

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 78–9.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 212.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
29. *Manifesto del Futurismo*, articles 9, 10, 14: my translation.
30. Alziator, the Sardinian author and reviewer of *Sea and Sardinia* who defined D.H. Lawrence as ‘a kinsman’, wrote that ‘We may find clear suggestions of the Italian prose of the time... the exuberant adjectivation shows traces of D’Annunzio’s style...’, *Il Convegno*, Anno 8 no 1, Cagliari, 1955, p. 3.

Cruelty by Contract: The Democracy of Touch as a Masochistic Power Arrangement (Toward a Consensual Slavery)

Stephen Alexander

Opening Remarks: ‘The time is coming when politics will have a different meaning’¹

Lawrence claims that, as a novelist, his primary concern is to determine the forces that make up the individual and to help bring new feelings into full consciousness. However, as he does not regard the subject as an ideal abstraction (pre-given and self-contained), he remains deeply interested in and concerned by questions relating to culture, politics, and society; i.e. with power relations and forms of what he calls ‘touch’.

Here, I wish to discuss Lawrence’s ‘democracy of touch’ as a masochistic concept and to examine the notion of a consensual and ironic slavery as the basis for a postmodern politics and ethics. I will argue in essential agreement with Nietzsche that whilst culture does require cruelty and hierarchical power formations, by conceiving of these in terms of contract and consent (*à la* the masochist), Lawrence subverts an inherently authoritarian and humourless political philosophy, leaving in its place something radical and gay which enables men and women to relate to one another and to themselves in new and transformative ways that are invested with active desire and tenderness.

Of Culture and Cruelty

When he is at a low ebb, Birkin wonders why he should care about forming relations with the world. But when feeling stronger he instinctively knows it is vital to establish connections between himself and others if he is to construct a

fulfilling way of life (i.e. a life based upon a wide series of duties and obligations). He realises that his hard-fought for 'singularity' has neither meaning nor value outside a social and cultural context; that it is, in fact, the finest product of such.

Arguably, this Heidegger-like realisation that being is a being-with and being-for others, is one reached by all of Lawrence's protagonists: Aaron, Lilly, Somers, Kate, Connie and Mellors all come to the inevitable conclusion that you can not keep on being alone unless you wish to become an isolated ego and dead-man or dead-woman in life like the wretched Sir Clifford Chatterley.

Above all, what Lawrence wishes to counter in his work is the isolation and fragmentation of man which he associates with modernity in general and liberal capitalism in particular. Thus it is that his final plea in *Apocalypse* is for the destruction of the pseudo-relations produced by an abstract economic system and the re-establishment of what he calls the 'living organic connections'² and by which he refers to libidinal and material relations formed at a 'deeper level than love'.³ Like Nietzsche, Lawrence wishes to overcome the restrictive humanism of modernity and reactivate the latent forces of the body which form the basis of those internally sturdy and sensitive bonds between men that, he claims, existed in the ancient world and, perhaps, are still to be found in non-Western societies even today. Bonds not of affection and comradeship, nor of brotherhood, but, rather, of power and the mystery of lordship: 'The other mystical relationship between men, which democracy and equality try to deny and obliterate.'⁴

For Lawrence, the all-dominant money economy in addition to the moral idealism from which it arose, has had the effect of compromising culture in the noble sense, resulting in a systematic anarchy and aggressive philistinism in which all production of greatness becomes impossible. If

liberal capitalism allows for and encourages a certain type of 'freedom' and 'equality', Lawrence is quick to pour scorn upon these and other related ideals; arguing with Nietzsche that they are merely forms of disguised hatred and nihilism, ultimately harmful to man's wellbeing and prohibitive of his future becoming. 'Human rights' do not convince Lawrence to give his blessing to modernity; for, as Deleuze and Guattari rightly point out, they say nothing about and do little to lessen the 'meanness and vulgarity of existence that haunts democracies... The ignominy of the possibilities of life that we are offered.'⁵

But if, on the one hand, Lawrence wishes to reactivate subliminal forces and lost forms and to reaffirm the cruel sounding truth that it is power – not love – which is the first and greatest of the mysteries and which keeps us alive and in touch with one another, on the other hand he knows that we cannot simply go back to nor build once more a social order in the oldest sense. For we are, we moderns, as Nietzsche demonstrated, no longer material for such. Thus, to be clear on this point, Lawrence is neither advocating an attempted reterritorialisation upon an ancient model, nor the transplantation of such into the modern world. Lawrence is not a reactionary nor a romantic. He simply wishes to invoke a different order of sensibility ('phallic consciousness') via experimentation of an essentially artistic character. His hope is that by so doing he will proliferate and intensify relations, bringing men and women back into touch and enabling them to regain their 'living wholeness and living unison'.⁶ But this of necessity involves submission and obedience. Of course, the modern sensibility rises up in protest at even the thought of such a proposal – as it rises up in horror at the thought of physical suffering and cruelty. But just as cruelty has played a profound and intimate part in our self-formation and history, so too is it the case that: 'only he

who has attached his heart to some great man is by that act consecrated to culture.⁷

Of Obedience and Submission

'All living creatures are obeying creatures' – says Zarathustra.⁸ And for Lawrence too, obedience (that which the masochist longs to give) is an ontological and existential imperative inscribed in nature. Only where the art of obedience is widely cultivated and practised does there emerge something 'for the sake of which it is worthwhile to live on earth'.⁹ A people which has lost the art of obedience shall not only know nothing of joy, but ultimately 'perish and lose all respect' for itself.¹⁰ Thus it is not shameful to submit and give obedience; but a sign of health. To insist on an ideal independence and individual liberty – this is the great danger; an unwillingness to yield before those cycles and forces of life which are over and above and beyond oneself – this is the mark of the slave in revolt unable to recognise and acknowledge greatness.

In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Connie at first fears adoration and submission; she resents the necessity to surrender her will and old self – for such a submission she fears will leave her helpless: 'And she did not want to be effaced. A slave, like a savage woman.'¹¹ However, she eventually realises (like Kate before her in *The Plumed Serpent*) that there is a wider non-personal freedom to be gained and the life of the body to be lived beyond the face 'with all its complexities and frustrations and vulgarity!'¹² The proto-Connie of the *First Lady Chatterley* retires to her bedroom one evening and puts 'a thick veil over her face, like a Mohammedan woman... And thus she stood naked before her mirror and looked at her slow, golden-skinned, silent body.'¹³ This Connie escapes the tyranny and overcoding of the face and becomes after all the 'savage woman' that the later Connie half fears, half desires to become; the non-western, non-

Christian, alien woman. But does she also become a slave? Many feminist commentators fear so and see her taking up of the veil as a theatrical, quasi-fetishistic gesture of self-effacement in entirely negative terms; concerned as they are primarily (if not exclusively) with 'personal' freedom and 'individual' rights; not with impersonal fulfilment via the surrendering of the self. However, I would suggest that Connie does not become a victim or a slave in the negative sense by her self-effacement; for, on the contrary, as Lawrence makes explicitly clear, the true slave is not she who escapes the face (i.e. the self she has been given), but rather:

[she] who does not receive [her] powers from the unseen, and give reverence, but who thinks [she] is [her] own little boss. Only a slave would take the trouble to shout: *I am free!* That is to say, to shout in the face of the open heavens. In the face of men, and their institutions and prisons, yes – yes! But in the face of the open heavens I would be ashamed to talk about freedom. I have no real power, unless it will come into me. And I accomplish nothing, not even my own fulfilled existence, unless I go forth, delicately, desirous, and find the mating of my desire.¹⁴

And this – as the man who dies also learns via his relation with the Priestess of Isis – requires submission: not of the woman to the man (nor of the man to the woman); but of the personal to the impersonal; the egoic to the cosmic; the human to the *daimonic* and divine; the known to the alien and other. Before these forces as they are glimpsed in other men and women we must learn submission and reverence; forces symbolised in Lawrence's later work by the phallus. It is arguable that the slave revolt in morals begins as a revolt against the phallus; free men and women (free, that is, of fear, of shame, and of self-contempt), are happy to submit before the phallus and accept it as the bridge to the future.

They are happy to come into touch and to establish circuits of libidinal energy with other bodies (to find the mating of their desire).

Of course, one might ask whether such a submission can really be expected today? Perhaps not: perhaps Lawrence's anguish and despair is rooted in the fact that he realises that the touch of phallic tenderness and all that this involves has become an impossibility. But then, on the other hand, Lawrence's demand for the impossible may be considered perfectly reasonable amongst lovers and masochists and the polymorphously perverse who are happy and crazy enough to lose themselves and care nothing for the old ideals of identity. Such souls may be ready and able to give their consent to a wide series of new practices and to form new contracts with one another as they progress from ritual to myth and on toward the democracy of touch.

Of Contract and Consent (and From Ritual to Myth)

To reiterate: submission and obedience are crucial notions for Lawrence. In *The Ladybird*, Count Dionys informs Basil of his conviction that he cannot himself fulfil his sacred duty as an aristocrat and master until other men *willingly* put their lives into his hands. It is the consensual nature of this submission, insisted on by the Count, which interests us here. Basil is scornful of such a voluntary submission ever being made within a modern democratic world order (even though he has himself made a Severin-like submission before his wife; much to her contempt). However, the Count argues that it is precisely the prevalent sociopolitical and economic conditions of modernity which make the freely chosen submission he advocates a genuine possibility for perhaps the first time in history. The argument seems to be that once men discover – as Richard Somers discovers – that there is nothing ‘more hopelessly uninteresting than accomplished

liberty’¹⁵ i.e. democratic freedom without ‘any core or pith of meaning’¹⁶, then they will eventually seek out something beyond such liberty. The Count says: ‘At a certain moment the men who are really living will come beseeching to put their lives into the hands of the greater men among them’¹⁷ i.e. become vassals by active choice, accepting and affirming the rule of masters (or, indeed, mistresses) and entering into contractual relations with superiors as is the norm within masochistic practice.

Like the Count, Lilly also believes this consensual and contracted power arrangement will emerge from within our mistaken democracy and eventually be the means to the latter's own self-overcoming. He tells Aaron that whilst every man and every woman is a star who must fulfil their own destiny and follow their own pathways, nevertheless, our mode of being is such that we can achieve this only in relation to others and via an active submission. Aaron remains sceptical and perhaps rightly so. But this is in part because he makes the mistake, like the political ascetic Levi-son, of taking what Lilly says *too seriously* and not allowing his thinking on this point to become *gay* (or radically post-modern). Before making clear what I mean by this, I would like to offer a few further thoughts on the notion of contract within masochistic theory.

According to Deleuze, the sadist formulates a political philosophy in terms of institutions and institutionalised possession. The masochist, on the other hand, thinks in terms of contracted alliance. This distinction is crucial. Deleuze writes:

the contract presupposes in principle the free consent of the contracting parties and determines between them a system of reciprocal rights and duties... valid for a limited period. Institutions, by contrast, determine a long-term state of affairs which is both involuntary and inalienable.¹⁸

Institutions establish a base form of power, which Lawrence thinks of as bullying and nihilistic authority: i.e. that which negates the flow of genuine power. Quite clearly, then, it would be fairer to describe Lawrence's political thinking as masochistic, rather than sadistic; as it is often wrongly characterised and caricatured by his critics who stupidly understand nothing of such distinctions and ignorantly conflate the two terms even though their processes and formations are entirely different.

I think that Lawrence is also attracted toward the notion of masochistic contract due to his understanding of how the above opens onto a sacred-ritualistic order of the kind that he finds hard to resist. For Lawrence, as for the masochist, ritualistic activity (role playing and fantasy, fetishism etc.) is important as it secures man and culture firmly within the sacred primal site of myth and make-believe (i.e. the world of the visionary, the poet, and the artist). This point cannot be over-emphasised: the masochistic realm is, like Ramón's neo-Aztec Mexico, a combination of religion, politics, philosophy and aesthetic theory. A clear progression can be traced, as Deleuze argues, from contract to ritual, to the formation of a mythical complex or new cultural arrangement; one which Lawrence terms the democracy of touch and from out of which contract and ritual derive their function and value. Deleuze writes:

The situation that the masochist establishes by contract, at a specific moment and for a specific period, is already fully attained timelessly and ritually in the symbolic order of masochism. For the masochist, the modern contract as it is elaborated in the bedroom corresponds to the oldest rites once enacted in the swamp and the steppes.¹⁹

A politics of desire is, therefore, more than a mere 'sex-radicalism'; it is, crucially, a politics which enables what

Lawrence calls the 'religious impulse' active expression: the masochist is not merely a sexual deviant in search of physical pleasure – he is also a holy fool in search of spiritual fulfilment (and he believes that both can be attained via consensual slavery and contracted cruelty).

On The Democracy of Touch

In a sense, Basil and Aaron are right to insist that the submission required by Count Dionys and Lilly will never be made as it was previously made in the premodern era. The masochist knows this and, therefore, anticipates and advocates a different kind of submission: a postmodern submission made beyond (and yet upon) democratic equality and liberal freedom. It is an *ironic* submission, which is to say, the subordinate subject within the masochistic relationship with a master or mistress whilst appearing to be held by real chains, is, ultimately, 'bound by his word alone'²⁰ and there is an agreed reciprocity with regard to duties between parties; the slave agrees to obey and to serve, the master or mistress agrees to rule in good faith and with conviction (free of any lingering 'bad conscience of commanders').

This is not to say that there is no real cruelty inflicted, or real pain suffered: masochism is not pure theatre; it involves real techniques to produce real effects (often of the most intense and transformative nature). But masochism is founded upon consent and trust as well as the touch of the whip and it *plays* with the exercise of power according to a series of either explicitly or tacitly agreed rules.

Foucault always stresses that what most appeals to the practitioners of masochism is that 'the relationship is at the same time regulated and open',²¹ i.e. is both serious and yet playful; a form of what Nietzsche terms the 'gay science' and productive of new knowledge forms, new sensibilities, new selves, and new relations of the kind that people previously had no notion of. Foucault writes:

I don't think that this movement of sexual practices has anything to do with the disclosure or the uncovering of sado-masochistic tendencies deep within our unconscious, and so on. I think that [it] is much more than that; it's the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure.²²

– and, ultimately, the creation of a society of pleasure: the democracy of touch.

To conclude, then, we may say that whilst masochism opens up a 'pathos of distance' once more between masters and slaves, thereby creating a new 'order of rank', it has nothing to do with the creation of ideal hierarchies and absolute divisions in the old, stupid (metaphysical) sense – any more than it is a means of liberating an ugly violence and fascist aggression. For via the eroticisation of strategic power relations everything is radically transformed: whereas the above relations were stabilised through past social institutions and enforced by officers of the law, within masochism they are made mobile and dynamic: 'Of course, there are roles but everybody knows very well that these roles can be reversed... you know very well that it is always a game.'²³

Lawrence's democracy of touch is an attempt to think society once more in terms of the *agon* (and this time as an erotic contest); i.e. as a dynamic arena of power forms and new becomings in which power is understood to be continually flowing between and transforming those subjects it produces, so that selves and relations between selves ever-change and mutate: *No one possesses power and no one lacks power* – and, because this is so, because power is never stable, so a man's status or rank can never be fixed or finally determined 'in-itself'. Lawrence avoids the black hole of a lazy and untenable biological essentialism (or material idealism) and does not posit master and slave figures in the serious and vulgar manner that authoritarian and fascist thinkers are prone to do. Lawrence is not, therefore, in his

political thinking, seeking to pervert desire or oedipalise history once more by reducing the social field to the familial or the level of the nursery – exactly the environment that all his protagonists seek to flee from. What Lawrence wants is for men to command and obey (themselves and others) as men of tenderness, good humour, and intelligence: not to bully or refuse any rule. The democracy of touch will emerge only when men learn how to resist the urge to surrender to a simple-minded and infantile idolatry, or to a resentment-ridden anarcho-nihilism that is anti-power and all riches.

Closing Remarks

Perhaps the question might be asked why modern man is so afraid of physical pain and why he seems to suffer so at the thought of physical cruelty. For clearly he does not object to the internalisation of cruelty and the psychic suffering caused by bad conscience and all manner of torture within the confines of the soul. Sublimated and disguised violence raises little objection, even though the internalisation of cruelty does not in any way lessen the pain caused: in fact, as Foucault shows in his studies of the treatment of the insane and the punishment of the criminal, by refining and 'spiritualising' cruelty, suffering has been intensified and made more effective. Maybe the time has come to externalise cruelty once more – but this time as play and in order to experiment with pleasure *à la* the masochist. However, such a suggestion is often greeted with horror: far from enabling men and women to transfigure their historical fate and facilitate the birth of new selves, masochism – it is said – merely allows the acting out of the crudest and cruellest of (predominantly masculine) fantasies of morbid convergence of sex and death, and also the most reactionary of social and political agendas. My response to this should be self-evident from a reading of this essay. To reiterate: I believe that even the most repressive and reactionary of practices

can be transfigured via active desire into erotic games which open up new possibilities of self and society. Like Foucault, I would argue that masochism is potentially one of the most positive and creative of ascetic practices: 'a way of consensually expressing, and gaining a sense of mastery over a host of otherwise taboo impulses'.²⁴ It is regrettable that we moderns remain full of fear and hatred of the flesh, unable to tolerate any active interchange of passion and shrinking from the touch of another. For we remain thus not only uncomfortable with any genuine sexual contact (i.e. nonheadbound, non-representational), but also with corporal punishment, or any overtly physical discipline which strikes us as 'barbaric' and 'inhumane' (e.g. bare-knuckle boxing). The most insidious forms of emotional-spiritual bullying and blackmail are accepted as belonging to a morally just society, but the thought of a flogging sends us into a state of near nervous hysteria, even whilst the latter, if carried out within the context of passion, is, according to Lawrence; 'a natural form of human coition'.²⁵

Like Nietzsche, Lawrence thus suggests that it may well be preferable to have a playful externalised politics of power, desire, and cruelty (a politics of evil), than a self-serious and self-righteous politics of reason, will to love, and the rancid milk of human kindness, which ultimately causes the animal in man to become perverse and full of self-loathing. Like Blake, Lawrence is clearly of the view that: 'He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence.'²⁶ Thus we witness Lawrence's attempt in *The Plumed Serpent* to invoke a temporary release into a new barbarism and imagine a 'sulphurous politico-theological' order in which cruelty is acknowledged and affirmed. The hope is that via an active immoralism in which men learn both how to accept great discipline and inflict great suffering, a new innocence can be attained and that from out of cruelty will arise a new compassion (phallic tenderness) and a noble form of justice

(symbolised by the green leaf of Malintzi). If Lawrence eventually rejects the priest-controlled military order hinted at in *The Plumed Serpent*, nevertheless his democracy of touch remains closer to this aristocratic vision than to the 'robot' democracy it is designed to supersede (i.e. the democracy of today in which 'nobody is willing to serve'²⁷). The *predilection d'artiste*, it seems, is not only for the aristocrat who can put us in touch with fire and ice, but can also reintroduce us to the sting of the whip and the thrill of the spurred heel.

Endnotes

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12. D.H. Lawrence, *The First Lady Chatterley*, London: Penguin Books, 1986, p. 29.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
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D.H. Lawrence: A Single Life

John Worthen

I

This is the end of Chapter Three in my Single Life – my single-volume life – of Lawrence, which Penguin Books have commissioned.

'On the morning of Sunday 3rd March Lawrence took the train into Nottingham, almost certainly getting off at the Carrington station he would have known from his last two years at the High School, and then walking up the Mansfield Road, into the airy, middle-class, north-eastern suburbs. The day was sunny, spring-like and warm; the walk would have taken him fifteen minutes or so. He may have arrived early, or Weekley may have been delayed in coming home; either way, his host was not there. Lawrence was shown into the drawing room, with its big windows looking out over the garden where children were playing, to be greeted by Weekley's wife. And the next half-an-hour changed his life.'

II

No. Let me redraft those last two sentences:

'Lawrence was shown into the drawing room, with its big windows looking out over the garden where children were playing. Frieda Weekley was indisposed and did not come down for lunch. Weekley arrived late to give Lawrence advice, but the latter left the house without having met the woman whose reputation for beauty and uninhibited behaviour was legendary at the University. He never did meet her.'

So simple, so different... biographical narrative so easily makes the known the inevitable. But in our own lives we