

Representation of Travel and Movement in the Letters of D. H. Lawrence

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“Comes over one an absolute necessity to move. And what is more, to move in some particular direction. A double necessity then : to get on the move, and to know whither.” (*Sea and Sardinia* 7)

Throughout his life D. H. Lawrence was a traveller on the face of the earth. His motto was : “one must strike camp, and pack up things and go on” (IV. 327). Travel for Lawrence was often a struggle for existence. This struggle can be analysed at least in three basic ways. First, he was desperately in search of warm climate and fresh air as he suffered from the “chronic inflammation of the bronchials” (VII. 538) since his childhood. He, therefore, travelled far and wide. Less than a year before his death he told Huxley, “my health is very tiresome, and I’m sick of it altogether. I sort of wish I could go to the moon” (VII. 591). Secondly, Lawrence had sometimes to move from one place to another under an awful compulsion. The hectic movement of Lawrence in the inter-war years is a case in point. We know how in 1917 the Lawrences were evicted from Cornwall on suspicion of spying. In 1918 they moved to Newbury, in Berkshire, then to Mountain Cottage, Middleton-by-Wirksworth, Derbyshire. He moved back to Berkshire in 1919 when he fell ill with influenza. And finally in that year the Lawrences left for Italy. Thus in that period, they were, to quote the words of Lawrence himself, “the most unfortunate, agonised, fate-harassed mortals since Orestes and that gang” (II.

107).¹ Thirdly, Lawrence's identity as a radically individual artist, always fighting with the world, at times impelled him to undertake journeys. For example, in order to undercut the pirates and settle about a "cheap edition" of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (VII. 213) he even ignored his ailing health and travelled to Paris in the month of March 1929.

But obviously, Lawrence's wanderlust² cannot be wholly explained with the help of these formulae. The fact is, till almost the end of his life Lawrence was on a quest for new values, new life and new civilizations. On 6 January 1930 we see him write to Mabel Dodge Luhan, "Ida says she has written you about our coming to Taos in the spring. I think, if I felt safe about it, I have the energy to get up and start, and I feel that once I got there, I should begin to be well again. Europe is slowly killing me, I feel" (VII. 616). Lawrence's travel which occupies a great part of his life and experience is, therefore, capable of various levels of interpretation and meaning. In the present article, my attempt is to explore how the representation of travel and movement in Lawrence's letters helps in understanding the man as well as the artist and thereby makes the letters inexhaustibly interesting.

Lawrence's attitude to travel is often expressed in his letters in sharply antithetical terms. Sometimes he felt, "After all it's better to travel... and feel one moves in life, than to sit still in nothingness" (IV. 258). In other moments it is his dejected mood that comes to the surface : "Better sit quite still in one's own room, and possess one's own soul. Travel seems to me a splendid lesson in disillusion" (IV. 286). In fact, Lawrence could never afford to be rigid and static in his philosophy of travel. On the one hand, travel seemed to him a great weariness at times. To Amy Lowell he wrote on 1 June 1920, "Why should one travel — why should one fret ? Why not enjoy the beautiful indifference" (III. 539). On the other end of the spectrum, travel was to him an excitement — a voyage of discovery towards the unknown land. Lawrence's thirst for visiting Palestine is thus voiced in eloquent words in his letter to Dr David Eder on 25 April 1919, "Oh, do take me to Palestine, and I will love you for ever. Let me come and spy out the land with you — it would rejoice my heart into the heavens." (III. 353).

Jeffrey Meyers in *D. H. Lawrence : A Biography* points out that travel "changed the pattern of his [Lawrence's] daily life and introduced him to new people and stimulating experiences" (Meyers 269). This observation is fairly

convincing and strikes the keynote of Lawrence's travels. At this point one may quote from the opening section of "Mandas" in *Sea and Sardinia*:

The coach was fairly full of people, returning from market. On these railways the third-class coaches are not divided into compartments. They are left open, so that one sees everybody, as down a room. The attractive saddle-bags, bercole, were disposed anywhere, and the bulk of the people settled down to a lively conversazione. It is much nicest, on the whole to travel third-class on the railway. There is space, there is air, and it is like being in a lively inn, everybody in good spirits. (*Sea and Sardinia* 70)

Lawrence believed that travel "would be so nice if fewer people travelled" (IV. 284) but here we see him delight in God's plenty. The "bulk of the people" absorbed in their "lively conversazione", their bag and baggage — all seemed to please him. As we go through the last line of the above extract : "There is space, there is air, and it is like being in a lively inn..." we are reminded of the jolly gathering of pilgrims before they set out for a pilgrimage in Chaucer's *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*.

Travel and movement indeed often gave Lawrence 'air' and 'space' and a feeling of freedom from "all the hemmed-in life—the horror of human tension" alluded to in *Sea and Sardinia* (*Sea and Sardinia* 30). This 'horror of human tension' has obviously many dimensions which include Lawrence's agony caused by the war which was to him "utterly wrong, stupid, monstrous and contemptible" (III. 32), ill-health which perennially tormented him, increasing poverty which at one stage in his life reduced him to "a sort of charity-boy of literature" (III. 475), humiliating examinations for military service, and his inability to get permission to leave England in the inter-war years. All these factors often brought him close to despair and even misanthropy. And Lawrence desperately wanted a liberty from this hydra-headed human tension. Thus one listens to Lawrence's ecstatic joy in the sea-voyage as described in "The Sea" of *Sea and Sardinia* : "Ah God, liberty, liberty, elemental liberty. I wished in my soul the voyage might last for ever, that the sea had no end... space never exhausted, and no turning back, no looking back, even"³ (*Sea and Sardinia* 30-31).

Lawrence's passionate cry for the 'liberty', however, has its metaphorical dimension too. Lawrence had the conviction that an artist must be "the free soul"

but he recognised that “the wind is dead against a free spirit and a *real art*” (III. 281). He, therefore, often suffered disappointment and dislocation in his journey as an artist. The banning of *The Rainbow* and the uncertainty of the publication of *Women in Love* made Lawrence so desperate that he wrote Amy Lowell on 11 September 1918, “I can’t do anything in the world today — am just choked... The ground dwindles under one’s feet — what next, heaven knows” (III. 280). *Women in Love* was published in England by Secker in June 1921. But problems again cropped up in the final phase of his career when Secker himself warned Lawrence about the “public presentation” of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (VI. 344). Lawrence felt awfully desperate and wrote to the Brewsters on 13 April 1928:

If I can sell my novel and have some money, *I’d like to go round the world again...* it would be so nice, just for a bit, to be drifting out of mail and malice, no letters, no literature, no publishers or agents or anything — what a paradise ! [Emphasis mine] (VI. 367)

Lawrence’s craving for his cherished ‘paradise’ was never realised and was at best an illusion for throughout his professional career Lawrence was not only a busy writer but an entrepreneur as well. Lawrence, therefore, sometimes looked at travel as a sort of blessed release from all the hectic entanglements in the world of his literary activity.

But it is significant to point out that travel at times provided an impetus to his writing too. On 17 September 1912 we see Lawrence write to Arthur McLeod about his infinite joy in the gorgeous natural background of Italy and his decision to finish *Paul Morel*:

Indeed, the Villa Leonardi is quite gorgeous and palatial. The figs they send up, fresh gathered out of the garden, are a dream of bliss... I’m going tomorrow to the Villa Igia... It is fearfully nice... There, in the sunshine — it is always sunny here — I shall finish Paul Morel and do another novel — God helping me. (I. 456)

The glorious sunshine and the ‘fearfully nice’ climate of Italy thus seemed to provide a creative inspiration for the smooth completion of his *Paul Morel* which later became *Sons and Lovers*.

Another important point about Lawrence’s odyssey is that travel and movement

often helped him in an inner exploration. Though Lawrence's travels were sometimes marked by restlessness and indecision he never took them in a casual fashion. In fact, Lawrence was a visionary. He travelled here and there in search of the vision of his truth. And when he was close to achieving it we see him all eloquent :

When we came over the shoulder of the wild hill, above the sea, to Zennor, I felt we were coming into the Promised Land. I know there will a new heaven and a new earth take place now : we have triumphed. I feel like a Columbus who can see a shadowy America before him : only this isn't merely territory, it is a new continent of the soul. [emphasis mine] (II. 556).

Lawrence thus describes his arrival in Cornwall to Lady Ottoline Morrell. Cornwall to him was not merely a "territory", rather a "Promised Land"— "a new continent of the soul".

Lawrence's thirst for America may serve as the second example in this context :

I am tired of Europe — really tired in my bones ... What I want in America is a sense of the future ... I believe in America one can catch up some kind of emotional impetus from the aboriginal Indian and from the aboriginal air and land, that will carry one over this crisis of the world's soul depression, into a new epoch. (IV. 157)

Lawrence thus gives voice to his awful sickness of Europe and his wish to fly to America which can give him the direction of "the future" and which would usher in "a new epoch".

But a sort of bitter realisation dawned upon him with the passage of time. He confided in Mary Cannan in his letter dated 3 April 1922, "One only goes further and fares worse" (IV. 221). This idea is, however, expressed better in his letter to Robert Pratt Barlow on 30 March 1922 :

But I do think, still more now I am out here [Ceylon], that we make a mistake forsaking England and moving out into the periphery of life. After all, Taormina, Ceylon, Africa, America — as far as we go, they are only the negation of what we ourselves stand for and are : and we're rather like Jonahs running away from the place we belong. (IV. 219)

At one crucial point of his life Lawrence, therefore, realized that he had a profound sense of belonging to England and “the most living clue of life” of an Englishman “is in... England” (IV. 219). Lawrence, however, did not take much time to withdraw his statement. Soon he felt, “I belong to Europe. Though not to England” (IV. 362). Actually Lawrence was often torn in a kind of love-hate relationship with his motherland. Sometimes we see him write, “Curiously, I like England again, now I am up in my own regions. It braces me up” (V. 519). In other moments he doubted “whether I shall have the strength to put my nose into that stink-pot of an island” (VI. 542). The point is, if Lawrence had not travelled in the different parts of the world with an inquisitive soul, he would not have been able to look at his country from different critical as well as detached perspectives. Travel abroad thus helped him in gaining a clearer vision of England, Europe and the world at large.

The travel-letters of Lawrence are, therefore, crucially important: they sharply reflect the author’s attitude to and philosophy of travel. But one may note that these letters have an aesthetic importance too. Thus, the use of allusions in these letters sometimes makes the account of the author’s travel more lucid and revealing. For example, the Biblical allusion to Jonah in the letter to Robert Pratt Barlow, cited above, clearly reveals Lawrence’s crisis in exile as he often moved out “into the periphery of life.” In this context, we may refer to another letter which was written to David Garnett (dated 19 November 1912). Lawrence was then in Italy (Lago di Garda). We see him all praise for the place which seemed to him “lovely as a dream.” And then he exclaimed, “I s’ll feel like Orpheus coming up from Hades when I next set foot in England” (I. 474-75). The classical allusion employed here is apt and at once brings home Lawrence’s passionate attachment to adventure.⁴

Lawrence ardently believed, “ it’s the adventure counts, not the success” (IV. 327). And he never lost his faith in humanity’s adventure into the unknown. The Greek hero of Homer’s *Odyssey* thus appealed to his adventurous soul:

Morning came sunny with pieces of cloud : and the Sicilian coast towering pale blue in the distance. How wonderful it must have been to Ulysses to venture into this Mediterranean and open his eyes on all the loveliness of the tall coasts. How marvellous to steal with his ship into these magic harbours. (*Sea and Sardinia* 184)

Nothing daunted Lawrence. Like Ulysses he wanted to be an eternal traveller and assert his life against the vastness of the world.

In addition, the allusions at times give a humorous turn to Lawrence's travel-letters. Lawrence knew how to make fun of himself even when the situation was a bit oppressive and melancholic. Thus, his letter to Frieda's mother (dated 7 August 1923) offers a humorous comment on his predicament as he is caught between America and Europe :

We are still here, in America. And my soul comes so unwillingly to Europe, it is like Balaam's ass, and *can't* travel any farther. (IV. 479).

Lawrence here compares himself with the 'Balaam's ass' (a Biblical allusion), and uses humour "to proportion things that otherwise could be painful"⁵ (Kinkead Weekes 187).

Another unmistakable point about the aesthetic interest of Lawrence's travel-letters is that they are often heavily picturesque and thereby come close to poetry. Lawrence's letter to Edward Garnett on 7 September 1912 may very well be referred to here. The opening lines of the letter read:

Now we are going to settle somewhere near here in Riva. It is quite beautiful, and perfectly Italian — about five miles from the frontier. The water of the lake is of the most beautiful dark blue colour you can imagine — purple in the shade, and emerald green where it washes over the white rocks... There are roses and oleanders and grapes in the garden. Everywhere the grapes are ripe — vineyards with great weight of black bunches hanging in shadow. It is wonderful, and I love it. (I. 447 - 48)

This is how Lawrence evokes the image of an idyllic land. Like a Pre-Raphaelite word-painter⁶ Lawrence here shows his abiding interest in studying nature in close details ("vineyards with great weight of black bunches hanging in the shadow"). On top of everything, the artist's vivid sense of colour as he depicts the water of the lake from different perspectives ('purple', 'dark blue', 'emerald green' etc.) is remarkable. We are at once reminded of Lawrence's pictorial description of a village in Lago di Garda as he watched it from the terrace of the Church of San Tommaso:

There was a blood-red sail like a butterfly breathing down on the blue water,

whilst the earth on the near side gave off a green-silver smoke of olive trees, coming up and around the earth-coloured roofs. (*Twilight in Italy* 105)

The expressions in the extract like ‘blood-rail sail’, ‘blue water’, ‘green-silver smoke’ and ‘earth-coloured roofs’ again reveal, what Jack Stewart would like to say, “a keen painterly interest in saturation of colour”.⁷ (Stewart 33).

Lawrence’s letter to S. S. Koteliansky on 7 March 1922, which bears an ample testimony to his experience of sailing near the Sahara Desert, however, serves as perhaps the greatest example of Lawrence’s picturesque style:

We had a few hours in Port Said, and it is still just like *Arabian Nights*, with water-sellers and scribes in the street, and Koran readers and a yelling crowd. And I loved coming through the Suez Canal. It takes 18 hours — and you see the Arabs and their camels and the rosy-yellow desert with its low palm trees and its hills of sharp sand. Almost one seems to walk through it. It gave me rather a nostalgia for the desert. Then Mount Sinai is like a vengeful dagger that was dipped in blood many years ago, so sharp and defined and old pink-red in colour. (IV. 208)

It is realism, but perhaps more than that, magic realism. Ordinary events and details are woven together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with materials derived from myth, romance and fairy tales. The picture of the desert is splendidly vivid with colours (‘rosy-yellow’) and it is so engaging that the reader “seems to walk through” the desert by the side of the author as he/she reads the extract quoted above. The use of simile in the description of Mount Sinai: “Mount Sinai is like a vengeful dagger that was dipped in blood many years ago” further adds a burden of poetry to the passage.

Travel and movement, therefore, figure largely in Lawrence’s letters which reveal his excitement as well as boredom, ecstasy as well as agony. Lawrence’s travel-letters are remarkable for their freshness, vividness as well as extraordinary immediacy. The pictures of places available in the letters are so lively that they seem to float in front of readers’ eyes. That is why the readers while going through Lawrence’s travel-letters can comfortably enter a new land with him and become his fellow-passengers. They feel that Lawrence is always whispering in their ears, “travel beside us and with us. Such is life. We can go together, in spite of separation” (IV. 590).⁸

Notes

1. Lawrences pitied themselves (himself along with Frieda Lawrence) in this way in a letter to Lady Cynthia Asquith on 25 November 1913. This statement, however, is equally applicable to Lawrence's agony as he frantically moved from one place to another in the years of the First World War.

2. Lawrence's wanderlust finds a brilliant exposition in his letter to Earl Brewster on 8 November 1927 :

After all one *moves* — and this deadening kind of hopelessness-helplessness one has in Europe passes off. Let's all go in March — let's go. I'm sick of here ... And let's make an exhibition of pictures in New York — what fun ! ... then go west. We might afterwards sail to China and India from San Francisco — there's always that door out. Let's do it ! Anything, anything to shake off this stupor and have a bit of fun in life. I'd even go to Hell, en route (VI. 208).

3. When Lawrence wishes : “the voyage might last for ever, that the sea had no end... no turning back, no looking back, even” one is reminded of a similar kind of craving voiced in *The Ship of Death* :

build your little ship

Of death, that will carry the soul

On its last journey, on and on, so still

So beautiful, over the last of seas.

See “The Ship of Death”, in *The Complete Poems*, collected and edited with an Introduction and Notes by Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1993) p. 964.

4. Orpheus, the god of music in Greek mythology made a venture into the underworld in order to recover his wife, Eurydice after her death from a snake bite. He did not succeed for he violated the condition imposed by Persephone, the goddess of the Underworld. Lawrence seemed to adore the adventure of Orpheus in spite of his failure.
5. While commenting on Lawrence's humour, Mark Kinkead Weekes observes, “More seriously *and* more comically, he will use humour to proportion things

that otherwise could be painful”.

6. For this idea I am indebted to Jack Stewart who in his article “Color, Space and Place in Lawrence’s *Letters*” discusses about Lawrence’s ‘Pre-Raphaelite word-painting’ in his letters as well as in his novels like *The White Peacock*. See Jack Stewart, “Color, Space and Place in Lawrence’s *Letters*”, in *D.H. Lawrence Review* 29.1.(2000) p. 21.
7. Jack Stewart in his ‘Notes’ (No. 7) to his article “Colour, Space, and Place in Lawrence’s *Letters*” observes that in the essay “Flowery Tuscany” Lawrence “shows a keen painterly interest in saturation of colour”.
8. This forms a part of Lawrence’s endearing words addressed to Frieda’s mother. The full quotation is, “So, Schwiegermutter, you know all that we’re doing, and travel beside us and with us. Such is life. We can go together, in spite of separation, and you can travel, travel, in spite of age” (IV. 590).

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