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“Good Monotony”

Modernity, monotony. I’m interested in monotony – boredom – flatness: modern experiences or states that are typically and paradoxically imagined in modernist terms as both embodying extremity and negating it.

Monotony, boredom, flatness, tedium, ennui: as related, though scarcely synonymous, words accumulate, we glimpse what the philosopher Lars Svendsen calls a “large conceptual complex with long historical roots” (24). The verbal accumulation itself suggests how boredom, often described as a feeling of time’s emptiness, may also evoke the opposite experience of time as replete with possibility, even to the point of excess. But what does such monotony look like, how does it sound, how does it feel? And what would our answers, *Lawrence’s* answers, tell us about modernity?

In Lawrence, monotony quarrels with itself. It vibrates; equivocates. It may turn utterly dull, dismal, registering Lawrence’s dismay at how mass industrialism penetrates almost every corner of modern English life, producing “block[s]” of school-children whose teachers grind on like machines, their voices – even when “full of hate” – reduced to “the same set, harsh monotony” that Ursula hears at the Brinsley Street school in *The Rainbow* (349, 356). *That* monotony is the sound of mechanization, like the “toneless bell [that] tang-tang-tanged drearily overhead, monotonously, insistently” (348). In *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, industrialization has precipitated the astounding visual monotony of Tevershall, a town caked in blackness: “blackened brick dwellings, the black slate roofs, [...] the mud black with coal-dust, the pavements wet and black [...] blackened shrubs [...] black trees” (152). This, as I argued at the Nanterre videoconference (“Monotony and the Masses”), is the bad monotony of Lawrence’s industrial modernity. Adjectivally insistent, such writing seems vulnerable to familiar anti-Lawrentian complaints of rhetorical overkill, although its extreme repetitiousness hardly conveys a single unvarying note of feeling: if *Lady Chatterley’s* hammering on *black* and *blackened* is meant to convey the dulling effects of industrialization, it’s hard not to sense the author’s and his heroine’s rising anger, yielding perhaps to a kind of wonder at modern humanity’s transformation of the natural world.

In which case, we might ask if this monotony is always, necessarily bad. While Lawrence’s sentences engender lively effects at odds with the dull monotony they describe, his representation of the natural world discloses different forms of monotony – let’s call it good monotony, though we may wonder *how* good. Sometimes, as in *Sons and Lovers*, this other monotony makes itself felt in the author’s native England – or, at least, on its coastline. Paul “loved the Lincolnshire coast,” Lawrence writes, and with Clara he looks “round at the endless monotony of levels, the land a little darker than the sky, the sea sounding small beyond the sandhills” (402). Paul feels refortified, “his heart filled strong with the sweeping relentlessness

of life” (402), and begins to detach from Clara; when they return to the coast, monotony shows itself again, but now resists any move toward self-differentiation. Paul’s mother is fatally ill but refuses (as he puts it) to let him go, and this unrelenting sense of maternal embrace rewrites the scene; reshapes it, recolors it. “Don’t those windmill sails look monotonous?” Paul asks (437). His own voice sinks into monotony, as if competing with the sound of the “black, heavy sea” (437), and Clara too feels “the black, re-echoing shore, the dark sky down on her” (438). Now the natural world sounds as black as it looks, as black as Paul’s own mood. *Dark* feels synonymous with *black*, identical to it.

Monotony, it seems, has gone bad again. Does any good monotony gleaned from the natural world inevitably revert toward the bad monotony of the modern? Lawrence’s tales of the New World tell the story the other way round. Early in *Kangaroo*, a suburban Sydney street is scored by “little square bungalows dot-dot-dot, close together and yet apart, like modern democracy”: pictured or, rather, printed dots marking an ellipsis in the modern soul, the yawning space of bad monotony. A little later, gazing inland from the shore, Somers remarks “a weird scene, full of definite detail, fascinating detail, yet all in the funeral-grey monotony of the bush” (98), as if it’s possible to appreciate the “subtle, remote, *formless* beauty” of this landscape only “when you don’t have the feeling of ugliness or monotony” (87). But later still (and I’m grateful to Ginette Roy for reminding me of this passage during the Nanterre conference), monotony is associated with “[s]trange old feelings [...] old, non-human feelings” evoked by a sudden apprehension of a “previous world! – the world of the coal age.” This is how Somers responds to seeing vegetation massed along cliffs lining part of the Australian coast. As historical experience gives way to a sense of geological time, Somers intuits “an old, old indifference, like a torpor [...] An old, saurian torpor [...] darkened, wide-eyed” (197). Lawrence’s hero reflects: “Worlds come, and worlds go: even worlds. And when the old, old influence of the fern-world comes over a man, how can he care? [...] Even the never-slumbering urge of sex sinks down into something darker, more monotonous, incapable of caring: like sex in trees. The dark world before conscious responsibility was born” (197-98). *Dark, darker, darkened*, not *black* or *blackened*: *dark, darker, darkened* – implying extent and depth rather than simple flatness; shading and variation, not encroaching uniformity.

In Lawrence’s New World, a sense of old-world monotony proliferates, pluralizes. But it rounds on itself too. *The coal age*: the non-human, the prehistoric; modernity’s opposite, but finally the origin also of our industrial species. *The coal age*: modernity’s inversion, its mirror-image.

Works Cited

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