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Timothy Wientzen

Skidmore College, twientzen@skidmore.edu

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**Automatic Modernism:
D. H. Lawrence, Vitalism, and the Political Body**

Across the disciplinary spectrum, renewed attention to the body's role in shaping thought is dramatically recasting our understanding of the origins of subjectivity, the conditions of personal agency, and the logic of political modernity. Recent critical interest in the politics of the material world has hastened a return to such twentieth century thinkers as Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch, as well as the scientific contexts of early psychology, sociology and pragmatism. In the fervor of the moment, however, we sometimes forget that recent critical theory is hardly the first intellectual attempt to wrestle with the implications of cognitive science and new theories of embodiment. Modernism followed a century during which Cartesian speculations about the mechanistic basis of human behavior found experimental validation in the work of Lamarck, Loeb, von Helmholtz and others, who argued that the milieu of a given organism played a primary role in shaping and delimiting its range of possible development—a fact that applied as well to humans as to caterpillars. By the late nineteenth century, as physiologists like Ivan Pavlov worked to establish the rules by which the physical environment conditions reflexes and creates the neural patterns of behavior we call habits, questions central to scientific materialism had begun to enter the mainstream of cultural and political life. From pragmatism to public relations, the physiological discourse of an automatic, conditioned body became fundamental to the most diverse accounts of political modernity.

For many political theorists, the physiologically habitual body indeed became an important site of modernity itself—a guarantor of social cohesion of amid the tumult of social dislocation. As British philosopher and political theorist Bernard Bosanquet

explained in 1899, “social life is necessarily and increasingly constituted by adjustments which have become automatic, and are in a large measure withdrawn from public attention” (1899: 167). A habitual body that “receives the *imprimatur* of the State” could thus be seen as the very “condition of social progress” (1899: 167) – or, as William James memorably phrased it in 1890, “the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent” (1981: 125). For contemporaries of James and Bosanquet, the findings of physiological science harbored the utopian promises of modernity, in which the body’s power to conform to the passive work of stimuli augured a politically automatic social body. While the scientific aspects of these debates were, with some exceptions,¹ remote from novelists and poets themselves, the question of material embodiment raised a host of political and aesthetic problems that saturate the cultural life of the twentieth century.

In the essay that follows, I recover the influence of these materialist concerns on modernism by focusing on the relationship between automatic behavior and literary form. Returning to debates about embodiment now animating the new materialisms, I argue that habitual and automatic behaviors functioned as categories of experience central to the political life of modernism. My analysis will center on D. H. Lawrence, whose work was guided by an informed preoccupation with materialist science and its political implications. Like many of his contemporaries, Lawrence’s work persistently takes aim at the collusion of positivism and the institutions of modern life. By treating the human as “a sort of complex mechanism made up of numerous little machines working automatically in a rather unsatisfactory relation to one another” (Lawrence, 2004a: 95),

¹ Gertrude Stein is a famous exception. Working as a research assistant for William James in the 1890s, Stein co-authored two papers on motor automatism.

capitalist modernity, he argued, enforced socially orthodox habits of thought and action that undermined the genuine individuality of subjects. But, rather than insisting on the free, radical agency of individual minds, Lawrence endeavored to imagine new forms of collective life defined above all by a materially indeterminate body.

Lawrence's work has often been described as exhibiting a marked distrust of collectivist politics.² In accounting for his longstanding interest in the politics of embodiment, I hope to challenge the critical perspective that sees in Lawrence an apolitical individualism. Looking at his non-fiction works of the 1920s, as well as both late and early novels, I argue that Lawrence's thinking about materiality, especially his understanding of positivist science, informed the political dimensions of his novels in ways that mirror the work of vitalist philosophers Henri Bergson and George Sorel. My analysis centers on Lawrence's much neglected, late novel *The Plumed Serpent* (1926). Bringing the concerns of this novel into dialogue with Bergson and Sorel, I read *The Plumed Serpent* as a work that imagines a vitalist mode of social organization. Employing the distinctive formal qualities of vitalist discourse, *The Plumed Serpent* promotes the vitalist polity that it depicts through an appeal to readerly embodiment. This vitalist approach to literary form, I suggest, constitutes part of a larger modernist reaction to the political appropriation of materialist science in the twentieth century.

Lawrence and the Politics of Vitalism

At once critical of scientific materialism and deeply invested in the material body, Lawrence's work persistently exposes the political stakes of embodiment in the twentieth

² Lawrence critic David Parker, for example, has recently argued that *Women in Love* is a novel that refuses politics in favor of the permanent ontological possibility of individuals. As Parker argues, Lawrence rejects "any larger political responsibility or social consciousness is a form of false consciousness—a strategy for avoiding the responsibility of looking closely into oneself" (2006: 94).

century. The language of physiology appears throughout both his fiction and non-fiction as a marker of distinctly modern forms of political and cultural “automatism.” Such language was a natural extension of his own readings as a young man; familiar with a variety of post-Darwinian analyses of material embodiment, including the work of Herbert Spencer, T. H. Huxley, and William James, Lawrence was acutely aware of ongoing debates about the new scientific discourses of embodiment and the consequences of such thinking for modern culture at large. As Jeff Wallace has suggested, exposure to these thinkers put Lawrence fundamentally “in tune with contemporary, post-Darwinian science in its critical interrogation of all aspects of the ‘human’” (2005: 18). However, as Lawrence understood it, scientific materialism posed a significant problem for modern political life. By treating the human as an endlessly tractable machine, as physiologists theorized, the institutions of twentieth century modernity threatened to render life “automatic” in the worst possible ways. While, as we shall see, the equation between institutional modernity and automatism was common among his literary contemporaries, Lawrence associated scientific materialism with a particular kind of automatism, one that put him fundamentally in accord with vitalist thinkers like Bergson and Sorel.

Throughout his non-fiction of the 1920s, Lawrence links the rise of positivist sciences with a new historical episteme in which organic life and community were increasingly defined by the automatic repetitions of a codified set of culturally amenable ideas. This ideology he termed “idealism.”³ In a series of non-fiction books published after WWI, including *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921) and *Fantasia of the*

³ While Lawrence had a deep and abiding attachment to Nietzsche, a virulent critic of German idealism, his critique of the “ideal” is a relatively idiosyncratic formulation that closely associated with positivism. His use of the term “idealism,” then, should in no way be confused with the idealism of thinkers like Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling.

Unconscious (1922), Lawrence represents scientific materialism as a total epistemic system in which thought in its objective character gains priority over feeling, affect and the vicissitudes of the body. To live according to our ideas rather than our “passional” selves, Lawrence suggests, is to be forever in thrall to the ready-made habits and ideas we acquire through social conditioning, thereby sapping us of the spontaneity inherent in life itself. As he describes in *Fantasia*, “The ideal mind, the brain, has become the vampire of modern life, sucking up the blood and the life. There is hardly an original thought or original utterance possible to us. All is sickly repetition of stale, stale ideas” (2004a: 105-6). Rather than see the habits of social life as the product of an unthinking mass, as did many of his modernist contemporaries, Lawrence understands modernity as characterized by an *excess* of thought that renders life a series of premeditated, automatic repetitions, bereft of organic creativity.⁴ Guided by the logic of materialist cause and effect, modernity becomes, in the words of the narrator of *Kangaroo* (1923), mere “mechanical repetition of given motions—millions of times over and over again—according to the fixed ideal” (1994: 295). It is, in short, a world of “pure automatism” (ibid.: 295).

Such anxieties in Lawrence’s non-fiction work, particularly in his writings on psychoanalysis, may seem abstract when studied outside of the social context in which they were elaborated.⁵ Within his novels, however, Lawrence frequently pits the desires of individual characters against massifying forces of the nation-state, particularly its

⁴ Though I have given only one example here, throughout his non-fiction of the 1920s Lawrence consistently links idealism to notions of human automatism. Idealism is variously called “the fall into automatism, mechanism, and nullity” (2004a: 152), “the little, fixed machine-principle which works the human psyche automatically” (2004b: 14), and “a superimposition of the abstracted, automatic, invented universe of man upon the spontaneous creative universe” (1988a: 69).

⁵ For a biographical account of the emergence of the concept of “idealism” in Lawrence’s thinking, including the evolution of such ideas in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, see Kinkead-Weekes (1998).

institutions of subject formation, such as schools. In *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, for instance, schools serve as a primary site of the collusion between materialist science and the prerogatives of the state. Ursula Brangwen's work as a schoolmistress, which serves as one of the few plot continuities between these sequential novels, underscores the political value of materialist science in a nascent apparatus of subject-formation.⁶ As Lawrence describes in *The Rainbow*, the goal of schooling is "the graceless task of compelling many children into one disciplined, mechanical set, reducing the whole set to an automatic state of obedience and attention, and then of commanding their acceptance of various pieces of knowledge" (1989c: 355). Here as elsewhere,⁷ Lawrence employs the language of physiological conditioning to figure education as a habituating force—one that not only robs children of individual agency but also orients them toward ideas rather than the instinctive spontaneity of the body. In both novels, schools bear the symbolic weight of a modern world in which a mechanistic view of the body is employed to minimize social affect and inhibit individual agency. While schools figure as prominent impediments to individuality and agency in the work of modernists like Mann, Joyce and Musil, Lawrence explicitly casts these institutions as the practical application of a scientific materialism that reinforced the ideological pressures of mass society. Indeed, for Lawrence "idealism" was nothing if not the ideology of modern science—

⁶ For an historical analysis of early twentieth century modes of subject formation, see Van Creveld's *The Rise and Decline of the State* (1999). Public schooling did not become compulsory in England until 1890, which, as Raymond Williams points out, made Lawrence "one of the first English writers to have direct experience of ordinary teaching" since he taught for over three years at the Davidson Road School in Croydon (1973: 7).

⁷ Lawrence would return to the problem of education throughout his writing career. C.f. "Education of the People," in which he suggests that the entire apparatus of education is intended to minimize individual agency by prioritizing the mind over the body. That there is a specifically materialist element to such idealism can be seen in Ursula's own educational experience; in *The Rainbow* her college professor proposes that life consists of nothing other than "a complexity of physical and chemical activities, of the same order as the activities we already know in science" (1989: 408).

“pure idealism” and “pure materialism” being “identical” in their orientation to human life (1988b: 79).

However strongly Lawrence criticized the use of mechanistic models of subjectivity in modern institutions, to conclude that he exalted the ego as a transcendental realm of free, radical agency would be to misunderstand his critique. Torn between the purely mechanistic theories of empiricist discourse and traditional notions of unbounded agency, Lawrence produced an alternative ontology that deeply influenced his notion of literary character, readerly affect, and the political stakes of art in the twentieth century.

The most useful parallel for Lawrence’s alternative materialism is to be found not in the literary discourse of his contemporaries, however, but in the philosophical critique of scientific materialism in vitalist thinkers, such as Henri Bergson. Though critics have often casually suggested that Lawrence’s work harbors a “vitalist” undercurrent, they have only rarely made this connection explicit.⁸ This can be explained in part by the ambiguity of the term itself, which has traditionally encompassed a variety of “spiritualist” theories from Antiquity to the Enlightenment. However, in the context of the twentieth century, vitalism constituted a specific school of philosophical and political thought dedicated to combating the “radical mechanism” implicit in much of scientific thought. As Sanford Schwartz explains, “Whereas the positivist applies the mechanistic assumptions of the physical sciences to the study of human thought, feeling, and action, the vitalist maintains that the organic nature of ‘life’ is irreducible to mechanistic explanation, and that the methods appropriate to the investigation of the physical world lead only to a distorted understanding of human nature” (1992: 278). Vitalists like

⁸ Though Wallace stops short of calling Lawrence a “vitalist,” he notes that Lawrence had encountered Bergson’s ideas as early as 1911, in article by A. J. Balfour, entitled “Creative Evolution and Philosophic Doubt.” For other considerations of Lawrence as a vitalist, see Lehan (1992) and Watson (2003).

Bergson and Driesch rejected the radical mechanism of physiology as both a philosophical and practical matter. For them, matter itself exhibited a deep intransigence to the total domination of conditioned reflex. Jane Bennett has called this aspect of vitalism “a commitment to the indeterminacies of material causality—a philosophical faith in indetermination” (2010: 53).

By investing organic matter with creative potentiality, twentieth century vitalists attempted to excavate conceptual space for individual agency without recourse to outmoded notions of a transcendental ego or the determinisms of positivist thought. For the philosophically inclined Lawrence, this inversion of empiricist ontology offered a way of imagining new kinds of aesthetic experience and social relationships beyond the disciplinary mechanisms of industrial modernity. Just as thinkers like Bergson stressed the inadequacy of positivist accounts of subjectivity, Lawrence looked to the material body in forging an alternative account of human agency. In *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* and *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, Lawrence argues that bodily being is the source of all “real” agency and creativity in human behavior. Employing an esoteric anatomy of “plexuses” and “ganglia” to challenge Freudian ideas about the unconscious, Lawrence argues that the “unconscious” is a physical, embodied fact and the source of all human potentiality.⁹ Lawrence tasked himself in these books with countering what he understood as a strictly determinist account of human action by defining “the nature of the true, pristine unconscious, in which all our genuine impulse arises” (2004b: 12). These books collectively elaborate a model of the human subject in which the body, rather than the ideal mind, functions as “the fountain of real motivity” and the source of

⁹ By insisting on the “unconscious” rather than the body itself in these books, Lawrence in some sense returned to a pre-Freudian model of a material unconscious. See Lancelot Law Whyte’s important 1960 work, *The Unconscious Before Freud* for background on Enlightenment ideas of an embodied unconscious.

human agency (ibid.: 12). This account places priority on the body as a reservoir of impulses that may allow subjects to transcend the idealist habits of modern political belonging. As Lawrence writes in “Education of the People,” the body “contains all our radical knowledge, knowledge-non-ideal, non-mental, yet still knowledge, primary cognition, individual and potent” (1988b: 129). As the source of our “primary cognition,” the material body functions as the baseline of all human consciousness and the source of action. Equipped with this embodied, non-mental awareness, individuals are capable of exceeding the narrow boundaries imposed on them through the institutions of modern life, Lawrence suggests. Embodied cognition thus entails a radical awareness of the necessarily creative nature of life, in which emotion figures as a form of knowing at odds with the disciplinary mandates of modernity.

Lawrence’s emphasis on the instinctual body is perhaps his most characteristic gesture, one enabling a distinctly modernist mode of literary characterization— an ego that is no longer solitary, whole or durable, in which fluidity, multiplicity and instability reign.¹⁰ But while he strives to avoid the pitfalls of positivism on the one hand and a faith in the transcendent ego on the other, Lawrence’s theory of character, like Bergson’s, creates a problem when it comes to volition. As Judith Shklar argues, if human volition depends on actions that are “indeterminate [and] unforethought,” they are by their very nature “unpredictable” (1958: 644). Free actions thus “occur on those rare occasions when we act in defiance of reason and calculation to follow some inner urge of our hidden self” (ibid.). Such an understanding of vitalism would certainly square with the traditional reading of Lawrence as a radical individualist, whose work forecloses the

¹⁰ For Lawrence’s thinking about physiology and literary character, see his 5 June 1914 letter to Edward Garnett, which calls for moving beyond “the old stable *ego* of the character” in favor of a “physiology of matter” (1981: 90-1).

possibility of political action at a systemic level. For if we are freest when least captivated by our ideas, when the primary cognition of the body overtakes the conscious mind, what room is left for collective action of agents? Lawrence's vitalism would thus seem incompatible with a political solution to the idealism of modernity. But, as we shall see, by transforming the notion of agency along these vitalist lines, Lawrence worked to rethink the tension between collective and individual life. His critique of human automatism took the form of a social vision in which the body could liberate subjects from the disciplinary apparatuses and cognitive habits of twentieth century life.

The Plumed Serpent and the Political Body

For Lawrence, vitalism offered a way of solving the intractable problem of collectivism in the era of mass habituation. This political project can be seen most clearly in *The Plumed Serpent*, a novel that extends the problem of modern automatism to the political body as a whole. While Lawrence's novels regularly invoke the language of automatism, the novels he wrote immediately following WWI, including *Aaron's Rod* and *Kangaroo*, explore the possibility of non-habituating social arrangements. In *The Plumed Serpent* this matter is given its most explicit treatment as structural problem of modern life. As Jeff Wallace has noted, "With more conviction than either of its predecessors, *The Plumed Serpent* adheres to the notion of a religious-political programme and all its attendant paraphernalia—hymns, rituals, the appropriation of churches, the letters to clergy and politicians—in order to bring about a 'new conception of human life'" (2005: 226). Although it represents Lawrence's most fully realized effort to imagine a non-habituating social order, *The Plumed Serpent* has long been the object of criticism among even Lawrence's most dedicated champions.

In his otherwise laudatory book *D. H. Lawrence, Novelist* (1956), F. R. Leavis set the stage for much modern criticism of the novel when he argued that Lawrence was simply out of his depth in dealing with political themes. So unlike the novels of “personal engagement” (1956: 71) like *Sons and Lovers* and *Women in Love*, *The Plumed Serpent*, Leavis argued, “cherishes the illusion that it grasps and presents more in the way of positive ‘answer’ to the large issues raised than it actually does” (1956: 73). The result is “a bad book” (1956: 21) that appears “willed and mechanical” and “produces boredom” (1956: 71).¹¹ Subsequent critics have followed Leavis’ lead in seeing *The Plumed Serpent* as a relatively minor work, with most recent engagements centering on Lawrence’s problematic imagination of “the primitive.”¹² By consigning *The Plumed Serpent* to the margins of Lawrence’s canon, critics have refused to entertain the possibility that it might be the fullest achievement of Lawrence’s political vision. This, despite the fact that Lawrence himself considered it his most fully realized a novel, an opinion he repeatedly stated in his correspondence throughout the two years of the novel’s composition.¹³ His preference for *The Plumed Serpent* may very well reside in the novel’s attempt to offer a positive vision of political life outside the bounds of an automatizing modernity.

¹¹ Leavis would return to *The Plumed Serpent* in his 1976 appraisal of Lawrence’s work, *Thought, Words and Creativity: Art and Thought in Lawrence*. Seeking to understand how Lawrence could regard the novel as his “most important” work, Leavis reiterates his earlier criticisms and judges Lawrence’s view of the novel “a disconcerting aberration” (1976: 60).

¹² See Brett Neilson’s essay on “narrative primitivism” (1997), as well as chapters in Terry Eagleton’s *The English Novel* (2005) and Marianna Torgovnick’s *Gone Primitive* (1990).

¹³ Two months after having begun the novel’s first draft in Mexico in 1923, Lawrence reported to Adele Seltzer, “I like my new novel best of all—much” (1987a: 455). A full two years later, as he was completing an entirely new iteration of the novel, Lawrence wrote to Curtis Brown, “It is different from my other books: and to me, the one that means most” (1989: 260), a sentiment he was to repeat again and again before the novel’s publication 1926. As he told Brown in a different letter, “I consider this my most important novel, so far” (1989: 271).

The story of Kate Leslie, the widow of an Irish revolutionary, whose travels in Mexico bring her into contact with an Aztec religious and political renaissance, the novel traces the protagonist's transition from a Western tourist to an active participant in the movement, and ultimately her beatification as a goddess in the Aztec pantheon. The automatism of thought elsewhere common in Lawrence's work are here figured as a problem of global proportions, as economic modernization threatens to disseminate Western mores, including the ideology Lawrence had earlier termed "idealism." In part this ideology manifests itself in the habits of thought typical of the American tourists that populate the early portions of the narrative. Guided by what the novel calls an "American automatism," these tourists exhibit the ready-made political ideas of global capitalism in their dealings with Mexico (1987b: 93). Their wanderings, however, take place against the backdrop of a general economic process in which the modernization of Mexico threatens to transform the indigenous population by prioritizing idealist forms of knowledge. Late in the novel, as Kate experiences a reluctance to accept the native religious renaissance, Cipriano accuses her of being stuck in American habits of thought:

You can only think with American thoughts ... Nearly all women are like that: even Mexican women of the Spanish-Mexican class. They are all thinking nothing but U.S.A. thoughts, because those are the ones that go with the way they dress their hair. ... But you only think like this because you have had these thoughts put in your head, just as in Mexico you spend centavos and pesos, because that is the Mexican money you have put in your pocket. It's what they give you at the bank. So when you say you are free, you are *not* free. You are compelled all the time to be thinking U.S.A. thoughts—*compelled*, I must say. You have not as much choice as a slave. As the *peons* must eat tortillas, tortillas, because there is nothing else, you must think these U.S.A. thoughts Every day you must eat those tortillas, tortillas.—Till you don't know how you would like something else. (ibid.: 204-5)

Here Lawrence suggests that thoughts are conditioned not simply by one's education but also by the seemingly innocuous details of everyday life, including cultural practices and

modes of production. The reference to Mexican pesos conjures the broader context of economic modernization, one in which foreign values supplant native social practices even as the form of currency remains the same. Fashion is here coded as a kind of stimulus that works to condition behavior in new and determinate ways—a process of “Americanization” through collective habits.¹⁴ “U.S.A. thoughts” are, in other words, not just “foreign” to the indigenous population of Mexico; the influx of American styles and American goods produces a fundamentally new form of social life defined by material wealth *and* its particular mode of cognition, the intellect. As Lawrence’s narrator comments, the rising importance of American automobiles in Mexico threatens to fundamentally change the very essence of the country’s inhabitants: “the automobile will make roads even through the inaccessible soul of the Indian” (ibid.: 116). The question that Lawrence poses in *The Plumed Serpent* is how to constitute a political body capable of countering idealism and the automatisms of thought it promotes.

As Kate grows to recognize the habits of her traveling companions, she recoils, “*Give me the mystery and let the world live again for me! ... And deliver me from man’s automatism*” (1987b: 105). This deliverance she will find in Don Ramón’s native religious renaissance, a political movement that provides the very thing Lawrence’s project might have seemed to call into question, namely a non-habituating form of political life. To imagine a resolution to these problems, Lawrence turned toward a

¹⁴ Fashion is a recurrent site of modernist anxiety about automatic behavior. In his 1928 book, *Propaganda*, Freud’s American nephew Edward Bernays suggested that fashion is paradigmatic of the use of conditioned reflex in modern politics. He explains, “A man buying a suit of clothes imagines that he is choosing, according to his taste and his personality” when in reality he is “obeying the orders of an anonymous gentleman tailor in London” (2005: 61). What appears at first sight as an index of individual volition—the choice of clothes—discloses an essentially avolitional process of manipulation and conditioned reflex. For Wyndham Lewis, fashion becomes a functional metaphor for describing modern politics themselves. As he puts the matter in *The Art of Being Ruled* (1927), “The ideas of a time are like the clothes of a season: they are as arbitrary, as much imposed by some superior will which is seldom explicit” (1989a: 363).

model of political organization very closely mirrored in the thinking of vitalist philosopher Georges Sorel. Deeply drawn to Bergson's critique of scientific materialism, Sorel worked to extend Bergson's understanding of intuition into the political realm by theorizing its role in modern mass movements.¹⁵ Central to his project was the same problem that dogged Lawrence—how to forge a structure of political action that does not foreclose the embodied agency of individuals.

In *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence confronts the same problem. Here the bargain affected between collective and individual life is dramatized through the figure of Kate, who struggles to accept a new sense of self promised by Ramón's religious renaissance. We might even understand the plot of the novel as structured according to Kate's ability to realize a dynamic sense of self through participation with the collective, a drama that reaches its highest pitch and final synthesis in the closing chapter. Even after she has married Cipriano and joined the Aztec pantheon in the guise of the goddess Malintzi, she still desires a purely individualized existence, which produces a conflict between her "two selves: one, a new one ... which was her sensitive, desirous self: the other hard and finished, accomplished ... (1987b: 429). In the contest between these two selves, Kate comes to realize that she is most fully herself when she is "limited" by her connection with the collective (ibid.: 439). Contact with this new social body enables her to sustain a dynamic—we might say vitalist—sense of self and to fully commit to the revolutionary project. Kate's story is one of overcoming a purely "European" adherence to unbounded individualism, which finds its fullest expression not in an outright collectivist bargain like

¹⁵ For more on Sorel's relationship to Bergson's philosophy, see Shklar (1958), Lovejoy (1913), and Jennings (1999).

socialism but in a new social order that maintains individuality by transforming it into the very substance of collective life.

But in order for collectivity to be an enabling force within the world of the novel, it has to abstain from the disciplinary formations so frequently discussed by Lawrence as the bane of modern life. Lawrence consequently invokes a Sorelian notion of myth, which acts as a prophylactic against the automatic and the ready-made in collective structures. By placing myth at the center of a political revolution in *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence envisions a vitalist social structure capable of providing the impetus to individualized agency. If for modernists myth often acts as a conservative effort to consolidate national belonging under the sign of faith, humanism or some other waning ideology, Lawrence's notion of myth works in opposition to rather than in concert with ideology.

This sense of myth formed a central component of Sorel's vitalist philosophy. In his "Letter to Daniel Halévy" (1907), Sorel defined myth as a body of images capable of evoking all those instinctive sentiments of a group that reside at the level of unconscious desires. He explains, "men who are participating in great social movements always picture their coming action in the form of images of battle in which their cause is certain to triumph" (2002: 20). As a force for political action myth thus functions an actuating power beyond the simple forms of conditioned behavior and indoctrination typical of modern political life. Such an idea of myth coheres around the very ontology of embodiment shared by Bergson and Lawrence. Because myth transcends the doctrinal character of political ideology, it understands political actors as driven by the same forms of agency that cannot easily be called "willed." As Judith Shklar has pointed out, for

Sorel political freedom is a kind of creativity, “characterized by the absence of premeditation,” and action “must emerge from some blind, nonrational inner impulse” (1958: 647). Myth thus serves as the key term in a properly vitalist political framework, a force capable of both triggering revolutionary action and negotiating the balance between collectivity and individuality in a post-revolutionary society. Lawrence came to very similar conclusions in his own thinking about alternative forms of political life.

In *The Plumed Serpent* he dramatizes the power of a myth as the foundation of a non-habituating social order. Here, it is not Sorel’s myth of the general strike that actuates behavior, but the myth of an exit from the broad consequences of economic modernization. Led by Don Ramón, who claims to be the living incarnation of the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, this revolutionary movement promises its adherents relief from the automatism of thought promoted by capitalist modernity. Unlike the “ready-made” world of the United States and the industrial West, Ramón’s political and religious renaissance seeks to restore spontaneity to both individual and collective life by reanimating embodied life as a social good. This in turn creates a “new body” (ibid.: 200) that then serves as a mode individuation in which one’s particularity—what the novel characterizes as the “god” in one’s “manhood” or “womanhood” (ibid.: 199)—is both expressed through intuitive forms of action and enabled by a dynamic social structure.

Lawrence insisted in his late non-fiction that what the twentieth century lacked was precisely what myth enabled. As he explained in *Apocalypse* (1931), “We have lost almost entirely the great and intricately developed sensual awareness, or sense-awareness, and sense-knowledge, of the ancients. It was a great depth of knowledge

arrived at direct, by instinct and intuition, as we say, not by reason. It was a knowledge based not on words but on images” (1980: 91). In *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence found his most perfect articulation of what such images might be in the figure of indigenous gods. These gods operate as the “images” or myths that catalyze the revolutionary movement and preempt the collapse of individual agency into the “idealism” of a modern political order.

In *The Plumed Serpent*, the anti-dogmatic potential of revolutionary myth enables a social system in which the primary cognition of embodied life serves as the core of a new collectivity. Contrary, then, to critics like Anne Fernihough, who concludes that “Lawrence’s stance is, in the final analysis, apolitical, if by politics we implicate large, controlling organizations” (1993: 187), a consideration of Lawrence’s vitalism shows him imagining structural catalysts to new modes of political affiliation. Lawrence’s novel emphasizes embodiment and spontaneity over the idealisms of both capitalism and communism. During a century in which social, cultural and political experience was increasingly viewed as a means of habituating human behavior, vitalist embodiment offered Lawrence a genuine way of escaping the categories of left and right with their ready-made models of collectivity. But, as we shall see, Lawrence’s vitalism runs deeper than mere plot, raising questions about aesthetic form itself.

A Vitalist Aesthetic

Vitalist thought suffers from a constraint unique to modern philosophical schools. Bergson, Sorel and Lawrence recognized that the central tenets of vitalism could easily devolve into the dogma of idealism. Bergson explained this problem in *Creative Evolution*: “Our freedom, in the very movements by which it is affirmed, creates the

growing habits that will stifle it if it fails to renew itself by a constant effort. It is dogged by automatism. The most living thought becomes frigid in the formula that expresses it. The word turns against the idea” (127). In order to counter the “automatic” as a social and scientific category, vitalist philosophy re-imagined not just the *content* of philosophical discourse, but its *form* as well by placing new emphasis on the affective plane of readerly experience. By this I mean to suggest that the work Bergson and Sorel self-consciously refuses ideational closure in order to prompt what Bergson called “integral knowledge,” knowledge grounded in embodied intuition rather than intellect alone. As Judith Shklar has explained, Bergson’s thought is essentially “aesthetic” in nature (1958: 656); this element of his work is “not an accidental feature, a matter of careless expression. His method was an integral part of his thought” (1958: 635). In attempting to elicit an intuitive response to his philosophy, Bergson rejected the idealisms of traditional philosophical discourse.

Sorel’s work poses the question of form even more directly. As he explains in *Reflections on Violence*, “Ordinary language could not produce these results [revolution] in any very certain manner; appeal must be made to collections of images,” which must be “*taken together and through intuition alone*, before any considered analyses are made” (2002: 113). Sorel called this discursive method “diremption.” Literally meaning “a tearing asunder,” diremption effects a formal preemption of the reader’s “idealist” inclinations through a commitment to what might be termed an aesthetic of abstraction, incompleteness, or obscurity.¹⁶ In “every complex body of knowledge,” he explained, there

¹⁶ As J. Cerrulo explains, “The diremptive investigator proceeds indirectly: circling around the subject and viewing it from various vantage points rather than seeking the single one from which its totality can be taken in; pursuing tangents; considering various aspects of it without concern for their inter-connectedness; and, in fact, deliberately foregoing all attempts to grasp the thing *in toto*” (2003: 136).

resides “a clear and an obscure region,” the latter of which is always “the most important” (2002: 136). The power of vitalist discourse consequently resides in its ability to frustrate ideation and vest readers with interpretive agency. Inhibited from merely reproducing vitalism as an intellectual doctrine, Sorel reasoned, readers would be forced to embody vitalism’s refusal of all things automatic.

Lawrence saw the same problems at work within literary discourse. *The Plumed Serpent* thematizes a vitalist mode of political organization where embodied knowledge overrides the idealisms and automatisms of modern society. But it is one thing to depict a utopian world and quite another to make it, for modeling a vitalist society could easily produce the idealist habits Lawrence wants to discredit. The question of vitalist form thus figures prominently in his thinking as a way of inciting in readers those forms of knowledge that he had identified with the primary cognition of the body. As he explained in “Morality and the Novel” (1925), an essay written just after completing *The Plumed Serpent*, the job of the novel is not that of philosophy, religion and science, which are “busy nailing things down, to get a stable equilibrium” (1985b: 172). To the contrary, he argues, “The novel is the highest complex of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered. ... If you try to nail anything down, in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail” (ibid.: 172).¹⁷ The power of the novel resides in its unique ability to transcend the cognitive habits essential to scientific materialism and modern political structures. As he explained in “The Future of the Novel” (1923), the job of the novel is “to present us with new, really new feelings”

¹⁷ Lawrence’s letters echo this vision of literary form. As he wrote to Carlo Linati while he was writing *The Plumed Serpent*, “But really, Signor Linati, do you think that books should be sort of toys, nicely built up of observations and sensations, all finished and complete?—I don’t. ... whoever reads me will be in the thick of the scrimmage, and if he doesn’t like it – if he wants a safe seat in the audience—let him read somebody else” (1989: 200-201).

(1985a: 155) by means of formal devices that resist the purely intellectualized knowledge endemic to modern life.

Such an aesthetic was already at work in Lawrence's novels, wherever style attempts to confound the idealizing impulse of readers. For example, *The Rainbow* attempts to elicit a response from readers that differs sharply from the automatism of thought so regularly confronted by his characters.¹⁸ In the "Cathedral" chapter, to take but one well-known example, Lawrence describes Will and Anna Brangwen's experience of a church. As they enter the building, the narration departs from a realist description in order to indulge in what soon became signature Lawrentian prose:

Containing birth and death, potential with all the noise and transitation of life, the cathedral remained hushed, a great, involved seed, whereof the flower would be radiant life inconceivable, but whose beginning and whose end were the circle of silence. Spanned round with the rainbow, the jeweled gloom folded music upon silence, light upon darkness, fecundity upon death, as a seed folds leaf and silence upon the root and the flower, hushing up the secretes of all between its parts, the death out of which it fell, the life into which it has dropped, the immortality it involves, and the death it will embrace again. (1989c: 187)

This passage does not offer readers a logical translation of Will and Anna's experience into realist description. Instead, Lawrence produces a hypersensual prose that becomes virtually unmoored from any reference outside itself. The organic figure of a seed suggests an unfolding or blooming—but of what? Through his juxtaposition of contraries—music and silence, light and dark, birth and death—and the use of the obsolete word "transitation," Lawrence pushes the image of the seed beyond the ordinary language of literary description, as if the passage were itself caught in the process of life. We might say that the passage performs what Sorel calls "diremption," in that it is

¹⁸ In *The Rainbow*, the importance of readerly affect is self-consciously mirrored in the plot, as Lawrence works to overcome what one character calls the "dead language" modern social life (1989c: 423).

capable of being known only in the sense that it is felt.¹⁹ Form is here deployed to disrupt the reader's reliance on the habits of mind over than the primary cognition of feeling. Anne Fernihough has indeed noted that "Lawrence's own prose-style represents an attempt to render palpable the energies of the unconscious" such that "we are never allowed to feel that a final 'signified' has been reached" (1993: 73).²⁰

Such moments, in which pure being eclipses the ready protocols of realist narrative, are common throughout Lawrence's fiction. In *The Plumed Serpent*, however, Lawrence gives the stakes of affect an explicitly political dimension by insisting that a solution to modern automatism depends on embodied knowledge. At the most immediate level, the novel's use of religious experience mirrors the modes of affect seen in works like *The Rainbow*, with ritualized dance, drumming, and the incantations of religious hymns forming central aspects of *The Plumed Serpent*.²¹ Even the gods themselves are figured as little more than a "fertility of sound," a sensual appeal to new ways of knowing (1987b: 62). Unlike *Aaron's Rod* and *Kangaroo*, novels that likewise take up questions of political organization, here Lawrence employs the unspeakable poetry of religious experience to engender something approaching the primary cognition of embodiment—a readerly experience that is not strictly reducible to the idealism of standard linguistic

¹⁹ The relationship between sensation in *The Rainbow* and vitalism has not been lost on critics. Sean Watson has suggested that *The Rainbow* is a novel that "does not trace life in the domain of language, but in the domain of pure sensation" (2003: 27) in a manner that mirrors Bergson's work.

²⁰ For more on modernism and an aesthetic of vagueness, c.f. Megan Quigley's article, which argues that modernism mirrored "the revolt against positivism in the philosophy of language" (2008: 103).

²¹ As Louis L. Martz has pointed out, one of the primary differences between the first draft of the novel, published as *Quetzalcoatl* (1995), and the final version is that the latter is marked by an increased emphasis on such forms of religious experience: "In *Quetzalcoatl* the local and the mythological are closely wrought together, evenly balanced in emphasis. But in *the Plumed Serpent* the additional mythic and transcendent elements—sermons, ruminations, expanded hymns, expanded ritual—tend to dominate the landscape and local detail preserved from the early vision ..." (1995: xxix). This endows the final version of the novel with a kind of political cosmopolitanism that the first draft lacks. For more on Lawrence's relationship to native dancing, see L. D. Clark's introduction to *The Plumed Serpent* as well as Lawrence's essays on the topic in *Mornings in Mexico* (1927).

formulae. Myth likewise plays an important part in this effort. Because it does not depend on the resources of ordinary language, myth promises to speak in the language of sensation, of vital knowledge. As Lawrence wrote in *Apocalypse*, myth enables people “to achieve a consummation of a certain state of consciousness, to fulfill a certain state of feeling-awareness” (1980: 91). The sense awareness central to vitalist ontology is the very thing disabled by modern social structures. Within the novel, myth works as a non-ideological form of politics, one that speaks as much to the characters engaged in revolution as it does to readers caught in the automatisms of modern social life. “Dogma,” he writes in “Education of the People,” “is the translation of the religious impulse into an intellectual term ... a finite, fixed, mechanical thing” (1988b: 108). Form becomes in his analysis the motive power of individual agency—an affective experience that inhibits the reification of desires into the ready-mades of political action.

Automatic Modernism

For many writers, twentieth century life could be defined above all by the welter of cultural forces that daily conditioned thought and action, producing habitual, docile subjects. Rather than equip subjects with the ability to act as agents in an increasingly complex world, mass society appeared to compromise the autonomy of individuals by outfitting them with habits and stereotypes of thought that, by definition, fall below the level of conscious apprehension. Lawrence’s critique of modern “idealism” finds its counterpart in the work of writers like Wyndham Lewis, who argued that “the machinery of education, of the press, cinema, wireless, and social environment” diminishes people’s genuine individuality, providing them “with a system of habits which agree with their neighbor's habits, and from this coma they seldom wake” (1989: 44-5). Like Lawrence,

Lewis understood the findings of physiologists like Pavlov as auguring a new form of political life that denied the agency of individuals. Science, Lewis argued, had not only demonstrated that our most individual beliefs and practices are the product of an impersonal force of conditioning—it had provided government and industry with a blueprint of the human machine.²²

Once a dominant concern of modernist writers and their critical contemporaries, the political stakes of embodiment are now finding renewed interest among critics. The return to such materialist concerns, now underway widely underway in the humanities,²³ resides in its capacity to help us understand the political, cultural and philosophical stakes of physical embodiment in productive ways. In the context of literary modernism, these discourses augur a return to some fundamental literary and political problems,²⁴ as well as a more rigorous understanding of the relationship between modernism and early twentieth century discourses of embodiment.

For several recent scholars of modernism, embodiment has emerged as a crucial site of modernist literary practice. In the last several years critics like Lisi Schoenbach and Liesl Olson have attempted to uncover the utility of pragmatism's understanding of habit within literary modernism, just as Douglas Mao has called attention to the intercourse between physiology and modernist aesthetics. If "[h]abit is the ballast that

²² For Lewis, this fact was complicated by philosophies like vitalism, which in his view tended to reinforce the appeal of fatalist doctrines like scientific materialism. Cf. *Time and Western Man* (1927).

²³ While the range of critical investments in materiality is probably too long to list, the so-called "affective turn," engagement with cognitive science, and a new investment in vitalism across the humanities all point to a renewed interest in matter. For an overview, see the introduction to Coole and Frost's *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010).

²⁴ In addition to the matters of collectivity and individualism that I have outlined in this article, the preoccupation of modernist-era critical schools with embodiment is surely one avenue of promising research. The Russian Formalist aversion to the "automatism of perception" (1998: 21) and the New Critical critique of the "superficial, automatic and cheap mental and emotional responses" (1959: 102) of mass society underscores the problems of habit and embodiment for any account of modernist literary form.

chains the dog to his vomit,” (1957: 8) as Beckett wrote in 1930, these scholars suggest it is simultaneously a lot more than merely a dead-end of experience in industrial modernity; it is the very condition of possibility for literary innovation. However promising these models of habit are for discerning modernism’s relationship to everyday life (Olson) and the avant-garde (Schoenbach), scholarship that does not engage with the broader scientific and political context of habit is likely to mischaracterize the countervailing way in which automatism and embodiment figure within modernist literary experiment. Modernist preoccupation with collective and individual habit took shape within a specific historical conjuncture defined by positivism, the nation-state, and economic modernization. These forces promoted a new epistemic orientation toward the body as a machine; this turn defined a field of knowledge in which individual volition and collective will were redefined in material terms. In this environment, embodiment became a primary aspect of literary experimentation.

While Lawrence’s interest in the “vitality” of the human body could be read as an idiosyncratic response to the political problems of the era, his enduring attention to the mechanizing forces of industrial society is in fact typical of modernist literary practice. For Lawrence and his contemporaries, the relationship between embodiment and mass politics was crucially important to literary practice. In the work of Wyndham Lewis, for instance, the concurrence of mass society and new scientific paradigms like behaviorism diminished powers of individual cognition, even as the body appeared as a possible solution to the automatisms of modern life. For Rebecca West, scientific materialism provided a model for understanding cultural endurance and collectivity amid the transformations wrought by economic modernization. Indeed, drawing on her readings

of Ivan Pavlov's *Conditioned Reflexes* (1924), West forged an entire literary aesthetic geared toward the value and dangers of embodied automatism. In *A Strange Necessity* (1928), West argued for a vision of literary form grounded in the politics of what she called "body-consciousness" (1987b: 99), a term that both closely mirrors Lawrence's insistence on the "primary cognition" of the body and underscores the intimate link between physiological automatism and the politics of literary form.

For these writers, embodiment stands as both a problem of modern political life as well as a potential solution—one to be affected through the stimuli of literary experience. With the emergence of nationalist institutions of subject formation and a modern mass media, automatic behaviors appeared as evidence of the radical circumscription of individual agency. Yet, as Lawrence's emphasis on the agency of the body shows, habit was not a monolithic category to which all modernists objected. His vitalist political vision depends on a body for which agency and automatism are virtually indistinguishable—a body for which volition means foregoing ideational willing. If scientific materialism deflated Enlightenment notions of individual autonomy and judgment, modernism takes this fact as an incitement to re-conceive the modern political subject in terms that incorporate the body—as both passive register of stimuli and active agent in the world. The body becomes not the enemy of agency, autonomy and the utopian promise of modernity, but its very essence.

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