EXILIC DIMENSIONS OF MODERNISM:
D. H. LAWRENCE'S 'ISLAND'-CHARACTERS

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A notion possibly as old as humanity itself, 'exile' represents an important biographical element as far as the representatives of high modernism are concerned. 'Many writers and artists of the [modernist] period worked in someone else's metropolis' (Carr 74). Helen Carr legitimately points out in *Modernism and Travel* (1880-1940) quoting Peter Nicholls in order to sum up the essence of modernism as 'the shock of "exile" and cultural contrast'(74). Evoked in almost all the manuals or books of criticism as members of the expatriate sector of the modernist age, such writers as James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound or D. H. Lawrence could by now be seen as part of a literary canon of exile.

Lawrence's life-time experience as a traveller - covering a variety of geographical spaces: Australia, Italy, Ceylon, the United States, Mexico and France – intersects self-exile motivation and confirms Paul Fussel's description of diaspora as 'one of the signals of literary modernism' (Fussel 51).

Though Lawrence's British persecution both as an author and as a citizen is a fact, though 'Lawrence is widely known to have been an autobiographical writer' (13) as John Worthen has put it, it is recommendable, we think, to focus on the textual achievement of the analysed pieces, on the 'created voice' (13) considering this approach more productive as compared to one exclusively centred round life-work correspondences. Differently defined by critics as 'his wartime experience in Britain, including the difficulty in having his major works published' (Bell 133); his rejection of 'mechanistic ideologies of industrial capitalism'(Eagleton 32); 'exploration of possible forms of deity' (Cowan 43); the quest for 'the presence in the world of a new primitive soul, natural and animal'(Bradbury 166), D H. Lawrence's travel motivation comes not to matter anymore at the moment when one inspiringly decides to follow the author's own advice in *The Spirit of Place*: 'Never trust the artist. Trust the tale' (123). A 'life into art' perspective like the one recommended by Keith Sagar should be used with a certain amount of reserve and one should not fall into the trap of turning Lawrencian critical studies into (exclusively) political reading.

Politically determined events such as the disintegration of the old Empire or World War I are not the only ones invoked when inventorying the sources of the emerging turn-of-the-century modernism. Mechanisation, industrialistion, urbanization are also considered, especially in accounting for the general sense of fragmentation and estrangement of the individual. 'God', 'reason', 'society', 'human psychology' are no longer the stabilities of previous ages, Darwin, Freud, Frazer being key-contributors to this state of facts. Revising the changes that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, Peter Childs' pertinently mentioning 'the societal shift' and its theoreticians seems to indirectly essentialize the main causes of the new man's alienation: '[Emile] Durkheim focused on the increased division of labour inherent in modern production, [Max] Weber on the disenchantment of a rationalized world, and [Ferdinand] Tönnies on the gradual move from the interrelations of the close-knit rural community….' (Childs 15).

Why is 'exile' relevant in a paper where simple terms like 'isolation' or 'alienation' could have replaced it? It is a term used here with an extended semantic sphere that makes it applicable to such cases as 'exile at home', 'self-exile',' inner exile' or simply 'isolation', 'closure', 'non-communication'. At least in metaphorical terms, it can be an inspired usage given the generally alienated condition of man seen in both (generally) modern and (chronologically-determined) modernist terms.

With a structuralist mind-set we are proposing here a cursory overview of the forms of isolation in D. H. Lawrence trying to single out specific conceptual nuances allotted to 'exile'.

The title-word – 'Island'-Characters – was inspired by Lawrence's *The Man Who Loved Islands,* a literary piece presenting the spatial translation of the gradual (physical and mental) isolation of an individual. It provides a case of empowerment in solitude, the character wanting 'an island all of his own: not necessarily to be alone on it but to make it a world of his own' (*Collected Stories* 1171). The islander's loving 'an island for its insulation' (1171), his progressive retirement from the world, from the promise of prosperity, of love, of family, are emblematic of a certain misanthropism consistently illustrated in Lawrence by characters who feel cut off from the world or who choose isolation as an existential strategy. A mechanicism of the ways of the world and a fatalistic determination of human existence can be detected in the character's physical annulment: he remains in the realm of snow to 'feel its breath on him' and be degraded by it because 'You can't win against the elements' (1193).

A story like *England, My England* can be redolent of a drama of the author's national belonging: Egbert can be seen, in Philip Hobsbaum's words, as ' 'what he [Lawrence] himself despised in modern England: effeteness, dilettantism, people who are artistic without being artists' (Hobsbaum 34). Yet political exile is not relevant as regards Lawrence's

fictional work or travel books. If detected, it follows the lines of the traditional and of the (slightly) pamphleteering, it can be read as pure social critique.

Beyond a first level of reading - the deploration of England -, *England, My England* displays similarities with *The Man Who Loved Islands* through examples such as Egbert's resolution 'not to go into the world and work for money' (Lawrence 388) or his final 'sick abandon of life' (408) into 'the great forgetting of death' (409). Both characters try to escape into the a-social and the a-moral and end up in physical and mental dissolution. Also Egbert's refusal 'to decide between German militarism and British industrialism' because 'There was nothing national about crime.' (403) is comparable to Richard Somers' failure to join the army or to truly adhere to the *Kangaroo*'s political programme. It is not political dissidence, they are samples of self-provoked social insularity. Somers' inability to fully adhere to the political programme initiated by Benjamin Cooley translates as exilic condition in terms of the generally human, not in terms of the local or the political. 'It's not the politics. But it is a new life-form...'(Kangaroo 111) the character concludes at some point and his skepticism towards politics fits in his general social phobia, in his 'exiled at home' position due to his eluding the gregarious expectations of his human datum.

Analysing a letter sent by Lawrence to Rudolf Gardiner in 1926, J. R. Watson comes across descriptions of places of Lawrence's youth and the telling statement 'That's the country of my heart' (*Collected Letters* 18). The existence of an idyllic, rural, serene England in Lawrence is undeniable. The 1911 novel, *The White Peacock***,** is an example in point.

The author's affective connection to his mother-country is, at least at its starting point, that of the average citizen and it follows the general pattern of the attachment to smaller communities such as the family, the village, or the region. In line with what years later Benedict Anderson called 'imagined communities', he acknowledges the drama of displacement as early as the time of his first novel: 'We were the children of the valley of Nethermere, a small nation with language and blood of our own, and to cast ourselves each one into separate exile was painful to us.' (*The White Peacock* 263 emphasis mine) – but, seen from this angle and even considering his work in its entirety, Lawrence simply produces traditionally patriotic writing. His displacement in both human and authorial perspective is essentially that of the modernist man, not of the Englishman.

The Boy in the Bush offers the classical form of exile: Jack is expelled from college, his being sent to a foreign country is a form of expiation. Australia is the territory allowing the character to inscribe himself in an antinomy relation, to define himself as a pole in a couple of opposites: 'He [Jack] had come to Australia to be a Man, a wild, bushy man among men. His father was a gentleman' (*The Boy in the Bush* 27). Exile is thus

revaluated: an expatriate comes to live damnation as an experience different from what it was meant to be; the expected discourse of exile is turned into the discourse of the picaresque or, possibly, into a Bildungsroman, this revaluation itself standing for a sample of modernity.

In Lawrence isolation often reaches sheer misanthropism. The main male character of *Kangaroo* is in love with the landscape, to him 'Australia' is a generalizing abstract concept belonging to the sphere of the non-human: 'All the shibboleths of mankind are so trumpery. Australia is outside everything' (*Kangaroo* 226). Also placed (symbolically or not) on an island-continent, *The Boy in the Bush* displays similar concerns, by distinguishing between the continent and its people: 'The place would be all right but for the people*'* (*The Boy in the Bush* 35).

The characters' retirement into themselves can be read as awareness of otherness and as impossibility to appropriate otherness. Indulging in nihilistic despair – possibly of Nietzschean extraction -, the Birkin of *Women in Love* completes the line of Lawrencian misanthropism. Ursula and Birkin's retirement on 'The Island' is an opportunity for Birkin to express his fundamental inner closure, the result of an anxiety rooted not in Englishness, but in a new consciousness of the world. A *modus vivendi* is conceivable only if restricted to bare spatiality and to the non-human element: 'If only man was swept off the face of the earth, creation would go on so marvelously…' (*Women in Love* 188).

Equally situating themselves outside the /+human/ element but being less restrictive in this sense, Siegmund in *The Trespasser*, and Aaron in *Aaron's Rod* are common cases of domestic exile illustrating a kind of male bovarysme. 'In the traditional world, the home and alien places were strictly and traditionally separated.[…] But in the modern world the question of home 'being at home' becomes a question' (Heller 192). Agnes Heller's signalling the relativism of the former centres finds an even more telling expression in Alvina Houghton's married life, in the disillusion with what was expected to be a new 'home'. The heroine's psychic and physical impossibility to cope with the reality of 'The Place Called Califano' is openly described as 'exile': *'*Ovid isolated in Thrace might well lament. The soul itself needs its own mysterious nourishment. This nourishment lacking, nothing is well*'* (*The Lost Girl* 367).

The characters' impression of inadequacy - acutely experienced as confinement - does not limit itself to the man-woman relationship and the marital status, it extends to physical location (Gudrun), or to the mental space represented by society and historical circumstances (Richard Somers), by age and maturation (Kate Leslie), or by the necessity of renewing one's old self (Lou Witt).

The poetics of the closed space is substantially represented in Lawrence and the characters' attempts to escape their seclusion enrich them

from the point of view of experience and personal growth. 'More Irish than anything' (*The Plumed Serpent* 452), Kate Leslie is symbolically subject to imprisonment in her Sayula room with the 'barred window' (*The Plumed Serpent* 143). 'Girls in my generation occasionally entered convents, for something bigger' (*Collected Stories* 924). Lou Witt notices in *St Mawr*. It is a symbolic form of self-exile exemplarily dissolved by Lou's travel to America, an illustration of movement facilitating her access to 'something big', that is the *'wild spirit'* (925). Seized by 'the panic fear of a black-eyed, semi-barbaric people' (168), Kate is similarly offered the chance to get connected 'with the mystery of the cosmos again' (*The Plumed Serpent* 172).

An interesting case of self-exile is figurally symbolized by the characters' nakedness and the self-sufficiency they achieve in this state. Because this is truly a state, not a sterile representation meant to contribute to the décor of the domestic setting. In chapter XIII of *The Plumed Serpent* Ramón significantly puts 'off the world with my clothes' (230). External nakedness permits the character's access to 'the dark fecundity of the inner tide' (230), the complex symbolism – the walls of the isolated room, the darkness, the naked body – contributing efficiently to the rendering of abstractness through concreteness. The experience points ambiguously to a Freudian kind of subconscious or, more plausibly, to a Jungian collective unconscious. Likening Ramón's self-exilic hypostasis to Anna Brangwen's nakedness in the sixth chapter of *The Rainbow***,** the woman's ecstatic isolation in the dance can no longer be read, in gender criticism terms, as a symbolic example of female emancipation, but as return of the individual to the roots of his/her own creation as 'she danced in secret before the Creator…' (*The Rainbow* 183) feeling 'complete in herself' (179). If desired or not, the characters' exile into themselves, their closing a world epitomizes isolation *per se*, the condition of the individual in his/her individuality.

The characters' physical seclusion is suggestive of the obsession with the unattainable, the underlying and unknown strata of their 'already known', of their 'already experienced'. Insularity is not posed in terms of deploration, it seems to be only a neutral state of facts. Alone or part of a couple, the characters enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy; once created, the circles around them appear as unbreakable. Thus, in *Women in Love*, 'when they were together, doing the things they enjoyed, the two sisters were quite complete in a perfect world of their own' (*Women in Love* 230).

The sufficiency of the two sisters' double exile – in the external and in the inner space – is comparable to the quasi-intimacy shared by Birkin and Gerald in the train episode. Our reading of the characters' isolation is in favour of filling in the male/female gap and for considering the individual outside his/her gender (or sex) determination. Though temporary, these

closure episodes keep their character of permanency as the same chronotopes of isolation are not reiterated in order to reach different endings, the characters' openness is achieved under different circumstances (see marriage, common actions, occasionally shared love or shared ideas, as in the case of the above examples, the Ursula-Birkin and Gudrun-Gerald couples).

'Exile' understood as all forms of alienation – from society, from the nation, from the family, from the partner, from one's own predictable, known self - places Lawrence within the general modernist problematics. The essential form of exile in D. H. Lawrence is, as in the case of other representatives of high modernism, the individual's (physical or inner) isolation and failure to communicate. Still, unlike a Woolf or a Joyce undoubtedly caught in existential despair, Lawrence's modernism is not essentially descriptive, it is a rather prescriptive and enthusiastic type of modernism. It renders a certain optimism through its preoccupation with providing a world of discontinuities with its opposite – ways of ensuring continuities, means of survival for both existential dead-ends and formal exhaustion (so brilliantly rendered by the stream-of- consciousness school).

Though productive - more as a literary experiment than as an efficient social cure – the solution of isolation does not distinguish itself as a specifically Lawrencian way of solving existential tensions. Spatial movement is the author's prevalent response to problematic fixities.

The function of travel appears to be that of dissolving the fixity of 'exile', that of taking the story further, it is a relic of the endangered narrative that saves the expected narrative from the unexpected ending. Through 'travel' the character is opened up as possibility; through 'travel' Lawrence preserves the amount of suspense provided by the solid realistic novel of previous ages. 'We are in exile in the world' (*Collected Stories* 932) is Colin Urquhart's conviction in *The Princess* and it is the very awareness of this condition that prompts the characters to use (the) 'travel' (to America) as an empowerment strategy meant to surpass the exilic state:' Let us take their money…'(932).

The inadequacy of the new or unfriendly territory paradoxically has positive effects as to Lawrence's growth as a writer and as a self. Its main merit is that of not closing a circle, but of permanently defining itself by the tendency towards achieving completeness because 'You have got to go through the mistakes. You've got to go all round the world, and then half-way round again, till you get back' (*Kangaroo* 381). What the character needs is experience spatially expressed through the necessity of exploring other geographical areas and especially through the roundness of the Earth, the symbolic guarantee that the voyage through one's own self has been completed.

The traditional Lawrence finds it easy to take over an element of the classical narrative, travel, and use it to resolve exilic refuges as well as ensuing blockages (seclusion, self-sufficiency, end of the narrative). Similarities between travel and narrative are not actually new on the stage of general critical awareness being generally grounded on issues of formality: the narrative thread is a travel into completion, a travel towards the desired objects; in narrative terms it takes the hero to object acquisition, it closes a circle, it ensures equilibrium.

In Lawrencian discourse it is 'movement' that solves exilic blockages. 'Travel' is the materialization of the idea of 'possibility' (of human contacts, of renewal, of self-development through access to new civilizations, new religions, new orders, or new consciousnesses). It is spatial mobility that fulfills the function of continuity generator in a world of discontinuities, a world in which the only form of stability is the awareness of non-stability. 'Exile' thus becomes latency, a beginning, not an ending.

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