

## REVIEWS

**Ben Etherington, *Literary Primitivism*.**

**Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 2017.**

**Pp. xix+218. £52 (hardcover). ISBN 978 1 5036 0236 6**

**Rachel Crossland, *Modernist Physics: Waves, Particles, and Relativities in the Writings of Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence*.**

**Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018.**

**Pp. xii+193. £60 (hardcover). ISBN 978 0 1988 1597 6**

**Stephen Kern, *Modernism after the Death of God: Christianity, Fragmentation, and Unification*.**

**New York and London: Routledge, 2017.**

**Pp. x+189. £105 (hardcover). ISBN 978 1 1380 9403 1**

*Reviewed by Michael Bell*

These three books deal extensively with D. H. Lawrence as part in each case of a larger argument about modernism. Ben Etherington has revisited the important and highly visible, yet curiously neglected, topic of literary primitivism. Etherington comments on this surprising absence of discussion noting that his one immediate predecessor is my own short volume of 1972 and I indeed have the sense of a conversation continuing after a long hiatus. No doubt, a principal reason for the neglect of this topic during the intervening period has been its apparent self-evidence. The orthodoxy of post-colonial critique made it, in the full sense of the word, blindingly obvious. Edward Said's deservedly influential *Orientalism* was a striking instance of the endemic principle of scholarly culture noted long ago by Nietzsche:

He who nowadays knows how to open up a new field within which even the weakest heads can labour with some degree of success becomes famous in a very short time: so great is the crowd that at once presses in. Every one of these loyal and grateful people is at the same time a misfortune for the master, to be sure, since they all imitate him and his defects then seem disproportionately great and exaggerated because they appear in such tiny individuals, while it is the opposite with his virtues, which are proportionately diminished when these same individuals display them.<sup>1</sup>

The impact of Said's volume was to convert orientalism from an academic specialism into an ideological sin. It became nigh impossible to believe that a "Western" individual of goodwill could exercise a sympathetic, informed appreciation of non-Western peoples and cultures, and improper even to consider degrees of success in doing so. The project is contaminated at its root by imperial projection and condescension; a cultural structure most notably revealed in the very notion of the "primitive". Etherington is properly respectful of the cultural turn represented by Said but resists the tendency to such sweeping judgements. Indeed, he makes the case for a serious use of primitivist motifs precisely by discriminating it from more naïve or defective instances. For this purpose, he gives close readings in turn of Aimé Césaire, D. H. Lawrence and Claude McKay.

By the twenty-first century, of course, the word "primitive" cannot be used without at least implicit quotation marks. Primitive is necessarily a judgement made from a given point of view. Nothing is primitive in and of itself. This recognition was developed over the, at least mentally, decolonising twentieth century which is why Etherington takes this period as the defining historical parameter of his theme delimited as "emphatic primitivism". Or that is perhaps my way of understanding it as an internal cultural development. Etherington's geo-political account, informed by Marxist analysis, defines his chosen period as the point where the globalisation of

capitalism has effectively destroyed the sense of foreign otherness, including the primitive other; a period, therefore, in which the experience of the primitive becomes at once more precious and more problematic. But whatever its aetiology, the new awareness of the “primitive” as a necessarily shifting, projective, hypothetical order of judgement aligns with Etherington’s further defining emphasis on *literary* primitivism. He is concerned with these motifs as deployed within consciously aesthetic and imaginative orders. This relates in turn to a third significant aspect: he includes as notably successful cases of literary primitivism writers from regions, primarily the Caribbean, which have historically been thought of as instances, rather than imaginative exploiters, of the “primitive”.

These considerations bear significantly on the generation now thought of as modernist, including Joseph Conrad and Lawrence. However critical in intent, both were creatures of their time, sharing many of its assumptions and thinking within its discourse. It is therefore easy, especially by means of decontextualised quotation, to present them as simply endorsing racist or imperial values. Yet Conrad and Lawrence radically questioned these values. In this respect, primitivism has two interrelated aspects: it may make an historical or ethnographical claim about a way of life identified as primitive or it may express dissatisfaction with the writer’s own culture by imagining an alternative form of life with an essentially utopian status within the work. The trouble is that both these dimensions, the ethnographic and the utopian, are likely to occur within the same work which is why Etherington insists on the literary, rather than the anthropological, dimension as governing the significance of the whole. Whatever their ethnographic limitations, and however literal their beliefs, Conrad and Lawrence used their best understanding, whether at first or second hand, of ancient or tribal peoples to identify the moral and spiritual deficit in their own European modernity. It is the latter critique which makes them significant writers and places them among the initiators of the post-colonial late twentieth century.

By the same token, of course, such primitivist projects are intrinsically fraught with ambivalence and subject to damaging naivety both in the writing and in the reception. No doubt for this reason Etherington presents his most positive case first. After an extended analytic and historical introduction, he reads the poetry of Césaire as a sophisticated use of primitivist motifs to affirm a cultural identity in apposition, if not opposition, to the white European norm. It is also relevant here that Césaire is a poet in a highly accomplished idiom of the Francophone avant-garde. An idiom that might otherwise be a too rarefied verbal symbolism is given urgency by its resonances for a specific historical experience and identity. And by the same token, the poetic transmutation reflects how that history now persists as psychological forms and traces.

Lawrence provides a sharply contrasting case in his Mexico-based novel *The Plumed Serpent* which Etherington offers as the primary instance of Lawrence's primitivism. Setting its action almost contemporaneously in the early 1920s when the bloodshed of the Mexican Revolution was finally coming to an end, Lawrence imagined the possibility of a new state based on the pre-Columbian religious sensibility of Mexico which, in many peoples' view, has left psychological as well as archaeological traces in modernity. The religious revival is led by the patrician anthropologist Don Ramón Carrasco along with the army under General Cipriano Viedma. Few people see this novel as a success, and Lawrence himself soon rejected the element of political leadership. Yet Etherington is surely right to see it as a complex and illuminating instance of modern primitivism. It is best read as a utopian thought experiment although this constantly conflicts with the mode of historical realism in which it is conceived. Or to express the same point more positively, it is the work in which Lawrence pushed his primitivist speculation to its limits and tested it within, or against, the realism of the novel form. It is telling in this regard that a rejected earlier draft, now published as *Quetzalcoatl*, offers a more moderate version of the theme.

Lawrence's primitivism finds other expressions such as his sympathetic recreation of ancient Etruscan life from the evidence of

its funerary decorations. Likewise, in his essays on the Pueblo Indians he tried to enter imaginatively into the cosmic beliefs underlying their way of life while always conscious of the danger of white liberal sentimentalising of Native American culture. Lawrence was at once the greatest exemplar and the most penetrating critic of modern primitivism, which is why *The Plumed Serpent* hovers constantly between affirmation, self-critique and unwitting self-parody. Readers of Lawrence may think of more successful and varied instances of the primitivist impulse throughout his oeuvre, but in so far as Etherington's purpose is not to explore the full range of Lawrence's art but to exemplify a spectrum of possibilities in modern primitivism, his choice of this novel is apt and effective.

For his third case study, Etherington focuses on the fiction of another Caribbean writer, Claude McKay. A positive value in the primitive may be appropriated for the self as well as projected on to the cultural or ethnic "other". But reversing the formula of "Narrative Primitivism" that he sees in Lawrence, Etherington sees in McKay a "Primitivist Narration" which is to say the very premises of the narrative are unquestioningly primitivist. In this respect, the sequence of writers makes for an anti-climactic structure, but this in itself helps to emphasise reflection on the critical and analytic paradoxes of a modern primitivism.

Early-twentieth-century culture is not short of paradoxes, whether real or imagined, some of which emerge from the ongoing revolutions in scientific thought. Rachel Crossland's *Modernist Physics* is a contribution to a burgeoning field of study devoted to the interrelations between scientific and artistic modes of understanding in the period. Her principal authors are Virginia Woolf and Lawrence read closely in the light of their knowledge of contemporary physics as represented in turn through three focal themes: waves and particles, relativity, and Brownian motion. She offers some close textual analysis, making plausible claims for scientific awareness in these authors' tropes and metaphors. This includes useful documentation of Lawrence's scientific knowledge acquired in the course of his training as a school-teacher. At the same

time, readers seeking literary critical insight may feel that the motive of contributing to a “field” dominates over an intrinsic interest in the author.

Crossland devotes considerable space to general methodological concerns: is the interrelation of scientific and literary discourse best understood, for example, as influence or as old-fashioned *Zeitgeist* or as a common pool of discursive metaphors? The possibilities are carefully examined and critiqued but there lurks a prior question as to whether such a general model is not a distracting chimera. The relationship is likely to be different in all its varied instances and, while it is true that to conduct such a study one must have thought about these questions, it is not perhaps necessary to rehearse all the theoretical possibilities to make specific claims. During the theory wars of the previous academic generation it was common to point out that those hostile to “theory” were not without it but just unconscious of it. No doubt there were plenty of such cases but the problem for sophisticated critics was a more subtle one about the mode of self-consciousness and the assumed priority of a theory.

A propos an episode in the relationship between Miriam Leivers and Paul Morel, Crossland observes: “As in *The Trespasser*, the moment cannot be sustained for long, but in this novel there does at least seem to be some hope of achieving a successful and practical theory of relationships...” (94). Why does this factually unexceptionable sentence seem to misrepresent Lawrence’s novel? It gives assumed priority to a self-conscious theoretical quest and makes this the criterion by which to judge the central relationship. But for Lawrence all human relationships, including the most “successful”, are arenas of strife and a successful theory of relationships would not entail a successful relationship; nor vice versa. Indeed, one of the novel’s remarkable moments of intuitive insight into relationship is the episode with Paul and Clara in the field with the “pee-wits” calling. Here there is a sense of cosmic connection that Lawrence was able to develop in his next novel *The Rainbow*. Not only does that add a new dimension to the nature of human relationship, it is also an instance of Lawrence’s dramatic

imagination moving ahead of conceptual understanding. This is the underlying significance of his claim that his theoretical writings, his “pollyanalytics”, grew from, rather than being the creative starting point for, his fiction. Precisely because he had a formidable intellect Lawrence worked hard, if not always successfully, to prevent it distorting his intuitions.

All this has a bearing on the question of literary quality which has an ambiguous place in a cultural analysis of this kind. On the one hand it is implicitly bracketed since writers great and small may equally respond to the discourse and world view of science. Yet on the other hand the generally acknowledged status of the writer implicitly underwrites the significance of these connections. The chosen writers are among the canonical “major” figures and it is not clear that the critical question can really be bracketed since aesthetic quality is intrinsic to the imaginative mode of literature as such. In that respect the question is not whether a writer has responded to scientific thought but what place this has in the imaginative achievement. I should confess at this point to having recently reread Woolf’s *The Waves* with a view to finding it more impressive than previously but found it even more archly willed and self-conscious in the wrong kind of way. For me, Crossland’s account does not help to alleviate this impression so much as help to explain it. But Woolf has many admiring readers who are likely to respond differently, and this reading certainly affirms her alertness to intellectual currents of her time.

For readers of Lawrence the central chapter on “human relativity” is likely to be the most significant, but also the most anti-climactic. Lawrence had an intense sense of the unique being of all creatures, human and non-human. The appreciation of difference underlies his perception of nature and his understanding of human relationships. It was when seeking to articulate this discursively that he drew explicitly on the notion of relativity as put into the public arena by Einstein. It is generally understood by readers of Lawrence that, however well he may have understood the scientific theory in its own terms, he was using the stir created by Einstein to introduce his own

notion of human relativity. Or rather he saw in this stir an indication of possible readiness for the seismic cultural transformation he envisaged. Hence, when he says in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* that Einstein had pulled out the “pin” that secured the old absolutes, it is not clear to what extent he means this to be a graphic account of Einstein’s theory as such or of the subsequent cultural commotion around the term relativity, but in any case he shifted the topic to his own concern with human relativity.

Crossland claims a closer link to Einsteinian theory but the argument effectively switches at this point to an extended exposition of Lawrence’s sense of difference in his fiction and essays including the classic instances of *Women in Love* and *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine*. Given the abundant commentary on this central aspect of Lawrence, veteran readers will not find anything new in itself nor significantly transformed by the suggestion that his invocation of Einstein may be more informed and literal than previously supposed. Indeed, the approach through Einstein’s relativity rather than Lawrence’s own *oeuvre* means that the proper force of difference in Lawrence is actually missed as if the writer’s attention is somewhere else. Crossland remarks that “although he does not always express the problems of apparently unbridgeable differences between lovers in scientific or mathematical terms, [Lawrence] does refer to such difficulties frequently within his writings...” (90). There follow instances of such “difficulties” in relationships but in all cases, although the characters do indeed feel unnerved by their mutual strangeness, the narrative makes clear that this is a vital dynamic of the relationship as such. The instances include Lydia and Tom Brangwen for whom a literal foreignness is extensively thematised in the novel to focus the positive significance of their difference. The misappreciation of difference vitiates much of the discussion of Lawrence and it is precisely in so far as Lawrence does have a theory of relationship that Crossland misses the point.

Aristotle remarked on the importance of recognising the degree of precision appropriate to a given subject matter. The effect of this study is, partly by argument and partly by inadvertence, to show the

elusiveness of its topic. In the last section, on Brownian motion and the psychology of the crowd, Crossland comments on how the individual ego is caught up in an impersonal process. But in the age of Nietzsche, Freud and Marx it is problematic to itemise any particular source for the period's conceptual dissolution of the ego. In a way this precisely demonstrates the book's principal thesis: that there is between distinct disciplines a shared, mutually interacting set of terms and concepts. By the same token, however, it shows the difficulty of isolating individual echoes and causalities.

Stephen Kern sets out to define an "ideal type" of the modernist writer or thinker (based on the analytic model of Max Weber). Looking in turn at Nietzsche, Joyce, Freud, Lawrence, Gide, Heidegger and Woolf, he traces a similar pattern: a strong religious upbringing (apart from Woolf); a developed hostility to Christianity; an ambivalent respect or co-option of it into a personal spiritual understanding; and, finally, an attempt to overcome the perceived fragmentation of modernity by means of a philosophical or aesthetic synthesis. Few readers are likely to dissent from the general proposition and the question is rather how much fresh insight it yields into these writers or into the period at large. In that respect it is hard to say what the intended readership may be. To make the case for the importance of religion in all cases, Kern gives an extensive biographical account which makes no strong claim to originality and, for readers of Lawrence in particular, covers familiar ground: his pious upbringing, his sexual inhibitions, his ambivalent appropriation of Christianity and his exploration of ancient religious traditions. As a series of introductory essays these chapters work well enough but otherwise the analytic implement of the "ideal type" developed for sociological thinking is highly ambivalent when applied to literary texts. In bringing out a common pattern it rather blunts the individual element that constitutes the primary interest of these writers.

Of these three thematic studies, Etherington's is the most nuanced and probing while the two others create something of a straitjacket.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 171–2.

**Helen Smith, *The Uncommon Reader: A Life of Edward Garnett*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2017. Pp. 440. £30 (hardcover). ISBN 978 0 2240 8181 8**

*Reviewed by Annalise Grice*

Above all, Edward Garnett was a man of letters. He was also a proud freethinker, whose anti-institutional principles led him to refuse official recognition for his services to literature in a career spanning some fifty years. When offered an Honorary Doctorate in 1936, Garnett declined, describing himself as “an outsider, a solitary person, unacademic in essence and unfitted to be Dr Garnett” (350). Emerging from an intellectual – rather than wealthy – middle-class background, Garnett had close family links to the world of literature. Lacking a university education, in 1889 he married the Cambridge-educated Constance Black, who became the celebrated translator of over seventy volumes of Russian literature including the complete works of Turgenev, whose writing Garnett held in the highest regard. Alongside Constance, Garnett became known as a promoter of Russian literature, writing volumes on *Tolstoy* (1914) and *Turgenev* (1917) and contributing literary journalism and reviews to the *Speaker*, the *Academy* and the *Nation*.

Helen Smith’s highly anticipated biography *The Uncommon Reader* provides valuable and extensive details about Garnett’s career as a publisher’s reader for T. Fisher Unwin, Heinemann, John Lane, Duckworth and Jonathan Cape, and as English representative for the American *Century* magazine and the Viking Press. The biography is designed to appeal to a broad readership, but scholars reading the book for research purposes may be frustrated by the lack of a chronology, and an appendix of first meetings or first