

## My Personal Lawrence

By Gaku Iwai (Konan University in Kobe, Japan)

I first read Lawrence when I was at university. I do not remember how much I knew about Lawrence before I grabbed his text. Now, I feel I had known that he was a radical and controversial novelist. In my class, I had read some of his essays—his introduction to *The Grand Inquisitor*, “Pan in America” and some pieces from *Mornings in Mexico*—and they captured me. Sometimes difficult to follow, perhaps slightly self-righteous occasionally, but Lawrence’s unique and provocative essays have always been of great interest to me since then.

What fascinated me then was probably how Lawrence condemned his own country. He posited that England and its people were numbed by mechanical civilization and obsessed with mammonism. He was sure of the deadlock of European civilization and forsook Europe in search of his ideal world. Via Australia, he eventually reached New Mexico, where he found what he was looking for—vitality, the flame of life and the vibration of the souls. Yet, at the same time, he felt alienated from the native people because he realized that he was a total stranger to them and felt it impossible for him to have a feeling of intimate togetherness with them.

Likewise, when I was in my twenties, I was strongly critical of my own country—Japan. In the early nineties, Japan was in the last orgy of its economic boom. People worshipped money and sought merely ephemeral pleasures—at least from the perspective of a young person. I believed the Japanese people had lost something vital. So, I yearned to see other worlds, other ways of living, and the only country available for a frugal student in Japan was China. So, I took a boat from Osaka to Shanghai. China was, at that time, a socialist country (it still is ‘officially’), and people were generally poor in the towns, and extremely impoverished in the countryside. People did not work

hard, because if they fulfilled their work quota, they would be assigned more tasks. On his walk to Huayapa, Lawrence wanted some fruit, but nobody cared to sell some to him. He writes:

On the bottom of the *plaza* is a shop. We want some fruit.—*Hay frutas?* Oranges, or bananas?—*No, Señor.*—No fruits?—*No hay!*—Can I buy a cup?—*No hay.*—Can I buy a *jícara* . . . ?—*No hay!*

*No hay!* means *there isn't any!* and it's the most regular sound made by the prevailing dumb bells of the land. (MM 28)

As Lawrence experienced, I met ‘没有’—‘there isn't any’—everywhere in China—at shops, guesthouses and ticket offices. ‘没有’ was ‘the most regular sound’ and the first word I learnt in China. However, despite these kinds of puzzling experiences, I saw in the Chinese people great power and resilience, and there were deep bonds between people, which seemed to have been lost in Japan. Through the experiences of excitement and bewilderment at cross-cultural encounters like those written in Lawrence's essays, I realized that there were many ways to articulate the world, many frames of reference and senses of values.

My travels to foreign countries continued into my graduate school period. However, as I learnt literary theories as a tool to decipher his texts, they made it possible for me to look at Lawrence's works in a new way. I was more interested in the ambivalent nature of Lawrence's texts. By ‘ambivalent’ I mean two things. The first is a discrepancy between his theory and his fiction. It has often been argued how Lawrence's ‘philosophy’ is embodied in his fiction, but I feel it is more fruitful if we focus on the fact that the ideas he expresses in his essays are often incompatible with his fiction. For example, in his middle era, Lawrence argued for a polarity between two opposite beings, the eternal conflict between a lion and a unicorn, in such essays as ‘The Crown’. However, when he composed ‘The Prussian Officer’, a story of two opposite persons, he could not portray his ideal state of being. The orderly kills the officer and an eternal conflict of two opposing beings is

not attained.

The second ‘ambivalence’ is that on the one hand, his texts are subversive, but on the other hand, they are deeply influenced by the contemporary reactionary discourses. A typical example can be found in the descriptions of the Germans in *Movements in European History*, written during and just after the First World War. In Britain during the war, Germany was a target of wartime propaganda and attacked in every aspect. Even the Germanic tribes in ancient history were slighted or just ignored in contemporary history books. Nonetheless, Lawrence devoted a chapter to the Germanic tribes. Emphasizing the importance of the ‘German spirit’, he argued that the intermarriage between the Germans and the natives formed ‘the base of the great modern nations’ of Europe (MEH 63). Yet at the same time, his depiction of the Huns is deeply influenced by the contemporary anti-German propaganda, in which ‘Hun’ was a typical epithet that overemphasized the atrocity of the German soldiers. ‘Hadrian’, or ‘You Touched Me’, could be another example. It is a story of an orphan returning from Canada after the First World War and demanding his right to marry a daughter of a pottery manager. Within the story is inscribed the contemporary fear of the working-class ex-soldiers widespread among the ruling classes in post-war Britain and scepticism about democracy shared among the intellectuals.

As I grew older, however, I returned to reading Lawrence for pleasure and found myself more often sympathising with some of the characters in his works. This is probably because I got married and became a father to two children. The character I sympathise with most is Walter Morel in *Sons and Lovers*. He is a working-class father of late nineteenth-century England, but he certainly shares some typical characteristics of the head of a family in Japan of earlier generations. Morel is, I believe, essentially kind-hearted and has many good pals at public houses, but he is shy of showing his emotions at home and often cannot express his feelings except through violence. In a traditionally patriarchal society, Japanese fathers did not speak much at home, did not express their feelings, and

did not show their kindness to their family members. Morel reminds me of my father because, although he was fortunately not violent like the fictional character, my father was certainly not good at expressing his emotions to his family and was always reticent at home. I understood this better when I got married and had children. Surprisingly, or as a natural consequence, I found myself often feeling shy of showing my true emotions to my wife and kids. I found myself ambivalent in the sense that while I disagree with the traditional patriarchal family, I felt myself a descendant of that tradition. This discovery added a new charm to Lawrence's works for me. Thus, I rediscovered Lawrence again and again, depending on the phase of my life. Now, I am beginning to feel my age—my hair is greying, my daughter studies mathematics at university and my son will also leave home for university soon. I now look forward to knowing how my reading of Lawrence will be changing in the future.