

D. H. Lawrence's Queer Flatness

Abstract:

Despite Lawrence's well-documented interest in 'Alpine' landscapes, characters in his *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *The Lost Girl* (1920) and *Kangaroo* (1923) repeatedly find themselves lingering in and on flat spaces. This essay attends to the dynamics of these flat spaces to complicate critical models which have emphasised sympathy, vitality and responsiveness in encounters with the Lawrentian Other. It finds that in Lawrence's prose, physical flatness (of landscapes, faces and objects) offers a mode of habitation, and an occasion for a literary style, which encode a reserved self-presentation, a failure of mutuality and sympathy, and a refusal to participate in an economy of responsiveness between viewer and land, person and person. The first section examines the stakes of Lawrence's peculiar insistence that the reader invests in characters and situations which will later vanish from the plot, refusing stable focal points in the novel's narrative landscape. The second section then investigates the relationship between protagonist and flat landscape in *Kangaroo* to uncover a fundamental Lawrentian trope: openness which is nevertheless inaccessible, demanding a sustained attention that it cannot justify. The essay ends by arguing for the importance, in Lawrence, of relationship which may be at once intense and unresponsive, with one or more of the entities involved flatly complete in themselves.

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D. H. Lawrence's Queer Flatness

In 1908, D. H. Lawrence wrote, facetiously, to Blanche Jennings:

I am very conceited, but not lofty; Oh ma foi, non! I am like a bit of hummocky ground, with many little amusing eminences – but Alpine – Oh dear No!¹

Despite Lawrence's well-documented interest in 'Alpine' landscapes,² characters in *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *The Lost Girl* (1920) and *Kangaroo* (1923) repeatedly find themselves lingering, ambiguously, in and on the flat. This essay finds, in the encounters that Lawrence's characters have with flat spaces, a poised, lively, active attentiveness to an expanse which offers nothing 'Alpine' to sight: in which no individual 'eminence' marks itself as *the* focal point, the thing worth looking at. Everything there is to see is offered starkly to sight.

These encounters model, and in many cases become identical with, modes of intense but undirected emotion and attention, reserved self-presentation, and insistent-but-aimless, dogged-but-listless narrative in Lawrence's work. Physical flatness, in Lawrence's writing (of landscapes, faces and objects) provides a model for pinpointing what his frequent emotional and tonal flatness encodes. Namely: a failure of mutuality and sympathy, a refusal to participate in the economy of responsiveness.

As affect studies has developed, theoretical attention to what it means to 'feel flat' or exhibit 'flat affect' has grown. Flatness associates easily with death, with depression,³ with post-traumatic affect, and with exhaustion. Yet recent work has expanded the range of what emotional flatness, broadly understood, may signify. Underperformativity, neutrality and blankness can represent what Jackie Stacey calls 'the absence of ... a sensual registering';⁴ what Lauren Berlant records as a defence, a distancing mechanism, a scene of appeal;⁵ what Rei Terada identifies as the 'wish to be relieved for a moment of the coercion to accept whatever one does not dispute'.⁶ Flatness, Steven Connor suggests, may be 'hotly impassioned'.⁷

To these formulations, I add the way that 'flat affect' aptly characterises, in Lawrence's work, a retrenchment of an immovable self in the face of a world which seeks to undermine, threaten or dismiss it.⁸ That emotional mode is not simply underperformativity. It is an intensity, a self-insistence far exceeding the apparent value of what is insisted upon, so that the viewing eye can neither settle upon nor decode what is offered to it.⁹ This essay seeks, in Lawrence's flat spaces, to locate a language for a narrative and literary style which is intense yet evacuated, stressing something in which there is nothing to see. It displays, with stark insistent openness,

that which does not instruct the viewer how to view it. I suggest that Lawrence's imperative to attend, in an intense, anticipatory posture, to something which never delivers anything that seems to merit that attention, drives both his uniqueness and the ambivalent critical response he has received.

The first section examines this early ambivalent response, suggesting that the oddness of Lawrence's narrative derives from his insistence that the reader invests in characters and situations which will later vanish completely. That demand for investment becomes the subject of the second section, which investigates the relationship between protagonist and landscape in *Kangaroo* to uncover a fundamental trope in Lawrence: openness which is nevertheless inaccessible, demanding a sustained attention that it cannot justify. The essay ends by arguing for the importance, in Lawrence, of relationship with the Other which may be at once intense and unresponsive, with one or more of the entities involved flatly complete in themselves.

Narrative and Flatness

In the *Times Literary Supplement* of 2 December 1920, Virginia Woolf reviewed Lawrence's *The Lost Girl*: a novel about a Midlands family, moving from one failed enterprise to another. She finds the book disappointing:

If you want a truthful description of a draper's shop, evident knowledge of his stock, and a faithful and keen yet not satiric or sentimental description of [its inhabitants], here you have it. [...] But, distracted by our preconception of what Mr. Lawrence was to give us, we turned many pages of very able writing in search for something else which must be there. Alvina seemed the most likely instrument to transmit Mr. Lawrence's electric shock through the calicos, prints, and miners' shirts by which she stood surrounded. We watched for signs of her development nervously, for we always dread originality, yet with the sense that once the shock was received we should rise braced and purified.¹⁰

Woolf vocalises a familiar ambivalence here. The plots of Lawrence's less popular novels challenge readers because they give no guidance about how to direct and allocate attention. For much of *The Lost Girl*, characters are sidetracked; they engage intently – and, in narrative terms, pointlessly – with one activity, one relationship, after another. The protagonist Alvina, for instance, trains as a maternity nurse. Lawrence tells us about her training house in extensive, repetitive detail:

A servant, not exactly dirty, but unattractive, let her into a hall painted a pale drab, and floored with cocoa-matting, otherwise bare. Then up bare stairs to a room where a stout, pale, common woman with two warts on her face, was drinking tea. It was three o'clock. This was the matron. The matron soon deposited her in a bedroom, not very small, but bare and hard and dusty-seeming, and there left her. Alvina sat down on her chair, looked at her box opposite her, looked round the uninviting room, and smiled to herself.¹¹

This pale, bare, pale, bare house, about which we are told everything from the servant's appearance to the number of warts on the matron's face, attracts an extraordinary amount of narrative focus for a phase of Alvina's life which – by the following chapter – ends abruptly. As a trained nurse, 'She had exactly four cases – and then no more.' (LG, 40). What seemed narratively significant vanishes altogether: Alvina's private smile amounts to nothing. The same holds true for her relationship with the enigmatic Albert, which Lawrence lingers on intently before the character disappears forever from the story, and for her father James' series of failed businesses. Lawrence takes even temporary feelings very seriously. His prose dwells on emotions, encounters and activities, then eliminates them completely from the plot. Woolf does not, therefore, find the peaks of 'development' which she feels 'must be there' in *The Lost Girl*. She barrels on through 'many pages' only to find nothing: none of the contours of plot which, she admits, she had a 'preconception' that she would find.

Woolf admits graciously to her own preconceptions. She is looking at Lawrence in the way she thinks it worthwhile to look: in short, for something *worth looking at*. Things must, she feels, come to something. As she reads, she waits to identify 'the magnet to which the myriad of separate details would adhere.' It must be sex, she thinks. But 'We were wrong. Details accumulated; the picture of life in Woodhouse was built up; and sex disappeared.' Underlying the language and ideology of Woolf's critique is the trope of *literature as topography* which underpins centuries of textual criticism. This allows us to think in terms of narrative peaks, troughs, and landmarks, together with the moral, aesthetic, and affective hierarchies attendant on such topographical fluctuations even before the Romantic cult of mountains. In the seventeenth century, for instance, John Dryden remarks of Milton's writing that there are 'flats amongst his Elevations...he creeps along sometimes, for above a Hundred lines together.'¹² Dryden does not need to tell us that he considers the 'flats' a defect: Milton becomes a little insect, tracing out a dull flat textual landscape for us as he creeps (rather than striding) from line to line. Three hundred years later, as Woolf searches through Lawrence's many pages, she

casts herself as explorer, searching for a landmark which would justify the hike. But the sex mountain disappears from the horizon. She is left facing a snowy flat of endless details.

For Dryden, a textual landscape with nothing elevated into significance stands in for creative failure. Such a level landscape has a long association, also, with affective failure: an absence of appropriate or meaningful feeling. Viewing a mountain, our attention rises and falls, as Vernon Lee describes in her treatise on beauty, tracing the structure's definite outlines: our empathic responses rise and fall legibly along with the horizon line. As the mountain rises, Lee writes, we perceive 'empathic movement.'¹³ Our attention and our emotions are steered by a visually varied, hierarchically arranged landscape. Conversely, we infer, a flat landscape attends on, and shapes, numbed or absent feelings. 'Flat' as a word, therefore, capaciously accommodates dull prose, level landscapes, and unresponsive affect. The metaphoricity which connects the three is long dead: to describe prose as 'flat' implies that it makes us feel nothing, to describe our feelings as 'flat' means, typically, that they have no rises or plunges beyond a low-lying level.

The Woolf review is striking, then, because it discusses an encounter with textual 'flatness' which is not affectively numbed, but poised, fascinated, and uneasy. Woolf describes acutely the sensations that Lawrence's prose (and prosaic) space elicits in her. There is anticipation, but also tension. She figures development (in plot, in character) like a shock of cold water: 'brac[ing]', 'purif[ying]'. She awaits the rising peak, but 'nervously'. Here, Woolf orients intently towards something she cannot stop searching for, but does not wholly want; she is only partly joking when she writes 'we always dread originality'. A flat prose space like this encodes disappointment either way: as the eye circles over the eventless space, it shrinks away from the jolting interruption of that expanse, even as it continues to seek it. One is disappointed if one finds it and disappointed if one does not.

This lack of emotional investment in event characterises the moments in Lawrence's novels – generally coming very belatedly in their narratives – when they finally do rise into sustained plotting and event. Eventually, in *The Lost Girl*, Alvina marries Ciccio. This is the point, incidentally, at which she goes up into the mountains, the topography rising as the plot ascends towards climax. As in *Women in Love* (1920), with its climactic scenes in the Alps, Lawrence's landscapes seem to trace the shape of the narrative, associating plot rises and falls both with topographical outlines and with the affective sensations that they represent and elicit. And yet, crucially, there is no sense, in style or pacing, that Alvina's marriage is any more important

than any of her other encounters. When the political plot in *Kangaroo* reaches its peak, it is, Cheryl Hindrichs suggests, ‘a flat anti-climax’.¹⁴ Again, the language of landscape dominates. Lawrence directs us to invest in what Harriet makes for tea in *Kangaroo*, and to the economics of a rural midwifery business in *The Lost Girl*: to pay equal, ‘faithful’ (to use Woolf’s word), frustrated attention to the trivial, the dreary, the irrelevant. Attentiveness to the everyday is, I emphasise, a foundation-stone of modernist literature,¹⁵ but other modernist authors help us find a way and a reason to linger on the unmarked. As Sara Crangle describes, Woolf ‘labors to demonstrate how things presumed banal – marked walls, snails – might in fact be interesting’;¹⁶ Liesl Olson uncovers how Joyce’s *Ulysses* becomes a study of how we notice, and what we do not.¹⁷ The ordinary works hard, for these writers. Lawrence’s banal does not seem to.

In Lawrence, things are not there, or they are there but they do not matter, or they matter but do not distinguish themselves from things which do not matter. Vision and engagement become deeply conflicted and complicated: especially because of the extensiveness with which Lawrence explains, demonstrates and populates his novels. Lawrence’s fixed attention on what he describes, his elaborate and repetitive explanations, make his readers feel that nothing could possibly be more thoroughly laid out to readerly sight. It is this very sense of something wholly revealed which makes us feel, along with Woolf, that we *should* be able to see, and grasp, everything, but which actually makes us unable to ‘see’, to focus on, anything. As Woolf notes, the encounter with Lawrence can involve a frustration inextricable from fascination. We circle over the space of the text, unable to hook ourselves securely on to it. Why is Lawrence invested in creating a form of literature which gives us nothing to look at or hold on to – which rebuffs and punishes both narrative and emotional investments from the reader, wiping characters point blank from its landscape – but keeps us in relationship with it? How does he imbricate a way of reading, a way of looking and a way of feeling within the concept, and image, of flatness?

Absolute Openness

Just as Lawrence reaches for mountains at key moments, mapped clearly on to summits of plot and feeling, he returns to flat landscapes, such as those of Lincolnshire, with a focus less immediately symbolically legible. Legibility – or, rather, the illegibility of particular affects, experienced in and in response to flat landscapes – is, I suggest, the question with which these landscapes invite Lawrence’s characters to grapple. Mute with overwhelming emotions at his daughter’s wedding in *The Rainbow* (1915), Tom Brangwen translates his sensations into a

mental image of ‘himself tiny, a little, upright figure on a plain circled round with the immense, roaring sky [...] He exulted strangely, with torture.’¹⁸ Later in the novel, when Ursula and Skrebensky couple on a Lincolnshire beach, both characters are overpowered by a confusing combination of openness, intimacy, exposure, intensity, and wordlessness which they cannot articulate, and which manifests in a kind of frozen horror. Afterwards, Ursula weeps; Skrebensky runs.¹⁹

Paul in *Sons and Lovers* is fascinated by the flat landscapes of Skegness:

from the seaside he wrote long letters to Mrs Leivers, about the shore and the sea. And he brought back his beloved sketches of the flat Lincoln coast, anxious for them to see. Almost, they would interest the Leivers more than they interested his mother.²⁰

Paul’s pleasure in these landscapes is idiosyncratic. It cannot seem to find full reciprocation, for others’ interest cannot be fully counted on. Therefore, it continues insistently. The letters are ‘long’; he is ‘anxious’ for the Leivers to look and affirm. The same unending quality emerges when he pours his feelings about flat landscapes out to Miriam: ‘He talked to her endlessly about his love of horizontals: how they, the great levels of sky and land in Lincolnshire, meant to him the eternality of the will...’²¹ Stretching far and wide, flat landscapes enable a movement of ‘going on’ which does not end. They also come to invite that movement discursively: Paul talks ‘endlessly’ about them, reaching and reaching for a connection or recognition – with the landscape as well as with Miriam – which never fully materialises. Here and through Lawrence’s work, flatness embodies and gives shape to a mode of relationship which is persistent, mostly futile, characterised by repeated passes towards and around the Other.

This sense of a constantly thwarted, constantly sustained reaching out for connection pervades Lawrence’s later novel *Kangaroo*. *Kangaroo* engages keenly with a question that defines Lawrence’s work: what it means to encounter. Lawrence’s poems and novels are full of disconcerting, but riveting, encounters with alien things and creatures (‘Snake’ and ‘Mountain Lion’, for instance). Though these connections have received significant critical attention,²² his failures of responsiveness, of affective connection, remain under-examined. In *Kangaroo*, Lawrence uses Australia’s flat landscapes to tackle a specific aspect of encounter: how one attends to, and engages with, an entity which offers nothing to rivet to, so unremarkable that it is remarkable.

Based on Lawrence's 1922 stay in Australia, *Kangaroo* describes an equivalent visit by the writer Richard Somers, and his wife Harriet. Traumatized by intense surveillance in Cornwall during the Great War, Somers hopes to find in Australia a newness and wilderness that might absorb him, allow him to disappear. Yet he finds its freedom precarious, dangerous, even anarchic. Unsettled by Australia's levelling democratic instincts, Somers finds himself drawn to the quasi-fascist 'Diggers', led by the charismatic Kangaroo, to whom Somers is irresistibly attracted.

Kangaroo traces two sets of unsettling encounters with two different, but connected, kinds of 'levelness': not just egalitarian democracy,²³ but the enigmatic Australian landscape, whose emptiness seems at once too young and too old, undeveloped and post-apocalyptic.²⁴ A passage where Somers sits with his neighbour Jack distils the paradox of Australia's flat spaces. They are so open that they remain, fundamentally, closed:

Jack was smoking his pipe. There was something unnatural about his stillness.

'You had a dip after all,' said Somers.

'Yes. A dip in and out.'

Then silence again. Somers' thoughts wandered out to the gently darkening sea, and the bird, and the whole of vast Australia lying behind him flat and open to the sky.²⁵

Australia spreads out 'vast', 'flat and open'. The sense, one might think, would be of potential: for occupation or development. 'Open' carried a special, racist meaning in Australia and New Zealand in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: it referred to land "available" for settlement, apparently ready and passive, laying itself out for an occupier to shape it to white needs.²⁶ This sense connects to the other inviting connotations of openness: without concealment, candid, sincere, receptive, free from obstructions to sight or movement.

Yet Lawrence's phrasing reframes that sense of openness. Somers sits with his back to it. He does not look straight at it or enter it. That very openness, in the flat landscape, becomes enigmatic: in dialogue with concealment, with latency, with indirection.²⁷ Both Jack's silence, and the open space around them, offer room for Somers's thoughts to 'wander'. Yet the landscape remains tucked away 'behind' him. That behindness has a predatory quality, immediately and bewilderingly – and incompletely – disarmed by the assurance that it is 'flat and open'. It is not that the flatness and openness, seeming to hide nothing, are deceptive. It is that the very flat openness seems to encode this quality of 'behindness': that this very act of

full disclosure seems at best overwhelming and at worst dangerous in its complete enigmatic withdrawal.

Kangaroo centres on Somers's struggle to find a language for the landscape and its (white) inhabitants. He initially experiences the Australian landscape as offering a menacing but unlocatable encounter:

The terror of the bush overcame him. He had looked so long at the vivid moon, without thinking. And now, there was something among the trees, and his hair began to stir with terror, on his head. There was a presence. He looked at the weird, white, dead trees, and into the hollow distances of the bush. Nothing! Nothing at all. [...]

But the horrid thing in the bush! He laboured as to what it would be. (K, 14)

Somers senses something in the 'hollow distances' of this unremarkable landscape, but cannot see it, any more than he can 'see' the indigenous Australians who nevertheless underpin his understanding of the country. They are absent from the narrative, refracted instead into cliffs, tree-trunks, rocks and the dusk, described as 'aboriginal' (K, 60). The closest brush with an indigenous person emerges via a comparison of Australian landscape to 'a face with little or no features, a dark face...aboriginal' (K, 77). The featurelessness of the landscape, on which Somers can get no purchase, becomes identical with this open secret, of continued aboriginal presence and survival in a land supposedly empty: neither Somers nor Lawrence, I suggest, can either see it or succeed in not seeing it.

Somers's 'labour' to articulate the 'horrid thing' draws visibly on Lawrence's own difficulty in finding a language to describe Australia. His letters show, and in fact embody stylistically, his ambivalence about this undifferentiated landscape:

Seems a queer godforsaken place: not so much new as non-existent...[letter to Robert Mountsier, 4 April 1922]²⁸

It's queer here: wonderful sky and sun and air – new and clean and untouched – and endless hoary 'bush' with no people – all feels strange and empty and unready [...] One feels like the errant dead, or the as-yet-unborn: a queer feeling. It is not. And the people are not. And there is a queer, pre-primeval ghost over everything. [letter to Curtis Brown, 15 May 1922]²⁹

A rather fascinating indifference, a physical indifference to what we call soul or spirit.
It's really a weird show. The country has an extraordinary hoary, weird attraction.
[letter to Catherine Carswell, 22 June 1922]³⁰

Lawrence cannot find a satisfactory way to relate, through language, to the country. Yet he cannot stop trying. And he tries repeatedly in the same terms. In these extracts, Lawrence reaches and reaches for the right words, but only the same unyielding, inadequate ones – ‘weird’, ‘queer’, ‘indifference’ – offer themselves again and again. The prose of these descriptions circles without conclusion around the words ‘weird’ and ‘queer’.

These words only play at description. Really, they disown their responsibility to describe with either precision or finality. They signify merely an unease which cannot be resolved: they conclude that what they are describing cannot be described, reaching for a performative outsiderism which refuses to try to comprehend its subject. The unease finds its manifestation (such as it is) only in words which sum up the landscape's unrevealable strangeness, instead of illuminating it. Accordingly they must be repeated again and again.

Repetition of this sort signifies that the first use of the word did not satisfy. It did not achieve what was envisaged. Yet no alternative exists but to try again, and in the same way. The landscape resists description, but insists on being described. In this, for Lawrence, inheres the fascination of a flat or undifferentiated space. What we witness him doing, in language, is returning repeatedly to the same verbal territory, circling over it again and again without knowing what is sought, or lighting on it. There is nothing in this landscape on which he can get a linguistic grip. Faced with a flat expanse, viewers tend to scan, with striking urgency, for a focal point. If one is found, however, that interrupts the encounter with the flat space. Scanning a flat landscape involves both seeking and not seeking that interruption: circling ambivalently towards its possibility, yet knowing that finding it will terminate the freedom of possibility and spaciousness in which one is moving pleasurably.

‘Fascination’ helps describe this experience. It signifies both pleasure (fascinated by something interesting) and entrapment (fascinated and arrested by a snake's gaze). His focus revolving around the unyielding bush, Lawrence is both deeply unsettled by it and unable to stop looking. The same phenomenon emerges in *The Lost Girl*, as the protagonist Alvina regards her unappealing suitor Albert:

...she [Alvina] found Albert quite unattractive. He was tall and thin and brittle, with a pale, rather dry, flattish face, and with curious pale eyes. His impression was one of

uncanny flatness, something like a lemon sole. Curiously flat and fish-like he was, one might have imagined his backbone to be spread like the backbone of a sole or a plaice. His teeth were sound, but rather large and yellowish and flat. A most curious person. (LG, 63)

As in the Australia letters, Lawrence mirrors Alvina's spellbound struggle for comprehension of the flat-faced Albert through a style which circles and reiterates: that Albert is like a 'fish', he is 'curious' and above all he is 'flat'. Why does Alvina linger here, staging and restaging encounter with a flat surface so slippery, so resistant, that every attempt to gain purchase on it generates only the imperative to try again? Why might one remain in a space which offers nothing to satisfy sight? Why, through his style, is Lawrence directing her – and us, as readers – so insistently to look at something with which we cannot engage? Lawrence's looping monotonous sentences state and restate the same points. The focalised attention loops intently, but perplexedly, over the character: the flat person on whom no purchase can be found.³¹

This phenomenon resembles, at first sight, the rhythm of reading that Lawrence described in the style of Giovanni Verga:

the mind makes curious swoops and circles. It touches the point of pain or interest, then sweeps away again in a cycle, coils round, and approaches again the point of pain or interest...yet again turns, bends, circles slowly, swoops and stoops again, until at last there is the closing in, and the clutch of a decision or a resolve.³² Yet while Verga's stylistic rhythms eventually reach 'a decision or a resolve', the circling in *Kangaroo* and *The Lost Girl* does not. The prose settles eventually on words which signal their failure to decide, to resolve. In the passage above, Alvina finds Albert 'curious'. That adjective, like 'weird' and 'queer', does double work. It constitutes, on one hand, a dismissal: a giving-up of analysis, a relegation of the 'curious' thing to the realm of the quaint, the fundamentally incomprehensible. On the other hand, it concedes its own decision to withdraw from understanding. When one calls something 'curious', one concedes that one *has* given up; that there is something there, though it resisted one's articulation, or even one's vision. This idea of failed vision underpins precisely the terms in which Somers explains the Australian landscape. Its flat, featureless spaces continually challenge the visitors' capacity to understand what they are looking at:

You feel you can't see – as if your eyes hadn't the vision in them to correspond with the outside landscape. For the landscape is so unimpressive, like a face with little or no features... (K, 77)

The landscape causes a crisis of vision. It is there, but the viewer realises that they cannot see it. The sense, again, is of something which is available, but on which the onlooker cannot get purchase. It does not ‘impress’ upon one, like the point of a mountain.

For this reason, I suggest, ‘flat’, for Lawrence, joins the ranks of words like ‘weird’, ‘queer’ and ‘curious’, as a space where engagement is both impossible, and impossible to stop. When he uses the word in his prose, it is likely to recur. As Somers lingers on the Australian shore at the end of *Kangaroo*, the word ‘flat’ – describing the rocks and the sea-shells – occurs eight times in two pages: a point to which I shall return. In this repetition (perhaps Lawrence’s most tiresome and most illuminating stylistic tic) it indicates a mode of literary attention which is peculiarly Lawrentian, in which focus circles keenly and without settling. In Lawrence, repetition works against rhythm: where the cadence of a sentence leads one to expect progression, a heightened or intensified word, only repetition of the earlier word is offered: weighting the reader down on an intense but enigmatic level.

What I propose here is that this levelled mode of looking and engagement reshapes our understanding of encounter in Lawrence’s writing, particularly his minor works. If we attend to his treatment of flat spaces, and the idea of flatness, then we can understand it as part of a wider phenomenon of failed, but indefinitely sustained, vision which defines the way his characters relate to each other. This is not simply a Lacanian model of desire that cannot be satisfied: that fixes itself on one false friend after another. This is an appetite (for understanding, for encounter) that centres precisely on an absence of focal point, which inheres in a constant shifting, an ambivalent seeking for something unknown and undesired. That mode of movement finds shape and form in an encounter with flat spaces. I argue that it offers a language for the affectively unresponsive, illegible, hostile, failed yet fascinating relationships which recur in Lawrence’s novels.³³

The Repulsive Relationship of Flatness

Kangaroo is a novel about relationships which struggle to work. Its plot hinges on Somers’s intellectual and emotional division between two interpersonal impulses: he is drawn to open himself to the rest of humanity, and yet equally inclined to shut himself off and define himself as an individual. Lawrence works through this dilemma of relationship via encounters with Australian topography. With a nod to environmental determinism (as racist as Lawrence’s sense of the country’s “newness”), where landscape shapes the nature of its inhabitants,³⁴ Lawrence’s letters repeatedly associate the weirdness of the landscape with the oddness of the

white Australian people that he meets: 'It is not. And the people are not.'³⁵ According to this model, one's capacity to relate to a landscape maps on to one's (failures of) relationship with the people living in it.

In the passage quoted earlier, Lawrence treats an encounter between Somers and his neighbour as inextricable from encounter with the Australian landscape:

Somers' thoughts wandered out to the gently darkening sea, and the bird, and the whole of vast Australia lying behind him flat and open to the sky. (K, 88)

As discussed, the word 'open' offers a hinge for the paradox of encounter with a flat space: something might be freely available, but not penetrable. In other words, it might not be willing to participate in intimacy in the ways we expect. This section suggests that Lawrence uses flat landscapes as a space in which particular kinds of being-in-the-world, and particular kinds of relationship, can be brought into vision. These modes of being and relationship may be, differently, queer, desireless, rigid, or indifferent. Lawrence's flat landscapes offer both an occasion and a metaphor for all these modes. They involve (for the subject) not responding to what is offered, and a kind of 'being oneself' that excludes others. For both viewer and subject, they involve not finding what one seeks, but continuing to try.

It is precisely flatness that offers a language for the phenomenon Woolf describes in her review. Flatness offers a space where the viewer does not find what they seek: they must choose between continuing to seek, or withdrawing. What they expect to be offered up, in that prose or by that landscape, does not materialise. An overture is made, by the eye which seeks – for to seek is to have faith that there is something to be found, to take the risk of reaching out for it – and that overture is rebuffed by a space which cannot 'rise' (pun intended) to the occasion. In other words, an encounter with a flat space involves a failure of an expected responsiveness. We find ourselves in the presence of something which has wholly rejected modesty: which is simply itself, without (terrifyingly) any reference or deference to its viewer.

The word 'open' in *Kangaroo* becomes a stage for a puzzlement about such failure of responsiveness. Australia is open, but Somers sits with his back to it; he senses that nothing will be gained by making an overture to it. Harriet, Somers's wife, expresses this confusion in sentimental but related terms:

'Your wonderful Australia!' said Harriet to Jack. 'I can't tell you how it moves me. It feels as if no one had ever loved it. Do you know what I mean? England and Germany

and Italy and Egypt and India--they've all been loved so passionately. But Australia feels as if it had never been loved, and never come out into the open. As if man had never loved it, and made it a happy country, a bride country--or a mother country.' (K, 77)

Australia is 'flat and open' but it has not or cannot 'come out into the open'. Lawrence's use of 'coming out' predates the first use in the OED of 'coming out' to refer to a revelation of oneself as homosexual (1949); nevertheless, that pun has traction here.³⁶ What the Australian landscape is doing is refusing to make its debut – refusing to come out, like a seventeen-year-old girl into society, to rise to patterns of expected desire. Lying flat, it does not rise, like Vernon Lee's mountains, along obedient aesthetic and affective lines, into love and lovability. It is indifferent. Sara Ahmed describes how 'happiness scripts' are offered to women: patterns of behaviour and life which will bring them happiness.³⁷ Australia, Harriet feels, refuses these scripts of sentimental happiness, via bridehood or motherhood, which come easily to hand for her. Australia refuses love; it refuses viewers' engagement, offering no hook on which to hang one's interest.

At this point, Lawrence's repeated description of Australia as 'queer' in his letters reveals itself as more than a useful pun. Queerness is, as Sara Ahmed suggests, not desiring what is offered to you to desire, not orienting towards what is to-hand.³⁸ Refusing to 'come out', the flat landscape of Australia lies still and inert. It does not rise to the eye, responsively, in what Kirsty Martin might call the rhythm of sympathy: 'energetic sympathetic encounters between individuals' which Martin finds in Lawrence's earlier novels, shaped by a pattern of turning towards and away from the Other.³⁹ Such an emotional topography is characterised by peaks and troughs, attraction and repulsion: a responsive landscape, which reacts to the Other, which reaches out and away. The novels which have received most critical attention are, largely, those which centre these legible interpersonal rhythms. In *Kangaroo*, however, Australia's flatness gives space to another mode of relationship: that of an unresponsive Other, enclosed in themselves.

Once someone is married their story ends, or only continues in the most predictable way (having become a 'mother country'). Safely happy, we do not have to think about them any longer. If a woman does not rise to happiness, Ahmed says, it is read as sabotaging the happiness of others.⁴⁰ Australia's refusal to be made happy, through a cooperative intimacy with its inhabitant or viewer, is affronting. The country continues to worry at the mind:

attention circles uneasily around it, in the way that Lawrence's repetitive style invites. The viewer cannot leave it alone. Harriet expresses her struggle for (not quite articulable) meaning. 'I can't tell you [...] Do you know what I mean?' The characters are unsettled; kept in an unsatisfactory relation to the landscape, to the country, which cannot be resolved.

Queerly, Australia cuts itself off from love and lovability, not entering the economy of love which could respond to it and to which it could respond.⁴¹ This can seem like an act of psychic hostility. It can also be an act of spacious accommodation of the Other. When my cat sits with her back to me, I feel most secure in her love. She relies on my presence but does not feel impelled to continually be in active exchange with me. When Somers sits with his back to flat Australia, he is not simply avoiding the sight of an unnerving landscape. What Australia and Somers are doing is navigating a new mode of relationship.

That relationship concretises itself at the end of the novel. The political plot ends with a riot between the Diggers and the socialists, in which Kangaroo is fatally shot. With that passionate connection terminated, Somers turns away from politics, and seeks relief in the indifferent Australian landscape. Lawrence encodes this relief in terms of flatness. In a lengthy paragraph, Somers dwells lovingly on the 'the innumerable little black snails that lived on the flat rocks', 'Flat rocks ran out near the coal jetty', 'On the flat rocks were pools of clear water', 'The jetty straddled its huge grey timbers, like a great bridge, across the sands and the flat rocks [...] here Richard found the best of the flat, oval disc-shells with the whorl and the blue eye. 'On the flat rocks, all pocketed with limpid pools, the sea-birds would sit with their backs to him, oblivious. [...] Beyond, the everlasting low white wall of foam, rustling to the flat-rock. Only the sea.' (K, 330-1)

Flatness of this sort accommodates its observer without being interested in a relationship based around mutual exchange. The basis of the pleasure that Richard Somers derives from the land inheres in the land's refusal to perform or to participate in this kind of legible passionate love, where it rises up to meet you, to interact with you. What I suggest is that encounters with Australia's flat expanses offer Somers a route into his fundamental dilemma: whether to open himself to others, or to absorb himself in the project of being himself. Australia – open but never come-out-into-the-open, exposing everything without offering a handle for understanding – demonstrates how such openness and self-absorption can become fundamentally imbricated. Flatness of landscape involves a self-enclosure indistinguishable from openness. Levinas clarifies this phenomenon in *Totality and Infinity*:

The things are naked, by metaphor, only when they are without adornments: bare walls, naked landscapes. They have no need of adornment when they are absorbed in the accomplishment of the function for which they are made: when they are subordinated to their own finality so radically that they disappear in it.⁴²

Bareness and exposure come to signal absorption in one's own being, one's idiosyncratic work. In *The Lost Girl*, Alvina finds Albert's flatness repellent yet arresting in its self-enclosure: 'His manner was oddly gallant, with a gallantry that completely missed the individual in the woman, circled round her and flew home gratified to his own hive.' Albert only seems to respond to the person in front of him; fundamentally his behaviour remains oriented towards himself, 'home', in 'his own hive'. Self-enclosed, Albert does not rise out of himself. Skrebensky in *The Rainbow* appears similarly:

He seemed simply acquiescent in the fact of his own being, as if he were beyond any change or question. He was himself. [...] He made no effort to prove himself to other people. Let it be accepted for what it was, his own being. In his isolation it made no excuse or explanation for itself.⁴³

To 'prove' is to show, to demonstrate, but in a way that is effortful and oriented towards others: to rise to an external challenge. Again, this figure is oriented away from others, simply 'himself': asserting his nature, as it were, flatly. To assert something flatly is to imply that there is no hook for further discussion, just as Skrebensky is 'beyond any change or question'. In both Albert and Skrebensky, there can be no 'rhythm of sympathy' (to quote Kirsty Martin's phrase) because there is no interpersonal rhythm.⁴⁴ Rhythm depends on rises and falls; a rhythm of sympathy depends on an enthralled and affected listener and participant. It is designed to catch the affect, and sustain a relationship with it. To simply be, without reference to an Other – to project a general undifferentiated gallantry, unfocused on any individual – suggests something level rather than rhythmic. Something flat – a flat tone, a flat landscape, a flat statement – is something on which an Other can find no purchase. They cannot argue, cannot fix their vision, cannot respond appropriately.

Yet Ursula's fascination with Skrebensky is prophetic. As Lawrence's career went on, his novels fill with characters who prefer not to make themselves emotionally or affectively available. In *The Escaped Cock* (1929), Christ wakes alone in the tomb, cold and disillusioned. He wishes only to be left alone:

He had risen without desire, without even the desire to live, empty save for the all-overwhelming disillusion [...] Yet perhaps, deeper even than disillusion, was a desireless resoluteness, deeper even than consciousness.⁴⁵

‘Resolute’ implies orientation: moving towards something, having a goal. A judgement may be described as ‘resolute’: settled, closed to further discussion. ‘Resolute’ also implies constancy and steadfastness (it won’t go up and down or waver). Yet here, resoluteness and indifference become associated. ‘This man was middle-aged and disillusioned, with a certain terrible indifference, and a resoluteness which love would never conquer.’⁴⁶ It is that coupling, which recurs so often in Lawrence, that distinguishes his mode of flatness. Resoluteness implies intent direction; indifference implies a failure or refusal of desire’s directedness. Lawrence’s flatness inheres in the paradox of resolute indifference. Once we identify his preoccupation with this mode, his circling style, frustrated encounters and dissolved plots reveal themselves as aspects of the same project: to narrate a mode of relationship which is intense but unfocused, at once keenly trained on the Other and unable to connect.

Conclusion

In her review, Woolf concludes generously, ‘the proper way to look at “The Lost Girl” is as a stepping stone in a writer’s progress.’⁴⁷ It’s not to be lingered on, in other words, but immediately crossed, with your eyes on the next point of topographical interest. How do we inhabit, rather than walking over, flatness? In the looping, repetitive prose describing Albert’s flat face in *The Lost Girl* – a biopsy of Lawrence’s style across his writing – Lawrence forces us to linger. He keeps us in this flat expanse, where no matter where one shifts one’s eye, all that is there is something we have already seen, which does not rise into significance: a surface we do not know how to relate to.

Lawrence is not the writer of the eloquent. He is the writer of the struggling-to-exist, the intently but unproductively regarded, the staged-and-restaged without result. The omission we have made with Lawrence, I suggest, is to read such affects as mere preliminaries to relationships which eventually, belatedly emerge in his novels. If critical work focuses on connection in Lawrence, what I am proposing we might view differently is the periods of *failed* connection in his work. Might these have a significance quite separate from any eventual successful connections?

The interaction between Lawrence’s characters and their flat spaces, with the movements and dynamics occasioned in this space of encounter, articulates a specifically Lawrentian mode of

interpersonal address: where one entity invites and seeks intimacy, between characters and between reader and text, even as it holds the Other in an unresolvable dynamic paralysis. Our reading is guided by the ways of looking which his characters bring to the flats of Lincolnshire, of Australia, of flat or flattish faces: circling without conclusion, the impasse of encounter with something so available that it becomes unavailable. Reading Lawrence is to experience and to witness the sensation of being held in relation to an impenetrable surface which offers no purchase while it simultaneously insists that we continue to attend. Observing our own attention, and taking seriously its refusal to settle during the encounter with the text, we start to find a language for Lawrence's acts of repulsion and failures of intimacy.

¹ D. H. Lawrence. *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence: Volume 1: 1901-13*, ed. James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 71.

² On Lawrence's Alps and psycho-geography, see Catherine Brown, 'Lawrence and the Alps', *Journal of D. H. Lawrence Studies*, 3:2 (2013), pp. 57-84, p. 57.

³ See Steven Connor, 'Flat Life', <http://stevenconnor.com/flat.html>

⁴ Jackie Stacey, 'Crossing over with Tilda Swinton – the Mistress of "Flat Affect"', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28:3 (2015), pp. 243-271, p. 254.

⁵ Lauren Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling: "Mysterious Skin"', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28:3 (2015), pp. 191-213, p. 195.

⁶ Rei Terada, *Looking Away. Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 3. For work within the penumbra of this argument see Jessica Burstein, 'A Few Words about Dubuque: Modernism, Sentimentalism, and the Blasé' *American Literary History* 14:2 (2002), pp. 227-254 on the blasé; Eric Cazdyn, *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012) on the chronic; I am indebted to Mari Ruti's scepticism about the value of relationality in *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory's Defiant Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 82.

⁷ Connor, 'Flat Life'.

⁸ See also Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), describing 'numbing as a relief from the work of managing attachment' (p. 220). I focus on a gesture which may look like numbing, but is in fact a re-establishment of greater intensity.

⁹ See also Berlant's 'impasse': 'a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things' (Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 4). Berlant's formulation does not capture what I emphasise: the circling, scanning gestures, wherein the eye returns repeatedly without finding what it seeks, and importantly the fascinated pleasure which may inhere in this.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, 'Postscript or Prelude', 2 December 1920. Accessed <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/postscript-prelude-virginia-woolf/>

¹¹ D. H. Lawrence, *The Lost Girl*, ed. John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 31. Further references are to this edition, indicated parenthetically as LG.

¹² John Dryden, *Sylvae: or, the second part of poetical miscellanies* (London: 1702), n. pag.

¹³ Vernon Lee, *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), p. 71-3.

¹⁴ Cheryl Hindrichs, "'Falling out of a picture": The Australian Landscape in D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo*', *D. H. Lawrence Review* 36:2 (Autumn 2011), pp. 43-71, p. 57.

¹⁵ See Laurie Langbauer, *Novels of Everyday Life: The Series in English Fiction, 1850-1930* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999); Michael Sayeau, *Against the Event: The Everyday and the Evolution of Modernist Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Lorraine Sim, *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); Siobhan Philips, *The Poetics of the Everyday: Creative*

Repetition in Modern American Verse (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (London: The Athlone Press, 2000).

¹⁶ Sara Crangle, *Prosaic Desires: Modernist Knowledge, Boredom, Laughter, and Anticipation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 74.

¹⁷ Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 46.

¹⁸ D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, ed. Mark Kinkead-Weekes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 126.

¹⁹ Lawrence, *Rainbow*, p. 445.

²⁰ D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers: Part I*, ed. Helen and Carl Baron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 179.

²¹ Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, p. 215.

²² On the other as unknowable, see Amit Chaudhuri, *D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), p. 167; on the racial other as knowable, see Judith Ruderman, *Race and Identity in D. H. Lawrence: Indians, Gypsies, and Jews* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 5; on the self as most itself in communion with others, see Neil Roberts, *D. H. Lawrence, Travel and Cultural Difference* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 21.

²³ On land testing notions debated in the 'political plot', see Terry Gifford, 'A Playful Novel of Reprise: An Ecofeminist Reading of Kangaroo', *Journal of D. H. Lawrence Studies*, 3:2 (2013), pp. 109-119, p. 110.

²⁴ On colonial instincts, see Hindrichs.

²⁵ D. H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, ed. Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 88. Further references are to this edition, indicated parenthetically as K.

²⁶ "open, adj.". OED Online. March 2020. Oxford University Press.

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/131699?rskey=y7PJYa&result=2&isAdvanced=false> (accessed May 14, 2020). The earliest usage the OED cites is 1830; the latest, 1948.

²⁷ The landscape frustrates Somers, early on: 'he could not penetrate into its secret. He couldn't get at it. Nobody could get at it' (K, 14). To 'get at' something is to delve to its heart. Somers assumes that its secret is penetrable, rather than inhering in the surface, having given all it has to give. Compare with J. Hillis Miller, 'Derrida's Topographies', *South Atlantic Review* 59, No. 1 (Jan 1994): pp. 1-25, p. 18: 'To say the secret is on the surface is to say that it generates the illusion of hiding a secret at some fathomless depth.'

²⁸ D.H. Lawrence, *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence: Volume IV: June 1921-March 1924*, ed. Warren Roberts, James T. Boulton and Elizabeth Mansfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 235.

²⁹ Lawrence, *Letters IV*, p. 240.

³⁰ Lawrence, *Letters IV*, p. 271.

³¹ For more on this passage, see Noreen Masud, 'Flat Stevie Smith', *Twentieth Century Literature* (forthcoming 2021)

³² D. H. Lawrence, 'Translator's Preface to *Cavalleria Rusticana*' in *Introductions and Reviews*, ed. N. H. Reeve and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 163-73, 172.

³³ The style echoes Sianne Ngai's 'stuplimity' (Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 281. Absent from Ngai's framing is the absorbed interest (apparently, staged) on the writer's part, as they circle intently and monotonously.

³⁴ See John Wylie, *Landscape* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 22.

³⁵ Lawrence, *Letters IV*, p. 240.

³⁶ "coming out, n.". OED Online. June 2020. Oxford University Press.

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/416963?rskey=DEpVYe&result=3&isAdvanced=false> (accessed August 10, 2020).

³⁷ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 59.

³⁸ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 21.

³⁹ Kirsty Martin, *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy: Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 134, 153.

⁴⁰ Ahmed, *Happiness*, p. 66.

⁴¹ Harriet's phrasing implies that only certain people's love 'counts': that Australia needs to be loved and attended to by white people. See Ahmed, *Happiness*, p. 125: 'Colonial knowledges constitute the other ... as being unhappy, as lacking the qualities or attributes required for a happier state of existence.'

⁴² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 74.

⁴³ Lawrence, *Rainbow*, p. 270.

⁴⁴ Martin, p. 27.

⁴⁵ D. H. Lawrence, *The Complete Short Novels* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 560.

⁴⁶ Lawrence, *Complete Short Novels*, p. 566.

⁴⁷ Woolf, 'Postscript or Prelude'.