"In the Shadow of the Golden Bough": in response to Lienhardt

Chaos is new,
And has no past or future. Praise the few
Who built in chaos our bastion and our home.

Such is Edwin Muir's response to the dilemma which faced many English writers at the turn of the century - the feeling that unity of culture had been lost in the mechanistic and scientific world, that the increase in knowledge of other societies led to a breakdown of confidence in one's own. Lienhardt has shown (1973; p. 61) how the writings of anthropologists at this time contributed to many creative writers' sense of alienation, almost of 'anomie'.

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born.

Anthropological writings provided a new framework for experience, a mode of understanding which attempted to see the world through the eyes of 'savages' and 'primitives' and in doing so recognised that the savage might exclude the European from his world view as much as the European had been accustomed to exclude the savage. The sense of disintegration that this gave rise to is traced in various directions by Lienhardt. This new relativism created an excess of knowledge which Nietzsche as early as 1909 called 'dangerous' and 'harmful'. It also gave rise to an excess of consciousness - of intellectual awareness. D. H. Lawrence in particular represented this as destructive of finer sensitivities, of spontaneity and emotional response. Moreover examples of 'primitive' cultures in which small-scale, community life revolved around a unified centre of common knowledge and assumptions increased the awareness of what modern industrial life had lost with its complexity and impersonality. The very thinking on which anthropological enquiry was based contributed to this sense of disunity - the attempt to participate in another, alien way of life and yet remain within one's own cultural framework, seemed to lead only to disruption. Eliot, writes Lienhardt (ibid. 65) 'seems to suggest that somewhere a halt must be called to sympathy, or empathy, lest the person, no longer belonging to any society, disintegrate.'

This fear of disintegration was in keeping with the growing sense of the creative writer as isolated from his society, that derived from other trains of thought than just anthropological ones. But anthropology contributed:

> with the imaginative attempt to enter into the experience of other lives and times, there goes the isolation of the thinking individual which is such a characteristic theme of this country's thought and writing. (Ibid. 65)

In these various ways, then, anthropological writings and theory at the turn of the century contributed to that characteristic sense of disintegration and alienation.

But the emphasis was not all in this negative direction. Lienhardt notes one way in which anthropological thinking provided a model for unifying experience:

> Now I think we may see a parallel between this conscious effort of Tylor to think and experience, at once, the thoughts and experiences of foreign cultures and of his own, thus unifying and relating them, and the efforts made by the writers of this century to find some way of integrating their sympathies and experience, which has been so much a subject of critical thought.

Unfortunately, Lienhardt leaves it there and returns to those currents of uncertainty which flowed in anthropological and literary writings alike and which anthropological enquiry helped to swell into something of a flood. It is the purpose of this article to point out the other, more positive contributions of anthropology to the mainstream of English literary life - the sources of unity that at least some writers found in the very material and ideas that had, apparently, caused so much disintegration. The discoveries of anthropologists made no small contribution to the work of those few who 'built in chaos our bastion and our home'. If they helped to increase the prevailing sense of chaos, the anthropologists also provided a unifying scheme for coping with it.

Hoffman (1967; 5) in a study of Yeats' use of myth, notes this fact and from the standpoint of a literary critic, acknowledges the significance of anthropology at that time;

> But if the natural and social scientists seemed to deny the absolute authority of Christian doctrine or the truth of mystical experience these iconoclasts proved saviours in disguise for the de-faithed poets of the turn of the century and since. All whom I have mentioned (Pound, Wallace Stevens, Whitman, T. S. Eliot) write necessarily in the shadow of the golden bough, but for Yeats, Graves and Muir the discoveries of the Cambridge anthropologists and of similar researchers into pagan antiquity were to have special importance.

What was this importance and in what way did "The Golden Bough" provide a source of unity to some, even while others saw it as a source of disintegration? I shall cite W. B. Yeats and D. H. Lawrence as particular examples of the way in which 'researches into pagan antiquity' could be used by creative writers in the building of such a "home".

Yeats, in his concern with redeeming "the 'soul from its subjugation to a mechanistic world', turned to myth and folk lore. The 18th century had been barren of myth, according to Douglas Bush, because of "the dominance of rationalism and realism". The early 19th century poets had reacted against this and returned to myth; "the fundamental impulse of the mythological renascence was contained in the romantic protest against a mechanical world and mechanical verse stripped, as it seemed, of imagination and emotion, of beauty and mystery." The early romantics had turned to Greek and Roman myths, but these became debased in overuse and the "Last Romantics", as Yeats called himself and his contemporaries, searched for new sources of mythological power. "Although no mythologist or poet could avoid his classical heritage, or would want to, Yeats and Graves had a given advantage of working also from within an unfamiliar though analagous mythical tradition, that of Celtic pagendom." One reason why the myth, folklore and legend of Ireland was available to Yeats at the time when he deemed such material vital to his purpose, lay in the stimulus and respectability given to studies of 'pagan antiquity' by anthropologists. Local folk lore and legend became a source of imaginative power to many writers at this time, their bastion against the chaos of science and of excess learning. Much of this material was available because of such learning and science?

The 'discovery' of local dialects, the investigations of antiquities of custom and belief and the detailed recording by the 'folklorists' of myth and legend, provided a vast new source of material and of ideas. The folklorists worked within the framework of anthropological ideas, notably including concern with origins and social evolution. Primitive peoples and, indeed, European peasants it was posited, represented survivals of various stages of development through which the modern, sophisticated European had passed many ages before. Consequently, an investigation of contemporary folk-lore and legend among primitives and peasants might tell something of the origins of modern literature. Deriving from Tylor's analysis of such 'Survivals', two schools of thought arose in folk studies:

> "One of these was represented by those who found the source of literary expression in the invention of the individual artist, the minstrel and the trappings of chivalry. The other had, as its exponents, those who followed Herder and Grimm back to the unlettered peasant and ascribed poetry in the ballad form to the poet aggregate called 'folk'" (Hodgen 1936, 126)

Andrew Lang, one of the most influential anthropologists enquiring into European folk lore, subscribed to the theory of communal composition;

> Ballads ... flit from age to age, from lip to lip of shepherds, peasants, nurses, all that class which continues nearest to the state of natural man. (Lang: 1878)

Here, then, was a source of inspiration and a source of 'unity' for writers who saw the mechanistic world disintegrating; the ballad form provided not only a framework for writing poetry but a cluster of associations which fitted well with the poet's own ideas.

> In that ancient and communal poetic form they found a sense of solidarity with a community and a means of experiencing and expressing archetypal, often atavistic, emotion. (Hoffman; viii.) (It is interesting to note Hoffman's obvious debt to Lang here, 89 years later.)

For Yeats, at least, this identity with a community is not just a convenient intellectual idea; he was actually brought up in a peasant community in West Ireland and in his later writing he still preserves his sense of a genuine identity with the countryside and people. He writes of those other writers from Ireland - Swift, Goldsmith, Berkely and Burke - that their

> ... bloody, arrogant power
> Rose out of the race
> Uttering, mastering it,
> Rose like those walls from these
> Storm-beaten cottages. ('Blood and the Moon')

Hoffman relates this to Yeats' search for an overriding 'unity'; "unity of spirit can be achieved as well by men who live in 'storm-beaten cottages' as by those in the tower, and much better than by any who drift in the undirected masterless society of our time" (op. cit. p. 32). There are more than political considerations alone behind the 'Celtic Revival' of the turn of the century and anthropological ideas play their part in Yeats' formulation of his ideas. The searches into pagan customs provide the ethnological content for romantic ideas of "the soil".

Yeats, writing of himself, Synge and Lady Gregory, refers to their source of inspiration:

> All that we did, all that we said or sang
> Must come from contact with the soil, from that
> Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.
> We three alone in modern times had brought
> Everything to that sole test again,
> Dream of the noble and the beggar-man. ('The Municipal Gallery Revisited')

Apart from this direct concern with the cultural unity that (somewhat idealistically) places the noble and the beggar-man in the same flow of tradition, Yeats also derived some of his own deepest religious beliefs from that peasant background. The beliefs of Celtic peasants gave Yeats an initial experience of spiritual reality which was denied by the mechanistic world of industrial London and Europe. Again the work of anthropologists into 'primitive' religion contributed to Yeats' being able to use it in his poetry. Apart from the respectability such interests had acquired through academic patronage, they had been brought before a wider public and so could provide a common term of reference for many romantic primitivists who had read Tylor and Lang or the enquiries of Sir Samuel Ferguson and Standish O'Grady into Irish antiquity and legend.

Moreover, the search of some poets for a means of expressing a sense for 'unity' could be partly satisfied by the architectonic framework of the myths being recorded by anthropologists.

> Robert Graves and Edwin Muir are in no sense Yeats' followers, yet they resemble him in their need to root imagination in an 'a priori' structure of experience, a frame of archetypes or myth which each poet worked out for himself independently... All three share an identification with the primitive and folk cultures of the outlands of Britain which offered them alternative casts of feeling and contrasting associations to those of the modern industrial culture they abhorred. Romantic primitivism was expressed through reliance on myths... (Hoffman: viii.)

Writing specifically of Yeats, Hoffman claims

> In his eclectic fashion he would fuse his later researches into magic and spiritism, together with his own experience of folk belief and join to these his readings in Irish epic literature and mythological studies of Irish pagandom" (Ibid: 24)

Here, then, we find the writings of 'anthropologists', those 'mythological studies of pagandom' cited as providing a poet with a source of unity rather than creating the sense of disorientation that Lienhardt notes of Eliot. The very folk material provided a source of unity both in its concrete detail and in its archetypal pattern; moreover, the direct experience of spiritual reality evident in pagan myth and peasant life, was a source of personal inspiration to Yeats and others; descriptions of peasant life emphasised the sense of community that many urban dwellers in Industrial England felt was lost; concern with origins and social evolution led to a study of folk lore as a communal art, carrying through ancient traditions in a common culture - the poet could thus identify himself with the common traditions of 'noble and beggar-man' in a way he could not in middle class Europe where the writer was conceived romantically as isolated and alone; and, finally, the attempts to move between two such different ways of life and thought led some at least to discover deeper levels of affinity between

them. Yeats particularly experienced two societies, that of peasant Ireland and middle class London, as anthropologists like Tylor were attempting to do. Where such experience led Eliot to talk of limits to empathy and Lawrence to write 'Whitman wasn't an Eskimo', Yeats looked for unity at a deeper level. The writings of contemporary anthropologists and the climate of anthropological thought, by influencing such enquiries, made a positive contribution to the search for order in a world that others were accusing anthropologists of helping to disintegrate.

D.H. Lawrence, too, used anthropological writings in this positive way. However aware of the problems that moving between different cultures gives rise to, he used anthropology as an ally in his running conflict with the evil influences of contemporary science and technology. The work of anthropologists provided him, as it did Yeats and others, with a source of both material and ideas on which to build a coherent, unified structure in a disoriented world. He came to much of this anthropology in later life, while in Mexico, though we can trace the influence of general anthropological ideas in his earlier work. In The Plumed Serpent, written in 1926, we find one of the most remarkable examples of how closely anthropological ideas have affected a creative writer.

In The Plumed Serpent Lawrence expresses his own ideas of the contrast between modern, industrial life and the life of a former Utopian state in terms of a revived Aztec cult in Mexico, which attempts to return to the earlier values through the medium of symbols and rituals that had almost died out. Lawrence starts where most primitivists start; he is disillusioned with the values of modern life in the advanced industrial state, which he finds decadent and materialistic, having lost its awareness of the heart and the sense - 'the blood', and put too much emphasis on intellectual achievement - the mind. In this, Lawrence's work is in the main stream of primitivistic writing and many of the stock formulae of the genre are evident in his use of Aztec material. But Lawrence brings something new to the tradition. He is one of the earliest writers to take advantage of the new scientific study of primitive peoples, and as a result both the material he uses and his attitude to it differ from those of his predecessors. Even though he shares many of their preconceptions, his primitivism is grounded in much more ethnographic detail.

From the idea that modern society is corrupt he develops the notion that primitive peoples are superior because of a closer and different kind of communion with the universe. This is not merely because the primitive lives closer to nature and is more directly dependant on it; that idea, too, may be found in the literary treatment of the traditional 'noble savage'. But for Lawrence the relationship of primitive man with the universe is a mystical one, like that ideal communion between individual human beings which his earlier novels continually explore, where the true consummation for men is a relationship with another person or thing in which their two natures become fused, their 'polarity' is centralised.

Searching for this ideal he eventually found it in anthropological accounts of primitive life and ritual. These, at the time, were concerned with man's attempt to establish a relationship with nature, to achieve the fertility necessary for life to continue. Frazer in "The Golden Bough" interpreted ritual and symbol as attempts to achieve this fertility, arising from observation of natural phenomena by primitive minds. Lawrence saw this as true communion with the universe and thought that it was to be found in man's primeval past when he was nearer to his instinctual origins;

and, since primitive man today is nearer than 'civilised' man to this primeval past, the quality of that communion is to be more readily observed in him. Like Yeats, Lawrence writes within the framework of ideas developed by Tylor in his theory of 'Survivals'. Lawrence's search for the 'true values' in earlier forms of life, not a particularly new idea, was given new form and significance by contemporary anthropological theory.

But not all primitive life had, for Lawrence, this quality he was seeking. His journeys to Italy, Sardinia, Ceylon, India and Australia were a series of disillusioning discoveries of the repulsiveness and dirtiness of much savage life. The reality did not live up to his ideals. But when he was invited by Mabel Dodge Luhan to her farm in Mexico, where she hoped that 'her' Indians would provide him with the examples he wanted, he did indeed find for a while something approaching his ideal. After an initial disappointment at the hideousness of post-Aztec culture and the 'musical-comedy' aspect of New Mexico, he suddenly discovered that Indian religion expressed some of his own central ideas.

The landscape, he says, was the first 'revelation' (1936: 143), and the second was the realisation that the 'old human race experience' was to be found in Indian ritual, that the religion was living in a sense the others he had witnessed were not. Lawrence himself does not attempt to explain this radical change in his awareness, nor the reason for the 'revelation'. We find, on enquiry, however, that the reason for this change lies in his reading of anthropological works while in Mexico. The intrisic qualities of the Mexican Indians are not alone sufficient explanation for Lawrence's concern with Mexico and the importance he attributes to The Plumed Serpent (he calls it 'my best book'). I have argued elsewhere (Street: 1970) in more detail the reasons why we must look to Lawrence's reading in anthropology at that time for an explanation. For present purposes it is sufficient to show the extent to which a writer of this time was influenced by anthropological writings and the fact that he used them 'positively' to create an ordered view of the world rather than seeing them as destructive.

Browsing in Zelia Nuttall's library in Mexico and reading her book The Fundamental Principles of Old and New World Religions (1901), Lawrence found interpretations of Aztec and pre-Aztec culture that coincided remarkably with his own ideas and ideals of primitive values. Nuttall's main theme is that a common basic structure can be found in societies in many parts of the world, as her title suggests. She starts her analysis of these principles with the religion of the Mexican plateau, both Aztec and pre-Aztec. In a manner typical of early 20th century anthropology she attempts to relate all Aztec symbols and ritual to a scheme based on natural observation, in this case of the Polar Star. The position of this star and of Ursa Major, a group of seven stars with Polaris in the centre, she adduces as the origin of the whole Aztec conception of the cosmos, expressed in all their symbols and rites.

In The Plumed Serpent Lawrence employs her approach to the material and also attempts to explain the whole complex of beliefs and rituals in his imagined post-Aztec culture in terms of a single overriding unity. But he differs slightly from Nuttall in introducing current theories drawn from Theosophy into his explanation of Mexican religion. The theory that the occult mysteries of Atlantis had been lost in the Flood but were still retained by a few cultures that had escaped to the high places of the earth, was one of many attempts at the time to explain the remarkable similarity in the myths and symbols of diverse cultures being discovered

and brought together by the new discipline of anthropology. Frazer and Tylor accounted for the similarity on grounds of common experience of natural phenomena; others put it down to culture contact and diffusion through migrations; Max Müller saw myths as distortions of language and thereby explained their similarity; theosophists believed that all men were once part of one culture and similarities in diverse parts of the world were due to the retention of elements of this culture by people who had been divided by the Flood.

Lawrence was attracted by this idea; his reading in anthropology had clearly suggested that many primitive peoples represented survivals of an earlier state and he believed that modern society had lost intuitions of the 'blood' which older cultures retained. He could thus condemn the faults of his own society, in the traditional primitivistic way, by pointing in primitive societies to the values it had lost.

Not all primitive societies, however, has retained the Atlantean mysteries and his journeys to Ceylon and Australia had failed to reveal what he was looking for. Likewise his first sight of Indian ritual in Mexico was a disappointment. But in Nuttall he discovered that those symbols the theosophists believed to derive from Atlantis were retained by the Aztecs of Mexico. And when she showed that the same fundamental principles were to be found in some Asian cultures the 'revelation' was complete. By reviving in novel form the symbols and rites of the Aztecs he could suggest the real meaning of the Atlantean religion whose values he believed 'advanced' societies had lost and he could link it with the ancient tribes of Europe, with the Celts and the Druids, the holders of the mysteries on his own continent.

The Plumed Serpent, then, is an attempt to work out these ideas imaginatively. A group of modern Mexican visionaries attempt to recapture the old values by re-enacting the rites and recalling the symbols of the Aztecs. Lawrence's vision of the world is worked out in close concrete detail. And these details are derived, to a very large extent, from Nuttall and from other anthropological writings on the subject (see list at end). Moreover the ideas that lie behind these details are also derived, in large measure, from current anthropological theory. A close analysis of The Plumed Serpent and of Lawrence's other Mexican writings such as The Woman Who Rode Away reveals a remarkable similarity, sometimes almost word for word or idea for idea with the work of Nuttall and certain anthropologists. The central symbol of the book, the plumed serpent or Quetzalcoatl, is described in careful detail as are the colours used in ritual, clothing and decoration, the association of numbers, of points of the compass, specific symbols like stars, birds and geometrical shapes. With the practice of contemporary anthropologists to support him and the example of Nuttall's meticulous scholarship, Lawrence relates every action, look and gesture of the culture he describes back to his personal scheme. The Plumed Serpent is a dense and complex book that cannot be fully understood without some knowledge of anthropological writings of the time. It represents one of the most vital attempts by a creative writer to use anthropological discoveries and theories to build a coherent and unified imaginative scheme, to build 'in chaos our bastion and our home'.

The emphasis in "contemporary" writers' use of anthropological data and theory is at least as much on the positive contribution they can make to building a world order as on thercontribution,highlighted by Lienhardt, to destroying that order.

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Note

Much of the information regarding Lawrence's reading and movements is taken from Tindal, W. Y. (1939) and from the writer's doctoral thesis (Oxford: 1970).

Appendix: A selection of D. H. Lawrence's reading, as suggested by Tindall (1939).

Blavatsky, Mme Helena P.	The Secret Doctrine, 1888.
	Isis Unveiled. 1910.
Darwin, C.	Origin of Species, 1858.
	The Descent of Man, 1871.
Frazer, Sir James	The Golden Bough, 1890.
Harrison, Jane	Ancient Art and Ritual, 1911.
Jung, Carl Gustav	Psychology of the Unconscious, 1912 (trans. 1916)
Maspero, Gaston.	The Dawn of Civilisation, 1875 (trans 1894)
Murray, Prof. George	Greek and English Tragedy, 1912.
	The Rise of the Greek Epic, 1907.
Nuttal, Zelia	The Fundamental Principles of Old and New World Religions, 1901.
Prescott, W. H.	The Conquest of Mexico, 1843.
Saint-Pierre, J. H. B. de	Studies of Nature, 1784.
	The Indian Cottage, 1791.
Spence, Lewis	Gods of Mexico, 1923.
Tylor, E. B.	Primitive Culture, 1865.

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Lang, A.	'The Ballad' in Encyclopedia Brittanica 1878.
Lawrence, D. H.	The Plumed Serpent, 1926.
	The Woman Who Rode Away. 1928
	Phoenix, 1936.
Lawrence, Frieda	Not I - But the Wind, 1934
Leavis, F. R.	D. H. Lawrence - Novelist, 1955.
Luhan, Mabel Dodge	Lorenzo in Taos, 1932.
Nuttal, Zelia	The Fundamental Principles of Old and New World Religions. Harvard 1901.
Street, B. V.	Some Aspects of Anthropological Themes in English Literature. D. Phil. Oxford 1970.
Tindall, W. Y.	D. H. Lawrence and Susan his Cow, 1939.
Tylor, E.	Primitive Culture, 1865.
Yeats, W. B.	Selected Poetry ed. Norman Jeffares. 1964.