



Review: D. H. Lawrence and Pre-Einsteinian Modernist Relativity by Kumiko Hoshi

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Review

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- 1 This ambitious study is a welcome contribution to Lawrencian research in the way that it apprehends modernist aesthetic shifts as responses to the concept of relativity which emerged in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.
- 2 Dr. Kumiko Hoshi's aim is to explore how D. H. Lawrence's own concept of "human relativity" (16) developed thanks to the influence of Victorian relativists before his encounter with Albert Einstein's *Relativity: The Special and General Theory* in 1921. In this thought-provoking book which at times includes revised versions of previously published articles, she contextualizes the general enthusiasm for a new relative vision of the world in rejection of the Newtonian absolute vision arguing that this eager response "gradually moulded the international, interdisciplinary movement known as modernism" (4). To start, she delineates three essential tenets of relativity involving mutual relationship, perspective and movement. Throughout the study, the tenets will provide ground for analogies between Lawrence's novels and novellas and the works of painters, sculptors and other contemporary writers to discuss their representation of point of view, the self and motion. This somewhat heterogeneous cross-genres approach has the merit of highlighting a wide range of aesthetic implications of relativist concepts that spread before, and as, Einstein published his special theory of relativity in 1905 and his general theory in 1915 and 1916. These concepts offered a new intellectual framework that encouraged experimenting with crossing boundaries between artistic genres and sciences.
- 3 The detailed introduction demonstrates that Lawrence's awareness of Victorian relativity acquired by reading Charles Darwin, T. H. Huxley, William James, Herbert Spencer and Ernst Haeckel fashioned his own concept of "human relativity." The five chapters that follow are each devoted to one of Lawrence's novels and novellas and come under an epigraph that gives the main direction of the argument. Throughout the analysis, welcome reproductions of paintings and sculptures sustain the parallels drawn with other works of art despite their being in black and white.

- 4 In *Women in Love*, Hoshi studies the mutual relationship of light and darkness which, she contends, is instrumental to convey Lawrence's vision of the universe and of relativity. The image of light and darkness as vibratory waves that runs through the novel relates to Ernst Haeckel's idea of the ether adumbrated in *The Riddle of the Universe*. Hoshi notes that Lawrence, besides using it in his essays, actually introduced the term "ether" in the final version of *Women in Love*. Intricate analogies between Haeckel's views on the ether and the Italian Futurists' representation of "vibrations" introduce parallels with Umberto Boccioni's sculptures that Lawrence knew of to further contextualize this exploration of physical relativity. The Futurists' experiments are pitted against Lawrence's interest in Rembrandt's use of *chiaroscuro* as a means to explore "human relativity" in *Women in Love* through images related to light and darkness.
- 5 Then, building on the fact that critics have labeled *The Lost Girl* as New Woman fiction, Hoshi argues that Lawrence playfully parodies the genre. Indeed, thanks to a Bakhtinian use of laughter in the novella, Lawrence relativises the absolute self embodied in the stereotyped New Woman. Additionally, the contrast between live performances and the cinema that develops in the novella reveals the central role the body plays in Lawrence's view of the modern self. Thus, by coupling the manipulation of point of view through laughter to the concept of "blood consciousness" in the body derived from William James's "stream of consciousness," Lawrence attempts to create a paradigmatic shift from the absolute to the relative self.
- 6 Aaron's *Rod*, which Hoshi argues is Lawrence's "most spatial oriented work" (80), lends itself to the study of relativity through motion and four-dimensional space, a concept that Lawrence was later to consider in the light of mysticism. Striking analogies between this interest in "quick" and "relative" physical motion, two adjectives to be found in Aaron's *Rod*, and Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2" are followed by an insightful study of multiple viewpoints based on American artist Earl Loran's analysis of Paul Cézanne's "Nature morte au panier" ("Still Life with Fruit Basket"). The actual mention in Aaron's *Rod* of H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* gives evidence of Lawrence's emphasis on the "relative relationship" (90) between Aaron and the surrounding world. Aaron's indecisiveness as to whether to submit to Lilly or not bears resemblance to Herbert Spencer's rhythm of motion, characterized by attraction and repulsion, as adumbrated in *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy*. Finally, the ambiguous ending of Lawrence's novel read in the light of William James's pragmatism adduces how Aaron's ambivalent attitude to Lilly's philosophy disqualifies Aaron's *Rod* as a "leadership novel."
- 7 The concept of "relative sexuality" (100) is teased out of the two versions of *The Fox*, the first being written before Lawrence read Einstein's *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, and the revised version being completed after this encounter. Lawrence's portrayal of an androgynous view of sexuality in the first version of *The Fox* thanks to cross-dressings and lesbianism recalls the triangular relationships in Ethel Arnold's *Platonics* and in Henry James's *The Bostonians*, and also to sexual mutations in Japanese writer Izumi Kyoka's uncanny "Kitsune" ("The Fox"), a short story, contemporary to Lawrence's, in which a fox changes its sex. The additions made in the revised version of *The Fox* reveal the androgynous nature of each character, their sexuality being mutable and subject to change according to point of view and moment in time. Here Lawrence's new exploration of "relative sexuality" is reminiscent of representations of androgyny

in Rose Allatini's *Despised and Rejected*, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. Thus reading Einstein's theory reinforced rather than contradicted Lawrence's initial endeavour to resort to point of view to depict characters' "relative sexuality."

- 8 It is in *Kangaroo*, written in 1922, that the broad outlines of Einstein's theory are explicitly mentioned. In this novel, Lawrence's more experimental writing technique which recalls collage resonates, according to Hoshi, with German artist Hannah Höch's "Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany" (1919), a photomontage that includes a picture of the scientist. Both works come as a response to the complete revolution that Einstein initiated with his theory when the resulting shift in paradigms spread to other fields than science. Hoshi further argues that through the explicit references to Einstein what is also signified is the "chaos of the post-First World War world" (125).
- 9 Thanks to Hoshi's scrupulous cross-genre approach, which itself crosses theoretical boundaries by drawing on literary criticism, artistic techniques, philosophy and science, the reader of this book will appreciate how the influence of Victorian relativists and of Einstein's theory on Lawrence's writing and on the works of other contemporary artists is aestheticised to express a modernist response to a new relativistic vision of the universe.

AUTHOR

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Shirley Bricout's field of research is D. H. Lawrence and the Bible. The translation into English of her first book was released in 2015 under the title *Politics and the Bible in D. H. Lawrence's Leadership Novels* at the Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée. She has recently guest-edited a special issue of the *Journal of the Short Story in English* devoted to Lawrence. She has contributed articles and book reviews to *Études lawrenciennes* (Paris Nanterre), *Études britanniques contemporaines* (Montpellier III) and to *The Journal of D. H. Lawrence Studies* (Nottingham, UK).