

An Ass Struggling between Idealism and Naturalism

A New Interpretation of “The Ass” by D. H. Lawrence

Yongxue Li

School of Foreign Languages
Qinghai Normal University
Xining, China

Chengxu Ye

School of Computer Technology
Qinghai Normal University
Xining, China

Abstract—As a modernist poet in English literature, David Herbert Lawrence is widely known for his collection of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. “The Snake”, “The Tortoises” and “The Ship of Death” are probably the poems that most attract worldwide scholars and readers. However, due to Lawrence’s discursive and ambivalent artistic and philosophical ideas, it is by no means an easy job to understand his poems. The interpretation of “The Ass”, which is a striking picture of Post-Impressionism with reverberating musical effects, may be a challenge. However, after reading Lawrence’s *Fantasia*, the author finds a new perspective to understand “The Ass”. In *Fantasia*, two prime motives which activate men are discussed. The essentially religious or creative motive related to idealism is the first motive for all human activity and the sexual motive related to naturalism comes second. What’s more, there is a great conflict between the interests of the two at all times. Nevertheless, the poet through “The Ass” shows a suspicion of his statement in *Fantasia*, revealing that, in the tug war of the two motives, the former may reconcile to the latter. This approach is thus intended to facilitate the interpretation of “The Ass”.

Keywords—D. H. Lawrence; “The Ass”; religious or creative motive; sexual motive; ambivalence

I. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to Lawrence’s animal poems, “The Snake” and “The Tortoises” can be undoubtedly counted as the most widely commented poems but “The Ass” has barely been scrutinized. Although the former two, grouped under reptiles in parallel with creatures, birds, and animals in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923)¹, most embody Lawrence’s fascinating poetical essences such as mysticism, primitivism and pantheism, the latter placed under animals should nonetheless not be outshone by other poems in this collection. The less popularity in study of “The Ass” may lie in the fact that a donkey in both Eastern and Western cultures is viewed to be idiotic and obstinate. Besides this, the overt ambivalence delivered in this poem seems to head for a disappointing nihilism. However, for Lawrence, any form of life can in the same way trigger his creative impulse and serve as a channel to transport his artistic, philosophical and sexual concerns, without the exception of insects and plants like mosquitoes and almond-trees. Particularly, he based most of his life doctrines upon the animate nature with his pathetic fallacy strongly suggested by the title of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, which holds an irreplaceable position in his poetry. For another, he viewed the

world a lot more from the biological and corporal basis than from a social and scientific basis. As David Seelow stated, “Lawrence sees Freud as the epitome of the modern, scientific view of sexuality. Although Freud interprets through his patients’ subjective experience, he renders the personal experiences objective. This objectification of sexuality, in Lawrence’s reading, destroys the essence of sexuality. For Lawrence, Freud displays the rational attitude toward sexuality and this rational attitude destroys sexuality just as surely as censorship destroys it.” (2005, p. 12)

Though differences exist, life is ontologically equal to all kinds of living things, which start with insemination, experience their own course of growth, reproduce their offspring and end with death. Even so, every different form of life has its own way of being in this world and life can be colorful enough to elicit various sensations and perceptions so that life can show different faces as many as the number in species. Lawrence has such sharp eyes and keen mind that he is able to detect the subtly different representations of life among species and furthermore uncover the multi-faceted life forms. In particular, the artist Lawrence provides a unique perspective to view life from the part of an ass so that we can at least be illuminated more or less by a touch of light and we could approach the truth of life further. “The Ass” actually presents to its readers a three-dimensional documentary-like caricature with striking acoustic and visual effects.

II. A CARICATURED ASS HEEHAWING IN AGONY

The poem starts with a long-drawn bray of an ass that penetrates into the fresh and clean but chaotic sky of Sicily. It breaks, like the sun, the darkness encompassing the knot, where the prehistoric world is separated into Europe, Asia and Africa, where the Mediterranean water recedes and Sicily island rises. Standing on the pivot, the ass sees a desolate world deprived of all his like (esp. mares), so he shouts across the vault of heaven, his bray resonating over the primal origin of the world. “All mares are dead!” He finds himself the only one left, therefore letting out “a grunt of agonized relief”. What strikes most here is the discrepancy between a sunny tourist resort in one’s mind and a desperate donkey on a bleak island in modern age. The poet thus draws the readers into a timeless space to experience the reality of being in a straightforward fashion that visionary art occurs in due, in particular, the post-impressionist painting represented by Vincent van Gogh. Instead of the expected effects of light and color, “The Ass” initially captures its readers with sound that pierces and vibrates.

¹ D. H. Lawrence, *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. LONDON: MARTIN SECKER (LTD.) 1923

This paper is supported by Natural Science Foundation of Qinghai Province (2016-ZJ-739).

For all ages, the howling of an ass could have been so familiar to a rural world as to be taken for granted and “Arabs should know” better than anyone elsewhere probably because an ass seems the most typical to Arabdom though this domesticated animal has been indispensable for an agricultural world. Only when the ass’s hysterical yelling precedes his physical presence, can the poet avoid being suspected of taking the matter merely on ass’s merits on the one hand and narrow the narrative distance between thing-in-itself and phenomenon on the other. Only when an Arabian donkey turns up in Sicily, can he carry *Aesop’s Fables*, *The Decameron*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *The Arabian Nights* on the pack saddle. As an archetype of a household animal, the ass for the first time gains a right to see the world with his own eyes and finds himself trapped in unbearable circumstances, so he can not help lamenting in despair for what he has maniacally held to in his own way. As a result, as he brews, so must he drink. In this poem, his subjectivity substitutes for the democracy in narrative so as to dramatically manifest the tragic elements when life is unfairly treated. Rather than adopting the icon of a donkey, the poet, from the very beginning, like a composer, works adroitly in the way music works. Just listen:

All mares are dead!
 All mares are dead!
 Oh-h!
 Oh-h-h!
 Oh-h-h-h-h--h!!
 I can’t bear it, I can’t bear it,
 I can’t!
 Oh, I can’t!
 Oh--
 There’s one left!
 There’s one left!
 One!
 There’s one . . . left_ . . .

So ending on a grunt of agonised relief.

What pathos of life! Short, forceful, simple declarative sentences resound with regular repetitions and heart-beat rhythms: strong and weak beats, syncope and link word (interjection “oh”), ebbs and flows, ending with an agonized relief, followed by two solacing elaborating triplets. This sad and piteous ‘melody’ rings with blended elements of pang, repentance, hopelessness and helplessness though it, for the sake of a poem, sounds beautiful and compact with force and relief, urgency and resolution transported in good proportion, allowing lament and persistence released naturally and fully. What’s more, it predetermines the tone or storyline throughout the whole poem.

As a response, the two following triplets bring the elegy to an end, expressing the poet’s understanding and doubts about the elegy concerning the ass’s fate. Arabs should know but I am not sure. Such an epilogue leaves an uncertain question that wants readers’ answering for themselves. The narrator is not imposing something upon the narratee; otherwise the narrative would sound boringly didactic and preaching.

In order to leave readers impressed by and gain respect and compassion for the ass, the poet portrays the ass with effective and emphatic sentence fragments:

His big, furry head.
 His big, regretful eyes,
 His diminished, drooping hindquarters,
 His small toes.

Such a dear!
 Such an ass!
 With such a knot inside him!

Obviously, Lawrence gives priority to the bigness of the ass’s head and regretful eyes. It enables the spiritual being of the ass to be in a privileged level while the diminished hindquarters and small toes are hence subject to the strong-willed head. Nothing goes wrong here with the stark common sense but it contradicts what Lawrence upholds in his anthropomorphic conceptions of poetics based on a different ganglion from head — blood or phallic consciousness, according to which life blooms from the middle or lower part of the body and it is also the base where substantial being is actualized. As M. J. Lockwood contends, “What is involved is not only, as one might expect, a transfer from spiritual to sexual love, or from sexual activity which derives from the higher centres of consciousness, ‘sex in the head’, to sex which originates and remains on the level of the body’s lower centres, sensual love. There is also a need felt, as at the end of *Look!*, to replace, or at least to demote, sexual love itself, as a motivating force behind human activity. To use the terms of *Psychoanalysis and Fantasia*, not only must upper impulses give way to lower, but sympathetic must also give pride of place to voluntary.” (1987, p. 132) Only in this way, can an organic unity be reached. It reminds us of William Blake’s “The Proverbs of Hell”, where he announces “The head Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals Beauty, the hands and feet Proportion.” (1989)

III. AN ASS STRUGGLING IN THE TUG WAR OF IDEALISM AND NATURALISM

Acting in opposition to his belief, Lawrence intended to show a different picture of life devoid of sex. As far as his phallic consciousness is concerned, it is an unprecedented challenge to the cranial nerve-dominated consensus. Judging from physical appearances, an ass is what it is, with no exception for all forms of life, but the ass artfied by Lawrence with bigger head and eyes is telling an insightful and enlightening story with a touch of satire. Is the ass with big head, big eyes and diminished hindquarters and small toes the outcomes of will-orientedness or the result of losing his mares? Anyway, the poet tends to like and sympathize him by describing him with repetitious “His” and “Such” fragments. The poet even reads the ass’s mind like a second self in his big head, “He regrets something that he remembers. / That’s obvious.” Then what is he regretting? What on earth is the “knot” that gets on the ass’s nerves?

He, the ass, originally was on the Steppes of Tartary, with strong wild wind sweeping across and his mares grazing around. As the leader, he must beat against what stood in his

way like Genghis Khan². Driven by the desire of conquest and the Plato's reason or idea, he went so far to set his teeth in the sun, overriding his mares tragically with a full excuse of "noli me tangere" ("Don't hold on to me." in English). To him, this succession of actions means a matter of a natural course, which is evidenced by four 'And' -phrases in the following stanzas:

The Steppes of Tartary,
And the wind in his teeth for a bit,
And _noli me tangere_.

Ah then, when he tore the wind with his teeth,
And trod wolves underfoot,
And over-rode his mares as if he were savagely leaping an
obstacle, to set his teeth in the sun. . . .

However, here emerges a tragic turn: "Somehow, alas, he fell in love, / And was sold into slavery." Very much like men, he was plunged into slavery and the rut of love, his high aspiration, great gallantry and pride gone. His head previously heavy with the knowledge of desire and humiliation now became heavy with mare-goal and the knowledge of love. This seemingly downfall is actually empowered by the sexual motive. Subsequently, mares, the previous obstacle, turned out to be his knot inside and hence his life diverged thoroughly. Lockwood clarifies:

In the introductory chapter of *Fantasia*, written about a year after *Tortoises*, Lawrence draws a distinction between what he sees as the two prime motives which activate men, to the effect that 'the essentially religious or creative motive is the first motive for all human activity. The sexual motive comes second. And there is a great conflict between the interests of the two, at all times.'³ The religious or creative motive is the 'desire for great *purposive* activity' in man. Lawrence defines it in contradistinction to the pull of sex: 'Primarily and supremely man is *always* the pioneer of life, adventuring onward into the unknown, alone with his own temerarious, dauntless soul. Woman for him exists only in the twilight, by the camp fire, when day has departed. Evening and the night are hers' (p. 109).

Twilight, evening, and the night: these are just the times in the day of the human soul on which *Birds, Beasts* has concentrated, those times when the lower centres of life have the ascendancy. But the independent male purpose does not arise from the lower poles of being associated with sexual activity; it originates at the 'upper, busy poles', associated with spirit, understanding, and direction (p. 109). *Fantasia*, in fact, concludes that the only way sexual love itself can be truly successful and satisfying, is when the male has a purpose, or 'living *belief*', which is quite independent of and goes entirely

beyond woman and all she stands for: 'no man ever had a wife unless he served a great predominant purpose. Otherwise, he has a lover, a mistress' (p. 193).

(1987, pp. 134-5)

When the ass is no longer motivated to set his teeth in the wind and the sun, he happens to fall into the rut of love, so the two motives contradict and soon afterwards the upper one reconciles to the lower one. Likewise, David Seelow stated "Freud criticizes any religious system: the idealism involved in the notion that removing external obstacles will allow individuals more happiness." (2005, p. 62) As the primal creature, he got aware of his 'mistake' and became more obsessed with his mares that he used to disdain as if he reversed his 'living belief'. However, this does not mean the duality or dichotomy, but a quivering stay of equilibrium, torn and balanced by the pulling of the two polarities.

Hence Jesus rode him in the Triumphant Entry.

Hence his beautiful eyes.

Hence his ponderous head, brooding over desire, and downfall, Jesus, and a pack-saddle,

Hence he uncovers his big ass-teeth and howls in that agony that is half-insatiable desire and half-unquenchable humiliation.

Hence the black cross on his shoulders.

The five "hences" in this stanza demonstrate a straight causality due to the unintentional or unconscious option in life principles. Since then, his life showed a big difference. When a change in conceptions of life takes place, life will treat you in the way you are prepared. That is the truth of life. After the ass gained the knowledge of love, he became the beast of burden, to carry Jesus on the back, for he at least witnessed Jesus's birth in his stable. Under the cross, particularly when he is in the rut of love, he begets a desire for the mares that he used to take as obstacles when he was in paranoia with the big Plato's idea or Schopenhauer's will in head. Of course, he did not intentionally choose to be a disciple of the two philosophers above or to follow Cynicism or Epicureanism. As a Kantian thing-in-itself, he is possessed of voluntary tendencies either to reason or to feeling, rational restrain or sensational impulses, conscious strife or unconscious drive. Anyhow, he, precisely like the poet himself in this, placed himself in Sicily and found himself beset in "half-insatiable desire and half-unquenchable / humiliation", or more accurately, "[e]verlasting lament in everlasting desire."

The ass initially overriding mares as obstacles now became vexed in a reverie with them. Lockwood added: "It is the dilemma of the male tortoise, of the ass, and of the he-goat, that their purpose in life begins and ends in the female." (1987, p. 135) He appears like the mouse that tied the bell to a cat but now has to untie it. Stripped of all phenomenal appearances, he returns to the ontological substance, like a bit of rock. It is not the allusive Gorgon's head⁴ that turns him to stone but it is the

²Genghis Khan (1162-1227) was the founder and Great Khan (emperor) of the Mongol Empire, which became the largest contiguous empire in history after his death. He came to power by uniting many of the nomadic tribes of Northeast Asia. After founding the Mongol Empire and being proclaimed "Genghis Khan", he started the Mongol invasions that resulted in the conquest of most of Eurasia.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genghis_Khan. Retrieved April 27, 2016)

³The quotation is from *Fantasia*, p. 18.

⁴In Greek mythology, a Gorgon is a female creature. While the descriptions of Gorgons vary across Greek literature and occur in the earliest examples of Greek literature, the term commonly refers to any of three sisters, Stheno and Euryale, Medusa, who had hair made of living, venomous snakes, as well as a horrifying visage that turned those who beheld her to stone.
(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gorgon>. Retrieved on April 28, 2016)

earthly love that places him between the two eternally pulling polarities:

And tied in a knot, inside, dead-licked between two desires:
To overleap like a male all mares as obstacles
In a leap at the sun;
And to leap in one last heart-bursting leap like a male at the goal of a mare,
And there end.
Well, you can't have it both roads.

This stanza is mostly a favorable response to what Robert Frost (1874—1963), an American Poet laureate of Vermont contemporary with Lawrence, elaborates in his “The Road Not Taken”. It is the very quandary that “Jesus rode on him, the first burden on the first beast of / burden. /Love on a submissive ass.” that starts the whole story. For the same allusion to *The Bible*, the ass cannot get rid of biblical associations and hence claims to be an epitome of all creatures, “a primal creature”. Unlike the horse or men, he is conscious and voluntary enough to brood over this quandary and never forgets his history earlier from the Semites in *Genesis* to Hebrews in *The New Testament* till the medieval subjects of the Great Tartary to today's Sicilian braying ass. Approaching the end of the poem, the poet satires the humankind's forgetfulness through the ass's Sisyphusian adherence to his nostalgia complex.

But the ass never forgets.

The horse, being nothing but a nag, will forget.
And men, being mostly geldings and knacker-boned hacks,
have almost all forgot.
But the ass is a primal creature, and never forgets.

As the tenaciously tragic epitome of the cosmos, the ass deserves more esteem and compassion than humans can because he is self-conscious enough to introspect himself and feel remorseful to his ‘going astray’ while humans remain arrogantly blind to their ignorance and obstinacy, which are doomed to a catastrophic fate. Though Lawrence attempts to restore from the chaos incurred by idealism the organic wholeness in life vividly projected from the natural world, he failed to provide a feasible solution, at least in “The Ass”, to put into practice his utopian ideas learned from nature. In the concluding stanza, the ass sounds all the more pessimistic, as tragic as Sisyphus, rolling the stone onto the hill in vain, and a little skeptical about life:

Hee! Hee! Ehee! Ehow—ow!-ow!-aw!-aw!-aw!
All mares are dead!
Or else I am dead!
One of us, or the pair of us,
I don't know—ow!—ow!

Which!
Not sure-ure-ure
Quite which!
Which_!

IV. CONCLUSION

The poem starts and ends with the same heartbreaking and heartshaking bray of the ass, but what this agonized cry can suddenly make us refreshed is far from the sex frustration eating at the ass. All is not sex, the root is sex though. The insufficiency of sex in this poem can not undermine the governing rule in life that the nature itself is the exercise of the harmonious way of living and the ass counterevidences the intrusion of religion, reason and will dominance in a well-balanced natural life. David Seelow introduced to modern readers “the emergence of modern sexuality through the biological paradigm Dr. Richard von Krafft-Ebing describes in his monumental work, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and how Freud, Reich, and D. H. Lawrence, modernity's three principal thinkers on sexuality, position themselves on the circumference of Krafft-Ebing's biological center. The conceptualization of sexuality by scientist, psychiatrists, and others is a determining feature of modern culture. Yet the key feature of modern culture is not just the intellectual preoccupation with sex, but also the way in which sexuality becomes the essential factor in each individual's personality structure and everyday experiences of the world.”(2005, p. 14) This quotation is expected to better help us understand Lawrence's earnest considerations of sexuality from a modernist perspective. Do not look up at the metaphysical Idea, but look down at the physical Nature you set you feet on. That's why the ass that set his teeth in the wind and the sun now regrets overriding his mares as obstacles and cries in hysteria.

REFERENCES

- [1] David Seelow, *Radical Modernism and Sexuality: Freud/Reich/D. H. Lawrence and Beyond*, Palgrave Macmillan. 2005. p. 12.
- [2] M. J. Lockwood, *A Study of the Poems of D. H. Lawrence: Thinking in Poetry*, New York: St. Martin's Press. 1987. p. 132.
- [3] William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: Selected Poems of William Blake*, trans. Zhang Deming. China Federation of Literary and Art Circles Publishing Corporation. 1989.
- [4] M. J. Lockwood, *A Study of the Poems of D. H. Lawrence: Thinking in Poetry*, New York: St. Martin's Press. 1987. pp. 134-5.
- [5] David Seelow, *Radical Modernism and Sexuality: Freud/Reich/D. H. Lawrence and Beyond*, Palgrave Macmillan. 2005. p. 62.
- [6] M. J. Lockwood, *A Study of the Poems of D. H. Lawrence: Thinking in Poetry*, New York: St. Martin's Press. 1987. p. 135.
- [7] David Seelow, *Radical Modernism and Sexuality: Freud/Reich/D. H. Lawrence and Beyond*, Palgrave Macmillan. 2005. p. 14.