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Getting Better: *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and the Idea of Recovery

Paul Fussell wrote that '[t]he idea that one might go away, that one might try again, defines a repeated emotional action Lawrence performs, and his elasticity and power of recovery and capacity to rise Phoenix-like from calamity and despair are among the most striking things about him.'¹ I've always thought this was true, and that this 'elasticity and power of recovery' are the things I value most in Lawrence. This paper will look briefly at recovery in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), and raise questions about how Lawrence's focus on recovery, on getting better, might affect his attitude to disability.

Recovery forms an important historical background to Lawrence's work. As the historian Ana Carden-Coyne has explored, the years after the First World War were marked by a focus on *reconstruction*. A Ministry for Reconstruction was set up in 1917, and 'reconstruction', and related terms – rebuilding, rebirth, regeneration – were applied both to repairing damaged cities and economies and to healing war-wounded bodies and minds. Alternative therapies proliferated as cures were sought for the damage inflicted by war.

Lawrence's work participates in post-war thinking about reconstruction; his work also speaks to ongoing concerns around a focus on recovery. What Carden-Coyne calls the early twentieth-century 'cultures of resilience' prefigures some concerns around the idea of 'resilience' today.² The idea of resilience is currently the focus of a strand of research in psychology which has shifted attention away from an emphasis on trauma, to an examination of what makes people flourish. From the

¹ Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (Oxford, 1980), 147.

² Ana Carden-Coyne, *Reconstructing the Body* (Oxford, 2009), 2.

psychologist Emmy E. Werner's work on resilience in the children of Kauai, to self-help books instructing us to *Bounce Back From Whatever Life Throws at You* (subtitle of Jane Clarke's *Resilience*, 2010), resilience is a powerful thread both in political discourse and psychological research. However, there have been concerns about 'resilience'—Ann Masten has pointed out multiple objections to the term, from the blurriness of its definition, to the way it might function as a 'Pollyanna' term, attempting to deny suffering (2014).

Both the post-war context of reconstruction, and these questions about resilience as an attempt to ignore suffering, can be explored in relation to Lawrence's work. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) thinks about recovery from its opening lines:

Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen.³

The opening moves from denial: 'we refuse to take it tragically' to an admission of difficulty: 'It is rather hard work', and finally a desperate assertion of life: 'We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen'. As the novel proceeds there's repeated engagement with the notion of recovery. Critics working on illness and disability have largely focussed on Clifford's war wounds, and on the state of Mellors' lungs.⁴ Connie is also depicted convalescing – as when, for instance, she's shown heading into the woods:

The spring came back...'Seasons return, but not to me returns Day, or the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn'.

And the keeper, his thin, white body, like the lonely pistil of an invisible flower! She had forgotten him in her unspeakable depression. But now something roused...'Pale beyond porch and portal'...the thing to do was to pass the porches and portals.

She was stronger, she could walk better, and in the wood the wind would not be so tiring as it was across the park, flattening against her. She wanted to forget, to forget the world, and all the dreadful carrion-bodied people. 'Ye must be born again! I believe in the resurrection of the body! Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it shall by no means bring

³ D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), ed. Michael Squires (London: Penguin, 2000), 5.

⁴ Peter Fifield, *Modernism and Physical Illness* (Oxford, 2020), see chapter 1.

forth. When the crocus cometh forth I too will emerge and see the sun! In the wind of March endless phrases swept through her consciousness.

Little gusts of sunshine blew, strangely bright, and lit up the celandines at the wood's edge, under the hazel-rods, they spangled out bright and yellow. And the wood was still, stiller, but yet gusty with crossing sun. The first windflowers were out, and all the wood seemed pale with the pallor of endless little anemones, sprinkling the shaken floor. 'The world has grown grey with thy breath'. But it was the breath of Persephone, this time; she was out of hell on a cold morning.

(85-86)

There's a particularly sensitive attention to Connie's exhaustion, with a move into her perspective as she navigates the spaces of the world, measuring their capacity to deplete her: 'She was stronger, she could walk better, and in the wood the wind would not be so tiring as it was across the park, flattening against her'. As the passage proceeds different ideas of recovery proliferate. There's Christian resurrection: 'I believe in the resurrection of the body', seasonal renewal: 'The spring came back', and mythic rebirth: 'But it was the breath of Persephone'. Earlier Connie's London doctor expounded a vision of recovery that involved restoring nervous energy: 'You're spending your life without renewing it' (78). There are references to early twentieth-century travel cures: 'I'd put you right in a month at Cannes or Biarritz' (78), and to sunlight therapy: 'You want sun! you want life!' (79).

The very proliferation of possible cures mentioned suggests the intensity of Lawrence's interest in the possibility of recovering, and also the inadequacy of any single one of these cures. In addition there's perhaps, in this passage, an awareness of what cannot be recovered. Following 'The spring came back', the passage complicates such seasonal regeneration: "Seasons return, but not to me returns Day, or the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn".⁵ This is, unexpectedly, a reference to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). It's a quotation from the invocation to light at the beginning of Book III, and refers to the poet's blindness, and the ways in which seasonal regeneration might not be matched with personal recovery ('but not to me').

⁵ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667), Book III, l.41-42.

Throughout Lawrence's work, I wonder whether his commitment to recovery leads him to be impatient with personal loss, and with particular types of disability. I know it's problematic to define disability always in terms of loss, and it would be wrong to set up an absolute opposition between disability and resilience— but I wonder if there's something in Lawrence's focus on resilience that means his writing struggles to cope, in this particular novel, with wounds that cannot be cured, or with conditions that get worse. This prefigures the ethical problems that people have identified with resilience today: that it is insufficiently caring about pain, that it wants, Pollyanna-style, for everything to be overcome. But Lawrence does think carefully about forms of recovery. And in this reference to Milton there is perhaps an incipient acknowledgement of things that cannot be recovered. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* has historically been challenging because of its treatment of sex, and of gender relations. I think what is most difficult about it now, and what I struggle with the most, is its attitude to disability. One way of continuing to think about this issue might be to turn to the not-altogether-straightforward way in which Lawrence imagines what it would be to get better.