to nobody. Third, a conversation with Chambers about seeking “that” (referred to sexual matters). Fourth, his proclamation of his love for her “and extracting her agreement to sexual intercourse with contraception without marriage”. Fifth and last, “his break with her on 1 August 1910” (Stanley Sultan, “Lawrence the Anti-Autobiographer.”(*Journal of Modern Literature* 23.2 (1999): 225-48. Project Muse. Web.13 August 2011) 231-32.)

The process of “scene making”, observed in the transposition of different pieces of reality through the creative process of fiction, is part of the “aesthetic autobiography”, because it entails the aesthetic treatment of biographical data. Furthermore, this process is framed into the creation of “moments of being”, conceived by Virginia Woolf, which is characteristic of modernism. Nalbantian refers to this creative process in which “the past is retrieved and refashioned” (52). In doing so, she explains, “these authors read life backwards ‘novelistically’, attaching drama and object to the character” (52). In making this reading, what the author develops is a different way of looking at past events, which has to do also with a non-chronological view of time (something that will be treated later in this paper). James Joyce, like Virginia Woolf, believed profoundly in this transformation of the past into moments: “each moment shorter than a pulse beat was equivalent in its duration to six thousand years, because in such an infinitely short instant the work of the poet is conceived and born” (Joyce, *Critical Writings* 222). A “moment” could change everything; it was necessary to build it in narrative as a crucial element for the development of an artist: art and life were conjugated in the “moment”. This is relevant for the process of “scene making” in “A Modern Lover”, because the simple encounter constitutes a powerful instant of confrontation and feeling. The focus is in the “moment”; it is not important whether the events narrated are big events in life. The significance given by the author through his/her own subjectivity is what matters as a source for artistic and aesthetic development. “A Modern Lover” is an imaginary “moment” built up from different “moments”: the protagonist walking through the muddy countryside, the family dinner, the encounter with the woman and with the “other” lover, and memories coming and going. Lawrence, as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, was an inventor of “moments” created from the passion of his own life by the new ways of narrating it.

The placement and “re-creation” of the autobiographical event would be nothing without the “re-creation” of characters; they go hand in hand to constitute the central autobiographical elements that build the “aesthetic autobiography” in the short story. The protagonist, Cyril Mersham, and her friend Muriel (in the story her surname is not revealed), certainly share elements with their real counterparts. Even though one can be tempted to assert—as some critics, such as John Worthen in *D. H. Lawrence: The Early Years*, do—that these characters are actually autobiographical counterparts, this assumption can be quite misleading. The fact is that real people are being reworked in the short story just as the autobiographical event is. The main characters correspond, in Nalbantian’s words, to the “aesthetic selves” that modernist writers developed through their unique

fictions. The “aesthetic self” is the translation and transmutation of characteristics that the authors possess in such manner as to avoid any possible identification; it works like a subtle disguise made out of pure fiction. In this sense, Cyril Mersham is not the “autobiographical hero” that Worthen claimed, but a character that represents “how far Lawrence removed his fictional character from the autobiographical material which he drew on in creating him” (Sultan 236). In this sense, Cyril Mersham as a product of the “aesthetic autobiography” does not necessarily share the same traits D. H. Lawrence has. Therefore, this character is a manifestation of the “aesthetic self” created for the sake of a fictional situation (even though Michael H. Black defines Mersham as a Lawrentian “alter-ego” (*Early Fiction* 112)). Furthermore, it is claimed by Sultan that Mersham’s personality corresponds to an exaggeration made by Lawrence of “tendencies that he found disturbing” in himself (Sultan 235). This assertion could lead to the assumption that Cyril is just half of the representation of Lawrence, the negative one. Or moreover, that he is a parody of D. H. Lawrence. Nevertheless, it is possible to establish a parallel between Cyril’s fictional experience and Lawrence’s in order to say that this character is a manifestation of the “aesthetic self” of his author. Mersham is a young man who has recently been through a major transformation in his life, one that entails not only a change in his personal scenery (from the country to the city), but also a profoundly intellectual transformation. Similarly, the author experienced the process of moving from his birth place in Nottinghamshire to Croydon, suburb next to London (Poplawski, *Companion* 17). In the narrative, Cyril has undergone a process of adaptation:

Two years he had been in the large city in the South. There always his soul had moved among the faces that swayed on the thousand currents in that node of tides, hovering and wheeling and flying low over the faces of the multitude like a seagull over the waters, stopping now and again, and taking a fragment of life—a look, a contour, a movement—to feed upon. (2)

Cyril’s feelings towards the new city that are revealed in this passage can be equated to Lawrence’s feelings in Croydon and London, where he breathed a different air and enjoyed different experiences, as his biography exposes: “Living in Croydon did offer ... a new set of landscapes (he explored far and wide on his bicycle); and, in London itself, he went to plays and operas and explored art galleries and secondhand bookshops.” (Poplawski, *Companion* 17). Therefore, both fiction and biography portray the same passage and the same feelings in a single event; Lawrence was able to incorporate his own feelings about this particular experience into Mersham. The transfixion of experiences from Lawrence to Cyril reflects a different level of the “aesthetic self”,

because ultimately, whether it is possible or not to make a comparison between Cyril Mersham and D. H. Lawrence is not the central matter. A likeness becomes a secondary issue, for what is at stake is his aesthetic value within the narrative as a fictional character and how he is “re-created” as a “central autobiographical element”, not an evaluation of the final product of the transformation.

Cyril was given not only the mission of being one of the main elements in the “aesthetic autobiography” called “A Modern Lover”, but also the mission of im/personalizing this fictionalization of Lawrence’s life. Im/personality is a neologism introduced by Saunders in relation to the coexistence of both personality and impersonality (the actual author’s personality and the invention of a fictional character completely unrelated to the author’s experience, representing the impersonality) as a dual experience in modernist writing; in the theorist’s words, im/personality embodies “the inseparability of . . . apparently opposing terms” (59). Therefore, the “aesthetic autobiography” entails this process of personalizing and impersonalizing simultaneously through the building of an “aesthetic self”, because the main concern is the person re-presented, not the personality (T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” 6). Saunders exposes the apparent contradiction that modernism had to face, standing between romanticism and the celebration of the personality, and impressionism, whose central figure is Walter Pater, which proposes the abandonment of “the notion of a continuous self” (Saunders 29, 32). Modernism, and especially Lawrence, inherited the impressionist concept of impersonality that he applied in his aesthetic perspective as well as in life writing. Even though Lawrence is said to be the most “personal” modernist writer, he also manifested the importance of the concept, when talking about “the great impersonal which never changes and out of which all change comes” (Saunders 59). If this idea is applied to “A Modern Lover”, it can be seen that underneath the building of a character such as Cyril, the “aesthetic self” in the short story, there is a process of im/personalization, because of the presence of both apparent contradictory terms impersonality and personality. It can be seen through two different points: the fact that Cyril presents personal characteristics that Lawrence seemed to despise (which is impersonalization), and the fact that Cyril was given a perspective equitable to Lawrence when returning from the city to the country (personalization). Thus, Cyril Mersham, the fictional protagonist of the story, is an “im/personalized” product of the “aesthetic autobiography”.

In order to explain the relation Mersham/Lawrence within the modernist forms of life writing, the term co-consciousness needs to be introduced—a term also connected with how im/personality is used in “A Modern Lover”. Galya Diment in *The Autobiographical Novel of Co-*

consciousness: Goncharov, Woolf and Joyce, introduces this term in the analysis of these three authors' works, and found that they share a marked tendency of exhibiting and projecting their own ideas, hopes and fears, into their characters as an artistic device that can be identified by a term from the psychological ground: "co-consciousness".⁵ Applying this notion to "A Modern Lover", co-consciousness is used not only to emphasize that Mersham is an aesthetic detachment and approximation to Lawrence; he is also a sieve for Lawrence's views on life and events. This fact may not seem new in the bigger picture of the whole history of Literature, since in one way or another writers have worked their characters according to their personal experiences; this was an issue, however, that modernism reworked in order to reject nineteenth-century paradigms. During that century characters possess their own intellectual ideas, especially when one reads the works in the context of their authors' life writings; modernist writers, in contrast, convey characters their personal ideas regarding life (Saunders 342). The focus in nineteenth-century novel is placed on the story; the characters are only concerned with telling their stories, not with becoming artists and they present a sense of naivety towards their life experience (342). Modernists, on the other hand, established a nexus between the author and characters; this nexus can be referred to as co-consciousness. For instance, Virginia Woolf is said to have built Cam Ramsay, a character from the novel *To the Lighthouse*, in order to represent her younger self, placing in that character characteristics that she acknowledges as her own (Diment 82). Lawrence can be compared with her in this sense, because he also attempts to build a co-consciousness through the representation of his younger self. Cyril Mersham is that representation, thus, when the character speaks, there is a good deal of Lawrence's own speech in him. As an example of this, we find the expression of Mersham's perspective on life when talking to Tom Vickers, Muriel's suitor: "[L]ife is beautiful, so long as it is consuming you. When it is rushing through you, destroying you, life is glorious" (21). The quote is coincident with the vitalist vision of Lawrence and even with the way in which he lived his own life, which was certainly adventurous.⁶ Lawrence saw in the expression of human passions and impulsiveness a

⁵According to Diment, the term "co-consciousness" proposed by Morton Price in *Dissociation of a Personality* (1927) represents a duality marked by an "unconscious" side of the personality. Nevertheless, Diment emphasizes that it is the "idea of coexistence, not the lack of awareness" which is central in Prince's theory as well as in Diment's analysis (Galya Diment, *The Autobiographical Novel of Co-consciousness: Goncharov, Woolf and Joyce* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994) 49.)

⁶Jack Stewart in *The Vital Art of D. H. Lawrence: Vision and Expression* explains that the vitalist vision entails the intensity of conceiving thought related to the mind and the cosmos, and visionary points of view (131-133). Besides, some people commenting on Lawrence's personality write about the "red flame" that he had (Catherine Carswell quoted in Edward Nehls, *D. H. Lawrence: A Composite Biography. Vol. I, 1885-1919*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957) 227). Lawrence, on explaining how this vitalist vision was applied to the intellectual world, expressed that "real thought is an experience. It begins as a change in the blood, a slow convulsion and revolution in the body itself. It ends as a new piece

suitable and coherent way of life; he proclaimed, according to Eugene Goodheart in *The Utopian Vision of D. H. Lawrence*, that the key element for a transformation of the decadent modern world into a “new and vital form [of civilization] is man’s spirit of adventure” (15). This vision is delivered to the fictional character through what Lawrence calls “art speech”, meaning the empowering of the characters with Lawrence’s ideas, so that characters offer real “speeches” within the narrative plot (Goodheart 42-3). In delivering Lawrence’s own way of thinking into Cyril Mersham’s speech, Lawrence creates a character framed in the modern dialogue between authors and fiction, in which im/personalization and co-consciousness coexist for the sake of the aesthetic life-writing.

An “aesthetic” representation is also seen in Muriel, the object and objection of Mersham’s love. An analogous process of similarities and questions can be established in this character as well as in Cyril. Nevertheless, the biographical relations between Muriel and Jessie Chambers will be not explored in depth but the focus will be on one important aspect of Muriel’s stance: how she delimits the human relationship portrayed in “A Modern Lover”. She requires to be seen under the light of this game of fiction built by Lawrence, and the role she plays in it regarding Cyril’s attitude and emotions. In this respect, Nalbantian separates a feature of the “aesthetic autobiography” in relation to the author and his/her relatives, in which the author “manifested certain obsessions about close family members which were not simply reflected but ‘recreated’ in the fiction” (50). Even though Jessie Chambers was not a part of Lawrence’s family, strictly speaking, it can be stated that their close relationship allows us to equate their relationship to that of relatives, since in his biographies their relationship is highlighted as one of the most significant relationships for young Lawrence (Poplawski, *Companion* 13). Furthermore, Jessie is the source of several Lawrentian characters—the best known, “Myriam”, in *Sons and Lovers*—just as Joyce admits using his father’s memory in the creation of several fictional people (Nalbantian 51). Muriel is a re-creation of Chambers used, somehow, strategically by Lawrence to emphasize an aesthetic representation of the biographical event. Curiously enough, Muriel is described in the story in respect to the relationship: she is said to possess “the indulgent tone of a woman who will sacrifice anything to love” (16). The only bare remark, out of the filter of the relationship, appears when the narrator expresses that she is “a dreadful pessimist” (11). What we find in Chambers’s re-creation is a “satellite” representation, since this character works in relation to the autobiographical event transformed; the focus is on Cyril’s

of awareness, a new reality in mental consciousness" (D. H. Lawrence, "Making Pictures." Introduction. *Paintings of D. H. Lawrence*. Ed. Mervyn Levy. (New York: Viking, 1964) 616.)

experience created from Lawrence's autobiographical event which at the same time produces the effect of the "aesthetic autobiography". The importance is placed neither in the relationship itself, nor in Muriel as a character in all her complexity, but in how Cyril reacts to the whole situation, and how he sees her. This ultimately manifests the deep reworking of reality that Lawrence was able to develop in the short story.

The relationship between Muriel and Cyril is not only crucial for the plot of "A Modern Lover", but it also allows the possibility of building and unraveling "poetic relations" within the story that are capable of twisting the real focus of events and enclose those same events within a distinct atmosphere. "Poetic relations" that Nalbantian mentions in relation to a general view on "aesthetic autobiography", need to be understood in this case as the particular way in which the characters relate to the "amplified" event, amplification made from reality because of the aesthetic transformation of autobiographical facts. The re-creation of this special human relationship is part of the "aesthetic autobiography" since it is the "amplification of a life experience into an artistic representation" (Nalbantian 136). These "poetic relations" are built through the new insights given by the author to the autobiographical event (in this case the fictional event in the story), the emphasis on "the moments" and how both characters are thrown into a spiral of feelings and thoughts. This is a story of feelings aroused, of slight movements and confrontation, a fact inherent to the Lawrentian world. The sexual proposition that Lawrence made to Chambers according to his biographies is recreated in the short story in intense dialogues:

"At any rate," he said, "you have something to give me."

She continued to look at him with dark, absorbing eyes. He probed her with his regard. Then he seemed to withdraw, and his pupils dilated with thought.

"You see," he said, "life's no good but to live—and you can't live your life by yourself. You must have a flint and a steel, both, to make the spark fly. Supposing you be my flint, my white flint, to spurt out red fire for me?"

"But how do you mean?" she asked breathlessly.

"You see," he continued, thinking aloud as usual: "thought—that's not life. It's like washing and combing and carding and weaving the fleece that the year of life

has produced. Now I think—we’ve carded and woven to the end of our bundle—nearly. We’ve got to begin again—you and me—living together, see? Not speculating and poetising together—see?” (13)

Cyril exposes his reasons why they should come to terms in a matter that, for him as well as it was for Lawrence, is of extreme importance. It is addressed directly at the beginning of the quote by Cyril, who also highlights the sexual component of life through the elegant simile of “a flint and a steel”. This dialogue can also be seen as a powerful “moment of being” for the two characters, in which the importance is given, again, to the feelings aroused in the moment of the encounter. The possibility of a change in the relationship is also present, and it echoes Chambers’s and Lawrence’s intellectual exchange that marked their relationship (“speculating and poetising together”). Change is constant in the story while both characters remain within the stillness of confrontation. There is another important passage that reveals Cyril’s change and the influence of that relationship during his intellectual development:

There, by that hearth, they had threshed the harvest of their youth’s experience, gradually burning the chaff of sentimentality and false romance that covered the real grain of life. How infinitely far away, now, seemed *Jane Eyre* and George Eliot. They had marked the beginning. He smiled as he traced the graph onwards, plotting the points with Carlyle and Ruskin, Schopenhauer and Darwin and Huxley, Omar Khayyam, the Russians, Ibsen and Balzac; then Guy the Maupassant and *Madame Bovary*. They had parted in the midst of *Madame Bovary*. (10)

Books were the most important element for both relationships, Cyril/Muriel and Lawrence/Jessie. Furthermore, Lawrence’s biography documents the author’s interest in some of the texts mentioned in the story which the couple shared when spending time together in their youths (Poplawski, *Companion* 15). This passage reveals the change experienced by Cyril at an intellectual level that concerns this relationship, and how the same relationship shapes the experience of the character as well as the author’s. When the author highlights the topic of change in the short story, he is universalizing a personal experience through fiction, which was the purpose of modernist aesthetic autobiography. In Nalbantian words: “In the construction of such scenes, a certain universality of situation is created” (52). Change is a human experience, and can be lived by means of an intellectual change, or the breaking of a relationship. In the case of Lawrentian narrative and this short story in

particular, universality is also created from the “art speech”, a feature related to Cyril. Lawrence emphasizes even more the universality of what he is narrating by exhorting the reader with interesting propositions in the voice of his characters. Both elements (change and “art speech”) are able to shape the “poetic relations” which alter the autobiographical event into an artistic product, just as painting a landscape with shades of color and striking drawings translating emotional details. In this way, this short story as an artistic product and being an “aesthetic autobiography” provides the universality of a human experience, and therefore human emotions that invite emotions from the reader.

The peripheral elements—the change and effect in the sense of space and time—in this short story help the plot and characters, which are the central autobiographical elements, to develop in an “aesthetic autobiography”. The author’s own perception on time and space and the representation of them within the narrative is crucial in order to see the autobiographical event through the eyes of the author, because they are also drawn from the author’s own experience and reality. Modernism understood these elements under their own rules; an unusual importance was given to the ordinary things, routine and the intimate big moments within common life, which can be seen in Virginia Woolf’s “moments of being”, James Joyce’s “epiphanies” and Walter Benjamin’s “shock” (Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* 3). Space and time depend directly on the intimate perception of characters, which is why ordinary things, situations and spaces are given a central place in modernist stories. Moreover, the passing of time is marked by the internal perception; for instance, “moments of being” occupy a considerable length within the story. In “A Modern Lover” the presence of the ordinary is evident at the very beginning, when Mersham walks along the road observing what surrounds him: the details of trees, turnips, and the sunset. Later on importance is given to the little ordinary moments, like dinner or the simple exchange of ideas framed by the confrontation and the encounter. Little gestures and movements are crucial; the plot of the story is secondary as it is in most modernist narratives. As for the “aesthetic autobiography”, even though the plot is important when establishing the autobiographical background and the transformations made, the peripheral autobiographical elements can determine even more whether we are talking about a modernist narrative or not. Their treatment is what permeates the narrative with a unique personal perception.

The treatment of space in “A Modern Lover” under the light of the “aesthetic autobiography” allows the author not only to build a place in the narrative which belongs to his memory through the re-creation of that place, but also to change that place, which used to be known

and quotidian, into strangeness, a process that is related to the modernist conceptions of daily life and the “ordinary”. Within the story’s dynamic, this process of “defamiliarization” that is subtle and implicit in modernist narrative, is made explicit in order to unravel the “aesthetic autobiography”, since the change of identity as well as the important moment for the character and its consequent effect upon him are at stake in the story. The concern about ordinary life entails a twist in the representation of it within fiction through the building of familiar situations, elements and spaces detached from memories, inserting them within their own systems so as to “defamiliarize” them (Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* 4). The place depicted in the story is certainly a place already known well by Lawrence: the Hags farm, property of the Chambers’s (Poplawski, *Companion* 15). But there are other references to places that were familiar to Lawrence. For instance, Nottinghamshire, town of miners where Lawrence grew up, is recalled by Mersham at the beginning of the story. Cyril refers to it during “the walk”: “All the wide space before him was full of a mist of rose, nearly to his feet. The large ponds were hidden, the farms, the fields, the far-off coal-mine. . .” (5). A place that was certainly important for Lawrence during his youth is reinvented in fiction; Nalbantian explains this reinvention through the concept of “dislocation and amplification of place”, reflecting the obsession of modernist writers with places that were important for the construction of their identity (53). However, the narrator acknowledges that the place is not the same for Mersham, because walking this land that belongs to his past now poses a new discovery: “It was all very wonderful and glamorous here, in the old places that had seemed so ordinary” (4). An important revelation for Mersham is working within his perspective, he is noticing the place he used to dwell in a different way, and it seems to glow now probably because of the distance and the passing years. As mentioned above, this new insight is provided by the feeling of strangeness, because a place which used to be frequented by the characters is now “defamiliarized”, thus seen under a different light.

The process and feeling of defamiliarization and strangeness is not only noticeable outdoors, since the interior of the house is also re-created, and it is where most of the action develops. The strangeness, produced by the “defamiliarization” and felt by Mersham when encountering the Chambers again, is certainly accompanied by reencountering the private spaces he used to know when younger. This feeling is made evident in the story, when Mersham feels he is in a place “out of doors” (9), and also by Muriel: “She was keenly aware of his discomfort, and of his painful discord with his surroundings” (9). The feeling is reinforced by the idea of change and growing up, of which

Mersham is totally aware: “He dropped in the tapestried chair called the Countess, and thought of the changes which this room had seen in him” (10). Private space is intrinsically connected with experience by this awareness and recollection of thoughts about the past and changes involved, since the character considers space as something influential in his development, at the same time that it triggers infinite feelings and thoughts. Victoria Rosner in *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* refers to Virginia Woolf’s point of view on the importance of private space in life: “She felt that the spaces of private life had a determining effect on their occupants and that, inversely, individuals could create new ways of living by making changes to those spaces” (15). Virginia Woolf’s ideas can be immediately linked to the short story because of the manner Cyril has changed his perception of the space that determined his young self in the past. As there is not any apparent change in the space mentioned, the feeling of strangeness arises in Mersham because he somehow realizes how important that house used to be, but it is not so anymore. The house has not moved in time, whereas he has already done it. It is a consequence of the relationship between this private space and his change. The fact that the author is revealing this situation in the short story is definitely part of an autobiographical treatment framed within the “aesthetic autobiography”: the interplay of autobiographical elements in fictional grounds and the fictional characters gives place to the strangeness that, perhaps, the same Lawrence would have felt in that situation. The house is reworked in such a way that encloses the meaningful encounter between present and past.

The particular time perception in the story is another peripheral autobiographical element since chronological time encounters the filter of the autobiographical, and it is transformed aesthetically, reflecting the interiority of the author. The particular treatment of time present in “A Modern Lover” allows building upon the autobiographical event a meaningful structure of both fictional and personal intricacies. In the words of Suzanne Nalbantian, modernist works “undermine chronological time through the frequent intervention of subjective time” (59). This personal filter within the narrative is what Virginia Woolf’s claimed to be “moments of being”, and other modernist writers also developed in particular ways. Lawrence himself understood time under his own terminology; Ronald Granofsky, in *D. H. Lawrence and Survival*, claims that the author developed a personal viewpoint regarding temporality, because he “did not share the modernist obsession with time” (110). Furthermore, Lawrentian time is intrinsically connected with spatiality, keeping a canonical plot organization in the narrative, but revealing through space an “understanding [of] the world around us as temporal ones” (110). Even though this argument could deny the existence of

“moments of being” within Lawrence’s literary works, they actually exist in “A Modern Lover”, but serve a different purpose from Virginia Woolf’s ones or those of other modernist narratives. Taking Lawrence’s short story “Aaron’s Rod”—a representative short story from Lawrence’s maturity as a writer—Granofsky explains that “[h]is portrayal of the attempt to reconfigure and strengthen the sense of selfhood . . . depends not on the temporal deepening of memory (as in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*) but on the spatial widening of a feeling of connectedness between the self and the world around it” (110). In this very sense, the “moments of being” that Lawrence is able to build in “Aaron’s Rod” as well as in other short stories do not emphasize temporal fragmentation and chaotic modernist approaches to reality: they link the feelings of the characters through the spatial illusion of time longing to the narrative situation, as Granofsky claims, and at the same time they mark personal feelings which are directly connected with personal events. This is relevant for situations such as the long conversation Cyril and Muriel have, and the detailed account of little movements and feelings they are both experimenting: the waiting for each other’s reactions and how they feel threatened by those reactions. Besides, the sense of the “ordinary” present in the story strengthens the longing of feelings in respect to temporality. The same happens with the entrance of Tom Vickers into the conversation

“Sit here, will you?” said Mersham, languidly indicating the armchair.

“No, no, thanks, I won’t. I shall do here, thanks.” Tom Vickers took a chair and placed it in front of the fire. He was confusedly charmed with Mersham’s natural frankness and courtesy.

“If I’m not intruding,” he added, and he sat down.

“No, of course not!” said Muriel, in her wonderfully soft, fond tones—the indulgent tone of a woman who will sacrifice anything to love.

“Couldn’t!” added Mersham lazily. “We’re always a public meeting, Muriel and I. Aren’t we, Miel? We’re discussing affinities, that ancient topic. You’ll do for an audience. We agree so beastly well, we two. We always did. It’s her fault. Does she treat you so badly?”

The other was rather bewildered. Out of it all he dimly gathered that he was suggested as the present lover for Muriel, while Mersham referred to himself as the one discarded. So, he smiled, reassured. (16)

The observable interior battle that the three characters experiment, as revealed in the fragment, illustrate the connections between spatiality as temporality as discussed by Granofsky. Mersham provokes Vickers, he feels uncomfortable and Muriel tries to keep a straight face with her accustomed charm. The three characters are enclosed in a “moment of being” in a Lawrentian mode, because the narrative has enclosed them in a spiral of feelings and thoughts that the reader can observe as if looking through glass. The placement of these “moments of being” in the story constitutes part of the “aesthetic autobiography” because they reveal a highlight from the author in the story, mapping the interiority in an autobiographical manner. Even if the readers are aware or not, we are able to encounter the author’s own perception in this fancied moment, because the “moments of being” depend exclusively on the author’s subjectivity in placing the characters embedded in particular atmospheres; a matter of choice, finally. This is the way Lawrence wanted to write his “aesthetic autobiography”: as a battle in the field of the “moments”.

In conclusion, D. H. Lawrence’s “A Modern Lover” requires a close reading regarding Nalbantian’s concept of “aesthetic autobiography”; it can be considered as an additional example of the manner modernist innovations were established, since in this way it is possible to completely grasp all the intricacies in the story. This Lawrentian “aesthetic autobiography” is composed by central and peripheral autobiographical elements that together transform a single event in Lawrence’s life through the process of “scene making” into a piece of fictional writing, aiming to the universality of a personal event simultaneously revealing human stages and behavior. At the level of characters, Cyril Mersham is a product of the re-creation of Lawrence’s youth, equitable to an “aesthetic self” as well as a “co-consciousness” of the author—a character speaking the author’s words—but simultaneously independent from his creator as an “im/personalization”. Relations between the characters and the events are transformed into “poetic relations”. There are also changes in terms of the perception of place and time, due to an amplification of the places once known by the author, the focus on the “ordinary” and an emphasis in the effect that the place has upon the characters, a “defamiliarized” place which has gone “strange” for the character. Time is transmuted into an extremely personal experience that can create atmospheres enclosing the characters—the “moments”. Lawrence was able to unravel his innermost experiences in fiction to the

extent to be regarded, according to Saunders, as the most personal of the modernists; he was not considered, however, as an autobiographer in the traditional sense of the term, as Sultan comments. The analysis of Lawrence's main pieces of short fiction indicates that, undoubtedly, along with naming him one of the most important writers of the twentieth century, D. H. Lawrence needs to be granted the title of one of the most important "aesthetic autobiographers" in English literature.

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