

D.H. Lawrence's Sicilian Landscape

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1. Introduction

D.H. Lawrence lived in Sicily from March 1920 to February 1922. It was a very intense period of his life during which he wrote a lot and started translating the works of Giovanni Verga, a Sicilian realist writer of the 19th century, because of the fascination Sicily had on him. Such a creative power may be ascribed to his feeling completely at ease in Sicily, a place which was a real home for him and where his art could be enriched by new stimuli coming from the otherness of the place. Yet, only a few pages of Lawrence's huge output are explicitly set in Sicily, i.e. the first and last part of the travel book *Sea and Sardinia* (1921) and the short story 'Sun' (1926).

Here a close reading of those texts is proposed in order to point out those linguistic features that highlight Lawrence's idea of and attitude towards the Sicilian landscape and people and sketch his descriptive technique.

2. The spirit of place

The starting point cannot but be Lawrence's elaboration of the concept of 'spirit of place'. In the opening chapter of the essay *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), entitled 'The Spirit of Place' – first published in *English Review* in November 1918 –, Lawrence defines the spirit of place as the strong vital force able to maintain that otherness which differentiates a given place from any other. It should not be intended as something superficial, external, or natural, that is as something simply defining the territory of a given place, but as the very soul of the place, which has influenced behaviours, attitudes, beliefs, and practices of the people inhabiting it. He writes:

Every continent has its own great spirit of place. Every people is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland. Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality. (SCAL, 5-6)

The relation man / environment is pivotal in Lawrence's definition as the choice of the word 'place' suggests. A 'place' is usually defined as a cultural and anthropological category in contrast with 'space', which instead is defined as a physical and philosophical category (Michelucci, 1998: 14). In other words, men use space to define place and, by marking it, they transform a physical space into a human and cultural reality, i.e. in a place. This influence of a given culture on a given space differentiates it from all the other possible infinite and absolute spaces and defines it as a finite and controlled place determined by and bound to the identity of a given people (Michelucci, 1998: 15-16).

A similar concept is expressed in *Sea and Sardinia* where Lawrence writes:

Wherever one is, the place has its conscious genius. Man has lived there and brought forth his consciousness there and in some way that place to consciousness, given it its expression, and, really, finished it. (SS, 122-123)

The words above suggest that Lawrence's spirit of place can be seen as the modern development of the Latin *genius loci*, i.e. the deity that guarded a place or a city and which gave life to its nature. The strong belief in the existence – and power – of the *genius loci* made the ancient peoples confident of the necessity to reach a compromise with the genius of the place where they wanted to settle, even temporarily. In an animistic culture, which much appealed to Lawrence, the relationship between a place and its genius was supposed to have a strong physical and psychological influence on the men inhabiting that place (Brilli, 1997: 16), the close vital connection Lawrence speaks of in the essay 'The Spirit of Place'.

3. Pictorialism in Sicilian descriptions

The first element constituting the spirit of place is the natural landscape. Traditionally, quite all the descriptions of the Italian landscape in foreign (travel) books are informed by pseudo-romantic categories; travellers indulge in emphasising the unspoilt nature of landscape, the suggestions of history, the presence of ancient relics, the folklore, the sacred rites (Brilli, 1997: 10). Such a stereotyped view of Italy can also be found in Lawrence's texts: Sicily is the land of sunshine or, to quote Goethe's famous definition of Italy, 'das Land, wo die Citronen blühen' (the land where lemons bloom). The descriptions of the landscape, therefore, focus on the richness of the fruits of the soil, as in the following example, taken from *Sea and Sardinia*, where Lawrence is giving his farewell to his Sicilian house before leaving for Sardinia:

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.[...] Ah, dark garden, dark garden, with your olives and your wine, your medlars and mulberries and many almond trees, your steep terraces ledged high up above the sea, I am leaving you, slinking out. Out between the rosemary hedges, out of the tall gate, on to the cruel steep stony road. So under the dark, big eucalyptus tree, over the stream, and up towards the village. (SS, 5)

As the quite obsessive repetition of the adjective 'dark' suggests, it is very early in the morning and the sun has not risen yet. The author sees the landscape through the eyes of his memory which is arisen by the scents that he, and the reader with him, can smell. In addition, Lawrence's repeated references to flowers and fruits create a visual scene that the reader cannot but see painted in colours.

Similarly, in the following excerpt the Sicilian landscape is rendered through the reference to lemons and oranges:

When there comes a cluster of orange trees, the oranges are red like coals among darker leaves. But lemons, lemons, innumerable, speckled like innumerable tiny stars in the green firmament of leaves. So many lemons! Think of all the lemonade crystals they will be reduced to! (SS, 8)

This is another description appealing to the reader's senses, sight in particular. The reiterated reference to lemons, as well as the simile employed, makes the reader see the Sicilian landscape as an immense green sky scattered with yellow spots. Such a pictorial use of colours, impressionistic, even pointillist, is what is usually referred to as pictorialism.

Defined by Winner (1970: 70) as 'the practice of describing people, places, scenes, or parts of scenes as they were paintings or subjects for painting and the use of art objects for thematic perception and overtone', the term pictorialism, in fact, refers to the presence of pictorial elements in a written text. The use of pictorialism is not limited to 'decorate' landscape descriptions, it also embodies the author's ideas through the artistic perceptions of his characters. In Torgovnick's taxonomy (1985) there are different layers of pictorialism: *decorative use*, *biographical use*, *interpretive use* (divided into *perceptual* and *hermeneutic*), *iconographical use* and *ideological use*. According to Torgovnick (1985: 14-23), a decorative use is present in all those passages where descriptions are influenced by a particular pictorial movement or by a particular painter; a biographical use is present in those passages which refer to the author's personal involvement in the visual arts; a perceptual use of the visual art is made when the presence of pictorial images allows the emergence of the characters' consciousness; a hermeneutic use allows the readers' understanding of some 'hidden' meaning; an iconographical use makes reference to the presence in the text of images which can be perceived by the reader as real paintings; and an ideological use can be seen in those parts where references to the visual arts embody major themes, like the author's view of politics, history, society, or reality in general.

That analysed in the previous examples is the simplest and most evident form of pictorialism, that is the *decorative use* of the visual arts. But Lawrence's pictorialism is not limited to write colourful descriptions, it also allows him to introduce symbolic elements to go beyond the stereotypical views of Italy. The beginning of the short story 'Sun' presents a mythopoeitic description of the Sicilian landscape:

And though the Atlantic was grey as lava, they [Juliet and her child] did come at last into the sun. Even she had a house above the bluest of seas, with a vast garden, or vineyard, all vines and olives, dropping steeply in terrace after terrace, to the strip of coast palm; and the garden full of secret places, deep groves of lemon far down in the cleft of earth, and hidden, pure green reservoirs of water; then a spring issuing out of a little cavern, where the old Sicules had drunk before the Greeks came; and a grey boat bleating, stabled in an ancient tomb with the niches empty. There was the scent of mimosa, and beyond, the snow of the volcano. (S, 425)

The above words remind the reader of a sort of garden of Eden in a description strongly appealing to the senses: sight (the colours), taste (water) and smell (perfumes), particularly. Two other interesting elements in this excerpt are the reference to the primitive people of the Sicules and that to Aetna, the Sicilian volcano. The reference to the historical past is another constant presence in books about Italy, particularly in those books involving travel since not only does travelling imply a movement in space, but it also involves an excursion in time (Brilli, 1997: 11). And Lawrence's experience in Italy was marked by a necessity to delve into the past of the country and it is in the fascination of the ancient sites that he perceived the spirit of place (Corsani, 1965: 77).

Similarly, the presence of the volcano, which seems to recall the deity of the *genius loci*, is another stereotype deriving from the 19th century love for ruins and attraction for danger (Milani, 2001: 148-149) (and incidentally it should be remembered that god Vulcan was believed to live inside Aetna). Aetna is ever present in all Lawrence's passages about Sicily. *Sea and Sardinia*, for instance, opens with a personification of the volcano, whose magic is strengthened by its position by the sea and its threatening activity, and with an explicit reference to its importance to the ancients:

[T]hen Etna, that wicked witch, resting her thick white snow under heaven, and slowly, slowly rolling her orange-coloured smoke. They called her the Pillar of Heaven, the Greeks. (SS,1)

Its presence is so overwhelming that, in Lawrence's opinion, it has even influenced the temperament of Sicilian people:

There must be something curious about the proximity of a volcano. Naples and Catania alike, the men are hugely fat, with great macaroni paunches, they are expansive and in a perfect drip of causal affection and love. But the Sicilians are even more wildly exuberant and fat and all over one another than the Neapolitans. They never leave off being amorously friendly with almost everybody, emitting a relentless physical familiarity that is quite bewildering to one not brought up near a volcano. (SS, 7-8)

Such a consideration is in line with Lawrence's definition of the spirit of place as a polarity man/environment, which implies that not only does a community permeate a given place by settling there, but it is influenced by that place in the process of building its own identity, its customs, its traditions (Michelucci, 1998: 22). In 'The Spirit of Place' Lawrence writes:

Men are free when they belong to a living, organic, *believing* community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled, perhaps unrealized purpose. Not when they are escaping to some wild west. (SCAL, 6)

The above words suggest that man and his environment share a sort of vital force which lives on only when man lives in close contact with his homeland; on the one hand, man shapes his territory to adapt it to his own needs, as much as he can, on the other hand, man is deeply influenced by the 'wild' nature of his environment.

This sort of symbiosis between man and nature is also an important element of 'Sun' where the natives are always portrayed as living in communion with the place. The story is about Juliet, an American woman, who is advised by her doctor to go into the sun to cure her never overtly defined disease. She leaves her husband at home and goes to Sicily with her little child, and there she follows her doctor's suggestion to sunbathe in complete nakedness. Central to the protagonist's development is an unnamed peasant that Lawrence portrays as fully integrated with nature. He is constantly seen at work in the fields, together with his ass, as in the following excerpt:

[She had] watched him come with his ass, watched him trimming the olive trees, working alone, always alone and physically powerful, with a broad

red face and a quite self-possession. She had spoken to him once or twice, and met his big blue eyes, dark and southern hot. And she knew his sudden gestures, a little violent and overgenerous. (S, 434)

This view of the peasant is, in a sense, romanticised. Juliet sees the man as a nature's son, his toil – and possible poverty – is not taken into consideration, he is seen in his supposed 'wildness', in his primitivism, in his sexual power; in other words, he is the result of the 'spirit of Sicily'.

This idealized vision of the natives is emphasised by their contrast with foreigners. The unnamed peasant is contrasted with Juliet's husband; the former is fully integrated with nature and continuously seen in action, the latter, instead, is always seen standing still, foreigner to the Sicilian sun:

The old woman [...] found Maurice at a loss among the vine terraces, standing there in his grey felt hat and dark-grey city suit. He looked pathetically out of place in that resplendent sunshine and the grace of the old Greek world; like a blot of ink on the pale, sun-glowing slope. (S, 436)

The contrast is rendered also pictorially; the country man is associated with warm colours, the red of his face and the golden of the sun, whereas the city man is always portrayed in grey, he is so grey that he is not a real man to the old Sicilian maid who accompanies him.

Another inescapable presence in the pages about Sicily is the sun. Both in *Sea and Sardinia* and in 'Sun' it shines all the year round. In the short story, in particular, the sun – as the title itself suggests – is a constant presence, it pervades the whole story and becomes the very symbol of Sicily; not just an environmental presence, but an active protagonist: it is through her daily exposure to the sunbeams that Juliet's recovery is possible. At first, Juliet is distrustful and constantly looks for shelter in the shadow of a cypress tree, then she starts feeling confident with the sun as its beneficial effects become evident:

Her heart of anxiety, that anxious, straining heart, had disappeared altogether, like a flower that falls in the sun, and leaves only a little ripening fruit. And her tense womb, though still closed, was slowly unfolding, slowly, slowly, like a lily bud under water, as the sun mysteriously touched it. Like a lily bud under water it was slowly rising to the sun, to expand at last, to the sun, only to the sun. (S, 428)

Eventually, she becomes like 'sun-addicted', she needs to sunbathe because she feels that 'it was much more than that. Something deep inside her unfolded and relaxed, and she was given to a cosmic influence' (431). She also ceases to care about external circumstances (Juliet and her child go naked without thinking of the other people's gazes) and she realizes that she is 'another being' (431) as her child is:

When, out of the sun at noon, sometimes she stole down over the rocks and past the cliff-edge, down to the deep gully where lemons hung in cool eternal shadow; and in the silence slipped off her wrapper to wash herself quickly at one of the deep, clear green basins, she would notice, in the bare

green twilight under the lemon caves, that all her body was rosy, rosy, and turning to gold. She was like another person. She was another person. (S, 429)

Once again the Sicilian landscape is painted in green and yellow. Here the use of colours is functional to render Juliet's self perception as she eventually becomes aware of the effect Sicily has on her. This is an example of what Torgovnick (1985: 22) has called *interpretive use* of the visual arts, a *perceptual* use to be more precise, as it allows Juliet's consciousness and self-awareness to emerge.

Throughout the story, Lawrence renders Juliet's relationship with the sun in sexual terms, as the following examples make clear:

Soon, however, she felt the sun inside them [her breasts], warmer than ever love had been, warmer than milk or the hands of her baby. At last, her breasts were like long white grapes in the hot sun. (S, 426)

She was thinking inside herself, of the sun in his splendour, and his entering into her. Her life was now a secret ritual. (S, 427)

Thus, the sun is healer and lover at the same time and the two functions are to be seen as strictly connected. Lawrence seems to suggest that it is her new sexual awareness that makes Juliet recover from her disease, and the sexual nature of her awakening is made clear by her attraction for the Sicilian peasant whose vital force she compares to that of the sun:

But now the strange challenge of his eyes had held her, blue and overwhelming like the blue sun's heart. And she had seen the fierce stirring of the phallus under his thin trousers: for her. And with his red face, and with his broad body, he was like the sun to her, the sun in its broad heat. (S, 434)

In this way, Lawrence guides the readers towards the understanding of the real nature of Juliet's disease and helps them decode the symbolism used in the story. This is another aspect of the interpretive use of the visual arts, the *hermeneutic* use, as it enhances the readers' understanding of the story and its symbolism (Torgovnick, 1985: 23). This interpretation of the relationship between Juliet and the sun is reinforced by the fact that Juliet's attraction for the Sicilian peasant is parallel to that for the sun; at first she cannot accept even the idea of being attracted by a peasant, 'a crude beast for her to think' (434), then she recognizes that 'her womb is open to him' (435):

Then his eyes met hers, and she felt the blue fire running through her limbs to her womb, which was spreading in the helpless ecstasy. Still they looked into each other's eyes, and the fire flowed between them, like the blue, streaming fire from the heart of the sun. And she saw the phallus rise under his clothing, and knew he would come towards her. (S, 433)

As can be seen, Juliet's encounter with the peasant is from a distance and it is just by looking at him (and feeling looked at by him) that she starts her process of

(re)awakening, and, indeed, the eye is usually the threshold of knowledge in Lawrence (Torgovnick, 1985: 155). Juliet, in fact, often observes the peasant at work or with his family from her terrace as if she were looking at a picture:

She knew the peasant by sight: a man over thirty, broad and very powerfully set. She had many times watched him from the terrace of her house. (S, 434)

And when she is on the terrace with her husband and sees the peasant with his wife under a tree, she perceives them as part of a scene, like a picture:

The peasant looked up at the terrace, as soon as the American emerged. Juliet put her husband with his back to the scene. Then she sat down, and looked back at the peasant. Until she saw his dark-visaged wife turn to look to. (S, 441)

This is an example of *iconographical use* of the visual arts, consisting in the presence of images which can be perceived by the reader as real paintings and which are often 'framed', in the sense that the observer's point of view is physically limited as if the picture were in a real frame (Torgovnick, 1985: 21). (Also in *Sea and Sardina* Lawrence's farewell look at the Sicilian soil is from the window of his veranda (SS, 4)). As has been seen, 'Sun' is full of more or less explicit sexual references which suggest that only a life in contact with the unspoiled nature can free (wo)men from their cultural and/or social constraints. This implies that the beneficial effect of the Sicilian sun should not be separated from the 'meeting' with the peasant who awakens Juliet's senses with his unmediated sexuality. Nonetheless, Juliet dare not satisfy her desire and reconciles, even sexually, with her husband. Sadly enough, her reconciliation is due to her being unable to go beyond, but her self-awareness is complete and the cure of the sun has saved her from depression. These are the concluding words of the story:

And the little etiolated body of her husband, city-branded, would possess her, and his little, frantic penis would beget another child in her. She could not help it. She was bound to the vast, fixed wheel of circumstances, and there was no Perseus in the universe to cut the bond. (S, 443)

The relation man/woman, often portrayed in terms of strife, is a major theme in Lawrence's production. Love is to him the propelling force of the universe and the erotic impulse is an integral part of human beings that social conventions have distorted (Merlini, 1986: 134). His pictorial images in 'Sun', therefore, embody Lawrence's view of life and the theme that paradigmatically crosses all his literary output, an *ideological use* of the visual arts (Torgovnick, 1985: 14-19).

This brief analysis has shown that Lawrence's landscape descriptions make a great use of colours and, therefore, appeal to the reader's senses; they really make the reader 'see' the scenes described. This decorative use of the visual arts is particularly interesting considering that Lawrence was also a painter. But not only does Lawrence use pictorialism to 'colour' the verbal surface of the text, he also makes an interpretive use of the visual arts allowing his character's awareness and guiding the readers' interpretation, an iconographical use of the visual arts using his words to picture scenes,

like a painting of Renoir or Cezanne, and an ideological use of the visual arts in order to communicate his ideas through the artistic perceptions of his characters as his pictorial images tend to be symbolic and, therefore, embody the author's view of life.

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