

EDITING 'WINTRY PEACOCK'

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I have always been intrigued by Lawrence's infrequent ventures into first-person narration, and by the processes of revision in his short stories in particular – intrigued especially by those cases where certain promptings or impulses behind a story may only become apparent, paradoxically, once portions of the original text have been cut out. 'Wintry Peacock' features both first-person narration and a number of suggestive excisions, and I want to mull over them a little. It is a strange, awkward story, in which too many things are not-quite-happening for the reader to grip them, the material seeming too intractable even for the author to shape it with real confidence, so deeply is it immersed in his shifting responses to his home regions and his sense, in the bitter winter of 1918-19, of being at a kind of watershed in his creative and domestic life. Several other critics, notably Andrew Harrison some years ago,¹ have discussed the different versions of the text, and my speculations draw on theirs. The forthcoming Cambridge Edition of *The Vicar's Garden and Other Stories* will print the complete manuscript of 'Wintry Peacock', and it will also record the variants in Lawrence's typescript, which was not available at the time the Cambridge Edition of *England, My England and Other Stories* was prepared; working on this new edition was the principal stimulus for what follows.

When preparing his text for publication, Lawrence decided to delete the first two pages of his manuscript in their entirety.² The story originally began in the summer, with an extended description of the countryside around Tible, and the narrator's surprise at seeing a beautiful peacock in such an unlikely setting; following this was an account of the narrator's second excursion there, that autumn, when the woman at the farm, who had previously regarded

him in silence, initiated some wary sociability, his basket of blackberries providing a focal point for contact. Lawrence removed all this; the revised story begins in the depths of winter and plunges straight in to the letter-scene without preliminaries. What is lost by this change? The text's initial stress had been on the remoteness of the place (Tible was based on Ible, across the valley from Mountain Cottage, Middleton-by-Wirksworth, where Lawrence was living). His first revisions had added even more emphasis to this odd remoteness, a matter not of distance but of bypassing, the sense of somewhere left behind by contemporary development and retaining certain primal and evocative qualities as a result: "stranded on the brow of the hill high above its own steel ribbon of road ... as remote as only an English hamlet can be, forgotten of life".³ Lost from the story also is the exotic colour, the sense of unexpected transplanting that the peacock brings (in the revised version we only see the peacock in its drab winter coat): its dignified balance amidst the muck and dirt around it, the sense before the story properly begins that the narrator has already come upon an image of poise maintained in suddenly alien surroundings, the image he will later try to emulate in his own behaviour. It is as if that part of the story's imaginative work concerned with foreignness, trespass, adjustment, and the improvisation of bearings were originally condensed into images of place and threshold. Here too, in their deleted early meetings, the narrator and the woman, unnamed as yet, confront each other not just as strangers, but somehow consciously as outsiders, neither quite native to the district, and both eager to defuse that difficulty: the woman asking where he is from, the narrator preoccupied with locating her origins from her accent – "either Wiltshire, Berkshire or Oxfordshire, I decided"⁴ – while himself pinning down her peculiar furtive glance with a North Midlands dialect word, "glegging", that she probably could not have used herself. All this in a story that is effectively going to turn on a contest between different ways of adapting oneself to other cultures and customs: either through the ability to translate, having technical information about foreignness, or being able to convert

into your home language something expressed in another – an exclusively male accomplishment in 'Wintry Peacock' – or through a more elusive, intuitive power to penetrate deception and façade and mould oneself to new conditions.

Another writer attesting to this remoteness was Alison Uttley, famous for her children's stories, an almost exact contemporary of Lawrence, who was brought up on a farm about four miles across the valley from Ible, and who in her novels about her own childhood described the strange, Noah's Ark dreaminess of those hilltop settlements, looking down on the faraway traffic of the narrow valleys.⁵ She would also attest to the sense of gender-division in the landscape that infiltrates Lawrence's manuscript description, writing in similar ways about the stoniness, the ash-trees, and the grateful downward inclination from bareness and wind-exposure to sheltering dips and folds: the feminisation of the contours which Lawrence also worked into *The Virgin and the Gipsy*, another Peak District story with a problematic maternal pull at its centre. In various letters written from Middleton in 1918 Lawrence had grappled with this notion. As far back as April he had told Catherine Carswell that the place was "exactly the navel of England, and feels exactly that" – the navel as the mark of where one started, of one's sense of separation and connectedness; and in early December, when he was alone at the cottage without Frieda, he wrote the much-quoted letter to Katherine Mansfield – the one in which Frieda is described as the "devouring mother" – where he talks of how, in the valley, "the spell of hastening, secret water goes over one's mind", and that on reaching the summit again "I felt as if I had climbed out of a womb": images of fluid, narcotic enchantment and bracing release, of a constant struggle between regression and deliverance. Back in May, he had told Edith Eder how living at Middleton made him feel "queer and dépaycé" – uncountried, disorientated, out of the safe element (3L 240, 302, 242). Of course, he frames these letters to what he takes to be the current preoccupation of the recipient, or his response to it – Catherine Carswell was expecting a baby, and Edith Eder's husband David

had just set off for Palestine without her. But there is enough of a pattern emerging to suggest a story latent in the compulsions ('Wintry Peacock' is the only story Lawrence wrote at Mountain Cottage which is actually set in the immediate area). One could argue that the tone and phrasing of the deleted conversation about the blackberries marks the first skirmish in an obscure sexual battle to which the landscape itself seems to contribute, as if the now draggled, autumnal state of the peacocks had emboldened the woman, in her aggressively late-war-time outfit, to accost the narrator directly, while his replies are rather bristlingly defensive, as if he were being offered a kind of white feather, accused of doing something unmanly, and anxious to put her in her place.

Shorn of these cumulative background vibrations, the published story may appear more abrupt and immediate. But retaining the original opening would have seen an extra layer put behind some of the more pressured later moments. For example, in the narrator's account of the behaviour of the cattle while he waits for Maggie to come back with the letter:

They seemed happy, frisky cattle, a little impudent, and either determined to go back into the warm shed, or determined not to go back. I could not decide which. (*EME* 77)

In the published version, this may seem little more than a decorative interlude. But with the two cancelled pages behind it, the symbolic load bears down – the indecisiveness, the threshold uncertainty as to inside or outside, committing oneself either to comfort or to the keen wind, to the feminine or the masculine domain; a deft anticipation of the dilemma about to engulf the narrator. The revised story now opens with the three wintry peacocks struggling to stay upright in the wind without tails to ballast them, searching for the lee of the farm wall: a scene which in its original conception would not merely have offered an image of debility and emasculation to set the story going, but would have carried with it an already-established trace of anxiety about what it might be to

feel unprotected and insecure in a foreign or a hostile climate – a trace which passes in turn between all four characters in the story, the narrator, Maggie, Alfred, and Elise.

When the narrator finds himself deliberately misrepresenting the contents of Elise's letter, a number of factors are in play. His immediate instinct is not only to side with a man he has never met and knows nothing about, in an unspoken alliance against womankind in general. It is also to attempt to protect the man from his wife's vengefulness, paradoxically protecting the marriage as well – still unsure if he is on the windward or the leeward side of the wall, traducing and disparaging the French girl in a scattergun attack on manipulative foreign women as a displacement of his desire to attack Maggie herself in precisely this way. Another point that I think needs to be factored in, a point most commentators do not address perhaps because it is too obvious, is that at some level the narrator knows that she knows he is lying, that the whole performance is a game, a transparent attempt to get the better of her, and as such an implicit tribute to the power she wields over him. Comparison of two revised and manuscript passages suggests that Lawrence took steps to play down what in the original conception was presented as a peculiarly maternal power, whereby the narrator felt wholly, secretly *exposed* to the woman, as if he were somehow the result of her blueprint, and his subsequent manoeuvres had been already discounted, known to her before he made them:

Presently the woman came forward again, her head rather ducked. But she looked up at me and smiled, with that odd, immediate intimacy, something witch-like and impossible. (EME 78)

Presently the woman came forward again, her head rather ducked. But she looked up at me and smiled, with that odd, immediate intimacy, as if she had known me before I was conceived, before I was a person at all.⁶

Suddenly again she looked at me. She was searching. And at the same time she smiled at me, and her eyes looked softly, darkly, with infinite trustful humility into mine. I was being cajoled. (*EME* 78)

Suddenly again she looked at me. She was shy. And at the same time she smiled at me, and her eyes looked winsomely into mine as if she knew me, oh, so intimately, knew the very marrow of me, and could enter into the marrow of me. She was at once so child-like, and so like a witch.⁷

I mentioned the French girl, since originally Elise *was* French, before Lawrence changed her nationality to Belgian. Why would he do this? Might there have been rather too many faint memories of *Jane Eyre* to deal with, the lamed man who had had the cynical French mistress and the illegitimate child, before being brought under and made ready for domestic quiet? Lawrence never quite stabilised his attitude towards that novel – it carried on meaning too much to him. But as the deliberate mistranslating of the letter seeks to protect an ideal of unencumbered, insouciant masculinity, the story takes on an atmosphere resembling that of Lawrence's later first-person Derbyshire story, 'Glad Ghosts': both cases feature a narrator who has never been to the Front, attempting to arouse some martial swagger in various wounded or exhausted First World War veterans, to find that the bond of male fellowship he projects onto them only really exists in his own hunger for it. Both stories end with the narrator's intervention in the veteran's life having healed or bandaged over a problem, but leaving the narrator himself excluded from whatever results – here, any relationship he could form with Alfred could not possibly survive the circumstances that produced it. In both stories, one could put a Lawrentian spin on things, with the narrator appearing as a Holy Spirit figure, touching other people's lives and moving on; or one could see these endings filled with the pathos of someone unable ever to achieve the mutuality he is searching for. In that letter to Katherine Mansfield,

Lawrence had written of his belief in male friendship, in the “pledging of men to each other inviolably”, and commented on his failure ever to have formed such a friendship, every effort having fallen short (3*L* 302) – a frustration which his fictional works tend to present as both deep and somehow self-preserving. The relentless snow of that winter might well have brought this thought back to him;⁸ and at the same time, in those early days of January 1919, having at last realised he would never return to Cornwall, he was also writing his farewells to William Hocking (who never replied), and his brother Stanley, to whom Lawrence used to give lessons in French (3*L* 317, 319).⁹

In revising the ending of the story, one can see Lawrence gradually diminishing such sense as there was of intimate connection between the narrator and Alfred, who no longer asks why he altered the details of the letter, nor claps him on the shoulder laughing in delight at his answer, as he does in the manuscript – the laughter with which, in the story's last line, the narrator is trying to associate himself. One can note as well that Lawrence originally had Alfred twice saying admiringly to the narrator “You're a knock-out”: first changing this to the quite differently inflected phrase “It's a knock-out”, and then dropping the first utterance of this phrase altogether, leaving just one isolated, impersonal usage at the end – so that the narrator's laughter now seems to run across Alfred's rather than in tandem with it, and has perhaps a more wistful, valedictory, even a more judgmental tone than it once did.

Lawrence used the phrase “it's a knock-out” once before, in another first-person narrative, the story called ‘The Fly in the Ointment’, which dates from the Croydon years. In this story, the narrator has been daydreaming about the future of modest domestic bliss promised by his relationship with his distant girlfriend – or maybe wife; the text does not clarify. He suddenly finds himself having to deal with a loutish midnight intruder who has broken into his lodging-house to warm himself before stealing a pair of boots. The narrator reacts to this man, who has come in over the railway

tracks in search of footwear to walk away in, with horrified disgust, and a certain fascination too, regarding him as a kind of blight over his own sense of who he is, where he is going, and all the plans he has laid. Disgust and fascination characterise this strange Secret Sharer scenario, in which the other man marks a limit point for all the life the narrator was steadily progressing towards: a knock-out indeed, buffeting him sideways. It is curious that in the published version the intruder is seen as a “blot”, while in the manuscript the narrator called himself a blot – as the story feels its way forward something shapeless and indescribable seems to be exchanged between the two men (*LAH* 53).¹⁰ What interests me most is that the phrase “it’s a knock-out” comes immediately after the narrator has been suddenly gripped by the idea that if the intruder were to have a relationship with a woman, he would become a father. The idea comes into the narrator’s mind as he thinks again about his own relationship, and it is an idea he appears to need to get past in a hurry. Something in these first-person narratives seems always drifting towards the idea of fatherhood – which is finally brought to the surface in ‘Glad Ghosts’, although veiled, even then; at the bottom of ‘Wintry Peacock’ is the question none of its characters really wants to address: whether or not Alfred has actually become a father, and whether this might have any significance. The narrator seems to assume that if it were so, it would simply be an embarrassing revelation that Alfred would not want broadcast, not something that would be likely to bother him in itself; only in the revised story is the suggestion offered that perhaps it might, a suggestion quickly passed over. But, as Mark Kinkead-Weekes has pointed out, there is a tension between this presumption of male indifference towards real or prospective offspring, and the images of parental concern to which the text is repeatedly drawn.¹¹ Doesn’t the account of the narrator’s painstaking care for the peacock after he has rescued it suggest what one is really rather than theoretically driven to do, in the face of something vulnerable and in distress? – not to mention the effort involved in getting the bird into a bag and struggling down to the bottom of the snowy valley and up the other

side, in order to bring back to Alfred what he was trying to drive away? There is a persistent need to find comfort and affection somewhere, and it marks the way both Maggie and Alfred have infiltrated themselves into a position of prominence in someone else's family, in search of what the principal relationship was failing to provide. But emotional realities such as these, to which Elise and Maggie give expression in turn, the anxieties and apprehensions involved in having a child, for example, or in not having one, are things the narrator can only allow himself to regard as cynical or sinister practices. He squeezes them out of his surface account, but is nonetheless powerless to prevent them twisting back underneath it. And just briefly he sees something, when he breaks off from the letter-reading and steps out of the shelter of the cart-shed:

I went out into the road and looked at the cattle.

"Who is this driving the cows?" I said.

She too came out.

"It's the boy from the next farm," she said. (*EME* 83)

Is he thinking suddenly that this is her boy – and then it isn't, she hasn't one – and that this boy is taking the proper masculine path, driving the cows out from the warm place to the cold – but he isn't her boy, so whatever that might have meant cannot be: a moment with a strange poignant charge, that again seems weakened once the opening pages are lost. It gathers together for an instant everything that stands in for something else in this story, a cat's-cradle of substitutions and displacements, whose strongest thread the narrator unwittingly catches with his fumbling pretence, when reading Elise's letter, that the baby is really somebody else's.

I wonder if there is something in the actual structure of the intervention-story that sets up these intimations of fatherhood, surrogacy, commitments and escape-routes? I mean the kind of story where a first-person narrator stumbles into a situation for which he has had no time to prepare, and in which he cannot choose

but act, while conscious that any action he takes may have lasting and uncontrollable consequences, whose impact on him he is anxious to limit. For a while he plays God, and even enjoys the thin-ice skating, but he senses also the terror of it and its responsibilities. This kind of pattern is quite common in Henry James's first-person narratives, which in spirit at least Lawrence's often seem to resemble – a James story like 'Guest's Confession', for example, where the narrator innocently walks into someone else's tense moment and finds himself coerced into intervening simply by being there, having to improvise a reaction which colours the rest of his life; he goes on struggling to re-establish his independence and detachment while vaguely aware that the value of such independence has been unexpectedly put into question.¹² Something like this pattern seems to work itself into Lawrence's writing whenever the question of fatherhood starts to approach too closely. And in 'Wintry Peacock', where each successive scene takes essentially the same form – the letter-reading, the rescue of the peacock, the struggle back across the landscape defamiliarised by snow, the closing confrontation with Alfred – it is as if the initial trauma were being continually restaged, the fight to get oneself back upright after being knocked or blown off balance.

¹ Andrew Harrison, 'Reading the 'Restored' Text of 'Wintry Peacock'', *The Journal of the D. H. Lawrence Society* (1999), 8-22.

² The history of the text up to its first publication is outlined in *EME* xxxvii-xli.

³ MS (Roberts E437a), 1. See Warren Roberts, *A Bibliography of D. H. Lawrence*, 3rd edition, revised by Paul Poplawski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 690.

⁴ MS, 2.

⁵ In novels such as *The Country Child* (London: Faber & Faber, 1931) and *The Farm on the Hill* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941).

⁶ MS, 3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ I am thinking in particular of the ending to *Women in Love*.

⁹ See also Mark Kinkead-Weekes, *D. H. Lawrence: Triumph to Exile, 1912-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 379.

¹⁰ See also John Worthen, *D. H. Lawrence: The Early Years, 1885-1912* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 236.

¹¹ Kinkead-Weekes, *Triumph to Exile*, 495.

¹² Henry James, 'Guest's Confession' (1872), in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, vol. 2, ed. Leon Edel (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), 377-444.