Anthropology and Contemporary Literature *

My subject is a short period in the history of literary sensibility - that period which saw the end of the Victorian era, and the first World War, and which formed the minds of the first writers whom we normally refer to as "contemporary". It is precisely to that period that contemporary anthropology, as well as contemporary literature, traces its sources; and, by considering some aspects of the work of three writers familiar to everyone - Eliot, Yeats, and D. H. Lawrence - and of some anthropologists, I think we may see how the sensibility - one might say, the experience - of a generation was changed, in one way, by acquaintance with "primitive" culture and belief. As I see it, it was not merely that creative writers had read anthropological studies and made use of them or been influenced by them; it was rather that in some respects the works of anthropologists, of poets and essayists and novelists, all exhibit some of the same interests and directions in the workings of educated and imaginative minds as the Victorian world was ending. Both anthropologists and the first characteristically modern writers, that is, seem to have been interested in similar questions, though their interests were of quite different kinds. These questions were concerned with a rapidly expanding experience of the relativities of human experience in time and place, with the loss or destruction of the ethnocentric values of the mid-Victorians. By the time that Yeats, Eliot and Lawrence were writing, a conscious reaction against those values had set in in the most advanced literary circles; and the late Victorian anthropologists, though themselves not repudiating them with the warmth of these creative writers, had done much to undermine confidence in them.

A sign of what was to happen may be found in one of the best-known poems of Tennyson, Locksley Hall, in which, you may remember, the unhappy (and arrogant) lover considers the possibility of escaping from the restrictions of the English life of his time:

> Or to burst all links with habit - there to wander far away,
> On from island unto island at the gateways of the day.
>
> .....
>
> Never comes the trader, never floats an European flag,
> Slides the bird o'er lustrous woodland, swings the trailer
> from the crag.
>
> .....
>
> There methinks would be enjoyment more than in this march
> of mind,
> In the steamship, in the railway, in the thoughts that shake
> mankind.
> There the passions, cramp'd no longer, shall have scope and
> breathing space;
> I will take some savage woman, she shall rear my dusky race.
> Iron-jointed, supple-sinewed, they shall dive and they shall
> run,
> Catch the wild goat by the hair, and hurl their lances in the
> sun.
>
> .....

> Fool, again the dream, the fancy! but I know my words are wild,
> But I count the grey barbarian lower than the Christian child.
> I, to herd with narrow foreheads, vacant of our glorious gains
> Like a beast with lower pleasures, like a beast with lower pains!
> Mated with a squalid savage - what to me were sun or clime
> I the heir of all the ages, in the foremost files of time -
> Through the shadow of the globe we sweep into a younger day,
> Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay.

There is an indication here (and one might cite examples from other Victorian writers) that "the march of mind" was becoming a conscious burden. With Tennyson's sententious loyalty to his own culture, there is also a recognition of the possibility of deliberately repudiating it; a kind of doubt about the value of the very experience of being a European has become possible, though in this poem it is dispelled as artificially as it was introduced. The poet's consciousness of himself, and of himself in his society, have started to separate, and it is felt that it might be possible, if foolish, for the individual to detach himself from and get right outside a particular society and system of values.

How differently, after the few decades in which anthropology and (to a less extent psychology) were popularised among educated men, does D. H. Lawrence represent and develop a somewhat similar situation. In 1922 Lawrence wrote his essay on the Indians of New Mexico, whom he had visited and observed, and to a point admired. I do not think that his attempt to suggest their relationship with himself is entirely successful, but I quote part of it in order to compare the direction of his interest with that shown in Tennyson's poem; quite a different way of apprehending savages has become possible, and it cannot be accounted for, it seems to me, by differences in temperament between Tennyson and Lawrence alone. Lawrence is describing an Indian dance:

> "And the young man, who chewed gum and listened without listening. The voice (of an old man singing) no doubt registered on their under-consciousness, as they looked around and lit a cigarette, and spat sometimes aside. With their day consciousness they hardly attended.
> .....The voice of the far-off was not for my ears. Its language was unknown to me. And I did not wish to know.... Nor had I any curiosity to understand it. The soul is as old as the oldest day, and has its own hushed echoes, its far-off tribal understandings sunk and incorporated. We do not need to live the past over again. Our darkest tissues are twisted in this old tribal experience, our warmest blood came out of the old tribal fire..... I don't want to live again the tribal mysteries my blood had lived long since. I don't want to know as I have known in the tribal exclusiveness. But every drop of me trembles still alive to the old sound... I have a dark faced bronze voiced father far back in the resinous ages... And I have not forgotten him. But he, like many an old father with a changeling son, he would like to deny me. But I stand on the far edge of their firelight, and am neither denied nor accepted. My way is my own, old red father: I can't cluster at the drum any more."

If to our ears today, this passage has its own tendency to sentimentality, it is towards a sentimentality very different from that represented in Tennyson's poem; a new framework for experience, and not merely a new kind of experience, has been achieved. Tennyson recognises that his world excludes his savage; but Lawrence, partly taking the savage's point of view, recognises equally that the savage's world excludes him. The tension in the passage is created by a partial consciousness of being able, of being required, to be in two very different societies, without being of either. A point has been reached at which it is no longer possible to set the sense of being "in the foremost files of time" boldly against a nostalgia for primitive spontaneity of feeling. And, if I were to select one striking way in which anthropologists and creative writers at the end of the Victorian and into the Georgian period were sharing a common experience, I would say that it was in the apprehension, by both, that they were in a sense at the end of time, turning their eyes backwards; but while the anthropologists, as good Victorians, yet regarded 19th century England as the consummation of human development, and themselves in the 'foremost files' the creative writers of the early part of this century came to believe that they were in its decline, as in the famous lines of Matthew Arnold:

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

Already in 1909, Nietzsche was analysing their situation in the life of his contemporaries as one brought about by an excess of historical knowledge; and in considering what he then said we may properly include the anthropological knowledge of the time with the historical. "An excess of history" says Nietzsche "seems to be an enemy to the life of the time in five ways:

> Firstly, the contrasts of inner and outer is emphasised, and personality weakened. Secondly the time comes to imagine that it possesses the rarest of virtues, justice, to a higher degree than any other time. Thirdly the instincts of a nation are thwarted, the maturity of the individual arrested no less than that of the whole. Fourthly we get the belief in the old age of mankind, the belief, at all times harmful, that we are late survivals, mere Epigoni. Lastly, an age reaches a dangerous condition of irony with regard to itself, and the still more dangerous state of cynicism..."

Nietzsche, of course, was arguing a case as well as analysing a situation but if we take what he says as simple analysis, it applies very well to the background of those writers we are here considering. Without the contrast of inner and outer, for example, the criticisms, all different but all radical, made of their own society by Eliot, Yeats and Lawrence, could not have been made. All recognised, again in their different ways, that a kind of instinctive knowledge and experience had been lost, had been hidden by over-rationalisation. All imply that they find themselves in a decadent old age of the world, though Lawrence perhaps indulges the sentiment of this rather less than the others; less than Eliot of "withered stumps of time", or than Yeats writing The Second Coming:

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...

Finally, that condition of irony of which Nietzche writes, and which he calls "dangerous", is so well-known in the literature of this century that I need not dwell further upon it.

Of the writers I have mentioned, it seems to me that it is Eliot who most explicitly states the situation in which an excess, if it be an excess, of comparative knowledge about societies placed him and his contemporaries. This comparative knowledge came, in part, explicitly from such works as The Golden Bough, as we know from the general note to The WasteLand; but the kind of multiplication of experience I refer to in anthropological and creative writings, seems to me to be most succinctly expressed in the poem Ash Wednesday, where, you will remember, the difficulty of too much awareness is resolved, for Eliot, by an act of faith:

> Because I know that time is always time
> And place is always and only place
> And what is actual is actual only for one time
> And only for one place
> I rejoice that things are as they are and
> I renounce the blessed face...
> Consequently I rejoice, having construct something
> Upon which to rejoice...

Eliot is the most intellectual - one might say, the most academic of the writers discussed, and it is he who seems to have wished to explore most systematically the kinds of questions of comparative anthropology which anthropologists also were exploring; so far, indeed, that by 1940 he seems to have been enquiring of Ezra Pound for a work on the morphology of cultures, an indication of the interest which produced the vaguely sociological Notes Towards a a Definition of Culture. Ezra Pound replies in his racy and whimsical style:

> There is, so far as I know, no English work on Kulturmorphologie, transformation of cultures. Can't use a German term at this moment. Morphology of cultures. Historic process taken in the larger. I know that you jib at China and Frobenius because they ain't pie church; and none of us likes savages, black habits etc. However, for yr. enlightment, Frazer worked largely from documents. Frob. went to things, memories still in spoken tradition etc. His students had to see...

The contrast between Frobeius and Frazer indicates also what had happened to anthropology between the beginning of the century, and 1940; and in order to understand how literary and anthropological interests had moved together, we have to return to the beginning of anthropology in England, and see how, in that subject too, there is a reaching out for foreign worlds of experience, for their own sake, which eventually quite destroys the framework of ideas and values within and from which it first started.

The systematic comparative study of primitive cultures began in England only after the height of the Victorian period and the men who started it were to see the end of the narrower Victorian world of their childhood. Tylor's Primitive Culture (first published

in 1871) of course directed Frazer to the vein of interest which was later to yield The Golden Bough. Tylor had travelled in Mexico, a fact which seems to have given his studies of primitive cultures, though made from literary sources, a direct understanding which those of the untravelled Frazer sometimes lacked; and it need not surprise us that while Eliot was indebted to the more bookish and consciously literary study of Frazer, D. H. Lawrence preferred Tylor's work. He writes to Lady Ottoline Morrell in 1916:

> "Murry will read Tylor's Primitive Culture before I return it. It is a very good, sound substantial book, I had far rather read it than the Golden Bough or Gilbert Murray."

and elsewhere he describes Primitive Culture as "a v. interesting book, better than the G.B. I think."

Tylor was from most points of view a characteristic liberal Victorian savant; yet, from the beginning of anthropology, he gives us a hint of the development of interests and sympathies which were to threaten and finally destroy the philosophical and imaginative security of the age in which he was born.

The preface of Tylor's book Anthropology, published in 1881, indicates his view of the uses to which the study of that subject might be put. He refers to that multiplication and diversification of studies which was doubtless part of the ultimately wearying "march of mind" from which the hero of Tennyson's poem wished for a time to escape.

> "In times when subjects of education have multiplied" says Tylor, " it may seem at first sight a hardship to lay on the heavily-pressed student a new science. But it will be found that the real effect of anthropology is rather to lighten than increase the strain of learning. In mountains we see the bearers of heavy burdens contentedly shoulder a carrying-frame besides, because they find its weight more than compensated by the convenience of holding together and balancing their load. So it is with the science of Man and Civilisation, which connects in a more manageable whole the scattered subjects of an ordinary education".

Tylor's new science, however, was notmerely to be an account of primitive and civilised societies seen, as it were, from the outside; he tried (not always very satisfactorily from the point of view of modern anthropologists) to put himself in the position of those people whose life he was describing, to suggest how he would think were he them. The attempt was made, in fact, however inadequately, to enter into a very foreign kind of experience, as well as to describe and analyse it, or rather, in order the better to give an account of it. This attempt has been characteristically the effort of anthropologists.

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:

> "I wished for a system of thought that would leave my imagination free to create as it chose, and yet make all it created, or could create, part of the one history, and that the soul's."

Surely this is Yeats' way of expressing, as a poet, the sense of fundamental human similarities under the diversities of appearance, which animated the work of the earlier anthropologists, and led them to undertake the task of unification? And Yeats' own anti-scientific mythological and magical imaginative system in a surprising way receives a charter from the rationalist and scientific author of The Golden Bough. Towards the end of the abridgment of this work he writes:

> "Yet the history of thought should warn us against concluding that because the scientific theory of the world is the best that has yet been formulated, it is necessarily complete and final. We must remember that at the bottom the generalisations of science, or, in common parlance, the laws of nature are merely hypotheses to explain that ever-shifting phantasmagoria of thought which we dignify with the high-sounding names of the world and the universe. In the last analysis magic, religion and science are nothing but theories of thought; and as science has supplanted its predecessors, so it may hereafter be itself superseded by some more perfect hypothesis, perhaps by some totally different way of looking at the phenomena - of registering the shadows on the screen - of which we in this generation can form no idea."

I doubt if, at any other period, the "contrast between the inner and the outer" of which Nietzsche wrote could have become so acute as to permit a thoughtful person to speak of the world or the universe as "ever-shifting phantasmagoria of thought"; I think that no one will deny that both Yeats and Eliot were able to think of it as such, and, in Eliot's case at least, tried by a deliberate act of will to dispel this sense of relativities which the growth of knowledge and awareness, and the decline of faith, had brought about. The passages from Eliot's verse which expresses this situation are very numerous, and will readily spring to mind; perhaps that which most exactly express the impact of the extension of knowledge and experience in the late 19th century on the poets of the 20th is in East Coker. It may not be too fanciful, indeed, to see it as the imaginative summing up of the course of the development of thought of a generation, from the security of Victorianism, of a world with precise if restricting horizons, to the felt-complexities of the earlier part of this century;

> "Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
> The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
> Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
> Isolated, with no before and after,
> But a lifetime burning in every moment
> And not the lifetime of one man only
> But of old stones that cannot be deciphered....

Eliot was much concerned with finding a way out of, or through, this experience of "ever-shifting phantasmagoria of thought", but he understood well what it implied. In Notes Towards a Definition of Culture, for example, he is at one point explicitly concerned with the extent

to which it is possible for an anthropologist to participate in a savage culture - to live that foreign life - and yet remain himself and a member of his own society and tradition. He seems to suggest that, somewhere, a halt must be called to sympathy, or empathy, lest the person, no longer belonging to any society, disintegrate. The same problem, though differently resolved, is clearly present also to D. H. Lawrence, both in the passage I have quoted earlier, and elsewhere. Take, for example, his comments on Walt Whitman:

> "Walt wasn't an Eskimo. A little, yellow, sly, cunning greasy little Eskimo. And when Walt blandly assumed All-ness, including Eskimoness, unto himself, he was just sucking the wind out of a blown egg-shell, no more. Eskimos are not minor little Walts. They are something that I am not, I know that. Outside the egg of my Allness chuckles the greasy little Eskimo. Outside the egg of Whitman's Allness too.
> But Walt wouldn't have it. He was everything, and everything was in him..."

And that, of course, is the point which one would logically reach if one were convinced that the World could be represented as an "Ever-shifting phantasmagoria of thought." The efforts of anthropologists to think and live the experience of primitive peoples, however far they remained from success, similarly were bound to break down the particular society and at a particular time:

> "...a lifetime burning in every moment
> And not the lifetime of one man only
> But of old stones that cannot be deciphered..."

And with the break-down of that exclusiveness, 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. There are examples in <u>The Waste Land</u>, but the direct statement of the problem is found in the essays of Yeats. Yeats, of course, thought himself strengthened and inspired <u>directly</u> by the operations of "enchantments, glamours and illusions" from other societies and times:

> "Our most elaborate thoughts, elaborate purposes, precise emotions, are often, as I think, not really ours, but have on sudden come up, as it were, out of hell or down out of heaven..."

and he continues significantly:

> "We cannot doubt that barbaric people receive such influences more visibly and obviously, and in all likelihood more easily and fully than we do, for our life in cities, which deafens or kills the passive meditative life, and our education <u>that enlarges the separated self-moving mind</u>, have made our souls less sensitive...

We know, in this case, that Yeats was thinking specifically of the researches of anthropologists, for in the next few lines he refers to the work of Andrew Lang as supporting his contentions. Here is one example of the presence of direct connection between poetic and critical, and anthropological, thought and experience. I do not doubt

that research would produce many more; but it is enough here also to note not only Eliot's indebtedness to The Golden Bough and Miss Weston's From Ritual to Romance, but also his use of W. H. Rivers' Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia. There he explicitly uses Rivers' anthropological material to make his point about the breakdown and disintegration of European society. The comparative study of cultures, which in Tylor's day was to demonstrate the stages by which mankind had reached the summit of Victorian perfection, has turned the mind back critically on the society in which it started, to the disadvantage of that society:

> "W. H. R. Rivers adduced evidence which has led him to believe that the natives of that unfortunate archipelago are dying out principally for the reason that the 'Civilisation' forced upon them has deprived them of all interest in life. They are dying from pure boredom....

and he goes on

> "when applied science has done everything possible with the materials on this earth to make life as interesting as possible, it will not be surprising if the population of the entire civilised world rapidly follows the fate of the Melanesians."

It is ironical that anthropological writing should, in so short a time, have served this purpose for the best and most sensitive minds, when it started in Tylor's words, with the faith that

> "we civilised moderns have just that wider knowledge which the rude ancients wanted. Acquainted with events and their consequences far and wide over the world, we are able to direct our own course with more confidence toward improvement. In a word, mankind is passing from the age of unconscious to that of conscious progress..."

We know how the writers of the early years of this century suffered from the reaction against just such an increase in consciousness, against the varied knowledge about cultures which seemed to have destroyed any living culture in the society which produced it. So D. H. Lawrence:

> "Poor creatures that we are, we crave for experience, yet we are like flies that crawl on the pure and transparent mucous paper in which the world like a bon-bon is wrapped so carefully that we can never get at it....

and

> "I think New Mexico was the greatest experience from the outside world that I ever had. It certainly changed me for ever. Curious as it may sound, it was New Mexico that liberated me for ever from the present era of civilization, the great era of material and mechanical development... the great psych of materialism and idealism which dominated me..."

It was this then, that the movement exemplified in the development of anthropology, towards a wider sympathy with foreign and barbarous societies had led. And such a criticism of idealism and materialism could not fail to be suggested by the works of anthropologists who were themselves, in one way or another, idealists and materialists.

If we consider the many writings of Lévy-Bruhl, whom Ezra Pound much admired, on the nature of primitive thought, we find there an attempt to suggest that primitive thought has a kind of correctness and spontaneity (a lack of idealism) which the scientific and logical thought of civilised men lacks. It had been for long a feature of anthropological writings to try to compare the kind of thought found in savage societies with that which was found in the poetry of our own. Tylor himself compares them:

> "The modern poet still uses for picturesqueness the metaphors which for the barbarian were real helps to express his sense... early barbaric man, not for poetic affectation, but simply to find the plainest words to convey his thoughts, would talk in metaphors taken from nature...."

And again we find in the writings of Max-Muller:

> "before language had sanctioned a distinction between the concrete and the abstract, between purely spiritual as opposed to coarsely material, the intention of the speakers comprehended both the concrete and the abstract, both material and the spiritual, in a manner which has become quite strange to us, though it lives on in the language of every true poet"

I do not need to point out in detail the relation between this kind of concern with concreteness, directness, a kind of spontaneity and absence of rationalisation, and the critical and poetic theory and practice of the writers whom I have discussed. What else is Eliot desiderating when he writes that:

> "Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose..."

or Lawrence

> "it seems to me that when the human being becomes too much divided between his subjective and objective consciousness, at last something splits in him and he becomes a social being. When he becomes too much aware of objective reality, and of his own isolation in the face of the universe of objective reality, the core of his identity splits, his nucleus collapses, his innocence or naïveté perishes, and he becomes only a subjective-objective reality, a divided thing hinged together but not strictly individual..."

Anthropologists, though more soberly and coldly, have been aware of such kinds of problems arising from attempts to understand foreign or exotic societies. Not only have they been aware of them, but it seems to me that their work is itself a symptom of the division in the self of which writers of this century have made so much.

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* A talk given at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1951, with minor stylistic modifications.