

FROM ROMANCE TO RITUAL: MYTH, RITUAL
AND SUBVERSION IN D.H.
LAWRENCE'S *THE VIRGIN AND THE GIPSY*.

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ABSTRACT

D.H. Lawrence's prose has always been characterised by a fierce attack on the taboos imposed by bourgeoisie, and by an interest in the mythic which, as Eric Gould has pointed out, «lies in the eternal battle between the natural and the civilised.» (1981:219). The context in which *The Virgin and the Gypsy* was written reinforced Lawrence's appeal for myth in such a way that the English writer decided to join his voice to that of his contemporaries and advocate a revival of myth. The aim of this paper is to present *The Virgin and de Gypsy* as a work that holds strong links with the themes and structures of some classic fairy tales but which deviates from the socialising functions imposed on the folk tale from the 17th century onwards. I'll try to demonstrate that the aim of the tale is to achieve a reestablishment of the neat, original relationship between man and nature in what is in fact an apology of ritual and myth.

D. H. Lawrence wrote *The Virgin and the Gypsy* in 1927. The Great War had been over for eight years, and Europe was slowly recovering an apparent normality. I say «apparent», because the consequences of the war were not only economical and social, but also cultural, and in a sense, spiritual. World War I had shown the decadence of Western civilisation. Western culture and espe-

cially European culture became conscious of their own degeneration, and at the centre of that culture, the bourgeoisie, as the ruling social class of the moment, had to see how the values they had sustained and inquisitionally fought for, led Europe to the worst disaster humankind had ever known. But war didn't come alone: religious belief began to collapse massively under the impotent gaze of the Church, both catholic and protestant; and those to whom science had given any comfort had to surrender to the new ideas of Entropy that had smashed the previous Newtonian mechanist paradigm and only brought pessimism and uncertainty.

In this new Europe of political and social but also cultural and spiritual fragmentation the only shelter that sensible souls found was myth. Social and technical improvements had only brought about death and destruction, and the need for regeneration made all these people turn their eyes to a mythical past where rituals kept human beings attached to nature in a way which along with civilisation was inevitably lost. These were the times when T.S. Eliot wrote *The Wasteland*, in an attempt to denounce the spiritual and cultural death of Western civilisation and to advocate a revival in the shape of a return to ritual. Sir James Frazer, probably foreseeing the eventual outcome of Europe's trajectory, had written some years before the war *The Golden Bough*, the touchstone of twentieth century anthropology, which deals in depth with primitive rituals and myth. And in the field of literary criticism, Jessie Weston demonstrated in *From Ritual to Romance* that all those primitive rituals had somehow been kept alive in a literary genre. It was indeed a massive backward flight that covered every single field in the cultural life of the time, but also a protest against hundreds of years of social constriction under the suffocating command of bourgeois society.

D. H. Lawrence was also immersed in this mythical escape. His prose had always been characterised by a fierce attack on the taboos imposed by bourgeoisie, and an interest in the mythic which, as Eric Gould has pointed out, «lies in the eternal battle between the natural and the civilised.» (1981:219). But the context in which *The Virgin and the Gipsy* was written reinforced Lawrence's appeal for myth in such a way that the English writer decided to join his voice to that of his contemporaries and advocate revival of myth. The aim of this paper is to present *The Virgin and the Gipsy* as a work that holds strong links with the themes and structures of some classic fairy tales but which deviates from the socialising functions imposed on the folk tale from the 17th century onwards. I'll try to demonstrate that the aim of Lawrence's tale is to achieve a reestablishment of the neat, original relationship between man and nature in what is in fact an apology of ritual and myth.

The Virgin and the Gipsy is usually catalogued as one of Lawrence's tales. This is a genre whose limits are certainly difficult to draw, but if there is

something common to all tales it is probably their mythical charge. Every tale deals with a specific hero and a specific quest, but beneath that specificity there is a universal struggle between Life and Death, Good and Evil which is indeed a universal quest to be carried out by every single man and woman. All tales deal, no matter what their particularities, with only one quest: the quest for the meaning of life, and transcendence. The oral origins of the tale and its antiquity link this genre to a primitive past where myth explained the unexplainable, and rituals became the external manifestation of inner spiritual life.

But tales finally lost their oral condition and with it they also lost part of their purity and of their connection with the mythical past. This process would finally reach its peak in France at the end of the seventeenth century. At that time, the already powerful French bourgeoisie had transformed the folk tale into the literary tale and removed most of its ancient mythic elements. Old tales were conveyed with bourgeois values and became an instrument for the education and socialisation of children according to those very values. As Jack Zipes explains, folk tales were corrupted into becoming the bourgeoisie's assurance of its own continuation:

In fact, the literary fairy tales differed remarkably from their precursors, the oral folk tales by the manner in which they portrayed children and appealed to them as a possibly distinct audience. The fairy tales were cultivated to assure that young people would be properly groomed for their social functions. (1991:14).

Among all the writers who devoted themselves to this task, Zipes points to Perrault as the writer who «more than he realised, was responsible for the literary *bourgeoisification* of the folk tale» (1991:27). The socialising strategies of these tales became especially obvious in Perrault's tales for girls, such as *The Sleeping Beauty or Cinderella*, in which women were taught into accepting their social role as passive objects of male desire and exchange as well as the movement from the patriarchal dominion of the father to a new patriarchal dominion of the husband. Zipes depiction of Perrault's ideal woman is certainly not very encouraging:

The task confronted by Perrault's model female is to show reserve and patience, that is, she must be passive until the right man comes along to recognise her virtues and marry her. She lives only through the male and for marriage. The male acts, the female waits. She must cloak her instinctual drives in polite speech, correct manners and elegant clothes. If she is allowed to reveal anything, it is to demonstrate how submissive she can be. (1991:25).

One of the tales where we find an example of this ideal of woman, but also of the corruption in general of the genre, is *Cinderella*. The original folk tale from which Perrault's *Cinderella* derived dealt with the ritual of regeneration in the form of the heroine's loss of virginity. The struggle between the old stepmother and the young, virginal stepdaughter was in fact the struggle between death and life, decay and regeneration. The coming together of the heroine and a man, in spite of all the old woman's efforts to avoid it meant the triumph of fertility and the revival of life in a new generation. But all those meanings were utterly changed, and ritual was replaced by convention, transforming the heroine into a model to be followed, one very similar to the description I have noted above.

The story of *The Virgin and the Gipsy* resembles that of Perrault's *Cinderella* and other similar tales in a number of ways. The starting point is certainly very similar to that of *Cinderella*. Yvette, a middle-class, young girl suffers not only the absence of her mother, but also the oppression of two women who have seized authority over the family: her grandmother and her aunt. Her father is not dead, but he has lost his position as head of the family. The only possible way out of that insufferable situation seems to be marriage, the acceptance of a different form of male domination where father is replaced by husband. The very beginning of the story coincides with Yvette's completion of her studies abroad. It is the end of a period, the end of childhood, and the beginning of another which is inevitably linked with marriage. Yvette, and also her sister, who happens to be in the same situation, seem to be aware of it. They address the young farmers living near the rectory with contempt, but appear resigned to having to marry someone in the end. Their education and relative social superiority make them believe that they are snobbish and independent, but as the narrator reveals, they aren't:

They seemed so dashing and unconventional, and were really so conventional, so, as it were, shut indoors inside themselves. They looked like bold, tall young sloops, just slipping from one harbour into the wild seas of life. And they were, as a matter of fact, two poor young rudderless lives, moving from one chain anchorage to another. (1970:11).

The destiny of our heroine seems to be very much that of Perrault's *Cinderella* and the story at this moment threatens to become a 20th century recontextualisation of the 17th century tale. But Lawrence gives the story a sudden and unexpected turn with the introduction of the gipsy. The presence of the gipsy in the story, with the connotations of freedom and the challenge to social conven-

tions that gipsy culture conveys transforms the story completely. From that moment onwards, as Philip Hobsbaw, explains, «the tale is taken up with creating a contrast in atmospheres, between the rectory and what it stands for and the gipsy» (1981:116). The arrival of the gipsy is going to restore to the story the original meaning of the *Cinderella* myth: the struggle between death and life, oppression and freedom, decay and regeneration. The gipsy, with his culture, strongly linked to ancient magic rituals, still untouched by the stigma of civilisation, becomes an alternative to bourgeois society that didn't exist before. He is the «noble savage», whose very existence seems to menace the artificial balance and serenity created by bourgeoisie.

This struggle between opposites, which Eric Gould regards as a constant in Lawrence's work (1981:216), takes the characters to extreme, opposite positions and transforms them into archetypal paladins of primal forces. «Mater» acquires connotations that relate her to ideas of death and barrenness: she is a sucker of lives, a succuba who spares no one in the family. The greediness in her eating is only an external manifestation of her inner thirst of lives. She is described in the second section of the tale as a toad outside a beehive (18), swallowing up each generation of new life in the moment of its issuing forth; and in many cases the human being fades to give place to the totem of an ancient and everlasting evil force: she is the image of «some awful idol of old flesh» (15), and her face is «a mask that hid something stony» (18). She keeps the eldest members of the family under her will. The only remnant of manhood that the vicar might have been able to exercise after being left by his wife, that is, the command and ruling of his family, is also sucked by «Mater» in her seizing of power. But he worships her all the same, and Aunt Cissie has become a sort of grey living-dead whose only reason to exist is to serve her mother in such a way that her still able body becomes an extension of Mater's disabled one. The tools used by Mater and her submissive serfs are constriction and repression. The house, the rectory, is the symbol of this repression. Yvette's hatred for the rectory resembles that of a prisoner for his jail, and when she tries to open a window, her father, obeying one more time the commands of Mater, quickly closes it again (14): there was already a case of escape from the family (that of Ivette's mother), and the Saywells want to make sure that it will be the last.

If the oldest Saywells embody the idea of barrenness, the gipsy stands for fertility and life: he is the father of five children, and he saved the life of his superior, Major Eastwood, during the war. The craftsmanship with which he works bronze distances him from the traditional reputation of idleness that is usually associated with gipsies. More than that, he creates things with the skill of an expert, which brings him still closer to the idea of creativeness and, therefore, to fertility. This, together with the links that associate gipsies with ferti-

lity rituals, magic and lack of repression as imposed by the tight burdens of society, confers on the gipsy the role of champion of life.

The representation of the struggle between these primal forces is indeed older than literature, but what we witness in *The Virgin and the Gipsy* is in fact a subversion of the traditional representation. The usual adjudication of roles for these two forces has been the opposite to the one we find in Lawrence's tale: the champion of life has usually belonged to a society which is endangered and which needs regeneration, whereas the threat to this regeneration, and the survival of society, comes from an element external to that society, from an alien. Beowulf and Grendel, King Arthur and Morgana are significant examples of this literary tradition. However in *The Virgin and the Gipsy* we find an alien, the gipsy, as champion, and his aim is not to preserve society from danger but rather to destroy it. The gipsy brings chaos, but that chaos is preferable to the filthy order of English post-war bourgeoisie. Even the idea of the hall, a shelter against the unknown, against the dangers of the wilderness, becomes, in the figure of the rectory, a prison for their inhabitants. Lawrence's aim with this reversal of the traditional modes of representation is not to attack English or European societies themselves, but to denounce the degeneration that they have reached. It's a degeneration that demands an inversion of the connotations of «the natural» and «the social», a return to the rituals, a return to myth.

In the middle of this fight we find the real protagonist of the tale, Yvette. As noted earlier, the Yvette that we find at the beginning of the story is utterly conventional, she seems to have absorbed already the conventions and the moral values of the bourgeois society she lives in. But, as her father suspects, there is in her something of her mother's spirit which will come to light when she meets the gipsy for the first time. When she and her troupe of friends decide to have their fortunes told by the old gipsy woman she is the only one among all the girls that dares to go into her caravan. At that moment she crosses a threshold that will lead her into a deep spiritual metamorphosis. If the introduction of the gipsy in the story had meant a return to the mythical struggle between death and life which was present in the original *Cinderella*, Yvette's willing step into facing the unknown culture of the gypsies will restore the significance of the official tale: what Yvette undergoes from that moment onwards is a process of initiation which, far from taking her from one state of incompleteness to the next, as in Perrault's *Cinderella*, will lead her to reject the values that had been imposed on her and thus find her own ones.

Yvette's transformation, however, doesn't happen all of a sudden. She doesn't shed her bourgeois education as soon as she sees the gipsy (her depiction as a character wouldn't have been realistic). In fact, her apprehension of the figure of the gipsy is influenced by bourgeois values. Together with the attraction

she feels for the gypsy there is also fear: she thinks the gypsy exerts some kind of power over her, and that makes her address him as a menace a number of times. When he invites her to the caravan the scene, in which she is the focalizer, is presented as if she were mesmerised into accepting the invitation:

You want to go in my caravan now, and wash your hands? The childlike, sleep-waking eyes of her moment of perfect virginity looked into his, unseeing. She was only aware of the dark, strange effluence of him bathing her limbs, washing her at last purely will-less. She was aware of him, as a dark, complete power. (54)

When Yvette presents the gypsy as a «dark power» she is endowing him with the dangerous qualities of the alien, and therefore she is siding with the very same society she frequently criticises. But much of the fear comes from the fact that Yvette is influenced by the Victorian perception of every man as a potential sexual aggressor. It is her virginity that is at stake and, according to the values she has been taught, any direct, bare invitation to sexual intercourse is a clear and present danger.

Yvette's naive understanding of sexual relationships is also present in the manner in which she addresses the gypsy but in a very different way. The gypsy is not always portrayed by Yvette's perception of him as a dark, dangerous ripper; in many cases he resembles the princes of fairy tales. In these instances Yvette, influenced by the literary tradition of romance, but also by the literary fairy tales I have discussed above, depicts an idealised, dream-like gypsy. The effect caused by the idealisation of the gypsy is highlighted by the contrast with the dull realism that always hovers over the rectory. This is the contrast that has led Kingsley Widmer to define *the Virgin and the Gypsy* as an «odd combination of harsh realism and lyrical fairy tale». (1962:181).

The subplot of the Eastwoods will decisively help Yvette in her understanding of love and sex. The Eastwoods represent an inversion of the rules of the society Yvette lives in: she is a rich woman who has bribed a handsome, athletic man into becoming her husband. Yvette's recognition of Major Eastwood as an object of female desire, and as a man economically dependant on a woman broadens her scope substantially and shows her an alternative to the sexual behaviour she was taught, according to which women are only objects, and not subjects, of sexual desire. When, shortly after having met the Eastwoods, Yvette asks her sister «What is it that brings people together?» (62) she is beginning to revise all the assumptions about sex and love she had learnt before. This new step towards maturation and independence also affects her relationship with the gypsy. The sexual desire she feels for the gypsy becomes valid and the idea of the gypsy as a power-

ful, dark hypnotiser disappears. Yvette doesn't have to justify the sexual desire she feels for the gipsy any more, and so she doesn't need to convince herself that she is being forced by some dark, strange sort of magic to feel that attraction.

If it is at this moment that she confronts her bourgeois origins for the first time. She defends the Eastwoods in a quarrel with her father. The proof that she's deviating from the established norm can be found in her father's reaction: Foucault has written beautifully of the ways in which the bourgeois world has confined since 1650 all deviant and oppositional behaviour to prison or the madhouse. The vicar refers to both when he threatens his daughter with taking her to a «criminal-lunacy asylum» (40) Nevertheless the side of the gipsy, the side of life and freedom, is beginning to win the battle. Until this moment Yvette had been closer to the repression and de maniac order of bourgeoisie than to the freedom and the sweet, natural anarchy of the gipsy. From that moment onwards it will be the other way round.

But the fulfilment of Yvette's maturation will come in the shape of a ritual of initiation. The flood that will finally bring Yvette and the gipsy together can be interpreted from different perspectives. From a Freudian point of view, the «shaggy, tawny wave-front of water advancing like a wall of lions» (80) is inevitably associated with the unconscious. The house of the rectory, which stands for superego and its constrictive repression collapses under the furious might of the unconscious. The whole scene is presented in a way that makes the reader doubt whether the flood is real or only a dream in which Yvette's unconscious desires are fulfilled: the house she hates so much is destroyed, the gipsy is by her side and Mater is dead. It must also be taken into account that Yvette herself is in a state of half-consciousness throughout. Both facts point to the suitability of a Freudian interpretation for the resolution of the tale. But together with these Freudian connotations the scene possesses elements that endow it with the quality of a ritual of initiation. There is, first of all, the presence of two main elements in these rituals: water and fire. Yvette's getting into the waters and out of them again is in fact a rebirth. The waters wash away all the traces of the young girl, including her bourgeois inhibitions, and give place to a new, mature, more independent woman. The fire with which Yvette and the gipsy try to keep warm is a purifying element that will remove from Yvette the corruption of socialisation and will restore her links nature.

When the spiritual and mental implications of Yvette's metamorphosis are taken into account it is no longer important to know whether she finally loses her virginity or not. The towels stained with blood, and the frequent blanks and omissions in the description of the scene caused by Yvette's half-consciousness leave the matter open to discussion. The important fact is that Yvette loses in the flood her spiritual virginity, her naive and narrow understanding of life. If

she had already lost her idea of the gipsy as a danger she loses now her apprehension of the gipsy as an idealised, fairy tale prince. Far from being either shadow or perfection, or the fictionalised object of a childish girl he becomes what he is, a man. The gipsy finally materialises into a real, flesh and blood man: Joe Boswell.

This end is also a triumph of nature over civilisation. The dam, an improvement of civilisation, is smashed to pieces by the natural force of the water, and we must not forget either that the accident occurs because under the dam there were a number of very ancient tunnels that hadn't been discovered. The destruction of civilisation is significantly caused by a return of the old relationship between man and nature represented by the ancient tunnels.

The result of all is an appropriate ending for a subversive text that, spurred by its context, retakes the original mythical contents of the tale tradition as a means to claim a return to the ancient relationship between man and nature. This endeavour carries with it a necessary, bitter attack on the foundations of bourgeois society, and also the structuring of the tale as a ritual in itself. Yvette's ritual of initiation. *The Virgin and the Gipsy* advocates an inversion of the evolution of humankind in the last centuries. It is a return «from romance to ritual».

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