ZEPPELIN NIGHTS

Exile, Creativity and the Great War (1914–1918)

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> And the war will go on for a very long time.
> I knew it when I watched the Zeppelin
> the other evening, gleaming like a new
> sign in the heavens, a new supreme celestial
> body…which had assumed the heavens
> as its own.[1]

As symbols go, it would not be easily identified with the Great War (1914–1918).Other icons, more ominous and monstrous, such as the trench or the gas mask, would be more recognisable as a metaphor and memory. And yet, the image of a giant airship floating in the star-laden sky of London, hanging in mid-air, must have presented an eerie spectacle to those below. Immobile and ethereal, the Zeppelin, as a weapon of war, was evocative more of peace on earth than the deadly warfare engulfing entire nations. It is only the poet who could sense the essential paradox of the image, latent in 'a new celestial body', as he wrote to his sympathetic correspondent in America.

D.H. Lawrence was not the only one who saw the image as a paradox. The image of the Zeppelin seems to inform the classic *Zeppelin Nights* by his contemporaries, Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford) and his companion, Violet Hunt. Ford himself was a product of mixed German–British parentage, anathema to the all-pervasive war-mongering and hysteria raging then in England and the continent. The dropping of the more Germanic Hueffer in favour of the acceptable surname 'Ford' is a commentary on the time, just as the presence of the British-born David Herbert Lawrence and his

Autumn 2015, Volume 42, Number 2

Germanic wife Frieda Von Richthofen (1879–1956) posed a threat to the overzealous patriots of Cornwall in England who ransacked their cabin as part of 'patriotic' duty.

The return of the Zeppelin image with its double-binding message in recent times may not be entirely coincidental. *Zeppelin Nights*: *London in the First World* War is a contemporary historian's account of the 'saga of futility and wasted human lives. It provides a superbly detached account of everyday life in London from 1914 to the conflict's end in 1918'.[2] It is this paradox of war as a site of both destruction and creativity through acts of exile that will constitute the substance of this paper.

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British literary responses to the Great War, stretching from the trench poetry of Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) and non-canonical women poets like Vera Brittain (1893–1970), to the writings of Eliot, Pound, Huxley, Ford and Lawrence have been generally recognised. It is not so much the senseless savagery of the 'total war' and what Clive Bloom describes as 'totalized paranoia', ('there is no knowing who is the enemy, therefore presume *all* are the enemy) (1990: 4), the latter stemming from the seemingly tranquil but xenophobic Edwardian era[3] ('Britain's prospects as bleaker and its enemies as more monstrous') (Hitchner, 2010: 413; Denning, 1987: 41) that are new, although they are worth recalling on the occasion of the centenary of the world event. More importantly, a closer look is required regarding the precise manner in which the war impacted the fundamental choices—personal, institutional and literary—that writers made, and the manner in which exile and creativity were played out in literary–cultural and political terms. Revisiting authors, texts and life-writing in the context of the Great War thus becomes a useful exercise.

A simple approach to the study would call for the traditional line-up of heroic resistance versus opportunistic acquiescence/alliance of intellectuals and artists. That is a surface narrative/reading very much there for everyone to see, a polarisation in Manichean terms, although it must be admitted that the response to wars has never been bereft of moral issues or considerations. After all, the Oxbridge culture, the elite world of Bloomsbury parties

and publications continued blithely under the shadow of the war, even as, Janus like, sanctimonious patriotic slogans were mouthed by the newspapers and politicians of the day.

A closer look at war and creativity would show the manner in which biography and creativity were enmeshed in the vortex of war and exile. This intermingling gave new meaning to the concept of exile. It was no longer to be seen as an involuntary act of self-isolation in a foreign location. More fundamentally, thanks to the new role of the mass media and organs of the State, the dissenting writer would remain exiled within one's own country and community. More significantly, he/she remained an embattled and divided self, thanks to the forces of containment.

In this essay, I shall pay close attention to the war years of D.H. Lawrence with regard to his creativity, while bringing in the examples of some notable contemporaries such as Ezra Pound, Ford Madox Ford, Richard Aldington and Aldous Huxley. Unlike others, such as Wilfred Owen and Ford Madox Ford, Lawrence did not see action on the battlefield. He was not gassed or shell-shocked, but his 'nightmare' was no less traumatic and agonising. Subjected to a relentless regime of surveillance, persecution, moral and physical abuse, he stood out alone among many of his established contemporaries.

There are two literary texts by Lawrence that lend themselves to fruitful study in this respect: the story 'England, My England' (1922), and 'Nightmare' in the novel *Kangaroo* (1923) that he wrote at Thirroul in Australia. It must be stated at the outset that the war does not serve as a mere setting or backdrop to Lawrence's literary works; it is integral to his overall artistic vision. Secondly, and more crucially, war does not occupy only a passing phase in his writing career. It encompasses the entire corpus of his writings, including his creative works towards the very end of his life. Thus, while Lawrence leaves the war and England, the war does not leave him. The opening paragraph in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, his last novel, is a clear throwback to the Great War. The narrator stands poised as a witness to an era and reviews the essential paradox of the modern tragedy: both human and civilisational. Lawrence wrote the novel as he was fighting his terminal illness. The novel opens evocatively and combines despair with a sense of hope:

> Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new habitats, to have new hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen.
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> This was more or less Constance Chatterley's position. The war had brought the roof down over her head. And she had realized that one must live and learn (1928: 1).

Indeed the central motif in Lawrence's last novel was the way war, or the unbridled quest for absolute power (British brand of capitalism or German brand of militarism), led to the crippling of human life and civilisation, emblematic in the tragedy of Constance and Clifford Chatterley. The 'ruins' must give way to 'new hopes'.

It is easier to see that war is a recurrent motif in Lawrence's works than to see how his novels like *The Rainbow* (1915) had varying fortunes on account of the war. Two specific arguments may be advanced in this context which go against much of critical opinion and received wisdom. The conventional view is that the novel was proscribed and persecuted on account of its alleged obscenity. On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that the real reason for its banning, or the major contributory factor, was Lawrence's anti-war stand/sentiments. Again, following from the first, it is argued that the hostile treatment Lawrence received at the hands of those he called 'the censor morons' led to his decision to leave the shores of England for Australia and the New World, just as some observers see his opposition to war as responsible for his exile.

The irony was that while he left England, and the war, the motifs of war and violence were increasingly manifest in his 'leadership fiction', including *Aaron's Rod* (1922), *Kangaroo* (1923), *The Plumed Serpent* (1926), and the disturbing novella, set in New Mexico, called *The Woman Who Rode Away* (1928). While the disillusionments with Western democracy led to the European anarchism of Emma Goldman and Peter Kropotkin, in Lawrence and others such as T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound, it resulted, as Harrison argues cogently in *The Reactionaries: A Study of*

the Anti-democratic Intelligentsia, to an ideology of political orthodoxy, a viewpoint endorsed by Lawrence-biographer Jeffrey Meyers: 'The war impelled Lawrence not only to advocate an autocratic dictator who would control and transform corrupt society, but also to plan an idealistic community that would escape this corruption and the nucleus of a new society' (1993: 172).

In any event, Lawrence's dream project, *Rananim,* based on literary models like the Brook farm of Nathaniel Hawthorn and Margaret Fuller in the 1840s and to the pantisocracy of Coleridge and Southey, would wait, for Lawrence had 'conflicting desires for the stimulation of society and the solitude he needed for his work' (ibid.: 173). The Lawrences took up residence from late January until late July, 1915, in a portion of the house belonging to the poet-novelist Viola Meynell situated at Greatham, Sussex. The Meynell family was the inspiration for one of his most moving stories—'England, My England'.

The tale employs an ironical title after W.E. Henley's patriotic poem 'Pro Rigo Nostro' from *For England's Sake: Verses and Songs in Times of War.* Essentially, three motifs underline the narrative: first, placid agricultural England overtaken by the frenzy of war; second, Egbert's brand of individualism and aloofness vis à vis the domineering Godfrey Marshall; and, finally, the conflict between Egbert and Winfred, his wife, partly a fallout of the Egbert–Marshall imbroglio.[4] The family gets sucked into the mire of war, drowning Egbert finally in the battlefield (Lawrence, 1922: 250). Egbert's response to war is characteristically detached. He sees the rivalry between British and German militarism as 'between blue water-flowers and red or white bush-blossoms', or between the 'wild boar and the wild bear' (ibid.: 252). For him, nationalism, militarism and industrialism are all sides of the same coin. He refuses to 'reckon with the world', for he sees war as the triumph of the ugly mob spirit and realises that 'his feelings were his own, his understanding was his own, and he would never go back on either, willingly. Shall a man become inferior to his own true knowledge and self, just because the mob expects it of him?'

Nothing degrades Egbert as the mechanical uniformity of barrack life. Being ordered about by the 'petty canaille of non-commissioned officers' destroys his soul. 'In the thick, gritty, hideous khaki, his subtle physique was extinguished as if he had been killed.

In the ugly intimacy of the camp, his thoroughbred sensibilities were just degraded' (ibid.: 254). When he returns home, he finds no love but duty from his wife, she 'serves the soldier', but 'repudiates the man'. He was governed not by conscious will but only by the 'mechanism' of command and obedience. There was no attraction of the family and the children, only an overwhelming sense of emptiness. As he muses: 'No, no! No Winifred, no children. No world, no people. Better the agony of dissolution ahead than the nausea of the effort backwards' (ibid.: 258).

'England, My England' is thus a meditation on the scourge of war. The automatism of war spares none. Even the stoical Egbert must pay the price and succumb to dissolution. Along with his death, there is the annihilation of an organic life world that would be irrevocably gone.

Egbert's indifferent approach to dying may be carefully compared with the protagonist of Richard Aldington's later novel, *Death of a Hero* (1929). He wrote a fine biography of Lawrence published in 1950. It is interesting to see the affinities between Lawrence and Aldington in terms of novelistic techniques, characterisation and their responses to war. Like Lawrence's Egbert, who dies in the battlefield, George Winterbourne of Aldington, too, perishes before his time, his life savagely cut down by the machine gun just before the end of the war, as an utterly meaningless act. David Ayers writes: 'Like *Parade's End*, *Death of a Hero* sees the war not as the cause of change, but as a further blow to English society' (1998: 89). There is thus an affinity between Lawrence and Aldington in this regard. The major difference is that while in Lawrence there is the authorial voice that comments on the narrative action, Aldington employs a narrator for serving his ideological ends.

Few works of art of the period can surpass Lawrence's depiction of tyranny and absolutism of war. The entire chapter is punctuated by the imagery of violence and cruelty. There is an ominous refrain of the word 'criminal' that stands for the civilian and military bullies: 'Criminal public', 'Criminal mob' and 'Criminal government' (Lawrence, 1922: 235). The anger and rebellion are not so much against the actual combatants as the 'stay-at-home bullies'. Somers is no pacifist or conscientious objector. There are situations, he knows, that warrant defence and a judicious use of violence. But he aligns himself with no group because with the spirit of collapse,

practically every man 'lost his own centrality, his own manly isolation in his own integrity, which alone keeps life real'. Those who went to war, did so in a vainglorious manner, 'with outward glory but inward shame', their vitality and inward spirit gone. It is a colossal tragedy, as Richard Somers sees it, leading to what he terms as 'Bottomleyism' (ibid.: 240).

Somers does not give in to this collective insanity. For, the greater the crisis, the more intensive should be 'the isolated reckoning with his own soul'. Summoned to a medical test prior to conscription, he feels like a 'condemned man', but is determined not to serve: 'I will never obey another order if they kill me' (ibid.: 238).

It is indeed the ethics of every 'gentleman' to 'torture any single independent man as a mob tortures the isolated and the independent. Somers cannot go beyond a stipulated area and is periodically served with eviction orders. His private domestic life is violated with impunity. He is spied upon and the smallest words and deeds of the couple are monitored by overzealous patriots. A block of common salt or a diary comprising botanical notes is viewed as a subversive tool in the eyes of the custodians of the State.

The loss of individuality is further reinforced by the impersonal numerals typical of military culture—C1, C2 and C3. At the camp, men are thrown together and jeered at by the perverse elements. At the site of inspection, they are stripped naked. They become jackals and 'bay like some horrible unclean hound, bay with a loud sound, from slavering, unclean jaws' (ibid.: 236). When the individual suffers from the ultimate isolation, he becomes a spy (ibid.: 241). For the spy is an outcaste, outside the pale of law, with no access to legal or constitutional remedy. Somers refuses to give in. He learns to stand by the strength of his individual conscience: 'He discovered the great secret: to stand alone as his own judge of himself, absolutely. He took his stand absolutely on his own judgment of himself. Then, the mongrel-mouthed world would say and do what it liked. This is the greatest secret of behaviour: to stand alone, and judge oneself from the deep's of one's own soul' (ibid.: 278).

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Following the armistice and the formal end of war by November 1919, Lawrence was finally permitted to leave England for Italy.

Disillusioned by the war and the psychic damages it caused, he sought out the free atmosphere of Italy and was determined to live there with his wife as expatriates (Meyers, 1993: 231)

We may see a somewhat different response in the case of the American poet and imagist Ezra Pound (1885–1972) who made London his home in the first decade of the 20th century. By the early summer of 1912, he, along with Richard Aldington and Hilda Doolittle, had begun a Movement in poetry called Imagism. The Movement did well and, in March 1914, Harriet Monroe produced the impressive anthology *Des Imagistes*. Friendship with Yeats in November 1913 and marriage to Dorothy on 20 April 1914 were further advances on the personal and professional fronts, and in all this England was hospitable.

The major jolt to Pound came during the war when a close acquaintance, Gaudier Brezeska, was killed in action in 1915. Further disenchantment with war and Western civilisation coincided with the downturn in subsequent literary fortunes. Journals such as *Poetry*, *The Little Review* and *The Egoist* were no longer doing well. Consequently, by 1920, Dorothy and he decided to move to Paris.

Unlike Lawrence, who firmly opposed the war and sought out the life of an exile, Pound stayed on in England as an expatriate poet despite serious political reservations regarding the war, and continued his literary life in England until he left for Paris. Others like Ford Madox Ford and Aldous Huxley made more complex responses to the war. Huxley (1894–1963) volunteered to join the army when war broke out. However, he was turned down owing to partial blindness. Undeterred, he read English Literature at Balliol College, Oxford University, and taught French for a year at Eton. During the war he worked as a farm labourer at Garsington Manor, the property owned by Lady Ottoline Morrell. Here, he befriended some of the leading members of the Bloomsbury Group such as the well-known pacifist Bertrand Russell, and Clive Bell. He worked briefly for the Air Ministry in 1918. By the 1920s, Huxley and his wife Maria Nys (1899–1955) had left for Italy. They spent time with the Lawrences when there, and after a sojourn in Europe, travelled to New Mexico, Taos, in the 1920s, where they met the Lawrences in the company of Mabel Dodge Luhan, who attempted to create American counterculture in the south-west United States for which we may refer to Lois P. Rudnick's fascinating book,

Utopian Vistas: The Mabel Dodge Luhan House and the American Counterculture (1998).

In 1937, Huxley moved to California with his wife Maria and son Mathew, where he died in 1963. It is worth noting that unlike Lawrence, Russell and Pound, Huxley's attitude to violence and war was largely shaped by the post-World War I scenario. The experience he underwent in the New World, especially in Taos, and the cataclysmic events such as the Spanish Civil War, in addition to his attraction to Eastern philosophy, would make him a conscientious objector during World War II. He spoke out against war and nationalism in *Eyeless in Gaza*, and expressed deep disillusionment with violence and war in *Ends and Means: An Enquiry into the Nature of Ideals and into the Methods Employed for their Realization*.[5]

While Huxley could not join the army during the Great War (1914–1918), Ford Madox Ford (1873–1939) did. Born in Surrey, England, of a British mother and German father, he founded *The English Review* in 1908 and published the works of some of the best writers of his times. During the war, he worked for the War Propaganda Bureau and wrote two propaganda books, *When Blood is their Argument: An Analysis of Prussian Culture* (1915) and with Richard Aldington, *Between St. Dennis and St. George: A Sketch of Three Civilizations* (1915) He enlisted at the age of 41 and fought on the Western front. His war experience led to *Parade's End* (1924–1928). Other works he produced during the War include *The Good Soldier* (1915), and, as earlier cited, *Zeppelin Nights*.

Like Pound, Ford found the English literary scene no longer propitious in the 1920s and left for Paris. In 1924, with the help of an English patron, he founded the *Transatlantic Review* which published the works of James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound and Jean Rhys. Today, he is known for the support he gave to American writers such as Allan Tate, Katherine Anne Porter and Robert Lowell. He alternated between France and America and died in Deanville, France.

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Of the four major figures discussed here—Ford, Huxley, Pound and Lawrence—Lawrence clearly stands out for the manner in which he steadfastly opposed the war and paid the price for his dissent. The

other notable, T.S. Eliot, stayed on, steered the course of Faber and Faber and dismissed Lawrence as 'rotten and rotting others'.

Biographical and critical opinion differs regarding Ford's role in the persecution of Lawrence and the reasons for Lawrence's exile. Speaking on the issue, Meyers says:

> Ford's secret, semi-official report to Masterman on the Lawrences' opposition to the war and supposedly suspicious behaviour in Greatham combined with Lawrence's damaging association with Russell's pacifist activities and his powerful anti-war story, 'England, My England', encouraged the authorities to suppress *The Rainbow* in November 1915, and because Lawrence remained under government surveillance to expel him from Cornwall in October 1917 (1990: 81).

Others, including Ford's biographer, Max Saunders, question Meyers' conclusion and argue that Meyers seems to base his assessment entirely on two sources: those of Richard Aldington and David Garnett. While Lawrence biographers Meyers and Paul Delany (1978) come to similar conclusions regarding the role of Ford and Lawrence's exile because of the war, others like Max Saunders and Paul Skinner of the *Ford Madox Ford Society* think otherwise. They differ from the account provided by Meyers of what transpired at Alice Meynell's house. According to Saunders:

> Terms like 'testimony', 'confirmation' and 'evidence' try to give the illusion of the biographer as impartial judge. But when on flimsy basis, Meyers writes as if his wild allegation was fact, saying that later 'Ford justified his treachery by claiming he had gone to Greatham to help Lawrence instead of to betray him', it is the biographer who is inventing the evidence (the 'secret semi-official report') and being opportunistically and cavalierly indifferent to the obligation to find proof before libelling the dead (1996: 476–78).

According to Paul Skinner,

> Lawrence's anti-war views created some hostility but it was largely the reviews by James Douglas and Clement Short that prompted the authorities to act: many of the main libraries and booksellers had

> already rejected it. The book was published at the end of September and by 5 November the police were making their second visit to Methuen, confiscating all unsold copies. Methuen, of course, showed a very dispiriting lack of courage.[6]

While there will always remain legitimate doubts based on differing perceptions of different biographers, there is no denial of the fact that it was a combination of anti-war sentiments as well as the charge of obscenity that led to the banning of *The Rainbow* and Lawrence's final decision to leave the country. His publisher Methuen showed a singular lack of courage; it was equally true that Lawrence did not receive any support from political quarters, thanks largely to his strong opposition to the war. As Meyers correctly concludes:

> The suppression of the novel made Lawrence desperately poor. He remained trapped in England (when subsequent requests for passports were denied) and persecuted during the rest of the war. He was determined to leave the country as soon as the war was over and to live as an expatriate for the rest of his life. He abandoned all hope of achieving popular success in England and turned to America as his potential audience.[7]

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British literary response to the Great War varied in literary–cultural and political terms, and took myriad shapes. As examples of four of the leading writers reveal, each was psychically affected by the war, and each learnt to deal with it in his own way. All four eventually left England. It was Lawrence who was the first to become an exile. He offered the strongest opposition to war, and, consequently, faced the greatest persecution at home. The experience caused a profound disillusionment in him of liberal democracy, and queered the pitch for writing his 'leadership fiction' with proto-fascist heroes until the very late stage of his career. Moving away from the dominant 'leader–follower' theme, he would, in the final stage, try and establish leadership on alternate foundations.

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NOTES

1. D.H. Lawrence to Harriet Monroe, Editor, *Poetry*. See Monroe (1930).
2. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/apr/23/zeppelin-nights-london-first-world-war-jerry-w. Accessed on 3 August 2014.
3. Michael Denning writes that where popular literature had once been dominated by 'an assertive, confident, and expansionist genre' that is the imperial adventure story, this gave way to 'an increasingly insular, even paranoid, genre-stressing vigilance and protection against invasion'. Quoted in Hitchner (2010: 413–30). Also see Denning (1987).
4. For a detailed analysis of the text, see Mohanty (1993).
5. www.egs.edu/library/aldous-huxley/biography. Accessed on 3 August 2014.
6. Paul Skinner in an e-mail dated 22 July 2014 to Sachidananda Mohanty.
7. Meyers' account may be compared with an early biography of Lawrence by Richard Aldington (1950). See Meyers (1990). Also see Paul Poplawski (1996: 38–43).

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