



**LETTERATURA**

Alan Shelston - Luigi Tacconelli  
Paola Partenza - Giuseppe Serpillo  
Cristina Fiallega - Renzo D'Agnillo  
Christopher Williams - Monica Gori  
Nicola De Marco - Giuseppe De Matteis

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Renzo D'Agnillo

*Stylistic Technique and the Reader  
in D.H. Lawrence's "Sea and Sardinia"*

O. Universally acknowledged as one of his most charming and lyrically evocative works, *Sea and Sardinia* (1923) is also a prime example of the instinctive and spontaneous side of Lawrence's writing, both in terms of style and method. In fact, and as a contrast to those books of his which underwent long and laborious processes of re-elaboration, such as *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *The Rainbow*, (1915), and *Twilight in Italy*, (1916), *Sea and Sardinia* was produced in only six weeks and without the aid of a single note, an astonishing fact in itself and one which shows Lawrence's power of the "living imaginative memory" (1).

Lawrence's travelogue can be seen to operate on two levels; as an almost unconscious autobiographical self-revelation; and as a creative evocation of autobiographical events. Both levels will be drawn together here and discussed under a stylistic perspective in order to indicate some of Lawrence's finest techniques as a prose writer as well as considering the particular qualities and effects of his rhetoric and its implications for the communicative transaction of discourse situation. These elements will be dealt with under; "Lawrence's Use of the Historic Present", "Verisimilitude — Through Intonation and Iconicity", and "The Implied Reader and the Implied Author".

1. *Lawrence's Use of the Historic Present*. Firstly, mention should be made of the immediately apparent and almost con-

1) R. Aldington, *Portrait of a Genius But...* Heinemann Melbourne, London, Toronto, 1950, p. 234.

sistent linguistic feature of *Sea and Sardinia*, notably that of the historic present tense, (as distinct from the simple present tense of habitual action). The historic present is essentially a literary device and Lawrence's exploitation of it here is two-fold; One, to create a style analogous to that of a diary or a journal, with the effect of allowing the reader a "privileged" glimpse into his private thoughts and actions; two, as an appropriate means for rendering his sense of the transient nature of experience. Broadly speaking, the first is of a syntactic concern, whilst the second is semantic. By his use of the historic present, Lawrence charges his narration with a directness and urgency establishing a general sense of speed, which reflects his particular quickness and alertness of perception, so that the reader becomes involved in what may be described as a sort of "continuous" reading process, which in this work means to shift constantly from one impression or focus to the next. This elusiveness of Lawrence's style has been sharply observed by Virginia Woolf;

One never catches Lawrence — This is one of his most remarkable qualities — "arranging". Words, scenes flow as fast and direct as if he merely traced them with a free rapid hand on sheet after sheet (2).

Such an appreciation, though general in character, may be directly applicable to *Sea and Sardinia*.

A further reinforcement of Lawrence's linguistic effects is achieved through the coupling of the historic present with a high frequency of reduced clauses. This may already be seen in the opening lines of the book which also prepare the terrain for other hallmarks of Lawrence's style:

Comes over one an absolute necessity to move. And what is more, to move in some particular direction. A double necessity then; to get on the move and to know whither (3).

The use of deletion, the short atomic sentences, false starts, repetitions and rhythmic insistences on key words, are all suggest-

2) V. Woolf, "Notes on D.H. Lawrence" in *Collected Essays*, Hogarth, London, 1966, p. 553.

3) D.H. Lawrence, "Sea and Sardinia", Penguin, 1981. All further quotations refer to this edition.

ively fused with the quick development of his thoughts which very often progress merely through emotional or mnemonic association, to create a "natural" simplicity and directness of tone. Whilst such elements have, at least in the novels, been an irritation to many, here they have been said to "charm and disarm" (4).

Of course, it could be argued that the historic present tense is merely an artefact, a pretentious recourse in the attempt to convey the "illusion" of actions contemporaneous to the text (5), even though the reader's awareness of such an intention does seem unlikely. Besides, Lawrence provides his own means of defence against such a risk in his humour:

Why does one have to create such discomfort for oneself! To have to get up in the middle of the night — half past one — to go and look at the clock. Of course this fraud of an American watch has stopped with its impudent phosphorescent face (p. 9).

Humour, here in the form of deflatory self-irony as he mocks his own "curiosity and sense of adventure" (6), abounds in *Sea and Sardinia*, and its effects are not to be underestimated. For it is largely through his humour that Lawrence gains the sympathy and credence of his reader. In fact, in representing each moment of his trip in the same temporal perspective, (that of the historic present), Lawrence exposes the paradox of his sense of the autonomy, multiplicity and transitoriness of experience. Any occasional lapses into the past tense, (and there are indeed a few, particularly towards the end), are nevertheless so naturally, almost unconsciously "slipped" into the text, that the reader reads on unaware. The final sense seems to be one of past and present becoming relative entities forming a homogeneously "eternal present" — the eternal present of the interior time of the author's consciousness.

Therefore, the historic present must be an essential backbone to the stylistic effects of the text if it is to transmit the ambivalence of Lawrence's sense of the "immediacy of ex-

4) A. Burgess, *Flame into Being* Abacus, London, 1986, pp. 110-11.

5) R.P. Draper, *Profiles in Literature* Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1969, p. 69.

6) A. Burgess, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

perience" in the reading process.

2. *Verisimilitude — Through Intonation and Iconicity.* Being an account of autobiographical events, *Sea and Sardinia* can only seem to propose Lawrence as an overtly reliable narrator. Therefore, the communicative literary situation of a narrative pact, so essential to fiction, in which the reader sustains disbelief during the process of decoding and interpreting the textual message, may not appear, at a first glance, applicable in this case. Yet, in spite of the reader's pre-assumption of the text's authenticity as pure autobiography, a closer scrutiny shows *Sea and Sardinia* to be ultimately dependent on the functioning of something equivalent to a narrative pact. This for two basic reasons; firstly, it is not without its moments of narrative and dramatic dynamism, being not only a re-evocation but also a creative reconstruction of Lawrence's trip, so that memory capacity and imaginative power mutually co-exist. Secondly, even though one of the text's chief features is the "logical" development of temporal sequencing in the intent to create the impression of a "realistic" account, there is, of course, no such thing as a completely realistic narrative, fiction or non, and what we are ultimately concerned with is a sort of "contract of good faith" or "convention of authenticity" (7). For the literary writer communicates his own perception of reality and thus expresses "the very elusiveness of what he perceives" (8). It may be a paradox of *Sea and Sardinia* that we seem to learn more about Lawrence than we do of his subject, and yet this is a natural consequence of the fact that all language activity, be it literary or non, is a selective process. More significant in this case is that the selectioning betrays no attempt at objectivity — the viewpoint being always and essentially Lawrence's. Needless to say, such a subjectivity of perspective serves a precise function; that of consolidating fixed pre-conceived ideas and attitudes. What is actually proposed is not an objective depiction of the island of Sardinia, but the author's own psychological and emotional states which, in turn, colour his perception and interpretation of external reality.

7) G. Leech and M.H. Short, *Style in Fiction. A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*, Longman, London and New York, 1981, p. 158.

8) H.G. Widdowson, *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature*, Longman, Essex, 1975, p. 70.

It has been observed that *Sea and Sardinia* "absorbs" the reader into a moment of "heightened life shared" (9). It seems fruitful to pursue this notion of a mutual subjectivity between the author and the reader. Being a relative phenomenon, verisimilitude has to be considered in terms of the narrative pact; it is generated in the reading process. But the extent to which the reader is imaginatively co-involved in the subjective representation of the text is particularly evidenced by his experience of its intonational structure and rhetoric. The following extract is an illustration of Lawrence's powers of evocation through the phonological potential of his rhetoric:

Very dark under the great carob tree as we go down the steps.  
Dark still the garden. Scent of mimosa and then of jasmine.  
The lovely mimosa tree invisible. Dark the stony path. The  
goat whinnies out of her shed [...].

Ah, dark garden, dark garden, with your olives and your wine,  
your medlars and mulberries and many almond trees, your  
steep terraces ledged high above the sea, I am leaving you,  
slinking out (p. 11).

The impressionistic "feel" of this passage depends entirely on a series of short graphic units which develop into a gradual recognition and accumulation of invisible life-forms initially hinted through the senses of hearing and smell. The rhythmic progression, with its emphasis on trochaic stresses, imitates on a surface syntactic level the rhythm of the movement of a journey on foot; (véry dārk / the gréat cārob / scént of mimōsa / dārk gārden etc.). Particularly suggestive is the falling tone of "down the steps". To counteract this sense of a physical motion the repeated conjunction "and" in the part beginning "ah, dark garden", tends to speed up the rhythm adding an emotional note of anticipation and excitement, as well as emphasizing the quick changing scenery. There is also very little lexical repetition for the same reason, the only two instances being "dark" and "garden", sufficient to designate the moment and location of the scene. The reduced clauses "dark still the garden", "dark the stony path" and "scent of mimosa", with their omission of verbs, articles and demonstrative, together with the placing of the evocative key words "dark" and "scent" in initial

9) R. Aldington, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

position, serve to give the latter a heavy stress and hence a dominant focus, lending a sense of immediacy to the overall atmosphere of anticipation as the Lawrence's set out on their trip. On a semantic level, we infer the invisible objects to be familiar to the author. The frequent use of the definite article as an "incomplete cataphoric reference" (10) seems to assume this. It is by phrases like "the great carob tree" and "the garden" that Lawrence draws his reader into the scene he is evoking, so that he can imaginatively participate, though it is finally through the intonational structure of the text that the reader's co-involvement is intensified (11). As already implied, there are two distinct moments in the passage. In the second part, the direct invocation reinforces our original impression of a familiar surrounding as well as creating a different voice tune, imitative of a spoken voice and markedly emotive. The invocative "your" helps to provoke this tonal contrast between the first part and the second. That the reader feels the sudden emotive tone, in spite of the fact that the second part contains no adjectives, (apart from the neutral "dark"), shows how voice tune depends as much on inference as any explicitly phonetic means. The reader not only experiences the syntactic elements of the passage, but also enters imaginatively through its semantic features. This example is also illustrative of the role which iconicity plays in the representational function of the text — in terms of the mimetic force of sequencing, in particular psychological sequencing. The following uses other iconic elements:

And they fell on their soup. And never, from among the steam, have I heard a more joyful trio of soup-swilkering. They sucked it in from their spoons with long gusto-rich sucks. The "maialino" was the treble, he trilled his soup into his mouth with a swift sucking vibration interrupted by bits of cabbage. Black-cap was the baritone; good, rolling spoon-sucks. And the one in spectacles was the bass: he gave sudden deep gulps. All was led by the long trilling of the "maialino". Then suddenly, to vary matters, he cocked up his spoon

10) H.G. Widdowson, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

11) Of course it is only through a reading aloud of the passage that one can verify this, but "the silent reader also may be said to experience the intonational structure of text, in so far as he grasps the structure of the surface syntax in his decoding". R. Fowler in *Linguistics and the Novel*, Methuen, London and New York, 1977, p. 63.



in one hand, chewed a huge mouthful of bread, and swallowed it down with a smack-smack-smack! of his tongue against his palate (p. 85-6).

One of the iconic elements Lawrence indulges in employing here in this description of a soup-sucking scene, is onomatopoeia. Words such as "sucked", "trilled", "bass", "gulps" and "smack" all associate phonologically with the various sounds of loud soup-sucking. But there are also a number of phonoaesthetic words such as "spoons", "rich", "swift", "bits", "rolling", and "cocked", which are variably interspersed as reinforcements for the same purpose. Of course, rather than being directly representational, onomatopoeic and phonoaesthetic words can only really be suggestive and evocative of the sounds they intend to convey. Yet, although this type of iconicity has generally been snubbed by modern linguists as "marginal if not trivial in relation to the arbitrariness of language as a whole" (12), Lawrence does exploit the symbolic and evocative power of such elements with considerable skill. It will be noticed that there is a predominance of stressed syllables with sibilants ("they sucked it in from their spoons [...] gusto-rich sucks [...] swift sucking vibration"). The repetition of liquids, particularly in "all was led by the long trilling of the 'maialino' ", is both auditory and sensorally effective in conveying the liquid sound of soup-sucking, and the clogging effect of "interrupted by bits of cabbage", with the repeated B/T consonants, is also very effective in breaking the rhythmic flow of Lawrence's prose. Whilst the passage imitates on a surface level the sound of soup-sucking, certain lexical elements are given explicit musical associations on a semantic level; "treble", "trilling", "vibration", "baritone", "bass", (and further on "castanets"). In this light, other lexical items such as "sucks", "swift", "smack", "rolling", "gulps" and the trope "gusto-rich", all acquire similar connotations and thus are made to implicitly relate to the same field. The initial metaphor is, in this way, humerously reinforced in Lawrence's evocation of the scene in musical terms. The main active verbs, "sucked", "trilled", "chewed" and "swallowed" are all auditory and the movements they describe intrinsically accompany the sounds they imitate. On a further semantic level,

12) G. Leech and M.H. Short, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

the musical associations suggest a feeling of delight and fun, (the emotively marked adjectives "joyful" and "good" are confirmation). Thus, the reader is made to share the author's pleasure in textually transforming what is quite a banal occurrence into an original and lyrical one largely through the role which iconicity plays.

3.1. *The Implied Reader and the Implied Author*. Back in 1961 Wayne Booth complained of the lack of consideration modern literary criticism had given to the particular act of communication that takes place between the author and the reader, a communication "fundamental to the very existence of literature" (13). The last fifteen years or so has been dominated by a stream of critical thought that has perhaps more than made up for this negligence. The central role of the reader in narrative discourse has been reinstated and underlined by various critics, (Barthes, Iser, Jauss, Chatman, Eco, Fish and Holland, to name but a very few). There has consequently developed among critics a general dichotomy between an almost complete disregard of the reader in the quest for an artistic purity unblotched by humanism, and an imperative awareness of his central role in the narrative discourse. These contrasting attitudes may be summed up by the following two writers;

I write. Let the reader learn to read (14).

You must have your eyes continually on your reader — that alone constitutes technique (15).

The shift in critical attention from the "reader be damned" (16) approach to the sense of his fundamental importance should also be seen as a reflection of the stylistic attitudes of writers themselves. Even so, critics have been at pains to concoct some sort of definition for the author's sense of his reader's identity; Actual Reader (Van Dijk, Jauss), Mock Reader (Booth), Superreader (Riffaterre), Informed Reader (Fish), Ideal Reader (Culler), Model Reader (Eco), Implied Reader (Booth, Chatman, Iser,

13) W. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Penguin, Middlesex, 1983 (2 edition), p. 89).

14) Cited above. The author is Mark Harris (p. 90).

15) Ditto. The author is Ford Madox Ford (p. 88).

16) W. Booth, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

Perry) and Encoded Reader (Brook-Rose) (17), all of these labels depending ultimately on precisely what stress is placed on the reader's role. Basically, there are two diametrically opposed views; one is of the reader as an active potential, a structuring of a "competence within the text" (18), or a "hypothetical personage" (19); the other is of the reader as an "image of a certain competence brought to the text" (20), or of the author's abstract idea of him. Bearing in mind this dilemma, we may conclude in agreement with Culler when he says:

One ought perhaps to avoid speaking of the "implied reader" as a single role that the reader is called upon to play (21).

Chatman's term will be used here and is to be interpreted in the wide sense.

3.2. Although there is something about the style of *Sea and Sardinia* that makes it read like "a private notebook" (22), the idea of an explicit addressee continually lurks in the background. Not only are there indications of such a presence in certain telling asides;

For my part, as you may guess, I did not admire (p. 205).

But there are also direct addresses to the actual reader;

I hope, dear reader, you like the metaphor (p. 189).

In this initial sense, it may be pertinent to suggest that Lawrence's narration wavers between a sort of private self-discourse and overt direct discourse with the reader. But what precisely are the identity and function of Lawrence's implied reader in *Sea and Sardinia*?

17) Taken from Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction. Contemporary Poetics*, Methuen, London, 1983, p. 117.

18) Rimmon-Kenan, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

19) G. Leech and M.H. Short, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

20) Rimmon-Kenan, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

21) R. Culler, *On Deconstruction. Theory and Criticism after Deconstruction* Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1983, p. 83.

22) A. Burgess, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

We may say that Lawrence's implied reader has to inevitably be a 1920s Western European, (if not only British), product of a fair cultural level — at least to the extent of apprehending the social, psychological and existential dilemmas Lawrence insistently puts forward. To say this apparently entails the risk both of stating the obvious as well as restricting the book's scope of readership. Yet, if the reader is to sustain disbelief during the reading process, he must inevitably become this implied reader for the very fact that he imaginatively sustains the illusion of this potential identity.

The importance of the implied reader for Lawrence can be understood when we consider his vehement attacks against Western civilization. It is evident that he utilizes the narrative relationship in order to expose the reader, (a product of this civilization), and involve him as a competence in this sense, purposely provoking in him some sort of a reaction. Lawrence involves, and because of this, subjugates the reader to his opinions so that his exploitation of the narrative relationship is at times not far from bullying. This didactic element is, of course, typical of many of Lawrence's works.

Yet, in spite of this, it is also true that Lawrence exposes himself just as much as he does the reader, and he does so in all his inconsistencies and irrationalities as a human being:

I cursed the degenerate aborigenes, the dirty-breasted host who dared to keep such an inn [...] All my praise of the long-stocking cap — you remember — vanished from my mouth (p. 107).

However, even if Lawrence does go to pains in proposing a "real life" rather than a textual identity, he is, nevertheless, projecting a textually created self-image. The subjectivity of his focalization, therefore, yields an objective stance of him in the reader for the very reason that his choices in self-representation are inevitably arbitrary. Thus, subjective presentation builds up a notion of an implied author as well.

A final important point is that being an I-narrated text *Sea and Sardinia* should establish an impersonal distance between the reader and Lawrence's characters (or people). The effect, however, is again paradoxical because they are presented in a subjective way. On the one hand, the reader accepts them as "real life" representations, as having "become confused with people

we have met in actuality, not in books'' (23). On the other, the reader's objectivity towards the text reverts this effect and sees them as "creations" which acquire their vivacity and force of realism through a dramatic contextualization. It is ultimately a part of the essentially dynamic character of Lawrence's travelogue that just as there is a curious blend of an ideological and a psychological facet in which external and internal focalization are continually in alternation, so does the narrative relationship generate an oscillating of subjectivity and objectivity in the reader's response.

23) A. Burgess, *op. cit.*, p. 110.