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**Book Review by Shirley Bricout**

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**Noëlle Cuny, *D. H. Lawrence : Le corps en devenir*, Presses Sorbonne nouvelle, 2008, 23 euros, 189 pages.**

In this perceptive study, Noëlle Cuny sets out to examine the function of the body in D. H. Lawrence's writings, bringing to the fore a web of metaphors based on the themes of pathology and deformity, and thereby dismissing views that the Lawrencian body is only sexual or erotic. Focusing on four novels, *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, *Kangaroo* and *The Plumed Serpent*, she shows how the living body and fiction echo one another, and therefore, how, from this perspective, the metaphor of "the body in becoming" (*le corps en devenir*), coined from Deleuze's terminology, aptly depicts the development of Lawrence's fiction. Thus, she says, "the body in becoming" cannot fit one definition; rather, it oscillates between contrary forces which are unstable and ephemeral within the tensions of the narrative, the resulting dynamics combining cohesion and discrepancy, corruption and paroxysm. To sustain her point, Noëlle Cuny devotes interesting pages to how Lawrence appropriates the ancient rhetorical figure of the ailing body inherited from the Hebrew Prophets and points to how he responds to his readings of Frazer, Darwin and others, by resorting to the weaknesses of the body to express social *malaise*.

The novels considered in the book were written in two distinct periods of the author's life: the first a happy one in England, the second more bitter in exile. But going beyond mere biographical considerations, Cuny contends that taking into account scientific breakthroughs as well as emerging ideologies contemporary to Lawrence is fundamental to understanding the function of the body in the novels. Thus, *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* stage the construction of the self in the heart of modern industry, while *Kangaroo* and *The Plumed Serpent* depict the regeneration of the collective body in lands suffering from their history. To support her interesting findings, the study also contains incursions into Lawrence's short stories, essays and poems, and looks at some of his paintings. Excerpts from early versions of novels are also included.

Before launching into the study itself, Cuny devotes a chapter to the body in literature, identifying the liberating influences which enabled Lawrence to build his own vision of corporeality. She traces the evolution of critical views on the body, more specifically in feminist

and Marxist criticism. Set against the profuse critical studies devoted to Lawrence, Cuny's contribution casts new light on the body as a metaphor for the evolution of the literary works of an author whose own body was ailing.

In the first part, starting with *The Rainbow*, Cuny analyses the narrative components of the mystery (in the mystical sense) which frees Ursula Brangwen's body from her biological and social background. She studies how the alchemical metaphor of resolution disseminated throughout the novel expresses the character's endeavour to achieve singularity. Irresolute matter, she contends, is, as the blood of generations of Brangwens, that which has not been purified, and atavism, whose various bodily forms are studied, is identified as being the obstacle to the resolution, or fulfilment, of the potentiality of each character. As the characters deprived of a nucleus are prisoners of history, achieving singularity implies getting rid of *scoriae*, a term which evokes coal and also introduces the web of analogies linked to the production of steel. Indeed, steel is ridden of the coal and phosphor which make it brittle, two elements to be found repeatedly in *The Rainbow* which refer to the industrial expansion of the period when the novel was written. After having mentioned the eugenic connotations of such images, Cuny highlights the dual polarity of coal and steel between which "the body in becoming" oscillates.

The second chapter in this first part illustrates how, in *Women in Love*, the quest for the atom is voiced through an aesthetics of fragmentation. Focusing on the increasing mechanization of society, the chapter shows how such fragmentation leads to the reinterpretation of the human. A case in point, Gerald Crich, the director of the mine, incarnates this process when he reduces his employees to a mechanical and Taylorist function, and also when he subjects the body to a form of "exo-Darwinism", replacing it or extending it with tools. Cuny stresses that the merging of the human with the machine, characteristic of modernist aesthetics, also governs the manifestations of affect. Indeed, she shows that the semantic theme of electricity is disseminated in the narration of amorous intercourse, arguing that this form of energy, which affects the nervous system, is aggressive and destructive.

Cuny shows that language, like "the body in becoming", also undergoes fragmentation. The polysemic play on terms such as "concentration", "reduction" and "resolution", which all designate processes of purification, unfolds in a pervasive semantic web. As the web evolves from one novel to the next, the reader is enticed to find the new meaning(s) of language. Cuny concludes that the new meanings confer on the human metabolism a salvaging function. That's why, by means of a typically Lawrencian syncretism of different mythologies, the center and the origin of the world are

shifted to the digestive system, the bowels being the organ of reduction *par excellence*. The energy which the characters send out is assimilated to phosphor, to radioactivity, to the quanta of particles, so many images to express communication between two beings, all of which with hindsight seem to be borrowed from the scientific breakthroughs of a period in full mutation.

The second part of the book deals with the collective body. In *Kangaroo*, two political projects develop against the backdrop of the apathy of Australians at odds with their history. The homoerotic friendship which links the members of the military group named the Diggers stages the body through masculine embraces, which become so many manifestations of a will for universal fusion. The unflattering description of the body of the Diggers' charismatic leader, Ben Cooley, alias Kangaroo, conveys the ambivalent reaction of Somers, the main character who must decide whether or not to join the movement. His attraction to this body, whose enormous marsupial-like belly symbolizes the magnetic centre of the cosmos, leads to disgust. When Kangaroo dies, a bullet having perforated his belly during a riot, disgust reaches its climax. Cuny further explores the metaphors of roundness and adiposity which convey the tensions at play in the collective social body. She associates such corporeal excesses, which characterize the bourgeois masses in the novel, with a cerebral void. The key to the rebirth of man is therefore what Somers calls "the fearful god who enters us from below", terms reminiscent, as Cuny points out, of Lawrence's essays, in which he explicitly adopted the coccygeal centre as the starting point for the nervous flux.

In *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence daringly merges the political and the mystic by staging the accession to power of priesthood. Cuny argues that this new era is brought about to revive the ancient physiological humours. The body is therefore subjected to primitive rituals which glorify the interior life. The chapter analyses more specifically the ritual of unction which delineates the bodies of the chosen ones and enables them to achieve a form of secret communication, or communion, akin to *jouissance*. She also turns our attention to the female body which undergoes the cult's sexual rituals. As it is denied access to sexual satisfaction, she asks whether the sexual renewal staged in the novel does not aim at promoting the very cerebral sexuality which Lawrence spoke out against in some of his essays.

In her conclusion, in order to synthesize her findings, Cuny extends her analysis of "the body in becoming" to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. She demonstrates how the body here undergoes a perpetual refining process in order to achieve the essential and the truth. Thus the body is the means to convey an aesthetics of mutation, of conversion whose vocabulary is permeated both by alchemy and science.

The reader of this book will appreciate the impact that contemporary industrial and scientific breakthroughs had on Lawrence's writing. These breakthroughs provide webs of metaphors which converge to express a modernist view of corporeality. Annexed to this thorough study, an index of themes for each novel highlights the vast scope of the subject. Summaries of the novels discussed emphasize the role of the body in each of the narratives. To conclude, this book skilfully restores the body to its complex metaphorical function in Lawrence's art, a restoration that is fully symbolized on the book's cover through the choice of Lawrence's painting entitled "Leda", itself an allegory of the mysticism of the body.