"(I) AM HERE" : SEARCHING FOR ONE'S POETIC VOICE

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Both Lawrence's prose and poetry begin by the water's edge. *The White Peacock* opens onto a mill-pond, the water lying "softly, intensely still" [WP 5]. The silence of the place is barely disturbed by the murmur of a "thin stream falling through the mill-race" [*WP* 5] "The Wild Common"—Lawrence's seemingly initial poetic *scene*—starts with a "lazy streamlet [that] push[es]/His bent course mildly" and which suddenly wakes, laugh[ing], and gush[ing]/ Into a deep pond [*CP* 33].

Seemingly initial indeed, since this beginning is not a real beginning. Unlike Musset, who declares in the introductory poem of his *Premières poésies* that he has renounced to modify anything he published in his youth ("Et j'aurai pu le corriger./Mais, quand l'homme change sans cesse,/Au passé pourquoi rien changer" [Musset 1]), Lawrence, on the contrary (and very much like Auden later),[1] confesses doing just the opposite. As is made clear in his 1928 preface, what looks like a *first* scene is in fact the result of *subsequent* and *substantial* rewriting: "some of the earliest poems, like "The Wild Common" and "Virgin Youth", are a good deal rewritten. They were struggling to say something which it takes a man twenty years to say. ["Preface to *Collected Poems*", *CP* 27.] This first piece is therefore a re-construction, its rules, however, remaining remarkably vague. Starting with the chronological order which, though it is advocated by Lawrence, is almost

[1] See for instance his "Foreword" to his *Collected shorter Poems, 1927-1957*: "A good many of the poems have been revised. […] I can only say I have never, consciously at any rate, attempted to revise my former thoughts or feelings, only the language in which they were first expressed when, on further consideration, it seemed to me inaccurate, lifeless, prolix or painful to the ear." [Auden 16]

immediately questioned:[2] "I have now tried to arrange the poems, *as far as possible*, in chronological order" [*CP* 27, italics mine] Though this lack of certainty may be slightly disagreeable, any study wishing to restore the "real order" of the poems or to favour, in terms of contents, the early versions of Lawrence's pieces, is somehow bound to ignore what is essentially to be construed as a poetic *trompe-l'œil*—an artefact based upon perspective and *vanishing* points. Rewriting, for Lawrence, does not indeed aim to nail utterance down, nor to get it *straight*. It does not want to make meaning "more explicit" or more "stable" either, as suggested by Horace Gregory [Gregory 247] or M. J. Lockwood [Lockwood 19]. Underlying this particular process is, on the contrary, the poet's effort to *situate* his craft, as it were, back into the field of *non-permanency*, so that what ultimately prevails is, as Maurice Blanchot puts it, "l'affirmation nomade" (*nomadic assertion*) [Blanchot 49].

Such a remark should consequently lead to circumspection when considering "The Wild Common." Let us indeed take care *not* to see any evidence of a *real* repetition or replication (or *sameness*) in a piece that defines itself as a *false start*. The "initial" image is that of a naked young man, standing by a pool, watching his own "white shadow quivering to and fro" [*CP* 33]. "La forme fascine quand on n'a plus la force de comprendre la force en son dedans," Derrida writes [Derrida (1) 11] ("*form fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself*"). The trope is apparently *so* allusive that the poem has often been described as an example of narcissistic discovery of the self. Yet, however tempting the analysis may be, the text cannot be easily dismissed as mere mythological replastering or rewriting—a task which, incidentally, Lawrence embarked upon in a later poem explicitly entitled "Narcissus". What I first intend to show in this paper is that "The Wild Common" is not related *stricto sensu* to Ovid's

[2] Auden is equally vague when it comes to chronology: "Consequently, though I have shuffled poems so as to bring together those related by theme or genre, *in the main* their order is chronological." [Auden 15, italics mine]

version of the story. Or if it is, it is undeniably in terms of "dégagement" (to use Henri Michaux's terminology)[3] or "exile"—to readapt a word that is for Lawrence closely associated with Ovid's figure.[4]

Whereas Narcissus' enchantment originates in his mistaking of a mere shadow for a real body ("*corpus putat esse, quod umbra est,*" III-417), Lawrence's poetic persona understands right from the start that what he is faced with is but a mirror-image of his own self: "my own white quivering shadow." Narcissus's reflection has the premonitory rigidity of ivory ("*eburnea,*" III-422); and even though the water happens to be briefly disturbed by the young man's tears ("*et lacrimis turbavit aquas,*" III-475/"His tears ruffled the water," to quote from Frank Justus Miller's translation [Ovid 157]), the element rapidly *recovers* its clear ("*liquefacta rursus,*" III-407), "silvery bright" [Ovid 153] surface ("*nitidis argenteus undis,*" III-486) The Lawrencian image is, as indicated by this oxymoronic "white shadow," "quivering" in its very structure, unsteady and—hence—of an ungraspable nature enhanced by the Heraclitean element that displays it: "And the water runs, and runs faster, runs faster" [*CP* 34]. As opposed to what Jean-Jacques Mayoux writes,[5] Narcissus has *eventually, through his reflection,* the revelation of his identity, but his is a self that *merges* his reality with his ideality, and that identifies substance with an "unsubstantial form" [153] ("*spem sine corpore,*" III-417): "—Oh, I am he" ("*iste ego sum,*" III-463). The young man in Lawrence's poem, though puzzled by the reflection, is, unlike Narcissus

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[3] See for instance: "fou de dégagement et de rébellion contre toute obstruction ou limitation" [Michaux 234].

[4] See Lawrence's letter from Derbyshire to Cynthia Asquith, in May 1918: "We are feeling very lost and queer and exiled. The place is beautiful, but one feels like Ovid in Thrace, or something like that" [*Letters* III, 241-242]. See also his letter to Edith Eder: "I feel queer and desolate in my soul—live Ovid in Thrace" [*Letters* III, 242]. The idea appears both in *The Lost Girl* ("[Alvina] was cut off from everything she belonged to. Ovid in Thrace might well lament" [*LG* 314]) and in *Kangaroo* ("He could sympathize now with Ovid on the Danube, hungering for Rome and blind to the land around him" [*K* 26]).

[5] "Narcisse à travers l'apparente admiration de lui-même reste à jamais frustré : il ne trouve dans nul reflet la réponse au doute qu'il a de sa propre identité." [Mayoux 11.]

"never himself what he praises" [Ovid 155]; he never confuses his own self with a "thing" [*CP* 33] that fundamentally remains synonymous with alterity: "I on the bank all substance, my shadow all shadow looking up to me, looking back!" [*CP* 34]. Whereas Narcissus, pining for himself, is smitten by the sight of a statue carved from Parian marble ("*ut e Pario formatum marmore signum*")," the character of "The Wild Common"—in a noticeably less hyperbolic fashion—looks in wonder at something that curiously reminds him of a dog straining at its leash.

"She smiled with so sweet a cheer/That had Narcissus seen her as she stood/Self-love had never drowned him in the flood" [264-266] Images are sometimes deceptive. And this is one is probably more deceptive than others. Thus, though this quotation from Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*, might easily lure us to conclude that Narcissus gets drowned, the fact is that, in spite of what Louis Lavelle[6] or—in a lesser key—Gerard Genette imply, [7] his fate is by no means Ophelian. Narcissus, cherishing the flame that consumes him, does not go any further than plunging his arms into the water and dies *at the edge* of his image—his body ultimately and mysteriously vanishing ("*nusquam corpus erat*," III-509) to be replaced by a narcissus flower. Thus ends the son of the river Cephissus, unable to quench his thirst for himself. His story is clearly that of a decorporalization (or *desubstantialization*), trough the absorption of the self by the self, which, ironically, does not lead to any assertion of the essence of the self but to a complete loss of *eidos*.

The young man of "The Wild Common" is, in opposition, not satisfied with a shadow. He knows how to distinguish between vacuity and his substance: "But how splendid it is to be substance, here!/My shadow is

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[6] "[Narcisse] est le fou qui se quitte et court après lui-même, et il finit comme Ophélie" [Lavelle 15].

[7] See also what Gérard Genette writes in his "Complexe de Narcisse": "La surface aquatique la plus innocente recouvre un abîme : transparente, elle le laisse voir, opaque, elle suggère d'autant plus dangereux qu'elle le cache. Être en surface, c'est braver une profondeur ; flotter, c'est un risquer un naufrage. La fin qui menace le reflet dans l'eau, et qui exprime son existence paradoxale, c'est la mort par engloutissement" [Genette 24].

neither here nor there ; but I, I am royally here" [*CP* 34]. Entering the stream, the poet substitutes the immateriality of the shadow/dog with his own *tangible* self. There he discovers the validation of himself as a sentient being and is endowed with what amounts to extra beingness :

> Oh but the water loves me and folds me,
> Plays with me, sways me, lifts me and sinks me, murmurs: Oh marvellous stuff !
> No longer shadow!—and it holds me
> Close, and it rolls me, enfolds me, touches me as if never it could touch me enough. [*CP* 34.]

Water, the instrument of Narcissus' self-negation, is here at the origin of a forcefully reasserted, rediscovered and re-centred "I". It is the place and medium of a loud exultation (and not of a narcosis) that can only be conveyed through exclamations, anaphora ("What if […]"), epanaleptic structures ("I am here! I am here! [*CP* 34]), aposiopetic em dashes ("No longer shadow!—and it holds me/ Close" [*CP* 34]), accumulations ("Oh but the water loves me and folds me,/Plays with me, sways me, lifts me and sinks me, murmurs: Oh marvellous stuff !" [*CP* 34]), homophones ("the may-blobs burst out in a laugh as they *hear* !/ *Here* ! flick the rabbits" [*CP* 34, italics mine]) or through the use of vocative forms ("Oh but the water loves me and folds me" […] "Oh marvellous stuff" [*CP* 34]). Assonances in [i], [i:] and [@u] together with alliterations in [t] or [s] play their part in the musical expression of an exuberance chiefly emphasized by an iambic unit constantly contradicted by trochees. What R. P. Blackmur judges most severely (and memorably) as "lack of metrical propulsion" [Blackmur 259] is in fact a form of rhythmic euphoria mimetically communicating the young man's intense and unrestrained joy.

What the poet unveils *in* and *through* water is his own ipseity. And this has nothing to do with narcissism. This scene is in fact more reminiscent of Wagner than Ovid. Indeed, after looking at himself in the water, young Siegfried becomes aware of the specificity of his own self, especially through comparing himself with Mime—whose name suggests both in German

(*mimen: nachahmen*) and in English replication and imitation (and, in the particular context of the *Ring*, falseness and treason): "and there I also saw my face; mine struck me as very different from yours ("da sah ich denn auch mein eigen Bild; ganz anders als du dünkt' ich mir da" [*Siegfried* I, i]. That such an episode should also be rendered more or less similarly in *The Trespasser*—Lawrence's most Wagnerian novel—does not come as a real surprise: Sigmund, who has just caught his thigh on a sharp rock, realizes that he *too* is a unique entity: "That is I, that creeping red, and this whiteness I pride myself on is I, and my black hair, and my blue eyes are I. It is a weird thing to be a person." [*T* 74.]

What is asserted in the poem, through this act of individuation, is the original body of the *poetic persona* as well as a voice *now* capable of verbalising experience as something happening outside himself. The poet feels what is to be felt ("it rolls me, enfolds me, touches me" [*CP* 34]), sees what is to be seen ("I stand watching" [*CP* 33]), hears what is to be heard ("I hear" [*CP* 34])—all this happening in such a way that what is felt, seen and heard is situated in a *space* exterior to himself, or, to put it differently, in a *world* insofar as this term refers, as in Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, to this horizon of visibility that implies exteriority and plurality [Lucrèce II, 1047-69] And, most obviously, the outcome of this process is not mere solipsism as testified by a poetic "I" so attentive to *alterity*, in other words to a Nature-subject confessing so enthusiastically its intention *to get in touch*: "You are here! You are here! We have found you! Everywhere/We sought you substantial" [*CP* 34]. What could be summed as a process of *differentia individuans* is in fact analysed by Antonin Artaud in his *Fragments d'un journal d'enfer* in terms which at this point in our analysis, find both a strange and relevant echo: "Il me parle de Narcissisme, je lui rétorque qu'il s'agit de ma vie. J'ai le culte non pas du moi mais de la chair, dans le sens sensible du mot chair. » [Artaud 123.] ("He speaks to me of Narcissism and my answer to him is, we are speaking about my life. This is no ego but the cult of flesh, with the whole weight and substance of this word Flesh").

If this poem can be construed as a *scene*, it is only according to Maurice Blanchot's definition of the word "scene": "*Une scène : une ombre, une faible lueur, un 'presque' avec les traits du 'trop'*" [Blanchot (2) 176]. And unless we are prepared to be seriously deceived, this *presque* must not be confused with a *trop*. "One feature of narcissism, in its vulgar or subtle acceptations" Blanchot also writes "is that like La Rochefoucauld's self-esteem it is easy to condemn its effects everywhere and on everything" Including, of course, where it is not. The irony is considerable if one acknowledges that one of the lessons to be drawn from the myth of Narcissus—if any—is precisely to be distrustful of the fascination that images can exert on us: "Little jets of sunlight texture *imitating* flame" [*CP* 33, italics mine].

A body. Some water. This poem is hence a baptism. And almost immediately it is *also* a confirmation ("rabbit lobs/In confirmation, I hear sevenfold lark-songs pealing" [*CP* 34]). A poetic baptism and confirmation, of course. I just cannot resist the temptation to quote from Georges Perros' *Une vie ordinaire*:

> Ce que je cherche c'est ce trou
> entre ma naissance et le jour
> où l'air me donna la parole [Perros 197].
>
> *what I am looking for is the gap*
> *between my birth and the day*
> *when air bestowed speech on me.*

"The Wild Common" is also about a *being incarnate* trying to find his voice and the origin of his voice. The poet, in a kinaesthetic movement, abandons himself to the kisses given by a warm air carrying the song of larks: Over my skin in the sunshine, the warm, clinging air/Flushed with the songs of seven larks singing at once, goes kissing me glad » [*CP* 34]) Air is speech *and* a gift

of speech. The poet re-enacts here what could be seen as the discovery of his own poetic idiom. And as suggested by the larks, the origin of this *vox poetica*—or *inspired* utterance—is perhaps to be found in the most Aeolian poet. In *The Poetry of D. H. Lawrence : Texts and Contexts*, Ross C. Murfin emphasizes on several occasions Shelley's influence on the poems Lawrence wrote between 1905 and 1917: "In the poetry Lawrence wrote during his first lustre, it is Shelley who most often compels Lawrence's thinking and writing. » [Murfin 34.] Yet, though Murfin does not mention "The Wild Common," the larks' song of this piece implicitly echoes that of "To a Skylark"—a poem to which Lawrence returned in *Study of Thomas Hardy* and which he set out to study like "a young painter studies an old master" [*STH* 90]. Reflecting then upon such antinomies as "the Law *vs* Love", "The flesh *vs* the spirit", "the Father *vs* the Son" [*STH* 89]., Lawrence identifies in the first lines of Shelley's poem, "a sense of conflict contained within a reconciliation" [STH 90] :

> Shelley wishes to say, the skylark is a pure, untrammelled spirit, a pure motion. *But* the very "Bird thou never wert", admits that the skylak is in fact a bird, a concrete momentary thing. If the line ran, "Bird thou never art", that would spoil it all. Shelley wishes to say, the song is poured out of heaven : *but* "or near it", he admits. There is the perfect relation between heaven and earth. And the last line is the tumbling sound of a lark's singing, the real Two-in-One. [*STH* 91, italics mine.]

In "The Wild Common", the "Ethereal minstrel"—to take up Wordsworth's image—is also used as a syncretic instrument. In fact, it is as though the lark, once more summoned,

> Like a poet hidden
> In the light of thought,
> Singing hymns unbidden [Shelley 597]

could now be heard singing seven times more loudly, as if to assert its definite presence and substantiate its symbolism. Unsurprisingly, the conjunction *but*—absent from Shelley's piece but "reinvented" by Lawrence—is here vigorously made present so as to unequivocally communicate an effect of oxymoronic resolution or reconciliation: "Sun, *but* in substance" [*CP* 34, italics mine].

Writing therefore somehow entails the recognition of writing. Writing always implies the acknowledgement of some sort of pre-writing or pre-text. Thus producing his own work of art, the poet has to renounce the idea of producing and formulating himself. More exactly, self-fulfilment or self-assertion is possible only through the inscription of the self in some sort of continuity or wild "common" field—whether identifiable or not, whether accepted or rejected. Hence this title. Hence this inaugural but discreet allusion to Shelley. To take up Jacques Derrida double-entendre, speech is thus to be construed as "soufflé" [Derrida (1) 261-2]—in other words, and simultaneously, as *both* inspired (given) to him and stolen from him. Thereby—namely *surreptitiously*—right from the so-called start that this poem represents, what is here also articulated with renewed emphasis is the consubstantial link between art and absence, between writing and (self-erasing. Whilst staging himself, the persona of "The Wild Common" is also blatantly capable of questioning his presence : "What if the gorse shrivelled and I were gone?" [*CP* 34.] A few lines further down, the "but" in "But how splendid it is to be substance" [*CP* 34] is consequently more than the mere "sign of worry" detected by Mayoux [Mayoux (2) 78]. The writer confusedly senses that poetic utterance bears within itself, *ab origine*, the obliteration of its speaker. More than a language of presence, poetry is presence of language. Poetic utterance, straining at its leash, "dances", "quivers" [*CP* 34] and always ultimately frees itself from its owner, meaning being subsequently doomed to indetermination. Here, in this occultation of the origin of speech and of the signifying intention, lies the essence of writing. Because written language is always of *anteriority* and not of *authority*, there can only prevail echoes—more or less audible—very much like the

screaming of the birds with which the poem begins: "They have triumphed again o'er the ages, their screamings proclaim" [*CP* 33]. Because these birds—*pewits*—first owe their name to their cry, they thus chiefly define themselves as a persistent rumour—a noise, a sound—and not as embodied presence. They are, in a way, the vocalisation of some pre-text produced by a writer, or as Derrida puts it, the "logographer" [Derrida (2) 84]—strictly the man who, being absent, gives up his speech to be spoken/read by someone else. Whenever speech turns into written language, it says something about its orphanage and confesses the putting between brackets of its origin: *[I] write.* What remains is nothing but writing—spoken language without a father.

The fact is not so easy to accept. This is why the young poet is probably anxious, in this "first" act of writing, to find a father to help him. Yet because such need for assistance can only lead—through an oblique reference to Shelley—to some sort of scriptural *mise-en-abîme,* any attempt along this line is bound to be vain and deeply ironical. In fact, it is certainly as vain and ironical as the repetition of "I am here! I am here!" [*CP* 34]. But, as the pastoral title of the poem also implies, the young poet appears— in spite of everything—most desirous to wear the garb of a *scripturarius*—namely this scrupulous *scriptor* collecting the *scriptura*, that part of the revenue of the Roman republic which was derived from letting out those portions of the *ager publicus* which were not or could not be taken into cultivation as pasture land. Wishing to be a *scripturarius*, the poet, trying to dismiss his nature as a *logographer*, also attempts to establish, through writing, his status as *Aius Locutius*[8]—or god who speaks ("all that is God takes substance" [*CP* 34])—in other words his status as an *owner* of speech and not a mere *depository*. Yet,

[8] When in 387 BCE the Gauls moved towards Rome, a certain Caedicius heard for several days a mysterious voice from the shrubbery on the *Forum Romanum*. The voice warned against the Gallic attack and advised to fortify the walls of Rome. Caedicius went to the Roman authorities but they did not believe his story. The attackers found Rome virtually undefended and entered without much resistance. When the enemy was finally driven out, a temple was built on this place in honour of this warning deity, who was named *Aius Locutius* or *Loquens*.

and here lies the fundamental irony of this piece, the poet is a *scripturarius* who *cannot* fulfil his task, essentially owing to the *communitarian* dimension of the field. Under an apparently *apodictic* discourse of presence is to be found the expression of the impossibility for the poet to claim the right to be self-assertive—or to be "inscribed"—in the collective and polyphonic field (*campus*) of literature, or to put it differently on a *scripturabilis* which may not be anything else than a writing tablet (*campus cereus*) made of a wax (*cera*) refusing such *scriptura*—namely such writing and such a right.

Because "The Wild Common" is about the difficulty to write *and* to say *I*, because it has much to do with obliteration, this *entrée* (*starter*) can only be, if neither a *hors-d'œuvre* nor an end proper, at least a *false start* or a "beginning" that interrogates its founding assumptions. Thus, though repeatedly stressed throughout the poem, what is supposed to underpin and solidify the substance of the self and of the poetic I rapidly becomes as questionable as the turf rabbits "have bitten down to the *quick*." [*CP 33*, italics mine] and as identifiable as the "water-blobs" in the last stanza [*CP* 34]—presumably water-lilies. Presumably indeed. The point at issue can be put very briefly: Lawrence's poetry is probably *also* poetry *with* a mask.

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