

The D.H. Lawrence Society

D. H. LAWRENCE, DISTANCE AND PROXIMITY (10-14 July, 2021)

Workshop G: Universal Lawrence

Convened by Naveed Rehan

‘Lawrence in my geographical context’: Kathleen Vella (University of Malta)

I grew up in a home where learning, literature and books were the *raison d'être*. As the daughter of a local and respected teacher in Malta, I can say that I was lucky to have received a good solid education. Digging into my personal memory, my first brushes with Lawrence must have been as a child, hearing of the ‘Chatterley Obscenity Case’, which had occurred a few years before I was born. I do recall my father discussing the subject at the dinner table. Such was my father’s interest in all things cultural and literary. Attending a strict Roman Catholic Convent school run by nuns meant that any exposure to Lawrence as a young student, was of course out of the question. The Fifth Form ‘O Level’ in English Literature syllabus comprised William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *A Pardoners Tale* and a book of poetry. Lawrence was also nowhere to be seen at ‘A Level’ where Shakespeare now took me to the Scottish battlefields, Graham Greene to South Africa and Seamus Heaney’s poetry to the Irish bogs. Lawrence at that stage was non-existent.

My brush with Lawrence came years later, when, married with two daughters I visited a bookshop owned by a British lady who resided in Malta. Malta was, for many years a British colony, a tiny Mediterranean island, very British, some 90 or so kilometres south of Sicily and 280 kilometres North of Africa. Following national independence in 1964, many British nationals still lived on the island, some of whom made it their naturalised home. Now this bookshop looked like it had emerged out of a Dickensian novel. Never had I seen so many books squeezed into such a small place. The bookshop consisted of three small rooms in the front of an old Maltese house, a Mediterranean stone villa, very similar to Greek or Cypriot stone villas with patterned floor tiles and internal windows overlooking a central courtyard full of palmy plants where cats basked indolently in the hot shade. In each of these three tiny front rooms were bookshelves, ceiling-high along every wall, as well as several placed in the middle of each room in rows, so closely positioned that they only allowed for one person to walk through at a time. The rooms smelt of books and were quite dark. I remember my first visit quite vividly. After typically searching for activity art books for the children, my searching eyes steered me away, tracing the faint eye-level typed shelf labels, taking me from genre to genre

and room to room, until I stumbled across the English Literature section, where I found a section titled ‘Modernists’. I do remember pulling out *The Rainbow* and flicking through the pages which opened on the ‘Anna Victrix’¹ chapter. As Lawrence’s words became my own voice, I felt I wanted to hear more. I also picked up *Women in Love* and then *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* to complete the tertium quid, held these close to my chest and turned to find my family. These books were coming home with me. As a woman in a strongly-patriarchal society, reading the ‘Anna Victrix’ and ‘The Cathedral’ chapters in *The Rainbow*² felt like ‘[...] a new part of the soul woke up suddenly, and the old world gave way to a new.’³ I no longer felt I was bordering on the limits of insanity. Lawrence had captured my sentiments so closely that it felt uncanny. I devoured the novels and learnt all about relationship isolation, ‘annihilation’, ‘possession’ and ‘power’ dynamics, which assisted me with my own spiritual unrest to gain better perspective awareness across the complexities of self-understanding. What I found comforting was that these powerful narratives were giving me a sense of what was legitimate. What I found unbelievable was that the person who had given me this new sense of perspective was a British man from Nottingham who had died in 1930.

Years later, I encountered Lawrence at University where I studied his work for an undergraduate degree credit called ‘The Modern Novel’. I went on to select Lawrence as the topic of my Masters Dissertation, specifically the concept of Lawrence and travel as an apocalyptic visionary and the ‘spirit of place’. I found myself exploring all the different ‘Lawrences’, and the versatility and expansive diversity of his work. I had no doubt that Lawrence would be the focus of my Ph.D. thesis which deals with Lawrence and the influence of Art on his work, as well as Lawrence as artist and Art Critic. Joining the D. H. Lawrence Society and being given the opportunity to be a part of this wonderful group and listening to, and learning from Lawrentian experts, was the biggest highlight of my doctoral experience and which has brought me so much joy. By now I felt I had a very strong ‘relationship’ with Lawrence, so strong that I feel he is central to my life and that my reading of and research on Lawrence is an instinctive, irrepressible fact. At times in life, things happen so naturally that one has absolutely, no doubt. That is the feeling on Lawrence.

My greatest fascination with Lawrence is primarily his work on the psychological-aloneness, the management of thoughts and feelings, a challenge in and of itself, which is then compounded

¹ *Women in Love* (London: Penguin Group, 1996)

² *The Rainbow* (London: Penguin Group, 1995)

³ ‘New Mexico’, *Phoenix, the Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. by Edward McDonald Lawrence (New York: The Viking Press, 1968).

exponentially within the dynamics of any sort of relationship. Lawrence's voice travels across time, cultures, geography and gender delineation. Of particular poignancy is Lawrence's writing through a genre of psycho-sexual fusion of self-identification about the solitude of the inner female-sexual psyche, the complexities of thought and feeling and the relatedness to wholeness, writing in a way that only a woman could.

Lawrence's 'It is hopeless for me to do anything without a woman at the back of me', points to his 'supra-normal' psychic identification with his mother, the permanent necessity for a dominant matriarchal figure in his life, and to his female identification or Jungian female 'anima'.⁴ I find it touching that Lawrence strove to balance out the male hegemony he socially or physiologically represented, to access his mystic 'third eye', to acquire the Tiresian ability to see in two worlds, ultimately to find himself.⁵ Lawrence admits with irony that this abnormal, spiritual connection with his mother, and his ability to 'identify and empathize with womankind', contributes to 'his genius', allowing him to 'discern the unconscious and mysterious operations of life more clearly in woman's sensibility than in man's.

In *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, to mention just two works, Lawrence describes the wearying dynamics between the sexes and the inner workings of relationships, 'The gulf between Heliogabalus,'⁶ the infinite number of confabulated affects as two people, 'play each other's parts' which (refreshingly) end in a mythical counterpoint to the traditional 'happy-ever-after' endings. Lawrence, ever-proleptically 'Modern', presents succumbing to gender roles as a horrific spiritual constriction. This discourse, which enhances the dialectic on gender roles as a social construct, is of course, very pertinent in today's climate.

'There would be no more of this awful straining. [...] Nay, even the responsibility for her own soul she would have to commit to him. He knew it was so, and obstinately held out against her, waiting for the surrender.'⁷

⁴ Keith Sagar 'The Resurrection of Pan', 2005, 2012 <www.keithsagar.co.uk/downloads/lacan/can17.doc> [accessed 20th September 2015] As James Hillman argues, this does not necessarily imply the acquisition of female characteristics in Lawrence, but 'a double-consciousness, mercurial, true and untrue, action and inaction, sight and blindness, living the impossible oxymoron more like an animal who is at once superbly conscious in its actions and utterly unconscious of them'.

⁵ D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation*, ed. by Mara Kalnins (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 107.

⁶ *Fantasia of the Unconscious and Psychoanalysis of the Unconscious* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p.117.

⁷ *Ibid*

Lawrence visited Malta in 1920 and mentions it many times in his writing, notably in *Sea and Sardinia* in which he compares Cagliari to Malta, despite not having the Maltese ‘foreign liveliness’⁸, where one could acquire ‘good English bacon’⁹! He also mentions it with reference to the spirit of place,

‘[...] Malta: lost between Europe and Africa and belonging to nowhere. Belonging to nowhere, never having belonged to anywhere. To Spain and the Arabs and the Phoenicians most. But as if it had never really had a fate. No fate. Left outside of time and history. The spirit of the place is a strange thing.’¹⁰

In *Aaron’s Rod*, there is interesting reference to Malta once again in a discourse related to one’s search for the spirit of place which is totally unrelated to geography:

‘[...] what’s the use of going somewhere else? You won’t change yourself.” “I may in the end,” said Lilly. “You’ll be yourself, whether it’s Malta or London,” said Aaron.’¹¹

Lawrence in the mythical role of Orpheus or Persephone, a Cicerone across time and borders embodies foreign-ness to explore the chthonic world of one’s own psyche taking us to our own internal ‘unchartered’ territories. It is thanks to Lawrence that I feel that I have gained some ground into a new self-consciousness and self-identification, some sort of personal geography or ‘spirit of place’. I wonder, how many other Lawrentian enthusiasts share a similar experience to mine. Lawrence does touch one in very personal ways. I end in his voice on this.

ONCE men touch one another, then the modern industrial
form of machine civilisation will melt away
and universalism and cosmopolitanism will cease

the great movement of centralising into oneness will stop
and there will be a vivid recoil into separateness
many vivid small states, like a kaleidoscope, all colours
and all the differences given expression.¹²

⁸ D. H. Lawrence, ‘Sea and Sardinia’, *D. H. Lawrence and Italy* (Penguin, 2007), p. 189.

⁹ *Ibid.* p.144.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.191.

¹¹ *Aaron’s Rod*, ed. by Mara Kalnins (Penguin Books, 1976), p. 103.

¹² D. H. Lawrence, ‘Future States’, *D.H. Lawrence: The Complete Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993)