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Author: Bethan Jones

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REVIEW ESSAY

A TRIBUTE TO HELEN DUNMORE (1952–2017)

BETHAN JONES

Zennor in Darkness (1993) – Helen Dunmore’s debut novel and winner of the 1994 McKitterick Prize – achieves an astonishing blend of biography and fiction in portraying D. H. Lawrence’s experiences within an insular Cornish community during World War I. After the sad news that Dunmore died earlier this year, it seems appropriate to commemorate her within this particular journal number (arising from a conference that took place in St Ives, which unfortunately she was unable to attend because of illness) through a brief discussion of her many achievements, with a particular focus on the novel in which Lawrence plays such a pivotal role. Like Lawrence, Dunmore was a prolific writer and – also like Lawrence – her literary achievements span a number of genres. Initially a poet, she published eleven volumes of verse as well as twelve novels, three short story collections and a number of books for young adults and children. In addition to her extraordinary literary talent, she was renowned for her generosity to other writers, her modesty, courtesy and kindness, her commitment to literature and the arts, and her dedication to family.

In *Zennor in Darkness*, Dunmore accomplishes the almost impossible feat of finding a plausible voice for her incarnation of Lawrence. This comes through particularly strongly in the following lengthy quotation in which he is in dialogue with Clare Coyne, the (fictional) female protagonist of the novel. Clare is both insider and outsider: her dead mother belonged to the Treveal family with deep roots in the town of St Ives, but travelled to London in order to improve her prospects. Clare’s father, Francis, moving to Cornwall from London, was initially considered unsuitable and alien due to his

Catholicism. Clare and Francis also live in a villa situated physically above the cottages of their relatives and they retain a degree of separateness, both geographically and ideologically. They tend towards greater liberation and open-mindedness: hence Clare's acceptance of Lawrence and Frieda who evoke distrust, suspicion and even hatred in many members of the community. In the following dialogue, Lawrence and Clare discuss the death of her cousin, John William, who had been deeply traumatised by his war experiences and was driven to commit suicide (although this secret is not unearthed until the final stages of the novel). What we do know is that Clare and John William have become sexually involved during his brief return to Zennor before departing for officers' training, resulting in a pregnancy. Through discussing John William's death, Lawrence voices a number of familiar ideas and – Ursula-like – Clare challenges him:

“I heard in the town that your cousin was dead,” he says.

She waits for the conventional expressions of sympathy, but they do not come.

“I wrote once,” he says slowly. “It was to another woman; very beautiful she was, in the English way, you know? With her little air of being somewhere else even while she was talking to you. Her brother was killed. I wrote to her that I would rather put out my eyes than stand as a witness to this deliberate horror. And I believed it. But now I would not put out my eyes. I need them to look on other things – flowers, and beasts, and a little hut in the mountains. So I set myself to *keep separate* –” He breaks off.

“He was killed in an accident,” she says. “When we thought he was home safe.”

“Yes, yes,” he says quickly, looking intently at her face as if willing her to follow his train of thought. “You know that I was with your cousin after we left you? We walked up to Zennor that night after the concert.”

“Yes, when I came to your cottage for tea you told me you'd talked to John William that night.”

What did they say, she wonders? Did John William mention it? But she can't remember anything now, except, "You don't know how nice you are without your clothes." She feels her skin warming.

"He was sick to his soul too, though there wasn't any wound to see," says Lawrence, looking at her out of his taut, white face. "Perhaps that's what is coming – a time when men will go clean out of their minds. Except a man who can sit apart in his own soul and watch the foxgloves come out."

"We can't all do that," says Clare sharply.

"Why not? Why not, if it'll keep us living – *really* living, in the middle of all this madness?"

"John William wasn't mad," says Clare. "He knew what he was doing."

"No one knows what he is doing any more. He is joined to a machine. He is not free to act as a man any longer. He is part of a machine of colossal stupidity. And I think your cousin knew it. He was a brave man, but he wasn't blessed with stupidity. It would have been easier for him if he had been able to sink into a state of mindlessness and forget that he was a man with a soul of his own for which he was responsible."

"You talk of soldiers as if they were doing wrong – as if they were animals!"

"No; they are not animals. Perhaps it would be better for them if they were. An animal does only what is in its nature to do. It cannot kill its own instincts. Think of a fox when you come upon him suddenly. He looks straight at you, and knows you, and then he trots away, quite self-possessed. He knows whether you mean him harm or not. You can't fool him. But you can fool a man's soul out of him, if you set yourself to do it. The war has fooled England's soul out of her."¹

This passage reveals the subtlety and pertinence of Dunmore's engagement with Lawrence, on a number of levels. The letter mentioned here was written to Lady Cynthia Asquith in October

1915, and in this letter Lawrence does indeed advocate blindness (of both body and soul) over the horror of bearing witness to the war (*IL* 414). Yet in the passage above, Dunmore indicates a progression in Lawrence's thinking, in which he rejects his previous position in order to envisage an alternative. Here, he wishes to retain his vision in order to look at the beauty of the Cornish countryside, and his unquenchable love of nature infuses Dunmore's narrative. Instead of Birkin's "uninterrupted grass, and a hare sitting up" (*WL* 127) – part of his vision of a man-free world – Dunmore's Lawrence tempts Clare to see "rabbits sitting up" at the Carracks and calls Frieda from inside their cottage to observe an adder in the garden.² These gestures are warm and inclusive, yet we also witness a Lawrence who needs to remain separate. Like Rupert Birkin, Richard Lovatt Somers and Oliver Mellors, he is torn between his desire to connect with other human beings and the need to recoil into isolation, possessing his soul in silence and peace.

Dunmore transposes the phrase "colossal idiocy" (from a letter to J. B. Pinker, 5 September 1914 [*IL* 212]) to "colossal stupidity" and uses it in the passage above to epitomise her Lawrence's attitude to the war. This stupidity is reflected graphically in the visceral depiction of John William's experiences on the front lines, struggling with mud and lice as well as the enemy in an attempt to keep his soldiers safe. The soul-sickness – or post-traumatic stress/shock – that results from his immersion in the conflict leads to insomnia, instability, physical deterioration, hallucinations and finally suicide. In this respect his trajectory resembles that of Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) rather than any of Lawrence's own characters. Nonetheless, while John William is sick without a "wound to see", Clifford Chatterley is a returning soldier whose physical paralysis causes a bruise to his psyche that spreads and engulfs him. Both Lawrence and Dunmore tackle conscription, exploring the humiliation and relief of rejection: Richard Somers and Francis Coyne are both deemed unfit to fight whilst also feeling that enforced participation in the war would destroy them. Both authors reveal the irony of a society in which to be unhealthy is fortunate

while perfect health is potentially fatal. Both explore the devastating impact of war on those who do not or cannot fight but are displaced or ostracised due to their alienness or non-compliance. Appropriately, too, Dunmore's Lawrence describes the stupidity and madness of the war as subservience to a machine.

Dunmore presents us with a chameleonic Lawrence who can be sensitive, intense, warm, vibrant, compassionate, spontaneous, sociable, passionate, angry, bitter, unreasonable, dogmatic, reclusive and (of course) brilliantly intellectual. Her research, resulting in the effective appropriation of fictional and biographical sources, provides a solid foundation for this novel – and the evocation of a parochial, exclusive community in which gossip and rumour abound, overriding good sense, is wonderfully perceptive. The fictional plot has been carefully crafted, impelling the narrative towards its ironic conclusion in which the Lawrences are ousted from Cornwall by an apparently free-thinking and intelligent man who knows what it feels like to be an outsider. Ultimately, Dunmore's first novel – inspired by Lawrence as both man and writer – exists as a creative tribute and remains a remarkable literary achievement in its own right.

¹ Helen Dunmore, *Zennor in Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1994), 261–3.

² *Ibid.*, 55, 87.