

Ecological Affect in *Sea and Sardinia*

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Lawrence's motivation for travelling to Sardinia was ecological. He wanted to get closer to a wilder, less inhabited, less 'civilized' environment in an escape from the expat community he was living among in Sicily. But the book that Lawrence wrote about this journey is much more than a description of a wild landscape in the manner of a conventional travel book. The journey turns out to be an inner journey, or rather an exploration of the way a particular environment shapes its people and their culture, which, in turn, affects the writer. It is about the meeting of nature and culture, or rather culture as nature when social ecology is formed by natural ecology as the character of people is formed by their engagement with their environment. *Sea and Sardinia* is a perfect case study of ecological affect exemplified by a writer who is fascinated by his own response to affect. This is why the writer of this book frequently stands outside himself and presents himself as a slightly comic character, trailing behind the Queen Bee and affected by land, weather and people. A measure of the extent to which Lawrence himself registered the affect of the combination of natural ecology and social ecology in Sardinia is to be found in a comment from the illustrator of *Sea and Sardinia*, Jan Juta. After talking to Lawrence about the paintings to be made by Juta on his later visit to Sardinia for this purpose, Juta considered that 'the island had puzzled and disturbed him' (Nehls II, 1958, 86). These are curious words to use about the writer of a travel book. They suggest that this writer has gone deeper than might be expected of a descriptive travel book. This chapter will explore just how Lawrence was both 'puzzled' and 'disturbed' by the island's topographical, climatological and cultural characteristics as he registered them in his writing of *Sea and Sardinia*.

The famous opening sentence of *Sea and Sardinia*, 'Comes over one an absolute necessity to move' (SS 7), is a celebration of the essential mode of affect – that of moving from one source of affect to another with the openness of spontaneous intuition. Giving in to what 'comes over one' is, for Lawrence, the essential quality that enables travel to be a sensitive, deep absorption of the spirit of place. Indeed, the opening page of the book is a perfect example of what ecocritics recognise as psychogeography – the affect of place upon the psyche. Psychogeography has become a broad term, as Merlin Coverley, in his book *Psychogeography* (2018) testifies by writing, 'Are we talking about a predominantly literary movement or a political strategy, a series of New Age ideas or a set of avant-

garde practices?’ (Coverley, 2018, 13). In *Sea and Sardinia* Lawrence’s exploration of psychogeography is best approached through a detailed examination of his fascination for what might be called ‘ecological affect’ in his writing. In his earlier travel book *Twilight in Italy* (1916), written before he first drafted his theory of the spirit of place in 1917, nature and culture were described separately, but in *Sea and Sardinia* it is precisely their mutual affect that is the focus of Lawrence’s writing.

It should be noted that Lawrence’s sense of the spirit of place already had a long history. It was a principle central to Ruskin’s thought that people were affected by their environment, whether it be the built environment or their natural environment. The cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove, discussing Ruskin’s *The Poetry of Architecture* (1837-38) comments that it, ‘fuses conventional picturesque theory and strains of Romantic nationalism to forge a link between national character, physical landscape and climate’ (Cosgrove, 1995, 87). Like Ruskin, Lawrence believed that the affect of landscape and climate expressed itself in the national character reveal in a nation’s art. Thinking about American literature in 1917 Lawrence had written, ‘All art partakes of the Spirit of Place in which it is produced (*SCAL* 167). This includes the art of traditional costumes and festivals as much as buildings and the arts of husbandry adapted to the particularities of land and climate. But a neglected influence upon Lawrence’s thinking about art and ritual is the work of Jane Ellen Harrison, a Cambridge Classics scholar whose books were much discussed amongst Lawrence’s friends in England. In October 1913 Lawrence read Harrison’s new book *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913) and wrote what has particular relevance for art associated with religious festivals: ‘It just fascinates me to see art coming out of religious yearning’ (2*L* 90). More significantly Lawrence will have noted Harrison’s linking national character, physical landscape and climate: ‘It is idle to attempt a study of a ritual of a people without knowing the facts of their climate and surroundings’ (Harrison, 1913, 15). Here is a statement that would later be recognised as an awareness of psychogeography, or ecological affect.

Michael Bell has made a distinction between Lawrence’s travel writing and ‘the method of *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* whereby the environment is constituted as a specific psychic “world”’ (Bell, 1991, 170). In the novels, Bell argued, without ceasing to be a literal landscape, the environment constitutes a symbolic world that he called ‘a psychic “geography”’ (Bell, 1991, 171). For Bell this is the difference between focussing upon the qualities of the real world and a focus upon the dramatized landscape as reflective of the psyche of the character in question. Certainly in *Sea and Sardinia* Lawrence’s focus is upon the assimilation of the qualities of place in the character of the people of that place and its expression in their culture. It is also true that by *The Rainbow* Lawrence had moved on from the explicit symbolism of nature in *The Trespasser* – the beach as a warm female body. There is, perhaps, less difference between the

psychogeography of Lawrence's travel writing and the psychic geography of the novels than Bell has suggested. It is in *Sea and Sardinia* that Lawrence celebrates most transparently cultural engagements with the land and the place's affect upon men and women.

Significantly, Lawrence does not actually characterise his impulse to visit Sardinia as an escape from civilization, but as an exchange of the affect of one mountain for another. The second sentence - 'And what is more, to move in some particular direction' - aims to set up a trajectory of contrasts (SS 7). He seeks to leave behind the dominating influence of Mount Etna on Sicily to explore the Gennargentu mountains of Sardinia. But look at how Lawrence explains the way openness to affect demands an inner discipline beyond the casual glance associated with conventional travel. To truly 'see' Mount Etna the viewer must become 'a naked seer' and venture into an otherworldly realm: 'the strange chamber of the empyrean' (SS 7). This otherworldly realm can only be achieved by the traveller seeing like a 'seer' without the clothing of preconceptions and expectations. More to the point, 'You must change your state of mind' (SS 8). Lawrence's sense of psychogeography at work is brilliantly expressed in the way Etna's electricity affects the very cells of the human body and thus its spirit: 'With her strange remote communications, and her terrible dynamic exhortations. She makes men mad. Such terrible vibrations of wicked and beautiful electricity she throws about her, like a deadly net! Nay, sometimes, verily, one can feel a new current of her demon magnetism seize one's living tissue, and change the peaceful lie of one's active cells' (SS 8). So it is actually Etna that expels Lawrence: 'Perhaps it is she one must flee from. At any rate, one must go: and go at once' (SS 8). As we shall see, the psychogeography of the Gennargentu mountains of Sardinia is quite different from that of Etna in many respects as the natural ecology shapes the spirit of the social ecology in Sardinian mountains and plains.

However, first must come the tuning-in process offered by the fundamental sense common to all islanders of being defined by the sea, even if, in their mountain villages they never actually see it. In a sense, the sea is present throughout *Sea and Sardinia* since it is what bounds the distinctiveness of living on an island. At the end of the book Lawrence is explicit about the psychogeography of islandness when he himself uses the word 'psyche' to account for the affect of moving from island to mainland: 'And in an hour one changes one's psyche' (SS 170). However, much of the early chapter titled 'The Sea' is taken up with views of specific named places on land seen from the perspective of the sea as they themselves look outwards to the sea defining them. The affect of the beautifully described dusk and dawn at sea is so strong as to tempt in Lawrence a fantasy of continuous suspension in flight which would produce a complex inner state in 'the trembling of never-ended space': 'Space, and the frail vibration of space, the glad lonely

wringing of the heart' (SS 47). It is not at all clear in this sentence whether it is space or the traveller who is doing the trembling, or both. But that is the reciprocity of psychogeography at work. It is sometimes able to produce quite contradictory feelings at once, both heart-wringingly lonely and simply glad to be so. In Lawrence's time, all who came to experience Sardinia travelled through this sea-space, although few would have been able to express its qualities so deeply and so movingly, as Lawrence does in his sea-view of Cagliari which is not so much a description as a feeling: 'It is strange and rather wonderful, not a bit like Italy. The city piles up lofty and almost miniature, and makes me think of Jerusalem: without trees, without cover, rising rather bare and proud, remote as if back in history, like a town in a monkish, illuminated missal' (SS 53). If the town has an anthropomorphic character – 'proud, remote' – its affect upon the writer results in an amazing sentence: 'It has that curious look, as if it could be seen, but not entered' (SS 53). Of course it is the writer who *feels* that look, so that the spirit of place is internalised by the human who is actually doing the looking. Immediately, before he has even landed, one can understand what Jan Jutta meant when he said that 'the island had puzzled and disturbed him'. What could be more puzzling and disturbing than a town that can be seen but not entered?

In fact, when Lawrence and Frieda enter the town and climb up 'a street like a corkscrew stair-way' (SS 56) his view of the topography is equally strange: 'Land and sea both seem to give out, exhausted, at the bay's head: the world's end' (SS 57). It seems a place 'Left outside of time and history' (SS 57). This leads Lawrence to, in effect, make a claim for psychogeography against the mechanistic rationalism that overrides difference, ecological and cultural difference, in assumptions of hegemonic sameness: 'The spirit of place is a strange thing. Our mechanical age tries to override it. But it does not succeed. In the end the strange, sinister spirit of place, so diverse and so adverse in differing places, still smash our mechanical oneness into smithereens, and all that we think the real thing will go off with a pop, and we shall be left staring' (SS 57). To be noted here is the clear suggestion that the spirit of a place is not necessarily cosy or comforting; it can be 'sinister' and actually 'adverse' in its affect, as Lawrence was about to find out in his winter journey into the mountainous heartland of Sardinia.

Mark Kinkead-Weekes makes an interesting point about the significance of Lawrence and Frieda's initial choice for their exploration of Sardinia. They were trying out the possibility of somewhere to live in order to escape the coastal tourists of Sicily: 'When, however, they decided on the Friday afternoon to take the narrow-gauge railway up the centre of Sardinia rather than the state one up the west side, they were deliberately moving off the beaten track' (Kinkead-Weekes, 1996, 622). This railway, Lawrence said, 'pierces the centre' and 'we will go by the secondary railway, wherever it goes' (SS 68). There is no doubting the adventurous spirit of openness in which this exploration of

Sardinia is undertaken and this is immediately reflected in the ecology seen from the train – ‘Unremarkable ridges of moor-like hills running away’ - giving a sense of space which Lawrence translates as ‘liberty’ and internalises with a romanticism that he denies: ‘Room – give me room – give me room for my spirit: and you can have all the toppling crags of romance’ (SS 72). Lawrentian repetition always occurs when he is at his most relaxed and in a mode of thoughtful exploration. Here it is the landscape that produced this inner exploration that is so characteristic of *Sea and Sardinia*.

After a cold night, standing in his bedroom in Mandas looking out of the window, Lawrence is reminded, not for the first time, of the landscape and spirit of Cornwall and ‘the old nostalgia for the Celtic regions began to spring up in me. Ah, those old, drystone walls dividing the fields – pale and granite-bleached!’ (SS 81). Even more remarkable is Lawrence ending this paragraph critiquing his own flight of nostalgia: ‘Before the curtains of history lifted, one feels the world was like this – this Celtic barrenness and sombreness and *air*’. Having claimed that even the very air of the place carries this sense of the elemental prehistoric, Lawrence turns upon himself with a frank reprimand: ‘Nothing is more unsatisfactory than our conception of what is Celtic and what is not Celtic. I believe there never were any Celts, as a race’ (SS 81). Such a reversal is unusual for Lawrence and it is a mark of how fresh, relaxed and open his writing is in this book - unconfined by an agenda - that he can reach such a position from what began as an engagement with granite stones. Out on the frozen road and again he is receiving messages from the bleakness he perceives that intoxicate his soul: ‘After two southern winters, with roses blooming all the time, this bleakness and this touch of frost in the ringing morning goes to my soul like an intoxication. I am so glad on this lonely naked road, I don’t know what to do with myself’ (SS 81). Celtic or not, the cold winter air of Sardinia affects more than his body, although that is its material medium of communication.

As the ecology through which he travels changes, Lawrence again acknowledges the agency of its elements. A steep slope demands a certain skill he admires in the peasant ploughman. The poplars beside a waterfall ‘seem to have living, sentient flesh’ (SS 86). A ‘gleaming mauve-silver fig’ is ‘like some sensitive creature emerged from a rock’ (SS 86). To Lawrence the fig tree has ‘come forth’ into his attention with such power that he imagines its wanting to speak to him and for him to be able to speak to this being that is expressing life in deep winter: ‘A fig tree come forth in its nudity gleaming over the dark winter-earth is a sight to behold. Like some white, tangled sea anemone. Ah, if it could but answer! or if we had tree-speech!’ (SS 86). This is a remarkable moment for any ecocritical reading of Lawrence’s work. The desire for dialogue expressed here is a mark of the depth of Lawrence’s ecological sensitivity. There is no deeper affect than that which produces the desire for mutual communication and it seems that it was the affect of

Sardinia that produced such freely explorative writing in Lawrence.

The principle of mutual affect lies behind the final sentence of Lawrence's famous contrast between the mountain he left behind and Sardinia's Gennargentu: 'How different it is from Etna, that lonely, self-conscious wonder of Sicily! This is much more human and knowable, with a deep breast and massive limbs, a powerful mountain-body. It is like the peasants' (SS 90). By reversing ecological affect Lawrence endorses ecological affect. He is able to say, 'It is like the peasants' precisely because the peasants are like the mountain – physically powerful, robust and unself-consciously self-possessed. At the same time, in writing *Sea and Sardinia*, Lawrence is also aware that the land affects him too at a deeply personal level.

As his journey progresses Lawrence muses upon this process of the land itself 'giving back' to him. 'Again the dark valley sank below like a ravine, but shaggy, bosky, unbroken. It came upon me how much I loved the sight of the blue-shadowed, tawny-tangled winter with its frozen standstill' (SS 116). Lawrence's clear delight in the vivid, precise language of material detail – 'bosky' and 'tawny-tangled' – reflects an inner joy that is like a discovery, a surprising insight of self-awareness that revealingly 'came upon' him. Sardinia now makes him think of what an old sense of prehistoric place uncultivated Italy has given him, a consciousness of 'the far, mysterious gods of the early Mediterranean' (SS 116). But, again, for Lawrence this is a mutual process of bringing each other into dialogic expression: 'Wherever one is, the place has its conscious genius. Man has lived there and brought forth his consciousness there and in some way brought that place to consciousness, given it its expression, and, really, finished it' (SS 116). This is Lawrence's belief that local culture gives expression to the spirit of place through ecological affect. Most of *Sea and Sardinia* is an exploration of this belief, to which I shall return. Before doing so, two points should not be missed.

The first, is that for Lawrence himself, in Sardinia, the experience of this discovery is restorative. 'Italy has given me back I know not what of myself, but a very, very great deal. She has found for me so much that was lost: like a restored Osiris' (SS 117). Having already chided himself for his self-confessed nostalgia for a prehistoric Celtic spirit of place in Sardinia, he now realises that he must use the insights from the past to move forwards. He's not afraid to admit that this thought came to him on a bus to Nuoro: 'But this morning in the omnibus I realise that, apart from the great rediscovery backwards, which one must make before one can be whole at all, there is a move forwards. There are unknown, unworked lands where the salt has not yet lost its savour. But one must have perfected oneself in the great past first' (SS 117). Clearly one such land prompted this expression, which 'finished it', as it were: the land outside the omnibus where peasants work with a continuity with an ancient past that is at home in its

environment.

Second, travelling through ‘the high, fresh, proud villages’ (SS 124) gives back to Lawrence a restorative affect that leads him to develop a theory of ‘life-level’. If human consciousness is formed by the genius of place and, in turn, gives expression to the character of that place, life at sea-level is obviously very different from that lived on steep, colder inland slopes. ‘Usually, the life-level is reckoned as sea-level. But here, in the heart of Sardinia, the life-level is high on the golden-lit plateau [...] high up, high and sun-sweetened and among rocks’ (SS 121). The harsh, rocky environment is not denied, any more than the cold and discomfort for the Lawrences in those ‘high, fresh, proud villages’ is omitted from this book. Writing of the highest point in their journey there is no idealisation intended in this ‘life-level’ theory. Lawrence tells it as he found it and, again, even admits that his theory may be inaccurate. Simply, ‘those [villages] that lie below, infolded in the shadow, have a gloomy, sordid feeling and a repellent population [...] The judgement may be all wrong, but this was the impression I got’ (SS 124). The unusual possibility of self-doubt here not only displays the integrity of the travel writer, but also endorses his reliance upon intuition, even in the formation of a bold theory of psychogeography.

So, what of this possibly ‘repellent population’ and its possible elevated opposite? Given that Lawrence believed that ecological affect was so strong that the character of people was shaped by their engagement with their particular environment, as demonstrated in his Sardinian ‘life-level’ theory, it is no surprise that immediately on arrival in Sardinia he identifies characteristics in island people by contrast to the rest of Italy. In ‘strange, stony’ Cagliari (SS 56) it is market day and peasants in costume have arrived from the villages. Lawrence is struck by the self-possession of the people he sees, ‘the complete absence of self-consciousness’ (SS 62). In the men at a café he sees ‘a certain pleasant, natural robustness of spirit’ that he associates with ‘a feudal free-and-easiness’ (61-2). He cannot lose his acute sense of class, even in Sardinia, but admires the easy acceptance of social position that nevertheless retains the preservation of an inner dignity.

Lawrence writes: ‘Tenderness, thank heaven, does not seem to be a Sardinian quality. Italy is so tender – like cooked macaroni’ (SS 67). Because he is visiting a mountainous island in the cold of winter, Lawrence seems to be particularly aware of a ‘natural spirit of robustness’ in both men and women. Indeed, ever sensitive to gender differences, Lawrence develops a theory about Sardinian gender relations based upon ‘the defiant, splendid split between the sexes’ (SS 67). Unlike in Italy, ‘here men don’t idealise women, by the looks of things’ (again, a half-admission that he might be wrong!) (SS 67). ‘It is tonic and splendid, really, after so much sticky intermingling and backboneless Madonna-worship. The Sardinian isn’t looking for the “noble woman nobly

planned”. No thank you. He wants that young madam over there, a young stiff-necked generation that she is’ (SS 67). Lawrence is misquoting Wordsworth’s ‘Perfect woman nobly planned’, to be rejected equally as much as ‘a Carmen, who gives herself away too much’ (SS 67). ‘So the meeting has a wild, salty savour, each the deadly unknown to the other. And at the same time, each his own, her own native pride and courage, taking the dangerous leap and scrambling back’ (SS 67). Of course, Lawrence is aware that he might be idealising himself here, especially since he thinks of this mode of relationship as in the past, perhaps in his own past with ‘a heart yearning for something I have known, and want back again’ (SS 64). He writes this admission just before developing his Sardinian relationship theory. But he ends it with a personal exclamation, ‘Give me the old, salty way of love. How I am nauseated with sentiment and nobility, the macaroni slithery-slobbery mess of modern adoration’ (SS 67)

It might be objected that Lawrence finds in the ecological affect of Sardinia the very qualities that he himself feels to have been lost in the rest of Europe. A single reference to Pan in *Sea and Sardinia* might suggest Lawrence found here what he was eventually to find in New Mexico where a Mexican Indian culture was more fully and distinctively elaborated. But even if that is so, the combination of empathy and detail from which Lawrence draws the values admired in Sardinian culture both enhances its authenticity and its expression. It could be argued that in *Sea and Sardinia* Lawrence was exploring a discourse and an ethnographic practice that was an essential rehearsal for the great essays and stories that were to emerge from the New Mexico experience. Here even a change in the colours of women’s costumes and the shape of their bodices Lawrence attributes to the spirit of place, or rather a spirited response to the spirit of place: ‘The women of one cold, stony, rather jumbled broken place were most brilliant’ (SS 129). One does not have to be an academic ecofeminist to *feel* Lawrence’s excitement in communicating ecological affect upon the people in *Sea and Sardinia*.

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