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Special Issue: Transgressing Borders and Borderlines
in the Short Stories of D.H. Lawrence

Introduction

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Introduction

Shirley Bricout and Christine Zaratsian

- 1 D. H. Lawrence wrote over sixty short stories of which five volumes were published during his lifetime. Most of the stories first appeared in magazines, and in some cases were to be extensively rewritten before further publication in a collection under a new title. Given Lawrence's renowned achievements as a novelist, the short stories have long been treated as a minor art overshadowed by his longer fiction. In his 1978 study entitled *D. H. Lawrence at Work*, Keith Cushman remarks that Lawrence often wrote the short stories to earn short-term money to support himself and his wife. Indeed in his letters, besides mentioning the on-going financial negotiations with his publishers, Lawrence often laments his shortage of money as for instance when he writes from Italy in 1913, "I haven't got much money left. The cheque from the *New Statesman* hasn't come yet – yet it will eventually wander here I suppose" (*Letters 2*: 79). Nevertheless Cushman also reflects on how the succession of revisions of the short stories, whether for a magazine or for publication in a collection, disclose Lawrence's emergence into maturity as a writer. Similarly, in their respective introductions to the Cambridge editions of the *Prussian Officer and other stories* and *The Vicar's Garden and other stories*, John Worthen and N. H. Reeve concur to stress "his extraordinary development as a writer of fiction between 1907 and 1914, and his growing mastery of the short-story form" (Reeve xvii).
- 2 Indeed, the short story as genre fitted Lawrence's preoccupations with depicting the characters' growing self-awareness and its consequences; in fact the author took the genre seriously, finding within its confines the means to convey his maturing vision of human relationships while his writing gained in intensity and his experimentation with language became more accomplished, building up to a consummate conjunction between form and content. This is why "The Prussian Officer stories" in particular can be said to have marked a turning point in the author's career, since as Andrew Harrison puts it:

Where the realism of ["Daughters of the Vicar"] was concerned with exploring the social contexts of the lives of its characters, ["The Prussian Officer," "England, My England," "The Horse-Dealer's Daughter," and "The Blind Man"] all hinge upon some change of consciousness in them. We might say that the later tales are all

structured around a modernist epiphany, or a moment in which the characters gain some insight into their own lives. (12)

- 3 Lawrence's career as a short story writer opened with "The Prelude" which was published in 1907 in *The Nottingham Guardian* under the name of his friend Jessie Chambers. Providing an interesting cue, the title of this very first piece already points to the in-between territory where the artist crosses the border between nothingness and creation. Moreover, Lawrence tested and transgressed literary norms by blurring the limits of shorter fiction which developed into novellas, long short stories or short novels, a range Pierre Tibi expounds upon in his *Aspects de la nouvelle*. In April 1924, on the day he sent "The Border-Line" to his agent Curtis Brown, Lawrence encapsulated his approach to writing shorter fiction in a letter to his American editor Thomas Seltzer: "I am busy doing a few short stories – I wish they'd stay shorter. But they are the result of Europe, and perhaps a bit dismal" (*Letters* 5: 23).

- 4 This special issue aims at bringing into focus the patterns of transgression which map out borders and borderlines as well as in-between territories in D. H. Lawrence's shorter fiction. The characters he stages within the boundaries of the stories evolve along patterns of harmony and discord which lead them to transgress limits as they "seek that invisible and promised territory, that country that does not exist but that [they bear in their] dreams, and that must indeed be called a beyond" (Kristéva 5). This aim implies addressing Lawrence's personal contribution to renewing the short story as genre; indeed his numerous rewritings, which gave more prominence to symbolic realism and increased the dynamics of polarized tensions, point to an engagement with experimentation on which the very compression required by the short story destined for publication in magazines and/or collections had a strong bearing, while his consistent beginnings *in medias res* and open endings signal a beyond to the borders of the text itself. The Lawrentian text may be in fact a "differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces" (Derrida 69). Where the interaction with biographical elements and/or editorial demands come into play, this "beyond" raises, among others, the issue of the autonomy of the short story.
- 5 Borders and borderlines are demarcations originally indicating a division in spatial terms. As they signal separations and distinctions, which can be geographical, political, social, linguistic or sexual, etc., they "determine perceptions of people, dividing between known and unknown, us and them" (Yndigegn 33) and thereby hinge upon the ideas of protection and vulnerability. The transgression of borders and borderlines fosters dynamics which upset the *status quo* while transgression itself comes at a moment of crisis around which the plot and the structure of the short story revolve (Tibi 51). In her arresting study entitled *Borders, Borderlands and Frames*, Mae Henderson reminds us that "'to transgress' literally translates as 'to step across'" (2). As borders are drawn to protect, she pursues by suggesting that "breaking down structures of resistance [...] also concerns the modifying of limits in order to transform the unknown or forbidden (metaphorical borderlands) into inhabitable, productive spaces for living and writing" (2). Transgressing borders and borderlands is therefore an act of empowerment. Thus, given that the borderlines regulate the interaction with the

other, the “interplay between physical and mental borders” (Yndigeñ 34) also functions to build self-identity, a recurrent issue in Lawrence’s works.

- 6 Among the features of his writing, Lawrence’s characteristic use of dualisms further paves the way to transgression. Indeed he pits opposites one against the other to intensify emotions and physical sensations, and to stage transgression that “break[s] down structures of resistance.” Thus the plots unfold against a framework of antitheses: North and South, heat and cold, (as in “The Prussian Officer”), individual man and group (“The Thorn in the Flesh”), the split between our mental and sensual being (“The Thimble”), male and female polarities (in *The Fox* and “The Border-Line”), the threshold between life and death (“The Horse-Dealer’s Daughter” and “Odour of Chrysanthemums”).
- 7 As will be shown in the articles of this special issue, D. H. Lawrence’s stories broach the question of identity and self-fulfillment as the characters seek to transgress the limits imposed by social norms, military orders and gender constructs. The short stories focus on this moment of crisis when the characters find themselves in an in-between territory. As they “step across” the borders, they experience a liminal state which is characterized on the one hand by openness to new experiences and to the Other, and on the other hand by indeterminacy and ambivalence. Liminality – a term coined by ethnologist Arnold van Gennep from the Latin *limen* meaning “threshold” – is a period of transition which opens the way to something new.
- 8 Following up on these definitions, the contributors discuss how the short story as genre is particularly appropriate to narrate such transgressions and depict the subsequent liminal state the characters experience. The first part of the volume, entitled “Digression/Revision as transgressive creative process” addresses the departure from writing conventions and from original versions of a short story, as the dynamics the transgression fosters reach out to a symbolic beyond.
- 9 In her engaging essay “From Marching to Walking: Transgressing in ‘The Prussian Officer’ and ‘The Thorn in the Flesh,’” Elise Brault-Dreux shows how Lawrence transgresses the margins of narration and the limits of a “markedly bounded genre” in order to reach creativity. The study highlights how the digression from marching to walking can be understood as a means for the soldiers portrayed in the stories to transgress military norms in order to regain freedom as they walk away from the military community. Thus staged in a short-story, itself “a sort of literary march dictated by writing conventions,” walking, read as a transgressive-digressive stride, becomes a metaphor for creativity.
- 10 Also examining Lawrence’s creative process, Elliott Morsia opts for a genetic approach in “‘Odour of Chrysanthemums’: Absent-Presence and Textual Genetics” to question the autonomy of texts. He explores the mysterious boundaries between absence and presence in the story and explains how its climax represents an end to writing in Lawrence’s mind, as the writing process takes the author across a textual borderline. Building on previous critical research, Morsia deftly argues that the revisions made for editorial reasons actually curb the tensions and drama of the short story, while the reworking of the ending which introduces the dead collier’s body conjures up how writing endings was a constant dilemma to Lawrence, a finished work being “the dead material remainder” of his creative life.
- 11 The second category of articles, “Redefining borders as structures of resistance: modernist experiments,” broaches aesthetic pursuits from transgression to re-creation,

reaching beyond the borders of the short story through the evocation of the pastoral and the fairy-tale.

- 12 Foregrounding the transgression of modes, in her article “Reining in Expectations in ‘The Horse-Dealer’s Daughter’: A New Vision of the Pastoral,” Shirley Bricout reveals how, by hinting at a bygone pastoral ideal that lies beyond the borders of the text, Lawrence subverts the conventions of the pastoral mode in order to create a new modernist vision. Commenting on the story’s open ending and epiphanic denouement – typical modernist devices – she explains how “boundaries are blurred and redefined in order to map out a sacred territory” where a meeting between a man and a woman can flourish into love.
- 13 The thought-provoking essay “A Reluctant Awakening: Transgression and the Sleeping Beauty motif in D.H. Lawrence’s ‘The Thimble’” also points to the transgression of modes and the encounter of the sexes as a transcendental experience. Here Maria Casado Villanueva comments on the intertextual dialogue she finds between “The Thimble,” an earlier version of *The Ladybird*, and fairy tales such as “Sleeping Beauty” and “Beauty and the Beast,” stories based on epiphanic revelations. She contends that fairy tale motifs embedded in Lawrence’s story endow it with new meanings stemming from the tales’ “evocative symbolism and the mythical meanings they encode,” the motif of the awakening woman suggesting that personal boundaries need to be transgressed in order for the couple to find fulfilment.
- 14 The third part, “Liminality: departing from sexual choices,” focuses on the limits of human experience and on the borderland harboring ambivalence.
- 15 In her suggestive essay “Transgression in *The Fox*,” Jacqueline Guirand-Rousselon relies on a Freudian reading of the story emphasizing its oneiric dimension. She considers March, one of the three protagonists, as someone on the border between dream and reality, between consciousness and absence of consciousness. The article shows how this liminal state, characterized first by indeterminacy then by openness to another form of sexual fulfilment, is induced by the figure of the *shaman*, the fox, which will unsettle the *status quo*, the homogeneousness of the same-sex relationship she shares with Branford, in order to radically re-establish a more conventional male-female relationship.
- 16 Sue Reid’s “‘Between Men’: Male Rivalry in *The Woman Who Rode Away and Other Stories*” also studies the erotic triangle in this collection of short stories, focusing on homoerotic or homosocial tendencies in the male characters and placing them in connection with biographical elements such as Lawrence’s tormented friendship with John Middleton Murry. Reid reappraises the (homo)erotic passages of the collection and reads the liminal state prolonged by the title story’s unresolved ending as a reflection of Lawrence’s own crisis point as a husband and friend.
- 17 Finally, this special issue is concluded with a short story written in 1931 by an American writer, Kay Boyle, and brilliantly introduced by Anne Reynes-Delobel. The story is a thinly-veiled reference to the last months of D.H. Lawrence’s life in the south of France. Kay Boyle deftly captures the essence of Lawrence’s nature as the “invalid,” and conjures up the memory of the “black blank mines” of his childhood, the memory of the war, the memory of his father, crossing geographical, temporal, and affective borders, by exploring the ideas of rest and motion. This impressive work reveals how important Lawrence’s life and work were, even at the time of his death. Lawrence did transgress borders and borderlines throughout his life and work. What better way of

illustrating D.H. Lawrence's short stories than including an American short story writer's work, as if to prove that poetic creation is boundless and universal.

- 18 All the articles highlight Lawrence's dual vision, more specifically in his short stories in which he is constantly illustrating a genre and subverting it, using literary tradition and departing from it, criticizing deathlike attitudes and emphasizing rebirth. The short stories are then endowed with a mythopoetic dimension which enables "the text [to] overrun the limits assigned to it" (Derrida 69). Therefore, just as the characters reach out from their insularity to explore a geographic or symbolic beyond, the short story may no longer be self-contained but transcend its own borders. This volume is not meant to give an exhaustive idea of Lawrence's treatment of the short story. Rather, it could be seen as an attempt to show how Lawrence's short stories depict climactic, epiphanic moments of revelation, cathartic experiences in which the reader is led along, beyond boundaries, to cross genetic, generic, sexual and social borderlines, thus bridging the poetic gap that qualifies aesthetic creation.

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Shirley Bricout is a member of the post-doctoral research group based at the University Paul Valéry Montpellier 3 (France) devoted to British Literature and Art. 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. It is honored with a foreword by Keith Cushman. She has contributed articles and book reviews to *Les Etudes Lawrenciennes* (Paris X), *Les Etudes britanniques contemporaines* (Montpellier 3) and to *The Journal of D. H. Lawrence Studies* (Nottingham, UK).

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