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## HOW BEST TO CELEBRATE LITERARY HERITAGE?

JAMES WALKER

This summer I've been on various literary pilgrimages. My first stop was Rochester which is very much a shrine to Charles Dickens in the same way that Eastwood is to Lawrence. Various landmarks have featured in his novels, enabling shops to allude to the Victorian scribe through punning names that vary in nuance. My favourite was the confectionary 'Sweet Expectations'. There is always the danger of turning a town into a literary theme park. Getting the balance right is tricky. But the most important literary artefact in Rochester is Dickens's Swiss chalet, where he penned five of his novels. Unfortunately, it's a rotting carcass in desperate need of restoration.

Next up was Margate to find the shelter where T. S. Eliot penned part of *The Waste Land* (1922). He was suffering from a nervous breakdown at the time, and I suspect Thanet council were trying to replicate this condition in tourists by making it impossible to find. I took the lack of information and contempt for iconic modernist locations as a challenge and was rewarded when I spotted a blue plaque on the side of an adjacent toilet – rather than the actual shelter!

I sat down and slurped on a Mr. Whippy, wondering what Geoff Dyer would have to say about such things, remembering his apathy on finally finding Lawrence's home in Florence:

We stood silently. I knew this moment well from previous literary pilgrimages: you look and look and try to summon up feelings which don't exist ... You say, 'I am standing in the place he stood, seeing the things he saw . . .', but nothing changes, everything remains exactly the same.<sup>1</sup>

I specialise in digital literary heritage projects and have been contemplating how best to drag Lawrence kicking and screaming

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into the twenty-first century. What's more, how do you represent someone as complex and contradictory as Lawrence given that his reputation and influence waxes and wanes each decade? It's worth taking a brief potted history of the problem of defining him to understand the approach I've decided to take.

When F. R. Leavis declared D. H. Lawrence "novelist" in 1955 his intention was to restore Lawrence back to the Canon. Kate Millet wasn't convinced, accusing Lawrence of misogyny and sexism. Her three main criticisms were of his heroines and villainesses who had congenital and submissive personalities, the domineering and bullying male counterparts, exemplified by the phallocentric Mellors, Birkin and Paul Morel, and, lastly, a condemnation of Lawrence's message.<sup>2</sup>

"I shall always be a priest of love" wrote Lawrence on Christmas Day, 1912, after completing an early draft of *Sons and Lovers* (1L 493). Harry. T. Moore agreed and republished his 1955 book *The Intelligent Heart* as *The Priest of Love* (1974) in recognition of Lawrence's sensual message, taking a distinctly different view to Millet.

In the latest biography, Frances Wilson presents three versions of Lawrence via Dante's *Inferno*. Focusing "on the decade of superhuman energy and productivity between 1915 when *The Rainbow* was prosecuted, and 1925 when he was diagnosed with tuberculosis", she identifies these as Inferno (England) Purgatory (Italy) and Paradise (American Southwest), explaining that "Lawrence, who was a different man in every place, was never in the same place for more than a few months".<sup>3</sup> Rather than viewing him as a "novelist", like Leavis, Wilson credits him for his autofiction and his lesser-known work, such as his introduction to Maurice Magnus's *Memoirs of the Foreign Legion* (1924). "His subject in the *Memoir* is, among other things, conflict, and Lawrence's response to Magnus was, as ever, conflicted" writes Wilson. "He liked Magnus, he hated Magnus, he was attracted to Magnus, he was repelled by Magnus..."<sup>4</sup>

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So, there are multiple versions of Lawrence, literary critics can only agree to disagree on his value, and within his own writing, Lawrence is full of contradictions. Pinning him down, then, is a difficult, perhaps impossible task, and may explain why Aldous Huxley observed it's "remarkable how everyone who knew Lawrence felt compelled to write about him? Why, he's had more books written about him than any writer since Byron".<sup>5</sup> Huxley himself was a willing testifier to Lawrence's magnetism, writing:

To be with Lawrence was a kind of adventure, a voyage of discovery into newness and otherness ... He looked at things with the eyes ... of a man who had been at the brink of death and to whom, as he emerges from the darkness, the world reveals itself as unfathomably beautiful and mysterious. For Lawrence, existence was one continuous convalescence; it was as though he were newly reborn from a mortal illness every day of his life.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly Lawrence means many things to many people and, as culture does not exist in a vacuum, these meanings will continue to grow, transform and change as the world around us changes, which is why a literary heritage project attempting to explain his influence needs to be reflexive and fluid.

This is partly the reason why Paul Fillingham and I decided to celebrate Lawrence through a travelling "memory theatre" or a "cabinet of curiosities". Cabinets of curiosities (also known as Kunstkabinett, Wunderkammer; Cabinets of Wonder, and wonder-rooms) allowed collectors to accumulate objects and then define and classify them. One such collector was John Tradescant whose broad assortment of oddities provided a microcosm of the world. It was aptly named the *Ark* (1634). When he opened up his home to the public, Britain's first public museum was born.

In the D. H. Lawrence Memory Theatre we are piecing Lawrence's life together through artefacts rather than oddities. We want to do this via themes rather than chronologically. We have an open submissions policy whereby anyone can submit ideas. Our hope

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is that we will then be able to develop a broad and diverse appraisal of his work that captures the good, the bad and the ugly – those wonderful contradictions that Frances Wilson notes. Whereas memory theatres of the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century were very much about reinforcing the social capital of the owner, ours is more open and about creating a space for different writers to provide their own definitions and categories.

For example, our first artefact is ‘Mr. Muscles’ because Lawrence “loved to do the jobs you hate” and was always prepared to get his hands dirty. As Mabel Dodge Luhan observed in her memoir:

I don’t believe I ever saw Lawrence just sit. He was forever doing something ... He always did the baking, and at least half of the cooking and dish washing ... Lawrence really had very little sense of leisure.<sup>7</sup>

Knud Merrild, who would later join Lawrence for one winter up in the mountains of New Mexico, observed that Lawrence’s work ethic was born out of connecting to his immediate environment. He recalls Lawrence warning that “The more machinery intervenes between us and the naked forces, the more we numb and atrophy our own senses. Every time we turn on a tap to have water, every time we turn a handle to have fire or light, we deny ourselves and annul our being”.<sup>8</sup> Being busy is about being alive, sentiments which are understandable in a man for whom death was always lurking around the corner.

Frieda Lawrence explains this work ethic through a more spiritual connection. “To me his relationship, his bond with everything in creation was so amazing, no preconceived ideas, just a meeting between him and a creature, a tree, a cloud, anything. I called it love, but it was something else – Bejahung in German, ‘saying yes’”.<sup>9</sup>

Currently, the memory theatre lives a digital existence and is dispersed across the social media platforms Twitter, YouTube and Instagram as well as having presence through a project website and blog. This is partly a result of Covid-19 but also in recognition of the way in which our reading habits are changing. If Lawrence is to

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engage with modern audiences then our project needs to be accessible across different platforms as well as in different formats and lengths. But it has always been our intention to build a physical memory theatre, inspired by Lawrence's personalised travel trunk (that can be viewed at the Birthplace Museum), and set it on route to retrace Lawrence's steps.

Lawrence was a notorious fidget who Dyer describes as "nomadic to the point of frenzy".<sup>10</sup> Catherine Carswell observed he "disliked an air of everlastingness about a home. For him it must have something of the tent about it".<sup>11</sup> Therefore, he never owned property. Or a tent. Earl Brewster witnessed this restlessness in Ceylon when Lawrence became infuriated by Buddha statues, complaining "Oh I wish he would stand up!"<sup>12</sup>. It's for these reasons that I'm so against statues of Lawrence. To see him rendered static in bronze is antithetical to his nature. If we truly want to capture the essence of his personality, the fluidity with which he lived, then the form must reflect the content and so our memory theatre will retrace his "savage pilgrimage" rather than gather dust.

Lawrence meant different things to different people at different times. He was in a constant state of flux. He produced work in each place he lived, and this seems to have been the trigger to propel him onto the next destination. It is important to try to capture these sentiments in a literary heritage project and so it is not good enough to simply fill our memory theatre with artefacts. Like Lawrence, these need to grow in provenance as they move along and transform in meaning as they encounter different people.

An example of how this will work is through audience interaction with the memory theatre. For example, one of our forthcoming artefacts is a book of pressed flowers to represent Lawrence's connection with nature. This is based on a letter he sent to Catherine Carswell who recorded it in her memoir:

With my box of Derbyshire flowers there was a small floral guide, written by Lawrence, describing each plant and making me see how they had been before he picked them for me, in what sorts of

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places and manner and profusion they had grown, and even how they varied in the different countrysides.<sup>13</sup>

We will collect flowers from Eastwood with a local naturalist and place them in a book. When the memory theatre arrives at each new location around the globe, we will commission locals to collect flowers and add them to our book so that it continues to change and transform as it moves.

And movement is the most important factor when celebrating Lawrence. He opens *Sea and Sardinia* (1921) with “COMES over one an absolute necessity to move. And what is more, to move in some particular direction”. We hope that our project helps propel him into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and provoke more questions, arguments and uncertainties.

[www.memorytheatre.co.uk](http://www.memorytheatre.co.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> Geoff Dyer, *Out of Sheer Rage* (Canongate, 1997), 60.

<sup>2</sup> Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Frances Wilson, *Burning Man: The Ascent of D. H. Lawrence* (Bloomsbury Circus, 2021), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>6</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Olive Tree and Other Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), 232

<sup>7</sup> Mabel Dodge Luhan, *Lorenzo in Taos* (London: Martin Secker, 1933), 75.

<sup>8</sup> Knud Merrild, *A Poet and Two Painters: A Memoir of D. H. Lawrence* (New York: The Viking Press, 1939), 84.

<sup>9</sup> Janet Byrne, *A Genius for Living: The Life of Frieda Lawrence* (Harper Collins, 1995), 376.

<sup>10</sup> Geoff Dyer, *Anglo-English Attitudes: Essays, Reviews, Misadventures. 1984-1999* (London: Abacus, 1999), 157.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Carswell, *The Savage Pilgrimage* (London: Martin Secker, 1932), 26.

<sup>12</sup> Earl Brewster & Achsah Brewster, *D. H. Lawrence: Reminiscences and Correspondence* (London: Secker, 1934), 49.

<sup>13</sup> Carswell, *The Savage Pilgrimage*, 130.