

“He had no place in it”: D. H. Lawrence’s oedipal complex and national character

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Lawrence wrote openly of his Oedipal feelings for his mother, and the wound her death caused when he was twenty-five years old. Indeed, the last page of his autobiographical novel, *Sons and Lovers*, lays out the painful emptiness that Paul Morel experiences several months after her death. “Everywhere the vastness and terror of the immense night which is roused and stirred for a brief while by the day, but which returns, and will remain at last eternal, holding everything in its silence and its living gloom. [...] She was the only thing that held him up, himself, amid all this. And she was gone...” (464). Psychoanalyst Daniel A. Weiss writes, in his monograph, *Oedipus in Nottingham*, about not only the existence of Lawrence’s Oedipal complex, but his failure to vanquish it through a life of writing, loving, and traveling. According to Weiss, in *Sons and Lovers*,

the Oedipal situation prevails against Lawrence’s attempts to direct it along enlightened lines... as a drama in which the son does *not* obtain possession of the mother and does *not* seek his father’s death... What Lawrence does not take into account, is that the Oedipal situation is initiated by the son as his earliest attempt to establish himself in the family constellation (16).

According to Weiss, Lawrence will continue to compensate for that early Oedipal situation by attempting to subjugate women to men’s desires, at least in his fiction, if not so successfully in his married life. Oliver Mellors, Lawrence’s last protagonist, is a man for whom the complete submission of his lover is his only satisfaction (Weiss 108).

In a moment I will return to a close reading of the final scene of *Sons and Lovers*, in order to elucidate the key symptoms of loss that adumbrate the Oedipal complex; but here, I would like to mention that these same symptoms also recall other psychological concepts such as Julia Kristeva’s description of the abject in her 1982 essay, *Powers of Horror*, and Freud’s *Unheimliche* in his 1919 essay, *The Uncanny*. In his travel writings and novels, Lawrence repeatedly encounters what he calls a void, emptiness, terror, and meaninglessness. It is an experience of abjection that he first encounters upon the loss of his mother, and subsequently revisits in each of the places where he goes to escape the sensation. *Unheimliche* is the uncanny feeling of the familiar in the unfamiliar, and this is yet another psychoanalytic expression of the haunting that Lawrence cannot escape in his destinations, even amidst scenes and characters which he attempts to romanticize or domesticate.

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Freud said that the ultimate “place” of *Unheimliche* to a male with an unresolved complex is the female genitals, as they remind him of his place of origin. Weiss points out that late-Lawrence male protagonists are afraid of orgasms, unconsciously associating them with castration, and trying to prevent women from having them (108). From these descriptions, it appears that the unresolved Oedipal complex, the experience of the abject, and the uncanny are inextricably intertwined.

The following passage could be analyzed with all three psychoanalytical concepts; it is Lawrence’s fictional rendering of the experience of maternal loss almost too monumental to bear, at the very end of *Sons and Lovers*:

Beyond the town the country, little smouldering spots for more towns – the sea – the night – on and on! *And he had no place in it* [italics mine]. Whatever spot he stood on, there he stood alone. From his breast, from his mouth sprang the endless space – and it was there behind him, everywhere. The people hurrying along the streets offered no obstruction to the void in which he found himself. [...] There was no Time, only Space. Who could say his mother had lived and did not live? She had been in one place, and was in another, that was all. And his soul could not leave her, wherever she was. [...] Where was he? – one tiny upright speck of flesh, less than an ear of wheat lost in the field. He could not bear it. [...] himself, infinitesimal, at the core a nothingness, and yet not nothing” (464).

My theory is that the space that seems too empty to Paul Morel on the last page of *Sons and Lovers* will be the space that Lawrence attempts to fill in a lifetime of journeys, always looking to recreate the meaning that his mother gave to his life while she was alive. Lawrence frequently discusses “the spirit of place” as a belief in the quasi-anthropomorphic consciousness of places. I do not assert that this being is his mother’s ghost, or even his memory of her love for him, but rather his experience of lost and irrecoverable meaning, at first a seductive feeling, but always tinged with sadness, sometimes with terror and incomprehension. In this paper, I will examine how Lawrence projects the Oedipal complex, the experience of abjection, and the uncanny upon two of the nations, Italy, and Australia, which he visits and tries consciously to adopt as new homelands. Both comically and seriously, Lawrence writes national character as an extension of his own self-analysis. What excuses such a habit, which could be obnoxious in another writer, is that Lawrence knows exactly what he is doing; in his most self-reflexive novel, *Kangaroo*, he tells the reader: “Poor Richard Lovat wearied himself to death struggling with the problem of himself, and calling it Australia” (33).

ITALY

I will treat Italy first, as it preceded Australia in Lawrence’s lifetime itinerary. Italy was Lawrence’s first great escape from the problem of himself. He traveled on foot over the Alps, with Frieda von Richtofen, his new life partner, in 1912, settling in the village of Gargnano on the shore of Lago di Garda in northern Italy. His book, *Twilight in Italy*, is a collection of essays that describe his encounter with the Other during this glorious year of new possibilities, consisting of new love, a new career of writing, and a new country that promised respite from the ugly, creeping industrialism and anxiety-producing modernity of England. Although Lawrence is mostly enchanted by living among peasants, whom he considers more contented than English people, by virtue of their “blood consciousness,” still, he is haunted by something of his past that he portrays as something of Italy’s past. Accordingly, the figures to whom he has the strongest cathexis are always men whom he perceives as lost and alone, though strong and determined in compensation. I will examine his reaction to these types to demonstrate the aporia – the unexplainable paradox – that Lawrence experiences in each encounter.

First, he encounters Il Duro, the Italian word for “The Hard,” an expert vine grafter who works on the farm where the Lawrences stay. Lawrence is impressed by three things: first, Il Duro’s merging

into the work, his “intimate communion” with the earth and vines; then, his refusal to marry; and finally, the quality of sadness he emits, despite, or maybe because of, the sense that he is hard as stone. Lawrence is both attracted and repelled by the solitariness and simplicity of the man, fearing the unknown complexities underneath. After pressing Il Duro for the reasons he refuses to marry, Lawrence comes up with his own theory: marriage is a union of the spirit, and this man has none; for him, “sensation itself was absolute” (116). At this point, Lawrence proclaims Il Duro absolutely impossible to understand. However, his attraction to the man may be accounted for in part by Lawrence’s recollection of his father the miner, another man who seemed to content himself with a life of drinking and working. Freud said that “a symptom of a repressed Oedipal complex is that the cathexis of the boy’s mother changes, through repression, into anxiety, and may later emerge attached to a substitute for the father” (777). Throughout his life, Lawrence experiences the kind of sexual fascination with tough, working men that Il Duro epitomizes. On the other hand, in Il Duro he also sees a loner, and he always identifies with the lone-wolf. After his mother’s death, Lawrence was almost always in the company of others, but never able to shake the feeling of his own difference and aloneness. Finally, Il Duro represents a failure of Lawrence’s quest in Italy, or an example of the *reductio ad absurdum* of his desire to live in the senses. In another chapter, he discusses the need for balance between spirit and senses, but in life, he rarely finds what he considers a good representative of that achieved balance. The opposite extremes of the Apollo/Dionysus split are always frightening to him.

The second group of figures upon whom Lawrence projects “the problem of himself” is the Italians in Exile in what Lawrence deems a “soulless Swiss village” (135). Thirty Italian families live there, working in a silk factory and convening every evening in the local inn to rehearse plays and discuss Anarchy. They have exiled themselves from Italy because they refuse to serve in the military. They proclaim they live well without government, which is how they perceive their lives as an ethnic enclave in a German- Swiss village. Lawrence is mightily attracted to their bit of warmth amongst the cold Swiss Germans. But, he is also repelled by the sacrifice they are willing to make in order not to serve. He cannot explain his sadness, though he does describe a disconnection in understanding them, much like he did with Il Duro. In this case, however, the reason is the reverse: he does not share their idealism, or as he puts it, “belief in the perfectibility of man.” They represent to him the other side of the Il Duro coin: living too completely in the spirit, they deprive the senses of their beloved, sunny homeland. His reaction is extreme, clueing the reader to a personal complex about which he is unaware or inarticulate. He writes of their ringleader, Giuseppino, “I could feel a new spirit in him, something strange and pure and slightly frightening. He wanted something which was beyond me. And my soul was somewhere in tears, crying helplessly like an infant in the night. I could not respond” (144). The next day, he refuses to see them: “It was as if some curious negative magnetism arrested my mind, prevented it from working, the moment I turned towards these Italians” (147). The aporia here, though he proclaims not to understand it, is the question of how these simple Italians can be happy away from their homeland, when homeland means so much to them? And why would an abstract concept like Anarchy be sufficient for them to justify such exile? The first question relates to Lawrence’s self-exile from his own homeland, a life-long exile which he begins on this journey with Frieda. Does he see in the displaced Italians the same desperation, the same pretence of fulfillment that he will experience in his own life? The second question pertains deeply to his personal fears as well; that is, though perceiving life as what he calls a “thought adventure,” Lawrence is afraid of overthinking, and particularly of abstractions and most of all, political ideologies, as we will see in the next section on *Kangaroo*. The pull of the world of thought and of social accomplishment is his mother’s influence, but the sadness of that desire unfulfilled, as it was in her, is so potent when projected onto these anarchist Italian factory workers that Lawrence cannot even bear to think about them; his mind stops involuntarily at the recollection.

Another book set partly in Italy, *The Lost Girl*, offers a compelling example of the terror and emptiness that ripple through Lawrence’s psyche. In this novel, which starts out unusually similarly in tone and theme to the classic social realist novel of Midlands England, Alvina Houghton, a young

lady from a respectable middle class family, after courting several eligible prospects, tosses them all for Cicio, an Italian vaudeville actor. At this point, the tone turns typically Lawrencean, as Alvina accompanies Cicio to his tiny, impoverished village in the Abruzzi region of southern Italy, to live in a primitive house with Cicio, his uncle, an ass, and some geese. Here, she encounters an alternately frightening and compelling spirit of place: “Black and cruel presences were in the under-air. They bewitched you with loveliness, and lurked with fangs to hurt you afterwards” (394). In addition to the menacing void outdoors, she also combats the strain of her marriage to a man who is nearly her opposite. Cicio reserves all intellectual talk for his cronies in the piazza, and turns to her for sexual and emotional substance. Indeed, for me one of the most realistic representations of human emptiness in the Lawrence canon is the final scene of this novel. When Italy enters World War I, Cicio prepares to be called, but dreads his death, and cannot believe in the possibility of survival. “I can’t come back, I can’t come back,” he moans, until Alvina talks him into believing he will live through the war. There is a curious sense of homelessness in this Italian man, whose *campanilismo* – the Italians’ characteristic love of their home town – is at odds with his wartime sense of doom. When Alvina finally convinces him he will come back from war, he only brightens by deciding they will move to America. As Alvina notes, his hearth is not his home: “when the true Italian came out in him, his veriest home was the piazza of Pescocalascio, ... where the roads met and men stood in groups and talked” (389). E. M. Forster makes the same observation of male Italians, that home may be their castle, but the piazza was the place of real comfort, the place of the *heimliche* feeling.

Home was very important to Lawrence. His early essays, novels, stories and poems speak to the comfort of the family hearth, centered on the mother’s presence. In his life with Frieda, he was the more domestic of the two, waxing exuberant in letters about homey attributes of the series of rented houses that would constitute home for all the years of their lives together. He had to teach Frieda how to cook and clean; he enjoyed making their own furniture at Del Monte Ranch; he loved having company to dinner in his own home. In all three aforementioned Italian scenarios that inspired terror in him, the characters are in some sense homeless. Il Duro lives alone, and exudes loneliness beyond human comprehension. The Italians in Exile are putting on a good face to endure their sacrifice of home for their political beliefs, but Lawrence’s projected fear of homelessness is so powerful as to literally shut down his brain when he tries to think of them. And Alvina has to create both hearth and home for Cicio, her Italian husband whose fear of the void is so great that she has to remind him that a powerful will to survive is the only thing we can offer against the contingencies of war. I believe that Lawrence found the emotional source for this scene from the recollection of his own desire for annihilation after his mother’s death, as it is described in *Sons and Lovers*.

AUSTRALIA

Terror of the void continues, and takes on a different geographical manifestation during Lawrence’s stay in Australia. In 1922, the Lawrences live in a Sydney suburb for three months, just enough to write a novel about the experience. *Kangaroo* features a protagonist much like Lawrence – a writer looking for places that make more sense than England. However, he never overcomes his initial shock of the emptiness of the Bush, and the only reason he remains for even three months is to make the trip worthwhile by producing a book. Tied up with his fear of the Bush is his terror of democracy; he uses similar language to describe both, a feeling of impending doom. The egalitarian spirit in Australia is beyond his understanding; it is contradictory to his “instinct for authority,” which he believes is particularly an English trait (28). Lawrence frequently wrote about “natural aristocracy,” an idea that some people are born better than others, not because of race or class, but because of their ability to be in touch with the rhythms of the cosmos. So the Australian insistence on equality feels barbarian. “There is no real authority, no superior classes, hardly even any boss!” he laments (26). In the course of making friends in Sydney, he begins to like the happy-go-lucky, democratically friendly

people, but can not shake his antipathy to such a stance: “It made him feel so sad underneath, or uneasy, like an impending disaster” (304). He missed “the aristocratic principle, the innate difference between people” (305). I have wondered how Lawrence’s lifelong antipathy to democracy and socialism connect with his Oedipal complex, and I hope it is not simplistic to note that we can never be quite as special – that is, unique and superior – to anyone as much as to our mother. The statement does not, unfortunately, apply to all people, but only to those who received “good enough mothering”.

Along with this possibly Oedipal-driven terror of democracy goes his horror of the Bush. Lawrence would not be oblivious to the sexual implications in the term. He is particularly aware, in Australia, of his pathetic fallacy, that his feelings about the landscape reflect his psychic problems: “Poor Richard wearied himself to death struggling with the problem of himself; and calling it Australia” (33). The problem is the same one encountered by Paul Morel at the above-quoted ending of *Sons and Lovers*, when he finds himself staring into the void. In Australia, “the absence of any inner meaning: and at the same time the great sense of vacant spaces” (33) recalls the giant, spinning universe without Mother that terrifies Paul after her death. Richard too has physical reactions to the Bush: “his hair began to stir with terror, on his head. There was a presence... the bush seemed to be hoarily waiting [I see another pun here]... It was biding its time with a terrible ageless watchfulness, waiting for a far-off end, watching the intruding white men” (19). These are shades of the Devouring Mother, along with a political awareness of imperialism, although the sense of a sinister presence behind apparent absence appears in too many places in Lawrence to be attributed solely to colonialism. There may be a component of White Man’s guilt, combined with a fear of Woman in this compelling figuration of space. Simply, the fear of the repressed hostile urges against the Father may confront him particularly blatantly in spaces which are not “civilized” or inhabited.

CONCLUSION

The experience of his mother’s death left Lawrence with both the void of a loveless world and an intense commitment to vanquishing that particular ghost. This drive to heal the wound pushed Lawrence over the globe in search of home and *Heimlich* feelings. This driving force manifested as an intense preoccupation with gender and power. He psychoanalyzed countries as though they were companions in his own psychic journey. In Italy, repeated confrontations with seemingly displaced persons reflected his own fear of never finding home again. In Australia, his resistance to democracy and his fear of the Bush reflect unresolved repressions and complexes.

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