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Chasing the Writer

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"Why does the writing make us chase the writer?" Julian Barnes asks in Flaubert's Parrot (15). In the past, the answer was easy—we studied the writer to understand the writing. But Barnes suggests that now we study the writing to understand the writer. Barnes's interest in the writer marks a new direction in fiction and criticism. In the late 1960s, Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" and Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?" moved the locus of meaning from the author to the reader. In Barthes's words, "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (147). Similarly, Foucault disparaged the function of the author "as the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning" (159). These influential essays discouraged interpretations based on the reader's knowledge of the writer in favor of readings that unleashed the free play of signification. In contrast, Barnes's question heralds the return of the author.

Noticing how many contemporary writers use famous authors as characters, critics have provided postmodern explanations for the trend Barnes illustrates. These explanations are fully informed by poststructural narrative theory, but they reassess the rhetorical effect of authorship. For example, in *Postmortem Postmodernists: The Afterlife of the Author in Recent Narrative*, Laura Savu analyzes a group of novels in which famous authors appear as characters, texts she calls "author fictions." Contemporary writers, she argues, use the known facts about dead writers' lives to give them distinctly postmodern identities with "a body and a voice" (25). Savu restates Barnes's question in relation to postmodern concerns: "And, finally, what does the phenomenon of the author as character say about our current cultural moment and these canonical figures?" (vi). Her answer is that author fictions show "the classic's capacity to renew itself and take on new meanings in different contexts" (15). Specifically, contemporary writers recreate authors in their own image, giving famous writers distinctly postmodern identities: the "multiple roles, sociological and/or psychological, ascribed to the author-character evoke the modern view of identity with its suggestion of the 'provisional and performative'" (41). Author fictions anchor the indeterminacy of postmodern identity to the reader's knowledge of famous writers' lives. Information about authors' lives provides this stability, even when the facts are manipulated to serve the novelist's purpose. One of Savu's examples is Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence*. Lawrence is one of the greats worth chasing, and Dyer illustrates how contemporary writers derive authority and authenticity from their predecessors.

Neither authority nor authenticity, however, is a postmodern value. As David Chinitz observes:

The authentic is that which precedes representation. It is unmediated reality. As such it is, by all postmodern accounts, chimerical. For all its disciplinary variety, recent scholarship shares a skepticism toward "realist assumptions of authenticity" ...-that is, it rejects the idea of authenticity as something intrinsic, as opposed to something performed and perceived. (11)

Even if authenticity is theorized as performance rather than essence, it is a quality that contemporary writers achieve by referring to real authors and real places. While there is a theoretical difference between

performance and essence, there is also an important rhetorical difference between performing authenticity and performing indeterminacy. Lawrence's performance of authority and authenticity is so compelling that Dyer feels it as a "gravitational pull" that counteracts his own aimlessness and indecision (111). Unlike Barthes and Foucault, Dyer prefers the fixity of facts to the proliferation of meanings. Nor is Dyer burdened by the anxiety of influence Harold Bloom detects in ambitious writers (5). Dyer is "wrestling" with Lawrence to pin him down, not to throw him off. Reacting against the indeterminacy of meaning in poststructuralist readings, contemporary writers like Dyer use the lives of famous authors to impose a degree of stability on their texts. Author fictions anchor the indeterminacy of postmodern identity to the reader's knowledge of famous writers' lives.

Like Savu, Paul Dawson proposes a postmodern explanation for recent novelists' interest in famous authors. In *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator* Dawson focuses on the rhetorical effect of the author's presence, whether as character or narrator. He argues that since novels have been marginalized by other discourses, contemporary writers refer to famous predecessors to buttress their own cultural authority. Omniscient narrators and references to well-known authors help contemporary writers regain the prestige of fiction in the competitive arena of public discourse. Subduing the religious implications of the term, Dawson defines omniscient narration as "a rhetorical performance of narrative authority that simultaneously invokes and projects an historically specific figure of authorship" (247); the benefit of omniscient narration now as in the past is that it allows authors to provide "nonfictional commentary in the public sphere" (247). His broad definition fits both Dyer and Lawrence:

To avoid reducing omniscience to a synonym for third-person narration, I have argued that the term ought to apply to narrators who not only report the thoughts of characters, but who narrate what characters do not know (zero focalization), typically, aspects of consciousness which characters themselves are unaware of (psychonarration), or information which none could be privy to (prolepses, unwitnessed events). Furthermore, this performance of knowledge ought to contribute to an intrusive narratorial presence established by devices such as direct addresses, commentary, self-reflexive statements, and stylistic expressivity. (248)

While Dawson focuses on narrative point of view, he also calls attention to the importance of information outside the literary text. He proposes that our modern unwillingness to trust the authority of an omniscient narrator makes us turn to "extraliterary claims to knowledge or expertise in postmodern culture" (12). Whereas poststructuralism textualizes the world, applying the principles of representation far beyond literary texts, Dawson regards the text as one element of the writer's full public presence. The author constructs a public persona through literary and extraliterary writing as well as through other activities.

Dawson's willingness to admit extraliterary evidence is a radical departure from poststructural narrative theory. Challenging the fundamental principle of narratology, he conflates author and narrator:

Rather than maintain a strict distinction between author (or creator) and narrator (or knower), I think it is important to understand how the combination of these two concepts produces narrative authority. (14)

He believes that the "discursive continuum between narrative and authorial voice moves in both directions" (15). His claim validates the common reader's assumption that the narrator speaks for the author:

The narrator and the author may be separate entities, but the act of narration, while fictional, nonetheless constitutes a statement within public discourse which is attributed to the author. The intrusive commentary of omniscient narration draws attention to this relationship, so that the "fictional ity" of its discourse can be seen as a rhetorical device for asserting the importance of the novelist in public intellectual life, particularly when

this narrative voice resonates textually with the extrafictional and extratextual voices of the author. (239)

Dawson reclaims the author function that Foucault repudiated:

Here we see the value of Foucault's author function, not necessarily as the basis for a critique of authorial criticism, but as an anatomization of the ways in which an author's name "points to the existence of certain groups of discourse and refers to the status of this discourse within a society and culture." (236)

Dawson's case studies show how writers increase their authority by maintaining a consistent voice across genres. The totality of their production-fiction, essays, letters, interviews, and actions-amplifies the impact of each item.

Once the author's extrafictional and extratextual voices are accepted as sources of evidence about meaning, the person who wrote supersedes individual texts. The author acquires a presence in the world. Questions such as, "How does the author know this?" and "Did this really happen?" and "Is it true?" are again admissible. The writer's experience outside the text-the writer's authentic experience-becomes a guarantee of the truth of the narrative. Everything we know about writers' lives beyond the text augments their authority by increasing their authenticity. Dyer derives authority for his own book from his search for the authentic experiences behind Lawrence's writing. Like Barnes, Dyer reads the texts to understand the life of the author. *Out of Sheer Rage* suggests that contemporary writers invoke the great authors of the past because they need the mighty dead as a prosthesis to write at all. The narrator of *Out of Sheer Rage*-let's call him Dyer-writes about his inability to write a book about Lawrence. Of course, we are reading the book he says he is not writing, but the pretense that he is simply recording the "unmediated reality" of his situation makes the narrative seem authentic. Although the narrative point of view is first-person, it fits Dawson's criteria for the type of omniscient narrator he calls the "literary historian" (88).

Dyer comes to value Lawrence's published writings as clues to his real objective, knowing the man who wrote. Dyer pushes past Lawrence's major work to find the writer: "As time goes by we drift away from the great texts, the finished works on which an author's reputation is built, towards the journals, diaries, letters, manuscripts, jottings" (111). This quest is more than an effort to construct a complete archive:

It is also because we want to get nearer to the man or woman who wrote these books, to his or her being. We crave an increasingly intimate relationship with the author, unmediated, in so far as possible, by the contrivances of art. A curious reversal takes place. The finished works serve as prologue to the jottings; the published book becomes a stage to be passed through-a draft-en route to the definitive pleasure of the notes, the fleeting impressions, the sketches, in which it had its origin. (III)

Of course, it is the finished works that make the writer interesting. The unfinished writings are important because they reveal the individual who wrote the finished texts. As Dawson argues, the extrafictional evidence fills the gap between the narrator and the person who wrote.

Since the places Lawrence lived exist outside his writing, they are authentic in the sense that they precede representation. They lure Dyer as they lure many other readers. He explains, "I came to these places ... like Tess to the D'Urbervilles: to claim kin with them, to be guided by them" (86). These places function as part of an implicit syllogism: if I see what Lawrence saw, I will know what he knew. The logic implies that Lawrence was responding to his surroundings, rather than projecting meaning onto them. Carrying unread books from place to place, Dyer attempts to channel Lawrence by retracing his travels, as if being in the same location would reproduce what Lawrence felt:

If I was to make any progress with my study of Lawrence, if I was to stand any chance of making any progress with my study of Lawrence, I knew that I had to live in a place which had some strong connection with him, a place where I could, so to speak, feel the Lawrentian vibes: Sicily, for example, or New Mexico, Mexico, Australia. (12)

Since these places exist whether or not they are described, Dyer's accounts of his trips to Lawrence sites add authenticity to the narrative.

Lawrence provides ballast for Dyer as he drifts from place to place. Retracing Lawrence's footsteps, Dyer begins to identify with him. An epigraph indicates that Dyer takes his title from Lawrence's account of his study of Thomas Hardy, and Dyer's "sheer rage" mirrors Lawrence's. Using Frieda Weekley's name for Lawrence, Dyer's girlfriend, "almost-wife," calls him "Lorenzo" (220). Like Lawrence, Dyer writes about his ailments, his irritability, and his peripatetic life. This identification underlies his view that "one of the huge moments in Lawrence" occurs in the last essay of *Twilight in Italy*, "The Return Journey." Lawrence compares himself to the young man from Streatham who dutifully returns to a monotonous job after his annual two-week holiday. Lawrence is relieved to have escaped the man's fate: "Thank God I need not go home: never perhaps" (134). This statement could easily be Dyer's, and knowing that Lawrence acted on it, Dyer does too. By reconstructing Lawrence's life, Dyer is able to write his own book.

Lawrence is not the only author whose writing exerts a "gravitational pull." Dyer is also drawn to Camus, and Savu calls attention to other author fictions that construct the lives of famous writers such as Novalis, Wilde, Chatterton, Dickens, James, and Woolf. Dyer minimizes Lawrence's role in enabling the narrative, suggesting that other subjects would have served as well: "And since the only way to avoid giving into depression and despair is to do something, even something you hate, anything in fact, I force myself to keep bashing away at something, anything" (229). Having an interest of some kind, great or trivial, gives one a purpose. He urges everyone to take an interest in something: "One way or another we all have to write our studies of D. H. Lawrence" (231). But Dyer's choice is not as arbitrary as he claims. He turns to Lawrence for authority because of his authenticity.

Lawrence provides exactly what Dyer needs. Lawrence is the antithesis of the postmodern writer. Dyer's identity is provisional and performative, but Lawrence's is steady and stable. His writings project the voice of someone who is hardworking, productive, and confident. If, as Dawson claims, contemporary writers need famous authors to establish themselves as public intellectuals, Lawrence is the right choice for Dyer. Lawrence fits Dawson's criteria of the public intellectual *avant la lettre*. He diagnoses the ills of society and exhorts readers to change their lives. He challenges reigning ideas of the time in his novels, essays, and letters. If, as Dawson argues, authority requires a public presence that is recognizable throughout the writer's oeuvre, Lawrence achieves a distinctive voice as early as 1913. It is characterized by vivid description of empirical experience and vehement assertion of profound meaning in people and places, animals and things. Since empirical description represents sensory perception, it seems beyond representation and imbues the non-empirical meanings Lawrence asserts with authenticity.

The essays in *Twilight in Italy* illustrate how the authenticity of this voice establishes Lawrence's authority. The voice is, of course, constructed, but it seems personal because it is so different from conventional narration. In contrast to the retrospective stance of most third-person narrators, Lawrence registers wildly fluctuating emotions. He articulates unspoken feelings and unconscious thoughts that seem beyond the scope of representation. He seems to have personal experience of the events and people he describes. His habitual use of binaries seems to encompass everything between them. A secondary source of authority is based on his cultural knowledge. He issues *ex-cathedra* judgments of art and literature, and he asserts strong opinions about every topic he touches. This source of authority can backfire, and too much assertion diminishes his

credibility. The differences between the 1913 version of the essays and the 1916 revisions demonstrate how the balance of description of experience and assertion can vary in Lawrence's writings. In the 1916 revisions, assertion outweighs observation, and the speaker seems more opinionated than perceptive. Despite the varying ratio of description to assertion, however, the voice is always authentic and authoritative.

Since the earlier versions are closer to Lawrence's experience, meanings seem to cling to the location, where they are available to anyone. In Gargnano, where Lawrence wrote "The Spinner and the Monks," one can still see "the thin stiff neck of old San Tommaso, grey in the sun" (51). The narrator reaches the church via a "decayed Purgatory of a passage": he "popped out, like a figure on the stage, clear on the platform of my San Tommaso, in the grand sunshine" (51). But in 1916 the sight becomes "a vision": "The church became a living connection with me" (103). It acquires symbolic meanings: "It was another world, the world of the eagle, the world of fierce abstraction. It was all clear, overwhelming sunshine, a platform hung in the light" (104). In 1913, the narrator sees an old woman spinning. She is drab, but "her eyes were like two periwinkles in the grey stone. Nothing troubled her, and it was nothing she wanted" (53). The revision again submerges this image in symbolic meaning: "She was like a fragment of the earth, she was a living stone of the terrace, sun-bleached" (105). The narrator no longer regards the woman as a person: "Like the grey church, she made me feel as if I were not in existence" (105). Abstractions replace her periwinkle eyes:

She glanced at me again, with her wonderful, unchanging eyes, that were like the visible heavens, unthinking, or like two flowers that are open in pure clear unconsciousness. To her I was a piece of the environment. That was all. Her world was clear and absolute, without consciousness of self. (107)

She is "eternal, unchangeable, whole even in her partiality" (108). The spinner herself disappears beneath abstractions about consciousness, the absolute, and the eternal.

Lawrence penetrates surfaces as audaciously as he extrapolates from what he sees to what he thinks. For example, in "The Lemon Gardens of the Signor di P." the repair of a door hinge becomes the occasion for an analysis of the possibly unacknowledged and certainly unspoken feelings of a childless couple, he in his sixties and she in her forties:

Now, the signora held the little signore together whilst he undid the screw that fixed the spring. If they had been alone, she would have done it. As a matter of fact, he usually began, and she finished, the task in hand. And his beginning was like the launching of a ship by Lady So-and-so-a mere graceful formality. For she had all the life and vigour. (61)

As the signore leads Lawrence on a tour of the estate, they walk from sunlight to shadow. This pattern recurs when he describes the couple. The signora "sat laughing with a baby ... She laughed, bent forward her dark face out of the shadow, swift into a glitter of sunshine, near the sunny baby, laughing again, making mother-noises" (62). In contrast, the "signore stood aside, almost in the background, shadowed" (62). The empirical properties of light and darkness become metaphors for the temperaments of husband and wife. Mihaela Irimia interprets the image as an instance of Lawrence's characteristic dialectic that includes north/south, present/past (157). The symbolic meanings are firmly grounded in the empirical situation.

The narrator expands the significance of the visit, however, from the couple to the nation. Lawrence uses the incident to speak as a social critic or, in Dawson's terms, a public intellectual. Because the couple is childless, the narrator assumes that the signore resents his wife's delight in her nephew: "And the signore felt almost as if she insulted him, by being in such an ecstasy with the baby. He held his chin, gloomily, fretful, impotent" (63). The narrator extrapolates from individuals to nationalities, taking the couple as an illustration of Italian character: "These Italians, men and women, adore their children, at least while they are little. The man seems

not to be able to believe in himself, till he has a child" (63).

The English are different: "An Englishman walks as if he must brave it out: as if it were a chagrin to him to be forced to acknowledge his legs and arms, in public" (63). The scene moves from the immediate situation to the participants' unconscious feelings and then to generalizations about nationalities. The essay concludes with observations about the political and economic consequences of these traits: "'Ah,' cries the signore, 'in England you have the wealth-les riches-but here we have the sun-'" (67). The narrator disapproves of the signore's judgment: "If the sun had been a big lemon hanging in his garden, I am afraid he would have sold it by weight" (67-68). By 1916, however, Lawrence changed his mind. The later version expands the contrast between industrial England and agricultural Italy, yet it favors England:

I thought of England, the great mass of London, and the black, fuming, laborious Midlands and north-country. It seemed horrible. And yet, it was better than the padrone, this old, monkey-like cunning of fatality. It is better to go forward into error than to stay fixed inextricably in the past. (132)

Lawrence uses the particular incident to support general claims. His ambition takes him from fiction and travel writing to social critique, yet the leap depends on the particularity of the writing.

The 1916 version of the essay inflates the whole account with narrative details and cultural generalizations. The narrator explains that the visit to the lemon gardens occurred because the signore wanted him to translate instructions for installing a door hinge. Between the request and the repair, the narrator assumes the role of the public intellectual-or public preceptor. The motif of light and shadow in the lemon garden is extended to history-"the soul of the Italian since the Renaissance"-and metaphysics-the "mind, that is the Light; the senses, they are the Darkness" (116). The narrator expatiates on Christian Europe in the Middle Ages and Renaissance art. He cites Blake's "Tiger, tiger, burning bright" to illustrate the "transfiguration through ecstasy in the flesh" (117) and opines that the Italians follow God the Father but the Northern races follow Christ (118). He also comments on the Puritans, Pope, Shelley, science, and Shakespeare. Lawrence displays his characteristic antithetical thinking: "Having arrived at the one extreme of mechanical selflessness, we immediately embrace the other extreme of the transcendent Self. But we try to be both at once" (122). In my view, assertion overwhelms description, and the later version is less authentic and authoritative than the earlier one. Lawrence's opinions seem merely idiosyncratic when they are not tethered to empirical observation.

Other critics have noted how far Lawrence strays from his subject. As Paul Eggert argues in "Twilight in Italy and the Limits of the Foreign," travel writing is not bound to empirical accuracy. The salient questions are "whose Italy we are talking about and whom Lawrence saw himself as speaking to" (38). Eggert notes that the genre of travel writing is relational; it inevitably sees the foreign in relation to home. He concludes that Lawrence's primary concern is the "boundaries of English identity at that moment" (40). Naveed Rehan makes a similar point in "Lawrence's Travel Writing as Creative Nonfiction." He points out that travel writing often leads to greater knowledge of oneself, yet he calls attention to the sustained comparisons Lawrence makes between himself and others. Rehan emphasizes that the voice in Lawrence's travel writing is not unmediated. Lawrence uses a number of "carefully constructed personae" in his travel writing (65), though the resemblance to the writer is obvious. Irimia argues that "The Lemon Gardens of the Signor di P." illustrates Lawrence's ability to perceive the "spirit of the place" and make it symbolic:

As he sensed the spirit of the place wherever he traveled and lived for varying periods of time, Lawrence became aware of those particular places growing, in his mental geography, into paradigmatic places or loci, rather than mere spatial units. (156)

For Irimia, meaning is immanent in the place; it does not emanate from Lawrence.

While Irimia's reading indicates the powerful effect of Lawrence's method, in my view, the process is reversed. He projects meaning onto the place and then claims the meaning comes from that place. When we go to the places Lawrence describes, we are looking for the truth that he represented, but I think that what we find is the site of the truth that he created. Since Lawrence projects meaning onto the world and then reads it back, the meaning seems to emanate from the place rather than the observer. No wonder we chase the writer. As William Hazlitt writes in "My First Acquaintance with Poets," "I thought within myself, 'With what eyes these poets see nature!' and ever after, when I saw the sun-set stream upon the objects facing it, conceived I had made a discovery, or thanked Mr. Wordsworth for having made one for me!" (15). Dyer and many others feel this way about Lawrence. His writing convinces us that he sees more than we do, he feels more than we do, he knows more than we do. We want to know why and how he achieves this intensity, and we want to learn how to attain it too. We travel to the places Lawrence lived as if they were pilgrimage sites. The link between poet and work is not only a Romantic tenet; it appears in the return of the author. This return is far more than a postmodern textualization of the writer. Living in a cynical age, we seek the lived experience that might ground the truth of the text in the life of the author.

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