

## THE MARCH TOWARD MUTUAL DESTRUCTION: D.H. LAWRENCE'S "THE PRUSSIAN OFFICER"

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Although D.H. Lawrence is famous mainly for his novels, his tales, the majority of which appeared in various collections throughout his life, constitute an important part of his total work. The critical attention received by Lawrence's short stories is minimal, if we compare it with the piles of criticism dealing with his major novels. Nevertheless, it is reassuring to notice that some critics find Lawrence's aesthetics more refined and satisfactory in the stories than in the novels. In his tales Lawrence very rarely engages in theoretical discussion or in the direct sermonizing which we find so irritating and aesthetically harming in his novels. H.E. Bates says Lawrence's stories "are always an expression of a more direct, more controlled, and more objective art [than the novels]. In them Lawrence has no time to preach, to lose his temper, to go mystical, or to persuade the reader to listen to him by the doubtful process of shouting at the top of his voice and finally kicking him downstairs"<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, the constraints of the shorter form do not allow dilution or digression and the author is bound to say what he has to say within fairly strict limits of space and time. But the virtues of the best Lawrentian stories are the same as those of the novels. The same kind of inspiration, the same psychological intensity, the same vivid sense of place, the same original manner of writing are present in both forms.

"The Prussian Officer", which has been considered a "masterpiece of Lawrence's short stories"<sup>2</sup>, belongs to the period of the author's first visit to Germany in 1912 and reflects the Prussian sadistic militarism. Emile Delavenay says that on his way through Austria Lawrence might have heard of a sensational trial in which a captain who had kicked his orderly to death was acquitted on the grounds that it was only "the second time"<sup>3</sup>. In *The Priest of Love* Harry T. Moore points out that Frieda's father used to beat his orderlies in his own service in the army<sup>4</sup>. A letter to his friend

Edward Garnett in the autumn of 1912 indicates that Lawrence had the idea of the story in mind:

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<sup>5</sup>.

By 11 June, 1913, Lawrence had finished the story and he told Garnett in a letter: "I have written the best story I have ever done about a German officer in the army and his orderly"<sup>6</sup>. First published in *The English Review* in August 1914 under the title "Honour and Arms", it reappeared with some alterations the same year in the first collection of Lawrence's stories, which Garnett, against the author's wishes, entitled *The Prussian Officer*.

This paper in an attempt to study the different thematic aspects and the development of the structure of "The Prussian Officer", a tale with a highly symbolic language that reflects a commendable psychological intensity and portrays actions that are originated in the depth of the two main characters and that never quite emerge into actual consciousness. The story focuses on the inevitable conflict between two opposite worlds that come into collision and destroy each other instead of reaching a harmonious fruitful combination or mutual enrichment. It is the prototypical Lawrentian theme of modern mechanized man destroying simplicity and natural directness and, by so doing, committing himself to perversity, self-destruction, and death. Frieda Lawrence in *Not I, But the Wind* provides a clue to the meaning of the story, which she links to the conflicting sides of her husband's own personality:

The strange struggle of those two opposite natures, the officer and his servant, seems to me particularly significant for Lawrence. He wrote it before the war but as he had sensed it. The unhappy, conscious man, the superior in authority envying the other man his simple satisfied nature. I felt as if he himself was both these people. They seemed to represent the split in his soul, the split between the conscious and the unconscious man<sup>7</sup>.

Neither the setting nor the time are specified in a story which Lawrence undoubtedly intended to be of universal significance. The tale is restricted to two characters, the Captain and the orderly, which gives the mutually destructive relationship more intensity and tension.

As in Melville's *Billy Budd* and Carson McCullers' *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, to which it bears many a resemblance, "The Prussian Officer" takes place in a military environment. Both McCullers' and

Lawrence's stories take place in peacetime, and the absence of an enemy that would provide an outlet for repressed aggression makes it feasible for the participants to choose one another as objects of relationships that can easily become distorted. A military environment, with all the discipline and regimentation associated with it, is definitely the place in which individuals like private Schoner—very much of a square peg in a round hole—are likely to trigger conflicts of tragic consequences.

The abysmal differences that in many different respects separate Captain Hauptmann from his orderly are clearly stressed in the first section of the story. The Captain is "a tall man of about forty, grey at the temples", whereas the orderly is "a youth of about twenty-two, of medium height, and well built" and has "thick black hair". The Captain has "reddish brown, *stiff* hair, that he wore *short* upon his skull"; he wears a moustache "cut *short* and *bristly* over a full brutal mouth", in clear contrast with the orderly's "*soft*, black *young* moustache" (emphasis mine). The Captain's eyes are "light blue... always flashing with cold fire", an oxymoron that might suggest his persistent efforts to cool and repress a nature which is at bottom passionate and explosive. Everything about the Captain is "steely", "harsh", "stiff", "rigid". Born in an aristocratic family—the soldier is of peasant origin—and having ruined his prospects in the army, the Captain vents his frustration by exercising authority over the men under his command. His position as an army officer allows the Captain to enforce discipline not only on his men, but also on himself; with his rigid will he holds in check the demands of dark unconscious passion: "The irritable tension of his brow... gave him the look of a man who fights with life" (p. 8)<sup>8</sup>.

Whereas Captain Hauptmann is "a man of passionate temper, who had always kept himself suppressed", everything about his orderly Schoner suggests unconscious spontaneity, freedom and self-containment. There is "something altogether warm and young about him"; he has "dark, expressionless eyes, that seemed never to have thought, only to have received life direct through his senses, and acted straight from instinct" (p. 9). Often associated with the animal world, this "young, vigorous, unconscious" soldier who has "a girl from the mountains, independent and primitive" and who exhibits many qualities of the prelapsarian innocent, is certainly an anomaly at odds with the civilized world. At times he seems to represent a dark unconscious force which can be—and will be—threatening and disruptive when confronted with the rigid discipline of the army and with the "gentleman, with long, fine hands and cultivated movements" that the Captain is.

The officer tries to be at first "cold and just and indifferent" to his orderly: "he did not choose to be touched into life by his servant" (p. 9). But in spite of himself he soon finds himself feeling flashes of hate or of

anger through his blood; there comes a point when "the influence of the young soldier's being had penetrated through the officer's stiffened discipline, and perturbed the man in him" (p. 10). What irritates the repressed Captain most is precisely "the blind, instinctive sureness of movement of an unhampered young animal" that the soldier exhibits. The Captain's eyes, "bluey like fire", try in vain to penetrate the "expressionless", "unmeaning, dark eyes" of Schoner, who will not return the former's look, and moves "unthinkingly" about. The orderly seems to have something —though unnamable, impenetrable and mysterious— that the Captain lacks, something that shows the latter up in front of himself, something he would like to have but has irretrievably lost, something he will never admit and will always repress because he feels it to be uncontrollable. Maybe Schoner awakens in the Captain the painful realization that he is more of a mechanical doll than of a man.

Although there is much more to the story than the sexual aspect, the homosexual attraction of the officer for his orderly, which is clearly suggested —the Captain has never married and grows tense, hostile and irritable every time he takes a mistress; he prevents the soldier from seeing his girlfriend—, inevitably conflicts with the social and disciplinary distance put between the officer and the soldier by the rigid military caste system, a barrier which adds to the intolerable tension that is gradually but quickly generated<sup>9</sup>.

The rapidly increasing claustrophobic tension is presented through a succession of incidents that acquire a highly symbolical significance. The first of these, the spilling of red wine —which is suggestive of blood—, an incident which in other circumstances would have been trivial, unleashes a reaction which is unforeseen as it is revealing, and marks a point of no return in the relationship between the officer and his orderly. In a similar manner to the spilling of the soup by the innocent foretopman in *Billy Budd* and the spilling of coffee by the animal-like private Williams in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, the spilling of the wine by Schoner seems to be both a cause of and a metaphor for the spilling over of hereto repressed obscure feelings. For the first time the fiery eyes of the Captain meet those of his servant, who "felt something sink deeper, deeper into his soul, where nothing had ever gone before... some of his natural completeness in himself was gone" (pp. 9-10).

A scar that Schoner has on his left hand arouses ambiguous feelings of compassion and hatred in the Captain, who wants to do something to it and at the same time feels a flame "run into his blood" every time he sees it. As the soldier strives to keep himself aloof and avoid personal involvement, the officer forces physical contact by resorting to violence. His position of command allows him to have it both ways: by beating the person he most loves —and hates— he achieves a perverse gratification in

the contact and at the same time remains faithful to his ideal of rigid discipline and his position of authority. A heavy military glove thrown into the soldier's face makes the officer laugh "with a little tremor and a sneer", and, when he hits the orderly with the end of a belt, the feeling is "at once a thrill of deep pleasure and of shame". In spite of himself, the soldier is inevitably affected by the Captain's obsession and by the brutal treatment. The throwing of the glove produces an explosion that anticipates the climactic scene of the murder: the Captain sees the orderly's "black eyes flare up into his own, like a blaze when straw is thrown on a fire" (p. 11), a fire that the officer has kindled with his abusive treatment.

So much affront and humiliation make the hate —and, to a certain extent, the obsession— extensive to the orderly, who grows more and more isolated from his fellow soldiers —he is very much the reserved and withdrawn type, who does not talk even when he is with his girl— and from the rest of the world; his girlfriend is never mentioned as coming to the soldier's mind in the later sections of the story. It is as if only he and the Captain were left in the world:

No one should ever know. It was between him and the Captain. There were only two people in the world now —himself and the Captain (p. 17).

This passage, in which the points of view of the narrator and the soldier seem to converge, carries a strong suggestion of fatality and inevitability. Not surprisingly, in the preceding paragraph the word "inevitable" is repeated three times, in a context in which Schoner reflects on his inescapable obligations as the Captain's servant. The soldier's alienation from the world coincides with a gradual disintegration of his personality, which he tries desperately to hold together. After being brutally kicked by the Captain, "he was dulled, as if nine-tenths of the ordinary man in him were inert" (p. 16). After seeing the officer's hand tremble when he takes the coffee, Schoner went away "feeling as if he himself were coming to pieces, disintegrated" (p. 17). Exhausted by the brutalizing of the previous day and by the tiresome march under a blazing sun —the explosive feelings are transferred to nature: it is a "hot bright morning" in which "the air was too scented" and "the globe flowers stood suffocated"—, the orderly is completely in the hands, as it were, of his tormentor:

The orderly must move under the presence of the figure of the horseman... It was as if he was disembowelled, made empty, like an empty shell. He felt himself as nothing, a shadow creeping under the sunshine (p. 18).

The image of the shadow, which had also appeared in the third paragraph of the story —the story begins when the soldiers are in the middle of the march toward the mountains— suggests that the destinies of the Captain and the soldier irremediably fused together, which makes the decisive confrontation inevitable.

When the showdown comes, the Captain and the soldier are physically isolated from the rest of the regiment and it is a man to man. When the Captain presses open the lid of the beer mug, the lid with which the soldier had kept in his hate repressed breaks loose and “the instinct which had been jerking at the young man’s wrists suddenly jerked free” (p. 22). Schoner feels now “as if it were rent in two by a strong flame”, the flame that the Captain himself had ignited with the “cold fire” of his eyes. The two opposite natures on which the tale has been focusing finally engage in physical contact, this time forced by the hereto passive soldier. It is the first and the last time, since a clash can only end in mutual destruction. The language with which the fight is described carries a suggestion of a sexual element in the relationship, and this time the point of view is focussed in the soldier, who presses the officer’s chin “with all his heart behind in a passion of relief, the tension of his wrists exquisite with relief”; it gives him pleasure “to have that chin, that hard jaw already slightly rough with beard, in his hands”; and when he finally breaks his master’s neck the soldier feels “all the force of all his blood exulting in his thrust” (p. 23).

In a manner reminiscent of the stuttering and innocent Billy Budd, the reserved character of the orderly of “unmeaning” eyes hides dark mysterious potentialities which, when aroused, prove destructive and fatal. Schoner was indeed right when he instinctively perceived at the start of the whole thing that “if he were going to be forced into a personal interchange with his master he would be like a wild thing caught” (p. 10). The foretopman of the *Bellipotent* signs his own death sentence when he strikes Claggart dead, and Schoner, after he has carefully laid the Captain’s body —which now, significantly, “represented more than the thing which had kicked and bullied him”— feels that “here his life also ended”. These latter words lead Alderman to argue that the soldier’s soul and heart have been involved in the relationship<sup>10</sup>. I do not think there is sufficient evidence in the story to support this argument, especially if we remember the instinctive efforts of the soldier “to keep himself intact” until he cannot help himself and explodes.

But Lawrence does not end his story here and devotes some pages to portray the physical and spiritual disintegration of the soldier, who, now reduced to an empty shadow without the Captain to follow, inevitably dissolves into nothingness. It is as if he and the Captain were in some mysterious obscure way two extremes of a polarity that can neither live

without one another nor come together and achieve a mutually enriching harmony. After he has laid the corpse under the tree trunks, Schoner feels that "for him a change had come over the world... only he had left it. And he could not go back" (p. 24). In the final pages we see Lawrence at his best when he describes the state of trance in which the soldier walks through a landscape which for him is increasingly unreal. An intensely charged language is used to convey the increasing alienation of the soldier both from the world of nature and from other human beings. He wants to speak to the squirrels, "but only a hoarse sound came out of his throat. The squirrels burst away— they flew up the trees" (p. 27)<sup>11</sup>. And the community of village and church is not possible for Schoner either:

The village and the white-towered church was small in the sunshine. And he no longer belonged to it —he sat there, beyond, like a man outside, in the dark (p. 24).

When a peasant woman passes near him, the soldier sees her "like a block of shadow" and has no language with which to speak to her; she was "the bright, solid unreality". He loses his sense of place —"Where was he? - the barracks - at home?" —and of time— "he had silenced the Captain for ever - some time ago - oh, a long time ago". He has passed into the beyond of everyday existence, into a new consciousness which is, paradoxically, the end of existence and the dissolution of consciousness:

The world was a ghostly shadow, thrown for a moment upon the pure darkness, which returned ever whole and complete (p. 28).

Schoner's annihilation paradoxically coincides with an intensification of the perception of beauty. At the end he is very close to the mountains, which he sees "in a wonderlight, not far away and radiant... the further mountains stood golden and pale grey, the snow all radiant like pure, soft gold... He stood and looked at them, his face illuminated" (p. 28). When the disintegration of self is consummated, Schoner is staring "at the gleaming mountains... all still and wonderful between earth and heaven. 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" (p. 29). Very appropriately, the story began with a march toward the mountains, described from the point of view of the soldier as "pale blue and very still" and as offering a promise of coolness that could alleviate the suffocating heat and the thirst and the pain of the march. As he marched, on the very first page, Schoner stared "at the mountains ahead, that rose sheer out of the land, and stood fold behind fold, half earth, half heaven, *the heaven, the barrier* with slits of soft snow, in the pale, bluish

peaks” (emphasis mine). The orderly dies staring at what he considers to be heaven, an unattainable heaven whose alluring can be tragic and fatal to the self. The mountains —we must not forget his girlfriend is from the mountains— hold the promise of heaven but are at the same time the barrier that stops and destroys man in his attempt to accede to the world of purity and beauty that he imagines to lie beyond everyday reality. In his analysis of “The Prussian Officer”, Kinsley Widmer calls attention to the significance of the icy mountain image in the work of D.H. Lawrence, who, Widmer says, “regularly uses the icy mountain, probably inherited as a romantic image of defiance, as a trope for the point beyond immediate life, the image of cosmic finality, the scene of life-denial”<sup>12</sup>. It is in the snowy Alps that Gudrun and Gerald Crich, the death-oriented false lovers, identify themselves in a fatal way with the mountain scene at the close of *Women in Love*. A snowy mountain of the American Southwest is the scene in which the self-destructive protagonist is about to be sacrificed to the Indian gods at the end of “The Woman Who Rode Away”. In “The Princess”, Dollie Urquhart is brutally raped and spiritually ravaged in the cold Rocky Mountains that so strongly attract and fascinate her. At the end of “St. Mawr” we feel that Lou Witt will sooner or later be destroyed by the demonic and primitive mountains to which she has fled in revulsion from the shallow emptiness of the modern world.

The final section of “The Prussian Officer” is a brief vignette in which the two conflicting protagonists are brought together once again, this time is death:

The bodies of the two men lay together, side by side, in the mortuary, the one white and slender, but laid rigidly at rest, the other looking as if every moment it must rouse into life again, so young and unused, from a slumber (p. 29).

Adelman says that “to make the affair perfectly clear, Lawrence ends the story in a way perfectly fitting two tragic lovers”<sup>13</sup>. I would not narrow the meaning of the story down to just a tragic love affair, and it seems to me that the ending is much more charged with meaning that Adelman suggests. Death has ironically identified the unconscious natural soldier with the prototype of modern man bent on repressing his deep nature and living by will and rational consciousness. The soldier’s feeling at the beginning of the story that his destiny was “connected with that figure moving so suddenly on horseback” has tragically proved to be true. But still, in death the Captain and the soldier continue to be the irreconcilable opposites that they have been all along. The former has the white paleness of the individual oriented to death and is as rigid in death as he was in life.



The latter, who opens and closes the story, arouses in the reader a painful pity and a sense of loss at the waste of a young life full of possibilities. The sympathies of the narrator are manifest in the suggestion of a vain hope that the soldier might "rouse into life again".

#### Notes

- 1.. H.E. Bates, *The Modern Short Story: A Critical Survey* (London: Michael Joseph, 1972), p. 197.
2. Gary Adelman, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle: An Analysis of D.H. Lawrence's 'The Prussian Officer'", *Studies in Short Fiction*, 1 (1963), p. 9.
3. D.H. Lawrence: *The Man and His Work. The Formative Years: 1885-1919* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 196.
4. *The Priest of Love* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 233.
5. Quoted in Delavenay, op. cit., p. 196.
6. Quoted in George H. Ford, *The Double Measure* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 75.
7. Quoted in Ford, p. 77. Ann Englander reads the story as a dramatization of Lawrence's theory of the Conscious and the Unconscious, the former represented by the Captain and the latter by the soldier. She contends that "because the function of the characters as human beings at the literal story level does not coalesce with their role as cross-sections of the psyche, the reader is constantly invited to understand their actions and motivations in terms of ordinary human experience and is constantly thwarted by a psychological theory as intractable as it is inadequate" ("'The Prussian Officer': The Self Divided", *The Sewanee Review*, 71, 1963, p. 619). Maybe the whole problem stems from a too readily made assumption that Lawrence intended his two characters to be *just* symbols of the Conscious and the Unconscious respectively.
8. All the page references are to the Penguin edition of *The Prussian Officer and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth, 1945).
9. See: R.P. Draper, *D.H. Lawrence* (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 123.
10. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", p. 14.
11. Adelman, commenting on the soldier's horror of and revulsion from birds and squirrels, says that it is inevitable that he become like his master (op. cit., p. 14). I would argue that his case is different from the Captain's, in the sense that his alienation is something inevitable that happens to him, in contrast with the conscious self-willed alienation from nature of the rational repressed man the Captain represents.
12. "D.H. Lawrence and the Art of Nihilism", *The Kenyon Review*, 20 (1958), p. 607.
13. Op. cit. p. 14.