

Cultural Difference in D.H.Lawrence's novel of America

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Abstract: This paper deals with Lawrence's encounter with the Mexican culture, in the time he spent in that country (between March 1923 and April 1925). The immediate result of this period spent in Mexico was the writing of the novel *The Plumed Serpent* (in the first version, called *Quetzalcoatl*) and the essays that compound his *Mornings in Mexico*. The main topic approached in this essay is the clash of identities and the problem of cultural incommensurability. The theoretical framework encompasses the seminal works in post-colonial studies, by Edward Said (1978, 1989, 1993), scholars such as Marianna Torgovnick (1990) who elaborates on what she calls the "primitivist discourse," Anne McClintock (1995) and others, including Lawrentians such as L.D.Clark, Virginia Hyde (2001) and Neil Roberts (2004).

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The issue of cultural difference, so present in the globalized world, though initially an object only of Anthropology, was early tackled with by D.H.Lawrence. Neil Roberts claims, in *D.H.Lawrence, Travel and Cultural Difference*, that his quest may be construed as a familiar preoccupation with 'otherness'. He says: "Lawrence's major

writings from *Sea and Sardinia* to *The Plumed Serpent* are centrally concerned with the search for the other of European civilization: with cultural difference" (3).

Though this concern is obviously present throughout the time Lawrence resided and wrote in Mexico, his relationship with the "other" is far from problem free. One book which helps in the understanding of the difficult task of (and problems inherent in) the cultural representation of "others" is Marianna Torgovnick's *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives*. In this influential text, she provides a comprehensive study of what she calls "primitivist discourse," a discourse fundamental to the Western sense of self and Other, which, of course, has affinities with the Orientalist discourse described by Edward Said, and the disciplinary and hegemonic discourses described by M. Foucault. In her study of Malinowski's *The Sexual Life of Savages*, she observes that to study the primitive is to "enter an exotic world which is also a familiar world" (8). That world is structured by sets of images and ideas which have slipped from their original metaphoric status to control perceptions of primitives (images and ideas that she calls "tropes"). The tropes will portray primitives as children, as "our untamed selves, our id forces - libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous. Primitives are mystics, in tune with nature, part of its harmonies" (8). In the metaphors of stratification and hierarchy commonly used by Malinowski, primitives exist at the lowest cultural levels, and the Euro-American at the highest. The ensemble of these tropes, albeit many times contradictory, forms the basic grammar and vocabulary of the "primitivist discourse."

Lawrence, of course, thought of himself as a rebel, and as a liberal with regard to race, always seduced by what he called the "dark races," at a time when his home country had the infamous "British code against miscegenation." He was always interested in

experiencing (as he thought it possible to) the "native point-of-view," in his trips to Italy, Australia and Mexico. In spite of his concern with "otherness," and in spite of his drive to show a commitment to the non-dominant cultures, however, he could not avoid the pitfalls of the rhetoric of colonialism and the primitivist discourse Torgovnick describes. He sets out to write, in his novel of America, a narrative which would rewrite history, siding with the victims of the Spanish colonization and reversing the very act of Cortés's murders and atrocities, and yet, despite this very "anti-colonial attitude," cultural constraints make his rebellion problematic.

Arnold Odio, in "D.H.Lawrence Among the Mexicans," describes what he calls "Lawrence's Mexican adventure" in terms of "acculturation" (165), and goes as far as to say that "Like Kate, ... Lawrence also went through a process of 'going native'" (170). In the next page he claims that "he was able to cross the monumental barrier of language, thus, in fact, becoming 'de-culturized' of some Western views and values" (171). Whereas I would not go as far as Odio (his own choice of the expression "Mexican adventure" brings inherently in it a sense not at all compatible with the notion of "acculturation"), I will agree that the effort was immense and genuine and the whole structure of *The Plumed Serpent* proposes to go in the direction of the "other."

A contrapuntal reading of *The Plumed Serpent* evinces Lawrence's ambivalence. Such ambivalence had been pointed out by Charles Rossman and, before him, by L.D.Clark, even if from a different angle. Clark stresses, in *Dark Night of the Body*, an ambivalence particularly in terms of "the attraction of the old civilization and the repulsion of the new" as well as "the doubts that haunted Lawrence's desire for the

primitive" (16). Rossman, in his turn, in "D.H.Lawrence and Mexico," writes of his reactions to the country and his vacillating moods during the time he spent there:

His reactions were **intense, extreme**, and above all, **sharply ambivalent**, embracing both **exquisite sympathy** and **strident hostility**. Like Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene, and Malcolm Lowry, who made their own pilgrimages from England to Mexico over the ensuing fifteen years, Lawrence found the country, by turns, **irresistibly appealing, deeply unsettling**, and ultimately **nightmarish**.
(180; emphasis added)

As Rossman's clear postulation suggests, Lawrence is far from being a monoglossic, fixed entity whom one could easily label either as an "anti-imperialist subject" or as an "imperialist, manifest-orientalist-type travel writer." He paradoxically contains both. On the one hand, his "anti-imperialist stand" reveals itself in the choice of theme in *The Plumed Serpent*, in his attempt to politically side with the victims of the colonization, having protagonists who are native Mexicans, trying to revive the old Aztec religion, previously wiped out by the European colonizers. Lawrence understands the predicament of the Mexican people, as a "colonized" population, who had their culture annihilated by the conquerors. A similar grief is expressed in the opening of his "Etruscans Places," the regret about the extinction of a culture and language caused by the Roman Empire:

The Etruscans, as everyone knows, were the people who occupied the middle of Italy in early Roman days and whom the Romans, in their usual neighbourly fashion, wiped out entirely in order to make room for Rome with a very big R. ...
The Etruscans were vicious. We know it because their enemies and exterminators

said so. ... However, those pure, clean-living, sweet-souled Romans, who smashed nation after nation and crushed the free soul in people after people, they said the Etruscans were vicious. So *basta!* (1-2)

The same awareness of how "culture" itself can be the agency of power (and subsequent extermination of different cultures) gets reflected in the poem "Cypresses," in which he invokes the spirits of the lost (making the connection between the suppressed cultures of the Etruscans and of the native Americans of Mexico):

What would I not give
 To bring back the rare and orchid-like
 Evil-yclept Etruscan?
 For as to the evil
 We have only the Roman word for it,
 Which I, being a little weary of Roman virtue,
 Don't hang much weight on.
 For oh, I know, in the dust where we have buried
 The silenced races and all the abominations,
 We have buried so much of the delicate magic of life. (52-61)

...
 They say the fit survive,
 But I invoke the spirits of the lost,
 Those that have not survived, the darkly lost,
 To bring their meaning back into life again,
 Which they have taken away
 And wrapt inviolable in soft cypress-trees,
 Etruscan cypresses.

Evil, what is evil?
 There is only one evil, to deny life,
 As Rome denied Etruria
 And mechanical America Montezuma still. (66-76)

That is an illuminating example of Lawrence's "anti-imperialist stand," against both old and modern empires. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the colonial structures D.H.Lawrence necessarily inhabits. Evidently, regardless of his awareness, he is, like any

other subject, a man arrested in the prison-house of his language/culture, in a similar fashion to the image he himself presents, in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, of a divided monster, trying “to slough the old European consciousness completely” (57), and trying to grow a new skin underneath. Like a snake, he says, “which writhes and writhes” in the process of sloughing off the old skin. Of course, the sloughing off of a culture is a lot more complex than the natural process snakes go through, and yet, even with them, Lawrence significantly adds: “Sometimes snakes can’t slough. They can’t burst their old skin. Then they go sick and die inside the old skin, and nobody ever sees the new pattern” (58). Following his own analogy, *The Plumed Serpent* may well be read as another attempt by Lawrence (after the first version, *Quetzalcoatl*, in which different endings reveal even more intensely his heritage¹) to exorcize himself as a European. He tries to penetrate, appropriate and apprehend the culture of the other. To a certain extent, he does all that, but he can hardly manage to free himself from his own fantasies.

Let us now cast a closer look at the predicament of this torn monster while in Mexico. One can detect an undeniable, yet painful, effort by Lawrence to forget the European discourse. He declared in letters his disgust with European civilization, and that the Indians appealed to him as a possible source of renewal for the white Western world. On a surface level, the novel naively tries to promote forgotten histories, and has a pseudo anti-colonial attitude when it comes to the attempt of reviving the Aztec culture, religion, and belief system. On a deeper level, though, when one analyzes the discourse of the novel, it becomes evident that it is fully loaded with all the tropes Torgovnick describes as the tools of the “discourse of primitivism”. How could it be different? Lawrence inherited a tradition of the “savage” as the “other” of the European. As Neil

Roberts, in *D.H. Lawrence: Travel and Cultural Difference*, points out, "Lawrence makes habitual and unembarrassed use of the word 'savage' to describe the indigenous peoples of both the United States and Mexico". Roberts, justifiably, proceeds to say that "in this he is of his time," and goes on to cite Malinowski's foreword to *The Sexual Life of Savages*, in which he makes a "comment on the title, but it was the word 'sexual' that he felt the need to explain: 'savages' evidently needed no explanation" (146).

In his disgust with European civilization and what it entails, Lawrence tries to side with the American Indian population oppressed by the Spanish conquest, and creates, in *The Plumed Serpent*, Cipriano and Don Ramón, native Mexicans struggling against the heritage of the Spanish colonization. This could certainly be seen as an early attempt of a "decolonization process". The protagonists are fighting to revive their own culture. The problem is that his characters come from his own cultural heritage, the imagination of a European writer, reading myths about the other, with the tendency to perceive primitive peoples through the lenses of Western, "rational," "enlightened" values. As Torgovnick observes, Western thinking frequently substitutes versions of the primitive for some of its deepest obsessions, and this becomes a major way in which the West constructs and uses the primitive for its own ends. In "Lawrence and Mexico," Rossman points to the fact that Lawrence's imagination creates, in *The Plumed Serpent*, "a Chapala/Sayula that did not exist outside the novel" (197). Cipriano is described as a "pure-blooded Indian general in the Mexican army." He belongs to the upper class and the implication seems to be that in order to be a leader he could not be simply Indian, he had to have acquired some status, like that of a general in the army. Moreover, he had received Western education, for he speaks English impressively well, after being trained

in Oxford. Despite his Western education, Cipriano has chosen to return to his roots and to revive the ancient, primitive Mexican religions. He plays the "living Huitzilopochtli" in the revival, the god of air and wind, life and death. His close friend and (not less problematic) leader, the charismatic Ramón, plays the role of Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent of the title, the chief god in the Aztec pantheon. Together, the two men plan to use the religious revival to gain popular support from the peasants and then to isolate all of Mexico from its colonialist past, fighting the Catholic church and the local government. This pseudo anti-colonial attitude is naïve: if, on the one hand, the novel aims at posing a commitment to indigenous America, on the other hand, this privileging of indigenous culture is loaded with the tropes that were fabricated by the eurocentric primitivist discourse, such as accounts of lazy natives, matched with bestial and brutish images of what Mexico and its people are. In "El Mexico de los novelistas ingleses," Jose Emilio Pacheco writes about the resentment Mexico has with the English writers, who, according to many, he says, are "calumniadores que han dado al mundo una imagen irrisoria y bestial de lo que es Mexico" (19) [calumniators who have given the world a derisory and bestial image of what Mexico is] (my translation). He, however, significantly adds:

Recordemos, por otra parte, que nadie corre el riesgo de escribir un libro acerca de algo que no fue objeto de su amor o su dolor. Y que en toda oposición - bajo el desprecio, ante el orgullo - late un principio de solidaridad. (19)

[Let us be reminded, on the other hand, that nobody runs the risk of writing a book about something that has not been the object of either his/her love or his/her

pain. And that in all opposition - less for contempt, before pride - there is a principle of solidarity.] (my translation)

To be fair to Lawrence one must stress, as Lawrence scholars have done, Lawrence's serious effort in the attempt to learn about, study and rescue other histories, other cultures, other aspirations². One could argue that while other European authors (Conrad, for one, in *Nostramo*) wrote about South America without conceding that it could have ever had an independent history of its own, Lawrence went a step beyond, studying, learning about and trying to promote forgotten histories, even if naïvely, because the Mexico he presents derives more from his imagination, and readings of Aztec mythology, than from his actual perceptions of the country in the 1920s.

That his endeavor was problematic, there is no doubt, for even if one accepts Lawrence's willingness to denounce the European epistemology (which I do), he had no option but to borrow from his European heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself, to put it in Derridean terms, unwittingly reinscribing eurocentrism. And yet, that is as far as Lawrence could go. The contradictions that are left unresolved remain so, because he could only go as far as he did. America might well have been, for Lawrence, a source of excessive meaning existing beyond his European limited power to control discourses.

To conclude, I will borrow from Neil Roberts again, in his comparison between Lawrence and other British writers, to show that though, naturally, all of them were subjects of their culture and time, Lawrence does seem to get way ahead of his contemporaries, in his treatment of other cultures :

"Unlike Kipling, he does not accept the imperialist order; unlike Conrad, he does not see Western capitalist imperialism as the only power in the world; unlike Forster, he is not content to leave the self-determination of the colonised other to an implied future. His travel writing culminates in a vision ... *The Plumed Serpent* is a bold attempt to imagine beyond the terms of Western culture and, though by no means a flawless work, deserves to be treated seriously as such" (41).

NOTES

¹ I refer to the fact that in the first version, *Quetzalcoatl*, after the whole novel resisting to stay, Kate is last seen packing for England. She explains that she must turn Cipriano's proposal down because of "my feelings, my blood, my race, my colour", and she adds, "I *can't, really*, become the wife of a dark, Indian Mexican, I can't give myself to Mexico, and let Mexico be my country for ever. I can't. If I could, I would" (318). As Hyde and Clark put it, in "The Sense of an Ending in *The Plumed Serpent*", "Lawrence labored over the conclusion of *The Plumed Serpent* throughout the period of revision and production" (140). And the result is known: Lawrence manages to have Kate overcome such feelings. She stays and marries Cipriano, submitting to his race, converting to the Aztec religion, and finally materializing her larger conversion, going native and accepting the natives' beliefs and system of life.

² Among Lawrence's sources, L.D.Clark lists William Prescott's *The History of the Conquest of Mexico*, Bernal Diaz Castillo's classic *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, *The Mexican People: Their Struggle for Independence* by Gutiérrez de Lara and Pinchon, and Thomas Terry's *Terry's Guide to Mexico*. About the last, Clark adds "but he was skeptical, especially of Terry, whom he called a 'fool' and a 'liar'" (32). The impressive list of sources also include *Life in Mexico* by Calderón de la Barca, *Viva Mexico!* by Charles Flandrau, *Fundamental Principles of Old and New World Religions* by Zelia Nuttall (an Americanist who delivered a paper to the twenty-second International Congress of Americanists in Rome, 1926, and carried studies on Aztec calendars and the Pyramids), *A Naturalist in Nicaragua*, by Thomas Belt, *Vues des Cordillères*, by Alexander von Humboldt, *Gods of Mexico*, by Lewis Spence, *The Gilded Man*, by Adolph Bandelier, as well as some volumes of the *Anales del Museo Nacional de México*. Clark adds "In New Mexico he read another book by Adolph Bandelier, *Delight Makers*, a fictional reconstruction of pre-Conquest life and ceremonies in a Tewa pueblo. This impressive array of reading matter is undoubtedly incomplete" (103).

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