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A MAGAZINE IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

UNVEILING THE COLLECTIVE IN ISOLATION: THINKING THE APOCALYPSE WITH D.H. LAWRENCE

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Contradictions abound in the work of D.H. Lawrence. Every book, no matter its genre or subject matter, seems to interrogate the similarities between opposites that should—one would expect—cancel each other out. He has been called, at various stages of his life, a communist and a fascist, a pornographer and a poet. He was, undoubtedly, at some point, all of these things and none of these things. He remains, to this day, impossible to pin down.

I was wholly unfamiliar with Lawrence until last year, when I decided to become acquainted with my mother's favorite books. In late 2013, she suffered a mental breakdown. The cause went undetermined but the result swallowed everything. Since then, I have entered into a strange mourning process, for a woman still alive but not the same, trying to gain some insight into who she once was, who she is now, and how the two remain connected, all through the books that now linger neglected on the living room bookshelf, untouched since the onset of her illness.

Having long underestimated her cultural tastes, I have discovered, author by author, that the names that line her modest bookshelf, passively memorised from childhood, were not the boring has-beens I had unfairly judged them to be, based on nothing other than the fact that my uncool mother owned them. Each in their turn—the Brontë sisters, Daphne du Maurier, Virginia Woolf and, now, D.H. Lawrence—has resonated with me in profound ways. They have also provided a glimpse into a mind I did not know, belonging to a woman I thought I knew all too well.

What all of these writers share—emerging, as they did, between the dawn of the Industrial Revolution and the calamities of the two World Wars—is perhaps an attempt to reconcile the human and the inhuman; our conscious and unconscious desires. From the necrotic desire that passes between Catherine and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* to the life and death drives that entangle Virginia Woolf's flower-buying Mrs Dalloway with the suicidal Septimus Smith; from the violent sexual impulses carried on du Maurier's haunted weathers to Lawrence's machinic desires that plug Lady Chatterley into Mellors the Groundskeeper—each, in their own way, dramatizes the shared unruliness of industrialized and natural worlds, and the tragedies that erupt when they fail to coincide.

I felt that reading these books also helped me to understand the life of a woman plagued, even before her breakdown, by ruthless neuroses. They helped me to understand

the unconscious forces that erupted from within and without her, whether of their own accord or due to the pressures of a relentless working life.

With this familial experience in mind, it was my original intention, in writing this essay, to explore these themes and, more specifically, the relationship between the Apocalypse and collective thinking in the works of D.H. Lawrence. For Lawrence, as we shall soon explore, the Apocalypse of the Bible was not an ending but an unveiling, and what was unveiled was a pre-Christian connection between people, long since repressed. His later works beg the question: what might such an unveiling make possible? Where might these new connections lead? However, as the deadline for this essay's submission has crept ever closer, in the midst of our current coronavirus pandemic, this has increasingly felt like the worst topic imaginable . . .



Escape ~ Tatiana Bondareva

How do you write about an apocalypse in the midst of one? How do you affirm new connections with the people around you at a time when governments recommend “social distancing”? Perhaps there is no better time to tackle such things, if only so that, once we are on the other side of our present mess, we can begin our collective recovery and become reacquainted. Collective recoveries are never easy, however. The twentieth century demonstrated this repeatedly and relentlessly. As such, with the writers newly at my disposal from my mother's shelf, it is to the early twentieth century that I have found myself returning.

As our world prepares to change radically once again, the works of the literary modernists—Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, and James Joyce, among many others—emerge as interesting coordinates for contemporary thought. In their works, a radical thinking, both aesthetic and political, is often dragged, kicking and screaming, from the shallow depths of the everyday.

Their words excavate the very limits of contemporary experience from the most mundane of situations. Here, a walk becomes an existential quandary—a matter of life and death. Whilst this may be a scenario that we are currently very familiar with, the modernists instead seized the mundane and granted art the power of unveiling what is often left to the exceptional disaster.

Whilst his prose was perhaps too purple to sit comfortably alongside the likes of Virginia Woolf or James Joyce, it is arguably D.H. Lawrence, more than any other writer of his generation, who dramatises this relationship between the radical and the everyday most seductively. In his writings, the politics of class struggle often take on an acutely sexual dimension, as that most fundamental mode of human relation is both deadened and commodified by the moralising and monetising pressures of Christianity and capitalism. These pressures are, in themselves, described in inhuman terms as both sides of the class divide—the proletariat and the bourgeoisie—find themselves molested by the always-metastasising tentacles of what Lawrence would call those ‘malevolent Things outside.’

The subtle horror of Lawrence’s writings also reveal a man who found himself adrift. “The social ladder has been put ready for me to climb,” he wrote in the essay “Which Class I Belong To.” “Yet here I am, nowhere, as it were, and infinitely an outsider.” Finding himself emancipated and ostracised in equal measure by the social mores of his time, Lawrence believed that it is only by understanding capitalism and Christianity as disasters of indoctrination that we will be able to imagine a world without them.

This was something articulated most explicitly in his final book, *Apocalypse*. Whilst many other writers, over the course of the twentieth century, would excavate the integral relation that has shaped our societies—between Christianity and capitalism, between the monastery and the factory—few unearthed the prophetic futures that also lie within it. Enter Lawrence, who seeks to ground his final book’s title in the original Greek sense of the word, eschewing our modern understanding of the Apocalypse as an eschatological ending and instead affirming it as a great unveiling.

Through a close reading of the Book of Revelation, what Lawrence hopes to excavate is a pagan dissidence from that most horrifying of biblical texts. Although its purpose, once absorbed within the Bible, is to put the fear of God into the congregation, Lawrence believes that the writings instead become a vector for a repressed “power-sense” within humanity that must be newly encouraged. So far the Things outside have attached themselves to its trajectory, but they have curtailed its advance so that the hosts do not outgrow the parasites. Lawrence has other ideas. “What we want is to destroy our false, inorganic connections, especially those related to money,” he writes, “and re-establish the living organic connections, with the cosmos, the sun and earth, with mankind and nation and family.”

To some, the nature of this final book may be familiar. It holds the same place in Lawrence’s life as *The Anti-Christ* holds within Nietzsche’s—a polemical tirade against Christianity, affirming human strength and collectivity, written through an embodied knowledge of his own weak and lonely demise. The two books share more than this. Nietzsche is not against the figure of Jesus Christ but against the institutionalization of his teachings, arguing that what Jesus offers mankind is a “new way of life, *not* a new faith.” It is a travesty that Christ’s teachings have become doctrines, existing solely “to *devalue* nature and natural values.” Nowhere is this clearer than in our attitudes towards sex. “It was

Christianity with its fundamental *ressentiment against* life that first made sexuality into something unclean,” he argues in *Twilight of the Idols*.

Lawrence echoes these sentiments as well, damning the ascendancy of a hypocritical Christianity that champions “the self-glorification of the humble” over “the Christianity of tenderness”; of “Love one another!” However, Lawrence’s Christ-like love is not simply a pleasant turn of phrase, thrown stillborn from the pulpit. He wants to embody it absolutely, demanding that we retain the sacred nature of physical connection, devoid of the shame of institutionalised Christianity.

Beyond this Nietzschean connection, Lawrence’s *Apocalypse* appears, within the context of his other writings, to be a genealogical preface for a well-established argument that has run throughout his entire oeuvre. In his modernist family dramas, often set amongst the mining towns of his native Nottinghamshire, it is capitalism that is revealed to be the latest form that this insidious process of devaluation has taken. Just as human relations have been reduced by Christianity to an exercise in utilitarian reproductivity, so too has nature itself been disenchanting, reduced to an arena of “natural resources.” His argument is not simply ecological but also mystical, sexual and poetic. After all, it is sex that connects the two, that connects our nature to nature at large. It is this that we must finally attend to. We must address the disastrous escalation that first devalued our relations with one another and has now expanded itself to devalue the entire world in which we live.

For Lawrence, an outsider adrift in a world of rampant industrialisation, to re-read the Book of Revelation is to inadvertently uncover an ancient ouroboros. It is to return to the beginning so that we might unveil tomorrow. What he discovers is that the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending of the Christian New Testament, is a radical collectivity—a collective being-together that Christianity needed in order to establish itself. The disciples of Christ, a collective of men and women who have found a new way to live, are reduced to a band of Christians, of followers rather than students, destined to find their own way. In this sense, their collectivity has been restricted, amputating any alternatives to Christ’s ideological rule. As a result, Christianity has limited not just the human mind but also the body. It has limited our desires and our potentials. But all is not lost. Lawrence reveals that this repressed collectivity is nonetheless still visible in the Apocalypse of John. It is a text “for the non-individual side of a man’s nature,” he argues, “written from the thwarted collective self.”

Unlike the indoctrinated congregations of Christianity, the collective self unveiled by the Apocalypse is free to make connections wherever it pleases. Examples of what these connections might look like, however, under capitalism as much as Christianity, are to be found elsewhere, in Lawrence’s final and most controversial novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.

Following his return from the Great War, Clifford Chatterley has lost the use of his legs. Returning to his young bride, now unable to satisfy her or have children, he suggests that she take a lover, in secret, and try for a child so that they might still have a family and he might have a legacy. However, rather than finding a suitable man from her own class, Lady Chatterley falls for the groundskeeper, Mellors, and the fallout of their affair has far-reaching consequences.

This tale of transgressing class boundaries and all notions of literary proclivity has been retroactively defined, in the popular imagination, as the *Fifty Shades of Grey* of its day, but in truth, it was Lawrence’s bold attempt to write a revelation of his own, unveiling to his

readers another kind of being. However, this unveiling was not apocalyptic in any Christian sense. There are no angels and trumpets here—only the interpersonal ravages of capitalism, stifling the emergence of a new form of life from beneath the socialised restrictions of British high society.

Writing for the *New Left Review* in 1960—the year that the novel was first published “unexpurgated” after thirty years of active suppression and an obscenity trial documented with glee in the international press—Stuart Hall would make the connections between these two final works clear. He argues that, with *Lady Chatterley*, Lawrence pursued the “theme of mental or mechanical consciousness to its ‘most secret places,’ to ‘reveal’ it for what it is, and, by contrasting it with a genuine awakening, to make us ‘recoil from things gone dead,’ and, in the process, to ‘cleanse’ and ‘freshen.’”

This cleansing is dramatised primarily through Lady Chatterley—or Connie—who is gradually awakened to the passions of a life freed from social capture. However, to achieve her awakening she must first pass between the alienated, patriarchal existences of her diplegic husband, Clifford, and the groundskeeper, Mellors. As respective members of the upper and lower classes, they find themselves displaced by the forces that surround them in distinct but complementary ways, and we hear about their perspectives on their own circumstances throughout the novel as each navigates the minefield of society’s expectations.

The complaints of the bourgeoisie are heard first, as Connie listens passively to a drunken conversation held amongst her impotent husband’s impotent friends. As they bounce between discussions of business and pleasure, one of the men, Charlie, suddenly starts talking about the Bolshevik question. Bolshevism, he says, is “a superlative hatred of the thing they call the bourgeoisie.” And the bourgeoisie?

It is Capitalism, among other things. Feelings and emotions also are so decidedly bourgeois that you have to invent a man without them. Then the individual, especially the personal man, is bourgeois: so he must be suppressed. You must submerge yourselves in the greater thing, the soviet-social thing. Even an organism is bourgeois: so the ideal must be mechanical. The only thing that is a unit, non-organic, composed of many different yet equally-essential parts, is the machine. Each man a machine-part, and the driving power of the machine, hate: hate of the bourgeois!

This strange speech subsides and, soon enough, the men are back to talking about their penises, as men are wont to do. There is an irony to Charlie’s ramble, however. Through his cynicism, he perfectly—and inadvertently—describes the capture of alternative notions of community by capitalism. Unable to distinguish the position of the proletariat as both ‘work force’ and as community, he conflates their humanity with the machinery with which they toil—a conflation that Lawrence also argues the working classes have engendered for themselves’.

This is, in part, the same problem of community we see emerging out of the coronavirus crisis. Encouraged not to work, other modes of interpersonal relation and exchange start to take their place, rupturing, or threatening to rupture, the daily routines of millions. As the pressure grows, the disparity between economic groups grows ever wider, demanding a reevaluation of present circumstances. This is not how things appear to

Lawrence, however. For him, it seems there is still time to save ourselves from the utter devaluation of human interpersonal relations.

In a later scene for instance, Mellors, now actively engaging in an affair with the lady of the house, wanders down “into the darkness and seclusion of the wood” he otherwise tends to during the day. He is troubled by his new romantic situation and seeks solace there, alone and out of sight, but he is all too aware that “the seclusion of the wood [is] illusory”:

The industrial noises broke the solitude, the sharp lights, though unseen, mocked it. A man could no longer be private and withdrawn. The world allows no hermits. And now he had taken the woman, and brought on himself a new cycle of pain and doom. For he knew by experience what it meant.

It was not the woman's fault, nor even love's fault, nor the fault of sex. The fault lay there, out there, in those evil electric lights and diabolic rattlings of engines. There, in the world of the mechanical greedy, greedy mechanism and mechanised greed, sparkling with lights and gushing hot metal and roaring with traffic, there lay the vast evil thing, ready to destroy whatever did not conform.

These two scenes are brief but illuminating. Although the novel is infamous for its graphic sex scenes, it is underwritten by a quest to retain another kind of love, a kind of *tenderness*, wholly other to the vulgar, mechanical relations between people that have been violently entrenched by industrialisation.

Mellors' tenderness is distinct from the bourgeoisie's “half-witted performances” of love, for instance, described by Clifford's friends themselves as men “with swaying waists fucking little jazz girls with small boy buttocks like two-collar studs . . . Or the joint-property, make-a-success-of-it, my-husband, my-wife sort of love . . .”. There is far less to offend in Lawrence's descriptions of the couple's adulterous passions than in the laddish expletives uttered drunkenly by her husband's friends in the drawing room. The bourgeoisie, despite their protests against the unfeeling existence of the proletariat, embody a kind of masculinity that, as Lawrence writes of Christianity, “by old habit amounting almost to instinct . . . imposes on us a whole state of feeling which is now repugnant to us.” What Lawrence wants is “to get rid of all that *vulgarity*—for vulgarity it is.” It is a vulgarity affecting the human soul.

The vulgarity of the bourgeoisie is no different from the vulgarity of the Apocalypse, as a book of God-fearing control. It is nothing but an extension of the same Christian spectacle, grounded by a similar promise of ‘postponed destiny’. However, instead, it is the rich who are the chosen people. The indoctrinated masses must watch them and wait—wait for the emergence of a figure who will lead them, like sheep, to a new beyond. This life of indoctrination becomes a purgatory between nothingness and the glory of Christ, usurping Christ the teacher with Christ the indoctrinator. As Gilles Deleuze writes, summarising Lawrence's apocalyptic argument: “Christ had invented a religion of love, that is, an aristocratic culture of the individual part of the soul; the Apocalypse invents a religion of Power, that is, a terrible popular cult of the collective part of the soul.” The collective soul, once celebrated by the pre-Christian pagans and other civilisations besides, becomes Christ's alone. Today, the collective soul belongs to capitalism alone. It is championed as it is contained within the ‘workforce.’ The whole project becomes confused. By making the collective soul a treasure, by protecting it above all else, we smother it to become one more ‘thing gone dead,’ like a museum piece under glass.

This somewhat eccentric reading of the New Testament by way of D.H. Lawrence has much still to tell us, in the midst of a global pandemic that has millions self-isolating behind closed doors. As we get used to new lives spent inside, isolated within homes under quarantine, perhaps the smothering of this collective soul becomes all the more apparent. We find ourselves contained in much the same way, affirming the power of collective action whilst capitalism threatens to come apart at the seams. We might argue that it is precisely through a scenario such as this, where the collective are deemed a danger to themselves and the individual becomes a safe harbour for selfishness, that we might newly sense the absences within our own communities—the absence of a form of collectivity that re-emerges under times of great social pressure, unveiling other ways to be and live together. As Deleuze argues in his reading of Lawrence: “The collective problem, then, is to institute, find, or recover a maximum of connections.” Lawrence’s final works provide a glimpse of this same problem of finding connection, first perceived a hundred years ago, and if it still resonates with us today, it is for good reason: we are still yet to unveil the full potential of this suppressed way of being.

¹ It is interesting to note that, a few decades later, this encapsulation would be taken up and affirmed by numerous philosophers, directly inspired by Lawrence, who instead saw the machinations of the unconscious as an emancipatory foundation from which to interrogate our contemporary capture. For an overview of these developments, see: Land, Nick. “Machinic Desire” in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings, 1987-2007*, edited by Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier, Urbanomic, 2011.

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Escape is shown here as a portion of the full accompanying artwork originally featured on stillpointmag.org.