

"Wherein Does Fitness Lie?": Darwinian Fitness and Presence in D. H. Lawrence**Sarah Bouttier**

There are numerous studies on the influence of evolution in Lawrence's works,¹ and as many on Lawrence's reappraisal of time.² Yet few consider these together. Anne Fernihough posits that linear evolutionary time eroded presence and was therefore to be subverted by Lawrence: "For Lawrence, the linear version of time upon which Darwinian theory rests can never capture 'presence,' since it is based on the method in which presence is continually deferred. It posits itself [. . .] on absence rather than presence" (177). This idea is particularly useful in understanding the conflict between fitness and presence: a Darwinian notion of fitness is at odds with presence because it inserts the life of an organism into a linear conception of time for which the present has in itself no value, since it is only considered in its relationship to the future (will the creature or the characteristic survive?). Presence, in this context, refers to an object's material and historical existence, what Lawrence believes all art should aim to express. Presence amounts to the "existence of matter" (Lawrence, *Phoenix* 568) as opposed to "the abstracted reality" (*Phoenix* 569) of things as we usually perceive them through our logical minds.

In her seminal study, Fernihough frames this thought within a general appraisal of Lawrence's aesthetics but her point is not specifically to address evolutionary images in Lawrence's texts. For Ronald Granofsky, the tension generated by Lawrence's endorsement of a Darwinian notion of fitness is mainly due to his own anxiety of survival, his health being notoriously weak (Granofsky 8). This biographical explanation encompasses but does not dwell on Lawrence's emphasis on presence rather than progress. This article will argue that other factors, such as Lawrence's reappraisal of fitness as illness rather than health when one is facing a noxious environment, trigger creative conflicts within Lawrence's texts. In that point, this article differs from Granofsky's study, which comments upon the clash between fitness and presence thus: "Lawrence may be said to 'inherit' from Darwin and Spencer the circularity of his argument at this point, but the result in his fiction is unfortunate. It has the sanction of the very evolutionary theory Lawrence claims to reject" (33). Rather, this article will show that where Lawrence's texts grapple with the antagonism of the notion of fitness with his will to represent creatures in the present time, the relating conflict underlying his works can be creative.

Indeed, Lawrence's revision of Darwinian fitness is original in many ways. Its main characteristic, its ecological dimension, draws on another famous evolutionary trope, Darwin's 'entangled bank' as it is described in the last paragraph of *The Origin of Species*, in which Darwin shows a certain fascination for the interconnectedness of all living beings. However, Lawrence's revision focuses on the individual and its presence rather than on the abstract snarl in which all creatures are trapped, which is a more common interpretation of this trope. Moreover, the inevitable tensions led by the introduction of the notion of fitness in literary texts – the impossibility of reconciling fitness and presence, and its corollary, the impossibility of defining criteria a priori – add depth and intensity to the creatures represented, as the latter struggle to remain fit while not being abstracted by their fitness. In the context of literary history, Lawrence's revision of Darwinian fitness combines a linear account of evolution,

which recalls some Victorian thinkers and novelists, with a Modernist attempt to subvert this linearity and to emphasise the presence of his poetic objects. In this genuinely Lawrentian vision, a creature acquires fitness through its insertion and reaction to a system which must be far-reaching and perpetually evolving, be it the entire cosmos, or a network of images in a poem.

In *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin assessed fitness retrospectively, leading him to theorise the workings of natural selection. Lawrence, on the other hand, was a writer who wanted to capture his creatures and characters' presence, not to abstract them by inserting them into a grander narrative such as evolution; however, his work is, as Granofsky showed and as the quotation in the title of this article implies, pervaded with questions of fitness and survival. Lawrence's writing elaborates a personal conception of fitness, requiring him to eschew the theoretical frame of natural selection, and to consider fitness as more than an ability to survive. Conceptually, this disentanglement is contentious, perhaps accounting for Lawrence's reluctance to define his own criteria of fitness:

The quick is God-flame, in everything. And the dead is dead. In this room where I write, there is a little table that is dead: it doesn't even weakly exist. And there is a ridiculous little iron stove, which for some unknown reason is quick. And there is an iron wardrobe trunk, which for some still more mysterious reason is quick. And there are several books, whose mere corpus is dead, utterly dead and non-existent. And there is a sleeping cat, very quick. And a glass lamp, alas, is dead.

What makes the difference? *Quien sabe!* But difference there is. And I know it. (*Phoenix II* 419)

Here, Lawrence struggles with the impossibility of giving an abstract definition of what it is to be quick, fully alive. Margot Norris ascribes this difficulty to Lawrence's reluctance to reduce the flame to its components or to a law of nature (178). It could be reformulated in terms of fitness and presence: the iron stove's fitness *is*, and saying more would be inserting it into an abstract causal logic which would diminish its immediate presence at the moment of the description. However, this quotation shows a major feature of a potential Lawrentian fitness: what counts for Lawrence is not so much the definition of vitality as the interactions between quick things and dead things. The quickness of a thing or creature depends on its difference, that is to say on its insertion within a system in which it may be compared to other creatures and interact with them. Fitness, when it becomes Lawrentian, thus acquires an ecological dimension, in the sense that it is concerned with the relations of organisms to one another and to their surroundings.

Conversely, bodies absolutely disconnected from their environment, as in the poem "Bathing Resort" (*Complete Poems* 826) offer additional clues as regards the Lawrentian conception of fitness. Bathers lying on an Austrian lakeshore are ironically deemed "healthy":

All of them healthy

 Their skins all neat
 With full-fed meat
 Biologically admirable
 They'd be good to eat. (42-49)

This health is equated with a form of biological perfection, overtly criticised by the poet. Indeed, the adjective "admirable" gives the impression that the sunbathers' bodies are the result of a successful manipulation. Lawrence's awareness of the question of fitness, and the evolutionary vocabulary of the poem, which mentions "epochs" and refers to the bathers by a species name, "the humans," suggest that this manipulation is no less than a form of natural selection, whose aim is to produce individuals as fit to their environments as possible. However, this biological perfection is criticised as it does not come along with a perfect insertion in one's environment; on the contrary, Lawrence's sunbathers are inert, and do not interact with their surroundings:

Great thighs that lead nowhere
 Yet are fleeced with soft hair.
 Breasts that wink not
 Heads that think not
 Bellies that shrink not
 In the white air. (26-31)

In this poem, Lawrence clearly distances himself from biological accounts of fitness: if what is judged 'biologically admirable' is also described as inert and failing to connect with its environment, then Lawrence's own account of fitness differs from a biological account of fitness. A genuinely Lawrentian fitness must depend on a will, even an unconscious one, to enter into contact with one's environment, a tendency of which the bodies on the beach are deprived. A 'fit' body for Lawrence would be a body in movement, connecting itself to its surroundings.

For Lawrence, basing a creature's degree of fitness upon an ecological criterion allows the natural world to become a system and no longer a mass of disconnected species that have happened to survive. In this natural environment, a creature's fitness is conditioned by its degree of interaction with others. How, then, is this Lawrentian fitness distinct from a Darwinian fitness? The distinction lies in the fact that the effort to reach out is essential to Lawrence while it is only necessary in natural selection if it conditions survival. Indeed, for Darwin, "natural selection acts by life and death, by the survival of the fittest, and by the destruction of the less well-fitted individuals" (239). Therefore, the only criterion for the fitness of a form of life or of a characteristic in the theory of natural selection is its survival, an idea that underlies many of Darwin's developments, as the following:

Natural selection may modify and adapt the larva of an insect to a score of contingencies, wholly different from those which concern the mature insect; and these modifications may affect, through correlation, the structure of the adult. So, conversely, modifications in the adult may affect the structure of the larva; but in all cases natural selection will ensure that they shall not be injurious: for if they were so, the species would become extinct. (99)

It is apparent here that all modifications implemented by natural selection necessarily work towards more fitness at a given time, since modifications of any other kind would provoke the species' extinction. Therefore, only survival can condition fitness: whatever is not fit has simply not survived. This take on fitness faces what Mills and

Beatty have named "the charge of explanatory circularity": only what is fit survives, and only what survives is fit (161).

By making the reaching out, the interaction, an end and not a means to ensure survival, Lawrence avoids this Darwinian tautological structure in which fitness is equated with mere survival and which does not include any other criterion for fitness, as well as avoiding the abstraction problematic to an illustration of the notion of survival. Fitness and an emphasis on the present time coexist in Lawrence's writing. Indeed, it is really in its relation to the present time, the moment lived by individuals, that Lawrentian fitness is distinguishable from Darwinian fitness. In order to fully understand this distinction, one must compare what, in Lawrence, pertains to the movement of living matter as a whole and what pertains to the movement defining an individual's fitness. It appears that for Lawrence, living matter is animated by a movement of self-preservation, an eternal return to the centre and the origin of life, with no other aim than the continuity of its existence. In that, it differs greatly from the movement animating a 'fit' individual in a Lawrentian text. In terms of time-frame, the movement of living matter is only perceptible in the abstract, longer time of natural history while the movement of the individual is perceptible in the present moment.

That is why, when comparing the behaviour of living matter in the shape of an undifferentiated "living plasm" ("Poetry of the Present," *Complete Poems* 182) with the behaviour of the bodies lying on the beach in "Bathing Resort" (*Complete Poems* 824) and "August Holidays" (*Complete Poems* 826), one understands that the characteristics of the movement of living matter do not necessarily ensure fitness when they apply to a Lawrentian individual. Indeed, in Lawrence's texts, the perpetual struggle for self-preservation and the escape from the linearity of finality and the passage of time are sources of wonder when ascribed to living matter as a whole, but condemned when characterizing an individual. For example, the movement for self-preservation takes the form of a fascinating vibration when it comes to matter ("the living plasm vibrates unspeakably") (*Complete Poems* 182), while the bathers abandoned to the sole movement of their breathing are despised for their apathy: "They lie on the shore and heave / Deep panting breaths, like great beasts ready for slaughter" ("Bathing Resort" 15-16). The simple movement of breathing is enough to fascinate the poet when he describes the movement of living matter, but seems insufficient to satisfy him when it animates individual bodies.

Similarly, the absence of finality is celebrated in "Poetry of the Present"'s apology of living matter ("There is no plasmic finality, nothing crystal, permanent") while it is condemned in the bathers' behaviour: "Now wet, now dry / Without wherefore or why / Back and forth in a blind movement" ("August Holidays" 31-33). Finally, the escape of living matter from a linear vision of time is praised: "The living plasm [. . .] inhales the future, it exhales the past, it is the quick of both, and yet it is neither." (*Complete Poems* 182), while it is seen in a negative light when pertaining to the sunbathers: "All that will be, all that has been / - There is nothing between - / Now is nothing!" ("August Holidays" 20-22). In those quotations, it appears that Lawrence marvels at the sheer, purposeless being of matter, but sees it as preventing individual bodies from being connected satisfyingly with their environment and from living fully in the present.

Whereas the Lawrentian living matter exists only through this vibrating movement of eternal return to itself, Lawrentian individuals endowed with vitality must transcend this movement in order to connect with each other, inscribe their existence in the historical present, and react to their environment. That is exactly what

the sunbathers by the Austrian lakeshore fail to do, as they are repeatedly described as apathetic. Lawrence opposes an ideal form of living: "The upright is temporal, is effort, is outreach," with the bathers' inertia: "Horizontal eternity, fluid or null" ("Bathing Resort" 22-23).

In that sense, fitness and the movement of living matter have diametrically opposite attributes in Darwinian theory and in the Lawrentian conception of life: whereas in natural selection, living matter, in the form of species, evolves eternally but not in each creature (which does not prevent the latter from being 'fit'), for Lawrence, living matter preserves itself eternally but makes a movement, an effort (and thereby, evolves) in each creature. Not only does the movement of evolution happen in the present time for Lawrence, but it also conditions its fitness, while in Darwinian evolutionary theory, an individual can be fit without manifesting any movement of adaptation. Indeed, Darwin situates adaptive change between the generations: no evolutionary change or movement of adaptation happens during a creature's lifetime, as Darwin establishes that adapted creatures only reproduce more than others, and therefore that it is from one generation to the other that, very slowly, adapted characteristics appear:

[. . .] If variations useful to any organic being ever do occur, assuredly individuals thus characterised will have the best chance of being preserved in the struggle for life; and from the strong principle of inheritance, these will tend to produce offspring similarly characterised. This principle of preservation, or the survival of the fittest, I have called natural selection. (Darwin 160)

Since even the initial "variation" is actually present in the individual from its birth, it appears that in a Darwinian time-frame, no interesting change happens to an individual during its lifetime: the movement of adaptation to one's environment is therefore not visible at the level of the individual. Conversely, Lawrence, in locating fitness in the individual's reaching out, in its own movement towards its environment, allows fitness to be manifest at the level of each individual, in the present time, and not only within the longer time-frame of the history of species and living matter.

The behaviour of Il Duro, a young Italian whom Lawrence meets in San Gaudenzio in 1912 and describes in *Twilight in Italy* (1916) allows us to define more precisely the movement and interaction necessary to Lawrentian fitness. It is, indeed, very different from the movement of adaptation to one's environment present in the theory of natural selection. At first sight, however, both behaviours could be taken as one and the same, since Il Duro lives in perfect harmony with the earth out of which he seems to have emerged:

He mixed the messy stuff, cow-dung and lime and water and earth, carefully with his hands, as if he understood that too. He was not a worker. He was a creature in intimate communion with the sensible world, knowing purely by touch the limey mess he mixed amongst, knowing as if by relation between that soft matter and the matter of himself.

Then again he strode over the earth, a gleaming piece of earth himself, moving to the young vines. (*Twilight in Italy* 177)

Il Duro is a very 'fit' character in Lawrentian terms because he maintains a vital connection with his environment. However, Lawrence mentions Il Duro's previous

illness: "He had been ill two years before. His cheeks seemed to harden like marble and to become pale at the thought. He was afraid, like marble with fear" (175). Here is one of the recurring and paradoxical characteristics of Lawrentian fitness: it adapts with, or even generates, a certain degree of illness, of proximity with death.

Therefore, being fit according to Lawrence's vision does not ensure survival, and may even sometimes hasten one's death. Thus, in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), Mellors is close both to the purest vitality and to death, as the first description of him reveals:

He was in trousers and flannel shirt, with a grey tie, his hair soft and damp, his face rather pale and worn-looking. When the eyes ceased to laugh, they looked as if they had suffered a great deal, still without losing their warmth. But a pallor of isolation came over him – she was not really there for him. And she felt a curious difference about him, a vividness; and yet, not far from death itself. (68)

This odd association may be explained by the Lawrentian idea according to which illness in fit bodies amounts to a healthy defence, a survival reaction and thus the expression of the greatest 'fitness,' against the devitalizing process undergone by modern humanity. This theory is notably articulated by Rupert Birkin, in *Women in Love* (1920): "'Maybe,' he said. 'Though one knows all the time one's life isn't really right, at the source. That's the humiliation. I don't see that the illness counts so much, after that. One is ill because one doesn't live properly – can't. It's the failure to live that makes one ill, and humiliates one'" (125).

If an intense reaction to one's environment is the *sine qua non* for a Lawrentian fitness, this reaction is not necessarily that of Darwinian adaptation: for Lawrence, if the environment is noxious, it appears better to reject that environment, even if it means becoming ill, than to slavishly adapt to it. A Darwinian reaction of survival, on the contrary, involves adaptation at all costs, with no further insight than what serves survival at a given time:

As natural selection acts by competition, it renders the inhabitants of each country perfect only in relation to the other inhabitants; so that we need feel no surprise at the species of any one country, although on the ordinary view supposed to have been created and specially adapted for that country, being beaten and supplanted by the naturalised productions from another land. (559)

For Darwin, then, if an alien factor such as the introduction of a new species happens to change a given environment, fitness to the environment's previous state becomes of no use. The extreme relativity of this notion of fitness is distinct from Lawrence's selective conception of fitness, his injunction, uttered by Birkin, to "live properly" (125). In this, Lawrence also differs from another author concerned with Darwinian notions of survival: Hardy, who, in spite of his own horror at such amorality, pictures the characters who survive (and therefore the fittest) as often not the 'purest' but the best adapted to their harmful social environment (Richardson 16).

Lawrentian fitness may thus be better illustrated by an interaction that is always faithful to a general principle of life than by the survival and reproduction of an individual because it bears adaptive characteristics. Darwinian evolutionary theory, locating, as mentioned earlier, the movement of evolution between the generations,

could be said to deprive individuals of a sense of responsibility. This is visible in Darwin's comparison of natural selection with the selection operated by breeders on domestic species (Darwin 91-97), and in his conscious personification of nature:

It may metaphorically be said that natural selection is daily and hourly scrutinising, throughout the world, the slightest variations; rejecting those that are bad, preserving and adding up all that are good; silently and insensibly working, whenever and wherever opportunity offers, at the improvement of each organic being in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life. (96)

In this conception of natural selection, no latitude is given to the individual, which appears as the passive object of the workings of nature. Lawrence, on the other hand, seems to consider that the changes making for the evolution of a species happen within an individual's lifetime, so that this individual must react, and not only survive, to its environment.

Lawrence, therefore, is sometimes successful in distinguishing his own vision of fitness from a Darwinian vision of fitness. However, what he appears to find problematic in Darwinian fitness (its incompatibility with the present moment as lived by the individual, since it is only defined retrospectively by its survival) seems to affect his own notion of fitness as well. Indeed, a comparison of Lawrence's representations of Darwinian fitness with his own representation of fitness shows that they are faced with the same limit (as any kind of fitness is at odds with the author's will to give primacy to the present time) and that the conflict gives rise to creative tensions.

"August Holidays" and "Bathing Resort" include aspects of Darwinian fitness against which Lawrence pitches his own notion of fitness, as an intense and unceasing interaction with one's environment. Yet more fundamentally, by representing the sunbathers as apathetic, Lawrence criticises the absence of a 'present' in the time of natural selection:

They are making the pause
Between the epochs.
The life without laws
The time without clocks
Between the epochs.
When nothing is said
And nothing is done. ("August Holidays" 34-40)

Even though the bathers' bodies are 'biologically admirable,' their existence is trapped between evolutionary 'epochs,' much longer than their own lifetimes, so that they do appear apathetic. This can be interpreted as a Lawrentian critique of the Darwinian version of fitness. Indeed, unlike his predecessors, Darwin, as mentioned earlier, situates adaptive change between the generations: no evolutionary change happens during a creature's lifetime, the slowness of the process is often emphasised: "That natural selection will always act with extreme slowness, I fully admit. [. . .] I do believe that natural selection will always act very slowly, often only at long intervals of time, and generally on only a very few of the inhabitants of the same region at the same time" (108). For Lawrence, on the contrary, the emphasis must be laid on the creature's presence, the immediacy of its experience. That is why the introduction of a

Darwinian vision of fitness in his poem gives rise to such apocalyptic visions of inert bodies.

It must be noted that in these poems, Lawrence identifies a version of Darwinian fitness which is even more at odds with presence than the original notion of Darwinian fitness – the interpretation popularised by Victorian thinkers, according to which fitness, redefined as physical health, is an aim in itself. This vision seems endorsed here by the sunbathers:

Health is everything, health is all –
 Money is merely
 The wherewithal

 They are all healthy, healthy, healthy. ("Bathing Resort" 1-3, 9)

This reveals Lawrence's move away from Darwin who did not directly equate fitness with health. In *The Origin of Species*, even though he often refers to the idea of biological perfection which reminds us of the sunbathers' "biological admirability," marvelling, for example, at the complex structure of an eye, he deems an organ perfect only in that it perfectly serves a purpose such as seeing, or flying (Darwin 223-226). On the contrary, popularisers such as the social theorist philosopher Herbert Spencer emphasise the need for biological perfection, seeing the 'perfect man' in the 'perfect society' as the endpoint of evolution, and establishing ideal rules to follow in order to reach it: "For the average man [. . .] the desideratum is, a training that approaches nearest to perfection in the things which most subserve complete living, and falls more and more below perfection in the things that have more and more remote bearing on complete living" (11). In Lawrence's poems, this perfection has been reached, but with the result that the present time is not only considered non-existent, but also moved into a form of transfixed, apathetic eternity:

Along the lake, like seals, like seals,
 That bask and wake, oh high and dry
 High and dry
 The humans lie. ("August Holidays" 1-4)

While within the frame of evolutionary time, the present is not considered important, individual lives are still anchored within a greater natural history, made of 'epochs.' The present time is not the moment in which events take place, but at least it is a necessary step in the unfolding of this natural history. Yet in the case of the sunbathers, even this vision of the present is dismissed, in favour of plain apathy. Then, the sunbathers are trapped between a linear evolutionary time necessarily deprived of a present, and an attempt to escape it which results in even less presence. Natural selection, the theoretical frame of Darwinian fitness, appears at odds with presence, yet the sunbather's interpretation of natural selection appears even more so. This gives rise to tensions which allow for and sustain the poetic vision of humans abandoned by evolution.

More surprisingly, among Lawrence's own interpretations (or, given that he overtly criticises Darwinian fitness, subversions) of Darwinian fitness, some are also at odds with presence. In those cases, his loyalty to presence creates greater and more fruitful tensions with his illustration of fitness. Indeed, very often, the texts featuring very fit characters along Lawrentian criteria (connection to one's environment, loyalty

to a general principle of life) are confronted with the same limits Lawrence denounces in the system implied by a Darwinian fitness – namely, the incompatibility of ‘fitness’ with a full acknowledgement of the present time. Just as the evolutionary time Darwinian fitness imposes in “Bathing Resort” and “August Holidays” nullifies the present, the primacy of ‘presence’ often prevents Lawrence’s characters and creatures from being complete expressions of fitness, even Lawrentian fitness. However, this limitation can be fruitful.

This fruitfulness can be found in the descriptions of Il Duro, the Italian peasant of *Twilight in Italy*. Indeed, Lawrence, at first sight, appears to be describing in this character a type of fitness not incompatible with an ability to live fully in the present. Il Duro is both fit along Lawrentian criteria, being intensely connected to the earth he cultivates, and able to reach a certain degree of plenitude in the present, without even resorting to the mediation of consciousness, as he is depicted cutting vines, “swiftly, vividly, without thought” (177). However, the ‘perfect’ fitness that Il Duro has reached seems to freeze him into a cold statue whose qualities are clearly not that of Lawrentian fitness as all the links with his surroundings seem severed: “It was too complete, too final, too defined. There was no yearning, no vague merging off into mistiness [. . .] He was clear and fine as semi-transparent rock, as a substance in moonlight. He seemed like a crystal that has achieved its final shape and has nothing more to achieve” (176).

In being absolutely fit, Il Duro is simultaneously a lively figure whose very kinship with the earth is expressly emphasised, and an inert, unresponsive glass statue, later likened to stone and marble (175). When Lawrence focuses on that aspect of the villager, he no longer emphasises his presence but, on the contrary, his complete abstraction: Il Duro is then depicted as “curiously indifferent [. . .] as if none of what he was doing was worth the while” (173). This tension, generated by the character’s inability to be perfectly fit and perfectly present at the same time, produces enough intensity to provoke a hostile reaction in the narrator (“it filled me with a sort of panic to see him”) (175) as well as in the villagers, as Il Duro is always markedly alone. As fitness does not show in the present, his perfect fitness, even as a Lawrentian one, makes him paradoxically inimical to his surroundings and the present time, and, therefore, ‘unfit’.

Lawrence’s fascination with perfectly fit creatures (along his own criteria of fitness) equals his urge to anchor his texts to the present time, and the resolution of these conflicting views not only gives rise to tensions which intensify the description of ‘fit’ characters but sometimes affects the structure of his narrations. Lawrentian fitness is based on an intense connection to one’s environment rather than mere survival. Such fitness is exemplified by St. Mawr, the stallion in the eponymous 1925 novella: “St. Mawr flew on, in a sort of *élan*. Marvellous the power and life in the creature. There was really a great joy in the motion” (49). This *élan* reminds us of Bergson’s *élan vital*, placing the horse in a tradition of vitalism that avoids the materialism and the linearity inherent in Darwin’s natural selection. Throughout the novella, St. Mawr unceasingly dashes towards things and people, either to embrace or to destroy them: his response to his surroundings is therefore very intense, and the stallion can be considered fit along Lawrence’s criteria. For that reason, his arrival in Mexico, presented as an intensely vital environment, should signal the apotheosis of his fitness – yet none of this happens:

St. Mawr arrived safely, a bit bewildered. The Texans eyed him closely, struck silent, as ever, by anything pure-bred and beautiful. He was

somehow too beautiful, too perfected, in this great open country. The long-legged Texan horses, with their elaborate saddles, seemed somehow more natural.

Even St. Mawr felt himself strange, as it were naked and singled out, in this rough place. Like a jewel among stones, a pearl before swine, maybe. But the swine were no fools [. . .]. They could see St. Mawr's points. Only he needn't draw the point too fine or it would just not pierce the tough skin of this country. (130)

This anticlimactic scene is St. Mawr's last appearance. Suddenly, St Mawr is no longer fit but, on the contrary, absolutely disconnected from his new surroundings. Why should it be so difficult to depict a climax of fitness? It seems that however distinct Lawrentian fitness may be from a biological or Darwinian one, it faces the same limit: just like the sunbathers,' St. Mawr's perfect fitness cannot be fully shown in the present. As a result, St.Mawr abruptly disappears from the narration. Lawrence cannot show full fitness, even the type of Lawrentian fitness identified in St. Mawr, as Cézanne, in Lawrence's essay on art quoted in the introduction, shows fully existing apples, because fitness and presence are at odds. This may explain the sudden disappearance of the stallion even though he is central to the narration, and the shift of focus in favour of the life in the mountains of New Mexico: if St. Mawr has become fully fit, perfect, he can no longer be 'present,' whereas presence is what Lawrence struggles for.

Following this shift of focus, the characters of the novella leave town and finally reach a place where presence is possible – though no longer associated with fitness. Indeed, they arrive in the mountains in autumn, the season which, according to Lawrence is the only one really present in such a desert:

It was autumn, and the loveliest time in the south-west, where there is no spring, snow blowing into the hot lap of summer; and no real summer, hail falling in thick ice from the thunderstorms: and even no very definite winter, hot sun melting the snow and giving an impression of spring at any time. But autumn there is, when the winds of the desert are almost still, and the mountains fume no clouds. But morning comes cold and delicate, upon the wild sunflowers and the puffing, yellow-flowered greasewood. For the desert blooms in autumn. In spring it is grey ash all the time, and only the strong breath of the summer sun, and the heavy splashing of thunder rain succeeds at last, by September, in blowing it into soft puffy yellow fire. (*Saint Mawr* 134)

Here, the tension between fitness and presence has given rise to a shift in focus, privileging presence over fitness. Even though the image of pure fitness represented by St. Mawr has disappeared from the narration, it has allowed for a representation of pure presence instead, a presence which is the complete antithesis of the situation of the sunbathers in "Bathing Resort" and "August Holidays." Indeed, those poems show the dreadful consequences of privileging fitness over presence, a process which makes the present void as opposed to a larger time-frame, natural selection, in which events actually take place. Conversely, this passage of *St. Mawr* shows characters reaching the only moment in the seasonal cycle which does really exist in the present ("But autumn there is").

Another form of tension appears from the conflict between Lawrence's own interpretation of fitness and his urge to anchor his texts in the present time. As demonstrated in this analysis of *St. Mawr*, if natural selection introduces the negation of 'presence,' fitness cannot show, or be fully acknowledged, in the present. While it is not an issue for science to explain the fitness of characteristics retrospectively, it may become one when the notion of fitness is introduced in literature, especially for an author like Lawrence, who tries to grasp 'presence,' and the present time and attempts to apply it to the notion of fitness. In particular, Lawrence is confronted with the difficulty of establishing other criteria for fitness than mere survival. Ronald Granofsky has said that in Lawrence's texts, natural selection is replaced by authorial power, the narration becoming the arena where the character's fitness may or may not be established:

Lawrence self-reflexively applies to his own writing this same method Norris describes in Darwin, allowing some ideas and characters to survive the crucible of conflict, while others perish. Lawrence himself becomes, in effect, the animal predator, or perhaps more accurately the breeder or calculator whom Darwin speaks of as practicing a form of human selection that is akin to the natural kind. (24)

In such a system, the author must somehow let some characters or creatures manifest a form of fitness *before* they survive or perish, which amounts to establishing criteria for his idea of fitness. As the following analysis shows, this enterprise proves very difficult.

The difficulty is manifest in "Rabbit Snared in the Night" (1917) (*Complete Poems* 240), a poem in which Lawrence attempts to describe a rabbit before killing it. Since the rabbit is not dead at the beginning of the poem, we expect to be shown clues of his fitness or unfitness (ability or inability to survive), followed by his survival or death. However, we are never given those clues. Somewhat insincerely, the persona repeatedly claims that he killed the rabbit because the rabbit had lured him into that slaughter through some obscure trick. It would then be the rabbit's 'desire' which made it unfit. However, the very rhetorical devices used to persuade us of the rabbit's complicity cast a doubt on this claim:

It *must* have been *your* inbreathing, gaping desire
that drew this red gush in me;
I *must* be reciprocating your vacuous, hideous passion.
.....
It *must* be you who desire
this intermingling of the black and monstrous fingers of Moloch
in the blood-jets of your throat. (34-36, 40-42) [my emphasis]

'Must' introduces some uncertainty, as if the persona tried to persuade himself and the reader of his innocence. Similarly, the use of imperatives, supposed to validate what the poet already sees, may be understood as plain orders:

Yes, bunch yourself between
my knees and lie still.
Lie on me with a hot, plumb, live weight,
heavy as a stone, passive,

yet hot, waiting. (5-9)

Finally, the open question concerning the rabbit's behaviour, "why do you spurt and sprattle like that, bunny?" is answered by the following interrogation: "why should I want to throttle you, bunny?" The rabbit "sprattle[s]" only so that the poet may want to "throttle" him: he is thus given no freedom to reveal criteria of fitness or unfitness. Instead, the poem is trapped in retrospective legitimization, in a tautological structure where the lack of fitness is only assessed by the rabbit's death. If the rabbit's presence, in its unpredictability, is not rendered, the tension arising from the conflict between representing fitness and anchoring one's text in the present time is nonetheless creative: this enterprise of legitimization and the controversial claim that the rabbit actually desires its death provoke a feeling of unease which gives the poem its depth. Thus, it appears that most forms of fitness at work in Lawrence's text are bound to clash with his will to represent the present time, the lived moment in all its plenitude. However, this conflict is often creative, endowing the description of the sunbathers in "Bathing Resort" and "August Holidays," of Il Duro in *Twilight in Italy*, of the "Rabbit Snared in the Night," and of the landscape deprived of the stallion in *St. Mawr* with the depth and intensity of oxymoronic images: peaceful sunbathers now become evolution's castaway, the unsettling vision of a rabbit willing to die, an Italian peasant both wonderfully alive and resembling a statue, and a miraculously blooming desert.

As well as offering productive creativity, this specifically Lawrentian outlook on fitness also affects the structure of his poetry. "Sicilian Cyclamens" (1923) (*Complete Poems* 310), for example, features the blooming of little bunches of cyclamens in Taormina. At the beginning, the flowers do not seem to match any classic criterion of fitness:

Frost-filigreed
Spumed with mud
Snail-nacreous
Low down. (18-21)

Their environment, mud, frost, toads and snails, seems to smother rather than nurture them, and "low down" as they are, they do not seem to be able to adapt to it: unlike Darwinian creatures, the cyclamens will not derive their vitality from perfect adaptation through gradual mutation. The flowers, however, will bloom later in the poem, as more elaborate images associate them with various creatures. Even though the associations are incongruous, they seem to condition this blooming. For example, through the metaphor of little greyhounds, the cyclamens are given a chance to open:

And cyclamens putting their ears back.
Long, pensive, slim-muzzled greyhound buds
Dreamy, not yet present,
Drawn out of earth
.....
Folding back their soundless petalled ears. (24-27, 37)

By giving them a metaphorical muzzle, Lawrence even allows them to breathe; a vital, if not strictly vegetal, activity. Their metaphorical action ("folding back their soundless petalled ears") echoes the actions of a hare later in the poem ("The hare

suddenly goes uphill / Laying back her long ears with unwinking bliss") and of savages earlier in the poem ("when he pushed his bush of black hair off his brow"), while they become more and more active and alive:

Muzzles together, ears-aprick,
Whispering witchcraft
Like women at a well, the dawn-fountain. (52-54)

There seems to be a correspondence between the blooming of the cyclamens – the revelation of their fitness – and their ability to metamorphose: as opposed to a Darwinian slow mutation whose purpose is to adapt to an environment, transformations of the cyclamens involve their own being and are ephemeral. Through their allotropy, their ability to vary and to be associated with different images while keeping their own nature, they gain the "fullness" of life, the ability to "do more than survive" (*Phoenix II* 468), which Lawrence conceived as his notion of fitness. By the end of the poem, their fitness has been so well established that they are declared to have survived since before the Greek classical period, when the Erechteion was built: "Dawn-pale / Among squat toad-leaves sprinkling the unborn / Erechteion marbles" (61-63). Lawrence insists that the very cyclamens he sees are those already present before the Greeks. He makes clear that the fitness of his flowers allows them to do more than survive as a species: they are indeed able to survive themselves as individuals, thus transcending survival in Darwinian terms of continuation of the species.

In the cyclamens, presence and fitness have been reconciled: it seems that from a literary point of view, it is through confronting the creatures to incongruous images, and having them metamorphose, rather than gradually mutate, in order to fit into a network of images, that Lawrence ensures the simultaneous presence and fitness of his creatures. In other words, the use of varied and multiple metaphors allows the poetic object to continue to be present in the poem (which could be considered as a form of literary 'survival' due to the poetic object's 'fitness') and to acquire a fuller presence within the text, as the intricate network of images gradually built around the object provides the reader with the sense of a more and more comprehensive vision of the poetic object.

In the context of literary history, Lawrence's revision of the notion of fitness is unique, in that it differs both from a Victorian appraisal of time and from a Modernist one. Lawrence combines a Victorian concern towards the link between evolution and a conception of time with a Modernist will to reflect individuals' experience of time. Victorians often reacted to evolutionary theory by understanding it as temporally linear: in their assessment of Victorian temporality, Hughes and Lund (1991) claim that evolutionary thought, even though it could give rise to both linear and chaotic accounts of natural history, often led Victorians to consider creation as "a slow unfolding of life forms over vast amounts of time." They link this phenomenon to Victorian historicism, which, "like serial emplotment, emphasised non-reversible sequences of events essential to cultural development, and history was viewed as an analogue to the developmental process of nature" (169).

Modernists were more aware that time was not necessarily linear. Many explanations are given for such a shift in the perception of temporality in the early twentieth century: Hughes and Lund ascribe this to "the displacing of biology by physics as dominant science" arguing that "the work of twentieth century physics actively resists such a framework [the evolutionary, linear one] and calls into question

not only linearity but also simplified notions of causality" (167). In *Modernism and Time* (2000), Ronald Schleifer considers Modernism as the age of the collision between past and present, a shift in the perception of time triggered by the second Industrial Revolution which brought out abundance instead of need and thereby a sense of complexity and crisis which undermined Victorian historicism (145).

Therefore, it was not in relation to time and presence that Lawrence's contemporaries considered evolutionary thought, instead associating evolutionary thought and the notion of fitness with matters related to social Darwinism and with the question of the legitimacy of artificially accelerating natural selection. As David Bradshaw points out in his chapter on eugenics in *The Concise Companion to Modernism* (2003), in the early twentieth century, eugenicist ideas were not yet tainted with fascist overtones, and writers such as T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Lawrence himself embraced them to varying degrees. Anxieties also still attended the blurred boundaries between human and animal, and the possibility of degeneration: evolution is still considered in its effect upon the qualities of present-time men and women, but not in its effect upon the primacy and reality of the present time in itself.

Thus, among Modernist writers, linearity is subverted through other means than a critique of the evolutionary account of time, such as free indirect speech in Joyce or the multiplicity of narrative voices in Woolf, devices which Lawrence would consider disembodied and 'self-conscious.'³ Unlike his contemporaries, Lawrence attempts to anchor a non-linear account of time in the physical world, and therefore to link it with the evolutionary thought which informs the time's ideas on nature. This proves all the more problematic as he considers that the Darwinian theory of evolution entails a linear conception of time: in *Mornings in Mexico*, 1927, he states, derogatorily, that the process of evolution is a "long string hooked onto a First Cause" (4). Therefore, his account of fitness, that is of the expression of the workings of natural selection within the individual, is bound to clash with his Modernist attempt to express a nonlinear temporality. Lawrence's endeavour to associate a preoccupation for his creatures and characters' presence with a revision of fitness positions him as a unique figure in the history of literary responses to evolutionary thought.

Notes

1. See, for example the first part of Jeff Wallace's *D. H. Lawrence, Science, and the Posthuman* (2005).

2. For instance, a section of Ronald Schleifer's *Modernism and Time* is devoted to an analysis of temporality in *The Rainbow* (1915, 139-146).

3. Michael Bell notes that for Lawrence the "formal self-consciousness of modernist art and writing" did not restore a depth of consciousness in the present time but amounted to "a further, indulgent symptom of the condition" of modernity as abstracting presence (182).

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