“Volcanic Evidence” in D. H. Lawrence’s Letters and Works

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Abstract

This article proposes to examine how volcanoes fired D. H. Lawrence’s imagination throughout his works and letters. As he travelled the globe, the majesty and power of volcanoes inspired the writer beautiful picturesque descriptions of landscapes, however these always blend with allusions to a more primitive world. References to Greco-Roman mythology, as in *Sea and Sardinia*, express in gendered terms the author’s ambivalent relationship to volcanoes and the cultures and places associated with them. In *Sea and Sardinia*, these narrative choices infuse the written farewell to Etna with words of Greek origin, in such a way that the effect of the magnetism of the volcano is felt on Lawrence’s language too.

Moreover, Lawrence’s language is, like molten lava, maintained in ebullient flux as varying shades of meaning turn the literal volcanic features into metaphors to express moods, as in the poem “Volcanic Eruption” devoted to a woman, and to depict conflicts, as in *Kangaroo* and *The Plumed Serpent*. Indeed, making ample use of Nietzsche’s metaphor of “eruption”, Lawrence extends his idea of the “spirit of place” to volcanoes whose paradigms provide imagery to convey his own views on Western civilization. For instance, the poem “Peace”, written in Sicily in 1920, explores in volcanic terms the effervescent passions stirring within men and society. It is nevertheless in *Kangaroo* that the narrative itself is fragmented when newspaper cuttings about volcanoes are inserted with other news items to convey the character’s swaying moods and hesitations.

Thus, in Lawrence’s oeuvre, volcanoes and lava can be said to epitomize Modernist experimental writing through the motifs of expulsion, fragmentation and flux.

Keywords: modernism, eruption, fragmentation, flux, spirit of place, mythology, gender.

D. H. Lawrence travelled around the world noting in his letters and works abundant details about the fauna and the flora but also about the topography of the places he visited. Aldous Huxley remarks on his sensitivity to his surroundings,

> A walk with [Lawrence] in the country was a walk through that marvelously rich and significant landscape which is at once the background and the principal personage of all his novels. He seemed to know, by personal experience, what it was like to be a tree or a daisy or a breaking wave or even the mysterious moon itself." (232)

Anthony Burgess similarly reminds us of Lawrence's "sharp and retentive eye ... always at work" (21). Indeed, Lawrence sets in the limelight Bavarian gentians in the Alps, Mount Etna in Sicily, the desert and Mount Sinai he saw from her R.M.S. "Osterley" in the Red Sea, before turning to the dark, tangled jungle of Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), the Australian bush and the mountainous landscape around Taos in New Mexico. Lawrence also devotes pages to volcanoes and his fascination with the geological phenomenon reflected in his literary output and letters deserves attention because of the way paradigms of volcanoes provide imagery to convey his own views on Western civilization.

There is a long recorded tradition of man's fascination with volcanoes across the world. One may think of how reverence to the holy Mount Fuji is pervasively aestheticized in Japanese art and also of how the Māori's sacred Mount Taranaki in New Zealand recently gained the legal status of personhood. The ancient Greek myth of a giant buried under the mountain and belching fire and smoke has been addressed by Hesiod, Ovid and Virgil, among others. Renewed interest in volcanoes was kindled in eighteenth century Europe with the emerging science of volcanology championed by the British diplomat and collector Sir William D. Hamilton (c.1730-1803) who studied Mount Vesuvius above Naples and Mount Etna nearby. From an aesthetic standpoint, as Michael Ferber explains in his recent *Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, "by late in the century the volcano came to symbolize three explosive processes central to Romantic concerns, revolution, passion, and poetry" (238). Nietzsche also turns the volcanic into a metaphorical pivot between transcendence and immanence in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (152), where topographic imagery pertains to "geophilosophy," a concept that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari introduced in *What is Philosophy?* by studying the meaning of landscape metaphors in philosophical texts (102). Such metaphors, which may be based on personal or virtual experience of the place, are a means to put forward philosophical argumentation, conceptualization and critique.

Lawrence's work bears traces of these processes which weave into his Modernist experimental writing. Drawing from his travel accounts in letters, travelogues, poems and novels, I shall assess how his primal encounter with the Italian volcanoes overleaps literary genres to evolve from picturesque scenery to elaborate symbolism. To begin, a survey of Lawrence's first encounter with volcanoes will determine how he understood them to fully contribute to "the spirit of place." Then, the gendered imagery used to depict volcanoes will be shown to herald later poetry devoted to the revolutionary advent of the New Woman. Finally, Lawrence's literary appropriation of volcanic features will be read as an exploration of the effervescent passions stirring within men and society.

Lawrence left England in November 1919 for Florence where he settled for several months before moving with his wife to the isle of Capri then to Taormina, Sicily. The very

first postcards that Lawrence sent from Taormina in March 1920 were addressed to his sister Ada Clarke and to his friend Catherine Carswell and bore a picture of Mount Etna (Lawrence, *Letters* 3: 479). In subsequent private and professional correspondence, the volcano is mentioned recurrently often in relation to the weather. According to one letter, Lawrence and Frieda went on an excursion up the slope of Mount Etna to visit the Duke of Bronté, who was related to Lord Horatio Nelson, in his estate (Lawrence, *Letters* 3: 509).

Besides this touristic interest, Lawrence's response to the geological and historical features of Sicily conjures up "the spirit of place" over which the volcano looms. In the essay "The Spirit of Place," which opens *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), Lawrence defines the concept in terms of an interactive polarity in which man and environment interact. Therefore, as Stefania Michelucci explains in her research on place in Lawrence's works, "on the basis of this polarity, not only does a community settle and establish itself in a specific place, but it is also influenced by that place in the formation of its own identity, its customs and traditions" (5). In a hyperbolic passage in *Sea and Sardinia*, Lawrence builds on this organic relationship between the native place featuring a volcano and the local inhabitants to describe Neapolitans and Sicilians:

> There must be something curious about the proximity of a volcano. Naples and Catania alike, the men are hugely fat, with great macaroni paunches, they are expansive and in a perfect drip of casual affection and love. But the Sicilians are even more wildly exuberant and fat and all over one another than the Neapolitans. They never leave off being amorously friendly with almost everybody, emitting relentless physical familiarity that is quite bewildering to one not brought up near a volcano (13).

Moreover, developing a diachronic view of "the spirit of place," Lawrence links Mount Etna to the history of migrations to the island. In the opening pages of *Sea and Sardinia*, he clearly invests the mountain with indisputable power over the successive waves of settlers in a sweeping macrocosmic perspective:

> How many men, how many races, has Etna put to flight? It was she who broke the quick of the Greek soul. And after the Greeks, she gave the Romans, the Normans, the Arabs, the Spaniards, the French, the Italians, even the English, she gave them all their inspired hour and broke their souls (8).

From his microcosmic perspective while making plans to tour neighboring Sardinia, Lawrence associates his own restlessness to the influence of Mount Etna, recalling how over the centuries waves of migrants came and left the island each in turn. Pondering his personal motivations for undertaking a new trip, he concludes "Perhaps it is she one must flee from" (Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia* 8). The gendered address is the trace of a signifying shift in Lawrence's response to Sicily. As Julian Moynahan remarks, "one might note that Lawrence's sensitive response to the spirit of place really requires his coming along from someplace else ... the magic of Sicily was beginning to wear off" ("Lawrence and Sicily" 77). Indeed, in his first letters from the area, Lawrence writes of the mountain with the masculine pronoun to state facts, as in a letter to his uncle, Fritz Krenkow: "Etna is a lovely mountain – deep-hooded with snow – such a beautiful long slope right from the sea. *He* puffs flame at night, and smoke by day" (*Letters* 3: 490, my emphasis) but in the following set of correspondence, the volcano is referred to as female, as for instance in "Etna is looking extremely beautiful – with very heavy snow. I always

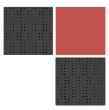
wonder when *she*'s going to burst out. I don't trust *her*" (*Letters* 3: 677, my emphasis). The shift signals growing ambivalence, the female pronoun conveying wariness and restlessness.

In *Sea and Sardinia*, gender is tied in with Greek myths woven into the travel narrative. Etna is identified with the witch Circe who seduces men and turns them into beasts to hold them captive. As Judith Yarnall points out, in Homer's *Odyssey* Circe's presence is made known with "hearthsmoke" (9) reminiscent of the volcano's fumes. The mythological references confer a lyrical mood to Lawrence's depiction as in "Ah, what a mistress, this Etna! with her strange winds prowling round her like Circe's panthers, some black, some white. With her strange, remote communications and her terrible dynamic exhalations. She makes men mad" (Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia* 8).[1] The allusion further empowers the volcano with domination over the inhabitants within the workings of the spirit of place. Thus the personification which taps into to Greek mythology is the aesthetic means to express in gendered terms the author's growing ambivalent relationship to the volcano and to the cultures associated with it.

Similarly in his letters, the atmospheric features generated by the volcano affect the surroundings and people. Seemingly joking, Lawrence attributes to the influence of the mountain a visiting friend's rash decision to cut her hair: "She's [Mary Cannan] cut her hair. One day it thundered and lightened and was very Etnaish, and it got on her nerves all alone in the Studio, so went and bobbed herself" (*Letters* 3: 551). The context enables the reader to understand that Mary Cannan may have been simply influenced by the modern style of a British cinematographic team she accompanied to film Etna, but the volcano is narratively empowered to preside over decisions and moods.

Furthermore in *Sea and Sardinia*, the allusions inspired by the magnetism of the volcano have a bearing on Lawrence's lexical choices. Indeed, the written farewell to Etna is infused with terms of Greek origin which are quite uncharacteristic of Lawrence's vocabulary in his travel books. The majesty of the volcano leads the visitor to look at the "ether" (from the Greek *aither* meaning pure fresh air), to gaze at the empyrean (from *empyros*, in the midst of fire) and to achieve metempsychosis (from *metempsúkhôsis*, transmigration of the soul). Aether, from which the term "ether" derives, was a Greek divinity, a personification of the pure, upper air. Shining above the volcano, Orion and Sirius both hark back to mythological figures. The etymology of the name "Etna" is itself uncertain and is usually attributed to the Moors who occupied the island, nevertheless the phrase "Pillar of Heaven" that Lawrence uses to name the mount can be traced to the Greek poet Pindar (*Sea and Sardinia* 7-8, 201) who wrote in his ode devoted to Etna, "and the pillar of snow-covered Aetna, rearing to heaven" (Pindar 41).

Thus, thanks to these aesthetic choices, Lawrence correlates his personal restlessness, his need to move on, with cosmic forces related to the volcano. As he weaves classical allusions into his banal down-to-earth preparations to leave Sicily, the resulting magic realism turns his trip into a universal and timeless quest. The Greek terms posit Etna out of time and reveal how the spirit of place harks back to original cosmic forces. As Moynahan argues, Lawrence's "deepest sense of Sicily and Sicilians aligns them with the earliest pre-Homeric Greeks, with the dawn-culture emanating and spreading from the eastern end of the Mediterranean, out of which developed Western Civilization itself" ("Lawrence and Sicily" 70). In his letters, Lawrence's sensitive awareness of the Greek legacy and folklore surrounding the volcano leads him to freely refer to Empedocles'

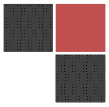


experience of Etna; the Greek philosopher (c.494-c.434 BC) is reputed to have committed suicide by throwing himself into the crater. Again Lawrence describes Mary Cannan's assent of the volcano with allusions to this fate: "Mary has gone...to climb Etna and peer down the crater. If she'll hop after Empedocles I'll write her an elegy" (*Letters* 3: 551).[2]

The personification of the volcano as a woman in *Sea and Sardinia* finds its mirror occurrence when at the end of his life Lawrence writes of women comparing them to volcanoes. In "Volcanic Venus," written in 1929 and collected in *Pansies*, the literal volcanic features expand into metaphors to express Lawrence's unease with the New Woman of his age. He does not sympathize with the feminist movement which he believes disrupts the balance between the sexes. He was aware of the work of the scientist and women's rights activist Mary Stopes who founded the first birth control clinic in Britain in 1921 and whom he mentions disparagingly in his essay "Pornography and Obscenity" (248) written the same year as "Volcanic Venus." He was also cognizant at the time of the difficulties surrounding the publication of Radcliffe Hall's revolutionary novel *The Well of Loneliness* which stages the amorous friendship of two women (Sagar 108).

In the poem "Volcanic Venus," militant women are compared to "little volcanoes/ all more or less in eruption" (Lawrence, *Poems* 1: 468). Venus in the title refers to the Roman goddess of love whose consort was Vulcan the god of fire and of metalwork and from whose name the term "volcano" derives. Throughout the short poem, the semantic field of volcanic manifestations ("smouldering", "lava-crater," "earthquake") is definitely linked to women and is counterbalanced by a list of gerunds which express man's point of view ("unnerving," "moving," "agitating," "sleeping with," "exhausting" and "penetrating"). This masculine stance also undermines, thanks to patronizing adjectives, the power and majesty of two volcanoes directly mentioned in the poem ("little Vesuvius" and "tiny Ixtaccihuatl" [3]) thereby forming two examples of oxymoron. Moreover, the poem's overtly sexual metaphor of the "lava-crater" questions man's new role as a partner of the New Woman. Thus, the overall volcanic imagery conveys how the patriarchal foundations of society are shaken by this revolution.

Lawrence's aesthetic response to the feminist movement is better understood if "Volcanic Venus" is read in its sequence, with the poem "Female coercion" which precedes it and "What does she want? –" which follows it (Lawrence, *Poems* 1: 467-8). The first poem is about women setting out to transform men according to their own desires, "to turn the poor silk glove into a lusty sow's ear" (Lawrence, *Poems* 1: 468), "the poor silk glove" being a synecdoche for man. As the association of transformation and of a sow suggests, the reference is again to the witch Circe who changed most of Odysseus's crew into swine. This suggestion is confirmed in the last line "The modern Circe-dom!" where the threat to the patriarchal order is clearly identified. Circe evokes the war of the sexes; she is "the archetypal woman of power" (Yarnall 5). Similarly, the poem "What does she want? –" reads like a sequel to "Volcanic Venus" whose title is inserted in its opening line (Lawrence, *Poems* 1: 468) and is expanded with the semantic field of volcanic manifestations ("fuming," "seething"). In "What does she want? –," Lawrence muses briefly over the revolutionary status of independent women and the issues of single mothers. Again in an overtly sexual line referring to the male organ this time, the poet tries to attract attention to how man's role as a partner is redefined by the social revolution. Thus, the poems echo each other thanks to volcanic imagery while the mythical references



associated with the volcanoes conjure up the castrating New Woman who transforms gender roles.

Transformation is also a major theme in the poem "The Slopes of Etna" written in Taormina in 1920. Better known under the title "Peace," the poem's imagery derives from the eruptive lava of Etna which is depicted in various stages of mutation, at first "brilliant, intolerable lava" and then "congealed in black lava on the doorstep" (Lawrence, *Poems* 1: 245). Lawrence explores the states from molted lava to grey-black rock insisting on the peace that settles once the eruptive lava has flowed down the mountain slope and cooled. In their scientific study of the relationship between humanity and volcanoes through poetry, Arianna Soldati and Sam Illingworth point out that, in the poem, "the likening of lava to glass is scientifically accurate, as both lava and glass are examples of a silicate melt. In contrast to this, the use of colour in this passage, whilst evocative, is not actually grounded in reality: lava does indeed turn into black or grey-black rock as it cools down, but is never white-hot" (83), stressing that the colour choice "may have been dictated by a contrast (black vs. white)" (83). These remarks interestingly reveal how Lawrence appropriated the features of a phenomenon for his own aesthetic needs.

The poem has been read on different levels illustrating the fact that, in his works, Lawrence's thoughts on Western civilization often blend in with reflections on the self. Dwelling on the concept of peace, Moynahan pinpoints the dualities that make up the poem. "The poet", he writes, "begins meditating over the duality of the bubbling, molten rock deep inside the mountain, and the stable surface of things which is seemingly as solid as the doorstep slab" ("Lawrence and Sicily" 81). He concludes saying that though peace is an illusion, the poem is "constructive and creative ... It wants to disturb the peace, not destroy it, so as to open up the circuit between depth and surface" ("Lawrence and Sicily" 82). Peace, therefore, is a fragile state of balance.

Focusing on the self, Carla Comellini understands lava as "an expression of change and transformation, thus elusively suggesting the process of self-renewal leading to fulfillment" (35). Ebullient lava represents the flux of life in the process of change. Comellini remarks on the image of the snake "one of the best emblems of transformation" tied in with that of lava (35). Indeed, in "Peace," lava is "walking like a royal snake down the mountain towards the sea" (Lawrence, *Poems* 1: 245); conversely in the poem "Snake" written a few months after "Peace," the reptile is seen "On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking" (Lawrence, *Poems* 1: 303). The volcano and its distinctive features are part of the place and as such have a bearing on "the spirit of place" that offers the self opportunities of fulfillment.

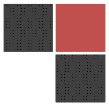
I would argue additionally that the poem can be said to explore in volcanic terms the effervescent passions stirring within men and society. Lawrence's free appropriation of the geological phenomenon as a poet insists on the resilience of the local inhabitants who bore the brunt of the eruptions and turned its residue, the grey rock of cooled lava, into pragmatic use as paving slabs. Besides alluding to self fulfillment, the poem "Peace" conjures up the cycles of civilizations which have succeeded each other, as the buried city of "Naxos thousands of feet below the olive-roots/ And now the olive leaves thousands of feet below the lava fire" (Lawrence, *Poems* 1: 245). Although the state of peace is celebrated, the process from which it stems cannot be forgotten and is metonymically transfixed in the paving of the doorstep. The doorstep itself mentioned at the very beginning of the poem is a threshold to a new cycle of life and of civilization. Such cycles

are discussed in Lawrence's final essay *Apocalypse* where he writes "A rising thing is a passing thing, says Buddha. A rising civilisation is a passing civilisation. Greece rose upon the passing of the Aegean: and the Aegean was the link between Egypt and Babylon" (90).

Lawrence felt that Western civilization had come to an end, that somehow a new cycle should start. He relentlessly inveighed against social mutations brought about by economic and industrial change, mutations he believes to have reached a climax with the outbreak of the war. This affected his religious and political beliefs and led him to leave Europe. Burgess rightly claims that "Lawrence is on the move, molten, seeing beliefs as products of emotional or instinctual states that, of their nature, are highly changeable" (4). Indeed, his thought is "molten," like lava in flux.

His novels in which he voices his geophilosophy bear traces of this on-going maturation. However, his is a process of deconstruction in order to better pave the way for creation. *Kangaroo*, published in 1922, exemplifies his search for a new form of leadership in the midst of social and political post-war chaos, but also personal chaos as an exile. In the chapter titled "Volcanic Evidence," Somers, Lawrence's alter-ego, takes pains to articulate his inner turmoil. Somers reflects: "I am not just merely a human bomb, all black inside, waiting to explode" (Lawrence, *Kangaroo* 165). The imagery of the bomb is followed by an article on earthquakes and volcanoes fully copied out from the 11 May 1922 issue of the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* with minor changes. The article questions the fact that Australia should be considered immune from the effect of volcanoes as the country is located between the volcanic ranges in Java to the north and New Zealand to the east, compared by the journalist to a lion and a tiger on each side of "a flowery meadow" (Lawrence, *Kangaroo* 166). In her study of the passage, Kumiko Hoshi suggests that the insertion of the article into the narrative works like a collage reminiscent of the work of German Dada artist Hannah Höch to the effect that "seemingly irrelevant, these juxtaposed texts in fact both refer to explosions: one psychological, the other geological" (128). Somers is indeed caught between two political factions, the Diggers led by the charismatic Kangaroo and the Socialist Labour Party led by Willie Struthers. Thus, though the newspaper cutting is factual and provides the reader with geological data, in the light of its disruption of the narrative it can be read as a means to convey inner chaos. After reading the newspaper column, Somers muses "If the mother earth herself is so unstable and upsets the apple-cart without caring a straw, why, what can a man say to himself if he *does* happen to have a devil in his belly!" (Lawrence, *Kangaroo* 168, italics in the original). Lawrence comes back to this idea in his novel *The Plumed Serpent* where the main character Kate wonders about the "organic rage" that surges in her, "Perhaps something came out of the earth, the dragon of the earth, some effluence, some vibration which militated against the very composition of the blood and nerves in human beings. Perhaps it came from the volcanoes" (47).

In fact, the whole structure of *Kangaroo* is based on similar narrative disruptions, as if this first insertion of volcanic facts heralds the Modernist approach to writing in the following chapters of the novel. The chapter titled "Bits" provides further evidence of collage when snippets from the columns of the 22 June 1922 issue of the Sydney *Bulletin* are inserted to insist on social chaos. John Humma interestingly founded his study of the fragmented structure of *Kangaroo* on this particular chapter. Humma, however, does not relate the fragments to a process of deconstruction but rather to the "devilishness" which urges the character to remain on the outskirts of society as a political system (35-8).



Similarly, the chapter "The Nightmare" is a long analeptic insert in which Somers remembers the harrowing experience at the conscription centers during the war. The chapter can be understood as the very product of an eruption, the expulsion of the memory of a traumatic experience and as such pertains to the deconstruction of the system of values the character has undertaken.

It comes then as no surprise that *Kangaroo* has been criticized for its seemingly disjointed, heterogeneous form. John Middleton Murry called the novel a "chaotic book," explaining that "it has many passages of great beauty, but internally it is a chaos" (238) and Moynahan reckoned it was "a heap of bits and fragments blown about on air currents of emotion" (*The Deed of Life* 102). John Worthen concludes that, in *Kangaroo*, Lawrence explores so many different areas of life, religion, sociology, economics, the war, to convey that "modern man necessarily lives through such involvements – through, indeed, such fragmentariness" (142-3).

Thus, as in the poem "Peace," where the residue of an eruption is turned into practical use, as a doorslab for instance, and becomes itself inspirational material for a poem, in *Kangaroo* the newspaper articles are the residue of Lawrence's reading and are inserted like slabs into the narrative. Far from treating volcano imagery as a tired metaphor, as poetically extinct, the Modernist technique makes use of the paradigmatic features of volcanoes as material for further artistic creation.

So, in Lawrence's oeuvre, volcano and lava imagery not only convey the tensions and mutations that characterize his geophilosophy, the geological phenomena also epitomize Modernist experimental writing through the motifs of expulsion, fragmentation and flux. In fact, Lawrence's geophilosophy evolves throughout his artistic output and language itself is, like molten lava, maintained in ebullient flux as varying shades of meaning turn the literal volcanic features into metaphors to express moods, opinions and a sustained critique of society.

Notes:

[1]Circe and her panthers captured the attention of the Pre-Raphaelites and of Modernist poets and painters. T.S. Eliot's poem "Circe's Palace" mentions beasts prowling on the grounds and in the forest "who look at us with the eyes of men whom we knew long ago." In 1915, Edmund Dulac painted "Circe, the Enchantress with panthers," a work Lawrence may have known of (Sagar 91).

[2]Lawrence may have known of Nietzsche's unfinished play about Empedocles' death or of the similar death he had planned for his character Zarathustra.

[3]A mount outside Mexico City. It is interesting to note that "Ixtaccihuatl" means the "White Woman" in Nahuatl (Lawrence, *Poems* 2: 1149).

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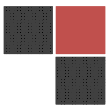

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