

**PRIMITIVISM IN MODERNIST LITERATURE: A STUDY OF
ELIOT, WOOLF AND LAWRENCE**

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The subjects of “civilization” are trapped in an alienating, inauthentic culture, but can escape by cultivating the “primitive” hidden within themselves: grotesque, even terrifying, but authentic in its drives, desires and relationship to the world. Known as primitivism, this diagnosis of cultural failure and its purported cure profoundly influenced modernist artists. Beyond the *succès de scandale* they enjoyed by inverting the hierarchy of savage and civilized, primitivists claimed to speak from a position that was, as Eliot put it, “deeper” and “older” than – and uncontaminated by – their culture. They plumbed an unchanging, inner essence, of which they saw glimpses everywhere from ancient artifacts and African masks to drawings by children and mental patients. The rediscovery of primitive mentality thus promised to overcome modernity’s characteristic epistemological anxiety – what James Clifford called “off-centeredness in a world of distinct meaning systems.” Yet while primitivism revalued the stereotype of the savage and prized the primitive as mysterious and unknowable, it never overcame the objectifying view that “primitives” were fundamentally all the same, and important primarily as a window onto suppressed aspects of the civilized personality.

Primitivism informed (and in some cases deformed) Eliot’s, Woolf’s and Lawrence’s critical social theories, their justifications for writing and publishing, and their understanding of their own aesthetic projects. These writers were preoccupied with the conflict between their need for authentic, radical expression, and their relationship to

the public. Primitivist aesthetics justified their art as a spiritual and societal necessity and shielded it from attack as mere neurotic acting-out. Further, each writer drew on primitivist discourse to develop theories of literature and the artistic impulse, from Eliot's theories of poetic imagination to his and Woolf's ideas of the importance of "impersonality." At critical moments in their creative lives, including the writing of "The Waste Land," *The Voyage Out*, and *The Plumed Serpent*, primitivism enabled these writers to set the criteria by which their writing should be understood.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

William Van Esveld received his BA (Honours) in Literary Studies and English Literature from Victoria College, the University of Toronto, in 1999, and his MA in English Literature from Cornell University in 2001.

To my parents, Bill and Elizabeth Van Esveld, and my sister, Kimberly Van Esveld
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Primitivism and the Promise of Authentic Artistic Production

1. Background of a movement

The concept that people were better off when their relationship to the natural world was unmediated by things like clothing and agriculture dates back at least to the Biblical story of the Fall. The anthropologist George Boas traced the sentiment that life was better long ago back to Hesiod's myth of mankind's degeneration through "five ages" of decline.¹ In fact, the act of tracing things back to the Bible or the Greeks itself exemplifies an analytical move – the creation of a criterion by returning to an "origin" seen as purer or more essential than its subsequent derivations – that Derrida argues is as old as analysis itself.² Good comes before evil, "the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation." Yet for all the antiquity of these tropes, from the late-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth, the discourse of primitivism gave them new intensity and appeal.

Coined in late-nineteenth century France, "primitivism" originally denoted the "Imitation des primitifs" in the "B[eaux]-arts."³ The term soon expanded to other languages and broader meanings. The 1934 edition of *Webster's* English dictionary stated that "primitivism" meant the "belief in the superiority of primitive life" and the desire to

¹ "Our own race, that of Iron, is the worst," in Hesiod's view. "It is a period of greater and greater degeneration and our race will disappear when it is 'born with greying temples.'" George Boas, "Primitivism," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 3. Scribner's: New York, 1973-74, p. 578.

² *Limited Inc.*, as discussed in Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1982, p. 93.

³ According to the *Nouveau Larousse illustré*, published between 1897 and 1904; quoted in William Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction," p. 2, in *"Primitivism" in Twentieth Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and Modern*, Vol. 1, ed. William Rubin. MOMA: New York, 1984.

“return to nature.”⁴ Primitivism’s influence spanned the aesthetic spectrum from Gauguin (1848-1903) to Tarzan (who first appeared in 1912); art historians have identified primitivism in aesthetic movements “from Symbolism and Art Nouveau in the 1890s [...] through American Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s.”⁵ The common thread running through these iterations of primitivism was the idea that “primitive” peoples had something vital which modern “civilization” had lost, and which writers and artists could uncover and even, perhaps, restore.

Whatever the merits of primitivism’s diagnosis of the malaise of modernity, it proved alluring to artists. Primitivism promised to free the artist from conventions that foreclosed the possibility of self-expression, and restore to him his lost birthright of a meaningful external world. Modernity has been defined as “a pervasive condition of off-centeredness in a world of distinct meaning systems, a state of being in culture while looking at culture.”⁶ By identifying with the primitive the artist implied that he was, as Eliot put it, “deeper” and “older” than his culture.⁷ The artist who asserted his identification with the primitive “othered” his civilized environment, distanced and recreated it as an aesthetic object, and adduced to his artistic productions the urgency and relevance of radical social critique. The artist who was aware of modernity’s loss of primitive ways of life but also of the hidden, continued existence of the primitive beneath the surface of civilization, also asserted a privileged position in relation to modernity.

⁴ Cited in Rubin, id., p. 74.

⁵ A notable primitivist “tendency” is the “use of nominally prior artefacts as models for developments in [artists’] own work.” Rhodes, Colin. *Primitivism and Modern Art*, Thames and Hudson: New York, 1994, p. 7.

⁶ Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1988, p. 9.

⁷ See Eliot’s 1919 review of Wyndham Lewis’ *Tarr*, discussed in the following chapter.

Civilization, like primitivism, is also a French term – coined around 1766 “to capture the essence of French achievements, compared to the uncivilized world of savages, slaves, and barbarians.”⁸ For his part, the modern French “savage” originated in the 1700s, as information about an ever-increasing number of colonized peoples began to flow with increasing rapidity to metropolises. This information was sorted according to taxonomies that tended to be based on perceived physical and cultural characteristics and often drew on familiar Old World social classifications.⁹ With the rise of the racial sciences, the stereotype of the low-browed, sensuous-lipped, lazy, cruel, irrational savage grew ever more meaningful.¹⁰

The developments of racial and evolutionary theory added a temporal aspect to the savage’s debased difference. Savages were living fossils, stunted ambassadors from the earliest era of human development. In a boys’ adventure novel (from 1914), the heroes, lost in a jungle, tie a pygmy to a rope and order him to lead them to safety; the narrator comments, “this little creature linked the Present with the world of ten thousand years ago.”¹¹ Colonial officials debated whether the primitive could be improved by education – could a primitive student really be “present” in class? – or whether his descendants could be improved by cross-breeding with higher races.

Varied motives drove this debasement of the primitive. Colonialists portrayed primitives as too incompetent to be allowed to govern themselves: stubbornly against

⁸ Conklin, Alice L. *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1890-1935*, Stanford University Press: 1997, p. 14.

⁹ Brian Street cites the example of Blumenbach’s craniological analysis of primitives. Street, *The Savage in Literature: Representations of primitive society in English literature, 1858-1920*. Routledge: Boston, 1975, p. 52. Cesare Lombroso similarly compared savages to criminals based on skull shape.

¹⁰ Street, p. 75.

¹¹ Gilson, Charles (Major). *In the Power of the Pygmies*, London: 1919 (first published in seven parts in *The Boy’s Own Paper* beginning v. 37, no. 1, November 1914), p. 35.

innovation, trapped in wretchedness, and hopelessly superstitious, prey to witch-doctors who dominated them by such tricks as predicting eclipses.¹² Missionaries argued that “the more degraded, backward and immoral” the native, the greater the urgency with which he must be “saved” – although they did not press the point too far, lest the native seem inhuman and unworthy of grace.¹³ Darwin, on the other hand, may have dehumanized the Fuegians he encountered in Patagonia (during the voyage of the *Beagle*) to make the theological implications of his evolutionary argument easier to swallow:

Such were our ancestors ... absolutely naked and bedaubed with paint, their long hair was tangled, their mouths frothed with excitement, and their expression was wild, startled and distrustful. They possessed hardly any arts, and like wild animals lived on what they could catch; they ... were merciless to everyone not of their own small tribe ... For my own part I would as soon be descended from that heroic little monkey.¹⁴

As Brian Street reads *On the Origin of Species*, Darwinian theory seems to support the idea that the gap between primitive and civilized man was unbridgeable, insofar as the theory of evolution “pushed the formation of different [human] races back into such a remote epoch that, to all intents and purposes, the differences ... were ‘primordial’.”¹⁵ Upping the ante, “degenerationists” argued that the modern-day primitives found in the colonies had actually regressed on the evolutionary scale and represented a lower “stage than the original condition of man.”¹⁶

¹² Street cites the vivid instances of native misrule – “providing fertile ground for English rule” – amongst the fictitious people of Zu-Vendiland in Rider Haggard’s *Allan Quatermain*, and cites astronomy as a means of controlling the superstitious savage in Mitford’s *The King’s Assegai* (1896), and Kipling’s “The Man Who Would Be King”. Id., pp. 136, 140, 156.

¹³ Cairns, H. A. C. *Prelude to Imperialism: British Reactions to Central African Society, 1840-1890*. London: Routledge, 1965, p. 89.

¹⁴ Darwin, Charles. *The Descent of Man*, [1871], p. 618.

¹⁵ Street, Brian. *The Savage in Literature: Representations of primitive society in English literature, 1858-1920*. Boston: Routledge, 1975, p. 95.

¹⁶ Degenerationists like Archbishop Whately of Dublin found evidence in the ruins of the city of Zimbabwe, discovered in the late 19th Century. The city’s current inhabitants, presumed to be descended from the original builders, were seen as utterly incapable of producing its like. Street, op. cit., pp. 88-89.

But the baseness of the savage also took on a life of its own—as manifested, for instance, in fantasies of knowing the lowest of the low. The boy’s adventure novel discussed above placed the fictitious “Batwa” tribe – a “hairy, vindictive, and jealous” lot – a step “lower on the scale of humanity even than the bushmen.”¹⁷ Many texts sought out what Freud termed the “most miserable and backward” of primitives:¹⁸ the tribe with the fewest words, letters or phonemes in its language;¹⁹ the fewest tools in its technology; the most barbaric beliefs in its religion. “Primitive mentality” became a particularly well-cooked topic. (Ernst Haeckel observed that “the psychic difference between the crudest savage of the lowest grade and the most perfect specimen of the highest order is colossal – much greater than is commonly supposed.”²⁰) The civilized/savage binary proved a rich mine of frisson. Adventure novels featured British boys like Tarzan and Tabu Dick, raised among savages, whose racial superiority revealed itself only gradually as they matured.²¹ Civilized by their very nature, their race ultimately split them apart from the beloved savages who had nurtured them.

Enter primitivism. Because the savage occupied the lowest level in the hierarchy of human development, to claim that savage instincts survived within supposedly civilized individuals, and that savage tribes were in some sense superior to civilized

¹⁷ *In the Power of the Pygmies*, p. 18.

¹⁸ Freud uses the phrase in *Totem and Taboo*.

¹⁹ Until the 1970s the Guinness Book had an entry for “Most Primitive Language,” with the honor going to Aranda, an Australian Aboriginal tongue, though an English-based creole dialect called Taki-Taki was mentioned as well (for having only 340 words). This fascination with the primitive’s impoverished means of expression, which indicate their lack of interior lives to express, bears an interesting relationship to George Orwell’s *Politics and the English Language*, which makes a fetish of keeping English trimmed to its most basic lexicon, syntax and grammar.

²⁰ *The Riddle of the Universe*, trans. Joseph McCabe, Buffalo Books: New York, 1992 [1899], p. 427.

²¹ The perversity of such an exact measurement of debasement mirrors the adventure genre’s perverse desire to observe civilized boys in prolonged proximity to primitives. The same desire played out in contemporary literature’s ugly fascination with “the half-breed” (e.g., *The Broken Road*, of 1907, in which an Oxford-educated Indian’s cultural “varnish” peels away under strain, discussed in Street, p. 112).

nations –specifically in the fine arts, the summit of civilization’s achievements – was shocking.²²

Primitivism’s notion of inverting the savage / civilized hierarchy could be seen as the stratagem of an avant-garde movement (or movements)²³ seeking to gain ascendancy at a time of cultural ferment. By the 1890s, according to Michael Levenson, capitalism and colonialism had elevated “the middle classes of Western Europe” to an uncomfortably luxurious position. It had become possible for the bourgeoisie both “to enjoy the delicacies of a long cultural tradition and to overstep the boundaries of that tradition, to witness civilization at its most finely wrought and to confront its rude origins, to contemplate the refinements of social convention and to watch such conventions dissolve.”²⁴ As they dissolved, a multitude of avant-garde movements began to precipitate: from symbolism to fauvism, cubism to vorticism. (Like many other “isms,” primitivism can claim its own manifesto.²⁵) The “modern” moment has been described as the first period “in all the history of art, to be characterized by a complex

²² Primitivism emphasized trends that had existed even within the racist discourse previously described. In *Allan Quatermain*, the narrator observes that “even highly civilized artists might learn something from the ... masterpieces” adorning a heathen temple – although the hero soon learns that the temple is used for human sacrifice, and the masterpieces open into a literal fiery furnace. (Haggard, 1887, p. 34; quoted in Street 82). The primitive was, as well, seen to have been blessed by nature. Fantasies of “tropical exuberance” in the African interior – perhaps sparked by the high mortality rate of settlers confined to the African coast – led to myths of fabulous wealth in Timbuktu, and even the idea, derived from Swedenborg, of a new, purer religion arising from Africa (Street, pp. 121-125; Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christian Religion* (1771), trans. John C. Ager (1906), p. 840).

²³ Robert Goldwater differentiates four sub-movements of primitivism: the “romantic” (Pont Aven – Gauguin); “emotional” (*Brücke* school); “intellectual” (Cubist – Picasso); and “subconscious” (Dada) schools of primitivism. *Primitivism in Modern Art*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge: 1986 (enlarged ed.; 1st ed. 1938).

²⁴ Levenson, Michael. *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality: Character and Novelistic Form from Conrad to Woolf*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1991, p. 1.

²⁵ Stanislaw Przyozszewski, *Primitivists to the Nations of the World and to Poland* (1920). Reproduced in *Manifestos: A Century of Isms*, ed. Mary Ann Caws. University of Nebraska: Lincoln, 2001, p. 100.

stylistic pluralism rather than by the simple hegemony of a unique and superior style.”²⁶

Seen in this context, primitivists had multiple motives for overstepping boundaries, confronting rude origins, and exploding refined conventions. Doing so promised to *épater les bourgeois* and blaze a path through the overgrowth of aesthetic choices.

An example of a primitivist *succès de scandale* is Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*.²⁷ The ballet evokes an “ancient Slavic society” and culminates as a girl, the “Chosen One,” dances herself to death before a circle of elders in a ritual fertility sacrifice. Stravinsky enjoyed toying with taboos while he was composing *The Rite* in 1910-11; he had nude photographs taken of himself in forested settings, ostensibly to emphasize how deeply he had entered into the spirit of his composition, and mailed prints to friends. By association with the primitive he sought to position himself on modernity’s cutting edge. The ballet score (notwithstanding its general tonality and the fact that it followed convention by beginning with an overture) was technically revolutionary in its attempts to capture the primitive ethos of its subject; the scoring for a massively expanded orchestra required over one hundred rehearsals. But Vaslav Nijinsky’s deliberately stark, awkward choreography prompted the Ballets Russes to “mutiny” in rehearsal. The tipping point was the premiere in 1913, where, Stravinsky later recalled, the Parisian audience rioted soon after the curtain rose on “a group of knock-kneed and long-braided Lolitas jumping up and down.” Nijinsky had to shout cues to the dancers, who could no longer hear the orchestra over the crowd. Stravinsky stormed out of the theatre.

²⁶ Poggioli, Renato. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1968, p. 180.

²⁷ See Walsh, Stephen. *Stravinsky: A Creative Spring, Russia and France, 1882-1934*, Knopf: New York, 1999.

The lights came up on what seemed to be a catastrophe, but insofar as Stravinsky's premise was the primitive's relevance to modernity, the ballet audience proved his point by the violence of its reaction. Gustave LeBon had compared the violence and irrationality of crowds (even if he did not have ballet audiences in mind) with the traits of primitive individuals. Freud expanded LeBon's argument by reasoning that the primitive id was temporarily liberated from the civilized superego when the modern individual found himself in one of the enormous agglomerations of humanity that urbanization had made possible.²⁸ Primitivism claimed not only that modern life bore a resemblance to savagery, but that the characteristics of the savage, which were thought to have been eradicated, survived in civilized man and had merely gone underground.²⁹ Perhaps the opening night debacle of Stravinsky's ballet, like the death of the Chosen One, re-enacted an ancient sacrifice of individuality to social reproduction. The rioting audience, like the circle of elders, insisted that artistry must serve communal continuity – the only difference was that Stravinsky's audience had repressed its awareness of the violence of social reproduction. As the Chosen One's fatal dance ensured the return of fertility to the earth, so *The Rite's* opening-night riot gave the ballet a distinctly modern kind of immortality – the kind conferred when an artwork is rejected by the Salon or seized and burned by customs officers.

Primitivism also promised to transcend an anxiety-ridden historical moment. The primitive is the variable product of a process that Michael Bell has called “a projection by

²⁸ See Le Bon, *La psychologie des foules* (1895), as discussed in Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), trans. James Strachey. Norton: New York, 1959, pp. 9-11.

²⁹ “The survivals of savage passion serve to remind us how thin is the veneer of our own civilization, how easy it is to drop back to the moral level of the ape.” Anonymous, “The Mystery of Cruelty,” *Nation* 28 May 1908, p.483; quoted in Crawford, Robert. *The Savage and the City in the Work of T.S. Eliot*, Oxford University Press: 2000, p.61.

the civilized sensibility of an inverted image of the self.”³⁰ Primitivism fantasized an opposite to contemporary (Western) civilization in order to describe the fate of the individual in the modern world. For primitivists, the civilized man is weak, dependent upon technologies and systems he cannot comprehend, alienated, and prey to false desires; the primitive is strong, self-reliant, and finds immanent meaning in his environment, and – crucially – authentic. If it is correct to characterize modernity – as Brian Hale has done – as a period of epistemological crisis,³¹ from the dissipation of religious faith to the advent of cultural relativism, then one could predict that modernists projected the primitive in response to that crisis.

Precisely because of his unselfconsciousness, the primitive has long enjoyed a privileged epistemological status; he was a figure to turn to in case of doubt. In ancient Athens, barbarians – slaves and foreigners – could be tortured to produce evidence in adjudicatory proceedings. If produced by torture, slaves’ testimony was of greater probative value than that of Athenian citizens. Citizens were tainted by their capacity to reason; they might calculate that lying was worth the risk.³² The barbarian, guided by nothing but the instinct of pain-avoidance, was guaranteed to speak the truth—under the right conditions. The primitive, whether as cannibal or as noble savage, is also a favourite figure of philosophical argumentation, from Locke to Hobbes, Montaigne to Rousseau. In the early twentieth century, even those who disagreed most vigorously with primitivism’s claims employed the primitive this way. Ortega y Gasset believed his

³⁰ Bell, Michael. *Primitivism*. Methuen: London, 1972, p. 80.

³¹ Brian McHale’s term.

³² As the orator Demosthenes argued to a jury, “wherever slaves and free men are present and facts have to be found, you do not use the statements of the free witnesses, but you seek to discover the truth by applying torture [*basanos*] to the slaves.” Demosthenes 30.37, quoted in Page duBois, *Torture and Truth*, Routledge: New York, 1991, pp. 49-50.

contemporaries looked “upon their own time as superior to preceding ages,” whereas the “most usual thing has been for men to dream of better times in a vague past, of a fuller existence.” To prove it, he cited not only the “‘golden age’, as those taught by Greece and Rome have it,” but “the Alcheringa of the Australian bushmen.”³³

The primitive’s status as an unselfconscious source of truth took on particular importance in an era when subjectivity itself seemed open to question. Thus Conrad explained why he had decided, in writing *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, that Singleton should not be an educated man: “he was simple and great, like an elemental force ... nothing could touch him but decay ... Would you tell such a man, Understand that thou art nothing, less than a shadow, more insignificant than a drop of water in the ocean... Would you?”³⁴ Singleton’s repose is simultaneously a mark of ignorance and of greatness; Conrad, somewhat aggressively and guiltily, refuses to tell Singleton the truth that would plunge him into the constant, anxious guardedness of modernity—where, as Yeats wrote, “the best lack all conviction, and the worst are full of a passionate intensity.”

The rise of anthropology cemented the primitive’s elevated epistemological status even as it exacerbated the modern crisis of cultural relativism. (Clifford writes that the increasing importance of anthropology in the early twentieth century was a “response to [an historically] unprecedented overlay of traditions.”³⁵) At the turn of the century, anthropology was largely a comparative project that sought to catalogue similarities

³³ Ortega y Gasset, J. *Revolt of the Masses*, W.W. Norton: New York, [1930] 1963, p. 29.

³⁴ Conrad, letter to Graham, quoted in Levenson, Michael. *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*, p. 33.

³⁵ Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, p. 9. Clifford identifies “surrealist ethnography” as a kind of short-lived, utopian response to that predicament. “A modern ‘ethnography’ of conjunctures, constantly moving *between* cultures, does not [...] aspire to survey the full range of human diversity [...]. It is perpetually displaced [...] a form both of dwelling and of travel in a world where the two experiences are less and less distinct.” (Id.)

across cultures, epitomised by James Frazer's comparison of fertility myths in *The Golden Bough*.³⁶ The anthropologist's disciplinary method was to direct a series of far-flung informants – the “man on the spot,” such as missionaries and colonial administrators – to conduct ethnographic research. The “armchair” anthropologist would then collect, compare and categorize the results. Conclusions could be checked against evidence in other ethnographic reports, as well as in histories of ancient societies.³⁷

Comparative anthropology promised nothing short of identifying the essence of human culture. If certain mythic tropes were found across all primitive cultures, anthropology could identify the lowest common denominator in primitive cultures through time and space – a claim of the type later taken up by Northrop Frye and “archetypal” criticism. By this method there could be built up a compendium of the essential characteristics of human structures of belief.

The claims of comparative anthropology gradually gave way to Franz Boas's recognition that certain beliefs and acts could only be analysed by reference to the entire meaning-system of the culture in question.³⁸ Primitivists like TS Eliot refused to admit the failure of Frazerian anthropology—its promise was too appealing. In 1922, the same year as Eliot's *The Waste Land* – highly indebted to Frazer – was published, the co-director of a mental institute in Heidelberg published a study entitled *The Artistry of the Mentally Ill*. Its author, Hans Prinzhorn, claimed that by following the method of cultural

³⁶ See discussion in the following chapter.

³⁷ Clifford cites E.F. Wilson, A.C. Haddon, and Baldwin Spencer as examples of such men on the spot. Clifford, op. cit., pp. 26-28.

³⁸ See discussion in the following chapter. For this reason, Boas (and, later, Malinowski) insisted that “participant observation” was a necessary aspect of anthropological work. The first example of first-hand “fieldwork” by anthropologists themselves was Boas' Torres Straits expedition of 1898. Street, *The Savage in Literature*, p. 16.

anthropology it had uncovered a universal truth.³⁹ Its starting point was the often-remarked “resemblance of pictures [created by the insane] to those done by children and primitives.”⁴⁰ The similarity of their artifacts indicates some underlying similarity between the insane, the child, and the primitive; the only thing they had in common is that they have not been shaped by any civilizing influence. Their artworks, therefore, cryptically represent the very forms and processes of the human mind. By studying the artworks of these uncivilized groups, the critic should be able to derive meta-aesthetic criteria that could be applied to judge all works of art. In Prinzhorn’s view, modern civilization is beginning consciously to close the circle of self-knowledge, insofar as modern artworks are beginning to resemble those of the unselfconscious primitive and “our mental patients.”

Some pursued this logic to argue that the primitive’s savage needs had to be met rather than suppressed in his modern descendants. If certain human urges manifested themselves throughout history, they must simply be accepted and room must be made for their social expression, lest they erupt destructively. Things might fall apart if civilization lost touch with primitive myths and rituals, because only these ancient, irrational, powerful forces were capable of structuring a society of increasingly atomised individuals.⁴¹ The sine qua non of social existence, argued Bronislaw Malinowski, was

³⁹ The book never sold well outside Germany, however.

⁴⁰ Prinzhorn, Hans. *The Artistry of the Mentally Ill. A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1972, p. 4.

⁴¹ Emile Durkheim felt compelled to examine how it was possible that modern society was holding together at all. Traditional societies, he argued, were glued together by “mechanical solidarity”: the “universal, uniform practice” of a set of unquestionable rules. The individual did the same work, on the same schedule, and lived according to the same dogma as his fellows. Modernity, by contrast, is characterized by the division of labor and a centrifugal emphasis on individuality. Yet the individual’s inability to meet his needs without others’ labor means he “depends upon” them “in the same measure that he is distinguished from them,” with the State representing the entire resulting system of “organic solidarity.”

the shared sense of the meaningfulness of life, and as culture became suspect and religion fell into a disorderly retreat, society might well begin to disintegrate. Religion provides society with those “indispensable pragmatic figments without which civilization cannot exist.” Malinowski asked his readers to engage in “work for the maintenance of the eternal truths which have guided mankind out of barbarism to culture, and the loss of which seems to threaten us with barbarism again.” Law and science might satisfy individuals' material needs, but religion and culture provided the sine qua non of social existence: meaning.⁴² Primitivists took up the challenge of producing “figments” and “eternal truths” with alacrity.

Primitivism provided artists with an attractive thesis. Superficiality and inadequacy were the characteristics both of mass culture and of high-brow artistic production. The civilized individual found ample distractions available to him but nothing that could answer his deep needs. In such a milieu, the true artist was alienated and isolated. Primitivism promised that an artist of sufficient courage could flourish if he abjured popular styles and based his art on the exploration of something deeper, which “civilization” had left unsullied. If the artist could bear the scorn of the philistines, the theory of primitivism would underwrite his efforts to create a new style. The crowd might view his works as crude, idiosyncratic or even degenerate, but primitivism would validate his stylistic eccentricities as representing valuable rediscoveries. Anthropology showed that primitive societies throughout history had produced artworks of profound

To primitivists, the perpetuation of such an elaborate structure of interdependency, which required that each individual maintain his awareness of the benefits he derived from his small place, was tenuous at best. Durkheim, Emile. *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. George Simpson. New York: Free Press, 1960 [1893], pp. 226-29.

⁴² Malinowski, Bronislaw. “The Foundations of Faith and Morals,” in *Malinowski and the Work of Myth*, ed. Ivan Strenski, Princeton University Press: 1992, pp. 131, 133-34.

spiritual significance. The primitivist artist who reached deeply into himself could re-attune himself to an ahistorical, human essence that was uncontaminated by modernity. He might even be able to recreate the vital social role played by the artist-shamans whose artefacts and practices fulfilled their societies' spiritual needs.

2. An aesthetic of identity crisis

With mischievous exactness, Virginia Woolf traced the origins of British modernism to “on or around December 1910,” the date of Roger Fry’s Post-Impressionist show (in which Gauguin and other primitivists’ work figured prominently). The French art-world had turned toward the primitive around five years previously. Gauguin’s interest in Breton peasants, Tahitian tiki figures, and Javanese temple sculptures would seem a tortuously eccentric path for others to follow. Yet in just over a decade, artists from Vlaminck and Matisse to Picasso were fixated on the diverse variety of “primitive” objects they encountered in curio shops and in the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro (“Le Troca”) – where such objects had been available for decades.⁴³

A combination of various historical and aesthetic changes seem to underlie the surge of interest in the primitive. In the 1850s and 60s, French colonialist policy sought out easily-defended “points d’appui” – islands or ports – with an eye to controlling sea-lanes. By the 1890s, when Gauguin left for Tahiti, “caution was thrown to the winds” and French expansionism reached a “fevered pitch.”⁴⁴ But “the most important reason” for the surge of interest in primitive artefacts, according to William Rubin, the curator of

⁴³ Rubin, “Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction,” *‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art*, p. 11.

⁴⁴ Aldrich, Robert. *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion*, Palgrave (European Studies Series): New York, 1996, pp. 87, 94-96.

a MoMA exhibit on primitivism, “had to do with a fundamental shift in the nature of most vanguard art from styles rooted in visual perception to others based on conceptualization”.⁴⁵ Rubin singles out a Picasso collage in which the empty sound hole of a guitar is represented by a projecting cardboard tube. Rubin traces this innovation to an African mask Picasso saw in Le Troca, which similarly represented the eyes as projecting hollow cylinders rather than as sunken cavities.⁴⁶ Picasso’s representation of negative space with the guitar collage was an inspired theft; several other scholars have noted the importance of the simple planes of the masks in the Troca’s collections for cubism.

Without discounting the attraction of ethnographic artifacts as inspirations for innovation at a time when artists were moving from representative to conceptual art, this argument obscures the fact that Le Troca’s masks were not just interesting for their planes and projections; they were redolent of exotic lands and savage peoples. Primitivism’s founding father is usually identified as an unsuccessful former stockbroker, Paul Gauguin.⁴⁷ In 1891 he travelled to Tahiti, declared himself a “barbarian,” and made a fourteen-year-old girl named Pau’ura his mistress.⁴⁸ Although Gauguin’s motto was the command, “be mysterious,” French audiences would have been well-prepared for certain aspects of his work, due to its intersections with the discourse of decadence. Gauguin’s interest in fantasy, his desire to escape modern civilization, and his fascination

⁴⁵ Goldwater observes that a much of the African and Oceanian artworks subsequently recognized for their artistic qualities were already in “the principle museums” (e.g., in Leipzig and Paris) in 1888. Artistic recognition did not come until 1904-05, and official recognition of primitive art’s artistic qualities lagged until after the first World War. *Primitivism in Modern Art*, p. 8.

⁴⁶ Clifford, James, *The Predicament of Culture*, p. 135.

⁴⁷ E.g., in Robert Goldwater’s standard work, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge: 1986 (enlarged edition; first edition 1938), p. xv.

⁴⁸ Gauguin’s fantastic “journal,” *Noa Noa*, is inscribed to “Téhura”; her name is variously spelled Pahura or Tahura. Gauguin’s second Tahitian mistress, Mari-Rose, is often forgotten.

with corruption led contemporaries like Mirbeau and Pissarro to view Gauguin as a decadent artist not unlike Baudelaire.⁴⁹ Both men, for instance, used similar tropes to eroticize and exoticize their mistresses. Baudelaire's "Black Venus" poems, published in 1857, focused on his "quadroon" lover Jeanne Duval, by whose "Parfum exotique" he was inspired. Gauguin's Tahitian journal, *Noa Noa*, was named for Pau'ura's "fragrance," which he elsewhere described as a "parfum vivant des bois."

Gauguin could be caricatured as "decadent" – he contracted syphilis and abandoned his wife and five children for a series of Tahitian mistresses – but the decadent and the primitivist pursued different goals. David Weir characterizes decadence as involving a "passive anxiety regarding future change" and a sense that "the barbarian ha[d] become history's agent"; the decadent gave himself "the passive, yet theatrical role of scapegoat or sacrificial victim."⁵⁰ The primitivist, by contrast, disavowed theatricality (often with theatrical flamboyance) and sought the role of the un-self-conscious barbarian.⁵¹ As compared to decadence, primitivism is both more defensive in its anxieties about the artist's social role and more aggressive in justifying his existence; it appropriates the primitive as an ancient, unassailable origin of the artistic self. To Baudelaire, Jeanne Duval's African ancestry prompted him to reveries of decay, animal-

⁴⁹ Mirbeau, for instance, wrote of his "savory and disquieting mixture of barbaric splendor, of Catholic liturgy, of Hindu reverie, of Gothic imagery, of obscure and subtle symbolism." Perloff, Nancy, "Gauguin's French Baggage: Decadence and Colonialism in Tahiti," in Barkan and Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, Stanford University Press: 1995, p. 243.

⁵⁰ Weir, David. *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*. University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, 1995, pp. 6, 12.

⁵¹ T.S. Eliot, who bemoaned the "chaos of contemporary life," created a narrator who seems to hover between a decadent and primitivist sensibility: the hyper-sensitive Prufrock realizes that, under certain artificial lighting conditions, the arms of fashionable women who "come and go, talking of Michelangelo" are covered in an eerily brutish "light brown hair".

like femininity, and sexual exploitation.⁵² He did not need to justify those reveries by claiming they were hers, or to go see the real Africa whence his fantasies derived. The decadent *flaneur* was able to savor whatever swam into his ken; he had the freedom “of being, at will, both himself and other people.”⁵³ Gauguin, conversely, claimed he had renounced Paris for the mysterious, immanently meaningful world Pau’ura represented. Gauguin sought to generate the primitive other within himself. Pau’ura was the “Voix des Secrets,” a portal to the numinous through whom Gauguin “enter[ed] into mysteries which hitherto remained inaccessible to me.” Thus inspired, he claimed to “have gone far back, farther back than the horses of the Parthenon [...] as far back as the Dada of my babyhood, the good rocking-horse.”⁵⁴ Decadence and primitivism each seemed to combine alienation with jouissance, but the decadent play of textualities and surfaces, its acknowledgment that desire is mediated and imitative, seems to give way, with primitivism, to the fetishization of mystery, depth, and identity.

As Gauguin’s need to inhabit Pau’ura’s world and renounce his own indicates, primitivism was an aesthetic built on an identity crisis. Primitivism insists on the primitive’s uncouth beliefs and practices, not as objects for anthropological explanation or as indicia of backwardness, but in a process of juxtaposing them to their civilized analogues with the goal of highlighting unsettling commonalities. Primitivism’s objective has been defined as “maintaining the strangeness of the unfamiliar,”⁵⁵ but it also insisted on the uncanny familiarity of the strange. Primitivist artworks sought to demonstrate that

⁵² See Sharpley-Whiting, T. D. *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French*. Duke University Press: Durham, 1999, pp. 62-70.

⁵³ Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, University of California: Berkeley, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Gauguin, Paul. *The Intimate Journals of Paul Gauguin*, trans. Van Wyck Brooks. London: Heinemann, 1931, p. 22.

⁵⁵ Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, p. 5.

the savage persisted within the civilized, where he should have disappeared. To the extent that the primitive is an inverted self-image, the unsettling appeal of primitivism lies in the suggestion that the primitive other also exists deep within the civilized self as its truth or essence. An artwork that “suggests ... a genuine rapprochement between the primitive and the civilized” is not truly primitivist⁵⁶; but neither is an artwork that suggests these categories are utterly distinct. Primitivism depends on juxtaposing them; the primitive is not “other” so much as it is uncanny.

By revealing the hidden identity of the civilized with its primitive analogue, primitivism exploded the dominant narrative of progress according to which the primitive has been surpassed, rendered obsolete, or renounced in favour of civilization’s alternatives. Bows and arrows were long ago replaced by guns, and, as demonstrated by an exhibit at Oxford’s Pitt-Rivers Museum – founded in 1884 to demonstrate “the evolution of ideas”⁵⁷ – guns have since improved, from wheel-locks to flint-locks to breech-loading rifles. But a primitivist would note that even today, there are people who try to defend themselves against machine-guns with bows and arrows, and men with machine guns who can only be described as savage.⁵⁸

In *Heart of Darkness*, the perpetrator of the most barbarous atrocities is Mr. Kurtz, a man to whose making “all Europe contributed.” Kurtz does not become a savage after ceasing to be the man who wrote a report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. The report was a camouflage, a papering over of the

⁵⁶ For Michael Bell, such works “begin to invite a different term such as ‘romantic.’” *Primitivism*, p. 81.

⁵⁷ According to the museum’s website, available at <http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/collections.html#main>, accessed on January 4, 2007.

⁵⁸ Such, for instance, was the message of the Parliamentary report on the excesses of Leopold II in his private demesne, the Congo Free State.

savagery innate to Kurtz, “the Society,” and society itself. There was no rupture or discontinuity, merely an un-concealment. Recognizing this continuity leads Marlow to crisis, for if civilization’s claims of altruism and progress are lies, it is the “good” man’s identity that is threatened. Marlow lies to Kurtz’s “Intended” about the true nature of her fiancée, and justifies the lie as compassionate; a small evil is done in service of a greater good. Yet Marlow cannot but recognize that his justification has become inextricably intertwined with the horror perpetrated in the Congo, where Belgium’s king oversaw the slaughter of between five and twenty million people in the name of progress and civilization. How can Marlow justify sparing the Intended, who lives within a society corrupted by Leopold II’s murderous greed, the discomfort of the truth? After his brush with “the horror,” Marlow no longer trusts his own, ostensibly chivalrous motives; the idea that noble ends might justify the means is tainted by crimes against humanity.

Marlow’s crisis seems overdone. Telling a nasty man’s fiancée what she wants to hear is, after all, distinguishable from killing people and sticking their heads on poles (Kurtz). But if Marlow’s crisis is somewhat bathetic, this may simply indicate Conrad’s determination to make sure Marlow had a crisis, and the fact that he found primitivism’s inversion of the civilized / savage opposition to be the best method of producing one.

Primitivism’s attempt to throw the discourse of progress into crisis overlaps with some of the claims of contemporary psychoanalysis, which perhaps gave additional resonance to primitivism. Writing in 1930, Freud compared human psychic development to the process of evolution, on the basis that primitive forms in both areas surprisingly continue to survive over time. Evolutionary theory, he wrote, proposes that “the most highly developed species have proceeded from the lowest; and yet we find all the simple

forms still in existence today. The race of the great saurians is extinct and has made way for the mammals; but a true representative of it, the crocodile, still lives among us.” The survival of the primitive original alongside its more complex, advanced descendants is even more evident “in the realm of the mind.” In the psyche, “what is primitive is so commonly preserved alongside of the transformed version which has arisen from it that it is unnecessary,” in Freud’s view, “to give instances as evidence.”⁵⁹ It is not clear whether Freud is referring to the development of the individual mind or to that of the human psyche in general, but any confusion only heightens the suggestive power of the argument. Drives dating from the earliest history of the human species continue to flourish within the civilized individual. Just as the fraternal members of the “primal horde” wanted to murder their father to end his oppressive monopoly on sexual objects, so the twentieth century boy wants to kill his father.⁶⁰ The only difference is that the boy does not (usually) carry out his desire. And as the horde, astonishingly, proclaimed as law the very prohibition it had once detested, so the boy must internalize the father’s prohibitions to emerge from this crisis as a socialized adult.

Freud’s version of Haeckel’s thesis that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny⁶¹ could be called the primitivist developmental narrative. According to the discourse of progress, humanity continuously comprehends and surpasses itself, yet according to Freud the boy not only re-enacts the ancient Oedipus myth, but he re-experiences the birth-pangs of

⁵⁹ Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey, Norton: New York, p.16.

⁶⁰ Primitivism could be seen as a rejection of the law of the father. Gauguin rejected the law of his father-in-law, who had supported him in Paris, for the charms (charms which, according to Price, were coded as sexually perverse) of his Tahiti mistress. Similarly, the proliferation of anti-traditional primitivist groups such as *Der Blaue Reiter*, *Die Brücke*, and others shows a fraternal solidarity that recalls Freud’s hypothesis of the primal horde.

⁶¹ Haeckel’s claim that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” continued to be influential even though Haeckel admitted that he forged some of his data, including illustrations purporting to show that human embryonic development paralleled that of “lower” species.

civilization itself. The primal patricide is the starting point of human history, yet the ancient battle must be fought anew even today. The horde's taboo on sex with any woman within the same "totem clan" initiated the practice of exogamy or tribal intermarriage, without which humanity would still be confined to isolated, inbred settlements.⁶² The boy's horror of incest, as he emerges from the Oedipus complex, recapitulates that move. What is more, the boy's Oedipal victory is hardly assured; and even if he triumphs, his battle-wounds may continue to fester as neuroses throughout his life. At any moment, he may be confronted with the very desires to which the basest savage succumbed eons ago. As Conrad ominously observed, "the mind of man is capable of anything, for all the past is in it, and all the future."

As comparative anthropology argued from evidence of common beliefs and practices across disparate non-western societies, the "fact" that the same savage characteristics are found not in primitives and just beneath modern man's civilized veneer was taken to indicate that they are ineradicable. Primitivism adduced the supposedly essential nature of these traits as an argument for why civilization needed to revalue its values: civilization merely overlays and attempts to repress human characteristics that it finds unpleasant.⁶³

⁶² *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* [1913], trans. James Strachey. Norton: New York, 1989.

⁶³ A text that inferred from a primitive trace that the work of civilization was incomplete, might be called "crude" primitivism; a more "advanced" primitivism would show that the supposed work of civilization or progress was itself a continuation of some primitive trait. This formulation may seem static – was primitivism unchanging? – and simplistic – who is this "civilized subject"? It was not the case that primitivism continued to shock every new viewer or reader. Rather, a taste for primitivism developed. Part of this taste was the ability to sense how shocking a given artwork would be to the "typical" or "bourgeois" viewer – a man quite different from the viewer himself. Instead of being shocked by the primitive, someone with a taste for primitivism finds that his self-conception is strengthened by it.

Primitivists claimed that civilization's failure to eradicate the primitive could be verified by the unsettling, invigorating experience of viewing primitive artefacts. Typical is an art collector's memory of his wild surmise, on first looking into Africana:

[On entering the gallery,] I felt a strange excitement mixed with anxiety. This sensation, which mixed pleasure and pain, I have never forgotten. Although I did not know what was happening to me, I recognized it as a powerful, even overwhelming experience, the quality of which I could not define [...].⁶⁴

On the one hand, pleasure: the primitive artefact liberates the modern individual, shows him long-forgotten modes of himself. On the other hand, pain: the powerful artefact destabilizes the accustomed boundaries of self and other and pierces through the superficial accretions of civilization to speak to a long-suppressed inner self. The vocabulary of "pain," being "overwhelmed," etc. indicates that primitivism was a close relative to what T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf would call "impersonality": the stripping away of contingent individuality in, by and for the work of art.⁶⁵ The primitive object communicates with the viewer's "impersonal" self, as it were, by undercutting his accreted, civilized identity, whether he will or no. As the collector states:

I had no knowledge of or information about the background of African art. [...] The plastic aspects of African works 'spoke' to me without my knowing about the coordination of those exciting shapes. [...] Only now do I realize that I approached these art works from the phenomenological point of view, i.e. without any presuppositions or information.

⁶⁴ Segy, Ladislav. *African Sculpture Speaks*. Da Capo: New York, 1975 (4th Ed.), p. 3.

⁶⁵ The locus classicus of impersonality is Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Eliot describes the ideal poet as one through whom tradition speaks and whose speech reconfigures the way tradition is perceived. Other instances of the impersonal aesthetic include, for instance, D.H. Lawrence's fantasy about the end of humanity in *Women in Love*; Stephen Daedalus's theory (in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) that the artist stands behind his handiwork, "invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails," and Joyce's statement that *Finnegan's Wake* will keep the professors busy for two hundred years; or Woolf's visions of the artist's task as representing the showers of atoms that score the brain at every moment in "Modern Fiction."

The collector insists that the cultural milieu in and which the artefact was produced is irrelevant to its appreciation; it was precisely his ignorance that enabled him to experience the artefact so powerfully, and at some level to share the point of view of its primitive creator.

It has been said that avant-garde movements make aggressive demands of the viewer, requiring a “sympathetic attitude” as a prerequisite without which the artworks produced in their name will be incomprehensible, much less enjoyable.⁶⁶ The viewer of a primitivist painting might well have sensed that the artist had designs on him. Picasso’s portrait of Gertrude Stein (1906), for example, represents her face as a stylized mask – based on an African original in the collections at Le Troca – and thus emphasizes non-identity precisely where the viewer expects to find a realistic representation of the sitter’s face, and more specifically, her eyes, which are absent. There is no face behind the mask – the eyes are simply black holes – suggesting that the mask *is* her face. Picasso’s portrait seems to play on Stein’s famously inscrutable writing style, which promised meanings only to play with expectations. Just as Stein’s aesthetic games meant that one could no longer expect to see through representations to reality, in her portrait, there are no eyes to act as the windows of the sitter’s soul, and the mask’s non-eyes reverse the viewer’s gaze.

Even more aggressive than such artworks was the claim that the modern viewer *wanted* to be disturbed in this way. Ezra Pound claimed that modern artists were “witch

⁶⁶ “The primary problem with avant-garde obscurity is not ignorance or the need for more education, but the ‘psychological’ boundary of mutual hostility... For those who can assent, even in principle, the most arduous asperities will be surmountable ... [but] it is only after being made possible by factors of calling and attitude that interpretation is made easy by education and familiarity ...” Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 154.

doctors” whose time was come to reclaim their rightful, masterful place in society.⁶⁷

Auguste Macke felt there was an essential human desire to be dominated by powerful artworks, noting that even “in our complicated and confused era we have forms that absolutely enthral everyone in exactly the same way that the fire dance enthrals the African or the mysterious drumming of the fakir enthrals the Indian. [...] At the movies the professor marvels alongside the servant girl.”⁶⁸ Primitivist artworks would fulfil the need to be mastered and to marvel.

Primitivism claimed that its direct, unconscious appeal to the viewer was validated by the viewer’s response to it – if he responded powerfully, it was because his inner primitive had been awakened – and by the need to save the individual from his self-destructive attachment to his modern, civilized subjectivity.⁶⁹ From the primitivist’s point of view, the inhuman machinery of social reproduction was stifling the depth and vitality of his very experience for a variety of so-called good reasons. If primitivism was the *imitation des primitifs*, imitating them promised an escape from the social requirement of imitation itself – the rational, hollow conformism that made modernity a Weberian “iron cage” for its subjects. He would perhaps have approved Nietzsche’s irate observation that originality seemed to generate an immediate and thoughtless “echo,” in the form of “critique” – even though “the moment before [he viewed the new artwork or read the new book] the critic did not so much as dream of the possibility” of what was

⁶⁷ “The New Sculpture,” *The Egoist*, 16 Feb. 1914; quoted in Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism*, p. 74.

⁶⁸ “Masks,” *The Blue Rider Almanac*, quoted in Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, p. 40.

⁶⁹ See Patrick Joyce’s *The Rule of Freedom* for a Foucauldian argument that the “discourse of freedom” was “deployed” during the late 19th and early 20th centuries to justify “the extension of governmentality” ever deeper into individuals’ private lives.

being attempted.⁷⁰ Primitivists declared a rebellion against this “burden of sophistication,” and set out to “regain a sense of seeing with the uneducated gaze of the savage.”⁷¹ The savage’s unsophisticated artworks were a symbol of his freedom, defined as the depth of his valuation of his own lived experience. “Negro art has reawakened in us,” wrote a curator in 1914, “a sensibility obliterated by an education which makes us always connect what we see with what we know.”⁷² Primitive art, which imitated nothing but the artist’s vision, rebuked the “civilized” requirement that individual experience must be stylized to be acceptable. Worse yet, the process of civilization had led people to mistake their genuine needs. Whereas the beneficiaries of modern civilization are “buried under a multitude of parasitical, non-essential desires,” in primitive cultures “the basic, fundamental and essential drives of life” continue to find expression.⁷³

3. Primitivism’s problems: promise of renovation, reality of retrenchment

Notwithstanding the primitivist emphasis on the buried, repressed survival of savage traits in civilized man, a common primitivist trope referred to the primitive as absent or tragically lost. T.S. Eliot claimed that with *Ulysses*, which incorporated the structure of the *Odyssey* into the novel form, Joyce had discovered a “mythic method”. By juxtaposing the quotidian story of Bloom to the epic of Odysseus, Joyce used the Homeric poem as a kind of negative space: *Ulysses* coheres by constant, mock-heroic

⁷⁰ *Untimely Meditations*, II, quoted in Kittler, Friedrich, *Discourse Networks 1800 1900*, Stanford University Press: 1992, p. 179.

⁷¹ Leo Stein, quoted in Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, University of Chicago Press: 1989, p. 33.

⁷² Marius de Zayas, *African Negro Art* [1916, written to complement the author’s 1914 exhibit in New York City], quoted in Rhodes, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, p. 13.

⁷³ Paul Wingert, *Primitive Art* (1962), quoted in Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, p. 32.

reference to the mythic worldview that modernity had lost. Joyce's innovation, Eliot claimed, made literature out of the "chaos" of contemporary life.⁷⁴ (Who better than the always-disappearing, pre-historical primitive to represent modernity's obsession with history, the nightmare from which Stephen Dedalus was trying to awake; the wreckage surveyed helplessly by Benjamin's angel, blown backwards out of paradise?) But primitivism's method also operates by representing the primitive as absent, or at best disappearing; he is always the Last of the Mohicans.

Gauguin felt he had already missed the last of the Tahitians, finding in their place Christianized people dressed in cloth produced by European factories. "It was all over – nothing but civilized people left ... To have travelled so far only to find the very thing which I had fled! The dream which led me to Tahiti was cruelly contradicted by the present: it was the Tahiti of the past that I loved".⁷⁵ In subsequent paintings and carvings, Gauguin's source for Tahitian myths and beliefs was not Pau'ura or any living "native informant", but a book that had been published in Paris in 1837, over a decade before his own birth. Increasingly his paintings conformed to that imaginary past rather than the present. In "Women on the Beach," from 1891, one woman is dressed in traditional garb, and a second in clothes provided by missionaries; in a nearly identical painting of 1892, the second woman's missionary clothes have disappeared, replaced with traditional clothing.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Eliot, T.S., "Ulysses, Order and Myth," *Dial* LXXV (1923), pp. 480-83. Eliot's review of *Ulysses* has been read as an attempt to prepare the ground for the reception of "The Waste Land," which carefully directs the reader to interpret it in the light of the ancient myths surrounding vegetation rituals and fertility rites, citing chapter and verse from James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Jesse Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*.

⁷⁵ 1891, letter to Bernard, quoted in Rhodes, *Primitivism*, p. 70.

⁷⁶ Rhodes, *Primitivism*, pp. 71-72.

The long-past nature of the primitive had an important benefit: it rendered the primitivist artist the public's only means of access to the primitive. Gauguin's overwriting of the Tahitians he saw with their ancestors meant that the "real" Tahiti lived on only in his own imagination. There is a certain imaginative violence in this overwriting. As colonialism disposed of the lives, labor and lands of subject populations, so primitivism appropriated their cultures, which had become fashionable once they were no longer threatening. Susan Sontag compared Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda films with her photography book on a Sudanese tribe, *The Last of the Nuba*, where "the stripped-down primitives, awaiting the final ordeal of their proud heroic community, their imminent extinction, frolic and pose in the hot clean desert."⁷⁷

The primitive's lamented disappearance, often represented as a result of an inevitable historical progression, also obscured the present violence being done to him in the name of progress.⁷⁸ The fascination with primitive societies was prompted by a desire for examples of organic, natural, unmediated forms of social organization (as opposed to the alienation and artificiality seen to characterize civilized society). This fantasy of the natural primitive society (projected onto the undifferentiated "tribes of central Africa" or "the South Sea Islanders") was blind to the social re-engineering then occurring in many of the newly-colonized societies of Africa and Oceania. Those cultures were being aggressively reshaped to suit the needs of the colonial Powers during the land-grabs of the 1890s and 1900s. And as Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm have

⁷⁷ Sontag, Susan. "Fascinating Fascism," *New York Review of Books*, February 6, 1975.

⁷⁸ A recent example is the appropriation of an Australian Aborigine's painting by that country's treasury in the 1970s. When the artist, Malang', was informed that his work had been reproduced on the Australian \$1 bill and asked for compensation, a currency designer stated that "we thought the designs were the work of some traditional Aboriginal artist, long dead." Price, *Savage Art in Civilized Places*, p. 66.

documented, this aggression was often cloaked through the “invention of tradition” as a means of legitimizing political and cultural power.⁷⁹ The invention of tradition was exercised most thoroughly in the colonies, where there was the greatest immediate need for securing local adherence to unprecedented structures of power. Parts of several African societies, Ranger writes, were completely restructured, a project helped along by the “manipulation ... [of] reified [local] customs ... as a means of asserting social control.”⁸⁰ By the 1920s, several “primitive” African leaders themselves had begun inventing their own traditions.⁸¹ Primitive customs became the very opposite of the natural, organic social facts that tradition is supposed to represent. The desire to recapture the power that mythic narratives and fetishized artefacts were believed to exert upon the primitive mind resonates disturbingly with fascist ideas that individual self-interest stood in the way of social vitality and should be subverted by an appeal to the subconscious.⁸²

A deeper problem is primitivism’s constitutive irony – that despite its seemingly radical critique of civilization, primitivism reinforced rather than interrogated many conventional, dehumanizing ideas of non-Western peoples.⁸³ Primitivism viewed every single non-Western person as a manifestation of “the primitive” in a self-absorbed project of discovering the primitive within the Western, bourgeois self. As Chinua Achebe observed, *Heart of Darkness* was ostensibly an indictment of Belgian rapacity in the

⁷⁹ See their “Introduction” to *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Cambridge University Press: 1983

⁸⁰ Ranger, Terence, “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa,” in *The Invention of Tradition*.

⁸¹ Ranger remarks that, “Like the missionaries, these men emphasized the function of religion in stabilizing society”. Op. cit., p. 253. Ranger cites John Iliffe’s *A Modern History of Tanganyika*: “Michel Kikurwe, a Zigua teacher and cultural tribalist, envisaged a golden age of traditional African society” pre-dating the colonial powers’ arrival, and “Samuel Sehoza pioneered the idea that indigenous religious beliefs had prefigured Christianity” (quoted in Ranger, p. 254).

⁸² See, e.g., the descriptions of fascism in Benjamin and Klaus Theweleit, as well as Sontag’s “Fascinating Fascism,” op.cit.

⁸³ Michael Bell, in *Primitivism*, notes another paradox, which is that primitivism aims at the conscious reproduction of a state of mind that it simultaneously insists must be unconscious.

Congo and the hypocritical colonialist mantras of civilization and progress. Yet in Achebe's view, Conrad trips so badly that the point *Heart of Darkness* actually makes is that a black African savage is lurking (tragically) within each of us. Conrad is harshly critical of "civilization" and finds a kind of eternal, ontological truth in "savagery," but the novella is nonetheless racist. It reduces all the peoples of the Congo, even the peoples of Africa, to their blackness, which turns out to refer merely to the qualities that white Europeans don't like to see in the mirror. Marlow, despite his empathy with King Leopold's victims and his revelation that "progress" is humbug, is adrift in a sea of racist hogwash. His melancholy is a disguised form of egotism; an overarching racial distinction continues to shore up his self-image. He wants to have his cannibal and eat him, too.

While the primitivist sees himself as a man purging himself of civilization's clogging inauthenticity and freeing the deeper man within, his behaviour seems to indicate a familiar, shallow self-interest. Gauguin's voyage to Tahiti in 1891 was intended, in a sense, to tell the story of an artist's rejection of civilization and his embrace of "barbarianism." Yet critics have identified other motivations. In 1889, Gauguin, along with his then-friend van Gogh, visited the Paris Exposition. That state-sponsored fantasy was staged to entice ambitious, frustrated, or troublemaking *citoyens* to support the Empire by leaving for the colonies. As portrayed at the Exposition, the natives of those colonies were so immiserated and backward that they would gratefully welcome newcomers as ambassadors of France's historic *mission civilisatrice*. The letters in which Gauguin described his plans to move to Tahiti contain passages taken verbatim from Exhibition pamphlets – extolling the low cost of living in the South Pacific, the docile

character of the natives, and so on – and these tropes turn up in his later descriptions of Tahiti as well.⁸⁴ Gauguin even managed to win a small amount of governmental financial support for his Tahitian voyage.

Primitivism did not demand of its practitioners any particular ethnographic knowledge. Just as *japonisme* was ignorant of much of Japanese art and culture,⁸⁵ primitivism was far removed from the vast global and historical array of arts, cultures and peoples it claimed as its inspiration. Such knowledge was beside the point, which was that primitive cultures, in their timelessness, connection to nature, spirituality, and so on, were manifestations of the same primitive essence. By 1914, the Parisian cognoscenti were using the term “primitive art” interchangeably with “art nègre,” with the result that Inuit, Aztec and Javan artefacts were all referred to as “black”.⁸⁶ Artists who paid too close attention to the inscrutable details of non-Western artefacts – the nitty gritty of alterity – were derided as mere “taxidermists”.⁸⁷ Partly for this reason, many primitivists did not find it necessary to leave Europe. Karl May’s best-selling Westerns are perhaps the most famous example of a representation of “native” cultures that was innocent of any experience of them. Ernst Kirchner, a member of the *Brücke* school and the painter of primitivist canvases like *Negro Couple* (1911), experienced “the primitive” solely in

⁸⁴ Perloff, Nancy. “Gauguin’s French Baggage: Decadence and Colonialism in Tahiti,” in Barkan and Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, Stanford University Press: 1995, pp. 232-35.

⁸⁵ The example is from William Rubin, “Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction,” in *‘Primitivism’ in Twentieth-Century Art*, p. 5.

⁸⁶ Rubin, “Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction,” p. 74.

⁸⁷ Max Pechstein, writing of his journey to Palau in 1914, argued that “the primitive is not ethnographic, or even orientalist-taxidermic, but syncretic, generalist.” Quoted in Rhodes, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, p. 86.

the form of performers at “the circus, Wild West shows and exhibitions at the zoological gardens” in Dresden.⁸⁸

Artists like Kirchner intended their art to embrace and exalt “the primitive” as a symbol of individual freedom, to demonstrate the idea that primitives, unlike “us,” had not lost X, were free of Y, and really knew how to Z. While a more searching critique of “civilization” might have been possible if primitivism had paid attention to the unique values expressed *within* discrete non-Western cultures, primitivists were not only interested in social change. They claimed a shocking affiliation with the savage and the exotic in order to set themselves apart from the crowd. Embracing the primitive was a way to declare one’s freedom from dominant fine-arts traditions, from bourgeois taste: a way of “making a difference” between one’s own –ism and the rest.⁸⁹ Ironically, from their ostensibly radical position, primitivists seemed to choose their battles against civilized society so as to ascend its ladders.

The irony that primitivism camouflaged a promise of retrenchment in rhetoric of renovation and revolution was as conspicuous in the consumption of primitive artifacts as in the production of primitivist art. A person capable of appreciating primitive art signals that he has attained a unique level of sophistication. One actually derived pleasure from realizing that one’s norms and values were culturally contingent, and comprehended the artefacts of semi-conscious, remote tribesmen. The belief that civilization was superior to savagery was replaced with the belief that, by appreciating savage artefacts, one was personally more civilized than the mass of one’s compatriots. The commonly-emphasized eroticism of primitive artworks provides an example: according to interviews

⁸⁸ Rhodes, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, p. 100.

⁸⁹ Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, p.148.

with Parisian art dealers in the 1980s, the best-selling primitive objects were “those that are strongly sexed,” particularly “Papuan figures with erect penises.” Price argues that this emphasis derives from the fact that “sexuality is the vehicle par excellence for the expression of deviance from mainstream cultural norms, and primitives are, from a Western perspective, culturally deviant.”⁹⁰ One who can appreciate “strongly sexed” primitive objects should have little to fear even from Freudian analysis. Freud himself possessed a famous collection of primitive figurines, although apparently none stood out as particularly Papuan.⁹¹

The art market gave a similar ironic twist to the supposed power of primitive art to scourge away the false accretions of civilized personality when it subsumed anonymous primitive artists to the famous modernists who “discovered” them. For instance, a newspaper advertisement for a MoMA exhibition of primitivist art juxtaposed one of the mask-faces from Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* with the anonymous sculpture in the Trocadéro museum that inspired it. Price argues that the ad reverses the hierarchy usually associated with originals and copies: the value of the anonymous, original African artwork derives from its having been “chosen” by Picasso, whose paintings sell for tens of millions of dollars, and not vice versa.⁹²

Primitivism’s appeal was bound up in its promise of cultural authority. Picasso was a notorious tease about primitive influences on his work; he variously encouraged rumours that he had “African blood,” and at other times denied that he had even seen any

⁹⁰ Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, p. 47.

⁹¹ Freud’s figurines were primarily Egyptian. In the mid to late 19th Century, the artifacts of tribal peoples as well as of ancient Greece and Egypt were referred to as “primitive”. See Rubin, “Introduction.”

⁹² Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, p. 95-96.

African art before painting *Les Femmes d'Alger*.⁹³ When Picasso first discussed what he had found in the Trocadéro's galleries in 1907, he claimed that "Men had made those masks and other objects for a sacred purpose, a magic purpose, as a kind of mediation between themselves and the unknown hostile forces that surrounded them, in order to overcome their fear and horror by giving it a form and an image." It was precisely this fearful, threatened quality that attracted him.⁹⁴ Yet when he was later asked about his large (and apparently "mediocre") collection of African and Iberian statuary, Picasso quipped, "L'art nègre? Connais pas!"⁹⁵ He viewed such artefacts, that is, as a standing reserve on which he could draw for formal innovations. The artist's embrace of the primitive's self-erasure threatened to be interpreted as a dependence that might actually erase the value of the primitivist artist. Paul Klee found that the first *Blue Rider* exhibit exemplified the "primitive beginnings in art," which was praiseworthy, since "the more helpless" the artist, "the more instructive" his artwork in "reforming today's art."⁹⁶ Later, Klee rejected the primitivist label: "If my works sometimes produce a primitive impression, this 'primitiveness' is explained by my discipline, which consists of reducing everything to a few steps. It is no more than economy; that is the ultimate professional awareness, which is to say the opposite of real primitiveness."⁹⁷

Primitivism's fascination with the other is inseparable from a desperate concern for the self. The flip-side of the proposition that civilized man did not know himself, that a savage other lurked within him like Mr. Hyde within Dr. Jeckyl, was that a civilized

⁹³ Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, pp. 144, 152; Rubin, "Picasso," in *Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art* (MOMA: New York, 1984), p. 254.

⁹⁴ Picasso, as recorded by Françoise Gilot, quoted in Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, p. 116.

⁹⁵ Rubin, "Picasso."

⁹⁶ Quoted in Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, p. 65.

⁹⁷ Klee, Paul. *The Thinking Eye: The Notebooks of Paul Klee*, ed. Jurg Spiller. New York: 1961, p. 451.

person had hidden depths. Frank Kermode argues that the turn of the century's "immense revaluation of primitive images" was triggered by the belief that these "primitive, external foreign objects ... corresponded to what Freud called the 'internal foreign territory'." ⁹⁸ At the very moment it seemed to be opening the self outward, primitivism could serve to shore up the ego. Gestures and tropes appropriated from non-Western cultures were a kind of vaccine for the civilized ego's self-doubt: primitivism weakened the otherness of the native and inoculated the bourgeois subject, who emerged more secure in his sense of superiority. Surely primitivists were the heirs of Rimbaud, the poet turned arms-dealer who illustrated his radical insight, "I is another," by identifying with the African "children of Ham" at the moment they were being invaded by Europeans: "The whites are landing. The cannon!" ⁹⁹

And yet even for Picasso, the primitive also represented anxiety and the desire for authenticity. Picasso's transformative encounter with some of the artefacts in "Le Troca" in 1905 led to a series of paintings – a portrait of Gertrude Stein, self-portraits, and in 1907 *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* – in which faces are represented as African or Iberian masks. Paintings such as *Les Femmes d'Alger* depended upon the contemporary discourse of "the primitive" for their very meaning. The faces of three of the five "demoselles" (prostitutes) are derived from Iberian and African masks, and thus incorporate the popular association of primitives with sexuality. Picasso, for whom the painting may have been a "brutish reaction" to Matisse's idyllic *Le Bonheur De Vivre* (1906), ¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Kermode, Frank. "Modernism, Post-Modernism and Explanation," in Barkan and Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future*, p. 365.

⁹⁹ *Un Saison En Enfer*, quoted in Nicholls, *Modernisms*, pp. 31-32.

¹⁰⁰ Museum of Modern Art, New York City, website, "History of the Painting [Demoselles d'Avignon]," available at <http://www.moma.org/collection/conservation/demoselles/history.html>, accessed April 10, 2007.

prompts the viewer to ask what the European aesthetic tradition suppressed, and how such a tradition could be adequate. The importance of this question may be seen in the fact that Picasso incorporated his own sexuality into the painting. In an early version of the canvas, Picasso himself appeared as a brothel patron, while in the final version, this figure becomes another of the demoiselles, all of which have been painted with mask-faces.¹⁰¹ From merely paying a visit, Picasso comes to identify with the scene.¹⁰²

4. The criterion of authenticity

Primitivism is in many ways easy to condemn, yet its embrace of a sceptical, “ethnographic attitude” (in Clifford’s phrase) towards all cultural values, including one’s own, seems to be grasping for a way to express what Habermas says is the “de-centering of subjectivity” at the centre of modern ethics. Without losing sight of its implication in violence and the fact that its promise to renovate the self was often hypocritical, primitivism nonetheless elaborated an aesthetic that seemed to “make the world possible for art,” as Eliot put it, at a time of crisis. According to the primitivist criterion of authenticity, artistic production was both involuntary – unselfconscious, psychically necessary, and attributable to an internal, primitive “other” – and in some sense objectively valid.

¹⁰¹ Rubin, “Picasso,” “*Primitivism*” in *Twentieth Century Art*.

¹⁰² Michael North identifies another linkage between primitive masking and self-fashioning in Gertrude Stein’s re-writing of an early short story. The protagonist of the original, *QED*, was an autobiographically-based white male, in love with a woman. In the revised story, *Melanctha*, the love-object remains the same, but the protagonist becomes an African American woman. With the author’s lesbianism both liberated and masked in black-face, the prose frees itself towards a recognizably Steinian style. North, Michael. “Modernism’s African Mask,” in Barkan and Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future*, pp. 270-89.

The primitive artist's production was not a matter of choice, taste, or ambition, but necessity. Théophile Gautier had proclaimed that "nothing is beautiful unless it is useless; everything useful is ugly, for it expresses a need, and the needs of man are ignoble and disgusting, like his poor weak nature."¹⁰³ For Gauguin and his heirs, the appeal of the savage artist was precisely the psychic and social necessity of his art as a source of meaning to his community. Picasso said he "had found [his] way" when he realized that in primitive societies, art played the role of propitiating the terrors of the natural world. Oscar Wilde found it harder and harder to live up to his blue china, but the primitivist was trying to return to a time when the fetishized object really was alive. T. S. Eliot saw in a Chinese vase a "moving stillness," and he placed this insight in a poem that he hoped would, with his other works, re-introduce spiritual contemplation to modern society.

The primitive's drive to create art was existential. Whereas modern man suffered the acedia that prompted Nietzsche's comment, "he who is bored with his life should risk it," the primitive found the world literally alive with spiritual meaning. But primitivists did not claim merely that the savage artist's animist beliefs were a form of unselfconscious connection with the natural environment. The savage was seen to live a life of terror which gave to his artworks a darkly appealing urgency as manifestations of the vital instinct of self-preservation.

The somewhat Hobbesian theory that the primitive lived a life of fear found its most influential expositor in the Viennese critic Wilhelm Worringer. Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* – a best-seller when published in 1908 – claimed that unlike the

¹⁰³ Gautier, "Preface" to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, quoted in Nicholls, *Modernisms*, p. 9.

mimetic tradition of Western civilization, primitive art showed an “urge to abstraction” that expressed the “great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomenon of the outside world.” Civilization had mastered nature, and so civilized artists could afford the “empathy” with the external world that realistic mimesis required. Primitives, by contrast, could not even recognize the possibility that their relationship with nature could be technologically mediated. The external environment was ineluctably uncontrollable. The fear of nature gave the primitive “an immense spiritual dread of space” itself. Space or “extension” is, first, the quality that “links things one to another,” and this interrelationship thwarts the primitive’s attempts to control anything; second, the abstract concept of extension “is the one thing which it is impossible to individualize,” which thwarts the primitive’s attempt to comprehend it through his usual cognitive method, personification. It followed from this dread of space that in primitive sculpture, “all endeavour was therefore directed toward the single form set free from space.” Worringer saw all primitive art as exemplifying “closed form”: representational images that were nonetheless abstracted from their environment.¹⁰⁴

The fear and disorientation with which Worringer diagnosed the primitive were, perhaps, not terribly far to seek in Vienna in 1908 (or so Worringer’s suicide might indicate). It seems plausible to view part of primitivism’s appeal in terms of a response to (and projection of) a widespread sense of threat, of being overwhelmed. What the natural environment was to Worringer’s primitive, the corrupting or distracting simulacrum of modern mass culture was to modernists like T.S. Eliot, who fretted that the unprecedented “flood” of “books being published by and for the present generation”

¹⁰⁴ *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), quoted in Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, p. 122.

presented “a huge obstacle” to “critical consciousness”.¹⁰⁵ Wyndham Lewis anxiously demanded that “a space must be cleared, all said and done, round the hurly burly of the present,” in which “no man can reflect or create ...”.¹⁰⁶ To J. A. Symonds even that might have been impossible, given the lack of any stable reference point in a world where “nothing can stand still ... [and] all must vary, must progress or retrograde.”¹⁰⁷

But the appeal of Worringer’s thesis about the primitive artist’s fear and anxiety was not merely that it offered modernist artists a kind of emotional analogue to their feelings about modernity. The popular idea that primitive artists were virtually compelled to produce their artworks suggests that artists embraced primitivism because they found it difficult to justify their desire for aesthetic pleasure and their ambition for aesthetic production. This unease may be seen in theories that true art was produced almost involuntarily, as if the artist were coerced by his drives and innocent of wanting to produce art for the market. Kandinsky’s criterion, while selecting art to include in *The Blue Rider* in 1911, was that the works should have been “formed through an inner necessity.”¹⁰⁸ It is as though artists projected their ambitions onto the figure of the primitive, thereby enabling themselves to identify anew with those ambitions, and more fervently than before.

Primitive artworks, and by extension the work of modern artists who could channel their inner primitives, were not authentic merely because they were produced out

¹⁰⁵ Eliot, “Christianity and Literature.”

¹⁰⁶ Lewis, “Essay on the Objective of Plastic Art in Our Time” (1922), *Wyndham Lewis on Art*, p. 233.

¹⁰⁷ Symonds, *Stella Fregelius* (1906, p. 289), quoted in Griffith, J.W., *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma: Bewildered Traveller*. Clarendon: Oxford, 1995, p. 6.

¹⁰⁸ Kandinsky, “On the Question of Form,” quoted in Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, p. 56

of necessity or inner compulsion, but because these artworks were uniquely objective records.

In 1931, the French Mission Dakar-Djibouti was launched with the purpose of obtaining (often looting) African artefacts for the new Musée de l'Homme in Paris. A comparison between the records of the Mission and of a prior French adventure is illustrative of the significance that primitive objectivity took on in modernity. In 1798, Napoleon invaded Egypt. His army was accompanied by an "Institut," a scientific task force intended, Said writes, to "put Egypt into modern French," to "render it completely open, to make it completely accessible to European scrutiny".¹⁰⁹ The Institut's triumph was the publication of the *Description de l'Egypte*: twenty-three enormous volumes, every page of which is a square meter in size, which contained "everything said, seen and studied" during the occupation.

A greater contrast to the *Description* than the fragmentary, agonised journal entries of Michel Leiris, the official secretary of the Mission Dakar-Djibouti, would be hard to imagine. Leiris' entries were longest when the Mission bogged down in Ethiopia, which was never colonized and remained an obstacle to authority.¹¹⁰ Far from aspiring to Enlightened omniscience, Leiris wrote, "I'd rather be possessed than study possessed people, have carnal knowledge of a 'zarine' rather than scientifically know all about her."¹¹¹ Elsewhere, when Leiris muses, "My boots are muddy, my hair long, my nails dirty. But I enjoy this filth," James Clifford observes that by an "excess of subjectivity, a kind of objectivity is guaranteed – that (paradoxically) of a personal ethnography. The

¹⁰⁹ Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Vintage: New York, 1979, pp. 83-84.

¹¹⁰ Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, p. 169.

¹¹¹ *L'Afrique Phantome*, p. 324, quoted in Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, p. 169.

realist imagination, fabricator of the vraisemblable, is refused in favour of an impossibly sincere record of the real: perceptions, moods, facts.”¹¹² By identifying with the primitive’s perceived objectivity, primitivists could take their own inner urges as quasi-objective facts.

Leiris seems to exemplify Kermode’s thesis that modernists sought out primitive artefacts as “external foreign objects” that corresponded to the Freudian “internal foreign territory.” The modern subject’s desire to go on expeditions that would retrieve primitive artefacts derived not so much from an Enlightenment desire to classify and taxonomize, as from the a sense that he could achieve an adequate identity only by seeking to identify with the most remote, bizarre and opaque productions of the other. The primitivist wanted to “discover” primitive artefacts within himself.

The primitive was in direct contact with his natural environment and produced myths and artifacts unselfconsciously in response to that contact. As the unreflexive creator of his own culture, he was innocent of the modern subject’s need to make and justify cultural choices; his productions were direct, unmediated representations of his states of mind. His process of production was innocent of base motives – it was determined by inner necessity rather than by the imitative demands of the art market – and the artifacts he produced took on a kind of objective glow. The primitive’s unselfconscious, psychologically necessary, direct and unmediated representations represented the desirable paradox of authentic art.

This primitive objectivity was highly appealing at a time of increasing distrust of explanations and glosses, and an empiricist desire to let facts speak for themselves. James

¹¹² Michel Leiris, *L’Afrique Phantome* (p. 287), quoted in Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, p. 167.

Frazer insisted in each new edition of his *The Golden Bough* that he had abstained from interpreting the ethnographic materials collected therein, and had merely organized them according to certain obvious similarities between diverse beliefs and rituals. Ludwig Wittgenstein hoist Frazer on his own petard, claiming that he was too intent on explanation: “one reason why the attempt to find an *explanation* is wrong is that we have only to put together in the right way what we *know*, without adding anything, and the *satisfaction* we are trying to get from the explanation *will come of itself*.”¹¹³ This ideal recalls Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, which he planned as a book consisting of “six hundred quotations, systematically arranged,” with minimal commentary; or the project announced by the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard, in his “Introduction” to *Man and Woman among the Azanda*, of writing a book of anthropology comprised solely of quotations.¹¹⁴ Clifford finds the presentation of haphazardly arranged primitive artefacts without an explanatory narrative in a contemporary museum, Paris’s Le Troca, where the visitor confronted a “jumble of exotica” that lacked any “coherent scientific contextualization,” and in a contemporary Parisian journal, *Documents*, whose organizing principle Clifford terms “ethnographic surrealism.”¹¹⁵

A similar example may be seen in the list that opens August Macke’s essay, “Masks”:

A sunny day, a cloudy day, a Persian spear, a holy vessel, a pagan idol and a wreath of everlasting flowers, a Gothic cathedral and a Chinese junk, the bow of a pirate ship, the word ‘pirate’ and the word ‘holy,’ darkness, night, spring, the

¹¹³ Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. A. C. Miles, Brynmill: Retford, 1979, p. 2e.

¹¹⁴ Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, Harvard: Cambridge, 1988, p.47.

¹¹⁵ Clifford argues that the collapse of *Documents* and the birth, three years later, of *Minotaure* (an art review) marked the same fault line as Jacques Riviere’s complete reorganization of the Musée Trocadero’s collections when he closed it down and opened the well-lit, well-organized Musée de l’Homme. Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, p.135.

cymbals and their sound and the firing of armored vessels, the Egyptian Sphinx and the beauty spot stuck on the cheek of a Parisian cocotte.¹¹⁶

Macke's list, brimming with the heterogeneous and the unfamiliar, rejects hypotaxis and hierarchization. It also uses primitivist rhetoric to intimate the need for aesthetic revolution as a revolution of perception: "The cast bronzes of [...] Benin in West Africa [...] the idols from the Easter Islands [...] the cape of a chieftain from Alaska [...] etc.] speak the same powerful language as the chimeras of Notre Dame and the Tombstones in Frankfurt Cathedral. Everywhere, forms speak a sublime language *right in the face of European aesthetics*."¹¹⁷ The pre-modern Europeans who built Notre Dame and the Frankfurt Cathedral were un-afflicted by "civilization." The similarity of their fantastic grotesques to artifacts from Africa, Alaska and Oceania, reveal that "civilization" is not an expression of universal truths, but a deviation from them.

Primitivism claimed that it had the answer to the modern desire for a mode of perception that would provide individuals with an objective point of view, based on its assertion that unselfconscious primitive peoples perceived facts objectively.¹¹⁸ By inhabiting a primitive point of view, it might be possible to see the world as it is instead of as one had been taught to think about it. The primitive bushman, according to Roger Fry, perceived objects with the immediacy of a high-speed camera, and could recreate images of running animals that look crude to us only because we lack that ability to

¹¹⁶ *The Blaue Reiter Almanack*, ed. Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, Viking: New York, 1974, p.83.

¹¹⁷ *Id.*, 89.

¹¹⁸ Similarly, Douglas Mao notes that "a standard piece of Victorian advice on child-rearing was to make one's child a collector," citing advice to parents to "encourage Tom to make a museum ... of his wonderful curiosities... you may make a philosopher of him." The intention was for Tom to learn the skills of nomenclature and organization, and derive pleasure from inductive reasoning. Julia McNair Wright's *The Complete Home* (1879), quoted in Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects*. Princeton University Press: 1997, p. 28.

perceive without preconceptions.¹¹⁹ The child, Kandinsky claimed, retains the primitive's "natural ability to absorb the thing as such," so that "in the child's drawing the inner sound of the subject is revealed automatically."¹²⁰ Artists saw in primitive unselfconsciousness a remarkable, unmediated circuit between perception and artistic creation.

Primitivism required the artist to produce an internal division; his life must be torn between impersonal drives and actions and the responsive action of recording them, despite the pain and bewilderment they may cause. This internal division reproduces the characteristics of alienation – when the point of primitivism is to achieve the opposite – but the primitivist's internal division marks him as authentic.

5. Primitivism in Anglo-American Modernist literature

As a movement that emphasizes immediacy, the short-circuiting of rationality, and an aesthetic of authenticity, primitivism's promise made it valuable for modernist authors as well. Among others, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf adopted primitivism and struggled with its inherent contradictions. None of these writers fully overcame primitivism's inherent contradiction: it purported to advocate for progressive social change but relied on reductive fantasies of "primitive" peoples. Yet all three authors balanced this contradiction to some extent by the primitivist insistence that the inadequate modern subject must open herself to the strange, the other, if she was to gain a chance to break free of inauthentic modes of life.

¹¹⁹ See Chapter 3.

¹²⁰ Kandinsky, "On the Question of Form," quoted in Rhodes, *Primitivism*, p. 56.

At various points in their careers, the discourse of primitivism and its criterion of authenticity structured these authors' analysis of their cultural predicament – whether the culprit was social fragmentation, repression, or patriarchy – and their understanding of their aesthetic projects – including Eliot's theories of poetic imagination and his and Woolf's ideas of the importance of "impersonality." Primitivism also directly affected these writers' novels, poetry, criticism and other writings, from their choice of themes and settings (from Lawrence's Mexican fantasias to Woolf's first novel, set in the Amazonian jungle), to the ways it enabled them, despite sometimes intense anxiety about their public reception, to open their texts to opaque, inexplicable passages that primitivist aesthetics justified as markers of authenticity.

T.S. Eliot's Impersonal Primitivism

Identifying with the supposed traits of “primitive” peoples involves a certain self-dramatizing flamboyance – from Paul Gauguin’s representations of his life in Tahiti¹²¹ to Josephine Baker’s nightclub performances in Paris. Many of T. S. Eliot’s readers would, perhaps, agree that “it is hard to imagine [him] dancing around the fire in a loincloth.”¹²² The theatricality of primitivism jars against Eliot’s reputation as the “invisible poet”¹²³ – an aloof modernist who insisted on the continuous sacrifice of individual personality to one’s art. More recent appraisals of Eliot as the neurotic, calculating son of a brick manufacturer who plotted his ascent to the pinnacle of Anglophone letters, seem similarly inimical to the consideration of Eliot as a primitivist.¹²⁴ Michael Bell sees Eliot’s deep and long-abiding interest in the primitive¹²⁵ as a mark of “conscious primitivism”; to Bell, Eliot carefully used “primitive” symbols and ideas for their supposedly universal resonance and epistemological heft. Michael Levenson sees in Eliot’s interest in anthropology and ethnography, a will to “assimilate, not to emulate, the primitive.”¹²⁶ It seems there was no question of loincloths; if anything, Eliot put the “prim” into primitive.¹²⁷

¹²¹ Most famously recorded in his partly fabricated “journal,” *Noa Noa*.

¹²² Crawford, Robert. *The Savage and the City in the Work of T. S. Eliot*, Oxford University Press: 2000.

¹²³ See Hugh Kenner’s study of Eliot, *The Invisible Poet*, first published in 1959.

¹²⁴ See, for instance, Louis Menand, *Discovering Modernism: T S Eliot in Context*, Oxford University Press: 1987; Mark Manganaro, *Myth, Rhetoric and the Voice of Authority*, Yale University Press: 1995, and Lyndall Gordon, *T S Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, Norton: New York, 2002.

¹²⁵ It dating from at least 1913, when Eliot wrote a paper for the Harvard graduate philosophy seminar of Josiah Royce, on “The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual.” For a discussion, see Piers Gray, *T S Eliot’s Intellectual and Poetic Development: 1909-1922*, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1982.

¹²⁶ Bell, *Primitivism*, pp. 71-72; Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism*, p. 195.

¹²⁷ See Michael Bell’s chapter on “Conscious Primitivism” in *Primitivism*, Routledge: New York, 1968; William Harmon, “T S Eliot: Anthropologist and Primitive,” *American Anthropologist* 78 n.4 (1976), p. 799ff., and “T S Eliot’s Raids on the Inarticulate,” *PMLA* (1976); Marc Manganaro, “Dissociation in the Dead Land: The Primitive Mind in the Early Poetry of T. S. Eliot,” *Journal of Modern Literature* (March

Ethnographers and anthropologists had been recording and analyzing “primitive” rituals, myths and social structures since the mid 19th Century. Eliot frequently drew upon these accounts of primitive in his poetry and criticism.¹²⁸ Yet from the 1920’s onward, rather than merely keeping up with the scholarship, Eliot actively resisted the emerging anthropological consensus about primitive social structures, and clung to the increasingly dubious theories of James Frazer.¹²⁹ The claim that Eliot’s primitivism was “conscious” is strained. By definition, primitivism involved a paradoxically conscious effort to unlearn civilized routines and to rediscover “primitive mentality.”¹³⁰ “The people who can be material for art,” Eliot had written, “must have in them something unconscious, something which they do not fully realize or understand.”¹³¹ The figure of the primitive is an embodiment of that unconsciousness inside the artist, who must thus be at once visible and unknowable to himself.

In Eliot’s hands, “the primitive” became a means to reconceive poetry and to justify the role of the poet in modernity, precisely because of the association of “the primitive” with excess, self-display and performance. As I will discuss, primitivism revalued those qualities by associating them with authenticity. It thereby provided Eliot an escape from what he feared, early in his career, was to be the fate of poetry in

1986, pp.97-110) and “Beating A Drum In A Jungle: T. S. Eliot on The Artist as Primitive,” *Modern Language Quarterly* (Dec. 1986, pp.393-421); Robert Crawford, *The Savage and the City in the Work of T. S. Eliot*, Oxford University Press: 1987; and Ronald Bush’s essay, “The Presence of the Past,” in *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, ed. Bush and Elazar Barkan, Stanford University Press: 1995.

¹²⁸ This Eliot used the primitive’s organic relationship to his society (or his *Gemeinschaft*) and to his natural environment as a criterion to judge the social function of contemporary art. The figure of the primitive thus focused the modern subject’s radical alienation from primitive being in the world.

¹²⁹ See notes 91-92 and accompanying text.

¹³⁰ See Levy-Bruhl’s *La Mentalite Primitif*, translated as *How Natives Think*.

¹³¹ “Eeldrop and Appleplex II,” *Little Review*, September 1917, p. 19 (Berg Collection, New York Public Library). This argument may not represent Eliot’s own view, since he assigned it to one character in a dialogue; but to say this is to recognize the dialogue as an aesthetic form that allows for authorial un-self-consciousness, reconfirming the “character’s” point.

modernity: an activity condemned to irrelevance and limited to the mere mimicry of dated styles.

The poet, Eliot moaned, “must borrow every changing shape / To find expression ... dance, dance / Like a dancing bear, / Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.”¹³² When faced with the grim reality of modernity, the responsive attempt to be poetic, as it were, was merely ridiculous. Eliot’s “Preludes” takes as its subject the attempt to imagine a poetry that would be adequate to modernity. It is largely comprised of scenes describing, in matter-of-fact tones, the sordid, empty existence of lower-middle class characters. The penultimate stanza, however, changes register; a moralizing voice intrudes, purporting to find meaning in these scenes of degradation:

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.

Such vague, moralizing escapism fails even to attempt to grasp the meaninglessness of modernity. It reveals nothing of the truth of its purported subject, modernity, and shows only that the poetic “I,” curled up amongst his fancies, is a fraud. Abruptly changing register again, the poem concludes with a little manifesto of entropy:

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.¹³³

“Preludes” tries to make poetry out of the purported disavowal of the attempt to make meaning out of the ugly emptiness of modernity. The moralizing penultimate stanza seems a straw-man, and the whole effort is perhaps not wholly satisfying. Yet the poem

¹³² “2. Portrait of a Lady,” from *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917).

¹³³ “3. Preludes,” from *Prufrock and Other Observations*.

also presents itself, ambiguously, as a prelude, perhaps to some utterly bleak future, or perhaps to some future poetry that will do justice to that bleakness.

Lionel Trilling characterizes modernity as an era in which artists confronted conflicting desires: to play aesthetic games, to establish contact with a mass audience, and to be “authentic”.¹³⁴ The primitive, modernists had discovered, seemed to open a route to authenticity. Wyndham Lewis’s assertion in *BLAST* (1914) that “the art instinct is permanently primitive” posits that the drive to produce art – the need for aesthetic play – is a rock in the stream of history.¹³⁵ Far from being condemned to imitate styles, the modern artist could, if he acknowledged that the need to create art was essentially savage, encounter within himself a poesis that transcended modernity. Primitivism signified a passion for – and even possession by – something deeper than contemporary fashions. Eliot claimed to be “certain that primitive art and poetry help our understanding of civilized art and poetry.” Primitive art not only explains the historical origins of that art and poetry, but shows that civilization cannot explain, on its own terms, the underlying needs that drive the subjects of modern society to continue to produce art.

Avant-garde artists seized on primitivism as a way of “making a difference”¹³⁶ between their own and previous or competing artistic styles. Lewis’s claim in *BLAST* was an attempt to distinguish Vorticism from Marinetti’s Futurism.¹³⁷ Pound’s proclamation that the men of 1914 were the “heirs of the witch doctor,” come to reclaim

¹³⁴ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*.

¹³⁵ Gadamer, who argued that “the basis of aesthetics during the nineteenth century was the freedom of the symbolizing power of the mind,” asked, “Is the symbolizing activity not actually still bound today by the survival of a mythological and allegorical tradition?” Quoted in Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 191.

¹³⁶ Cf. James Clifford’s reading of Picasso’s use of “primitive” art to mark a radical break with the European tradition in *The Predicament of Culture*.

¹³⁷ This is Peter Nicholls’ argument about Lewis’ statement. *Modernisms*, p.174.

their rightful social place,¹³⁸ was similarly intended to define an artistic group.

Primitivism generated rhetorical authority by implying that, to its adherents, nominally aesthetic questions were matters of passionate, existential importance. Primitivism, in short, partook of the opposition between “art” and “commodity” that has been described as central to the “structure of modernism” -- an ironic structure. Many artists adopted an “alienated” stance because doing so helped sell their work.¹³⁹

In primitivism, Eliot found a tactic that would enable him to perform authentically rather than performing on demand, and thus to re-imagine his relationship to an audience towards which he was profoundly ambivalent. This is not to say that Eliot became a primitivist because primitivism was the road to literary success. Eliot, often strapped for money,¹⁴⁰ knew poetry was “a mug’s game”,¹⁴¹ yet he gave up a promising academic career and a safe job at a bank to write. Primitivism involved a fantasy of escaping from the market’s values to forcefully confront a hostile audience. “The war between [the artist] and the world is war without truce,” Pound wrote, and so the artist must act “like the Tahitian savage ... by craft and violence.”¹⁴² For Eliot, primitivism functioned as a shield and a sword: it defended him from charges of inauthenticity, and supported his claim that, despite himself, the subject of modernity must be reformed by art.

¹³⁸ “The New Sculpture,” *The Egoist* (see below).

¹³⁹ Jensen, Robert. *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*. Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 10.

¹⁴⁰ Ezra Pound went to some lengths to raise funds for Eliot, while also having to conceal his hand in two such “schemes” for fear Eliot would refuse the money.

¹⁴¹ In *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism* (Faber, 1933), p.154.

¹⁴² “The New Sculpture,” *The Egoist*, 16 Feb. 1914; quoted in Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism*, p. 74.

1. Authenticity and Publicity

Eliot was fascinated, and tortured, by the dynamics of knowing and being known. The threat of becoming a “patient etherized upon a table,” “pinned and wriggling on the wall,”¹⁴³ seemed to haunt Eliot, and contemporaries perceived his manner and his poetry as cagey. One critic compared trying to “understand Eliot” to trying to catch a “slithering sand-eel.” Yet if he was repelled by the thought of being an object of attention he did nothing to hide his personal ailments – but rather the opposite, at least in his letters¹⁴⁴ - or to moderate opinions others found idiosyncratic. Less an *avant-* than a *derrière-garde*, Eliot fought the decline of the “English race” with an odd arsenal of poetry, plays, criticism, lectures, radio broadcasts, and a noisy conversion to “Anglo-Catholicism.”

Insofar as theatricality, or what might be called an attentiveness to the public eye, is a component of primitivism, there is a sense in which this ex-banker’s seemingly-incongruous claim to an affinity with the savage is characteristic. Gabrielle MacIntyre discerns intimations of Eliot’s own sexuality in “King Bolo’s Big Black Kween,” the fleshy, voracious heroine who “bursts on the scene” of his “Bolo and Colombo” poems.¹⁴⁵ Eliot did not confine his provocations to blackface. He rented a second London flat under an assumed name, and instructed guests to ask for “The Captain,” upon which Eliot was wont to appear, masked in a greenish, “corpse-like” face powder.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” from *Prufrock and Other Observations*, 1917.

¹⁴⁴ Eliot’s letters, such as one to his mother of 6 Sept. 1916, show this to an almost comical degree: “We enjoyed our [vacation] immensely, and it did us both a world of good. Unfortunately, Vivien had the ill luck to have a very bad attack of neuralgia last week. ... The [guest house] rooms were unused and the sitting room very damp; I think this protracted the neuralgia. At any rate it gave us both mild attacks of rheumatism, mine in the left leg. Hers is nearer to gout, which she gets in the feet. ... I hated to leave Bosham; it seems like a beautiful dream. ... It is idyllic.” *The Letters of T S Eliot: Volume I, 1898-1922*, ed. Valerie Eliot, p. 150. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York, 1988.

¹⁴⁵ Gabrielle McIntire, “An Unexpected Beginning,” *Modernism / Modernity*, April, 2002.

¹⁴⁶ Gordon, Lyndall. *T S Eliot: An Imperfect Life*. W W Norton: New York, 2002.

The relationship between Eliot's primitivism, and his oscillations between provocation and anxiety, may be elucidated by his view that the modern reader had become too powerful. This anxiety lies, for instance, behind Eliot's unusual comparison of John Ruskin and F. H. Bradley.¹⁴⁷ "Bradley's books," he wrote, "can never fall into [the] neglect that has [overtaken Ruskin's] because they will never rise to [the level of] notoriety [Ruskin's work] achieved; they come into the hands only of those who are qualified to treat them with respect."¹⁴⁸ Eliot's later claim that "poetry must be difficult" is perhaps related to his admiration of Bradley's thorny "technical philosophy" for its power to create a "qualified" audience. At the same time, Eliot's characterization of Ruskin as a kind of once-notorious, now-forgotten performer, a man briefly elevated and then deserted by a fleeting moment of public favor, is remarkable. The same jittery tone appears in Eliot's praise of Ethyl Levy, a contemporary "revue comedienne," for her "aloof and impersonal" persona. Levy is "indifferent, rather than contemptuous, towards the audience; her appearance and movement are of an extremely modern type of beauty. Hers is not broad farce, but a fascinating inhuman grotesquerie; she plays for herself rather than for the audience."¹⁴⁹ Bradley and Levy perform for themselves, but their exacting goal is a "modern type of beauty" that undermines distinctions between the beautiful and the grotesque. What is striking here is Eliot's fantasy that these performers may create, through their very disinterest towards their audience, a discerning audience, which will reward them with consistent fame.

¹⁴⁷ Bradley was the subject of Eliot's doctoral thesis at Harvard.

¹⁴⁸ "Francis Herbert Bradley," in *For Launcelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order*. Faber and Faber: London, 1928, p. 69.

¹⁴⁹ "London Letter," *Dial* LXX [June 1921], p. 688.

Reversing this fantasy, one senses that the source of Eliot's anxiety was the audience's disinterest toward the intentions of the artist. Such an attitude was, perhaps, the result of the proliferation of competing artistic styles. Modernity has been called "perhaps the [first period], in all the history of art, to be characterized by a complex stylistic pluralism rather than by the simple hegemony of a unique and superior style".¹⁵⁰ Far from endorsing such heterogeneity (as, say, an opportunity for consumer choice), Eliot viewed it as the product of ignorance and alienation. "There never was a time, I believe, when those who read at all, read so many more books by living authors than books by dead authors; there never was a time so completely parochial, so shut off from the past."¹⁵¹ The modern reader, drowning in the narcissistic deluge of modern publication, had lost sight of the very nature of reading as an atemporal experience of the past. To Eliot, reading was not a relationship between reader and text so much as a "feeling of profound kinship, or rather of a peculiar personal intimacy, with ... a dead author." This "secret knowledge, this intimacy, with the dead man" is, moreover, "an indubitable claim to distinction," for the reader alone "can call [him]self [the] friend" of the dead man after "many years or centuries" of popular misunderstanding.¹⁵² Yet Eliot also describes this intimate experience as "sudden" and uncontrolled; it "is certainly a crisis." The power in this relationship belongs to the dead author, not the reader. That the writer exercises such fantastic power beyond death strikes one as a wish fulfillment,

¹⁵⁰ Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 180.

¹⁵¹ *Essays Ancient and Modern*, Faber and Faber: London, 1936, p.108.

¹⁵² "Reflections on Contemporary Poetry," *Egoist* IV [July 1919]. Compare "Portrait of a Lady" (in *Prufrock and other Observations* [1917]): "So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul / Should be resurrected only among friends / Some two or three, who will not touch the bloom / That is rubbed and questioned in the concert room."

prompted by Eliot's sense of the modern writer's irrelevance and impotence, not to mention his difficulty in distinguishing himself from the rest of the mob of scribblers.

Eliot declared that "a writer's subject matter is racial,"¹⁵³ and so, in Eliot's fantasy, was his audience. If the writer, ideally, was the voice of a racial collective, then implicitly his social role was natural and unquestionable. It was natural for the reader, as a member of the same race, to see himself in the writer's books, and to turn to them to understand himself. But the modern reader is the product of a politics and an economics that generate social fragmentation through the production of heterogeneous wants. "Individualistic democracy has come to high tide," Eliot laments, "and it is more difficult today to be an individual than it ever was before."¹⁵⁴ The subject of this social centrifuge is led to believe that his only goal is self-satisfaction, when in fact he is merely an alloy of desires produced by external forces, alienated from the cultural identity that should have been his racial birthright. Social and cultural fragmentation made modernity an heroic time for criticism, in Eliot's view, since informing the public of how and what to read might help put Humpty Dumpty together again.¹⁵⁵ But a cracked society was hardly auspicious for poetry. The alienated reader assumes the right to interpret at will; he is ignorant of the "racial" conventions which should unconsciously guide him and lacks the deference to the poet those conventions would create. In such a fragmented social context, not only poetry but anyone presuming to write it was subject to scrutiny. Prufrock's fear of being "pinned" was not unreasonable. The modern reader's very

¹⁵³ "Turgenev," *The Egoist*, 4 Dec. 1917, p. 167.

¹⁵⁴ "Religion and Literature," *Essays Ancient and Modern*, Faber and Faber: London, 1936, p. 108.

¹⁵⁵ Eliot presumably had his own fragmented epoch in mind when he argued that "the most important moment for the appearance of criticism ... is the time when poetry ceases to be the expression of the mind of a whole people." *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p.22.

ignorance was threatening; he could be expected, for example, to miss allusions and misinterpret the allusive text, wresting its interpretation from the writer's control.

Moreover, modernity had witnessed the rise of certain styles of inquiry – particularly psychology (“such as it is,” in Eliot's phrase), ethnology, and anthropology¹⁵⁶ – whose “formulated phrases” were powerfully objectifying. The subject of such inquiry was rendered speechless; he was incapable of negotiating any adjustment of his status. *The Confessions of Zeno* (1923), for instance, are not confessions at all. A psychoanalyst steals his analysand's memoirs, publishes them, and prefaces them with the threat that Zeno, who “seemed to feel intense curiosity about himself ... little knows what surprises lie in wait for him, if someone were to set about analyzing the mass of truths and falsehoods which he has collected here.”¹⁵⁷ Psychoanalysis's invention of the unconscious, its blueprint of the ego's self-defenses, its demand for the analysand to produce free association and dream narratives – these steps were unprecedented in their aggression. The modern subject had to answer for the thoughts and feelings of a grossly enlarged, unrecognizable version of itself.¹⁵⁸ To artists, the combination of this style of inquiry with the simmering, widespread fear of cultural “degeneration”¹⁵⁹ created the

¹⁵⁶ “Psychology (such as it is [...]), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* [a text of comparative anthropology] have concurred,” Eliot claims, “to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago,” namely, the “mythical method” Joyce had discovered in writing *Ulysses*. Such statements indicate that Eliot's attitude to the social sciences, rather than to the primitive, should be characterized as “assimilative.” (A charge discussed in the first section of this chapter.)

¹⁵⁷ Italo Svevo, *The Confessions of Zeno* (1923), trans. Beryl de Zoete (Vintage: New York, 1989), p.vii.

¹⁵⁸ Eliot writes that “The [ordinary man] falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking” (“The Metaphysical Poets,” in *The Sacred Wood and Other Essays*, p. 127?). It seems that this list is a product of free association; and yet even in this innocuous example, there is a resistance to identifying Eliot's own unconscious as the source. Rather, this list is the product of the poetic sensibility somehow saved from the “dissociation of sensibility” that has set in since the Jacobean era.

¹⁵⁹ Max Nordau's book of the same name represents a kind of fin-de-siecle backlash against the efflorescence of avant-garde movements. Nordau's own masculine, Nordic name demonstrates the same anxiety – he changed it from the more agrarian and temperate “Sudfeld.”

threat that their aesthetic efforts would instead be misread in aggressively pathologizing terms.

Eliot's primitivism was, in part, a response to his view of modernity as a situation in which the author lacked social relevance, and where any attempts to regain it invited misunderstanding, attack, and even ridicule.

"Poetry begins, I dare say, with a savage beating a drum in a jungle," Eliot wrote, and he argued that the origins of poetry inform true poets even in modernity, such that "the poet is *older* than other human beings". The poet is obliged to do his homework; he must be "aware of all the metamorphoses of poetry that illustrate the stratifications of history that cover savagery".¹⁶⁰ But more than this, he must be able to delve beneath his civilized personality down to the savage bedrock of his art. His reward for doing so was that he would speak from an inner, personal voice that was also the voice of the human artistic impulse itself; he would exist both outside and inside civilization. He might even receive the veneration due to those who are "older" than their contemporaries.

"The Waste Land's" allusions to "the primitive" help elucidate Eliot's strategy, as they indicate that "The Waste Land" is simultaneously a poem and a manifestation of the meaning-system of primitive rites and beliefs. Legions of readers have followed the lead of these allusions, which suggest that primitive ritual may be the key to decoding the poem's meaning. But as some critics have also pointed out, these allusions also send another important, perhaps surprising signal: that the poem is not the result of Eliot's desire to be poetic. What shapes the poem, in other words, is not an individual writer's

¹⁶⁰ These quotes are taken from, respectively: "Tarr," *Egoist*, Sept. 1918, p. 106; *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Faber: 1933, p. 155; and a review of *The Path of the Rainbow: An Anthology of Songs and Chants from the Indians of North America*, ed. G.W. Cronyn, *Athenaeum*, Oct. 17, 1919, p. 1036.

stylistic goals, but the primitive drives that link him to his culture and, indeed, to Culture itself. By coding its aesthetics as primitive, the poem creates an alibi for Eliot, helps shift interpretive attention from him back to the poem, and structures that interpretation on its own terms.

A useful entry point to my argument is Louis Menand's "symptomatic" reading of the poem. It is almost impossible to tell, in Menand's view, if the poem was actually an attempt at poetry, or something more like a psychological symptom.¹⁶¹ As he represents "The Waste Land," with its multiple languages, arcane quotations, cryptic allusions, and discontinuities, the poem does not merely resist interpretation: it seems to oscillate between being a poem – something that attempts to be poetic in ways a reader would recognize – and being a mere nondiscursive behavior or action. For an instance of the latter, Menand interprets the fact that "The Waste Land" was published with Notes to itself – which suggests that one needs secondary sources to understand it – as an admission of the poem's inability to express its own meaning. The tone of the Notes is authoritative, but this only highlights, by way of contrast, the fragmentation of the poem's narrator, who not only needs the Notes to help explain what he means, but "who cannot distinguish what he intends to reveal about himself from what he cannot help revealing."¹⁶² Yet this apparent loss of control over its meaning, in Menand's view, is the

¹⁶¹ Eliot's fondness for discussing aesthetics in terms of formulae and catalysts betrays his eagerness to appropriate science's legitimacy. Eliot also annexed psychology to "The Waste Land," Menand argues, but in a rather different way. (See, e.g., the "suggestive analogy" of "the [catalytic] action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide." "Tradition and The Individual Talent," *Sacred Wood* (Dover: Mineola, NY, 1998 [1920]), p.30. Similarly, *Ulysses* "has the importance of a scientific discovery"; Joyce's imitators are like "the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein". "Ulysses, Order and Myth," *Dial* Vol. LXXV (1923), p. 482-83.)

¹⁶² Menand, *Discovering Modernism: T S Eliot and His Context* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1987), p. 90.

key to the success of “The Waste Land”: in fact, the poem “makes meaning out of its own (inadequate) attempt to explain itself.”¹⁶³

The poem’s problems, Menand argues, are a symptom not of the poet’s breakdown but of the culture in which he wrote, where the “nineteenth century metaphysics of style”¹⁶⁴ had been exploded. In Eliot’s early 20th century, a style was just a style, superseded by contemporary reality; and yet the poet could do nothing but imitate one style or another in his attempt to capture that reality. The fragmentation of “The Waste Land” avoids this crisis by purposefully, preemptively enacting it. The poem’s fragmentation indemnifies Eliot from the charge that his goal was merely to achieve a stylistic, poetic result – to write something “literary” – and yet at the same time, the poem was, of course, Eliot’s poem. Making meaning out of fragmentation is testimony to Eliot’s singular genius at capturing modernity. As Menand comments, “Eliot appears nowhere, but his fingerprints are on everything.”¹⁶⁵ Macavity’s not there, but only Macavity could thus have absented himself.

What this reading of “The Waste Land” captures is Eliot’s preemptive nomination of his poem – and potentially, himself – as a target of interpretation. A strong interpretive attitude must be brought to bear simply to make sense of the poem. There is no single coherent narrator to whom the reader might defer. Certainly the poem does not invite the unconscious, “racial” interpretation whose demise Eliot, rather innocently,

¹⁶³ Menand, *Discovering Modernism*, op. cit., p. 89.

¹⁶⁴ Id., p. 91. Menand sees Eliot’s own ideal in his description of *Ulysses* as “a gigantic culmination of an old [epoch].” Joyce has the “distinction... of having, in a positive sense, no style at all. I mean that every sentence Mr Joyce writes is peculiarly and absolutely his own; that his work is not a pastiche; but that nevertheless, it has none of the marks by which a ‘style’ may be distinguished.” Eliot’s essay appeared in the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise*, on 1 Dec 1922; and was translated as “Contemporary English Prose” when it appeared in *Vanity Fair* vol. 20 (July 1923), p.51. Quoted in Menand, op. cit., p. 92.

¹⁶⁵ Id.

would later mourn: while it is not clear what such an interpretation would look like, it seems unlikely to be prompted by such startling passages as, e.g., “And bats with baby faces in the violet light / Whistled, and beat their wings / And crawled head downward down a blackened wall”. The poem forces the reader to become a diagnostician. (Rather than symptomatic, this move might also be called masochistic, as it aggressively tweaks expectations to provoke a desired, aggressive response.¹⁶⁶) The breakdown of a coherent voice in “The Waste Land” steals a march on the threat that the reader will either ignore or aggressively misinterpret it, by preemptively naming the reader as hermeneutically aggressive,¹⁶⁷ then sitting back and waiting for his response.

An example may help to indicate the way primitivism advances Eliot’s preemptive or symptomatic strategy. As noted, Menand adduces “The Waste Land’s” Notes as an instance of Eliot’s fragmentation of the poetic voice. It is not incidental to Eliot’s strategy of fragmentation that the Notes focus on primitive myth and ritual – primarily the “vegetation ceremonies” described in James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* and the fertility-cum-Grail myths elucidated in Jesse Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*. In this respect the Notes follow a familiar pattern. Several works of 19th Century fiction featured an editorial voice which drew attention to the narrator’s ignorance of primitive cultures, and which emphasized their mysterious nature. H. Rider Haggard’s adventure novel *Allan Quatermain* featured footnotes which supplemented and challenged the narrator’s interpretations of “native rites.”¹⁶⁸ Similarly, while discussing an ancient

¹⁶⁶ This definition follows Gilles Deleuze’s treatment of masochism in *Coldness and Cruelty* (Verso: London).

¹⁶⁷ According to Menand, “The Waste Land” imitates a contemporary theory of degeneration. *Discovering Modernism: T S Eliot’s Intellectual Context*, p. 91.

¹⁶⁸ Street, Brian. *The Savage in Literature: Representations of ‘primitive’ society in English fiction, 1858-1920*, Routledge and Kegan Paul: Boston, 1975, p. 179.

African sculpture, the narrator of Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* exclaimed, "all I can do is to describe it as it was, and the reader must form his own conclusion."¹⁶⁹ By breaking down the narrator's authority, Haggard not only attributed to the reader a gentlemanly, anthropological knowledge, but interpellated him, as it were, into the dark, unsolved mystery of the primitive.

In "The Waste Land," the narrator's breakdown marks the presence of the primitive within the text. The poem's "symptoms" are to be read as citations or distorted enactments of primitive rites. The apostrophe to "Stetson," for instance, is to be interpreted as a distorted survival of the ancient belief (described in Frazer and Weston) that human sacrifice could bring about fertility in the natural world:

'That corpse you planted last year in your garden
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!'

Such passages may be rather grotesque or opaque¹⁷⁰ but their anthropological gestures towards the primitive ensure that the reader will perceive them as meaningful.

2. Primitivism, Fragmentation and Authenticity

Eliot did not want to be seen as a man of his time. "Whatever may have been the literary scene in America between the turn of the century and 1914," he claimed, "it remains in my mind a complete blank ... the only recourse was to poetry of another age

¹⁶⁹ Wordsworth Classics (Ware, Hertfordshire, 1998 [1890]), p. 188. (My emphasis.)

¹⁷⁰ Scholars have identified this beast's referent in a Jacobean tragedy.

and poetry of another land.”¹⁷¹ Eliot may have been posing, but the pose resonates with the attitude that good poetry was possible only if its production was shielded from and uncorrupted by what might be called, awkwardly, bad modernity. The price of authenticity is that the poet must demonstrate his own fragmentation – as discussed above, Eliot’s “The Waste Land” confronts the need to justify poetry by suggesting that it is indeterminably the result of either an attempt at poesis or of some non-aesthetic, uncontrollable behavior. Seen in this context, primitivism represents the culmination of a method that Eliot had been pursuing since his early poems.

In Eliot’s early poems the narrator is represented as the subject of involuntary mental processes. His mind is occupied by the “twisted things” that “the memory throws up”; his very “soul [is] constituted” by “the thousand sordid images” which it “watches the night revealing.”¹⁷² Both the original perception being recalled, and the act of remembrance – not unlike Proust’s *memoire involuntaire* – are beyond his control. This passive, spectatorial status guarantees that the narrator’s own desires and goals are not playing any role in the production of the material that comprises the poem.

While there is nothing overtly primitivist about Eliot’s insistence, in these early poems, on the uncontrollable content of the narrator’s mental life, that insistence may reflect contemporary philosophical discussions of the primitive. These discussions linked the primitive’s supposed irrationality to the immediacy of his perceptions. Henri Bergson, whose lectures Eliot attended in Paris in 1910, had distinguished two “selves,” one that experiences without analyzing, and one that analyzes without feeling. “We have been

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Weir, David. *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*. University of Massachusetts: Amherst, 1995, p. 175.

¹⁷² “Rhapsody on A Windy Night”; “Preludes (III)”, in *Selected Poems*, pp. 25, 23.

misled into neglecting the true testimony of the first self,” he wrote in *Time and Free Will* (1898), “because we have been cowed by the factitious authority of the second.”¹⁷³ In his early poems, Eliot applies Bergson’s preference for the “first self” to suggest that, rather than shying away from reality, the poems were being constructed by it, as by a kind of trauma. The poems reduced the role of the rational, analytical “second self” to registering the automatic operations of memory – in which, like a bad film strip, one cliché succeeds another and none contains any meaning with which the subject may identify. Indeed, Eliot wrote, the only way one’s “self-possess[ion]” can “flare up for a second” is if one predicts the next cliché in the sequence, so as to be able to say that, at least, “This is as I had reckoned,”¹⁷⁴ or, with Prufrock, “I have known them all already.” The advantage Eliot gains is that the narrator’s very helplessness in the face of his historical moment enables an authentic poetics, for his poem is an unmediated representation of the “twisted,” “sordid” world that has seared his mind.¹⁷⁵

Eliot’s primitivism refines this technique of authenticating artistic performance, as it signifies not only that the content of the poem is unmediated, but that its source is uncontaminated by the present. The primitivist poet, by demonstrating that his mental life is out of his control, also performs the fact that his conscious, civilized individuality

¹⁷³ *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F.L. Pogson. London: Allen and Unwin, 1910, p. 129. For a discussion of Bergson’s influence on Eliot, see also Menand, *Discovering Modernism*, pp. 33-34.

¹⁷⁴ “Portrait of a Lady,” *Selected Poems*, op. cit., p.20.

¹⁷⁵ Such a poetics recalls Woolf’s image, in “Modern Fiction,” of a “shower of atoms scoring the brain” of the author. It also fits with Renato Poggioli’s argument that avant-garde aesthetics relies on a “polemical ... deformation” of received literary styles. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald. Belknap / Harvard: Cambridge, 1968, p.180. Crawford, similarly, characterizes “The Death of St. Narcissus” as Eliot’s attempt “to burn off the page the polite saintliness of an exhausted way of life, replacing it with a savage rite.” *The Savage and the City in the Works of T.S. Eliot*, p. 80.

has been possessed by an uncanny, primitive self.¹⁷⁶ In “Portrait of A Lady,” for example, the narrator finds himself lost “among the windings of the violins / And the ariettes / Of cracked cornets.” Trapped in this banal hell, he senses something stirring involuntarily within him: “inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins / Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own”.¹⁷⁷ The “tom-tom” is inside the poet – indeed, it is a repetition of Eliot’s own first name – and yet the repetition also creates a moment of difference. It recalls the powerfully “fatalistic” drum in “Rhapsody On A Windy Night,” but it is also merely “absurd.” This internal drumbeat – which also echoes Eliot’s claim that poetry begins “with a savage beating a drum in a jungle” – teeters between intentional, aesthetic drumming and the mere, mindless action of hammering. It belongs to the protagonist, yet it is nonetheless inscrutable and uncontrollable.

The primary features of the poet’s inner primitive are that it is a powerful force and that it retains its otherness despite the attempts of the poet to identify with it.¹⁷⁸ Eliot argues that a good poet must have an “auditory imagination,” which he defines as “a feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end.”¹⁷⁹ The poet has an internal diving-bell; but once he has descended to the bottom of himself, he does not find “meanings in the ordinary sense,” but the atemporal rhythms that are constitutive

¹⁷⁶ The process is similar to Joyce’s claim (in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) that working up material into art, and paring oneself down to invisibility within the artwork, are the same process.

¹⁷⁷ Robert Crawford notes that, in the poem’s drafts, the tom tom first appears not as “dull,” but “droll,” then “strong,” then “male.” *The Savage and the City in the Works of T S Eliot* (Oxford University Press, 1987), p.72.

¹⁷⁸ *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 155.

¹⁷⁹ *UPUC*, p. 119.

of poetry and even language itself.¹⁸⁰ At bottom, “the poet” is nothing but this primitive, rhythmic template. The primitivist poet who steps onto the modern cultural stage is therefore propelled by an energy far deeper than himself; he has, as it were, an alibi.¹⁸¹

Generally speaking, primitivism promised that by acknowledging one’s inner primitive, one could create an “authentic” selfhood, which would function as the foundation for a new beginning in art, life, and ultimately society. In Eliot’s hands, primitivism melded into his somewhat ascetic theory of impersonality. In 1919, Eliot argued in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that the artist must be engaged in “a continual *surrender of himself* as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable”: namely, the racial / cultural “Tradition” of which he is an imperfect representative. A similar logic drives Eliot’s praise, also in 1919, of Wyndham Lewis’

Tarr:

The artist, I believe, is more *primitive*, as well as more civilized, than his contemporaries, his experience is deeper than civilization, and he only uses the phenomena of civilization in expressing it. Primitive instincts and acquired habits of ages are confounded in the ordinary man. In the work of Mr. Lewis we recognize the thought of the modern and the energy of the caveman.¹⁸²

Lewis’ energetic insistence on the primal and essential enables him to “express” a unique “experience” that is “deeper than civilization.” The judgment that “civilization” is secondary to Lewis’ individual experience may seem inconsistent with Eliot’s verdict that “Tradition” trumps individuality, but there is a deeper affinity. What Lewis

¹⁸⁰ Id.

¹⁸¹ Admittedly, such gestures toward the primitive may seem like portals to the deepest recesses of the soul, or like so much stage makeup. As a set of iterable gestures, primitivism was a mask of depth. And since the primitive represents a sort of lowest common cultural denominator, everyone’s inmost savage by definition looks much alike. As August Macke riddled in “Masks,” a kind of primitivist manifesto, “the exterior of the form of art is its interior.” “Masks” (1912), reprinted in *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, ed. Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, trans. Klaus Lankheit (Viking: New York, 1974), p.85.

¹⁸² *The Egoist*, Sept. 1919, p.106 (emphasis in original).

“expresses” is more profound than the “acquired habits” that constitute his own personality.

It follows that Lewis’ self-expressions are above reproach. Lewis the primitivist is forgiven his theatrics¹⁸³ because he has demonstrated a loss of self-control, which signifies the presence in him of the essential primitive energy that, in most cases, modernity has repressed. Eliot claims that *Tarr* “is only in part a novel; for the rest, Mr. Lewis is a magician who compels our interest in himself; he is the most fascinating personality of our time rather than a novelist.”¹⁸⁴ We are “compelled” by Lewis because, paradoxically, it seems he is not consciously responsible for actions which are mysteriously resonant with our own deepest needs. In the “Tradition” essay, Eliot defines the poet’s Herculean task as synchronically embodying the essence of his entire culture. Similarly, Lewis is not defined by his historical moment, but has something of crucial importance to say to it, because he is “older than” his contemporaries.

Eliot’s primitivism offered to deflect attention from the artist’s psychology while also representing it as something deep and universal. The importance Eliot attached to these benefits may be seen by comparing his praise of Lewis with his criticism of Shakespeare. Eliot’s best-known aesthetic theory is perhaps that of the “objective correlative,” which he defined as “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events” as represented in a literary work. If those objects “correlate” to a particular emotion, it will

¹⁸³ Ronald Bush argues that “normally, [Eliot] finds [the] lack of connection to inner life appalling. But part of him, during special moments, is able to enjoy” that lack, “consciously and keenly,” as a “spectacle. These moments ‘are of very great usefulness to dramatic verse.’ They allow the poet to swell out his language by incorporating [otherwise rejected] styles.... More importantly, they allow the poet to render a certain kind of non-sentimental ‘awareness’—an awareness of the human need to create and sustain an artificial self.” Primitivism extended this “special moment” to the “enjoyment” of an *inner* “spectacle” that was, precisely, *non-artificial*. *T S Eliot: A Study in Character and Style* (Oxford: 1984), p. 30.

¹⁸⁴ *The Egoist*, op cit., p.106.

be triggered in the reader; the author will have discovered the emotion's "formula."¹⁸⁵

The artist's proper aim is not to "express" his own emotions, but to produce art that produces emotions in turn, with the ideal ratio between an artistic representation and its correlate emotion being 1:1. Eliot elaborated this theory, ostensibly, to explain why *Hamlet* is unsatisfactory. Shakespeare's play fails to please, Eliot argues, because "we perceive [it] to be superimposed upon [the] much cruder material [of previous versions of the story] which persists even in the [play's] final form."¹⁸⁶ *Hamlet* failed to sublimate "the efforts of a series of men" to reshape the old story that had been handed down to Shakespeare. Eliot similarly senses the hidden presence of "some [private] stuff that [Shakespeare himself] could not drag to light." Shakespeare should have sublimated the efforts of previous writers, and should have dragged his own emotional stuff into the light for scrutiny, before ever staging the play.

It is in precisely these circumstances that primitivism pays dividends. The primitivist artwork succeeds not despite but because it retains such unfinished material; primitivism positively values that which the author cannot objectify. If *Hamlet*'s rawness fails to be aesthetically pleasing, it is not because Eliot demanded that all writers live up to Joyce's standard and become invisible behind their texts (disinterestedly "paring their fingernails"). The "problem" with *Hamlet*, instead, is that Shakespeare strained to achieve a perfect, finished surface when his materials called for a primitivist aesthetic.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ This "formula," which is vastly more affective than descriptions of emotional states, recalls the metaphor of the "platinum catalyst" for turning emotion into art that Eliot described in "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

¹⁸⁶ This material was the work of previous authors, who had inherited the same revenge-tragedy plot that eventually culminated in Shakespeare's play. "Hamlet and His Problems [1920]," *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays* (Dover: Mineola, N.Y., 1998), p.55.

¹⁸⁷ This parallels the logic of Eliot's pragmatic defense of relativism as "conscious neglect" to Norbert Weiner: "one has got to neglect some aspects of the situation, and what relativism does... is to neglect

In Eliot's analysis, it seems that Shakespeare's efforts smack of self-protective suppression, rather than the self-abnegating acceptance of his obscurely powerful raw materials. By contrast, Eliot praised Lewis' *Tarr* precisely for retaining evidence of the "energy" of its composition.¹⁸⁸

Three years after the *Hamlet* essay, a book review entitled "The Beating of A Drum" elaborated this shift in Eliot's position. Again discussing Elizabethan drama, Eliot now argues that when a literary work is based on a prior text, then not just the "form" but "the *nature* of the finished product ('finished,' of course, is relative) is essentially present in the crude forerunner."¹⁸⁹ A primitivist perspective enables Eliot to prize the awkward and unpolished, the (un)finished product that represents both its crude forerunner and the artist's attempts to "finish" it.¹⁹⁰ Residual evidence of the artist's labor or effort is an indicator of the difficulty of his materials and thus, their value.¹⁹¹

Eliot's primitivism justified the production of heterogeneous artifacts and prized the "failure" to impose a single coherent surface or style. On the same grounds, Eliot also justified the artistic impulse itself as a primitive drive for which the artist could not be held responsible: if the artist's need to produce the artwork can be described as

consciously where realism protests that there is nothing to neglect, and idealism that it has neglected nothing." *Letters of TS Eliot*, ed. Valerie Eliot (Harcourt Brace: NY, 1988), 6 Jan 1915, p.80.

¹⁸⁸ In Eliot's praise of *Tarr*, as well, the figure of the primitive fuses Lewis' conscious thought with an organism driven by instinct, in an exuberant embrace of raw sensation: "[i]ntelligence ... is only a part of Mr. Lewis' quality; it is united with a vigorous physical organism which interests itself directly in sensation for its own sake" (*Egoist* 105).

¹⁸⁹ A review of Olive Mary Busby's "Studies in the Development of the Fool in the Elizabethan Drama." *Nation and Athenaeum*, Oct. 6 1923, p.11-12.

¹⁹⁰ Like Levi-Strauss's definition of myths in "The Structural Study of Myth," the artwork, to Eliot, both "retains" (diachronically) and "represents" (as ahistorically, eternally valid) a kind of corpus of cultural knowledge.

¹⁹¹ Primitivism valorizes the unfinished product which retains the primitive material, but also gives the poet liberty to base his art on the creation of an aesthetic derived from that material itself. Henry Moore later said that his goal was to see the artwork already present but hidden within the raw material, and then simply to clear away the excess.

unconscious, that artwork may be said to be justified as psychically necessary. “The arts developed incidentally to the search for objects of talismanic properties,” Eliot asserts, finding that art “in its more primitive forms [had] very practical magical purposes—to avert the evil eye, to cure some disease, or to propitiate some demon.”¹⁹² The modern reader has lost the sense that art is necessary because art has lost these functions. This loss in turn opened up room in which to rationalize the need for artistic expression. “An unoccupied person, finding a drum, may be seized with a desire to beat it; but unless he is an imbecile he will be unable to continue beating it, and thereby satisfying a need (rather than a “desire”) without finding a reason for so doing.”¹⁹³ Seeing through such post-hoc reasoning, Eliot reminds us that artistic production is a function of something intrinsic to the human organism, something pre-existing individual rational choice. The need for art cannot be rationally explained, and that is its value. One has not chosen art, either as a producer or a consumer, but has been compelled to it by an unnamable drive.

3. The Meaningfulness of the Primitive

Eliot’s primitivist strategy of signifying authenticity by dividing the poet into an uncontrolled interior process and a recording consciousness – “inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins” – is successful only insofar as the strange, interior process is itself seen as a site of meaning. That meaningfulness, ironically, derives from the view that the “primitive mentality” was non-ratiocinative.

¹⁹² *Criterion* 2 (1923/24), review of *The Growth of Civilization* and *The Origin of Magic* by W. J. Perry, p. 490; “The Social Function of Poetry.”

¹⁹³ “The Beating of a Drum,” *Nation and Athenaeum* (6 Oct 1923), p.12.

“The savage” of the 19th Century lacked any meaningful interiority whatsoever because he was incapable of interpreting his own history and culture.¹⁹⁴ Such a primitive was easily objectified. Edward Burnett Tylor, the “father of [English] anthropology,” took the step of subjecting primitive cultures to quantification by applying statistics to their study.¹⁹⁵ With the rise of ethnography in the early 20th Century, however, the objectifying gaze had begun to turn inward. The discipline, in James Clifford’s view, transformed the “cultural predicament” of modernity into a positive goal: “to see culture and its norms—beauty, truth, reality—as artificial arrangements susceptible to detached analysis and comparison with other possible dispositions.”¹⁹⁶ Ironically, the primitive’s lack of reflexive knowledge of the contingency and relativity of his beliefs made him the object of nostalgic envy.¹⁹⁷

Anthropologists conjectured that the mental life of primitives was driven by images: intensely felt, intuitive, and unafflicted by the artificial mediations of reason.¹⁹⁸ According to T. E. Hulme, these qualities are precisely what was needed to renovate modern poetry. Poetry, to Hulme, “is a compromise for a language of intuition which would hand over sensations bodily,” and as such should be a language of “images,” for

¹⁹⁴ Cf. E B Tylor: “The lower races, wanting documentary memorials, loose in preserving tradition, and ever ready to clothe myth in its shape, can seldom be trusted in their stories of long past ages.” The absence of historical records means we cannot “write the course of culture in its lower stages.” *Primitive Culture* (Peter Smith: Gloucester, MA, 1970 [2nd ed., 1873]), p. 39.

¹⁹⁵ Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1st ed., 1871) claimed that “the statistical method,” which its founder Quetelet had applied to discrete social phenomena like suicide and murder, was applicable to the entire spectrum of behavior.

¹⁹⁶ Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge: 1988), p. 119. This thesis fits well with Ronald Bush’s argument that Eliot’s early poetry betrays a fundamental distrust of being betrayed by any given emotion (“The Pathology of Rhetoric,” Ch.2 of *T S Eliot*). One could expand Bush’s point to say that Eliot’s worldview is not so much skeptical as grounded in a belief in the inadequacy of any belief system over an extended period of time.

¹⁹⁷ For a history of the rise of anthropology as an academic discipline, c.f. M. Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

¹⁹⁸ See, e.g., Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*.

these comprise “the very essence of intuitive language.”¹⁹⁹ Modern poetry that could recreate primitive mental processes would thus have the capability of producing feeling immediately through words – rather like the objective correlative. Such poetry might reclaim for modern subjectivity the ability to experience thought as feelings. Primitivist poetics overlapped a good deal with the qualities that Eliot claimed the metaphysical poets exemplified before history, essentially, took a wrong turn with modernity. Today, “the [ordinary man] falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking.”²⁰⁰ For modern man, one thing follows another, whereas the metaphysical poet – and, I argue, the primitive – experienced ideas and sensations simultaneously as “forming new wholes.”

In Eliot’s view, then, the primitive enjoyed his non-rational mentality as a privilege. There was, further, a profound nexus between the meaningfulness that the primitive experienced in his daily life and the fact that his world was opaque and mysterious rather than an object of analytical probing. The real is irrational and the irrational is real, whereas the inauthenticity of modernity derives from the fact that the logical, transparent world science has created is so manipulable and understandable as to be meaningless. Eliot thus claimed that “the natives” of a certain “unfortunate archipelago are dying out principally for the reason that the ‘Civilization’ forced upon

¹⁹⁹ The essays were published in *The New Age* in 1909. See Menand, op. cit., p. 34.

²⁰⁰ *The Sacred Wood and Other Essays*. London: 1920 [Dover reprint, 1989], p.127. This theory recurs decades later in Eliot’s thought, although the relevant Queen has changed: “The history of every branch of intellectual activity provides the same record of the diminution of England from the time of Queen Anne. It is not so much the intellect, but something superior to intellect, which went for a long time into eclipse; and this luminary, by whatever name we may call it, has not yet wholly issued from its secular obnubilation.” *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 62.

them has deprived them of all interest in life. They are dying from pure boredom.” The moral is that,

when every theatre has been replaced by 100 cinemas, when every musical instrument has been replaced by 100 gramophones ... when applied science has done everything possible with the materials on this earth to make life as interesting as possible, it will not be surprising if the population of the entire civilized world rapidly follows the fate of the Melanesians.²⁰¹

Encountering a man-made object that was created only to give one a pleasurable sensation, virtually without the necessity of one’s own effort, is not a meaningful experience. The products of civilization have, as it were, “the look of roses that are looked at.” The unfortunate natives are being forced into a prefabricated world in which they, like Prufrock, will have known it all already. Unlike us, however, the “native” Melanesian is not yet inured to the death of the inexplicable difficulty of reality,²⁰² of which he himself is exemplary, and so he is dying out.

Eliot’s critique of “civilization” applies not only to cinemas and gramophones but to anthropology itself. As a scientific discipline it promises to create meaning through its explanatory power, but explanation destroys the meaningfulness of the thing explained.²⁰³

Anthropology to Eliot was rather like psychoanalysis to Karl Krauss: the disease of which it purports to be the cure. “A number of sciences have sprung up in an almost tropical exuberance which undoubtedly excites our admiration and the garden not

²⁰¹ “London Letter,” *Dial* 73 (Dec. 1922), p.663, citing “The Depopulation of Melanesia” by W. H. R. Rivers (whom Eliot calls a “psychologist”).

²⁰² In fact, Rivers’ argument about native depopulation was not based on technological progress, but on “the abolition of head-hunting by the British [colonial] Government.” “T S Eliot: Anthropologist and Primitive,” *American Anthropologist* 78 n.4 (1976), p. 799.

²⁰³ Though he viewed anthropology’s claims to scientific status as dubious—“you must postulate your own attitude and interpret your so-called facts into it, and how can this be a science?”—Eliot ultimately concedes, “And yet there is the material, and there must be a science of it.” The concession is telling just because it admits human behavior to have the status of “material” (“Primitive Ritual” [1913], quoted in Gray, *Eliot’s Intellectual and Poetic Development*, p. 134). Eliot’s view that “it is perhaps the supreme difficulty of criticism—to make the facts generalize themselves” (“Philip Massinger,” *The Sacred Wood*, p.71), is similarly expressive of a paradigm demanding inductive methods of inquiry.

unnaturally has come to resemble a jungle. Such men as Tylor, and Robertson Smith, and Wilhelm Wundt, who early fertilized the soil, would hardly recognize the resulting vegetation.”²⁰⁴ The ironic metaphor implies that instead of the actual jungle, modernity is left with a simulacrum, as scientific discourse has begun to replace reality.

Primitivist poetry thus has an excellent alibi, for it represents a desperately-needed attempt to break the interpretive fantasy that holds sway over the modern imagination. The goal is not explication, but the reinvigoration of meaning; in a sense, it is anthropology in reverse. Primitivism whets the reader’s anthropological appetite for knowledge, and invites the modern reader’s aggressive hermeneutics, but then converts this desire into an appreciation of the meaningfulness of opacity. Eliot’s call for a “Return to the Sources”²⁰⁵ is a call for a poetry that creates meaning by both tempting and foreclosing interpretation.

The allusions in “The Waste Land” exemplify the way Eliot set this idea to work. Levenson, studying the poem’s drafts and revisions, noted that Eliot tended to replace allusions to relatively recent artistic works, with allusions to works at a greater cultural and temporal remove. An epigraph from Conrad is exchanged for one from Petronius; an allusion to Henry James is replaced by a reference to Middleton. Whereas the poem’s original title, “he do the police in different voices,” was taken from Dickens, “the waste land” refers to the Grail myth, which in turn derived from vegetation rituals, and Eliot (as a reader of Frazer) may have taken these to be the origin of culture itself.²⁰⁶ Eliot pushed

²⁰⁴ “Euripides and Professor Murray” (1920), *The Sacred Wood*, p. 43.

²⁰⁵ “The maxim, Return to the Sources, is a good one.” “War-Paint and Feathers,” *Athenaeum*, 17 Oct. 1919, p. 1036. Hereafter “War-Paint.”

²⁰⁶ *A Genealogy of Modernism*, p.203. And compare “The Beating of A Drum,” where Olive Busby’s “Studies on the Development of the Fool in the Elizabethan Drama” is criticized for not tracing his origins far enough: the fool in *Lear*, Eliot angrily claims, “can hardly be classified as the ‘comic servant’”: he is “a

his poem towards the unfamiliar and the long-past, moving from “literary” allusions to citations of myth. The point of doing so is revealed by the process of revision itself: the fact that Eliot was, indeed, able to find more and more remote cultural artifacts with which to make the same points and evoke the same feelings. The power of the primitive is that his cultural artifacts uncannily parallel those of contemporary society, and can be traced to analogues throughout history. By its continued survival the primitive suggests that there exists an ahistorical essence to or truth about humanity. The poet who can grasp this truth, rather than recoiling from what it represents (“the horror,” according to Kurtz), has understood “not only the pastness of the past, but also its presence.” If, as argued previously, the primitive’s non-ratiocinative mentality allows it to grasp the present moment immediately and accurately, that mentality also transcends time – which was presumably a relief for a poet who had “measured out my life with coffee spoons.” Thus “The Waste Land’s” use of the Grail legend precisely as an *infertility* myth, suggests that the primitive mind was capable of giving meaning even to the sense of spiritual dryness with which modernity was afflicted.

Eliot credits Joyce with discovering the means to apply this insight to literature, via his “continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity.”²⁰⁷ As *Ulysses* demonstrated, this “mythical method” was capable of making the “futility and anarchy” of contemporary life “possible for art,” as he would recall at a performance of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* (“the effect was like *Ulysses*...”)

possessed; a very cunning and very intuitive person, he has more than a suggestion of the shaman or medicine man.” (p.11)

²⁰⁷ “Ulysses, Order and Myth,” *Dial* LXXV, 1923, pp. 480-83.

Picasso's primitivist paintings.²⁰⁸ And yet there is an enormous difference between Joyce's and Eliot's investment in the primitive. For Joyce, the *Odyssey* was a known quantity, chosen because it would be understood to present an ironic contrast to modern life.

By contrast to Joyce, for whom Homer's own values are less important in their own right than in their utility as an ironic framework through which to view modernity, for Eliot, the task of creating a continuous parallel between modernity and mythical narratives was a far more grave affair: not a formula at all, but an almost spiritual project. Like *Ulysses*, "The Waste Land" also uses "the mythical method" for its ironic power, but the poem is agonized by the desire to retrieve the primitive mentality expressed in myth. The poem sees that mentality as an ideal in which humanity, ignorant of its ignorance, effortlessly imbued the external world with meaning so profound as to be eternal in human culture. To reach the savage, the poet descends to "the bottom of the abyss" in himself, where he finds "what few ever see, and what those [few] cannot bear to look at for long"²⁰⁹ By citing the unspeakable one creates a parallel between it and everyday language, between the savage drumbeat and the degraded word, imbuing the latter with a meaningful resonance. At the same time, the *agon* of "The Waste Land" is its sense that it is impossible for the modern subject to think his way back into primitive

²⁰⁸ "London Letter," *Dial* LXXI (Oct. 1921), p. 452. At the time, Picasso and Stravinsky's primitivism associated them precisely with license and sexuality. Eliot was thus surely unique in praising Stravinsky's ballet for being "a form as strict as any old one, perhaps stricter"; and few others claimed that "cubism is not license, but an attempt to establish order" ("London Letter," *Dial* LXXI (Aug. 1921), p. 215). Eliot's literary criticism overshadows his art criticism, but in addition to Picasso, he informally reviewed "an exhibition... at the Goupil Gallery" in a letter to Mrs. Jack Gardner (founder of Boston's Gardner Museum) on 4 Apr. 1915. Eliot noted that Lewis exhibited works, as did Gaudier-Brzeska and Jacob Epstein, and said the latter's "wood statues ... give something suggesting the vigor of a central African image." *Letters*, p.94.

²⁰⁹ *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 111.

mentality. It is impossible to know whether DA means datta, dayadhvam, or damyata; but perhaps, if we listen to what the thunder says...

A brief examination of the poem's use of nonsense syllables may clarify this point. After ekphrastically representing "the change of Philomel" as an artwork, Part II adds that "other withered stumps of time / Were told upon the walls." These tales are the myths whose meanings have been lost, which have been reduced to subject matter for decadent art adorning the walls of a boudoir, just as Shakespeare has metamorphosed into "that Shakespeherian rag" and Michelangelo has decayed into the subject of women's idle talk as they "come and go." Once upon a time, entire cultures felt the meaning of these myths; now, they are an unconscious expression of individual alienation.²¹⁰ What is striking is that the Philomel myth itself gives a new kind of meaning to the process by which modernity has lost access to the truth. A draft version of the poem explicitly associates these "tales, from the old stumps and bloody ends of time" with the stump of Philomel's tongue, incapable of telling tales because it was torn out at the root so she could not accuse her rapist. The problem of modernity is not simply a species of cultural amnesia, but the refusal to acknowledge the primitive darkness of our hearts. Myths would name us, speak to our primitive natures, implicate us, just as Philomel would name her rapist; but "humankind" defends itself against this self-knowledge with repressive violence.

²¹⁰ As Grover Smith notes, the "Waste Land" uses myths "of thwarted questing and fruitless psychological initiation", not of lost fertility or eventual salvation. "The Structure and Mythical Method of The Waste Land" (1983), rpt. *In The Waste Land*, ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House, NJ: 1986), p. 102.

For all its “rhythmical grumbling,”²¹¹ the poem is haunted by guilt after the Philomel scene, until the irruption, 100 lines later, of “Twit twit twit / Jug jug jug jug jug jug / So rudely forc’d. / Tereu.” From the meaningless “twit,” to the allusive, Elizabethan “jug,” to “Tereu,” the onomatopoeia traces an arc of increasing antiquity. The final word almost names the rapist and the myth’s origin, but it is cut short by one unpronounceable letter, leaving the merely songful “Tereu.” 150 lines later still, the consequence is another metamorphosis, as the nightingale’s song echoes in the hermit-thrush’s “Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop” and the rooster’s “Co co rico co co rico”. In the waste land, at night, these songs tempt us by representing the water and dawn which we seek in the future, but which we have buried and forgotten.

The poem’s ending is structured by the repetition of another nonsense monosyllable, “DA ... DA ... DA.” Like “Tereu,” “DA” is a truncated, secret word. According to the Hindu myth, gods, demons and men interpret the word differently, as Datta, Dayadhvam, and Damyata. Again, the ancient myth seems to contain the modern subject’s dilemma: his inability to interpret the primal word that promises the answer to that very dilemma. The only possibility seems to be to make a leap of faith, by accepting whatever mythic “fragments” that one’s culture has managed to “shore” up despite one’s ignorance of their original meaning. From guiltily acknowledging a similarity to her rapist, the poem thus comes around to identifying with Philomel – the singer of nonsense who nonetheless knows it to be imbued with meaning – as it asks, “Quando fiam ceu [uti] chelidon” (When shall I become like a swallow?).

²¹¹ As Eliot later characterized the poem.

Moderns, like Madame Sosostris (with her Tarot deck) and Stetson (with his “planted” corpse), can only dumbly mime the actions and formulae which, once upon a time, were imminently meaningful. Nonetheless, the fact that even the isolated, ignorant modern individual returns to ritual, indicates that primitive forms of behavior are pre-conscious and innate, even now. What is crucial is the claim implicit in the poem’s opening lines, in which an eternal consciousness is cruelly awakened to modernity, which is that these primitive rhythms and meanings are innately meaningful and meaningfully innate. Beneath the poem’s many “voices,” one authentic and ancient voice, trapped within time, has access to an atemporal truth, which awaits the return of fecundity and would prefer to keep life in a state of suspended animation until then. The poem figures this voice in the Sibyl at Cumae, who withers eternally but cannot die, and especially in Tiresias, who has “foresuffered all” the misery and absurdity modernity has to offer.

The fact that this poem, spoken through the mouth of Tiresias and loosely structured via an ancient fertility myth, resonates so strongly with the crisis of modernity, shows that the only way to comprehend even the unprecedented failure of modernity is through the mythic forms created by our earliest forbearers. The poem’s paradox is thus that the emptiness of modernity can be represented through ancient myths and primitive rituals, at the same time as the mentality and social order associated with those myths and rituals are precisely what modernity lacks. The ancient or primitive mentality was a totality within which the malaise of alienation and isolation, dryness and sterility, had its place, whereas with modernity the malaise has broken all other structures and occupied the field of mentality and perception, with only momentary irruptions of a distantly remembered alternative.

4. The Inexplicability of the Primitive

Eliot saw the primitive as a means of justifying poetry as the result of uncontrollable drives which were essential to art and which remained constant throughout human history. Similarly, he felt primitivism made modernity possible for art by setting up a continuous parallel between modernity's quotidian surface and the mythic forms and primitive rites that it ignorantly re-enacted. The crucial feature of the primitive for the poet was its uncontrollable nature and its fragmentation of his identity. Similarly, the primitive had to remain inexplicably mysterious if it was to function as a source of obscure meaning for the tissue of clichés that comprised modern life.

More precisely, the primitivist walks a fine line between representing the primitive as comprehensible and incomprehensible, something with which one might seek to identify and something abhorrent. Eliot's view of the primitive resonates with the ideological representations of tribal peoples prevalent at the turn of the 20th Century. Eric Cheyfitz argues that the metaphorical project of imperialism is to designate as foreign that which it seeks to dominate.²¹² This ideology led to representations of Native Americans as peoples who, despite their "foreignness," were nonetheless subservient subjects of American government – an idea blessed by the Supreme Court's oxymoronic holding, in 1823, that Native Americans comprised "domestic dependent nations." By the time of Eliot's young adulthood, the "Indian Wars" had ended (in 1898) and the "Indians" confined to shrinking reservations – including one on the outskirts of Eliot's St. Louis. America thus exported the ideology of the domestic frontier overseas. The

²¹² Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan* (University of Pennsylvania: Philadelphia, 1997), p. xiii.

Roosevelt Administration wanted to annex the Philippines. In order to convince voters that Filipinos needed American civilization, in 1904 the Administration put several dozen Igorot tribesmen on display at the St. Louis World's Fair. Ironically, the government so over-played the "savagery" of the Igorot that the popular press began to doubt whether an American force could possibly accomplish its civilizing mission. Subsequently, instructions came from Washington that the savages "be clothed more fully,"²¹³ at which point the Igorot became ill in the heat of the Missouri summer. Eliot, who had attended the Fair with his father, avidly followed the affair in newspaper clippings.

Published in a school newspaper,²¹⁴ Eliot's earliest stories show the influence of these historical currents, as they imitated "Westerns" and adventure tales of young colonialists.²¹⁵ The adventure tale, as a genre,²¹⁶ intended its young readers to internalize their civilizing mission. The savage existed in the present tense,²¹⁷ and Africa and its inhabitants were portrayed as a test of a man's character. But the Western was indifferent to the white boy's burden²¹⁸ and the education of future colonial administrators.²¹⁹ If the

²¹³ Ronald Bush, "The Presence of the Past," in *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, ed. Bush and Elazar Barkan (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1995), *passim*.

²¹⁴ This was the *Fireside*, a publication of the Smith Academy of St. Louis. Crawford, p. 26.

²¹⁵ The generic species were related closely enough for Western tropes to migrate back into the adventure tale, and Eliot recognized the affinity, as other of his early stories move effortlessly to settings like "Matahiva" and "the Tanzatatapoo Islands." Crawford, *The Savage and the City*, p. 32.

²¹⁶ The adventure tale is thus instrumental even in its fantastic misrepresentations of "the native." Edward Said argued, analogously, that the fantasies of British Orientalism were always couched as useable information. *Orientalism*, p. 206.

²¹⁷ Thus the stories sought to give the impression that they were true to the author's personal experience. The anthropologist Andrew Lang, in 1891, wrote that if "there has ... arisen a new taste for exotic literature... [it] is only because men of imagination and literary skill have been the new conquerors, the Corteses and Balboas of India, Africa, Australia ... All such writers...have ... *seen* new worlds for themselves." *Essays in Little*, 1891, quoted in Brian V. Street, *The Savage in Literature*, p.11 (my emphasis). Lang co-authored several books with H. Rider Haggard.

²¹⁸ See Brian V. Street, *The Savage in Literature: Representations of 'primitive' society in English fiction 1858-1920* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: Boston, 1975) for a review of the primitive in Victorian fiction. The civilizing mission entailed all the signs of racial superiority, including health and manliness. The decadence of primitivism can be seen, by contrast, in the way its interest in atavism subverts ideas of racial health (as seen, e.g., in Max Nordau's *Degeneration*.)

Native American had been successfully “civilized,” the question of his political rehabilitation would have arisen. In the Western, the savage was confined to a nostalgic past.²²⁰ Cheyfitz argues that “the failure of dialogue, figured as a genetic inability in the other, rather than as a problem of cultural difference, is the imperial alibi for domination”.²²¹ But once the “Indian” has been domesticated, the primitivist is free to seek out that difference in order, somewhat decadently, to savor it.

By 1919, Eliot had come full circle from his youthful stories, for he acidly lampooned popular representations of the primitive as a “romantic Chippaway [who] bursts into the drawing room.”²²² By contrast, the serious writer is “the first person to see the merits of the savage, the barbarian and the rustic, [and] ... the last person to see the savage in a romantic light.” To protect the primitive, Eliot indulges a fantasy in which any author who desired access to ethnographic data would first be required to show his security clearance. “The poet and the anthropologist both want to be provided with these data,” writes Eliot, “and they are the only persons whose desires should be consulted. [They] will be the last people to tolerate the whooping brave ... as a drawing-room phenomenon”. The loss of the savage’s Otherness is an index of the feminization of popular literature—a field evidently still dominated by Hawthorne’s “damned mob of scribbling women.” Eliot’s identification with the primitive derives from his desire for a

²¹⁹ Mayne Reid—whose *The Boy Hunters* Eliot imitated in several early stories—was an Irishman, and a German, Karl May, was a wildly successful writer of Westerns. Reid, in turn, had been influenced by such colonial adventure classics as Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island*. See Crawford, *The Savage and the City in the Works of TS Eliot* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1987) pp. 23-25.

²²⁰ In 1893, even before the West had been “won,” Frederic Jackson Turner was lecturing on “The Importance of the frontier in American history.” Quoted in *The Expansion of England: Race, Ethnicity and Cultural History*, ed Bill Schwartz (Routledge, NY: 1996), p.2.

²²¹ *The Poetics of Imperialism*, p. 16.

²²² “War-Paint and Feathers,” *Athenaeum* 17 October 1919, p. 1036. (Review of George W. Cronyn, ed., *The Path of the Rainbow: An Anthology of Songs and Chants from the Indians of North America*.)

figure whose hermeneutic difficulty would be respected even by the mass market. When Eliot recommends a cleansing regime of ethnographic research, it is not because he hopes the ethnographers will learn the truth about the “Chippaway,” but because such a method will show how little we know of him.²²³

One need not accuse Eliot of being an imperialist to see a functional similarity between his insistence on the difficulty or otherness of the primitive, and the ideological uses of the savage as an excuse for expansionism. The figure of the primitive was a kind of rhetorical lever, the fulcrum of which was the claim that the primitive was foreign or other in ways that the speaker alone could comprehend. In Eliot’s case, this involved not imperialism but a pitched battle with anthropological explanations of the primitive. Eliot read widely and deeply in anthropology and ethnography,²²⁴ but his profit on it was that he had learned to curse those disciplines for purporting to “know” the primitive. What was crucial about the primitive was its persistent presence and its persistent inexplicability.

At the Sorbonne, Eliot attended the lectures of Bergson and also those of the anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl.²²⁵ Lévy-Bruhl’s topic was the universality of animism – the belief that the material world coexisted (in a continuous parallel) with a spiritual realm – among primitive societies. Lévy-Bruhl argued that in attempting to account for the phenomena he attributed to animism, other anthropologists had mistakenly assumed a similarity between their own mental processes those of primitives.

²²³ Eliot was also adverse to another clichéd trope, which represented the primitive as charmingly, surprisingly civilized. Cf., e.g., the ironic bite in his comment, “If the Bhikku Silacana’s information is quite unbiased, the primitive Shan tribes are undoubtedly more civilized than ourselves.” Eliot, “Recent British Periodical Literature in Ethics,” *International Journal of Ethics*, Jan. 1918, p. 276.

²²⁴ C.f. the discussions in Gray, Manganaro, and Crawford, *op cit*.

²²⁵ Levenson, Michael. That same year saw the publication of Lévy-Bruhl’s *Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (soon translated as *How Natives Think*), which Eliot later read.

He took as an example E. B. Tylor's scenario in which a primitive has a dream of traveling, but discovers on waking that his body has remained stationary. The "savage philosopher," Tylor claimed, trying to account for this, "probably made [his] first step by the obvious inference that every man has two things belonging to him, namely, a [bodily] life and a [spiritual] phantom".²²⁶ The primitive "probably reasoned about death" in the same way, until the hypothesis of bodies existing apart from spirits developed into a system of belief, according to which changes in the physical world could be explained by reference to the actions of the spirits of the dead.

To Lévy-Bruhl, the phrase, "savage philosopher," is an oxymoron. Tylor had simply assumed that primitives shared what Eliot would call our "more or less consciously rational inventing of theories to account for experience."²²⁷ By contrast, Lévy-Bruhl announced that animism is not a logically coherent belief system, but an aspect of a mentality wholly discontinuous from our own. The "native" is characterized by a "pre-logical," "mystical" mentality²²⁸ that is ruled by the "law of participation": "the fundamental belief ... that object, being, and phenomena can be ... both themselves and other than themselves," as for instance the primitive's belief that he *is* his totem *and* himself simultaneously.²²⁹ To Lévy-Bruhl, the primitive is not an individual apart from the world or a subject apart from his thoughts.

Eliot cited Lévy-Bruhl's theory of a "pre-logical" mentality from 1916 onward, and the theory of modern man's rejection of the "law of participation" has been traced as

²²⁶ *Primitive Culture* [1871], quoted in Gray, *Eliot's Intellectual and Poetic Development*, p. 115.

²²⁷ *Id.*

²²⁸ *How Natives Think*, p. 3; quoted in Manganaro 1986, p. 98.

²²⁹ Along with the law of participation, primitive mentality also followed the law of "collective representations": inherited ideas that are universally shared, and to which the native is bound by "respect, fear, adoration and so on." *Ibid.*, p. 61; quoted in Manganaro 1986, p. 99.

an influence on Eliot's own cultural theory, in particular his diagnosis of the "dissociation of sensibility" afflicting modernity.²³⁰ "Perception was an undifferentiated whole" for the primitive, but a "thought" is no longer an "experience" for us. But Eliot's use of Lévy-Bruhl went beyond the assimilation of his theories. Eliot so endorsed Lévy-Bruhl's critique of Tylor that he turned its premise – the radical otherness of primitive mentality – against its author. In "The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual," a philosophy seminar paper written three years after the Sorbonne lectures, Eliot criticizes Lévy-Bruhl for "invent[ing] an elaborate 'prelogism' to account for the savage's [mentality], where it is not certain that the savage, except so far as he had mental processes similar to our own, had any mental processes at all".²³¹ Eliot is not arguing for a return to Tylor, but saying that the question of mentality can never be answered. Tylor falsely identified his point of view with the primitive's, and despite himself Lévy-Bruhl does the same.

Eliot invalidates any claim to qualitative knowledge of primitive mentality, but simultaneously affirms that such knowledge is the only kind worth having. Eliot noted that primitive rituals were deemed important, according to the theory of "social evolution," because they would help us understand religion in modern society. The first step must be to ask what primitive rituals mean. Yet there is no way scientifically to achieve such an understanding.²³² In order to ask what primitive rituals mean we must ask to whom they are meaningful. Thus we confront the insurmountable difference

²³⁰ Certain ethnographic accounts mention a failure of the "law of participation" that Lévy-Bruhl calls "dissociation," when "what we call a natural phenomenon tends to become the sole content of perception to the exclusion of other [spiritual] elements" (ibid. 31; quoted in Manganaro 1986: 100). Manganaro argues that Eliot took this negation of pre-logicality as the closest we can come to identifying with the primitive mentality.

²³¹ *Josiah Royce's Seminar*, p.74 n.24.

²³² "The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual," quoted in Gray, *Eliot's Intellectual and Poetic Development*, p. 108.

between the primitive mentality and our own. Even if our own religion descends directly from primitive precursors, we cannot recapture what primitive rituals mean by reasoning backward from our own point of view, because our point of view on religious matters is already completely bound up within a culture that will inevitably distort our interpretations. Eliot quoted Bradley on this point: “The flower cannot know the bud.”²³³

Nor can the flower ask the bud, because the bud itself doesn’t know. In the “Introduction” to his mother’s poem, *Savonarola*, in 1926, Eliot argued that “no interpretation ... of a rite could explain its origin. For the meaning of the ... acts is to the performers themselves an interpretation; the same ritual remaining practically unchanged may assume different meanings for different generations of performers; and the rite may have even originated before ‘meaning’ meant anything at all”.²³⁴ Rituals were not invented with meanings in mind, but are behaviors repeated to the point of having meanings gradually attached to them. Eliot blocks off the remaining possibilities one by one. We cannot know the primitive mentality directly. “The primitive life” is “immersed in practice and incapable of the degree of speculative interest necessary for the constitution of an [ideational or mental] object,” whereas we “have no direct (immediate) knowledge of anything” or any means of retrieving primitive “practice.”²³⁵ Nor can we even construct a theory of primitive mentality, because “mental states [e.g. happiness] as such can never be objects of attention ... it is impossible to say what is left when you abstract from a mental state its reference [e.g. what has made one happy].”²³⁶

²³³ Id., quoted in Gray, *Eliot’s Poetic and Intellectual Development*.

²³⁴ Quoted in *Josiah Royce’s Seminar*, p. 73 n.23.

²³⁵ Quoted in Walter Benn Michaels, “Philosophy in Kinkanja,” p. 176. In Michaels’ reading of Eliot’s thesis, “there is once again a radical discontinuity between the primitive’s world and ours, a discontinuity which suggests that it may be in principle impossible to pass from the primitive’s world to our own” (ibid.).

²³⁶ Quoted in Michaels, p. 181.

Eliot insisted that the scientific claims of anthropology were fraudulent. Where science must be based on the inductive method of “generalization from the facts,” cultural questions necessarily involve the meaning of the cultural practices involved. When the question of meaning arises, it is impossible to separate facts from our interpretation of them because we project definitions before engaging in fact-based scientific induction. In sociology, Émile Durkheim attempted to avoid the problem by investigating how groups behaved, isolating “social facts” that can be known objectively.²³⁷ Durkheim offers as an example the relationship between an increase in suicide rates and a fall in rates of religious belief. Eliot counters that when the question is the meaning of primitive religious rituals, statistical analysis is useless. “Suicide is a social behavior in a rather different sense from the participation of a social group in a spring or harvest festival... You must take into account the *internal* meaning: what is a religious phenomenon for example which has not a religious meaning for its participants?”²³⁸ Only facts will do; yet a science of religion based on facts alone is nonsensical.

It is worth dwelling on Eliot’s insistence that the flower cannot know the bud because, if taken seriously, it would make primitivism impossible. As Eliot argues that we can have no objective knowledge of the primitive, he also closes off that wordless, subjective knowledge of the inner savage that was primitivism’s *sine qua non*. One suspects, in other words, that he does not really mean it, and indeed there is a strange inconsistency in his claim that the primitive is unknowable. His insistence on

²³⁷ *The Rules of Sociological Method* p.20, quoted in Gray, *Eliot’s Intellectual and Poetic Development*, p. 125.

²³⁸ *Id.*, pp. 125, 127.

distinguishing “between a fact and an interpretation”²³⁹ in the context of primitive belief is at odds with the pragmatic idea of factuality he cultivated in his thesis and elsewhere.²⁴⁰ A fact need not be defined in terms of objective reality. It is simply “an ideal construction” that “has its existence within a sphere of ... practical or scientific interest.”²⁴¹ An example of Eliot’s epistemological pragmatism is his nomination of “human value” as a “standard” for evaluating the natural world.²⁴² Although our situatedness within human societies means we cannot judge the “values” of other cultures objectively, our relationship to nature is different.²⁴³ In that context, our values, however particular or contingent, are as objective as they need to be.²⁴⁴ Eliot does not ask if our relationship to other species is any less cultural than our relationship to other cultures. Why, then, is it unsound to apply our values to the interpretation of primitive rituals? Because they are human objects? But Eliot has stripped them of any ability to enter into dialogue with their investigators. Primitives are not only pre-linguistic, they are encased – according to Eliot – in a solipsistic thought-world lacking “external objects.” The impenetrable primitive could not speak on his own behalf any more than an anthropologist could. Whatever anthropology might claim, the primitive was not

²³⁹ “Interpretation of Primitive Ritual,” quoted in Gray, id., p. 116.

²⁴⁰ “Philosophy in Kinkanja: Eliot’s Pragmatism,” *Glyph* 8. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1981.

²⁴¹ Quoted in Gray, id., pp. 117-118.

²⁴² Letter to Norbert Weiner, 6 Jan. 1915. *Letters*, p. 80.

²⁴³ Pragmatic critique applies to artistic production as well as to scientific knowledge. In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Eliot claims to have no more right than any other person to say what his poem, “The Waste Land” means. In this disavowal one may glimpse a pragmatist’s idea of the most crucial fact about any cultural product. “The Waste Land” is a meaningful poem not insofar as it means anything in particular, but proportionally as more people than its author are talking about what it means.

²⁴⁴ “There is a difference between natural and social evolution in that in the former we are able practically to neglect all values that are internal to the process, and consider the process from the point of view of *our* value, which is for our purposes conceived as outside the process... While to some extent in a social progress, and to a very great extent in a religious progress, the internal values are part of the external description” (Eliot’s thesis, quoted in Gray, id., p. 115).

recoverable. Eliot warns anthropology not to discuss meaning and value, even as he affirms that meaning and value are the only game in town.²⁴⁵

Only one anthropologist, in Eliot's view, had found the key: James G. Frazer, the author of the comparative anthropological study, *The Golden Bough*. Frazer's genius was to provide each "fact" gleaned about primitive cultural practices with a comparative framework based solely on its formal properties (e.g. the fact that sacrifices tended to occur at the culmination of fertility ceremonies), which avoided the need for substantive interpretation. Reviewing the third edition of the thirteen volume "book," Eliot describes the evolution of Frazer's comparative method as a "withdrawing in more and more cautious abstention from the attempt to explain"²⁴⁶ the rituals he documents.

Comparatively exposing "the similarities and identities underlying the customs of races very remote in every way" is exciting precisely because it creates a new kind of meaning from the facts.²⁴⁷ Frazer's inductively drawn, systematic framework shows that human culture takes a limited, discernable number of universal forms. All societies include some of a finite number of initiation, fertility, and funerary rituals, and so on.²⁴⁸ Frazer

²⁴⁵ Walter Benn Michaels' discussion of Eliot's pragmatism argues that the thesis contains a projection of the limits of pragmatic knowledge, figured as primitive: "primitivism ... cease[s] to be philosophy's necessary hypothesis and become instead its nostalgic fantasy" (176).

²⁴⁶ In "A Prediction in Regard to Three English Authors," Eliot wrote of Frazer's "stupendous compendium of human superstition and folly," that "It is a work of no less importance for our time than the complementary work of Freud—throwing its light on the obscurities of the soul from a different angle; and it is a work of perhaps greater permanence, because it is a statement of fact which is not involved in the maintenance or fall of any theory of the author's. Yet it is not a mere collection of data, and it is not a theory" (quoted in Gray, id., 131). Yet as Gray asks, given that Frazer can only give a *formal* account of the past, has he really, as Eliot claims, "extended the consciousness of the human mind into as dark a backward and abysm of time as has yet been explored"? (id).

²⁴⁷ Brian Street argues that "the great appeal of works like *The Golden Bough* was that they provided a scheme into which interesting customs from exotic lands could be fitted... they were no longer to be merely described as savage or horrific, they were to be 'explained' by some theory". *The Savage in Literature*, p. 152.

²⁴⁸ Quoted in Gray, id., p. 129.

provides Eliot the requisite picture of the human mind operating throughout history and space.

Ironically, for an epistemological pragmatist, Eliot embraced Frazer at a time when his claims were being rejected by the anthropological community. In 1896, Frans Boas published “The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology,” an essay that marked the death of armchair anthropology and became the touchstone of a school that argued for the necessity of going “inside” cultures to ask about their meanings. Frazer claimed that “one general conclusion” had emerged “from the mass of particulars” collected by ethnographers in the field: “the essential similarity in the working of the less developed mind among all races.”²⁴⁹ As Boas notes, Frazer assumed “that if an ethnological phenomenon has developed independently in a number of places its development has been the same ... [i.e., that] the same ethnological phenomena are always due to the same causes. This leads to the still wider generalization that the sameness of ethnological phenomena found in diverse regions is proof that the human mind obeys the same laws everywhere.” But Boas argues that “even the most cursory view shows that the same phenomena may develop in a multitude of ways.” Anthropology’s only possible goal was to examine human cultural change in history, which entailed discovering the historical causes for the “development” of customs, beliefs, and rituals within a specific culture.²⁵⁰ It was time to awaken from the dream of delineating the characteristics of a universal and ahistorical human mind.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ *Balder the Beautiful*, v. I (Vol. XII of *The Golden Bough*, 3rd Ed.) (Macmillan: London, 1980 [1913]), “Preface,” p.vi.

²⁵⁰ *Id.* Clifford notes that Boas was the first to put his own theory into practice, in an expedition to the Torres Straits in 1899. *Predicament of Culture*, p.26.

²⁵¹ Excerpt from Boas reprinted in *High Points in Anthropology*, ed. Paul Bohannan and Mark Glazer, 2nd Edn. (McGraw Hill: New York, 1998), pp.87-89.

Eliot does not discuss Boas. He also seems to have ignored Malinowski, whose field-work in the Trobriand Islands methodologically applied Boas' insistence that cultures be interpreted from within. As Frazer himself wrote, "Dr. Malinowski lived as a native among the natives for many months together, watching them daily at work and play, conversing with them in their own tongue, and deriving all his information from the surest sources".²⁵² Yet this anthropological method is of no use to "the invisible poet," for with participant-observation the anthropologist himself becomes a site of science. "Imagine yourself suddenly set down," he intones, "alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight. ... I well remember ... the first weeks; the feeling of hopelessness and despair after many obstinate but futile attempts had failed to bring me into real touch with the natives ..."²⁵³ In this mood, Malinowski might well have appreciated "The Waste Land," but his classic study, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, published in the same year as "The Waste Land," undermined Eliot's primitivist project in its insistence that the Trobriands did not offer access to universal cultural forms, and that the ethnographer could only discover the meanings of Trobriand culture by plunging himself into its contemporary historical practice.

Far from assisting the primitivist poet in his attempt to recreate his folk, Boas and Malinowski radically decenter both themselves and their own culture. In terms redolent

²⁵² J. G. Frazer, "Preface," Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Routledge: London, 1922), p.vii. Passing the torch to his younger colleague, Frazer himself admitted "it is true that the analysis of motives and feelings is logically distinguishable from the description of acts, and that it falls, strictly speaking, within the sphere of psychology; but in practice an act has no meaning for an observer unless he knows or infers the thoughts and emotions of the agent" (ibid. ix).

²⁵³ Malinowski, "Subject, Method and Scope," *Argonauts*, op. cit., p. 4.

of his understanding of culture as essential or racial, Eliot attacked field-work and participant-observation as misguided:

[Cultural] understanding ... is [either] abstract—and the essence escapes—or else it is *lived*; and in so far as it is *lived*, the student will tend to identify himself so completely with the people whom he studies, that he will lose the point of view from which it was worth while and possible to study it.... What we ordinarily mean by understanding of another people ... is an approximation towards understanding which stops short at the point at which the student would begin to lose some essential of his own culture. The man who, in order to understand the inner world of a cannibal tribe, has partaken of the practice of cannibalism, has probably gone too far: *he can never quite be one of his own folk again.*²⁵⁴

As Manganaro points out, Eliot's strict adherence to Frazerian anthropology creates a special role for the poet: he interprets the primitive to his folk. Frazer's and Eliot's authority depended upon the distance between the primitive and the civilized, for that distance allowed them to interpret the former to the latter.²⁵⁵ Eliot claimed that the task of the social sciences was the reversal of Babel, "interpreting into one language an indefinite variety of languages".²⁵⁶ Frazer exemplified this task precisely by his famous refusal to learn any of the languages whose speakers he was studying – so as to maintain his objectivity.²⁵⁷

The gap between the comparative anthropologist and his individual sources was analogous to the gap between the recording consciousness and the savage behavior in which primitivism operated. But what perhaps bears repeating is that Eliot embraced Frazerian anthropology, with its formal emphasis and its promise that the internal cultural meaning of primitive rites and myths was unknowable, because Eliot felt that such an

²⁵⁴ *Notes Toward a Definition of Culture*: Harcourt, Brace, [New York, 1949] 39-40; quoted in Manganaro, "Beating A Drum in A Jungle," p. 419.

²⁵⁵ See generally *Myth, Rhetoric, and the Voice of Authority*.

²⁵⁶ Quoted in Gray, 133.

²⁵⁷ Marc Manganaro, *Myth, Rhetoric, and the Voice of Authority*. Yale: 1995, p.33.

understanding of the primitive would enable him to re-instantiate those myths for his own age. Eliot seeks, in fact, to tap into what he sees as the power of these primitive mythic forms to act automatically upon the reader's psyche.

5. The Primitivist's Happy Death

Primitivism was more than a shield to protect the artist. Eliot believed that the power of primitive tropes could reverse the threatening gaze of the modern audience. A writer who had made contact with the inner primitive might achieve an automatic influence over the reader's subconscious. And that power was necessary to achieve the poet's true calling: to reform his culture from one of splintered individualism to communal solidarity. The attitudes expressed by Eliot's primitivism, in other words, shade from the poet's fear of cultural irrelevance and a hostile readership, to an altruistic desire to reform his culture for the reader's own good, whether the reader approved or not. The mark of such altruism is the inner struggle of the primitivist, for he was torn between his conscious, cultural identity and the primitive's uncontrollable, inexplicable nature. The artist whose work derived from this painful struggle, sought to interpret the primitive for the good of his fellow men.

Such was the power of the primitive that it could be dangerous in the wrong hands. Eliot detested Gertrude Stein because, while her writing was powerfully primitive, she had abdicated her social responsibility and simply allowed the primitive drumbeats to take over. "There is something precisely *ominous* about Miss Stein ... her work is not improving, it is not amusing, it is not interesting, it is not good for one's mind. But its rhythms have a peculiar hypnotic power not met with before. It has a

kinship with the saxophone. If this is of the future, then the future is ... of the barbarians.”²⁵⁸ Paradoxically, a person who experienced the primitive could thereby become culturally powerful but also deracinated. The power to be gained by descending to the primitive, for Eliot, entails the poetic responsibility to return to one’s own (cultural, racial) community.

However, if modernity was bankrupt because it had elevated the individual above the community, the individual reader was unlikely to agree with Eliot’s prescriptions for reform. Eliot’s criticism evinces a marked distrust of individual consciousness as tending to rationalize its own socially destructive force. When Eliot stated, “I myself should like an audience who could neither read nor write,” his point was that the goal of art in modernity is not to be consciously appreciated, but to ameliorate desire itself until what is desired is that which produces social cohesion.²⁵⁹ Consciousness is a problem that the concerned artist must work around. “The chief use of the ‘meaning’ of a poem,” in Eliot’s view, is “to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog.”²⁶⁰ Confronted by the house-dog, the poetic cat-burglar sneaks past the reader’s consciousness and removes the valuables that have distorted his desire. Eliot thus demands a “return” to a primitive era before “the attempt to design and create an object for the sake of beauty become[s] conscious.”²⁶¹ As he voiced this idea in a different context, “What I want is a literature which should be

²⁵⁸ “Charleston, Hey! Hey!,” (Review of Stein’s “Composition as Explanation,” etc.), *Nation and Athenaeum* (29 Jan 1927), p. 595.

²⁵⁹ Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. Faber and Faber: London, 1933, p. 152.

²⁶⁰ *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, op. cit., p. 151.

²⁶¹ “War-Paint and Feathers,” *Athenaeum*, 17 Oct. 1919, p. 1036.

unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly Christian”.²⁶² Eliot’s primitivism and his Christianity share a preoccupation with the relationship between artistic production and social formation, and a preference in that context for the unconscious and collective over the conscious and individual.

It is in this way that Eliot saw primitivism as a technique for the amelioration of modernity: for nothing less than striking the reader at his core would achieve it. The power that primitive tropes offered to the artist was that they could directly affect the reader’s psyche – for, as Frazer had indicated, those mythic tropes expressed essential and atemporal human cultural needs. A primitivist poem will “do its work” on the reader whether his conscious mind approves or not, by virtue of its resonance with his essential, inner needs. Because the primitive “mentality persists in civilized man, but becomes available only to or through the poet,”²⁶³ the primitivist’s artworks will have the same relationship to their audience as the internal savage does to him.²⁶⁴ If the reader is powerfully influenced, even dominated by the writer, this is justified as the reassertion of the forms of social organization that are natural and proper to human life.

The Cocktail Party, first performed in 1949 as “A Comedy”,²⁶⁵ represents this final twist in the story of Eliot’s primitivism, suggesting that he had arrived at a new appreciation of Frazer’s discovery of the unconscious universality of primitive forms.

²⁶² “Religion and Literature” (1935), quoted in Carol H Smith, *T S Eliot’s Dramatic Theory and Practice: From Sweeney Agonistes to The Elder Statesman*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1963, p. 22.

²⁶³ *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (Faber and Faber, 1933: London) p.148 n.1. Eliot actually buttresses this point by citing it in the work of Emile Cailliet and Jean-Albert Bédé, anthropologists “who have done field work in Madagascar.”

²⁶⁴ Eliot adduces low- and high-brow performers to prove that the ability to appreciate the primitive “essential” of art is universal: “It is the rhythm, so utterly absent from modern drama, either verse or prose, and which interpreters of Shakespeare do their best to suppress, which makes [Léonide] Massine [of the Ballets Russes] and Charlie Chaplin the great actors that they are, and which makes the juggling of Rastelli more cathartic than a performance of ‘A Doll’s House’.” *Nation and Athenaeum*, October 6 1923, p. 12.

²⁶⁵ Carol H Smith. *T S Eliot’s Dramatic Theory and Practice: From Sweeney Agonistes to the Elder Statesman*. Princeton UP: 1963, p. 147.

The play inverts “The Waste Land’s” strategy of highlighting its use of primitive narrative forms. Far from explicit references in a set of Notes, the play keeps secret the ancient texts which it is reenacting. As if conducting a secret experiment to determine the unconscious power of mythic tropes, Eliot was determined “to conceal the origins so well that nobody would identify them until I pointed them out myself.”²⁶⁶ The play’s source, as Eliot revealed two years later, was Euripides’ oldest surviving play, *Alcestis* (438 B.C.), and Euripides was known, in turn, to have borrowed from Greek mythology and folk tales.²⁶⁷ *Alcestis* offers herself as a sacrifice in the place of her husband Admetus, who has offended Artemis. The next day, Heracles arrives as a guest, and eats, drinks and raucously sings as Admetus grieves in secret, graciously withholding his suffering and its cause from his guest. Heracles, however, soon learns of *Alcestis*’ death, and in gratitude to Admetus, overtakes Thanatos and brings *Alcestis* back from the dead. Heracles presents her, veiled, to Admetus, who rejects her until he is convinced to lift her veil, whereupon he joyfully recognizes his wife.²⁶⁸ In Eliot’s retelling, as Smith has shown, Heracles becomes the physician Sir Henry, and Celia represents a combination of *Alcestis* and Christ.

It is not quite clear what “work” Eliot intended this play to do “on” its audience. Eliot apparently used the play as a vehicle for ideas he had developed as a member of “the Anglo-Catholic intellectual movement,” which “sought to establish a social plan built around the unit of indigenous communities held together politically, ethically, and

²⁶⁶ Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, 1951, p. 91.

²⁶⁷ Ancient Greek, Egyptian and even Roman society – Frazer’s starting point in *The Golden Bough* is the *Aeniad* – were referred to as “primitive” until well into the 20th Century.

²⁶⁸ According to Smith, op. cit., p. 176.

spiritually by their geographic and religious bonds of kinship”.²⁶⁹ These ideas, as expressed by different characters, were that two routes to God were possible: the “Way of Affirmation,” which was “to affirm all things orderly until the universe throbbbed with vitality”; the “Way of Rejection” was to “reject all things until there was nothing anywhere but He.”²⁷⁰ The fact that the play was a comedy may represent Eliot’s attempt to avoid the failure of *The Family Reunion* (1939), where the audience laughed at the play’s heavy-handed and incongruous religious interpretations of its own scenes, as well as his newfound recognition that serious messages could be imparted beneath a comedic surface.²⁷¹

An attentiveness to Eliot’s primitivism, moreover, draws attention to several parallels. Heracles’ concealment of Alcestis’ identity resonates with Eliot’s concealment of his source. The self-sacrifice of Alcestis, as well as Admetus’ selfless concealment of his own grief, seem to figure the self-denial of the poet, who was willing for his motivations in writing the drama to be misunderstood due to his altruistic desire to recreate the unconscious effect of the Greek drama (and of its mythic source) rather than to cite it explicitly for the audience’s intellectual gratification. Heracles’ descent to the underworld is the secret journey of the poet, who finds and retrieves a primordial dramatic form to which, as Admetus to the veiled Alcestis, his audience is already, ignorantly, intimately bound.

²⁶⁹ Id., p. 159.

²⁷⁰ Smith, id., p. 162, quoting Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church* (rpt. NY: Meridian, 1956), pp. 57-8

²⁷¹ Eliot owed this insight, in Smith’s view, to S L Bethell’s book on *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition*, for which Eliot wrote the introduction. Id. pp. 149-50.

As noted above, Eliot's primitivism, like his theory of impersonality, attaches an aesthetic value to an artist's self-surrender. Indeed, if the poet follows a sort of primitivist regime of self-sacrifice and self-fragmentation, his poem will not only be "impersonal," but it may even approximate the social function of the primitive ritual it seeks to emulate. Primitivism thus serves to guarantee the poet's disinterested altruism as a cultural agent, for the primitivist poem is not written by the poet, but by that essential thing within him that is continuous with his readers and his culture. In his plays, Eliot seems strikingly drawn to the martyr, a person whose exit from life is, one might say, a form of community service.²⁷² The death of these figures gives spiritual significance to the communities formed by, and left to cope with, their absence. When, in *The Cocktail Party*, Celia dies the "happy death" as a missionary in to the "natives in Kinkanja," the surviving characters are drawn together by her death because her self-sacrifice follows the form of Christ's and Alcestis'. And there is a sense in which the author of *The Cocktail Party* saw his own authorship as reduplicating that self-sacrifice for the same, community-forming purpose.

In hindsight, it seems Eliot saw "The Waste Land's" primitivism as far too concerned that the poem would be properly interpreted. That concern, ultimately, was self-centered, for it was bound up with concern for the author's own social standing. If one takes seriously Frazer's claim that primitive myths are universal and his implication that these forms are somehow essential to the psyche, there is little need to worry about how the reader consciously interprets one's poetry and plays. The primitivist may die

²⁷² Reinforcing the theme is that Eliot's martyrs die off-stage: Becket is thus murdered in *Murder in the Cathedral*; Harry exits in agony in *The Family Reunion*, never to return; and Celia in Kinkanja.

happy in the knowledge that, even if they were misinterpreted or ignored, his works have done their work.²⁷³

²⁷³ This chapter has not addressed primitivism's basis: the idea that all non-industrialized societies were essentially the same. From this stereotype of sameness, primitivism circularly argued that the characteristics of primitive societies must be essential human characteristics, such that civilization harms itself in its attempt to repress them. Given the dubious basis of primitivism's "critique," it is not surprising that Eliot could both praise artists as "primitive" and engage in racism. His recurring character, Sweeney, features an "apeneck" and "gesture of orang-outang." [*Selected Poems: The Centenary Edition* (Harcourt Brace: New York, 1988), pp. 36, 46.] "King Bolo's Big Black Kween" is a hypersexual woman who "bursts on the scene" in Eliot's unpublished "Bolo and Colombo" poems. In these instances Eliot seems to use the savage to satirize sexuality and the desire to be looked at, and thereby to disavow his own desires. [See McIntire, "An Unexpected Beginning."] Eliot's primitivism involved a kind of repression-through-racism. Still, repression is less characteristic of primitivism than is identification. [See Marjorie Perloff, "Tolerance and Taboo: Modernist Primitivisms and Postmodernist Pieties," in *Prehistories of the Future*, ed. Barkan and Bush, Stanford 2002.] The primitivist discovered or produced savage traits within himself. Those traits were marks not of repression, but of the desire to desire authentically. When Eliot argues that it is not "possible and justifiable for art to persist indefinitely without its primitive purposes", he uses the discourse of the primitive to justify art as a response to a basic need. Eliot, review of *The Growth of Civilization* and *The Origin of Magic* by W J Perry, *Criterion* 2 (1923-24), p.490-91.

A Jungle of One's Own: Primitivism in Woolf's *The Voyage Out*

When Virginia Woolf declared that “on or around December 1910, human character changed,” one of the catalysts she presumably had in mind was Roger Fry’s exhibit of Post-Impressionist artworks the month before. The controversial show at London’s Grafton Gallery was the first time most of the Gauguins and Van Goghs on display had been seen in Britain.²⁷⁴ But perhaps Woolf’s pronouncement also recalls an event that immediately followed the exhibit: the Post-Impressionist Ball. Woolf and her sister Vanessa “browned [their] legs and arms” with make-up, put on “indecent” costumes “made for natives in Africa,” and, “nearly naked,” appeared at the ball as “Gauguin Girls.”²⁷⁵

This embodiment of the nubile, if not noble savage was Woolf’s second primitive performance that year. In February, she had joined a crew of friends and relations at a London costumer’s, where they donned gaudy clothes and turbans, and darkened their skin. They cabled to inform the HMS Dreadnought, moored in Weymouth, that the Emperor of Abyssinia and his royal entourage would be visiting the warship immediately. Speaking gibberish and a few Swahili words learned from a dictionary they brought along, the “Abyssinians” duped naval officers into touring them around Britain’s most expensive piece of war materiel. One of the conspirators soon exposed the hoax,

²⁷⁴ Samuel Hynes argues that the Post-Impressionist show marked a moment at which England was opening up to continental influences after a period of aesthetic insularity. Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, Princeton UP: Princeton, NJ, 1969.

²⁷⁵ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, Harcourt Brace: New York, 1997, p.287. Lee quotes Vanessa Stephen, with whom Virginia appeared at the Ball. Notwithstanding Vanessa’s geographical disinterest in writing that Virginia dressed up in African attire to appear as a Polynesian “Gauguin girl,” Gauguin was best-represented artist at the Post-Impressionist show was Gauguin, with thirty-six paintings and ten drawings of Breton peasants and Tahitian “savages.” See Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton: 1968), Appendix D.

and Virginia's name appeared in the newspapers, prompting admonishing letters from her family.²⁷⁶

In the winter of 1910, Woolf was also engaged in a different kind of primitive performance: writing her first novel. *The Voyage Out* (1915) is set in a fictional "tourist colony" on the mouth of the Amazon. Woolf may be mocking the vulgarity of the popular fad of the primitive when she has the tourists loudly proclaim their love for "primitive carvings," and "declare that the natives were strangely beautiful, very big in stature, dark, passionate, and quick to seize the knife" (VO 90). One character literally embroiders a "tropical river" scene, complete with "naked natives whirling darts" (VO 33). Yet the Amazon really does "seem new and full of new forms of beauty"; the narrator shares the "dissatisfaction among the English with the older countries and [their] enormous accumulations" of history and art (VO 90). And beyond aesthetic dissatisfaction, the tourists' desire "to lose sight of civilization" (VO 173) springs from the grim recognition that civilization is corrupt. London is "a circumscribed mound, eternally burnt, eternally scarred ... a crouched and cowardly figure, a sedentary miser" (VO 18). The British Empire has succumbed to the death-drive: while its poets praise the "magnificent qualities of British admirals" (id.), its power is dependent upon "sinister grey vessels ... bald as bone ... with the look of eyeless beasts seeking their prey" (VO 69).

The critique of "civilization" is a major feature of Woolf's primitivism. The protagonist's journey down the Thames and up a tropical river signals Woolf's indebtedness to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which elaborated the thesis that civilization

²⁷⁶ Lee, *Woolf*, pp. 278-9.

and progress are self-serving illusions; that savagery can irrupt in any of “us” at any moment; and that even our seemingly progressive actions, like the “civilization” of the Congo, merely express our savagery and barbarism. Marlow is driven to crisis when he sees that Kurtz has become far more brutish than the savages he proclaimed he would enlighten. It is not simply that Kurtz degenerated or “went native” in the Congo: his actions at the central station reveal the truth of the man and of his culture (“All Europe had contributed to the making of Kurtz”). Kurtz pulls the rug from under the myth of progress, shattering the modern subject’s image of himself.

The Voyage Out is similarly situated between critique and anxiety, but ultimately a comparison to *Heart of Darkness* reveals significant differences. In Conrad, it is the savage that is always already there, ineradicably within us; in Woolf, the thing we cannot escape is civilization itself, its dull routine, mealy-mouthed hypocrisy and patriarchal domination of any alternative discourse. Where Conrad collapsed the Congo and its inhabitants into “the horror, the horror” Kurtz found within himself, Woolf sees positive values in the alterity of the Amazon.

The Voyage Out builds from an opaque jungle scene – often read as the protagonist’s first sexual experience – to her uncanny encounter with the women inhabitants of a “native village,” to her fever and death. Several critics read the novel’s opacity and the heroine’s death as the result of Woolf’s early struggle to articulate a lesbian-feminist aesthetic, to renovate a genre still dominated by the “marriage plot,” and to face down her fears of censorship and a hostile audience. This reading forgets, however, that for Woolf, illness (as the removal of oneself from the daily social round) and death (as the extinction of the ego) may signify something beyond defeat and failure.

In my view, Woolf's primitivism is the origin of her unique, radically critical aesthetic of impersonality, with its intense, plot- and ego-less attentiveness to fragmentary, momentary, lived experience.²⁷⁷

1. Three Scenes

At age 24, Rachel Vinrace, whose mother died when she was sixteen, is beginning to escape from an unnaturally extended girlhood.²⁷⁸ Her father, Willoughby, has business interests in South America and has made plans to travel there. Rachel's aunt Helen, who will be joining Willoughby on the voyage, persuades him to bring the "girl" along as far as a "tourist colony" at the mouth of the Amazon. He drops the two women off in the village of Santa Marina, where they settle into a villa. They then join a tourist group on a trip upriver to see a "native village." Among the group is Terence Hewet, a young novelist.

En route to the village, Terence and Rachel strike out on their own into the jungle.

With every word the mist which had enveloped them ... melted a little further, and their contact became more and more natural. Up through the sultry southern landscape they saw the world they knew appear clearer and more vividly than it ever had before. (281)

Rachel's senses open up in the jungle; the quality of her experience is heightened, more intense; the exotic, sultry landscape reveals a reality that she already "knew" but did not

²⁷⁷ Marianne DeKoven, in a nuanced analysis that compares *The Voyage Out* and *Heart of Darkness*, suggests Woolf was writing a traditional novel "under erasure": seemingly succumbing to the patriarchal plot but defiantly showing that this plot is marked by a woman's tombstone. But the somewhat abstract concept of writing under erasure suggests both repetition and a degree of ironic control, and thereby obscures the strange, unprecedented, opaque and even beautiful moments of the novel with which Woolf struggled. DeKoven's reading also elides the novel's most striking feature: its primitivism. *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism* (Princeton, 1991), Introduction; and see Ch. 5, passim.

²⁷⁸ In early drafts of the novel, Rachel's father brought "poor little goats" – presumably for their hides – from South America to England. As critics have noted, Woolf's childhood nickname was "Goat."

perceive clearly. The jungle's arousing intensity has to do with the fact that "natural" communication is possible there. Once they are left alone, "every word" functions to clear away the mist between the young lovers. It suddenly occurs to Rachel, "This is happiness," a feeling so new to her that she is "surprised at recognizing in her own person so famous a thing" (283). Intensity of perception, natural contact, happiness: her life has been so stultified that Rachel first experiences these things in the middle of the Amazon.

Rachel recognized happiness in the jungle, but she then has an experience that is overwhelming and unrecognizable, beyond the reach of any available discourse.

A hand dropped abrupt as iron on Rachel's shoulder; it might have been a bolt from heaven. ... She fell beneath it, and the grass whipped across her eyes and filled her mouth and ears. ... Helen was upon her. Rolled this way and that, now seeing only forests of green, and now the high blue heaven, she was speechless and almost without sense. At last she lay still, all the grasses shaken round her and before her by her panting. Over her loomed two great heads, the heads of a man and woman, of Terence and Helen.... She thought she heard them speak of love and then of marriage. Raising herself and sitting up, she too realized Helen's soft body, the strong and hospitable arms, and the happiness swelling and breaking in one vast wave. When this fell away ... and the sky became horizontal ... and the trees stood upright, she was the first to perceive a little row of human figures standing in the distance. (283-84)²⁷⁹

This scene begins abruptly and violently, but the language grows increasingly sexual.

Helen rolls Rachel around; the experience makes her pant; Helen's soft body seems connected to Rachel's swelling, breaking sense of happiness. And as Helen overwhelms Rachel, so does the jungle: its grasses fill Rachel's eyes, mouth, and ears. Rachel ceases to exist as a being separate from her perceptions; she is overwhelmed to the point of being rendered speechless and senseless. Even more than the clarity and vividness with which Rachel and Terence perceive the jungle, Rachel's intense experience with Helen

²⁷⁹ For an analysis of Woolf's extensive rewriting of this scene and of its progression through numerous drafts, see DeSalvo, *First Voyage*.

virtually fuses her with her surroundings. Where Rachel had previously been rather bemused by her own happiness, she no longer has the opportunity even to think. This jungle scene, I will argue below, presages Woolf's later theories of immediate experience and her aesthetic of impersonality.

For all its strange violence, the scene describes immediate, authentic, overwhelming experience: precisely what is missing from civilized life. And the scene also contains a sharp critique. Moments after Helen provides Rachel with an unprecedented, speech-defying experience, Helen also betrays that experience by speaking to Terence of "love and marriage" over Rachel's prone body. Rachel is unable to represent her strange experience, much less defend or oppose it to the conventional discourses that overwrite it. The row of little, monitory figures (the other tourists in their party) appears, to recall Rachel from her brief ecstasy to the world of social convention.

The trio rejoins the tourist party and reaches the primitive village that was "the goal of their journey." This third scene describes the transformation of the quaint primitive village into something uncanny and threatening:

[T]hey observed the women, who were sitting on the ground in triangular shapes ... But when they had looked for a moment undiscovered, they were seen ... The women[']s] ... long narrow eyes slid round and fixed upon them with the motionless inexpressive gaze of those removed from each other far, far beyond the plunge of speech.... [T]he stare continued. It followed them as they walked, as they peered into the huts ... in the dusk the solemn eyes of babies regarded them, and old women stared out too. As they sauntered about, the stare followed them, passing over ... their bodies ... curiously ... like the crawl of a winter fly. As she drew apart her shawl and uncovered her breast to the lips of her baby, the eyes of a woman never left their faces, although they moved uneasily under her stare, and finally turned away, rather than stand there looking at her any longer... [feeling] like tight-coated soldiers among these soft instinctive people.... (284-85)

Opaquely, the native women seem to represent an alternative that Rachel has lost, now that her future has been defined for her as one of “love and marriage”. Upon rejoining the tourist party, Rachel is subjected to the uncanny gaze of the native women, and feels the creep of “the winter fly,” mortality. The reversal of gazes echoes an earlier scene when Rachel and Helen are walking, at night, toward the tourist hotel in Santa Marina. Rather than entering, they choose to remain outside in the dark, gazing invisibly at the brightly lit scene through the hotel windows. The narrative voice is describing the scene from their point of view when a male voice suddenly announces, “Two women.” It is St. John Hirst, a young man who has been leaning over the balcony of his room above, speaking to his roommate. The narrative point of view shifts to Hirst, whose voice recalls the social order under which a gazing and unseen woman is a kind of outlaw, and the women flee, like natives, into the blackness of the jungle. Analogously, when first looking upon the native women, the tourists occupy the invisible position of civilized, imperial subjects. Yet a civilized woman who gazes upon the native woman as an object assumes the position of her own oppressor. She cannot meet the native woman’s gaze lest the foundation upon which her own subjectivity is built crumble. Unlike Rachel and Helen, made outlaws by a man’s voice, the civilized women spying on the natives are made to disavow their gaze by women’s eyes.

I will argue that Woolf used primitivist discourse as a means of opening up her narrative to emphasize the value of unprecedented, prohibited, unrepresentable, overwhelming experience. But before arriving at this conclusion we must address the fact that at some point on her upriver journey, perhaps during her uneasy encounter with the native women, Rachel contracts the tropical fever that kills her.

1. Rachel's Death

The tourists, after “looking for a moment undiscovered” at the native women, become objects, as the women’s “eyes slid round and fixed upon [the tourists] with the motionless inexpressive gaze of those removed from each other far, far beyond the plunge of speech” (284) – a strange locution suggesting that deathly submersion has become the only alternative to the (phallic?) invasive, dominant discourse of femininity. In her final, fatal hallucinations, Rachel becomes like the native women: beyond the plunge of speech – she sinks from “floating on top of the bed” to “far beneath” the Amazon River and the ocean (347). As “the faces” of her caretakers grow distant “among the trees and savages,”

she fell into a deep pool ... which eventually closed over her head. She saw nothing and heard nothing but a faint booming sound, which was the sound of the sea rolling over her head. While all her tormentors thought that she was dead, she was not dead, but curled up at the bottom of the sea. There she lay, sometimes seeing darkness, sometimes light, while every now and then someone turned her over at the bottom of the sea. (341)

This eerie passage – which brings to mind Rachel’s being rolled about the jungle clearing, but also Woolf’s own suicide by drowning – seems to reveal a preference for passivity and death; others’ efforts to help are useless and hurtful. The transformation of caretakers into tormentors and of the protagonist into a passive submerged object indicates Woolf’s ultimate skepticism that within a community in which “it appeared that no one ever said a thing they meant, or ever talked of a feeling they felt” (37), autonomous individuals could grow or even survive.

The history of *The Voyage Out* certainly reveals Woolf's hermeneutic anxiety. The novel went through ten or so drafts over roughly seven years (1908-1915). While still hoping that "one sentence still more or less follows another" at one point, a month later Woolf "had become convinced that it was pure gibberish."²⁸⁰ The writing and publishing process apparently drove Woolf to one breakdown in 1913. Ironically, her fears that the novel would be seen as the product of a deranged mind apparently contributed to a second breakdown two years later, on the day before publication. She "became ... violent and delusional She entered into a 'state of garrulous mania, speaking ever more wildly, incoherently and incessantly, until she lapsed into gibberish and sank into a coma'," and was transferred to a nursing home.²⁸¹ It was as though Woolf's symptoms first over-compensated for, then mimicked, and finally placed her beyond the reach of the uncomprehending readership she feared.²⁸²

The novel's primitivism itself may reflect the complex fact that Woolf was anxious at the thought of public exposure and yet had a deep-seated need to express herself publicly. On the one hand, the view of some critics that Rachel's death reveals a failure of nerve on Woolf's part seems to conflict with that author's performances on the Dreadnaught and at the Ball. By donning a primitive persona, Woolf gained a certain protection for herself even as she increased her ability to tweak the authorities and gain

²⁸⁰ The first quotation dates from December 1914, the second from January 1915. Quoted in Louise DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf's First Voyage: A Novel in the Making* (Rowman and Littlefield: Totowa, NJ, 1980), p. 108.

²⁸¹ DeSalvo, p. 109, quoting Quentin Bell, *Biography*, Vol. 2, p. 25.

²⁸² Coincidentally, Woolf's doctor's name was Savage. A playful letter to Clive Bell, of 18 April 1911, hints at connections between illness, primitivism, and writing:

I shall probably go... to Savages on Saturday. I hope we shall start for France on the Monday ... I mean to throw myself into youth, sunshine, nature, primitive art. Cakes with sugar on the top, love, lust, paganism, general bawdiness, for a fortnight at least; and not write a line [of *The Voyage Out*.] (*Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. I, Letter 566.)

incognito access to places and behaviors otherwise off-limits. Evading national-security-surveillance on HMS Dreadnaught, Woolf disappeared in plain sight into the skin of an Abyssinian; when she bared her flesh at the Ball, it was the make-believe, darkened flesh of a “native.” Perhaps if Rachel Vinrace, the protagonist of *The Voyage Out*, had had her strange experiences with Helen in a Bloomsbury boudoir, the censors would have swooped, whereas the jungle setting gave her a certain license.²⁸³ Other modernists experimented with primitivist tropes, finding a certain freedom by revaluing the marginal and deviant. Critics have argued that for some modernist feminists, the primitive “mask” became a means of self-fashioning: they represented their own “deviant” concerns and desires through the use of primitive personae.²⁸⁴ (Needless to say, this primitivist tactic of achieving expressive freedom looks like the dubious license of blackface. Playing at being a Gauguin Girl was not a winning game for a feminist.²⁸⁵)

²⁸³ Leonard Woolf’s first novel, *The Village in the Jungle*, published in 1913 (a year after his marriage to Virginia), is based on his years in the Colonial Service in Jaffna, and contains several sexually-frank scenes. Mark Wollaeger argues that *The Voyage Out* assumed its final form only after Virginia had read Leonard’s novel on returning from their honeymoon in 1913: she “had to think past her husband in order to get to Conrad.” *The Woolfs in the Jungle: Intertextuality, Sexuality and the Emergence of Female Modernism in The Voyage Out, The Village in the Jungle, and Heart of Darkness*, MLQ: 2003 (64):1, pp. 33-69.

²⁸⁴ Robin Hackett has described, for instance, the interplay of racial marking, lesbian sexuality, and modernist aesthetics in Gertrude Stein’s re-writing of her first novel, *Melanctha*. In Stein’s drafts, Hackett traces the development of a unique, modernist voice, which begins to speak when the novel’s protagonist metamorphoses from a white man to an African-American woman, while the love object remains the same. The drafts reveal Stein’s discovery that she could exploit the association of blackness with sexuality, irrationality, primitivity, even authenticity, to explore “deviant” themes. Stein’s primitive “masking” of her narrator in *Melanctha* was, Hackett claims, “a revelation ... a means of achieving” expressive freedom. Olive Schreiner, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Willa Cather also “exposed lesbianism and female sexual autonomy ... by manipulating figurations of blackness—by metaphorically giving female sexual autonomy, including lesbianism, African and African-American masks.” Robin Hackett, *Sapphic Primitivism: Productions of Race, Class and Sexuality in Key Works of Modern Fiction* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 2004). See also, for instance, Michael North’s discussion of Stein’s primitivism, and of her primitivist collaboration with Picasso, in *The Dialect of Modernism*.

²⁸⁵ Woolf herself was attuned, albeit imperfectly, to primitivism’s cannibalization of real difference. For instance, in *The Voyage Out*, Helen despises England because the English are “so ugly and so servile”, whereas in South America “the servants are human beings. They talk to one as if they were equals” (VO 96). That “as if” exposes Helen’s seeming cosmopolitanism as mere parochial snobbery.

Such a reading of the novel's primitivism as an overdetermined symbol of Woolf's anxiety and her revolutionary ambition seems partly accurate. This reading would also fit fairly well with most readings of the death of her first novel's heroine. Many critics see Rachel's death as the result of a young writer's struggle to write an aesthetically and thematically ambitious lesbian-feminist novel in the face of hostility and censorship, which other writers who attempted similar projects (e.g., Radcliffe Hall) suffered. Post-Impressionism and the women's suffrage movement were popularly regarded as symptoms of national decline, as diseases "infecting the manhood of the English and the purity of their women," and on a more individual level, as indicators of "mental disorder."²⁸⁶ Christiane Froula sees Rachel, a talented young pianist, as the potential heroine of a feminist *Künstlerroman*, whose story is overtaken by a dominant, patriarchal "marriage plot." Woolf, Froula argues, found it impossible to tell the story of a young woman's growing autonomy, intellectual and aesthetic achievement and emotional fulfillment without devolving into mere fantasy.²⁸⁷ Rachel is unable either to go forward into the inauthentic, alienating world of matrimony and social convention, or to return to the world of her girlhood. Stymied, Woolf sacrifices Rachel to a tropical fever; her death signifies Woolf's failed struggle to free her text from novelistic convention.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ See quotations from *Virginia Woolf*, p. 273, quoted above. See also p. 283: "The outrage of family and authorities over the Dreadnaught Hoax was remarkably similar in tone to the public outrage at an exhibition at the Grafton Gallery called 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists,' organized by Roger Fry."

²⁸⁷ Christiane Froula, "Chrysalis."

²⁸⁸ Other critics, unhelpfully, read Woolf's primitivism as an unmediated reproduction of contemporary discourse. "Virginia Woolf's response to the primitive is arbitrary, ambivalent, troublesome, and largely ironic, embodying notions of the primitive associated with the ethnographic exhibition culture and with notions associated with avant-garde art." "Virginia Woolf, Bloomsbury, and the Primitive," in *Virginia Woolf and Communities: Selected Papers from the Eighth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jeanette McVicker and Laura Davis (Pace University Press: New York, 1999), p. 128.

Yet Rachel's death of tropical fever bears a strong resemblance to the defining trope of a subgenre one could plausibly call feminist. The fever that kills Daisy Miller vivifies *Daisy Miller* as a novel of social critique; her death condemns the heartlessness and hypocrisy of those who shunned her for being a "flirt." By the time *The Voyage Out* was published, the trope had undergone almost post-modern permutations – notably in Edith Wharton's "Roman Fever."²⁸⁹ The death-by-fever of a young woman cannot be called prima facie evidence of Woolf's struggle against the conventional marriage plot when it could equally reflect her choice to work within a genre. One meaning of Rachel's death is the violent victory of a patriarchal plot over another, inchoate, feminist kind of narrative. But this struggle is itself thematized within the novel—a novel behind which Woolf arguably stands, like Stephen Daedalus' ideal artist, paring her fingernails.²⁹⁰ While DeSalvo adduces the fact that Rachel's death-scene was revised at least seven times as evidence of Woolf's struggle and failure, this statistic could equally show that Woolf had long planned to kill off Rachel, and wanted to do a good job of it.²⁹¹

²⁸⁹ Edith Wharton's "Roman Fever" turns on the fact that the titular disease, rather than marking a fall from innocence, was already a known quantity to young women decades ago. As young women, Wharton's protagonists had plotted each other's deaths by arranging nocturnal liaisons in malarial parts of Rome. Wharton reveals that James' conceit in *Daisy Miller* – that the moralizing strictures of society destroy girlish innocence – was itself an ideological creation. Daisy's trope was given a more conservative turn in *A Room With A View*, which Woolf reviewed the year she began writing *The Voyage Out*. Whereas Daisy falls in love with an Italian and dies, Lucy Honeychurch witnesses an Italian's death and falls in love with an Englishman. Like Rachel, Lucy is a talented pianist smitten with Beethoven's late sonatas. Both women struggle to affirm love and life in the face of convention. The difference is that *The Voyage Out* has no Emersons to represent continuity between the Anglo-Saxon intellectual tradition (Emerson *père*) and the Mediterranean embrace of bodily desire (Emerson *filis*). The absence, in Woolf's novel, of men like the Emersons who are both wise and sexy marks the absence of a collective in which "life and love" make sense. Lucy finds these values in marriage, but Rachel's engagement is the beginning of her fatal illness. (Forster would revisit the trope in the "Malabar Caves" episode of female sexual hysteria in *A Passage to India*.)

²⁹⁰ Woolf's theory of impersonality, which aimed at creating a "world seen without a self" (in *The Waves*), sought to out-Joyce Joyce, whose "damned egotistical self" she hated for distorting his writing. See Judith Ryan, *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 190.

²⁹¹ Froula, *Woolf's First Voyage*, p. 126.

What is more, I will argue, if Rachel's death is read through the prism of the novel's primitivism, it may be seen as an aspect of a radical Woolfian critique of social convention that goes well beyond *Daisy Miller*.

2. A Revaluation of Values

The scenes of Rachel's illness and death are moments of unprecedented, idiosyncratic and inventive writing. True, Rachel Vinrace's inarticulate, inchoate sense of herself seems doomed to give way to the unbearably artificial constraints that "civilized" life would place upon her as a wife and mother. And the authentic, natural alternative to such artificiality, as she sees the lives of the "primitive women" in the Amazonian jungle, appears too radically other to come to terms with. But by "infecting" Rachel during these scenes, Woolf is not half-heartedly turning to a tragic plot as a kind of Plan B. Instead, through the use of primitivist tropes—the journey upriver, the jungle, the uncanny gaze of the native—she is challenging the reader to value Rachel as a symbol of the incomprehensible, authentic, unspeakable thing that civilization and progress cannot extinguish.

Rachel's tropical fever is linked to a radical critique which Woolf expressed in primitivist terms. In *On Being Ill*, Woolf described illness as an "undiscovered country," a "virgin forest" and a "primitive fact."²⁹² Woolf's celebration of illness as primitive, factual, natural is a revaluation of values, a claim that illness is mankind's original and natural status, whereas health is derivative, contrived, aberrant. Her characterization of illness as primitive also plays on the term's political implications. The healthy, civilized

²⁹² Paris Press: Ashfield, MA, 2002, pp. 3, 11.

man sees the sick/primitive as an object to be accounted for, explained, and eliminated as such. His duty is “to civilize ... [to] educate the native” (12). Woolf’s essay values the sick and the savage precisely because they refute the presumption that everything can be known, said, and registered, recognizing that “there is a virgin forest in each [of us] ... where even the print of birds’ feet is unknown” (11, 12). According to the myth of progress, modern civilization comprehends and surpasses all that “preceded” it, yet civilization in reality not only fails to comprehend the past but suppresses huge swathes of the present. Illness, conversely, recalls to us the experiences we were capable of having before we were formed into subjects—“until ‘I’ suppressed them” (18). As Woolf revalues pathology as an escape from the ego, she traces an analogous idea of moving back from a civilized world of rigidly enforced individuality to a more primitive time when “the police [were] off-duty” and people enjoyed more authentic modes of being (20).²⁹³ The primitive and the ill are aware of a truth others suppress: their own contingency. “It is only the recumbent who know what, after all, nature is at no pains to conceal—that she in the end will conquer” (15). The sick/primitive values the flux of experience, of self and non-self, over and above the ego.

The “recumbent” are epistemologically liberated but that liberation is intimately tied to their isolation. Diseases are communicable, but the sick cannot communicate the experience of illness. As Woolf later wrote, “I believe these illnesses are in my case—how shall I express it?—partly mystical.”²⁹⁴ Mystical knowledge can only be hinted at indirectly. The experience of being ill is therefore an aesthetic touchstone, for it reveals

²⁹³ Illness reveals the half-bodily, half-spiritual nature of human beings, which Woolf, alluding to Thomas Browne, refers to as “amphibious”: “Have lain about here, in that odd amphibious life of headache...” *Diary*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth, 1980), 5 September 1925, Vol. III, p. 38.

²⁹⁴ *Diary*, 16 February 1930, III, p. 287.

the difficulty and the value of finding words for experiences that, like Rachel's, lie far outside the common social round.²⁹⁵ The sick person "is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other (as perhaps the people of Babel did in the beginning), so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out" (OBI 6). The value attached to the "brand new word" indicates not only the immense labor of the sufferer, but the fact that common language stifles authentic expression and life, such that a new language is needed. Again, Woolf links her reevaluation of illness to primitivist discourse, claiming that "it is not only a new language that we need, more primitive, more sensual, more obscene, but a new hierarchy of the passions" (7). The bounded, policed, inauthentic, "healthy," civilized ego must be diminished and quieted, until the artist can hear the voice of her own experiences and passions—both ontogenetic and phylogenetic, as people knew them "in the beginning" and before the individual "'I' suppressed them"—and try to create a language adequate to express them. The extinction of the "I" is a prerequisite of this aesthetic of authenticity. This seems appropriate; the Greek root of the word "authentic" meant both "mastery" and "suicide".²⁹⁶

Woolf's dream that the sick / primitive can invent an authentic language is reminiscent of Stephen Dedalus' plan, at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, to "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race," creating a community through an internal act of heroic artifice. A "brand new word," created by an

²⁹⁵ Both *The Voyage Out* and *On Being Ill* quote approvingly and repeatedly from the same section of Milton's *Comus* (dealing with the goddess Sabrina); and both criticize Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as unreadable (Rachel abandons her copy and has an epiphany while looking at a giant tree)("not the book for influenza," OBI 19).

²⁹⁶ "Authenteo: to have full power over; also, to commit a murder. Authentēs: not only a master and a doer, but also a perpetrator, a murderer, a self murderer or suicide." Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1973), p. 131.

individual out of her own suffering, would be unknown to anyone else, and yet as a word it would be by definition significant and comprehensible within a language-community. The logic of primitivism tries to overcome this paradox by arguing that authentic language exists within us already. Long forgotten, its invention is really a recovery. As a girl, Rachel Vinrace “was haunted by ... [the] idea [that], if one went back far enough, everything perhaps was intelligible; everything was in common; for the mammoths who pastured in the fields of Richmond High Street had turned into paving stones and boxes full of ribbon, and her aunts” (VO 66). Rachel’s desire for a time when “everything was in common” exposes the isolation and alienation of modernity, especially for women; a return to origins promises to regain the deep, shared connection preceding the pathetically circumscribed present of ribbons and aunts that has grown out of it.

Whereas Joyce saves the dream of authentic language for the end of his first novel, Woolf courageously places it in the middle of hers, and things grind to a halt as the difficulty of authentic communication is borne home by Rachel’s and Terence’s love-scene in the tropical jungle. At first, the immediately, mutually perceived natural world floods their senses and seems to validate their language: “they began to speak naturally of ordinary things, of the flowers and the trees, how they grew there so red, like garden flowers at home, and there bent and crooked like the arm of a twisted old man” (283). Yet this sentence immediately stumbles over the dream of authenticity, because to say Amazonian flowers are like the ones at home is to misname the other as the same. Affect thus shuttles from an attractive “garden” to a repulsive “twisted old man.” Faced with the demand to be faithful to the uniqueness and specificity of the things it represents, language necessarily breaks down. Rachel and Terence begin to talk less—“long silences

came between their words” (283)—and, lacking the buffer of words, their experiences oscillate from immediacy to mere disconnection. At one moment, they are “drawn so close together ...that there seemed no division between them ... the next moment [they were] separate and far away again” (282). As indicated by Terence’s (unrealized) plan to write a (silent) novel about the things people don’t say, it is immensely difficult to make a new language to replace the false one they seek to escape.²⁹⁷

Regardless of its illustration of failure, this scene manages to give voice to a great theme of Woolf’s work: the importance of that which “escapes registration,” as she later put it in *Between the Acts*. In her hands, primitivist discourse signals the need for a new language. The novel’s primitivism has been read as a kind of camouflage, revealing Woolf’s ambiguity towards her imagined, possibly hostile public. But Woolf also used primitivism to convey her belief in the importance of the asocial, ahistorical experiences for which savage, obscene words must be coined.

3. Primitivism and the Development of Woolf’s Critique

To understand the role primitivism plays in *The Voyage Out*, it is necessary to appreciate the development of Woolf’s radical critique of language and history. Woolfian primitivism originated as a fantasy of a primitive subjectivity with which one could identify, but ultimately came to express a radically anti-subjective ethos.

Roger Fry’s Post-Impressionist show opened a new front in the culture wars raging in 1910. In her biography of Fry, Woolf recalled that “the public in 1910 was

²⁹⁷ Froula’s interpretation of this scene is analogous to mine: “Woolf represents speech and story – authority – as a burden heavy with terrors: of leaving the past behind, of groping without words in the silences of an unwritten world, of a tongue burdened by the past, of all the old words returning in spite of all effort to keep them at bay” (Froula, 272).

thrown into paroxysms of rage and laughter” by the show: “they were infuriated.... The pictures were outrageous, anarchistic and childish”.²⁹⁸ “The public” was not infuriated by actual primitives, but by the willful perversity of artists who imitated them. Woolf quotes “the *Times* critic” who opined, “Really primitive art is attractive because it is unconscious; but this is deliberate—it is the rejection of all that civilization has done, the good with the bad” (*Fry*, 154-55). In the critic’s view, the primitivists’ pose of rejecting civilization is an insincere “joke at [the public’s] expense”; it is certainly not art.²⁹⁹

Woolf responds to this attack by shifting the burden of sincerity back on to the attackers. “The cultivated classes ... cared only for what could be labeled and classified ‘genuine.’ *Their* interest in [Fry’s] lectures had been a pose; art was to *them* merely a social asset” (*Fry*, 158, italics added). Woolf argues that social conservatives produced the category of “genuine art” for non-aesthetic reasons,³⁰⁰ whereas Fry’s interest in art really was genuine.³⁰¹

Her underlying claim is that it is possible and preferable to experience art in ways not conditioned by one’s social status: taste itself should be innocent of social codes, of class awareness, of the desire for distinction. And primitivism promises the ability to

²⁹⁸ *Roger Fry: A Biography*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York, 1940, pp. 153-54.

²⁹⁹ Jonathan Culler argues that “authenticity” is necessarily a sign operating with others in a system of signification. As such the authentic or genuine article only truly exists when it has been copied; in a sense, the real thing is secondary to its copy. Thus Woolf’s “Gauguin Girl” performance, when she dressed up like one of the primitives in a French ex-stockbroker’s paintings to tweak the public, is almost decadent in its irony, yet reinscribes the basic ideas of primitivism. On the other hand, Woolf’s first novel copied the structure of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in its quest for authenticity. One could thus argue that primitivism is a structure in which copying the authentic can produce it twice.

³⁰⁰ While my discussion is limited to primitivism’s place in contemporary aesthetic battles, analogous ideas were being played out in other realms. In 1905, in a Tory pamphlet entitled *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, the causes of British decline included “the prevalence of town over country life, and its disastrous effect upon the health and faith of the English people,” and the “growing tendency of the English to forsake the sea except as a health resort.” Quoted in Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, p. 24.

³⁰¹ Woolf’s goal is to gain Fry social approval (posthumously), notwithstanding her definition of genuine artistic taste by contrasting it to socially-motivated gestures of approval and disapproval.

recognize values and to experience meanings in ways unmediated by one's social milieu, and to break free of that milieu (with its contingencies, contradictions, and compromises) by such recognition and experience. What made Fry's show so important, so worth defending, was its promise that such an authentic experience not only exists, but that it could be shared—that it *was* shared by the artists represented in the show. My point is not to question this fantastic claim but to highlight the desire it expresses for authentic community.

The moment in *The Voyage Out* that comes closest to the ideal of authentic community is the dance held for a young British couple who have become engaged. Local musicians play at the party; the musicians leave; the tourists want to continue dancing. To gratify them Rachel plays the piano but soon exhausts her slim repertoire of modern dance tunes. She begins to experiment with classical pieces:

[She] went on to play an air by Mozart... she marked the rhythm boldly so as to simplify the way [The dancers] whirled around the room, now curtseying, now spinning round, now tripping this way and that like a child skipping through a meadow. "This is the dance for people who don't know how to dance!" she cried Once their feet fell in with the rhythm they showed a complete lack of self-consciousness Rachel passed without stopping to old English hunting songs, carols, and hymn tunes ... by degrees every person was tripping and turning Mrs. Thornbury tried to recall an old country dance which she had seen danced by her father's tenants in the old days "Now for the great round dance!" Hewet shouted. Instantly a gigantic circle was formed, the dancers holding hands and shouting out, "D'you ken John Peel," as they swung faster and faster and faster, until the strain was too great (166)

The English tourists, awkwardly perched on the mouth of the Amazon, are for once able to escape their self-consciousness. The rhythm of the round dance "instantly" induces the tourists to form a "gigantic circle," evoking a nostalgic, racial Englishness that appeals to

a common, unconscious identity.³⁰² A prior draft of the novel is more explicit: one character, after exclaiming that the dancers “ought to let themselves go more ... they ought to leap and swing,” then “rose as the moon rises” to dance with an “anonymous gentleman whose blood ran darker than is nice” (*Melymbrosia* 121). The communal dance is a common primitivist trope.³⁰³ The medium of rhythm combines lowbrow and highbrow culture (dance tunes, Mozart), merges past and present while erasing class (the landowners’ children recalling the tenants’ dances), and joins everyone together in a round each invents for himself.

Woolf’s desire for an authentic community could lead her to fall into the sort of racial nationalism reflected in the “great round dance.” Yet Woolf also used primitivism in precisely the opposite way: to critique and express her alienation from the racial myths of British civilization. Terence, seeking to expose and expunge his faults before beginning his new life with Rachel, resolutely tells her, “Now I’m going to begin at the beginning” (VO 280). Yet Woolf’s search for the authentic is so relentless that it discovers the creep of inauthenticity even in the quest for origins itself. Rachel is, for instance, ecstatic when she reads the beginning of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: “never had any words been so vivid ... Aethiopia ... barbarian They seemed to drive roads back to the very beginning of the world, on either side of which the populations of all times and countries stood in avenues, and by passing down them all knowledge would be hers, and the book of the world turned back to the very first page”

³⁰² In primitivist discourse, rhythm is important as a content-less but driving and deeply-felt aspect of both music and language. Thus the ill “grasp what is beyond [the] surface meaning [of words]... [whereas] in health meaning has encroached upon sound” (OBI 20). Cf. Eliot’s essay, “Beating a Drum in the Jungle.”

³⁰³ See *Prehistories of the Future*. And cf. Pound’s maxim, “the farther the poem strays from the song, and the farther the song strays from the dance, the less you’ve got a poem.” *ABC of Reading*.

(VO 175). Envisioning this imperial parade, Rachel “immediately ceases to read”—actual facts would impede her fantasy of total knowledge. The imperialist metaphor exposes the quest for origins as a perversion, a desire to rechristen the Other in one’s own image.

Woolf’s primitivist paradigm is the reverse: it recognizes otherness and ponders whether the self might be implicated or dependent upon it. One character babbles of how much she “would give ... to realize the ancient world,” because “one never does think enough about the ancients *and all that they’ve done for us*” (VO 114, my emphasis). Unconsciously presentist in assuming her debt to the past, this character turns to praise an elderly literary historian: “But *you* begin at the beginning.” The historian’s reply indicates a different, primitivist paradigm: “When I think of the Greeks I think of them as naked black men” (ibid.). From representing a kind of cultural ideal ego, an origin with which one identifies, the naked black Greeks become a touchstone of difference.

Woolf ultimately had to leave behind primitivist tropes like the dance that confused authentic community with nostalgia for a never-never land of shared national and racial identity. It took Woolf time to develop a primitivism of difference, but her feminist critique of colonialism required it, as did other considerations. Early drafts of *The Voyage Out* attempt to subvert the illegitimacy of patriarchal history by envisioning a woman-centric prehistory for humanity, and contain such passages as, “A mature woman feels herself as old as the Pyramids, which have looked down upon countless generations, and sees her husband as the youngest, the most pitiable of mankind”.³⁰⁴ DeSalvo suggests that “Woolf was [originally] writing an angry novel about how the power of

³⁰⁴ Quoted in DeSalvo, “Introduction,” Virginia Woolf, *Melymbrosia*, xxxii.

women had eroded since the time of the Egyptians, since pre-Olympian Greece”.³⁰⁵

Woolf may have been influenced to undertake this project by the Cambridge classicist and anthropological theorist Jane Harrison, whom she apparently met in 1904.³⁰⁶

Harrison influentially argued that “no one ... can have an adequate knowledge of Greek art without a study of the Mycenaean and Minoan periods” from which Greek culture drew its roots.³⁰⁷ More “heretically,” Harrison proposed that those earlier periods centered on the worship of female deities, and “that the Great Mother is prior to the masculine divinities”.³⁰⁸ The primitivism of Woolf’s early drafts, to follow DeSalvo’s reading, seeks to find a common starting ground for modern women in the prehistoric period when they had not been alienated from, but were the creators of culture.

This feminist search for an historical narrative of primitive origins was confronted by the patriarchal nature of History itself. To illustrate why Woolf had to change tack, we can turn briefly to feminist criticism of Freud. Freud theorized that before reaching the Oedipus complex, a young girl’s primary sexual-developmental phase is characterized by exclusive love for the (phallic) mother. In “Feminine Sexuality,” Freud wrote that “our insight into this early, pre-Oedipus phase in girls comes to us as a surprise, like the discovery... of the Minoan-Mycenaean civilization behind the civilization of Greece.” (1931). In this passage, Elizabeth Abel notes, Freud “radically gendered developmental narrative, decisively split between a maternal prehistory and a paternal history.” Rather than declaring the prehistoric maternal period to be the sine qua

³⁰⁵ Ibid., xxxiii.

³⁰⁶ “Florence Maitland... is going to introduce me to the repulsive Jane, and all the other learned ladies” at Newnham College, Cambridge. *Letters of Virginia Woolf*, I, Letter 184 (22 Oct. 1904).

³⁰⁷ *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*, 2nd ed., (London: Merlin, 1963 [1911]), p. 2.

³⁰⁸ Op. cit., “Preface to the Second Edition,” p. ix.

non of historical understanding, as Harrison did with Minoan and Mycenaean culture, “Freud reads from the onset of ‘history’ backward to remote, scarcely visible antecedents ... the Oedipus complex becomes a point of origin before which everything recedes into the indistinction of prehistory.”³⁰⁹ In the face of such narratives, Harrison’s woman-centered culture did not displace, but eternally receded from the Greek origin of history.

Woolf’s primitivism ultimately overcame this limitation. Instead of seeking primitive origins with which to identify, Woolf’s primitivism values the constantly-receding and the unknowable. A scene in *A Sketch of the Past* shows that this kind of primitivism provided, for Woolf, a paradoxically selfless self-defense mechanism. Recalling her revulsion, as a child, at having her “private parts ... explored” by Gerald Duckworth, she calls her revulsion “instinctive,” and argues that this instinct “proves that Virginia Stephen was not born on the 25th January 1882, but was born many thousands of years ago; and had from the very first to encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past.”³¹⁰ Woolf does not identify with her ancient ancestresses, she invokes them as a means to reject subjectification and emphasize her own unknowability. She is unknowable even to herself, whom she describes in the third person as a girl being forced to “encounter” ancient instincts, even as she embraces these as somehow constitutive of her own identity.

By the same token, primitivism can be a sword as well as a shield: it exposes the inauthenticity of those who fail to realize they are driven by such instincts.³¹¹ Woolf uses

³⁰⁹ Elizabeth Abel, *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* (University of Chicago: 1989), p.8.

³¹⁰ “A Sketch of the Past,” in *Moments of Being*, p. 69.

³¹¹ Kurtz’s whisper, “the horror, the horror,” is the double horror of finding a savage within himself, and of recognizing that the savage has always already corrupted Kurtz’s noblest ambitions – that, long before he

primitivism to represent, beneath a speaker's words, a deep, contradictory story he does not know he is telling. One evening aboard ship, Helen and Rachel are retreating from the smoking room as two men begin recalling stories of their college days. "'Ah, one could tell strange stories of the old days,' they heard Ridley say Glancing back, at the doorway, they saw Mr. Pepper as though he had suddenly loosened his clothes, and had become a vivacious and malicious old ape" (VO 17). As they recall their college years—supposedly scenes of *Bildung*—the men enact a strange story of very old days indeed.

Similarly, describing the history of the tourist colony at Santa Marina, Woolf employs primitivist discourse to undermine the myth of a glorious English past. A celebration of "the hardy Englishmen" who first "colonized" Santa Marina turns into a catalogue of degeneracy: "tawny with sea-voyaging, hairy for lack of razors, with muscles like wire, fangs greedy for flesh ... they drove the dying [natives] into the sea ..." (*Voyage* 89). The passage grimly inverts any notion that the "natives" were brutish savages and the Elizabethans were heroic explorers. Crucially, Woolf also shows that the Elizabethans' brutality was linked to the corruption of their language. The narrative slips via free indirect discourse into the antique diction of the Elizabethans, and describes the "Indians who came from the interior with subtle poisons, naked bodies, and painted Idols." Woolf uses the Elizabethans' self-contradictory claim – that their victims were simultaneously subtle and painted, yet naked and heathen – to expose their self-serving lust for power. At the origin of modern English history, Woolf's primitivism thus reveals that there is already the misrecognition of the other in the pursuit of power. Having

scrawled the words "exterminate the brutes," his altruistic plan to civilize the Congo was a cryptic mark of savagery.

moved beyond the desire to identify a sort of feminist primitive historical moment, Woolf has developed primitivism into a sophisticated critique of identity.

Woolf used primitivism to conceptualize and express her critique of that pursuit. Another example may be found in a personal experience that touched Woolf as a writer. In 1896, a young Virginia Stephen typed a letter to her brother Thoby. “How does the family Museum get on?,” she asks. “Father says that they have discovered an ape which is nearer to us than anything else which has yet been found.”³¹² Then, under the words “Dictated by father,” comes her transcription of Leslie Stephen’s voice: “I wanted to see how fast this wretched girl can typewrite...”.³¹³ An early draft of *The Voyage Out* seems to rewrite that moment of writing. Richard Dalloway interrupts his wife as she writes a letter to *her* brother: “He kissed her passionately, so that her half-written letter slid to the ground. Picking it up, he read it without asking leave. ‘Where’s your pen?’ he said; and added in his little masculine hand, ‘R.D. *Loquitur*...’” (*Melymbrosia* 37). As girls and women try to write, their texts are taken over by the voices of fathers and husbands. In the novel’s final version, Woolf exacts a Darwinian revenge when Rachel dreams about Richard Dalloway, transforming the overwriting man into a “little deformed man who squatted on the floor gibbering, with long nails ... [and] the face of an animal” (VO 77).

(An analogous strategy is at work in Woolf’s punning choice of the books Rachel is instructed to read. Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; Balzac’s *La cousine Bette*; and the lines on “father Brute” from Milton’s *Comus*. “Gibbon” becomes

³¹² The ape was *Pithecanthropus erectus*.

³¹³ *Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautman (Harcourt: New York, 1975), Vol.1, Letter 2. Douglas Mao notes that the creation of a family museum was “a standard piece of Victorian advice on child-rearing,” and quotes several books telling mothers to “encourage Tom to make a museum,” or that “every house ought to possess a ‘Museum’.” *Solid Objects* (Princeton: 1999?), p. 28.

a hairy ape; said aloud, *La cousine Bette* could refer to a beastly relative (*La cousine bête*); and “father Brute” becomes a subversively anti-patriarchal Darwinism.)

Though Woolf’s early drafts theorized a primitive origin on which to base a claim to cultural autonomy, the published novel does not depend on a prehistory in which women escaped objectification. Indeed, it recognizes that the reality may be the opposite during the tourists’ expedition to the native village. A pair of tourists, Mr. and Mrs. Flushing, convince the others to join them on a trip they present as a journey of anthropological interest, but the Flushings’ real motive is profit: bringing along the others cuts down on their own share of the costs. Mr. Flushing bargains with the “head man” of the native village for primitive artifacts he plans to resell in London. These goods are the personal effects of the native women. Their shawls, earrings and bracelets are taken according to an agreement between men—savage or civilized, modern or prehistoric, their treatment of women is indistinguishable.

But what makes Woolf’s primitivism truly radical is that her feminist critique includes a critique of the extent to which women have been undermined by the language they must needs use to define themselves. Insofar as the primate father exerts his control over language, the writing girl is wretched indeed. “Suppose I, at fifteen, was a nervous, gibbering little monkey, always spitting or cracking a nut and shying the shells about, and swinging in rapture across the cage,” Woolf writes in “A Sketch of the Past.” Her father, Leslie Stephen, “was the pacing, dangerous, morose lion.”³¹⁴ Trapped in the king of

³¹⁴ “A Sketch of the Past,” in *Moments of Being*, p. 116.

beasts' linguistic cage, the girl gibbers.³¹⁵ The question is how, if at all, the girl can escape that cage.

The scene of Rachel and Terence alone in the jungle, presents a striking elaboration of Woolf's sense of language as lie. The young lovers are barely able to communicate beyond repeating one another. "Does this frighten you?" Terence asked... 'No,' she answered. 'I like it.' She repeated 'I like it'... There was another pause. 'You like being with me?' Terence asked. 'Yes, with you,' she replied.... Silence seemed to have fallen upon the world... 'We are happy together.' 'Very happy,' she answered.... 'We love each other,' Terence said. 'We love each other,' she repeated." (VO 271). The fact that this conversation occurs on a tropical river, while the characters are waiting for a "steamer" en route to a native settlement, recalls a similar conversation in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlowe tells his lie to Kurtz's Intended, simply by repeating her. "'He was a remarkable man,' [said Marlowe]... 'I knew him best.' 'You knew him best,' I repeated. 'But you have heard him! You know,' she cried. 'Yes, I know'.... 'His words will remain,' I said. 'And his example,' she whispered to herself.... 'True,' I said, 'His example too.'"³¹⁶ What Marlowe cannot repeat are Kurtz's last, repeated words, "The horror! The horror!"; and so he lies: "The last word he pronounced was—your name" (HD 147).

³¹⁵ Helen Ambrose, Rachel's surrogate mother, "trusts to" the "medicine" of "talk ... talk about everything, talk that was free, unguarded, and as candid as a habit of talking with men made natural in her own case" (VO 124). But when the "medicine" of "talk" is male, when communication is not "natural" and "free" but demands the subtle erasure of one's gender, language itself destroys the difference that would make communication worthwhile. Helen, too late, admits, "I'm not a good hand at talking" (*Melymbrosia* 214).

³¹⁶ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness / Youth / The End of the Tether* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1995), pp. 144-146.

Marlowe's repetitions mark his decision to allow a woman to continue to believe in the narcissistic fabrications upon which her life is based,³¹⁷ to hide the truth that savagery lurks in the heart of European civilization. Rachel's repetitions allow Terence the same illusion of communication, but whereas Marlowe's sense of self is undermined by his lie, Rachel is unable to tell whether she is lying or not, as she tries to build up a sense of self from repeating what is said to her. What Kurtz's revelation of "The horror! The horror!" did to Marlowe, the "terrible—terrible" primeval jungle does to Rachel: it reveals that her identity was based on a lie. In Rachel's case, the lie was that she could win an adequate sense of her own life experience through available civilized discourse. When she begins to pay attention to reality, "sounds stood out from the background, making a bridge across their silence; they heard the swish of trees and some beast croaking in a remote world" (VO 271). This, again, is why the inscrutable women of the "native village" in the Amazon are uncanny, even threatening. The "plunge of speech" into which the sight of the primitive woman pushes her civilized counterpart is the abyss yawning beneath the objectifying, patriarchal discourse with which the civilized women tourists had unwittingly constructed their own identities.

Woolf emphasizes the point in describing the discomfiture of English worshippers during a service in the hotel's chapel. Greeted by "mild sweet chords issuing from a harmonium" (VO 226), they imagine "the sad and beautiful figure of Christ" (227), but the daily portion turns out to be a particularly bloodthirsty passage from the Old

³¹⁷ "It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own... it is too beautiful altogether.... Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over." *Id.*, p. 59. Marlowe thus makes all women his alibi for lying to one; he also seeks to separate his chivalric lie from "the horror" of covering up the heart of darkness, even though that is precisely its function.

Testament. “It could be seen from a glance at their faces that most of the others, the men in particular, felt the inconvenience of the sudden intrusion of this old savage. They looked more secular and critical as they listened to the ravings of the old black man with a cloth round his loins cursing with vehement gesture by a camp-fire in the desert” (ibid.) “For the men in particular,” perhaps, the savage is to be administered, not worshipped. The service that was previously “too familiar to be considered” (227) is now too close for comfort.

The discomfort of the faithful in the presence of the origin of their faith reveals that savagery is the litmus test of authenticity. As the figure of the primitive distinguishes the authentic from the inauthentic, so exposure to the savage creates critical distance and authentic taste by forcing a rupture from the status quo.³¹⁸ Rachel, “for the first time in her life, instead of slipping at once into some curious pleasant cloud of emotion ... listened critically to what was being said.” (228) The irruption of the savage galvanizes Rachel by revealing a pervasive insincerity. “All round her were people pretending to feel what they did not feel ... all over the world ... innumerable men and

³¹⁸ Ridley Ambrose epitomizes cultural inauthenticity and the consequent value of rupture. He spends the novel translating Pindar’s *Odes*; yet what could be the value of a better rendering of the Greek when “no one ever said a thing they meant” (VO 37)? The bottom has dropped out of the fantasy that the British Empire represents the continuation and perfection of Greco-Roman civilization. English civilization needs to produce translations of Pindar to shore up own validity—a moribund culture worshipping its own continuity. The ship that, literally speaking, translated Ridley across the Atlantic—the *Euphrosyne*—is named after a compendium of forgettable poetry (by Lytton Strachey and Leonard Woolf, among others). Woolf had ridiculed this “first book of Bloomsbury” as a half-hearted attempt to carry Victorian literary values into an era that made them irrelevant. As noted, Woolf envisioned her own project as translation’s opposite – “to coin words ... as perhaps the people of Babel did in the beginning” – and she opposes to Ridley’s hollow labors a utopian version of translation.

During a church service, St. John Hirst, like a naughty schoolboy, sneakily reads a small blue volume instead of his Bible. “Sappho,” he whispers to his neighbor: “The one Swinburne did – the best thing that’s ever been written.” Woolf represents the primitive as an agent of desperately-needed rupture and renewal. Sappho’s lesbian odes disrupt the patriarchal Biblical text, and Swinburne’s “translation” disrupts the idea of a canon of classics, since, as the best thing ever written, Swinburne’s Sappho is better than Sappho herself. As Hirst’s neighbor “gulp[s] down the Ode to Aphrodite during the litany,” one senses an authorial fantasy. What better fate for Woolf’s novel than to be another such rupture: a subversive text that would spark the spontaneous formation of a discriminating but passionate readership.

women... finally gave up the effort to see, and relapsed tamely into praise and acquiescence ... the thought [caused her] ... physical discomfort” (VO 228). Glancing around, Rachel sees a woman “adoring something shallow and smug, clinging to it ... with the assiduity of a limpet ... a limpet, with the sensitive side of her stuck to a rock” (229). The woman senses her own “discomfort” at “the old savage,” but represses it, just as the tourists look away from the gaze of the native women in the village. Conversely, Rachel’s “physical discomfort” at the sight of that repression grows until “the face” of this worshipper “became printed on Rachel’s mind with an impression of keen horror” (VO 229). Rachel is not horrified by man’s ineradicable savagery, but by those who refuse to recognize it. If Kurtz was horrified because the savage turned out to be inescapable, Rachel is horrified because the civilized woman found the lie of civilization so easy to swallow.

4. An Impersonal Primitivism

The primitive women, with their uncanny stare, “fix” their civilized spectators, who, wriggling uncomfortably, are surprised to find themselves placed in the Prufrock position by primitives whom they had planned to approach as anthropological or even aesthetic objects. As the women “squatting on the ground in triangular shapes” swivel their eyes around at the tourist party, it is as though Lily Briscoe’s abstraction of Mrs. Ramsay into a “triangular shape” of paint on canvas had come uncannily alive. This moment says something about Woolf’s goals for modernist art, including her first novel—it should look back and challenge the viewer’s sense of herself. The native women’s unsettling, “inexpressive” gaze suggests “the indifference” Woolf valued in the

natural object world and in works of art, which “console not by their thought of us but by their forgetfulness” (OBI 21). As discussed above, Woolf’s primitivism emphasizes that authenticity lies in recognizing otherness, not projecting sameness onto it. In my view, primitivism also provided, for Woolf, the beginnings of a theory and a technique that she would develop into an aesthetic of impersonality.

In describing Fry’s attitude toward Post-Impressionist paintings, Woolf recalls him “gazing at them, plunging his eyes into them as if he were a humming-bird hawk-moth hanging over a flower, quivering but still.” Yet as important as Fry’s phallic response to them are the paintings themselves, which “stood upon chairs ... bold, bright, impudent almost, in contrast with the Watts portrait of a beautiful Victorian lady that hung on the wall behind them.” These bright, impudent modern paintings – Woolf’s language suggests a connection between these paintings and the sort of “painted lady” who is thrown out of the tourist hotel in her first novel -- assert themselves in the center of the room, and close the distance of safe interpretation and aesthetic judgment; like the native women, they look back.

The less that is known about women, the harder it is to objectify them; and Woolf insists that the primitive woman is inexplicable. In *Roger Fry*, Woolf is implicitly critical when she represents Fry excitedly arguing that the Gauguins and Picassos getting up off their chairs signify “transition” and “continuity” rather than a “break” from traditions. Woolf is not interested in continuity when tradition is represented by the “Victorian woman” hanging meekly on the wall. Describing Fry’s fetishistic collection of primitive “trophies,” Woolf mimics his enthusiasm but undermines his claims:

[There were] stuffs... pots ... [and] cotton goods from Manchester, made to suit the taste of the Negroes There were hats, enormous hats, boldly decorated and thickly plaited to withstand a tropical sun and delight the untutored taste of negresses. And what magnificent taste the untutored negress had! Under [Fry's] influence, his pressure, his excitement, pictures, hats, cotton goods, all were connected.³¹⁹

The connections Fry makes between cotton goods made for export and exotic paintings made for the domestic art market is a tribute to the aroused "pressure" of his discourse; but nothing more. Woolf insists that Fry's aesthetic revolves around a primitive figure about whom nothing is or can be known. (In any case, how can one guess what the primitive woman's "untutored taste" would be, when "Manchester" is working to turn her into a consumer?) Woolf's insistence that "the negress" is beyond comprehension, that the native women are "beyond the plunge of speech," confronts us with the dilemma of looking and saying nothing.

Fry, noting that the silhouette often appears in primitive art, argues that it represents the primitive's perception of "a single whole," as opposed to conceptual drawings "reconstruct[ed] from separately apprehended [and conceptualized] parts."³²⁰ In Woolf, a silhouette's blackness and the racial difference of "natives" signify unreadability. As Rachel dies, she sees for "a moment distinctly; a large head above her; it became fringed with black and then became altogether black". As another character recovers from her death, he senses a "pattern" in the "procession of objects, black and indistinct, the figures of people," that pass "across his eyes" (VO 231, 244). In a narrative that is extremely skeptical of claims to omniscient understanding of

³¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography*, 152-153.

³²⁰ Roger Fry, "The Art of the Bushmen," [1910], in *Vision and Design*, p. 64 (Chatto and Windus: London, 1924 [reprint: New York: Peter Smith, 1947]).

interiority, the black, primitive silhouette represents the commitment to representing the unknowable without projecting onto it.

In this sense primitivism was an aesthetic precursor to the goal Woolf articulated in her 1923 review of *Revolving Lights*, where she wrote that Dorothy Richardson had created “a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender. It is of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes.”³²¹ By contrast, a superficially appealing character named Clarissa Dalloway initially enthralls Rachel because “she seemed to be dealing with the world as she chose; the enormous solid globe spun round this way and that beneath her fingers” (VO 47). In fact, Clarissa’s poise recalls a line from Sir Thomas Browne - “The world that I regard is myself ... I use it but like my globe, and turn it round sometimes for my recreation ... there is all Africa and her prodigies in us” - which Woolf elsewhere attacks for its “immense egotism” (*Common Reader* 71-72) and which Conrad would reverse with his ominous line, “the mind of man is capable of anything, for all the past is in it, as well as all the future.” Clarissa’s husband, Richard, says of the British Empire, “It’s taken a long time, but we’ve pretty nearly done it ... it remains to consolidate.”³²² Richard’s “consolidation” and Clarissa’s “solid globe” suggest that Rachel’s ideal language will be far more fluid.³²³

³²¹ *Modernism: An Anthology of Documents and Sources*, ed. Vassily Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman, Olga Taxidou. U Chicago: 1998, p. 486.

³²² With an irony that is murderous in its unselfconscious assurance, he adds, “It takes all sorts to make a world” (VO 51). In fact, only some “sorts” should be allowed to define the world thereby created. “May I be in my grave before a woman has the right to vote in England!” Woolf then puns: “the solemnity of her husband’s assertion made Clarissa grave” (VO 43).

³²³ A letter of 1905 provides an instance of Woolf imagining her writing through images of voyages, seas, and connection between women: “It seems absurd that we should still be in the same place where you left

Not only fluid, in fact, but capable of representing experience at an almost pre-conscious level. In “The Art of the Bushmen” (first printed in 1910), Fry’s appreciation of primitive art (a category that included both extant tribal peoples and Paleolithic cultures) led him to advance a theory of art that is also a historical hypothesis about consciousness and perception. He begins with cave paintings of “animals trotting.” While prior generations of aesthetes dismissed these paintings as crude, he writes, we can now see that their “crudity” is in fact a mark of the accuracy of their vision. “[T]he gesture is seen by us to be true only because our slow and imperfect vision has been helped out by the instantaneous photograph” (“Bushmen” 60). Edward Muybridge’s stroboscopic photographs of galloping horses prove that the awkward cave-drawings are actually perfect renderings of animals running.

The high-speed camera is a prosthesis as much as a technological achievement; the very need to have invented it is symptomatic of the fact that civilization’s successes are also failures. In Fry’s view, “it is to be noted that all the peoples whose drawing shows [the highest] power of visualization belong to what we call the lowest of savages” (“Bushmen” 61). The march of civilization causes and results from the loss of this visual power. It was with “Neolithic man,” apparently, that “the conceptual view of nature began to predominate” (62). The unfortunate “habit of thinking of things in terms of concepts ... deprived him ... of the power to see what they looked like. With Neolithic man drawing came to express man’s thought about things rather than his sensations of them” (62). “Civilization” is merely an accumulation of concepts that replace the

us... the Capital—or Mother City of the Empire.... I have been scribbling [reviews] all the time you have been sailing, and if all the sheets I have written were pasted together they would just catch you up—all but three feet 2 inches and $\frac{1}{4}$.” *Letters of Virginia Woolf*, I, 252 [p.211, Nov. 10 1905.

instinctual apprehension of the world with a simulacrum of cognitive representations.

“Paleolithic man,” conversely, was still “at a stage of intellectual development where the concepts were not so clearly grasped as to have begun to interfere with perception, and where therefore the retinal image passed into a clear memory picture with scarcely any intervening mental process” (63).

Woolf voiced a similar idea. “We look back with envy to those happier warriors,” earlier writers, because, with their “simple tools and primitive materials,” the “fight” to represent reality “was not so fierce for them as it [is] for us” (*Common Reader* 207). The fight is fiercer for us because we are burdened with all the modes of representing reality that came before us; reality itself has become ever more elusive. It is the immediate translation of experience into memory without conceptual interference—what Woolf calls “my capacity for scene-receiving”—that would form the central theory of “A Sketch of the Past.” Woolf’s “instinctive notion” was that “we are sealed vessels afloat upon what it is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality; that is a scene” (*Sketch*, 142).

It is a theory both of consciousness and of Woolf’s own identity. The “exceptional moments” of her childhood were those in which she ceased to exist as something separate from her external environment. They “brought with them a peculiar horror,” a “shock.” Yet horror was the wrong response: “the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer,” since “a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. ... It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get in writing”.³²⁴ The rapture of

³²⁴ “A Sketch of the Past,” in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (Harcourt: New York, 1985), p. 72.

writing lies in the explanation of the shock: self-transcendence recuperates self-obliteration. Yet the self in question is itself largely the result of shock. Woolf's mother's death "had been a latent sorrow" because "at thirteen one could not master it, envisage it, deal with it," but in its latency it "had toned my mind and made it ... unnaturally responsive ... when once more ... the second blow of death struck" (*Sketch* 124). The death of her half-sister Stella two years later "fell on a different substance; a mind stuff and being stuff that was extraordinarily unprotected, unformed, unshielded, apprehensive, receptive, anticipatory" (124).

This extending chain of adjectives indicates that Woolf, writing her memoir, is not remembering but constructing a self whose primary characteristic is that, like Fry's primitive artist, it is utterly susceptible to experience. The development and refinement of this self leads not to stability or identity, but only to ever-greater receptivity. Even the desire to "explain the shock" is a quest for "rapture" -- for being carried away from oneself -- and stems from an impersonal instinct. "These scenes ... are not ... a literary device [;] scene making is my *natural* way of marking the past. A scene always comes to the top; arranged; representative" (*Sketch* 142). Similarly, in "Modern Fiction," Woolf drew a picture of reality as the scoring of the brain by "a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall... the accent falls differently from of old" (CR 212). Capturing this accent is the true object and goal of novelistic representation. The brain of the writer, like Rachel as she is rolled about by Helen and

the jungle floods her senses, and like the retina of the savage, is authentic in its impersonal recording of experience.³²⁵

The primitive signifies the primal, natural, pre-subjective openness to experience available outside the discourses of “civilization.” This openness is without discernible attributes or content—it cannot be defined. The analogy between Rachel and the primitive represents Woolf’s rejection of the drive to define, to impose identity. Hirst argues to Hewet that the tourists live inside tiny “circles,” enclosing only a few people; each night, they retreat to the “little boxlike squares” of their hotel rooms (VO 80). In the face of encirclement and being boxed in, the primitivist value of inchoate openness should be seen not as a failure but as a positive value.

This valuation of the inchoate and the unknowable is in tension with the expectation that Rachel will grow up or be rounded out as a character. She and Terence seem, in the words of one critic, “to come together without past histories One learns less about [their] pasts than about the pasts of any other characters in the novel ... [they] inhabit ... the province of myth”.³²⁶ Rachel, an only child, has no mother; her father is distant and has left her uneducated; “friends might have told her things” but she has none, having been cloistered with elderly great-aunts (VO 34-5).³²⁷ Yet while Rachel’s

³²⁵ In *A Room With A View*, E M Forster mocks a tourist who goes to study “the tactile virtues of Giotto.” Oliver Stallybrass identifies the source of Forster’s ire in a contemporary, art-historical argument that these “virtues” were superior in the way they struck the optic nerve, as if by touch. (*A Room With A View*, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1978, note to p. 38.) Such theories of unmediated or anti-conceptual aesthetics were in the air at the time. Seurat’s mature paintings, for instance, were based on the theory that separate, pure colors were the most effective, pre-conscious way to stimulate nerves.

³²⁶ *Virginia Woolf’s First Voyage*, pp. 114-15.

³²⁷ The narrative itself, at one level, participates in this desire for Rachel to achieve autonomy. Rachel, like the ship that carries her to the mouth of the Amazon, is “a virgin unknown of men” (VO 32), but upon arrival in the tourist colony of Santa Marina, Rachel begins taking walks at night. She watches “the young women, with their hair magnificently swept in coils, a red flower behind the ear, [who] sat on the doorsteps, or issued out on to balconies, while the young men range[d] up and down beneath ... stopping here and there to enter into amorous talk” (VO 99). With this incipient carnal knowledge, “The girl

upbringing is marked by enforced ignorance and the lack of educational opportunities Woolf fiercely criticized elsewhere, Rachel ultimately remains “vague” and “unmarked” (VO 24) not because she can’t grow up, but because she is less valuable as a character than as a focalizer for impersonal moments of being. Helen Ambrose thinks that Rachel’s mind “was in the state of an intelligent man’s in the beginning of the reign of Queen Elizabeth; she would believe practically anything she was told, invent reasons for anything she said.... [which] had one great advantage.... it put no obstacle in the way of any real talent that the pupil might chance to have” (VO 34). The analogy to the Elizabethans implies that a potentially world-changing power resides in Rachel’s very distance from modernity.³²⁸

The phrase, “the plunge of speech” suggests that the native women are at the bottom of a body of water; the figure recurs when Rachel, dying of fever, is described as sinking to the bottom of a body of water where words reach her only as a “dull booming.” Like the primitive women, by the end of the novel Rachel is submerged too deeply for discursive understanding, and represents a truth that language is inadequate to express.

[became] more definite and self-confident ... her skin was brown, her eyes certainly brighter, and she attended to what was said as though she might be going to contradict it” (VO 97). The narrative’s desire for autonomy, however, is largely driven by its critique of older characters who stymie or prey upon their juniors, as Rachel’s father Willoughby wants to turn her into a perfect “Tory hostess” to replace his deceased wife. “When you consider what a nice girl she was—only just engaged ... it seems so tragic,” says one tourist of Rachel’s death (VO 364), as if the deaths of girls with no prospects would be preferable.³²⁸ For Woolf the New World symbolized a challenge to express the vast variety of the unclassified and unfamiliar. Woolf found Hakluyt captured this variety but failed to translate it into a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Hakluyt is “not so much a book as ... an emporium, a lumber room strewn with ancient sacks ... one is forever untying this packet here, sampling that heap over there ... while outside tumble the huge waves of the uncharted Elizabethan sea” (*The Common Reader*, NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1925; “The Elizabethan Lumber Room,” 61-72, p.61). Like the diversity of the New World, Rachel Vinrace challenges conventional representation, and is similarly misrepresented by a monologic discourse. The motherless Rachel needs to find the sort of matrix Woolf intimates in the image of “the Elizabethan sea.” Rachel creates a false idol of a politician named Richard Dalloway whom she meets on ship. Whereas Hakluyt’s prose failed “to grasp a thought closely and firmly,” Dalloway “grasped things so firmly but so loosely” (VO 47).

At her death, Rachel seems to lack the disturbing agency of the native women's gaze—but perhaps, if the novel succeeds, it will similarly transfix the reader's mind's eye, just as the tourists are transfixed by the native women staring them in the face. The analogy between the reader and the tourists suggests an aggressive conception of the novel: that it, like the primitive women, represents an uncanny truth. With such primitivist scenes *The Voyage Out* signals that it does not intend to speak its readers' language, but to undermine it.

Creo que sí: Primitivism and the question of belief in D. H. Lawrence

The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounselled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life.

Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller"³²⁹

Lawrence wrote that *The Plumed Serpent* was the novel "that mean[t] the most to [him]," the one "closest to [his] heart." It may be his most critically-reviled novel. It is also the work in which he most thoroughly expressed his sense of civilization's decline, and interrogated the possibility of its renovation by imagining the marriage of primitive rites to a modern political revolution.

After the first world war, Lawrence fled England for Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Australia, and the American southwest on a "savage pilgrimage," looking "over all the world for something that would strike me as religious," and finding it in Native American rituals that he witnessed in New Mexico.³³⁰ By "religious" he meant ceremonies and rituals that reaffirmed oneness with the world, in which every moment and thing carries an immanent spiritual meaning.³³¹ He felt that the sense of oneness or spiritual plenitude that still characterized the worldview of "primitive" peoples had once been the general possession of all people.³³² "White civilization" has lost this worldview and lives in a disenchanted world; "our" dominant epistemology derives not from lived experience but

³²⁹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (Schocken: New York, 2002), p.87.

³³⁰ D.H. Lawrence, *Phoenix*, (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 143.

³³¹ "The Indian does not consider himself as created, and therefore external to God, or the creature of God... In everything the shimmer of creation, and never the finality of the created." Lawrence, *Mornings in Mexico and Etruscan Places*, (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 106.

³³² Lawrence described in detail an ancient, world-wide civilization that he hypothesized once existed and which explained the presence of common elements in contemporary cultures. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious, and Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*, (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1986), p.12.

the objectifying study of inanimate objects, “a science of the dead world”; religion has degenerated into self-conscious performance for a distant, spectatorial God; and other cultural achievements, especially secular art and literature, have fallen even further into alienation and anxiety.³³³ In hindsight, from the regretful point of view of the subject of modernity, Lawrence argued that “the supreme lesson of human consciousness is to learn how not to *know*.”³³⁴

Lawrence was not content with melancholic nostalgia for the primitive and his forgotten, superior mode of being in the world; he wanted to use the primitive to reform modernity. How can one learn to un-know one’s own alienation when alienation is the basis of one’s epistemology, even one’s mode of being? The challenge Lawrence set himself was thus to mediate the primitive to the modern subject who will only unwillingly grant it a hearing. *The Plumed Serpent* is Lawrence’s response to this challenge.

Focalized through Kate Leslie, the novel represents the attempt of a few Mexicans – Don Ramón Carrasco and General Cipriano Viedma – to resuscitate, or reinvent, the pre-Colombian religion of Quetzalcoatl. Ramón tries to build an explicitly anti-modern national community, where myth rather than democracy is the founding principle. Kate agrees that modernity is bankrupt. She is repulsed both by European and American “civilization” and by the *ressentiment* against it that she perceives in Mexico – a country, she thinks, that modernity has pushed aside and left behind. But Kate sees no hope for Mexico in political revolution, a despair born of the fatal efforts of her late husband,

³³³ Lawrence, “Indians and Entertainment,” in *Mornings in Mexico*, op.cit.

³³⁴ Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, op. cit., p. 76.

Joachim (whom we learn about only in the past tense) to foment revolution in their native Ireland.

The Plumed Serpent traces Kate's struggle to accept the role Ramón and Cipriano have projected for her in their primitivist revolution. Kate is to become Malintzi, the goddess in a pantheon comprising Queztalcoatl (Ramón) and Huitzilopochtli (Cipriano), and to marry the latter. As Ramón's revolution begins to take control of Mexican territory, it unfolds in Kate as well, who tentatively repudiates her civilized, autonomous "self" or "individual ego." From viewing Cipriano's pretensions to godhood as ridiculous, to fearing that marrying him will lead to her subjugation within a patriarchal theocracy, she begins – tentatively – to desire precisely that which will engulf her "old" self as the only hope for a new, liberated subjectivity. Lawrence invites the reader to identify with Kate at moments when she seems to undergo a sort of conversion, such as her realization that "everything is possible, even that oneself is elusive among the gods," but Kate's struggle does not culminate in a blissful, final conversion. In the last line of the novel, she ambiguously accuses, thanks or pleads with Ramón, "you won't let me go!" (PS 341, 420).

Many critics view the novel's primitivism as a mask for misogyny, racism and neo-colonialism, and often blame what they see as the novel's aesthetic failure on its ideological sins: instead of rendering luminous, human experience, the novel is filled with turgid passages describing Ramón and Cipriano's primitivist rituals.³³⁵ The novel's

³³⁵ T S Eliot's cutting post-mortem review, entitled "The Victim and the Sacrificial Knife" (1934), set the tone for critical discussion of *The Plumed Serpent*: "in his travels to more primitive lands, [Lawrence] could never take the crude peoples simply for what they are; he must needs always be expecting something of them that they could not give, something peculiarly medicinal for himself" (reprinted in R. P. Draper, *D H Lawrence: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge: 1997, p. 362). Lawrence's racism, which Eliot handles clumsily, has also been censured. Hugh Stevens argues that the novel's Mexican setting allows

politics deserve scrutiny, but as a starting point, its aesthetic choices are particularly intriguing. Surely a novel seeking to convert its readers to a “primitive” worldview would represent that worldview as attractively as possible – like “somebody in the fresh ... morning ... singing rather beautifully, letting the sound, as it were, produce itself”³³⁶ – drawing them in through empathetic characters, or the kind of lyrical descriptions of the natural landscape that Lawrence had long since mastered. Yet the most surprising feature of *The Plumed Serpent* – which accounts of its aesthetic “failure” tend to overlook – is that it does not fail to meet such expectations, but deliberately thwarts them. Why, when Kate dons her wedding dress prior to the ritual in which she will incarnate the goddess Malintzi, does the narrator mention that she “sighed,” because she saw that the dress “was but a shirt with flowers upturned at the bottom” (PS 344)? Why does the novel, which denigrates the “trashy,” “cheap charade” and “frowsty images” of the Catholic rites that the Quetzalcoatl religion intends to replace, go on to emphasize that Ramón uses three different colors of fireworks to dignify his religious ceremonies? (PS 357, 290,

homoeroticism to coincide with political domination. The “rich” physique of “native” men resembles that of “Greek” sculptural nudes, Lawrence tells us. Stevens argues that by choosing Mexico over the Mediterranean setting (Greece, Stevens points out, was virtually a homosexual cliché), Lawrence gained the benefit of a change of skin color. Instead of statuesque white, the “native men” are a “reddish brown.” This racial difference allows Lawrence a free hand to revel in a scopophilic, power-laden relationship to his Mexican peons. Other critics also condemn the novel’s sexual investment in authority, but locate this investment in its misogyny. Laura Frost reads *The Plumed Serpent* as representing Lawrence’s libidinal authoritarianism – politics and sexuality are both reduced to servant (female) and master (male) relationships. Moreover, Frost argues, *The Plumed Serpent* solves the dilemma of Lawrence’s previous novels by replacing the male–male pairs at the center of *Aaron’s Rod* and *Kangaroo* with a female–male relationship. A woman now represents the subject in need of subjugation, which allows for a less fraught eroticisation of male power, as well as a more amenable object of that power. Kate’s masochism frees the male–male pair of Ramón and Cipriano from the impossible imperative of representing “good” relationships in *both* political (dominance and submission) *and* sexual (“balanced,” “star equilibrium”) spheres—the imperative, in Frost’s view, which had scuttled the loves of Lilly and Aaron, Kangaroo and Somers. The novel is not fully-realized fiction but “pure doctrine,” says Frank Kermode (in *Lawrence*, 1973); Michael Bell calls one character’s death “the sign of an ideology that has forgotten humanity.” Bell, *D. H. Lawrence: Language and Being*, (Cambridge: 1992), see chapter 6, “Sentimental primitivism in *The Plumed Serpent*”.

³³⁶ Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent*, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1988, p. 257. References to this novel are hereafter cited in the text as (PS).

305) Similarly, Lawrence follows up Cipriano's proposal to Kate – “won't you sit beside me, and be wife of me when I am a god” – with the following dialogue: “I am going to be the living Huitzilopochtli,” he said. ‘Are you? When?’ ... ‘On Thursday. The day of Huitzilopochtli is to be Thursday.’” (PS 387)

One might expect that such passages would occur early on in the novel but would fade and disappear with Kate's conversion. But the novel relentlessly calls attention to the contrived, cobbled-together nature of supposedly “primitive” rites. Ramón invokes a “return” to “ancient” religion and rituals in order to undo the damage of modernity to the subject, yet he frequently admits that such a “past” may need to be invented rather than rediscovered, inculcated rather than excavated.³³⁷ *The Plumed Serpent* takes as its project the reinstatement of a mythic sense of history, but seems to invite the reader into the process before the show is ready to be staged, while the costumes are still being sewn and the script rewritten; it seems like a camp version of “The Waste Land.”

Critics have attempted to explain these features of *The Plumed Serpent* by arguing that Lawrence failed to “believe” adequately in his own novelistic project. But it seems clear that Lawrence's “perverse materialism” (PS 318) is intentional, and that his goal was not to lull readers into uncritically accepting a primitivist revolution, but to draw their attention to the gap between Ramón's ideal and what he produces. Instead of questioning Lawrence's failure to command belief (or at least the suspension of disbelief), I will argue that his novel raises the question of belief in order to show the seemingly paradoxical necessity of creating, or making up, something primitive to

³³⁷ Lawrence's voluntarist statements elsewhere invite such a reading; e.g., “I don't believe in evolution” (*Mornings in Mexico*, “Corasmin and the Parrots”); “I like the wide world of centuries and vast ages – mammoth worlds beyond our day, and mankind so wonderful in his distances, his history that has no beginning” (*Fantasia of the Unconscious*, p. 14).

believe in. The novel's foundational claim, typical of primitivism, is that the modern artist can and should create objects that subvert the alienated mindset of modern civilization by channeling deep psychic and social forces, just as fetishes and rituals supposedly do in "primitive" societies, and that do not repress uncouth urges. But *The Plumed Serpent* is unique in its investigation of the related claim that modern subjects can invent and respond to rituals as if they themselves were "primitives." Indeed, Lawrence takes this as-if claim as his subject. The entire action of the novel describes the construction of Ramón and Cipriano's cult, and constantly raises the question of how modern subjects like Kate could see that cult not just as the strange project of a pair of egomaniacs, but as representing something ancient and essential.

Lawrence exhaustively describes the depravities of modern life – passages that serve as evidence in favor of Ramón and Cipriano's belief-project – and in these and other passages the narrative seems to adopt their perspective. But these passages must be reconciled with Kate's skepticism, and the "perverse materialism" described above. Lawrence's novel, strangely enough, is thoroughly concerned with the reader's attitude: it both elicits skepticism and attempts to oblige the reader to question that reaction by emphasizing the urgency of creating a belief-system that can save modern civilization.

1. Collapse

Traveling through Italy in 1911, Lawrence had met an old peasant woman:

She was spinning [wool], spontaneously, like a little wind. Under her arm she held a distaff of dark, ripe wood ... with a clutch at the end, like a grasp of brown fingers full of ... rusty fleece ... her fingers were plucking spontaneously at the strands of wool ... And hanging near her feet, spinning round upon a black thread, spinning busily, like a thing in a gay wind, was her shuttle, her bobbin wound fat

with the coarse, blackish worsted ... “That is an old way of spinning,” I said.
(*Twilight in Italy* [1911], 219)

This description may owe something to Lawrence’s reading of E. B. Tylor, the “father of anthropology,” who had introduced his concept of “survivals” with the example of an old woman with a hand-loom³³⁸:

I know an old Somersetshire woman whose hand-loom dates from the time before the introduction of the ‘flying shuttle’, which new-fangled appliance she has never even learnt to use, and I have seen her throw her shuttle from hand to hand in true classic fashion.... (Tylor 16)³³⁹

In Tylor’s theory, “survivals” are “processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home.” The survival theory found epistemological value in outmoded fragments of the past precisely because they were obsolete.³⁴⁰ For Lawrence, the spinning woman’s mentality itself represents a precious survival, an alternative to modern anxiety and self-consciousness:

She knew that I was an inhabitant of lands which she had never seen. But what of that! There were parts of her own body which she had never seen, which physiologically she could never see. They were none the less her own because she had never seen them. The lands she had not seen were corporate parts of her own living body, the knowledge she had not attained was only the hidden knowledge of her own self. She *was* the substance of the knowledge, whether she had the knowledge in her mind or not. (TiI 220-221)

Describing the woman’s Ptolemaic status as “the sun, the firmament” of her world (TiI 220), Lawrence momentarily glimpses a mode of being that is bodily, centered without being egocentric, and thus untouched by the alienated anxiety of virtually

³³⁸ Tylor, E. B. *Primitive Culture* (v. 1: *The Origins of Culture*: Harper, NY, 1958 [1871]).

³³⁹ Within Tylor’s lifetime, piece-work, “cottage” weavers like the old woman could only stay employed by lowering the cost of their labor, first to sub-Indian, then to sub-factory levels. See Wolff, *Europe and the People Without History*.

³⁴⁰ Tylor muses, “It needs but a glance into the trivial details of our own daily life to set us thinking how far we are really its originators, and how far but the transmitters and modifiers of the results of long past ages,” a “history” that is secretly “stamped” upon both objects and practices (17).

everyone else in Europe. The idea of such an authentic, indestructible mentality would become increasingly important to Lawrence after the war, when he would elaborate it in explicitly primitivist terms.

Though Lawrence was rejected for military duty due to his delicate health, his experience of the First World War was nonetheless hellish. Having married a cousin of Manfred von Richtofen (“the Red Baron”) in July 1914, Lawrence became a scapegoat after the war began in August. He was guilty by association with the brutish, militaristic “Hun,” a stereotype that threatened Britain and democratic civilization itself.³⁴¹ The Lawrences were hounded from Cornwall to London – they were suspected of signaling to German submarines off the coast, among other unlikely activities – even as the Defense of the Realm Act prevented them from fleeing Britain.³⁴² In the view of one biographer, the effects of Lawrence’s wartime persecution on his writing “cannot be overestimated.”³⁴³ Certainly it is hard to imagine a more vulnerable victim of wartime paranoia and routinized intolerance than Lawrence – the slight, tubercular author of such volumes of poetry as *Birds, Beasts and Flowers!*, whom a contemporary called a “delicate sensorium, quivering and vociferating to every physical fact.”³⁴⁴ Lawrence later lamented, “The War finished me: it was the spear through the side of all sorrows and hopes.”³⁴⁵

³⁴¹ Moore, Gregory. “The Super-Hun and the Super-State: Allied Propaganda and German Philosophy during the First World War.” *German Life and Letters*, Vol. 54 (4), October 2001, p. 310.

³⁴² The Defense of the Realm Acts of 1914 and 1915 “effectively restricted private travel abroad” for the duration of the war. Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars*, Oxford: New York, 1980, p. 9.

³⁴³ Mark Kinkead-Weekes, “Decolonising Imagination,” in *The Cambridge Companion to D.H. Lawrence*.

³⁴⁴ H. M. Tomlinson, *Norman Douglas*, London: Harper & Brothers, 1931, p. 8.

³⁴⁵ J. T. Boulton and G. J. Zytaruk, eds., *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence* (Cambridge: 2002), Vol. 2, p. 268.

He fled England in 1919, an end that was the beginning of a period, not much beloved of critics, during which he wrote his “leadership novels” – *Aaron’s Rod* (1922), *Kangaroo* (1923), and *The Plumed Serpent* (1926). As he traveled from England to Italy, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Australia, and ultimately the American southwest and Mexico – another biographer called this period a “savage pilgrimage” – Lawrence sought alternatives to post-war Europe. In his travel writings, Lawrence still found utopias that had escaped history – in 1921, for instance, he described Sardinia as a place which no civilization had “captured,” a place with “no history, no date, no race, no offering”³⁴⁶ – but in his novels he staged a series of violent, anti-democratic revolutions.

Post-war, Lawrence diagnosed civilization’s decline as terminal; it could not be reformed from within. What took root in the arid soil of his disillusionment was primitivism. Like T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” Lawrence’s primitivist works, as he put it in his novel *The Plumed Serpent*, are attempts to rejuvenate an “earth” gone “dry ... like a memory gone dry and sterile, hellish” (PS 443). In the present, even memory is dry; yet beneath the regions accessible to what Proust would call our “memoire volontaire” there exists a buried, primitive substratum, which we can regain and use to construct alternative ways to live our lives. In the view of primitivists like Lawrence, primitive societies gave expression to eternal, essential human drives, such that the primitive society represents the ideal of a community structured by rituals of deep self-

³⁴⁶ Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia*, op. cit., p. 11. The word “offering” implies that history is comprised of idolatrous sacrifices on the bloody altar of nationalisms. Sardinia was an inverted England. England had tried to master history and fit other peoples into a grand historical scheme, and for its pains had become an offering in 1914-18. Sardinia had suffered, but had never succumbed to the awful fate of a self-imposed historical identity.

realization and fulfillment. (Lawrence does not dwell on the prohibitions commonly associated with primitive societies, such as the incest taboo.)

Primitivism's promise thus bears an affinity to the fascist, völkish, and racist ideologies that critics have identified in Lawrence's leadership novels.³⁴⁷ These ideologies include the claim that geography and race are deeply linked (an idea satirically summed up as "*Blut und Boden*") and the subsumption of the individual to his racial/national group. Individual fulfillment is accordingly found by playing one's pre-determined social role and by participating in collective rituals.³⁴⁸ Those roles and rituals were justified as having originated naturally from the interaction of place and people to produce a race and a culture to which the individual owed his identity and thus his loyalty. Lawrence's own ostracism and exile evidently bear a complex relationship to the appeal that such group- and place-based ideologies held for him, but his disdain for an opposing ideology, liberal democracy, is explicable insofar as its promise to defend individual freedoms had proved a sham in his case.

Not only did völkish and racist ideology justify authoritarianism – since great leaders could tap into the collective unconscious of their people – but authoritarianism was particularly appealing to Lawrence's post-war politics because he viewed it as the best guarantor of individual freedom. "I shall be glad when men hate their common, world-alike clothes, when they tear them up and clothe themselves fiercely for distinction, savage distinction, savage distinction against the rest of the creeping

³⁴⁷ Most recently, the connections between Lawrence's fascism and his primitivism have been analysed by Jad Smith, "Völkisch Organicism and the Use of Primitivism in Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*," [*D.H. Lawrence Review* 30:3, 2002.](#)

³⁴⁸ Cf., e.g., J. W. Barrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914* (Yale: New Haven, 2000), p. 137.

world.”³⁴⁹ It is hard to see the writer of these lines joining the Blackshirts, particularly after fascism became entrenched. Lawrence’s attraction to authoritarianism stems, at least in part, from his fear that democracy is a threat to individual artistic freedom. Another experience during Lawrence’s travels in Italy exemplifies his anti-democratic mode. In Messina, Lawrence saw two prisoners – one young, one old – on a train platform. Sensing “instinctively” that the convicts were “evil,” he mused, “It is a great mistake to abolish the death penalty. If I were dictator, I should order the old one to be hanged at once.... I must remember again Oscar Wilde on Reading platform, a convict. What a terrible mistake, to let oneself be destroyed by a lot of canaille. A man must say his say. But *noli me tangere* [touch me not].”³⁵⁰ Lawrence argues that we need dictators to protect unpopular artists from the deadly “touch” of the “canaille” (“the riffraff,” the masses). Democracy, in this view, is the anti-individualistic rule of the lowest common denominator, which elevates mob prejudices to principles of government. Wilde’s fate revealed that democracies pay lip service to freedom of expression but ultimately sacrifice individuals who say their say (particularly regarding the love that dare not speak its name). What is needed to save the Wildes of the future, Lawrence argues, is a society in which power is centralized in a dictator who can recognize and protect genius from the threatening members of the masses.

The war had “finished” more than Lawrence’s faith in liberal democracy.³⁵¹ It destroyed his belief in Progress itself: his sense that “the great procession is marching, on

³⁴⁹ *Sea and Sardinia* (1921), p. 103. The Blackshirts, which became the paramilitary wing of Mussolini’s Fascist party, was first formed in 1919.

³⁵⁰ Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia* (Doubleday: New York, 1954 [1923]), pp. 18-19.

³⁵¹ In *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence’s scorn for political ideologies is as capacious as it is merciless. Democratic socialism is variously the “inferiority complex” of the “bottom dog,” or an intellectual fad of cosmopolitan dilettantes. Capitalism finds an apoplectic old American spokesman in a certain Judge

the whole, in the right direction,” and his “wonder” at the “great purpose” behind this advance.³⁵² Consequently Lawrence also lost his faith that, as a writer, “I can help the march.” His goal, he remarked in 1912, was to “bludgeon [the English] into realizing their own selves” with his work.³⁵³ He repeated a version of this motto a year later: “I do write because I want folk – English folk – to alter, and have more sense”.³⁵⁴ In the view of biographer John Worthen, the war shattered Lawrence’s confidence that these goals were attainable:

At a stroke, the country's energies re-directed themselves into barbarous opposition, hatred and a relapse into communal - not individual - emotion; and the writer who believed in the progress and development of “the great racial or human consciousness, a little of which is in me” and who wanted people to read his fictions and “be made alert and active” (Letters II: 302), to alter their relationships, to realize their own hearts and desires, felt himself utterly displaced.³⁵⁵

The war revealed a scale of failure and barbarism that extended well beyond England’s borders.³⁵⁶ With his “savage pilgrimage,” Lawrence – like many post-war writers – attempted to escape civilization for the ends of the earth. A contemporary, H.

Burlap. To Lawrence, partisans of the former ideology want all of society to be geared toward their own benefit, and hide their concern with their own welfare by touting the common weal. Capitalists, despite surface differences, are equally egocentric. Both ideologies were mere symptoms of the egotism and alienation to which the modern subject is condemned. Similarly, Lawrence saw such peace-making efforts as the League of Nations as top-down attempts to codify relations between subjects, which encouraged individuals to accept shallow, managerial definitions of themselves.

³⁵² G. T. Boulton, ed., *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence* (Cambridge: 2002), Vol. I: 57 (hereafter cited as “Letters I”). John Worthen quotes these letters in his *DH Lawrence: The Life of an Outsider*, London: 2005, Chapter 10: “In England at War.”

³⁵³ *Letters*, Vol. I, p. 424.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 544.

³⁵⁵ See Worthen, *Lawrence*, op. cit., Chapter 4.

³⁵⁶ In 1898, Conrad published Mr. Kurtz’s expression, “the horror, the horror,” to communicate the uncanny realization that the seemingly vast distance between civilization and the savages of the jungle was illusory. The uncanny, unsettling effect depends on the terms, civilization and savagery, retaining their meanings. After the war, the terms’ meanings had inverted. In 1918, Theodore Roosevelt, reviewing William Beebe’s *Jungle Peace*, wrote, “This volume was written when the author’s soul was sick of the carnage which has turned the soil of Northern France into a red desert of horror. To him the jungle seemed peaceful...” Beebe and Roosevelt identified the “horror” with Europe; the savage jungle was peaceful by comparison.

M. Tomlinson, traveled as far as Borneo, only to meet another veteran who remarked, “The Somme told me all I wanted to know of Europe – that and the Vimy Ridge [D]on’t worry about me. I shall be fine here with the orang-utans.”³⁵⁷

The war had shattered Lawrence’s self-image as a writer contributing to the more-or-less inevitable creation of a society which would enable each individual to fully realize herself. Before the war, Lawrence had written that his goals were to reestablish a lost connection with a deeper identity, a “great racial or human consciousness,” which is also the source of individual “alertness” and “sense.” Giving expression to this consciousness would be “a sort of answer to the want of today: to the real, deep want of the English people.”³⁵⁸ Having then found himself exiled not only from England, but from the narratives “civilization” used to describe itself, Lawrence continued to believe in the existence of a deep, “racial or human consciousness.” Indeed, after the war, there was little else in which to believe. At this impasse, primitivism offered Lawrence the means to create a ground for artistic production that was outside modernity and free from its corruption, while also remaining, as a critical discourse, connected and relevant to modernity.

2. Lawrence’s primitivist turn

The late 19th century saw “Europe ... gripped by the fear that its ‘superior races’ were in decline.”³⁵⁹ By the 1890s, Britain faced a decline in her “national health” that

³⁵⁷ Tomlinson, 1923, quoted in Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary traveling between the Wars* (Oxford: 1980), p. 7.

³⁵⁸ *Letters* Vol. I, p. 511.

³⁵⁹ Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (Vintage: New York, 2000), p. 82.

was blamed on unsanitary urban living conditions, poor nutrition, and overwork.³⁶⁰ More troubling still was the possibility that these or other external circumstances were leading to the degeneration of the British race itself – the human organism as it existed in the British Isles.³⁶¹ Such fears only increased with the First World War, which caused the deaths of around 13 million Europeans.³⁶² The trope of civilization’s decline fed the discourse of primitivism, which saw the primitive as hardy, masculine, self-sufficient, and at one with an unspoiled environment.³⁶³

In *Aaron’s Rod*, Rawdon Lilly thinks that the European upper classes – “this little gang of wastrels” – have “exterminated all the peoples worth knowing.” He muses, “I would have loved the Aztecs and the Red Indians.... The American races – and the South Sea Islanders – the Marquesans, the Maori blood.” The peoples who are thriving are another matter. “I can’t do with folk who teem by the billion, like the ... Orientals Only vermin teem by the billion.”³⁶⁴ The world, in Lilly’s view, is evidently in need of a good exterminator. The wastrels are responsible for letting the world be overrun with vermin, and both are equidistant from the preferable but absent primitive. Nonetheless, the primitive remains eerily present, capable of holding up a mirror to the Medusa’s head of civilization. In *Studies in Classic American Literature* he predicts – he almost vows –

³⁶⁰ Fred Reid, “The Disintegration of Liberalism, 1895-1931,” in *The Context of English Literature 1900-1930*, ed. Michael Bell (Holmes and Meier: NY, 1980), p.97-100.

³⁶¹ See, e.g., Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, which intermixes analysis of individual physiological and more abstract cultural degeneration.

³⁶² Mazower, op cit., p. 78.

³⁶³ Sir Arthur Keith, an eminent anthropologist, “contrasted the life led by modern city-dwellers with that of their ‘tribal ancestors’ ... Whereas ancient village life was supposed to have bred a sense of community and encouraged child-rearing, the modern city offered ... temptations which threatened family solidarity and fed individual selfishness and alienation.” Mazower, p. 93.

³⁶⁴ Lawrence, *Aaron’s Rod* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1950 [1922]), pp. 118-120. Hereafter cited in the text as (AR).

that once the last “red man” dies, the murderous “white man” will be haunted and tormented by the ghost of the Indian.³⁶⁵

In passages like these, the primitive signals complete alienation: Lawrence’s antipathy towards modernity is so all-consuming that he equates authenticity with the primitive’s very extinction, as if the fact of having already been exterminated spared him the degradations of modernity. In *Women in Love* a kindred misanthropy underlies Rupert Birkin’s apocalyptic musings on a post-human world, which he describes as “a beautiful clean thought, a world empty of people, just uninterrupted grass, and a hare sitting up”.

The technique of identifying with a privileged, authentic, disappearing primitive essence while debasing one’s conscious ego seems an almost masochistic response to the pressures that modernity was placing upon its subjects. Primitivism, perhaps, results from a subject under threat identifying threatened existence with a higher form of subjectivity. Primitivism reproduces the absent, ever-receding primitive *within* the modern subject – as a deep essence that can neither represent itself, not be easily grasped or identified without a kind of violation. But primitivism’s insistence on the purity of the long-distant primitive represents both a protest against and an attempt to overcome the inauthentic, alienated, corrupting influence of modernity.

Lawrence uses the primitive – akin to a beautiful clean thought in a world run by wastrels and teeming with vermin – to create a *cordon sanitaire* around his protagonists, immunizing them from the modern diseases of alienation and inauthenticity. *Aaron’s Rod* thus describes an upper-class Christmas party at which Josephine Ford suggests, “it would be pretty to put candles on one of the growing trees, instead of having a

³⁶⁵ Lawrence, “The Spirit of Place,” *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1990).

Christmas-tree indoors” (AR 42). The rest of the party instantly cheapens her suggestion: “We ought to do a ritual dance! We ought to worship the tree” (AR 44). The party-goers’ mock-ritual is a symptom of alienation, something done merely to pass the time. When Aaron, a working class “man from the coal-pit,” stumbles upon the party, his origins immunize him to these wastrels’ disease. Aaron is thus linked to Josephine, whom the narrator unexpectedly remarks “had some aboriginal American in her blood” (AR 60). When the group of party-goers later attends a performance of *Aïda*, Josephine “was filled with disgust”; she “looked down with the fixed gravity of a Red Indian, immovable, inscrutable” (AR 61). Josephine’s primitive blood rebels at the “the sham Egypt of *Aïda* [which] hid from her nothing of its shame.... The vulgar bodies of the fleshy women were unendurable.... [T]he leading tenor ... looked like a eunuch.” Turning to “the audience,” she sees “a million heads, a million hands, and one monstrous, unnatural consciousness” (AR 60-62). Among the fleshpots of *Aïda*, Josephine singles out Aaron in the orchestra pit, distinguishing him: “‘It is he,’ she said quietly” (AR 69). A primitive authenticity saves Lawrence’s protagonists from an all-pervasive, unnatural consciousness, even as they must live their lives surrounded by it.

As Lawrence used primitivist discourse to signal the authenticity of characters within his novels, he used it to construct the novels themselves as authentic artifacts unsullied by the modern degradation they described and represented. The primitive allowed him to imagine modernity from the outside, granting him a distance from which to enter into dialogue with an otherwise nightmarish and claustrophobic historical moment.

The textual history of *Women in Love* indicates that Lawrence used primitivist discourse to clear a space for imaginative production. *The Sisters*, the ur-text of the Brangwen saga, “began with a plot for *Women in Love*,” but after writing it, Lawrence “proceeded backwards in fictional time,” writing *The Rainbow*, which traces the pre-history of *Women in Love*.³⁶⁶ Lawrence’s drafts of *The Rainbow*, in turn, pushed farther and farther back into the past. The final version opens with a set of repetitive, cyclical actions closely connected to the land, which are described from a non-individualized point of view. Lawrence describes the Brangwen men as they seek out and participate in the seasonal, natural rhythms of “pulsing,” “sowing,” and “inseminating.” Critics have interpreted the opening of *The Rainbow* as drawing on contemporary ideas of primitive societies, which included a cyclical sense of time and a deep connection to the natural environment.³⁶⁷ Indeed, Lawrence used the same trope a decade later to describe a Native American dance:

The spirits of the men go out ... seeking the creative presence ... in the creative pulse, on and on into the ... maize that lies under the ground, there, with the throbbing, pulsing, clapping rhythm that comes from the dark, creative blood ... to stimulate the ... seed-germ, till it throws forth its rhythms of creative energy into rising blades of leaf and stem.³⁶⁸

Lawrence’s movement of the Brangwen saga back in time until he had reached an ahistorical, primitive moment, allowed him to begin his fiction from a point outside of the historical epoch he sought to critique. Lawrence wanted his novels “to be a great kick at misery,” but lacked models; he found that “all the modern stuff since Flaubert ... seems

³⁶⁶ Charles L. Ross, *Women in Love: A Novel of Mythic Realism*, p. 6.

³⁶⁷ Michael Bell, drawing on the work of Ernst Cassirer, argues that *The Rainbow* recapitulates the anthropological hypothesis of human development from primitive to civilized, which was prominent in Lawrence’s day. Bell, *Primitivism* (Methuen: London, 1972).

³⁶⁸ Lawrence, *Mornings in Mexico*, op. cit., 107-109.

like an acceptance”.³⁶⁹ The primitivist tropes that Lawrence uses to open *The Rainbow* represent a way to avoid the kind of social realism he repudiated. The novel’s ahistorical opening, in this reading, frames the subsequent narrative as a tragic fall into modernity; primitivism gives Lawrence a running start for his kick at misery, it opens a space in which his own creativity could operate unhindered. The opening of *The Rainbow* represents Lawrence’s discovery of a kind of pure story which his own “creative energy” could spark into life.³⁷⁰

3. The answer to alienation

Primitivist discourse gave Lawrence a foundation from which to write, grounding his attempts to imagine an alternative to the misery of modern life, because it posited the existence of a distant, remote and uncorrupted essence that could nonetheless be retrieved. By the same token, primitivism provided Lawrence with a diagnosis of civilization and its discontents.

Lawrence’s starting point is that the modern reader is alienated but aching for something other than his current lot. This alienation is inherent in our intellectual, ratiocinative, objectifying mode of perceiving the world. Intellectual historians have argued, for instance, that the modern sense of history, unlike the mythic sense, is

³⁶⁹ *Letters*, Vol. I, p. 459.

³⁷⁰ By using primitivist tropes to push backward in time, thus increasing the chronological referents of his fiction, Lawrence was making a typical modernist move. Michael Levenson notes that in editing “The Waste Land,” Eliot and Ezra Pound replaced allusions to relatively recent cultural texts with allusions to relatively distant ones. By describing the misery of modernity in so many historically diverse voices, the poem itself would, if not escape history, transcend the status of a mere example of its times. Lawrence, however, used primitivism not as the basis for an anxious claim to transcend the times, but as a means to oppose himself to the times and to fight them.

anxiously aware of the presence of alternative histories that need to be refuted.³⁷¹ To refute them requires one to produce an “objective” or “disinterested” point of view from which to deliver one’s refutation. By the 19th century, this approach had been adopted by critical scholars. The study of unfounded beliefs would help humanity consciously seize its historical destiny.³⁷² But while criticism had devalued myth it offered nothing in return as an object of belief, even as it alienated modern subjects from the myths that had generated truth-value for subjective experiences.³⁷³ Nietzsche, whose influence on Lawrence critics have thoroughly explored, bemoaned “the loss of myth, of a mythic home, a mythic womb”: “Man today, stripped of myth, stands famished among all his pasts” (*Birth of Tragedy*, Ch. 23). Lawrence felt that the wheel had begun to turn full circle. Ancient “myths now begin to hypnotize us” because “our ... impulse” towards other “ways of understanding” is “spent” (*Fantasia of the Unconscious* 13).

Lawrence argued that “white civilization” has condemned itself to disenchantment. Our perception of the world is predetermined by our objectifying episteme, which strips its objects of any spiritual significance.³⁷⁴ We exclude ourselves

³⁷¹ Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility*, (Chicago University Press: 1998), p.4.

³⁷² A colorful example is Max Nordau, the author of *Degeneration*, in his attack on the Hebrew Bible: “We find collected in this book the superstitious beliefs of the ancient inhabitants of Palestine ... which are rarely distinguished by beauties of the highest order but frequently by superfluity of expression, coarseness, bad taste, and genuine Oriental sensuality. As a literary monument the Bible is of ... late origin ... as a work of literary merit it is surpassed by everything written in the last 2000 years by authors even of second rank ... [it is] childish and its morality [is] revolting... And yet men... pretend to reverence this ancient work ... and they pretend to be ... inspired when they read it.” “The Lie of Religion,” 1883, quoted in Stanislawski, Michael, *Zionism and the Fin de Siècle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky*, University of California Press: Berkeley, 2001.

³⁷³ Wyndham Lewis argued that the dominance of the critical approach had transformed art: “...none of the pictorial and plastic arts... are today any more than an adjunct to the critical and historic faculty. The contemporary audience is essentially an audience of critics. They are, that is to say, as active as the performer—who indeed, exists chiefly in order that the critic may *act*—as a Critic. The only *rationale* of the professional artist at the present moment is to provide the critic with material for criticism.” (Lewis, *The Dithyrambic Spectator*, p. 170).

³⁷⁴ “Indians and Entertainment,” *Mornings in Mexico*, p. 50.

from the world by our disinterested, instrumental relationship to it. The result is a kind of infernal spectatorship, in which the ways we seek to find “satisfaction” (a negative, loaded word for Lawrence) distance us from the objectified source of pleasure, when we should rather open ourselves to it. Like the unnatural, million-headed audience attending *Aida*, “we go to the theater to be entertained ... to be taken out of ourselves,” but our capacity to do so has been corroded by our egocentric worldview. What we really want is not to lose ourselves but “to become spectators at our own show. We lean down from the plush seats like little gods ... and see ourselves away below there, on the world of the stage ... we see ourselves: we survey ourselves ... we are the gods above of our own destinies.”³⁷⁵

Our religious rituals, and our art and literature, have degenerated into a closed circuit of self-conscious performances, at a cost that is far worse than mere boredom. In reality, we can barely stand the success of our efforts to make our lives predictable and controllable: “Oh, God, to be free of all the hemmed-in life, the horror of human tension, the absolute insanity of machine persistence.”³⁷⁶ The vaunted individualism of civilized people is a mirage. “Men today were half-made, women were half-made ... half-responsible ... acting in terrible swarms ... to avoid the responsibility of achieving any more perfected being or identity. The queer, rabid hate of being urged on into purer self. The morbid fanaticism of the non-integrate” (PS 115).³⁷⁷

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia*, p. 35.

³⁷⁷ Lawrence’s critique evokes, perhaps, Georg Simmel’s thesis that the hypertrophy of individuality in modernity—as seen, for instance, in the dandy’s cultivation of idiosyncrasies—is an adaptive characteristic of people in “the metropolis,” who must fight the tendency toward anonymity (or meaninglessness as an individual) in an environment where an abstraction, money, is the source of all value.

Lawrence viewed the primitive as having retained a participatory mode of dwelling in a spiritually meaningful world.³⁷⁸ It was an anthropological commonplace among contemporary authors (from Tylor to Frazer to Levy-Bruhl) that the “primitive mentality” revolved around an animistic perception of the natural environment, in which each tree or rock had a spirit dwelling within. In Lawrence’s view, the primitive experienced his environment as brimming with spiritual significance.³⁷⁹ For “the Indian,” there is no self-God-world division; “everything is godly,” and the ritual performance is not done for an audience but to break through to and more fully embody that godliness. To Lawrence, in a world that had just survived the War, the primitive represented the continuing possibility of experiencing what Freud would call “the oceanic.”

The primitive’s animistic worldview meant that the quotidian objects of his life took on a heightened, experiential significance that our own society’s artworks can barely aspire to in the modern spectator’s experience. Moreover, unlike art today, art in primitive cultures played a central role in communal life as well as in individual experience. “Only a horizon ringed about with myths can unify a culture,” Nietzsche claimed, and the “images of myth” function as “daemonic guardians” in such a culture, “presiding over the growth of the child’s mind and interpreting to the mature man his life and struggles” (*Birth of Tragedy*, Ch. 23). The primitive, myth-enacting ritual came to represent a cultural ideal, where social unity depended upon art, and art opened up society as a whole to experiencing spiritual significance.

³⁷⁸ Lawrence argued that the spirituality of “primitive” societies had survived from a lost, ancient civilization, Atlantis, from which all people are descended. *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, p. 12.

³⁷⁹ “... Creation is a great flood, forever flowing, in lovely and terrible waves.” *Mornings in Mexico*, p. 106.

Lawrence read Jane Harrison's influential *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913) on the origins of Greek drama.³⁸⁰ Harrison argued that primitive rituals were artistic forms originating in spontaneous, "deep," communally-"shared emotions" about individual and communal survival. In short, rituals were born from the anxieties about "food and children" that were aroused each year by the change from the growing and reaping seasons to winter. The natural environment affected everyone in a primitive community similarly, and artists expressed these common responses in ways that were simultaneously spiritual, communal, and aesthetic. In ancient Greece, where art and ritual had not yet split apart, Harrison argues, "it is ... one and the same impulse that sends a man to church and to the theater" (9). Religious theater, or ritual, represented primitive man's attempts to influence the environment by enacting what was needed for his community's survival—rain, a good harvest, the return of the sun. Historically, "there is no division at first between actors and spectators... all are actors, all are doing the thing done, dancing the dance danced ... whereas ... now ... most are spectators, watching, feeling, thinking, not doing" (126).³⁸¹

Harrison's present tense "is" makes the ancient Greeks a source of possibility for the modern reader. The opening of *The Plumed Serpent* diagnoses the modern condition by inverting the opening of *Ancient Art and Ritual* almost exactly. Harrison begins by

³⁸⁰ Lawrence's reading about primitive peoples was extensive, and included Leo Frobenius, James Frazer, Jane Harrison, and E. B. Tylor.

³⁸¹ Harrison notes that "the oldest festival of Dionysos was ... held [not in an amphitheater but]... in the *agora*, or market place" (Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, Thornton Butterworth: London, 1913, p. 127). Lawrence's "Market Day," in *Mornings in Mexico*, celebrates the market as a kind of ritual space: "In the old world, men make themselves two great excuses for coming together to a center, and commingling freely in a mixed, unsuspecting host. Money and religion. (MM 88)... [T]hey have had their moment of contact and centripetal flow. They have been part of a great stream of men flowing to a center, to the vortex... they have felt life concentrate upon them, they have been jammed between the soft hot bodies of strange men come from afar, they have had the sound of strangers' voices in their ears... there is no goal, and no abiding place, and nothing is fixed... (MM 95)"

imagining an “Athenian citizen ... passing through the entrance gate to the theatre” to attend the Dionysian festival. He is “at once on holy ground ... [and] pay[s] nothing for his seat; his attendance is an act of worship” (Ancient Art 10). *The Plumed Serpent* opens with foreign tourists buying tickets to a Mexican bullfight “in [a] concrete and iron amphitheatre. A real gutter-lout came ... to see which seats they had booked ... in a ... big concrete beetle trap” (PS 12). As Harrison describes Athens, “the theatre is open to all ... but the ordinary man will not venture to seat himself in the front row. ... [There,] the seats have backs ... [and] on each seat the name of the owner is inscribed ... all priests” (Ancient Art 10-11). At the Mexican bullfight, “a few commonplace people in an expanse of concrete were the elect” (PS 19), the President never arrives, and “anybody who was anything sat ... at the top of the amphitheater,” “far away” from the front row.³⁸² The Greek religious ceremony involved several “chosen young men of the Athenians, in the flower of their youth—*epheboi*.” At the bullfight, “four grotesque and effeminate-looking fellows in tight, ornate clothes were the heroes. With their rather fat posteriors and their squiffs of pigtails and their clean-shaven faces, they looked like eunuchs, or women in tight pants, these precious toreadors” (PS 19). The ancient Athenian bull “was ... the primitive incarnation of the god ... Dionysos himself was brought to the theatre ... It was expressly ordained that the bull should be ‘worthy of the god’” (Ancient Art 12). In Mexico City, on “the Sunday after Easter,” “special bulls had

³⁸² Those who “venture” to sit up front are like waves in a flood of filth: “the masses in the middle, unreserved seats suddenly burst and rushed down on to the lowest, reserved seats ... like a burst reservoir ... [they] poured down ... round and about our astonished, frightened trio” (PS p. 13, 16; the scene recalls Klaus Theweleit’s thesis, in *Male Fantasies*, that fascism was built around a fantasy of masculinity as armored, distinct and hard, and opposed to the wet, flowing, mingling qualities of the feminine. While Lawrence’s primitivism shares a good deal with fascism, it goes beyond fascism’s emphasis on hardness and separateness, to insist on the openness to experience and the identification with the world – qualities that Lawrence praised as “religious”).

been brought over from Spain ... [due to] the lack of 'pep' ... in the native animal" (PS 11). The protagonist, Kate Leslie, "had always been afraid of bulls, fear tempered with reverence of the great Mithraic beast. [But] now she saw how stupid he was, in spite of his long horns and his massive maleness" (PS 21).

The opening scene of *The Plumed Serpent*, which inverts Harrison's study, also inverts Lawrence's own use of primitivism in the Brangwen saga. *The Rainbow* began with the communal scene of men reaping and sowing. Because this iterative, ahistorical starting-point did not need to be explained in terms of cause and effect, it enabled Lawrence to avoid representations that, in his view, would have amounted to surrendering to the modern status quo. By contrast, *The Plumed Serpent* begins from the bottom of the modern gutter. By describing that gutter in terms that are the perfect mirror image of the primitive rituals Harrison describes, Lawrence signals that his novel will provide an answer to the misery the Brangwen novels kicked against.

Like the "evil" convicts on the train platform in Italy who reminded Lawrence of the sacrifice of Oscar Wilde, and like the "million-headed" audience at *Aida*, the audience at the bullfight reveals the inability of modern individuals to perceive and respond to art in the right way. The bullfight is a "shameless spectacle" (*Quetzalcoatl* 7).³⁸³ And as a degenerate ritual, the bullfight's very ugliness points back to its primitive origin. Where Kate had hoped to see "a gallant display", she sees a horse being gored "before she could look away" (Q 6-8). The goring is represented in disgusting detail, and Kate is "shocked." But more disturbing still is the realization that modern people, from the "degenerate mob of Mexico city" (PS 19) on up the social ladder, *want* to be shocked.

³⁸³ *Quetzalcoatl* was a completed novel, which Lawrence revised and published as *The Plumed Serpent*.

The final straw, for Kate, is an American tourist's desire to watch even the goring, "craning his neck in one more frantic effort to *see*" (Q 15, emphasis in original). The credo of primitive participation has been replaced by the perverse, collective desire for a new sensation, a new experience.

What is needed is a return to active, participatory belief. The opposite of the bullfight's filthy display—"they might as well sit and enjoy someone else's diarrhea," thought Kate" (PS 24)—is the cleansing theme of a later chapter, "The First Waters," about Ramón's primitive revolution. The opposite of the self-willed, visual "shock" of the bullfight, is the ritual beating of a drum that "acts on the helpless blood direct" (PS 349). As modern mass-spectacles represent what we have become, Lawrence implies, mythic rituals could help return us to who we really are.

4. The question of belief

We return to the question of why *The Plumed Serpent* draws attention to the creakiness of its own primitivist plot, as it recounts the Quixotic attempts of Don Ramón Carrasco and General Cipriano Viedma to resuscitate, or reinvent, the pre-Colombian religion of Quezalcoatl.

Ramón is repelled by European and American civilization, but is particularly harsh when describing Mexico, which he sees as overtaken by *ressentiment*. Modern Mexicans are "reptilian": a "people who never really changed. Men who were not faithful to life, to the living actuality. Faithful to some dark necessity out of the past" (PS 432). Realizing that this dark, ancient aspect of the Mexican character had grown bitter under conquest, forgetfulness, and the resentment of the wealth of other nations, Ramón

launches a revolution. He reincarnates Mexico's ancient rituals and in the process deifies himself: he becomes Quetzalcoatl, the mythic winged snake of the title. Improbably enough, by novel's end, the revolutionaries appear to be succeeding. The "men of Quetzalcoatl" have taken over a town, repurposed a Catholic church, repelled an attack, executed spies and traitors, and infiltrated the Mexican army. Such is the weakness of modern Mexico, and such the strength of her ancient rituals.

Primitivist themes seem inherently difficult to novelize. Lawrence emphasized that a primitive drumbeat "wakes dark, ancient echoes in the heart of every man, the thud of the primeval world," whether it is "heard in ... Ceylon, from the temple," or in "the north, when the Red Indians were dancing," or in central Mexico (PS 348).³⁸⁴ But Samuel Johnson's dismissive quip, "one set of savages is like another," hints that primitivist narratives focused on basic, common human characteristics, maybe doomed to work against the grain of the novel as a genre. *The Plumed Serpent* attempts to establish primitivism as an alternative to the modern sense of history and character, without realizing how deeply implicated it is, as a novel, in this very sensibility.³⁸⁵ The basic, primitive desires Lawrence celebrates, paradoxically militate against Kate's "awakening"

³⁸⁴ Ramón also holds to a variant theory, such that he justifies his revolution as the truest expression of the culture born of a specific locale. Thus the Germans, Irish, and Mexicans all need to "substantiate" *different* gods (cf. PS 278, 375, 443). Ramón reconciles the two primitivisms by arguing, "the final mystery is one mystery. But the manifestations are many" (375). Ramón recapitulates a völkish nationalist trope, descended from Herder's concept of each "world-historical" nation's "mission." See J. W. Barrow, *The Crisis of Reason*, op. cit., p. 136.

³⁸⁵ *The Plumed Serpent* alone in turning to myth as an answer to the illegitimacy of the age. Modernism has been characterized by a widespread desire to escape from history through the "transformation of historical imagination into myth—an imagination for which time does not exist." Joseph Frank coined the term "spatial form" to describe the literary results of that desire (*The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature*, Rutgers: 1963, p. 60). But Lawrence's novel does not *formally* embody such a transformation. To write that "sometimes, the day of historic humanity would melt out of Kate's consciousness, and she would begin to approximate to the old mode of consciousness, the old, dark will... non-cerebral, but vertebrate" (PS 431) is to describe, but not to re-present Kate's primitive state of mind. Lawrence's novel is formally conservative.

plot, which requires interiority and character-development. Critics have almost unanimously seen the main characters of *The Plumed Serpent* as “two-dimensional.”³⁸⁶

The Plumed Serpent insists that Ramón’s primitive revolution had to create the past on which it based itself. In particular, Lawrence draws attention to the fact that Ramón’s primitivism is a pragmatic response to contemporary needs—yet primitivism claimed to provide an answer to those needs precisely because it was in contact with an ancient, prehistorical essence that pre-existed them. Take for example the description of Ramón’s creation of a small Quetzalcoatl cottage industry: children weave ceremonial *serapes*, a sculptor chisels gods according to blueprints, a blacksmith creates an iron *ikon*. The making of “beautiful things” (183) is conceived, *à la* William Morris, as unalienated craftsmanship.³⁸⁷ There is also a hint of William Yeats’s Byzantium, where “religious, aesthetic and practical life were one.”³⁸⁸ Ramón is not content to daydream of a non-fragmented, non-alienated culture. “The Irish,” Ramón tells Kate, “have been so wordy about their far-off heroes and green days of the heroic gods. Now tell them to substantiate them, as we have tried to substantiate Quetzalcoatl and Huitzilopochtli” (443).³⁸⁹

Byzantium must be rebuilt. Yet the narrator’s insistence on the materiality of Ramón’s

³⁸⁶ André Malraux similarly criticized *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* because “the entire technique of the novel is concentrated in the means the author uses to substitute for sexuality the living character of Mellors, or vice-versa” (reprinted in R.P. Draper, *D.H. Lawrence: The Critical Heritage*, op. cit., p. 197).

³⁸⁷ A “pudgy” sculptor is saved by his love for Ramón and pride in his work: “his fat, pale face took on an expression of peace, a noble, motionless transfiguration, the blue-grey eyes calm, proud, reaching into the beyond” (PS 185). Similarly, the men Ramón finds to sing the “songs of Quetzalcoatl” are singers rescued from alcoholism and the gutters of Mexico City.

³⁸⁸ *A Vision*, quoted in the *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3rd Ed. (Norton: New York), p. 886. Yeats envisioned Byzantium as that-which-modernity-is-not: “the painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject-matter and that the vision of a whole people.”

³⁸⁹ Yeats’s Celtic Mystical Order, which researched and even attempted to reenact ancient Irish rituals – partly in an attempt to counteract Protestantism – was actually a step closer to “substantiating” myth than Lawrence’s envisioned “Ramanim,” a “spiritual community” he planned to launch. On Yeats, see Patricia Rae, “Anthropology,” *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture* (Wiley-Blackwell: 2008), ed. David Bradshaw, Kevin Dettmar, p. 97.

props is nonetheless strange, because it serves to remind us that they have all been designed by Ramón only moments before: “two hoops of iron, one smaller than the other”; “some flat discs of iron, triangular in shape”; “two heavy hand-looms,” “a zig-zag border of natural black wool and blue, in little diamonds, and the ends a complication of blackish and blue diamond-pattern”; “the man was just beginning to do the center ... and he looked anxiously at the design that was tacked to the loom” (PS 182, 185, 186). The craftsman is anxiously working from a design, evidently drawn up by Ramón in a moment of arts-and-crafts inspiration, when the essence of primitivism’s claim was that the craftsman drew only on deep, inner, authentic, spiritually meaningful drives.

Ramón’s wife, Carlota, decries the “buffoonery” of “this Quetzalcoatl business” as a ruse, masking “vanity” and lust for “power” (PS 201, 174). Ramón, “an educated man,” “can’t really believe” such “*nonsense*” (PS 174, emphasis in original). Carlota dies, but her criticism lives on. Sandra Gilbert ascribes a “let’s pretend” quality to the novel, as if the characters were “children playing at make-believe” in “their serious way.” Gilbert’s phrase, make-believe, perfectly encapsulates the difficulty of believing in something still under construction, still being worked on. And if the necessity of building a new society perhaps explains Ramón’s actions, it fails to explain the narrative’s repeated hints that the intended spiritual meaning of Ramón’s props has failed to “take.” Lawrence needles any reader who attempts willingly to suspend his disbelief.

The novel thus complicates the reader’s responses to the hymns and prayers to Quetzalcoatl. Instead of presenting these as examples of “primitive mentality,” the novel confronts us with the realization that Ramón has just written them for instrumental purposes. The first “myths” of the Quetzalcoatl religion amount to obvious rewritings of

Aztec and Christian theology. Kate, having moved to the small village of Sayula, goes to the *plaza* and hears a singer reciting a new myth. The song places Quetzalcoatl at the beginning of history, when he created humanity and taught it to worship him. “But men forgot me,” he recalls; they created false religions (saying, e.g., “The sun is angry. He wants to drink us up. Let us give him blood of victims”) (PS 133). The god grew old, and went “home” to the “Master-Sun, the dark one,” which lies “beyond” the visible sun. Then “the dark sun ... brought white men out of the east. And they came with a dead god on the Cross, saying: Lo! This is the Son of God!” Today, this god is also old and tired: “Jesus is going home... and Mary is going back ... and both will recover ... during the long sleep” (PS 134). Quetzalcoatl has recovered already, and is planning his return.

This myth’s designs upon its peon, Catholic audience are so obvious that the reader interprets this myth as part of the plot, and nothing more. Yet the next moment, the narrator states that as the singer begins to beat a drum and “sing in the fashion of the old Red Indians,” his song “swirled the soul back into the very center of time, which is older than age” (PS 135). The first moment draws attention to primitivism as rhetoric and opens a gap between author and text; the second moment collapses the gap and seriously espouses primitivist values.³⁹⁰

³⁹⁰ Ramón’s absurdities are oddly similar to those concocted by Robespierre. His “last great comic [theatrical] moment before his fall was an occasion in which virtually the whole population of Paris participated... This was the famous Festival of the Supreme Being of 8 June 1793, in which... the French nation dedicated itself to the theistic creed.... Whether by intention or inadvertence. the day appointed for the festival was Whitsunday The celebration reached its climax on the Champs de Mars, renamed the Champs de la Réunion, where the people stood massed before its legislators, who were seated on the artificial mound that symbolized the ‘Mountain’ of the Convention; it was crowned by a Tree of Liberty. Robespierre presided, holding in his hand a bouquet of flowers and an ear of wheat. There were many speeches and the vast assemblage was led first in a hymn to the Being whose existence it was ratifying and then in patriotic songs. Multitude and unanimity proved intoxicating; to salvoes of artillery and with cries of ‘Vive la République!’, fervent embraces were exchanged. The enormous public act of faith had been inaugurated ... that morning ... in the Tuileries Gardens. Here the representatives of the people ... had met, arrayed in their brilliant new official dress, carrying flowers, wheat, and fruit. To them Robespierre ... had

Critics describe such inconsistencies as Lawrence's failure to command the reader's belief, and even posit that he failed to fully believe in his novel-world. But such inconsistencies are so consistent in the novel that we should ask whether, instead of intending to provoke belief, Lawrence intended to raise the *question* of belief. This is not to argue that Lawrence did not stand fully behind the primitivist project outlined in the novel, but that he did not believe that writing a typical novel would move that project forward. What if the reader's perception of a gap between mentalities (primitive and civilized, artist and audience) that cannot be bridged by will or by ratiocination is not evidence of a mistake, but a desired effect and theme? As Marjorie Perloff argues, in response to Marianne Torgovnick's *Gone Primitive*, the paradoxes of primitivism were not wholly invisible to modernists. Some modernists sometimes chose primitivism as a way of mobilizing these paradoxes.

Lawrence's description of "the soul" being "swirled" by the song in a properly primitive way is, in a way, prescriptive; as if to say, "unlikely as it may seem, gentle reader, your soul would have swirled too, had you been there." Yet Lawrence further defines "singing in the fashion of the old Red Indians": it means "singing inwardly, singing to [one's] own soul, not outward to the world." He signals that "the soul" of the reader is free to submit or to repudiate the song; the singer's own belief is what is crucial, and his singing was genuine. In this reading, part of the meaning of this passage is that the artwork being performed before the reader is not being performed for him; it is up to

delivered an oration in praise of theism, at the conclusion of which he set fire to an effigy of Atheism, from whose ashes there emerged, by means of machinery, the image of Wisdom, unfortunately a little scorched by the flames. The whole magniloquent occasion had been designed, directed, and rehearsed by David and was judged to be his finest achievement in this line of work." Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Harvard: Cambridge, 1973), pp. 69-71.

the reader to attain a primitive, mythic mentality that will enable him to appreciate the performance. Lawrence demands that the reader accept his primitivist argument while confronting him with the make-believe nature of Ramón's revolution.

However unusual this tactic appears, it marks a development in the way Lawrence dealt with the reader's state of mind. At one point in *Aaron's Rod*³⁹¹, the narrator brusquely informs the reader that the narrative is the only window onto the protagonist's mentality:

If I, as a word-user, must translate his deep conscious vibrations into finite words, that is my own business. I do but make a translation of the man. He would speak in music. I speak with words. The inaudible music of his conscious soul conveyed his meaning in him quite as clearly as I convey it in words ... Don't grumble at me then, gentle reader, and swear at me that this damned fellow wasn't half clever enough to think all these smart things, and realize all these fine-drawn-out subtleties. You are quite right, he wasn't, yet it all resolved itself in him as I say, and it is for you to prove that it didn't. (AR 199)³⁹²

This narrative moment is particularly strange in that Lawrence created it to insist that the reader should be convinced of something fictional. At analogous moments in *The Plumed Serpent*, the narrative draws attention to the fact that Ramón is making up a primitive religion as he goes along, despite the countervailing insistence of primitivist discourse that certain beliefs, rites and objects "act on the helpless blood direct."

At such moments, Lawrence acknowledges the severity of the crisis of modernity. Lawrence's thesis was that modern civilization, as compared to the religious rituals of primitive society, tend to satisfy our desire for control and self-identity. Egocentricity has

³⁹¹ Lawrence, *Aaron's Rod* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1950 [1922]).

³⁹² Frank Kermode argues that this and similar narrative moments in *Aaron's Rod* and in *Kangaroo*, represent a fragmentation in which Lawrence can no longer sustain narrative and the representation of a fictional world. If Kermode is partly correct, his is nonetheless a purely negative description of what Lawrence is doing. One could say that *Aaron's Rod*, as a novel, breaks down at this point; but one might equally say that it expands enormously, seeking to interpolate and engulf the reader. Kermode, *Lawrence* (Fontana: London, 1973).

cost us the ability to experience life as spiritually meaningful. Modern fiction must do more than create a pleasing mimesis – even if those pleasing representations are of modernity’s primitive opposite – if it is to break through the modern reader’s alienated shell. It must oblige her to revalue her values, to recognize the depth to which her own self-conception is inauthentic and contaminated by alienation. It proceeds, therefore, to force the reader to confront her own critical detachment, in order that she will come to see it as a sign of her alienation. The novel does not ask us to suspend our disbelief so much as it tries to force us to acknowledge that disbelief as representing a set of unquestioned, questionable values.

The novel’s own valuation of the ability to believe is represented in a passage that seems, at first glance, to be one of manipulation and credulity. The scene rewrites the trope of the pitiable, gullible, superstitious savage, familiar to readers of Victorian adventure novels in which adventurers in dire straits gained power over superstitious natives by deploying some commonplace technology – anything from rifles to almanacs. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines*, for instance, features a lunar eclipse that Allan Quatermain pretends to “magically” control, thereby wresting the credulous natives away from an evil witch doctor and saving his party’s lives. In *The Plumed Serpent*, Allan Quatermain’s tactic *discredits* those who employ it. Local Mexican officials, using an unconnected telephone, pretend to communicate the complaints of Indians to the capitol, as “the Indians sit gaping” at the “miracle” (PS 43). Ramón, conversely, uses the same tactic to restore “superstition” to the status of belief. One evening, Ramón “hesitate[s]” before calling his followers for their evening service, “and look[s] at the sky. ‘*Viene el agua?*’ he said. ‘*Creo que sí, Patrón,*’” replies a trusty peon (PS 206). Ramón “sounds

the summons,” and delivers a sermon—to their peril, Mexicans have forgotten the living “serpent of the earth” and the “bird of the sky” (PS 210-11). He then calls upon the “dark Bird” to return to Mexico, “with thunder in your pinions and a dark snake of lightning in your beak” (PS 211). Moments later, the predicted thunderstorm arrives. Importantly, everyone in his audience already knew the rains were coming. Ramón steps into the role of the adventure-novel’s evil witchdoctor, but revalues it by creating a spiritual meaning for the peons’ experience of their environment. Belief is, in fact, a matter of life and death. Later, after an attempt on his life, Kate asks Ramón whether he has killed his attackers. “‘*Creo que sí!*’ he replied” (PS 311), indicating that his survival was a miracle brought about by his faith in his own godhood.

Lawrence signals his awareness that the reader will find the novel hard to take through Kate and Carlota,³⁹³ who are asked to believe in the eternal sanctity of things that lack any history or wider acceptance. Nor does Lawrence purport to create such acceptance within the fiction. Carlota dies, and Kate faults Ramon’s spiritual revolution as patriarchal, ridicules Cipriano’s pretensions to godhood, and fears that marrying the latter will mean acquiescing in her own subjugation. Kate remains, irritable and dubious, in Sayula; the reader, dubious and irritable, keeps turning the pages. The fact that Kate is still hesitating at the novel’s end indicates Lawrence’s desire that the novel should keep bothering us after we close it.

³⁹³ If Kate’s predicament parallels the reader’s, Ramon’s powers presumably mirror Lawrence’s. Only Ramon can live both in the modern, quotidian world, and remove himself to the mythical world of his own invention. He can do “what Kate had not known anyone to do before”: namely, “withdraw his consciousness away” and “break the cords of the world” to reach a primitive, preconscious “oblivion” (PS 181). Ramón’s painful return to the world from his primitive nirvana – “it was hard to come back” (PS 193) – indicates an altruistic concern for humanity.

Although there is no guarantee Kate will repudiate her civilized, “individual ego” (by accepting her role as Malintzi), the prize for doing so is clear: a life of spiritual plenitude and an escape from alienation. Kate does, on occasion, come to desire that which will engulf her “old” self. Such self-loss, she discovers, is her only chance to attain a new subjectivity. Kate experiences a kind of auto-enchantment—“now she wanted this veiled *elusiveness in herself*” (PS 336, my emphasis)—and realizes that the way to produce it is through belief in Ramón’s religion, where (as noted above) “everything is possible, even that oneself is elusive among the gods” (PS 341).

Lawrence’s novel prods and pushes the reader to make a primitivist leap of faith – to accept that at some deep level, his or her identity is part of a universal pattern, and that it is worth trying to create a life based around this intuition. Moments where the narrative insists on the materiality of Ramon’s attempts to instigate a spiritual revolution are challenges to the reader, as if to say, as the narrator did in Aaron’s Rod, “it all resolved itself as I say, and it is for you to prove that it didn’t.” It is as though the reader is simultaneously asked to believe in the Wizard of Oz, and to pay attention to that man behind the curtain.

5. Primitivist splitting

Lawrence imagines the change from modern alienation to an almost animistic sense of the world and of one’s inextricable place within it by splitting the subject into primitive and modern selves. *The Plumed Serpent* does not mask this move – which has disturbing political ramifications – but tries to enact it in the reader, in order to create in him an awareness of a lack of access to his own primitivity that can only be overcome

through belief. Splitting the subject, for Lawrence, represents a means of achieving oneness: creating (the desire for) a “religious,” non-objectifying approach to the world.

One target of this splitting is “the Mexicans” themselves, whose primitive essence becomes both the object and the guarantor of Ramón’s reforms. Mexicans need to discover their inner primitives to escape from the injustice of conquest and imperialism. Cortés created a “heavy, bloody-eyed resentment” among a people “who have never been able to win a soul for themselves.” “Degenerate” modern-day Mexicans, whose “jeering” anti-élitism follows dialectically from their conquered history, nonetheless secretly thrill to drumbeats and human sacrifice. Only a return to pre-Colombian religion can throw off “the heavy, evil-smelling weight of an unconquered past” (PS 145).

Because the modern and the primitive halves of the personality are sundered, modern Mexicans have no access to their own submerged cultural and psychical essence.³⁹⁴ It is left for Don Ramón, an aristocratic, Columbia University-trained anthropologist of colonial Spanish extraction, to “consciously, carefully” (PS 147) pick and choose for them, from a set of “bygone” primitive practices that have “indeed gone by,” but “never shall pass away” (PS 325). Mexicans cannot be trusted to pick their own ideologies, but “when you got these dark-faced people away from wrong contacts like agitators and socialism, they made one feel that life was vast” (PS 113). Nor does Ramón need these dark-faced people to help him interpret their own dimly-remembered cultural practices. These practices retain their atemporal power, which dispenses with the need for traditional knowledge or hermeneutic techniques to give them meaning. It is thanks to Ramón that “this strange dumb people of Mexico was opening its voice at last” (PS 366).

³⁹⁴ The Orientalist’s vision of the “Arab” as having “centuries of experience but no wisdom” (Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage: New York, 1979, p. 320) fits Lawrence’s vision of the “Mexican” all too well.

Can the primitive speak? Lawrence elsewhere speaks of envisioning “mankind so wonderful in his distances, his history that has no beginning” (*Fantasia of the Unconscious* 14). Primitivism, while mourning the impassable chasm that separates modern life from man’s natural, primitive state, insists on and produces that gap. “They say the word *Mexico* means *below this!*,” Ramón recalls (PS 195). As a man with his ear to the ground, Ramon is listening for that which the Mexicans themselves cannot enunciate. The primitive begs to be re-presented; he belongs to “some distant period of time” (PS 171), after all, “not ... to the realm of that which comes forth” (PS 131). His authenticity inheres in the fact that he cannot represent himself.³⁹⁵

Kate’s inner revolution comes about through a splitting that divides her into a modern, verbal self—individualistic, willful, misanthropic, tortured by ennui—and a primitive, “elusive,” mute subjectivity. The latter gradually replaces the former, until Kate finds fulfillment in silent, “absolute submission” to “the phallic mystery.” What Ramón’s rites, hymns and fireworks do for the peons, sex with Cipriano does for Kate. It takes her “back to... the ancient ... world, where the soul of woman was dumb, to be forever unspoken” (PS 326), and so allows her inner “Malintzi” to speak. Kate must renounce “the curious irritant ... of talk” as the medium of her ego; she must also become “aware of her own desire for frictional, irritant sensation. ... [and of] the worthlessness of this foam-effervescence” (PS 439). Lawrence links (female) speech with clitoral orgasm as self-centered perversions of language and sex, which had originally been unalienated, open forms of interpersonal existence, language and sex. Kate’s “dark, Indian” husband,

³⁹⁵ Margaret Mead once vented her annoyance at a “culture” she has “almost completed” by imagining her tribal interlocutors “reading the index to *The Golden Bough* just to see if they had missed anything.” Letter of April 21, 1932, quoted in Clifford, James, “On Collecting Art and Culture,” p. 66, in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During, 2nd ed., (Routledge: New York, 2001).

“in his dark, hot *silence* would bring her back to the new, soft, heavy, hot flow, when she was like a fountain gushing *noiseless*” (PS 439, my emphases). Vaginal sex, “the greater sex,” is an authentic, primitive silence, and it creates a world-renewing mystery: “it was always the first time. And it made her again always a virgin girl. ... How else... is one to begin again, save by refinding one’s virginity? And when one finds one’s virginity, one realizes one is among the gods” (PS 409).

In *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence describes modern female sexuality as “prying” and degraded by the will-to-power, and uses primitivist discourse to open a path beyond it.³⁹⁶ Kate must accept that “the clue to all living and to all moving-on into new living lay in the vivid blood-relation between man and woman” (PS 414)—her escape from alienation depends upon her acceptance of a new, submissive sexual identity as transcendently or mythically important.

Lawrence argued that in contrast to modern sexuality, in “primitive” society, the bodily and the spiritual were linked. Today, “the senses become a conscious aim unto themselves,” which is “destructive, always consuming and reducing to the ecstasy of sensation.” By contrast, upon meeting an old woman – a peasant – in Italy, Lawrence discerns in her “soul” a “lapse back, back to the original position ... of the divinity of the flesh” (*Twilight in Italy* 221). That pure, unconscious, primitive relationship to the body mysteriously represents to Lawrence a deeper kind of individuality: “The senses are superbly arrogant ... the absolute, the god-like. For I can never have another man’s senses. These are me, my senses absolutely me” (“The Lemon Gardens,” 232).

³⁹⁶ Torgovnick identifies the changed gender and valuation of the primitive in Lawrence: from negative depictions of the female primitive in *Women in Love*, to positive, male primitives in *The Plumed Serpent*. Marianne Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (University of Chicago: 1991), see “Oh, Mexico!: D. H. Lawrence’s *The Plumed Serpent*.”

In *Women in Love*, Rupert Birkin explains Julius Halliday's primitive "Fetish" as the "unbearably condensed" expression of a putative ancient civilization organized around "pure sensuality." This African civilization, which was structured by a non-cognitive, bodily knowledge, was itself centuries old, and descended from a still older civilization in which the sensual and the spiritual were merged. That merger, for Birkin, recedes into an impossibly remote pre-history. The primitive fetish, in other words, signifies the unbridgeable difference between sensuality and spirituality, and so recalls the impasse of Birkin's relationship with Ursula. He thinks of sex with her as a way out of the unfulfilling, "willed" quality of their overly-conscious relationship, but he equally fears sex as self-betrayal for mere erotic sensation.³⁹⁷

Lawrence also represents Gerald Crich's sexual impasse in primitivist terms. The "Fetish" scene finds Crich aroused but confused about his homosexual desire. At Halliday's flat, Crich mis-identifies a man as "one of the Hindus down from Oxford," but later realizes that he is literally an "untouchable" Indian manservant³⁹⁸; later, Crich oscillates between finding a young Russian man "golden" and merely "animal ... somehow humiliating" (WIL 77). In the novel's first draft, at this point of racialized sexual confusion, "Birkin suddenly appeared ... in a state of *pure* nudity," and his "white body" strikes Crich as being "like a hieroglyph" (First WIL 65). The thin white body is as filled with alluring, hidden meaning as piece of ancient, primitive writing. Birkin seems, momentarily, to resolve the sensual and the spiritual into one. Crich renounces the female

³⁹⁷ As the primitive fetish exemplifies the danger of pure sensuality, another primitive woman symbolizes Birkin's view of consciousness as a sterile trap: when he "stones the moon," trying to "go away" from himself by breaking up its bright reflection on the dark pond, he names "her" as another ancient goddess, "the accursed Syria Dea"—the Syrian version of Astarte or Artemis, whom Robert Graves used as a unique example of a cult of goddess-worship.

³⁹⁸ Lawrence, *Women in Love* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1993), p. 73. Hereafter cited in text as (WIL).

figure, apparently representing heterosexual desire: “The African figure was low and gross and to be ignored, whilst Birkin’s figure, white and thin and abstract, gave it all the lie ... and the naked carven piece of wood was like dirt beside a jet of reality” (First WIL 68).³⁹⁹ But when Gerald asks Birkin to repudiate the fetish, he is disappointed. Birkin appreciates it as “art.” Gerald’s response is “shocked, resentful”: “You like the wrong things, Rupert.” Ambiguity changes to “hate” for “the African thing” (First WIL 79), as the primitive fetish moves from symbolizing inchoate arousal to representing blockage.⁴⁰⁰

With *The Plumed Serpent*, primitivism continues to signify aspects of sexuality that the individual cannot grasp, and that constitute a threat to his or her subjectivity. Ramón possesses “the aloofness of the savage” (PS 327), and Kate sees his “naked” body as representing a “*pure sensuality*” (PS 194)—Birkin’s phrase for the “naked” fetish. In her frustration at the “arrogance” of that aloof sensuality, Kate imagines a “knife between his shoulder blades.” But where Birkin is stymied, Kate’s fantasy gives way to “grief and shame,” until she comes to value Ramón’s sensuality for its “remoteness.” Kate repudiates her desire to possess Ramón by recognizing that it is “better to lapse away from one’s own prying, assertive self, into the soft, untrespassing self, to whom nakedness is neither shame nor excitement” (PS 195).

The technique of primitivist splitting disturbingly overlaps with colonialist, racist, and misogynist discourses, even as it forms an integral part of Lawrence’s project of creating an unalienated relationship between the subject and his or her external world.

³⁹⁹ *The First Women in Love*, eds. J. Worthen, L. Vasey (Cambridge University Press: 2004), p. 68. Hereafter cited in text as (First WIL).

⁴⁰⁰ Ironically this frustration leads to Gerald’s fall into the same sensuality he feared when, in looking at the fetish, “he saw the Pussum in it. And he knew her” (WIL 79). In a final, degenerate irony, Gerald’s “primitive” sensuality is actually parasitic upon his morality. He is aroused by a sadistic “pity” for the Pussum (WIL 79), “her inchoate look of a violated slave, whose fulfillment lies in her further violation, made his nerves quiver with acutely desirable sensation” (WIL 80).

The experience of religious ritual, sex, and art should be one that overwhelms the conscious ego; and to achieve this goal, the ego ought to dethrone itself and discover the hidden primitive ur-subject that is capable of authentic erotic – aesthetic experience. But that primitive “self” is not really a self; it must remain forever “elusive,” itself an object of desire and thus, in a sense, of belief.

Other critics have described the troubling aspects of Lawrence’s primitivism, but what perhaps still needs to be explored are the areas of overlap between critical condemnation and critical praise of Lawrence. In fact, my account of Lawrence’s primitivist splitting of the personality, and his privileging of the elusive, ultimately unknowable primitive self, is comparable to Jonathan Arac’s praise of Lawrence as a deconstructionist *avant la lettre*. Arac takes the moon (in the “Moony” chapter of *Women in Love*) as representing, for Lawrence, a Romantic symbol of sublime oneness, totality, a coherent and closed system⁴⁰¹. Birkin’s “mindless” throwing of stones at the moon’s reflection represents for Arac a radical break. Arac quotes Lawrence’s statement of his goal: to shatter that which is “static, petrified, turning towards what has been, and crystallized against that which shall be” (Letters 2:633). In Lawrence’s injunction to transcend “that passionate desire for the mastery of the medium of narrative, that will of the writer to be greater than and undisputed lord over the stuff he writes” (*Phoenix* 308), Arac finds an inviting, deconstructionist ethics (Arac 149).⁴⁰² Lawrence’s writing celebrates the way “writing solicits from us our interpretive power, the stones we critics

⁴⁰¹ Jonathan Arac, *Critical Genealogies: Historical Situations for Postmodern Literary Studies* (Columbia University Press: 1987), Chapter 6, “D. H. Lawrence and the Modernist Sublime: Stoning the Moon,” pp 139-156.

⁴⁰² Since for Lawrence “all vital truth contains the memory of all that for which it is not true” (Letters 2:247), it follows that “a work of art’s greatness is measured by its capacity to include that which calls it most thoroughly into question” (*Phoenix* 476).

and readers throw to shatter the old fixed images and startle new life in again” (Arac 155).

But this stone-throwing ethics can itself become a dangerous, totalizing system of thought. In Lawrence’s later short story, “The Princess,” the title character (probably based on his American benefactress, Mabel Dodge Luhan), is a monster of egocentricity. At a guest-ranch, she meets Romero, the “dark-skinned” man on whose land the ranch was built (Princess 179). She asks him to be her guide on a trip to the mountains, which she has a “fixed desire” to see (Princess 193). But as they crest a mountain ridge, instead of the sublime, Romantic vista she imagined, she sees “the massive, gruesome, repellent core of the Rockies ... *so* inhuman” (197). As if to recover herself, she “wills” Romero to take her to an isolated valley and make love to her: “she had *willed* that it should happen to her. And according to her will, she lay and let it happen.” (207) The next morning, she has regained her imperious attitude and demands to be taken home. But Lawrence will not allow Princess to turn her back after coming this far, to refuse to acknowledge within herself the primitive truth she has seen in the Rockies and sparked in Romero. At this point there is an ugly reprise of “Moony”:

[Romero] rose and reached her clothes, that hung on a peg ... She saw him stride down to the dark-green pool in the frozen shadow of that deep cup of a valley. He tossed the clothing and the boots out on the pool. Ice had formed ... Romero picked up rocks and heaved them out at the ice, till the surface broke and the fluttering clothing disappeared in the rattling water, while the valley echoed and shouted again with the sound. (Princess 210)

Romero rapes Princess repeatedly. “She would have called to him, with love” (216), except that she refused to soften her heart.⁴⁰³ Forest Rangers eventually come looking for them, and kill Romero.

“Princess” maintains the same values Arac praises in “Moony.” As Lawrence wrote, “it is life to feel the white ideas and the ‘oneness’ crumbling into a thousand pieces, and all sorts of wonder shining through” (Letters V: 67). Lawrence was willing to make his characters pay for this “wonder” by imagining rape. Lawrence’s primitivism insisted on a kind of splitting quite similar to the deconstructionist decentering that Arac praises, but Lawrence’s primitivism also shows that the valuation of alterity may itself be used to justify violence.

The Plumed Serpent persists in the kind of imaginary violence that cannot be whitewashed as deconstructionism, and that in many respects is directly opposed to the anti-violence of endless discourse. But in one important respect the novel is more humane than “Princess,” for the novel constantly invites the reader to question its assertions. It does so aggressively, and with the aim of leading the reader to throw away her skepticism. But the novel never loses sight of itself as a text in a relationship with a reader who can accept or ignore its primitivist challenge.

⁴⁰³ *The Portable D H Lawrence*, ed. Diana Trilling, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1988.

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