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

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Both Lawrence's prose and poetry begin by the water. *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 Gregory [Gregory 247] or 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" [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]. The trope is apparently *so* allusive that the poem has often been described as an example of narcissistic discovery of the self.[3] 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 intend to show in this paper is that "The Wild Common" is not related *stricto sensu* to Ovid's version of the story. Or if it is, it is undeniably in terms of "dégagement" (to use Henri Michaux'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]

[3] see, for instance, Mayoux (1) 11-12.

terminology)[4] or "exile"—to readapt a word that is for Lawrence closely associated with Ovid's figure.[5]

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,[6] 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 "never himself what he praises" [Ovid 155]; he never confuses his own self

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

[5] 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]).

[6] "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.]

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[7] or—in a lesser key—Gerard Genette imply, [8] 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 know how to distinguish between vacuity and his substance: "But how splendid it is to be substance, here!/My shadow is neither here nor there ; but I, I am royally here" [*CP* 34]. Entering the stream,

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

[8] 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].

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 in the stream I saw my face; but not like to thine looked it to me ("da sah ich denn auch mein eigen Bild; ganz anders als du dünkt' ich mir da" [*Siegfried* I, i]. That such an episode should be does not come as a surprise to read in The Trespasser—a novel deeply influenced by wagner—d realize he is different from at himself old Jean-Jacques Rousseau experiences

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