

## The Ending of *Sons and Lovers*

The great majority of critics and readers seem to read the ending of *Sons and Lovers* as up-beat, almost as a Joycean epiphany. Clearly the ending is affirmative insofar as Paul resists the attractions of suicide or a Schopenhauer-like nihilism. He sets off in quest of life, taking as his beacon a golden glow on the horizon:

But no, he would not give in. Turning sharply, he walked towards the city's gold phosphorescence. His fists were shut, his mouth set fast. He would not take that direction, to the darkness, to follow her. He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly. [SL 464]

But Lawrence does not allow us to take the desire for the accomplishment. What is that glow, that 'gold phosphorescence', but an emanation of the mechanized life of an industrial city; the glow of false promise which had lured Paul's older brother William to London and death.

Lawrence had already written, in 'Parliament Hill in the Evening':

The hopeless, wintry twilight fades,  
The city corrodes out of sight  
As the body corrodes when death invades  
That citadel of delight.  
Now verdigris smoulderings softly spread  
Through the shroud of the town, as slow  
Night-lights hither and thither shed  
Their ghastly glow. [CP 142]

Lawrence knew that many of the bacteria involved in the process of putrefaction are phosphorescent. The word 'phosphorescence' was shortly to become one of his jargon words, always expressing corruption and decay. In *Twilight in Italy* he associates it with Hamlet's diseased consciousness, and with Aphrodite, 'the phosphorescence of the sea':

She is the gleaming darkness, she is the luminous night, she is goddess of destruction, her white, cold fire consumes and does not create. [TI 116]

Lawrence himself, by the time he finished *Sons and Lovers*, had found his way to freedom and fulfilment with Frieda in Italy. But we leave Paul at the end of the novel on the threshold of no such new life. Had the novel followed him further, in autobiographical terms, it would have been into the 'sick year' of 1911, when 'everything collapsed, save the mystery of death, and the haunting of death in life' [CP 851].

The ending is a false epiphany, very like the ending of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which Joyce was writing at the same time as Lawrence was writing *Sons and Lovers*. The device is used much more systematically in the *Portrait*. At the end of every chapter Stephen feels that he has solved his problems, come into his own as Stephen Hero, or made some transfiguring discovery about life. Each time the style is ironically inflated. Each time the beginning of the next chapter punctures the illusion with an injection of sordid reality, revealing the epiphany to have been false, or at least inadequate. The novel ends with Stephen, after the death of his mother, turning his back on Ireland and the past. The moonlit distance beckons him:

The spell of arms and voices: the white arms of roads, their promise of close embraces and the black arms of tall ships that stand against the moon, their tale of distant nations . . . Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race. [PA 252-3]

This epiphany, since it comes at the end of the novel, cannot be undermined in the next chapter. But it is undermined in the next book, *Ulysses*: 'You flew. Whereto? Newhaven-Dieppe steerage passenger. Paris and back' [U 210]. Though there is no evidence that Lawrence ever read the *Portrait*, he was himself to use the idea of false epiphanies, or false rainbows, in describing Ursula's childhood and youth in *The Rainbow*.

Paul's tragedy is that although he is a creature of the sun, the moon (associated with the mother) holds him and prevents him, leaving him, at the end, able to move only in the direction of the false glow of the city, humming not with the natural activity of a hive, but with machinery, and glowing not with a glow of sunshine and warm life but with the ghastly phosphorescence of street lamps and decay. The title of the final chapter is 'Derelict'.

*Sons and Lovers*, like so many of Lawrence's novels, ends with an incomplete or ambivalent resolution, an open question which the next novel can then take as a point of departure. The attraction of the city, especially London, as a focus of life is again a false epiphany in *The Rainbow*. Even Skrebensky comes to find it 'an ashen-dry, cold world of rigidity, dead walls and mechanical traffic, and creeping spectre-like people'. It was 'as if the lights at night were the sinister gleam of decomposition' [R 423]. It is left for Ursula to discover that life is to be found in sunshine or in darkness, but not in sterile moonlight or the phosphorescent gleam and fume of cities:

The stupid, artificial, exaggerated town, fuming its lights. It does not exist really. It rests upon the unlimited darkness, like a gleam of coloured oil on dark water, but what is it? – nothing, just nothing.'

[R 414-5]

Given the decision to live, and to move away from things gone dead, be they one's old split personality, one's ties of family, class, culture and religion, England, a whole false inheritance and metaphysic, the question is in what direction to set out, in the effort to discover how the life that is in you wants to be lived. This is Ursula's problem in *The Rainbow*, and Birkin's in *Women in Love*:

How to get away from this process of reduction, how escape this phosphorescent passage into the tomb, which was universal, though unacknowledged, this was the unconscious problem which tortured Birkin day and night. {WL 496}.

It is Alvina's problem in *The Lost Girl*, Aaron's in *Aaron's Rod*, Somers's in *Kangaroo*, Lou's in *St Mawr*, Kate's in *The Plumed Serpent*, Connie's in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Each finds an incomplete resolution until the last of Lawrence's fictional protagonists and alter egos, the man who had died in *The Escaped Cock*, finds himself, and his place in the living world.

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## Reference Key

### THE CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS EDITION OF THE WORKS OF D. H. LAWRENCE

- R     *The Rainbow*, ed. Mark Kinkead-Weekes, 1989.  
SL    *Sons and Lovers*, ed. Helen and Carl Baron, 1992.  
TI     *Twilight in Italy*, ed. Paul Eggert, 1994.  
WL    *Women in Love*, ed. David Farmer, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen, 1987.

#### OTHER EDITIONS

- CP     *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Pinto and Roberts, Penguin 1977.

#### OTHER WORKS CITED

- PA     *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce, Penguin 1960.  
U     *Ulysses*, James Joyce, Penguin 1969.