

SHADOWS AND BROKEN MIRRORS IN "THE PRUSSIAN OFFICER" BY D. H. LAWRENCE



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Abstract: Unable to integrate the terror of his own depth of the psyche, the captain in D. H. Lawrence's "The Prussian Officer" will gradually evolve to complete dehumanization. A man exercised to gain control of his emotions, who prefers the reification of the feminine, the officer will stretch beyond acceptable limit the disconnection from himself, his disunion from other people and his disjunction from life's values. The intersection of fire and aspiration for aliveness with the broken mirror of self-perception can be approached from the point of view of abjection, like in Kristeva's theories. Violence becomes a failed attempt to harness otherness into an object. But at the same time, violence will unleash an endless loop, a lose-lose situation in which it co-involves the hitherto innocent person who just wanted to keep himself out of trouble. The landscape is the other reflection of the psyche in this story, is the mirror onto which the shadow can be projected without encountering the same demonic force. This mirror-landscape purifies the encounter with the shadow. After being the lodge of powerful emotions and self-analyses, after being carried away by the instinct of life and of survival, the two bodies are discarded. Lifeless, reduced to their reified physicalness, the two bodies show how the captain and the orderly mirrored in each other their inability to have embraced the shadow selves.

Key words: violence, army, landscape, D. H. Lawrence, The Prussian Officer, trauma, shadow, mirror, otherness

Violence and the Irreducible Other

"He lay still, in a kind of dream of anguish. His thirst seemed to have separated itself from him, and to stand apart, a single demand. Then the pain he felt was another single self. Then there was the clog of his body, another separate thing. He was divided among all kinds of separate beings. There was some strange, agonized connection between them, but they were drawing further apart. Then they would all split. The sun, drilling down on him, was drilling through the bond. Then they would all fall, fall through the everlasting lapse of space. Then again, his consciousness reasserted itself. He roused on to his elbow and stared at the gleaming mountains. There they ranked, all still and wonderful between earth and heaven. He stared till his eyes went black, and the mountains, as they stood in their beauty, so clean and cool, seemed to have it, that which was lost in him." (D. H. Lawrence- *The Prussian Officer*)

The Prussian Officer, D. H. Lawrence's short story initially named *Honour and Arms*, is a masterpiece on the infliction of brute force as an attempt to possess the irreducible otherness, where violence disguises the cruellest way to transgress the borders of the wounded self. Written before the outbreak of the First World War, it was published in 1914 (in August in the *English Review*, in December in volume). *The Prussian Officer* is not D. H. Lawrence's choice for title, it was the choice of his editor (Garnett). Keith Cushman sees the year 1914 as *annus mirabilis* for D. H. Lawrence:

"The year 1914, Lawrence's *annus mirabilis*, marked his great launching out. (...) The final revision of the tales collected in *The Prussian Officer and Other Stories* was an important component of his growth during this pivotal year, and in the process some enduring works of short fiction at last came into being."²

In another article, Cushman underlines: "The story achieves its nervous, overcharged intensity through Lawrence's repetitive, almost hypnotic use of words."³

As D. H. Lawrence states in one of his essays, "beauty is an experience"⁴. *The Prussian Officer* can be read as a short story about the impossibility of grasping beauty and having this drive fulfilled. The repressed sacred fire of the instinct, in D. H.

¹ D. H. Lawrence. *The Prussian Officer*. The Floating Press, 2010. All quotes are from the same edition, abbreviated here *PO*.

² Keith Cushman, "I Am Going Through a Transition Stage": "The Prussian Officer" and "The Rainbow" The D.H. Lawrence Review, Vol. 8, No. 2 (summer 1975), pp. 176-197, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44233503>>, retrieved 02-02-2019

³ Keith Cushman, *The Making of The Prussian Officer: A Correction*, The D.H. Lawrence Review, Vol. 4, No. 3 (fall 1971), pp. 263-273, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44233368>>, retrieved 03-02-2019, p. 265.

⁴ D.H. Lawrence, *Late Essays and Articles*, volume 2, edited by James T. Boulton, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 146.

Lawrence's terms, cannot be extinguished. *The Prussian Officer* follows in free indirect speech the way in which life's instinct, disconnected from honouring life's values, carries the character on the false path of legitimizing his power abuse and cruelty, in parallel with a collapse of meaning.

"Beauty is an *experience*, nothing else. It is not a fixed pattern or an arrangement of features. It is something *felt*, a glow or a communicated sense of fineness. What ails us is that our sense of beauty is so bruised and blunted, we miss all the best. (...) " (Ibidem).

Instead of pushing the instinct to gather all its obscure force to sample beauty as an experience, violence becomes the repressed muted voice of the same instinct. It means reaching out for the other one, the fellow being, but not with the purpose of sharing or of communion. The mind plots incessantly how to keep the other one in a prison of broken images of the psyche. It is the broken mirror that is forced as a perspective on the other person, through transfer, under the illusion that it will restore the unity of the felon's psyche.

Before WWI, an officer named Hauptmann, son of a Polish Countess, unaware of his psychological wounds, inflicts pain and change of behaviour upon his soldier, his orderly, finding pleasure in using his superior rank to torture him. There is no feminine constant presence in the life of the captain so there is no way to balance his wounded energy. Possessed by his urge to become increasingly violent and to resort to humiliating the orderly, the officer hides his blurred combination of necessity to dominate along with a surge of homoerotic impulses. Unaccepted as an infinite being, the other one is seen as an object. The orderly will rebel against this objectification by finding the momentum in which to take revenge.

Violence becomes a failed attempt to harness otherness into an object. But at the same time, violence will unleash an endless loop, a lose-lose situation in which it co-involves the hitherto innocent person who just wanted to keep himself out of trouble. In D.H. Lawrence's short story, it is the innocent who strikes as a culmination of hatred, in a peak moment of tension, when the accumulated humiliation merely searches for an outlet, without involving the mind.