**8 D. H. Lawrence: primitivism?**

We cannot help it if we are born as men of the early winter of full Civilisation, instead of on the golden summit of a ripe Culture, in a Phidias or Mozart time. Everything depends on our seeing our own position, our destiny, clearly on our realising that though we may lie to ourselves about it we cannot evade it. He who does not acknowledge this in his heart, ceases to be counted among the men of his generation, and remains either a simpleton, a charlatan, or a pedant.


Lawrence experienced primitivist tendencies, and these tendencies urged him to visit Ceylon, Australia and Mexico. His reaction to New Mexico and Mexico is very different from Forster's reaction to India. In our discussion of it, the concepts of primitivism are important. Because the term, 'primitivism', is often used in a loose, derogatory way, we must first clarify these concepts as they occur in the history of ideas.

There are two major primitivist views – chronological primitivism and cultural primitivism. The chronological side is a view of history based on the hypothesis that man's finest or happiest days were at the beginning of history. Several important theories are derived from this as to the course of man's subsequent deterioration. The Theory of Undulation conceives the course of history as wave-like in form, as cyclical, while the Theory of Progressive Deterioration looks upon history as a steady downward movement. Cultural primitivism seems to spring consciously or unconsciously from the dissatisfaction of the civilised with their own kind of civilisation. At a simple level, it manifests itself as a hankering after the primitive or the unfamiliar and as a reaction against the usual and the known. At a deeper level, it is a belief of men in a sophisticated and complicated society that a less sophisticated and simpler life is better. Both chronological and cultural primitivism accept nature and the natural, in their various senses, as a norm of human behaviour.

Lawrence's fascination with developing peoples – as it emerges in
his Australian novel, *Kangaroo* (1923), and, far more prominently, in his Mexican works such as *St. Mawr* (1925), *The Princess* (1925), *The Woman Who Rode Away* (1928) and *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) – will be examined in relation to traditional primitivist thought. Its origins are discernible in his European works preceding them and this will be discussed first. In his last (European) novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, he put explicitly important aspects of his view of European history:

This is history. One England blots out another. The mines had made the halls wealthy. Now they were blotting them out, as they had already blotted out the cottages. The industrial England blots out the agricultural England. One meaning blots out another. The new England blots out the old England. And the continuity is not organic, but mechanical.¹

Lawrence is a chronological primitivist in his view of European history. He considers the ‘blotting out’ of ‘the old England’, of ‘the organic community’, as a loss; ‘and the continuity is not organic, but mechanical’. At the same time he accepts this as an inevitable stage in the inexorable working out of history.

His critical acceptance of modern industrial civilisation makes it possible for him to contemplate its disorders very steadily and very acutely. His contemplation of it is at its widest in *Women in Love* (1920), and involves the fullest use of the art of fiction. Gerald Crich and Gudrun Brangwen are ‘born in the process of destructive creation’. In Gerald, this is shown in a dominance of will, a will which is more subtle and, therefore, more dangerous than the deranged will of Hermione Roddice. At the very beginning, he confesses his inability to strike a healthy, abiding relationship with a woman. ‘Coal Dust’ (Chapter 9) brings out in symbolic terms that his will is inimical to life; when spontaneous life, as found in the mare, shies away from his type of modernity, as represented by the railway, he would assert his inhuman will over her and press her down bleeding. His kind of condition is suggested by Lawrence in *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*: ‘The tortures of psychic starvation which civilised people proceed to suffer, once they have solved for themselves the bread and butter problem of alimentation, . . .’.² Once Gerald has gained mastery over material aspects of life, he begins to find life empty. His will turns to destruction and, at the end, even moves towards self-destruction.

The West African Statuette is perhaps the most important symbol of the novel, and it points to another process of destruction in European civilisation. It stands in sharp contrast to the equivocal murkiness of