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## Lawrence and “Otherness”\*

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The discourses of otherness in postmodern theory are concerned with postcolonialism, gender, and the unconscious. The term “otherness” itself, though, is part of the heritage of Romanticism, and probably springs from the Sublime and the Gothic Uncanny. With Wordsworth, who (as Empson said) used the lakeland mountains as a father totem, dread acquired a moral force: the “sublime” is “sublimated” as an exceptionally powerful other. Blake’s Old Nobodaddy, the Old Testament God, was “other” in a slightly different way, prefiguring the Freudian splitting of the psyche and of language. When the French Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud said “je est un autre”, he split the syntax of French along a psychic boundary of alienation in order to see himself as both subject and object, entity and non-entity, poetry and the poet both in process. It is no accident that his mental splitting and his homosexual season in Hell with Verlaine issue in the existential exile of the illegal gun-runner. Abyssinia was as much “an other” to Rimbaud as Hawaii was to Gauguin, or the Congo to Conrad.

Lawrence, heir to Romanticism, responds to “otherness” at all these levels, beginning from the sense of “in-betweenness” registered, in *Sons and Lovers*, in the divided class allegiances (and the Oedipal splitting) of his childhood, and developing into the kinds of creative defamiliarising processes that align him in certain respects with James Joyce’s protagonist in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce’s hero embraces postcolonial otherness by virtue of the Irish theme. Lawrence’s Paul has a more introverted battle with “the mother in the mind”. Like Joyce’s retributive theme of blindness, Lawrence’s illness/death marks out the anti-hero as bard and redeemer. When Mrs. Morel is pregnant with Paul, her drunken husband shuts her out in the garden, and she communes with moonlight and lilies in preparation for the miraculous virgin birth. Later, in a domestic row, her husband throws a drawer at her, and the baby on her lap is baptised in blood. A deep sense of awe in these sequences registers the ambivalent otherness attaching to the mother as symbol. Her vulnerability in the battle for sexual supremacy, her capacity for being physically dominated, while intellectually dominating, give her the high moral ground, and this becomes a Lawrencian theme.

However, in the literature of colonialism, as Edward Said has shown, “otherness” is

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constructed as part of a complex struggle for power and authority within narratives that unfold against an exotic backdrop. Violence is one of the most lucrative of our exports, but "otherness" displaces it on to the set of people who, in the memorable phrase of Conrad's Marlow, have flatter noses than ourselves. When Birkin, towards the end of Lawrence's *Women in Love*, says "I did not want it like this", he echoes the Kaiser lamenting the German soldiers who fell in battle. The small European conflict we call the First World War was of course an imperial war (All wars are trade wars, said Marx): its effects, said Lawrence, are "felt in the characters". In *The Rainbow* the Polish theme takes English provincial society to the heart of Europe and its turbulence. The Polish "otherness" of Lydia becomes irresistibly attractive to Tom, as she embodies the humiliated Polonia figure. Tom's relationship with her is alternately embattled and creative. Her daughter Anna becomes the reconciler of opposed sexual forces. Writing about Poland in his *Movements in European History*, Lawrence stressed how chaotic it was on account of a kind of anarchic "masterlessness": like the unconscious, in fact. This theme is developed in the character of Skrebensky, whose "otherness" effects a profound splitting in Ursula's consciousness. Like the return of the repressed, her Polishness (she is Anna's daughter) comes home to her in all its romantic, doomed intensity. Vast tracts of psychic experience lie devastated as Skrebensky chooses the "right" sort of wife, Ursula attacks a surrogate (Williams, in her class at school), etc. If she had had Skrebensky's child, it would have been three-quarters Polish.

One sees this preoccupation with otherness at work in landscape too, as with Wordsworth, or Bunyan. *The Prussian Officer* contains an amazing route march based on Lawrence's honeymoon experience with Frieda (was *she* not his "Prussian officer"?) The baking landscape has a life of its own (like the split bottle of wine, which seems to topple of its own accord): the piece of pencil significantly "in" (not behind) the Orderly's ear acquires powerful phallic connotations; it suggests a defiant or subversive act vis-a-vis the military codes of authority; it stands for homosexual congress via the reflexive act of writing (as with Rimbaud, a regression to the mirror stage). The schizoid split in the representation of the two men deepens. Lawrence, dramatising his own "imperial" role in annexing Frieda, alongside the aggressively imperial attitudes of Prussia on the eve of war, turns his new-found partner into an agent of more than one kind of disturbing "otherness". It was at precisely this moment that Lawrence began to see the potential of travel writing, which he extended in his subsequent novels far beyond its existing boundaries into complex psychological and historical narratives of otherness. The most striking, for me, is the set of Mexican narratives, perhaps because the postcolonial theme is here at its strongest.

It is instructive to compare Lawrence here with Graham Greene, who in *The Lawless Roads* (1939) offered a reading of the hidden scripts of revolutionary Mexico very unlike Lawrence's. Greene's jaundiced eye finds anti-catholicism everywhere, and he is (as

usual) immensely knowing about fallen humanity's capacity for evil, enlarged by revolutionary ideas. Mexico is therefore, as far as Greene is concerned, simply another battlefield on which the old battle between good and evil is being fought out according to the familiar rules (the role of Roman Catholicism here is of course decisive). In *Mornings in Mexico* (1927) Lawrence improvises a set of short, diagrammatic chapters aimed not at "explaining" what was "really" going on in this fraught political situation, but at engaging with the problem of "otherness". Constructing a culture as "other" was for Lawrence a precondition of the essential process of discovery which started not with the *appropriation* of a landscape, in the tourist fashion, but with a complex process of distancing, displacement, and projection.

It was, in other words, precisely the reverse of what the young German scholar does (whom Lawrence meets in his *Etruscan Places*), when he keeps telling Lawrence that Etruscan remains are "nicht viel wert", not worth much. To the practised, but jaundiced, art-historical eye, amassing scholarly data, the tombs of Tarquinia present an instance of a kind of latter-day provincial Roman art with some recognisable exotic elements perhaps originating in Asia Minor, and strongly linked with eastern funerary cults. For this scholar, his knowledge constitutes his colonising power: this positivistic art-historical construction of a collectable "otherness" is sufficient evidence of cultural supremacy. Lawrence, however, confronted by Etruria, manifests his usual Keatsian insistence on proving, or experiencing, everything, facts no less than fantasies, upon his pulses: or in other words developing what he liked to call a "quick" relationship. Without losing the essential "reverence" which for Lawrence was the precondition of all living relationships, here in Etruria a dying man confronts an art devoted passionately to the mystery of death. Death had always fascinated Lawrence, who had faced it many times, even as a young man, and who saw in it the liminal condition of organic form, and therefore the strangeness of life itself. Etruscan art celebrates death as that terminal otherness which throws into relief the fragile formal designs of the living, their desires and their fears and their lives *as a whole*, in an intense, doomed affirmation of form against chaos. In this way, the Etruscan tomb carvings transform the clichés of late Roman art and sculpture into a transgressive code of joyous sexuality: in some respects like the mystical Day of the Dead which Mexicans celebrate.

When Lawrence demands not "art for art's sake", but "art for my sake", he is often misunderstood, and thought to be somehow anti-art. In fact, he was by no means repudiating "art", any more than he repudiated "form". Just as he asserted vehemently, even surprisingly, against such critics as Arnold Bennett, that *Sons and Lovers* had, above all, *form* ("It has got *form*, *form* I tell you"), so his assertion of "my" sake was by no means just egoistic, as it may easily appear to be. For Lawrence, as for Nietzsche, the formal, Apollonian representational principle was caught for ever within the expressive Dionysian matrix of the world will, raw energy, in a vortex of contained power which

constituted a distinctly "other" domain from what Nietzsche calls the "allzu menschlich", the "all-too-human", constrained as it is by the all-too-familiar power of time. A culture and its characteristic landscapes can be known and understood only insofar as they are entered into on dialogic terms. Here was Lawrence's Heideggerian "ground of being", and without this there was no knowledge worth speaking of. The traveller must above all learn to listen. Many travellers babble endlessly about themselves, without even realising what they are doing.

The passionate, form-giving struggle with the great unknowable "body" of experience, and the foreign languages it inevitably speaks, is also what constitutes the real subject matter of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Lawrence's four-letter words engage with the forbidden body of life in such a way as to relate life-processes intimately with death-processes, just as Etruscan art does, thereby enriching them. It is in this sense that the novel can, as he tells us, lead us towards the secret places of life, away from things gone dead. Lawrence breaks the formal mode of his narrative in very surprising ways, in order to insert into it numerous dialogues of this sort with the meditative, improvising author-figure he constructs. Lady Chatterley, the protagonist, has reached the stage in a woman's life when fear of aging throws her into the arms of another man: the fact of Sir Clifford's physical disability compounds this, but is not the cause of it. A woman at this stage of her existence looks for her father, the gamekeeper/transgressor who guarantees, like the Ship of Death or Etruscan tomb art, that one may pass the terror of this liminal condition and enter the domain of the blessed (Mellors restores her father's blessing to Lady Chatterley: the family romance is renewed as the incest taboo is challenged and overcome: and Lawrence transposes the "Morel" of *Sons and Lovers* into the vernacular, code-switching Mellors of *Lady Chatterley*, at last allowing himself, too, to "replace" his father legitimately). We may say that it is Connie's last chance, or at any rate that she feels that it is. Connie's lover comes from dark roots, a ethnoic quasi-divine figure who transgresses the boundaries of language and its acceptable codes. Many women at Connie's stage in life choose a gamekeeper, before moving on to a toy-boy. Men, always more confused in such matters, mix bimbos with mother-surrogates. Connie had tried one toy-boy, the writer Michaelis, earlier in the novel, but Michaelis really preferred playing with himself to playing with Connie: his sexuality is an abstraction of his will to power. Having no way of recognising Connie's "otherness", and blaming her for not ministering to his own sexual gratification, he is as helpless as Sir Clifford, and as full of resentment as Mellors was before he knew Connie.

The understanding of the terminal tragedy of the human sexual predicament in Lawrence's swan-song novel seems to me remarkable. Sex is the last refuge of the numinous. Yeats spoke of the tragic solitude and forlorn poetry of the lovers: but above all, its significance lies in the way it constructs the body as a dark landscape of desire whose "otherness" must be revered by a complex act of empathy. We lack the ritual

knowledge and the forms of worship appropriate to making this manifest: so Mellors, lord of the woodland dance, the reborn and resurrected king of Sir Clifford's military-industrial wasteland complex, just has to improvise, inventing a language as he does do. In this way language dies, and is dismembered; as Connie said, the big words like "love" and "home" are empty, all negated; back to basics, then, to what Eliot called "the roots that clutch/out of this stony rubbish"; roots like fuck, cunt, balls, the basic, assertive, gestural language of life itself, language which restores a proper sense of the strangeness of the body and its functions.

*Mornings in Mexico* works very hard at the problem of releasing a distinctively national theme from the inevitable overload of exoticism which the nation, its history, and its culture have always suffered from. The politics of Lawrence's writings are always strongly felt, but they are constructed as a set of narrative positions, generating a dialogue which is in turn related to the predominant myths and icons of the culture concerned. This is also true for example of *The Rainbow*, which contains an immense amount of what Leavis used to refer to as "essential English history", but almost without a single date, and with hardly any facts either that a pure historian would accept. Mexican cult objects and images actually *were*, as Lawrence shows them (and again in the theatrical scenarios of *The Plumed Serpent*) in a complex state somewhere between obsolescence and informed revival at that historical moment. Mexicans like to tell salacious jokes about the grotesque earnestness of Lawrence's quest, driven as he was (and as others have been) by the desire to locate a new vision in their land; about how easily fooled he was; but at the same time, and in the same breath, they speak with appreciation of his quick eye, empathy, and bold intelligence, very unlike the common run of Norteamericanos, especially at that historical moment.

What matters most to Lawrence is the defamiliarising narrative that can strip away the skin of prejudice and insensitivity that comes between subject and object, white writer and Indian peasant: so that these opposing terms are set directly in conflict on the page, in the very process of representation. There cannot be any simple sort of identification, however powerful the act of empathy: no such thing is possible or desirable, and wherever in travel writing it *appears* to be the case, it always masks radical and contradictory bids for power. The "location of culture", to borrow the title of Homi Bhabha's most influential book, is (in other words) always textual. We know now—how could we not?—that to speak of a "developing country" is just like Lacan's imaginary father saying to his son "one day, my boy, this will all be yours": it is the unanswerable act of castration. Lawrence extended this important anti-Oedipal insight in the context of the revolutionary Mexico of his day: one day, the Church said over and over again, you will be free (when you are at one with the saints in heaven); one day, the revolutionaries said, you will inherit the earth; but, Lawrence says, what about *now*? one day, the universe exploded, and made life, and we may expect it to do so again one day; but the

historical moment which we inhabit is always present, nothing can be explained in relation to any first causes, or terminal goals.

This is his answer to the ubiquitous, overdetermined colonial concept of “underdevelopment”. As a consequence of that first big bang, there came a mighty scattering: and what we see in the world is something like Homi Bhabha’s vision of what he calls the “massive economic and political diaspora” that in its radical fragmentariness coincides with Walter Benjamin’s “present”: a Heideggerian state of “Geworfenheit”, being chucked existentially into the middle of things, with precious little connection with before and after, tradition and continuity, or maybe even hope, which Kafka also ruled out, at least, as he said, for us. Language, likewise, inhabits a world “after Babel”. The migrant is he who articulates the displacements of modernity: linguistic, cultural, gendered and carnivalesque: in this respect, local and specific questions of (I quote) “where you can sit, or not” (Homi Bhabha’s pregnant phrase which, contextualised, can evoke infinite depths of racism) turn out to hold the key to the historical meaning of a sequence of events, properly considered.

This is the point of Lawrence’s bizarre, disturbing Mexican book of Genesis, one of our author’s many deconstructed myths of origins, with which he opens his travel book. I will quote his opening paragraph at length:

One says Mexico; one means, after all, one little town away South in the Republic; and in this little town, one rather crumbly adobe house built round two sides of a garden patio: and of this house, one spot on the deep, shady verandah facing inwards to the trees, where there are an onyx table and three rocking-chairs and one little wooden chair, a pot with carnations, and a person with a pen.

The realism of this “person with a pen” is a complex achievement: moving in a contrary direction to that of Joyce’s Stephen, in *A Portrait of the Artist*, who constructs a universe from the centre of consciousness embodied in his own name, thus giving the artist and his ego a sort of privileged authority as an interpreter and redeemer of fallen reality, Lawrence wilfully unpicks the great chain of being, leaving no trace more significant in itself than that which the pen or pencil itself leaves, as it moves tentatively across the sheet of paper. Evidently, radical effacement and self-effacement of this sort may function in many different ways, most obviously to obfuscate as well as to clarify.

Which may be why Lawrence moves from an evocation of the smells of the land to a notation of the parrots which, as he laconically says, “reproduce”. This ambivalent word is left hanging: is it *reality* that they reproduce, as the realist artist may loosely be said to “reproduce” it? or are they “reproducing” in some other sense? They whistle like the peasant Rosalino, dusting the patio, and by doing so draw attention to *his* whistling, which he does not indulge in usually when the Lawrences are sitting out there. Laying

bare the device (of whistling or of writing, and later we see Rosalino is a writer as well, in his way) is much more than reproduction: and when they call to the dog, "Perro!", the parrots (like Mellors) can put on a special voice: "they can make their voices so devilishly small and futile": "I wait for the day when the parrots will start throwing English at us, in the pit of our stomachs": this last phrase because the parrots arouse a sort of involuntary visceral chuckle.

This is the cue for Lawrence's great decreation myth, his deconstruction or demystification of the Genesis story (cf. *The Rainbow*, the most protestant of scriptural interpretations since Bunyan). "Myself, I don't believe in evolution, like a long string hooked on to the first cause", he says. Rather, as in Aztec myth, there are cycles of time in our world, punctuated by explosions: first insects, then lizards, then birds, then animals, with man, and man's terrifying thing called language, the "unheard-of sound", as Lawrence calls it. So the parrots, left over from an earlier exploding sun, give words back a physical, gestural quality by virtue of an act of parody. A vortex of energies, with no rope or navel-string stretching back, what a relief! and in the shape of a great, unresolved, ironic dialogue. It is the deathly-disintegrative process, utterly contrary to European utilitarianism, and without which there can be no life. The same with the elections, which Lawrence calls a "farce", because they are so much fun, yet so irrational, and without any clear sense of cause-and-effect, like everything else in the Land of the Exploding Suns, where violence is the rule.

This is why the Mexican gods give birth, not least during this revolutionary period, not to a loving saviour but to a stone knife, "the veritable Paraclete of knives", Lawrence calls it. It is for cutting away the past, leaving the present moment naked, "sharp and without consciousness". The Aztecs could not understand why the Spaniards wastefully killed their enemies in battle, rather than taking prisoners to be sacrificed to their gods, a productive use of them to renew the crucial sanctity of the moment.

But the great white monkey has got hold of the keys of the world, and the black-eyed Mexican has to serve the great white monkey, in order to live.

That particular scattered fragment of the explosions of creation has no particularly privileged status from the Mexican standpoint: simply, it knows a few clever tricks, with its endless, subtle tick-tack of time and motion, and so is worth imitating, up to a point, but ironically, the way the parrots imitate Corasmin. The narrator himself is the butt of this irony at many crucial points. Against this mechanical white-monkey sense of time, the Mexicans hold on to their "moment of contact and centripetal flow": what the eruptive-creative cycle of the cosmos enacts, demanding no specific outcome or purpose.

And then there is the earth itself. We talk of conservation, of the need to think green, while the Indian dances round the drum, singing, "mouth open and speechless".

He will tell you it is a song of a man coming home from the bear-hunt; or a song to make rain; or a song to make the corn grow.

Which of us, the rather shabby Indian, or the traveller watching, knows nature's secrets? It goes without saying that the white monkey cannot join in. The otherness of it is beyond the comprehension of modern men. They like to talk of "the wonder of creation", but cannot see its "otherness" because their monkey business drives them on to exploit it, always more and more ruthlessly. The climax of it all is the Hopi Snake Dance: especially interesting, says the white monkey, because of the complex analysis of Hopi language offered by Benjamin Lee Whorf, the linguist and anthropologist. But characteristically, Lawrence refuses to end with his big set piece. There is a low-key epilogue about moonlight, wine, and his favourite tree, not to mention Susan, his black cow.