

‘Reading D. H. Lawrence in the Anthropocene’

Talk given in Eastwood for the D. H. Lawrence Festival, 3 September 2022

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Part I

[Part II was derived from the final chapter of my book *D. H. Lawrence, Ecofeminism and Nature* (2023)]

I read the news today, oh boy!

The stars and the earth and the sun and the moon and the winds / Are about to dance a war dance around you, men! (*PS* 242)

D. H. Lawrence announces the news:

The stars and the earth and the sun and the moon and the winds / Are about to dance a war dance around you, men! (*PS* 242)

This news is announced in Mexico. It is announced in fiction, by the character Don Ramón in *The Plumed Serpent*, a novel in which Lawrence explores the possibility of a new ecologically-attuned way of life and what might evolve to undermine its fulfilment. It is announced by a writer who believes that ‘The business of art is to reveal the relationship between man and his circumambient universe’ (*STH* 171). That relationship has not been going well, and we now are experiencing the consequences in terms of climate change, global heating and the sixth extinction. Lawrence did not have these terms, so we cannot expect to find direct comments on these issues. But Lawrence knew that Western civilization had developed in directions that clearly demonstrated, in his times, an alienation from what he called ‘the cosmos’, ‘the circumambient universe’ (how prescient of atmospheric change that phrase is) and the natural world which is our everyday home. To read Lawrence from our position in the Anthropocene – the era in which human presence is being laid down in the geological record as carbon and toxins and their consequences – is to find new meanings in his writing because, only a hundred years later, we know the outcomes of Lawrence’s warnings.

The stars and the earth and the sun and the moon and the winds / Are about to dance a war dance around you, men! (*PS* 242)

I want to thank Alan and the committee of the D. H. Lawrence Society for inviting me to think about Lawrence and climate change, at a moment when I was writing the Conclusion to my book *D. H. Lawrence, Ecofeminism and Nature* (London: Routledge: 2023) and realising that, although I had taken a decision not to directly address

Lawrence's political environmentalism, I did need to recognise that my readers would be reading in the Anthropocene. What I had been discussing in this book was Lawrence's exploration of the causes of the Anthropocene in attitudes towards nature that were almost always gendered in revealing ways. Central to those causes are the diverse forms, dialogues and poetic dramas of alienation from, and connection with, nature, 'the circumambient universe'. So, partly prompted by Alan's invitation, I now have fifteen ecocritically inclined Lawrence scholars preparing to write chapters for the book that will be titled *Reading D. H. Lawrence in the Anthropocene* in which Edinburgh University Press have expressed an interest. And now, the first monograph on Lawrence to mention the Anthropocene, on its first page, has arrived on my desk to review for the Society's *Journal*: Ben Stoltzfus's *D. H. Lawrence's Final Fictions*. Stoltzfus writes: 'One hundred years later Lawrence's rants against industrialization seem prescient and, insofar as the technological revolution has exacerbated them, solutions to the problems raised by mechanisation have become more urgent' (Stoltzfus 2022: 1).

My opening lines are taken from the first hymn to Quetzacoatl and it is usual to dismiss the hymns of *The Plumed Serpent* as unreadable. But why did Lawrence write such long hymns to Quetzacoatl and so many? He knew about hymns from this place - Eastwood. He knew their power to unify a community in their singing. He also knew their power to carry people along into an unquestioning ideology. My contention is that Lawrence demonstrates their part in the distortion and corruption of Ramón's well-intentioned ecologically-based religion into an arcane and violent social movement that is his deliberate narrative arch in this novel. I agree with Howard Booth who might have had *The Plumed Serpent* in mind when he wrote, about the political ambitions of Lawrence's art, that he sees Lawrence 'adopting open forms and styles that create the conditions, through the process of writing itself, for an emergent utopian trajectory' (Booth 2020: 129). As Malcolm Gray wrote to me after my Society talk on *The Plumed Serpent*, imaginatively Lawrence's intelligence prevents him from being able to propose a social state as an unflawed utopia. But 'the conditions for an emergent trajectory' he can offer us.

So contrast the first and the last of these hymns. The last hymn asserts a revolution based upon violence – the rains of the first hymn have now turned into blood: 'The rain of blood is fallen, is gone into the earth' (*PS* 385). The first one, from which I have quoted, actually persuades Kate to stay on in Mexico, although it is addressed to men, in the patriarchal culture of conquest and exploitation of the earth, as also of women and of colonised peoples. Kate finds that the first hymn's condemnation of the neglect of nature leads her to see the hubris of humanity as an 'aberration'.

'She seemed to see the great sprouting and urging of the cosmos, moving into weird life. And men only like greenfly clustering on the tender tips, an aberration

there' (PS 243).

As though in confirmation of this, Kate walks to the lake shore to find a boy firing at small red birds with a slingshot amongst the cattle in the mud. Here Kate sees 'the beach in the blind heat, strewn with refuse, smelling of refuse and the urine of creatures' (PS 244). Juxtaposed, without comment, to this particular 'aberration' by the boy is the sentence, 'Somebody in the fresh Sunday morning was singing rather beautifully, letting the sound, as it were, produce itself' (PS 244). Don't these three elements – Kate's feeling 'the urging of the cosmos', a young male's casual cruelty to small birds, and the human capacity for woman's singing that 'produces itself' – speak to us in the Anthropocene as a poetry of problems and possibilities, or rather – in cosmos, cruelty and singing - of potential, of problems, and of present capacities?

Lara Feigal's partner, quoted in her recent book, *Look! We Have Come Through!*, is misguided in his criticism of the Anthropocene as 'overemphasising the role of humans in nature' (177). It is a term of guilt, an implied critique of the role of humans in nature that has produced climate change. Although she is surely right to emphasise that in the opening paragraph of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* Lawrence refers to a 'catastrophe' that can be overcome, rather than an apocalypse that cannot. Lawrence ultimately retains a belief in human capacities for seeking 'an emergent trajectory' counter to human hubris – singing against stoning, to put it simply, although he knew that 'dissolution', 'rot' and the death process would also be unavoidable and even necessary.

So, I am finding that my reading of Lawrence in the context of the Anthropocene has been transformative and what were previously read as biographical texts - the *Last Poems* for example - are now saying new things to me: 'Ah, if you want to live in peace on the face of the earth / then build your ship of death, in readiness' (*IPoems* 634). That's the second version of the poem. But the first also saw a new dawn, 'A flush of rose, and the whole thing starts again' (*IPoems* 633). I shall be exploring some of these new readings in tomorrow's lecture at Newstead Abbey.

But there are lots more new readings to be had in *The Plumed Serpent*:

The earth is alive. And if he died, we should all perish. Only his living keeps the soil sweet that grows your maize [...] the earth is alive. But he is very big and very small, smaller than dust. But he is very big in his life, and sometimes he is angry. (PS 196)

One way of reading this is through the prism of George Monbiot's recent book *Regenesi* (2022) in which soil depletion, especially through the growing of maize to feed cattle for our meat, is linked to climate change: 'Under the worst climate scenario, extreme weather would also help denude central and eastern parts of the US and Canada, Mexico, most of

Africa, Europe, India, China and Russia' (Monbiot 2022: 54). 'The earth is alive. And if he died, we should all perish'. But 'The earth is very big' and we know that we face a series of interlinked global crises, just as what Lawrence was exploring in the context of Mexico in this novel for readers in Europe as well as North America, related to attitudes towards nature that he also located in fiction set in England, Italy and Australia. However, Monbiot reveals that only now are we learning the scientific complexities of the life forms and processes of 'his living' that make 'the sweet soil', life forms and processes that are 'very small, smaller than dust'.

On the other hand, such a passage is usually read in its narrative context of its demand for change, for a renewal based upon a reconnection to the distinctively local characteristics of nature under whose influence Mexican culture is shaped – the volcanic, the mineral and the extremes of drought and heavy rains. To fail to do so would be to experience the 'very big' anger of the earth itself, as we are doing today. And, of course, there *are* moments when Lawrence has his characters contemplate an apocalypse, an earth-anger that results in the eradication of the human species and the question of to what extent, from an ecocentric point of view, this would really matter. Perhaps Birkin's is the most famous example: 'Man is one of the mistakes of creation – like the ichthyosauri [,,] Humanity never gets beyond the caterpillar stage – it rots in chrysalis, it will never have wings' (*WL* 128). And the reason for this 'rot' is later recognised by Ursula as a life of alienation from nature, from the very values that make life worth living:

And all life was a rotary motion, mechanised, cut off from reality [...] The sea they turned into a murderous alley and a soiled road of commerce, disputed like the dirty land of a city every inch of it. The air they claimed too, shared it up, parcelled out to certain owners, they trespassed in the air to fight for it. Everything was gone, walled up, with spikes on top of the walls, and one must ignominiously creep between the spikey walls through the labyrinth of life. (*WL* 193)

Lawrence's critiques, fictional 'thought-adventures' as they are, go well beyond his 'rants' against money, materialism and mechanisation to the very roots of attitudes towards natural resources, or what are now called 'ecological services' in the language of 'nature capital', that contributed, and continues to contribute, to climate change.

But in the very last pages of *Women in Love* Birkin returns to his idea of human apocalypse as re-creation. Have you come across the idea of 'the resilient Cretaceous'? This is the notion that actually the temporary life of our species is part of the ichthyosaur's evolutionary plot to return after our species has reproduced, through climate warming, the conditions of the cretaceous period with warm seas, torpid swamps, and tropical trees. Listen to Birkin: 'If humanity ran into a cul de sac, and expended itself, the

timeless creative mystery would bring forth some other being, finer, more wonderful, some new, more lovely race, to carry on the embodiment of creation' (*WL* 479). But if this positive tone carries with it a large dose of Birkin's idealism, its cost is fatalistically clear as he is actually confronting Gerald's place of icy death (and readers in the Anthropocene easily recognise what Gerald stood for) and Birkin thinks, 'the mystery could dispense with man, should he too fail creatively to change and develop' (*WL* 478). Was there ever a clearer challenge to readers a hundred years further on in the Anthropocene?

As early as 1915 Lawrence was apparently writing in terms that anticipate the language of *Apocalypse*: 'Our task in the coming era is to relocate ourselves in the cosmos and to renew our kinship with all of life. It is time to join again in the dance-drama of biological and cosmic evolution.' [This was quoted and dated by the novelist Linda Lambert at the Taos conference, although neither she, nor I, can not source it. Can anyone?] But it was in New Mexico that Lawrence came to shift, in that provocative essay on Lawrence's notion of 'Aristocracy', towards supplementing tree-worship with sun-worship: '[Man's] life consists in a relation with all things: stone, earth, trees, flowers, water, insects, fish, birds, creatures, sun, rainbow, children, women, other men. But his finest and greatest relation is with the sun' (*RDP* 374). Remember the last lines of *Apocalypse*: 'What we want is to destroy our false, inorganic connections, those related to money, and re-establish the living organic connections with the cosmos, the sun and earth, with mankind and nation and family. Start with the sun, and rest will slowly, slowly happen' (*A* 149). Here is the challenge that confronted Lawrence's first readers and that confronts us with added urgency today.

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