

[‘Rooms in the Darwin Hotel’ Digital Edition]

## FOREWORD

by TOM GIBBONS

*Rooms in the Darwin Hotel* was published in 1973. At its broadest it was concerned with some of the many ways in which the spread of evolutionary thinking during the period 1880-1920 permeated Western thought and culture. From that point of view, the book may now perhaps be seen as possessing an additional level of interest and relevance since the more recent spread of neo-Darwinian theories which claim to offer all-embracing ‘explanations’ of the human condition. These have been engagingly surveyed in Andrew Brown’s book *The Darwin Wars* (1999).

When *Rooms in the Darwin Hotel* was written, the literary and artistic history of the period 1880-1914 was far from complete. Of literary guides which might give some sense of the period as a whole, there were mainly Holbrook Jackson’s *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913) and Frank Swinnerton’s *The Georgian Literary Scene* (1935). My own general sense of the period may not have been untypical at that time. On the one hand were the ‘Aesthetes and Decadents’ such as Wilde and Pater. On the other hand were the Moderns, beginning with ‘the men of 1914’ and apparently making a clean break with the past and leading in unbroken succession to *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land*, and the ‘Pylon Poets’ of the Thirties.

The period in between these movements appeared to contain no figures of great importance. Except, when one came to think about it, Kipling, Hardy, Shaw, Wells, Henry James and Joseph Conrad, to name but a few. These major authors were in a curious way 'displaced persons', there being no conceptualised 'period' for them to inhabit.

The achievements of Ford Madox Ford and Wyndham Lewis were at that time still largely disregarded, and in the visual arts a major historical hiatus existed between Leighton and Landseer on the one hand, and Picasso and Matisse on the other. In my own case at least, it was not until the English publication in 1974 of Philippe Jullian's *Dreamers of Decadence: Symbolist Painters of the 1890s* that one could become properly aware of vitally important links and continuities between late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century painting and aesthetics.

The topic of millenarianism is by implication central to *Rooms in the Darwin Hotel*, and much excellent writing on this topic has appeared since the first publication of Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* in 1957. When writing my own book I was unaware of Cohn's highly relevant volume and of two volumes by James Webb which are equally relevant and indispensable: *The Occult Underground* and *The Occult Establishment*.

I began the last chapter of *Rooms in the Darwin Hotel* by acquitting D.H. Lawrence and Ernest Hemingway of any ‘connection whatsoever with either occult doctrines or symbolist theories of the transcendental kind’. In the case of Lawrence this proved to have been mistaken. One of Lawrence’s best known statements is that in which he writes to Edward Garnett in 1914 that ‘You mustn’t look in my novel for the old stable ego of the character’ and goes on to discuss characterisation in terms of the allotropic states of carbon. This is a direct paraphrase of a footnote in *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903), by F.W. H. Myers, a co-founder of the Society for Psychical Research and co-author of *Phantasms of the Living* (1886).

In this same letter, Lawrence goes on to discuss fictional characters in terms of a ‘rhythmic form, like when one draws a fiddle-bow across a fine tray delicately sanded’. A highly probable source for this reference to ‘Chladni Figures’ is the book *Thought-Forms* (1901) by Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, two luminaries of the Theosophical Society.<sup>[1]</sup> As the art-historian Sixten Ringbom has shown, this volume was highly influential in the development of early-twentieth century abstract painting.<sup>[2]</sup>

Lawrence shows himself to belong to the ‘Age of Evolutionism’ in several other respects. In an earlier letter of 1908, for example, when he was twenty-three years of

age, he reflects current widespread concerns about ‘racial degeneration’ and eugenics when writing as follows:

If I had my way, I would build a lethal chamber as big as the Crystal Palace, with a military band playing softly, and a Cinematograph working brightly; then I’d go out in the back streets and main streets and bring them in, all the sick, the halt, and the maimed; I would lead them gently, and they would smile a weary thanks; and the band would softly bubble out the ‘Hallelujah Chorus’.<sup>[3]</sup>

Such sentiments, comparable to those of H. G. Wells cited in *Rooms in the Darwin Hotel* (p. 28), are a commonplace of ‘Progressive’ thought during the period, as may be seen from the writings of prominent Fabian Socialists such as Sidney Webb and George Bernard Shaw, or from the chapter entitled ‘The Creation of a New and Irradiated Race’ in *Radiant Motherhood* (1920) by the feminist Marie Stopes.

Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* is also of its time not only in its millenarian conclusion, but especially in the way in which its entire structure is presumably based upon Herbert Spencer’s ‘law of evolution’. The operations of this ‘law’ eventually produce, from the undifferentiated ‘homogeneous’ mass of men and animals described in the novel’s rural opening chapter, the ‘heterogeneous’ individual of the apocalyptic conclusion: Ursula, the New Woman and type-figure of the new evolutionary future.

The study for Epstein’s [Rock Drill](#) which appears on the mast-head of the *New Age* section of the Modernist Journals Project serves as a further reminder of the occult-

based aesthetic which runs unbroken from the late-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century. In his autobiography, Epstein expressed the greatest admiration for the ‘primitive’ African sculpture known as the *Brummer Head*:

This remarkable Pahouin head . . . is an evocation of a spirit that penetrates to another world, a world of ghosts and occult forces, and could only be produced where spiritism still holds sway.<sup>[4]</sup>

Similar sentiments about the primitive supernatural powers of art and artists and their imminent apocalyptic return were uttered by Pound in his account (‘The New Sculpture’, published in *The Egoist* for February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1914), of the lectures on modern art recently given to members of the Quest Society by himself, T. E. Hulme, and Wyndham Lewis. It is important to recognise that the Quest Society, which had been founded by G. R. S. Mead in 1909, was itself an offshoot of the Theosophical Society. Mead had been both secretary to Mme Blavatsky and General Secretary of the Theosophical Society, but like many others had resigned from the Theosophical Society in protest over homosexual scandals concerning C. W. Leadbeater.

A major demonstration of similar close links between Early Modernist art and such esoteric doctrines as Theosophy was the 1986 exhibition entitled *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* organised by Maurice Tuchman at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The catalogue for this exhibition is essential reading in

connection with the Age of Evolutionism, as is the Spring 1987 issue of *Art Journal* edited by Linda Dalrymple Henderson and entitled *Mysticism and Occultism in Modern Art*. John F. Moffitt's forthcoming *Marcel Duchamp: Alchemist of the Avant-Garde* (SUNY Press) will be of great value in tracing the essential continuity between late-nineteenth century Symbolist painting and the Modernist tradition.

Setting out some years ago to demonstrate conclusively what had often been claimed, that the early Cubist painters had based their ideas of the 'Fourth Dimension' on Einstein's Theory of Relativity, I soon found that this was chronologically impossible. It was much more likely that they had been reading such works as C. W. Leadbeater's Theosophical tract of 1895 entitled *The Astral Plane*, translated into French as *Le Plan Astral* in 1899.[\[5\]](#)

More importantly, as it now seems to me, the 'Fourth Dimension' was a fairly commonplace topic during the 1890s and after, and had been since the first publication in 1875 of the widely-read book *The Unseen Universe* by the eminent scientists Balfour Stewart and P. G. Tait. What is true of the 'Fourth Dimension' appears to be true of a great many of the ideas discussed in *Rooms in the Darwin Hotel*. In 1913, according to Chesterton in *Eugenics and Other Evils*, 'Eugenics began to appear in big headlines in the daily Press, and big pictures in the illustrated papers'. Chesterton, in *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908), and Conrad, in *The Secret Agent* (1907) were

writing about a topic, Anarchism, which was everyday news at the time. To a public familiar with the frequently voiced anxiety lest the white races would inevitably 'degenerate' when transferred to outposts of Empire, it may very well have appeared obvious that the primary theme of *Heart of Darkness* was neither imperialism nor racial oppression, but exactly that kind of degeneration as exemplified by Kurtz.<sup>[6]</sup>

Fictional motifs such as 'telepathy' and 'reincarnation', which appear in novels by 'highbrow' Modernist authors such as E. M. Forster, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, are the stock-in-trade of innumerable popular fictions of the period, as may be seen from Dorothy Scarborough's book *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* (1917). Furthermore, young avant-garde writers and artists of the period could, and probably did, gain their ideas from best-selling 'non-fiction' works of the period. A. P. Sinnett's *The Occult World* and Benjamin Kidd's *Social Evolution* are two such works mentioned in *Rooms in the Darwin Hotel*. An equally important best-seller was Tolstoy's *What Is Art?*, which advocated a millenarian aesthetics of empathetic emotional Expressionism strikingly similar to that of early-twentieth century avant-garde movements in literature and the arts. Yet another was Henry Drummond's *The Ascent of Man*, the Gifford Lectures for 1894, with its impassioned vision of an Evolution which is driving irresistibly towards a spiritualised, communitarian and telepathic matriarchy.

What follows from much of the above is that in interpreting literary and artistic works in terms of their 'background' in the history of ideas, the figure of speech employed may be every bit as misleading as it is helpful. It might well be less misleading for us to think in terms of the 'foreground' of such works, rather, i.e. in terms of the ideas which were very widely discussed and disseminated at the time as a result of their promulgation in widely-read works of the period.<sup>[7]</sup>

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[1] Tom Gibbons, " 'Allotropic states' and 'fiddle-bow': D.H. Lawrence's Occult Sources", *Notes and Queries*, ns 35, 3 (September, 1988): 338-41.

[2] Sixten Ringbom, "Art in 'The Epoch of the Great Spiritual.' Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* XXIX (1966): 386-418.

[3] James T. Boulton, ed., *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence: Vol. 1 (1901-13)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 81.

[4] Jacob Epstein, *Let There be Sculpture: An Autobiography*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1940), 216.

[5] T. H. Gibbons, "Cubism and 'The Fourth Dimension' in the Context of the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Revival of Occult Idealism", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XLIV (1981): 130-47.

A much earlier date for the appearance of abstract art by a Spiritualist painter is given in my article "British Abstract Paintings of the 1860s: The Spirit Drawings of Georgiana Houghton", *Modern Painters*, 1, 2 (Summer, 1988): 33-7.

[6] See Nancy Stepan, "Biological Degeneration: Races and Proper Places" in J. Edward Chamberlin & Sander L. Gilman, eds., *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985).

[7] Concerning a later period, Frederick J. Hoffman's *Freudianism and the Literary Mind* (1948) is a salutary reminder of how few if any of Freud's works had actually been read by authors who made use of 'Freudian ideas'.

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