

D. H. Lawrence's "Elephant" in the Imperial Contexts: Royal Tourism, *The English Review* and the Consumer Culture of Empire

Makoto Kinoshita

1. Re-historicising the Text

In the spring of 1922, D. H. Lawrence wrote a poem named "Elephant" while he stayed in Ceylon, a small island colony of South Asia in the British Empire. It describes a major Buddhist festival called the Pera-hera at Kandy, the old inland capital of the former Kingdom there. Why could he observe it in spring even though it is traditionally a mid-summer festival? Because the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII, came to Kandy on March 23, the Pera-hera was exceptionally held in commemoration of the Prince's visit that evening. The only Lawrentian poem written in Ceylon was first published in the April 1923 issue of *The English Review*, a literary magazine in England, and then included in his collected poems entitled *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923). Most critics have regarded "Elephant" as one of the exotic animal poems which deal with "the otherness of nature" (Gilbert 124) in the "Animals" section of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*.

However, we should never separate "Elephant" from the imperial contexts to which it belonged at the time of its publication for two reasons. First, the appearance of the Prince of Wales in the Pera-hera was closely linked to his imperial mission around 1920. Second, *The English Review* definitely took a

pro-imperial stance in the early 1920s. The fact that “Elephant” first appeared in the English magazine in the metropolis reminds us that the poem’s exoticism *was* a product of the age of the Empire, an imperial commodity made at one of the frontiers of the British Empire to be mostly appreciated and consumed in England. In this socio-political and cultural context, how should we interpret the poem’s negative description of the Prince of Wales who is “diffident” (Lawrence, *The Complete Poems* 387) and unable to properly perform his task as “royalty” (388) at the festival in the colony? The purpose of this paper is to examine how modern tourism as a form of imperial consumer culture imaginatively mediates a tension between the anti-colonial representation of the Prince of Wales in Ceylon in Lawrence’s “Elephant” and the imperialistic contexts of the poem at the time of its first publication in 1923.

Howard J. Booth, in his essay entitled “Lawrence in Doubt: A Theory of the ‘Other’ and Its Collapse,” explores the way “Lawrence took on, stretched and probed many of the possibilities of thought available around colonialism.” According to Booth, Lawrence expresses in “Elephant” his view that “the British Empire is weakening as its masculinity declines” (Booth 209). Ceylon, a colony in South Asia near India in disorder because of the decolonisation movement, is therefore regarded as a site for important turning points for Lawrence: before leaving Europe he hoped that the racial others would help renew the exhausted and decayed West, but now, personally unsettled by Ceylon, he feels Europe is under threat from colonial crowds (Booth 209–11).

Lawrence expresses sympathy for the Prince of Wales at the Pera-hera ceremony overwhelmed by the energetic Ceylonese and elephants in a

letter to his friend: “It was wonderful, gorgeous and barbaric with all the elephants and flames and devil dancers in the night [of the Pera-hera]. . . . The Prince of Wales seemed sad and forlorn. He seemed to be almost the *butt* of everybody, white and black alike. They all secretly hate him for being a Prince, and make a Princely butt of him—and he knows it. *My sympathy was with him*” (*The Letters* 219, italics mine). Lawrence in Ceylon, almost identifying with the fragile and confused Prince, could be described as, in Howard J. Booth’s words, “a beleaguered British Imperialist” (Booth 210).

This paper, while acknowledging Booth’s perspective, places great emphasis on not only Ceylon but also *The English Review* in the early 1920s as the historical contexts for a post-colonial re-reading of “Elephant.” We should go back to the text of *The English Review* in order to re-historicise the poem, because it has been un-historicised by being incorporated into the text of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. My interest lies in the “intertextual” relationship between the poem’s representation of Ceylon and the articles on imperial matters in the periodical in the inter-war years.

The latter half of the paper will be mainly dealing with modern consumerism of the age of the Empire, because the early twentieth century discourse on European mass tourism, a form of imperial consumer culture, circulates in and around the poem “Elephant” as well as *The English Review*. Therefore, instead of tracing Lawrence’s changing ideological stance for British Imperialism *per se* as Booth did, I focus on the way the anti-colonial and negatively written image of the Prince of Wales is transformed into, and made to serve as, the expression or reflection of the readers’ desire for tourism: Royal tourism and mass tourism overlap in the journal version of “Elephant.” The political discourse on colonialism, which undoubtedly

surrounded “Elephant,” can be partly understood as serving an instrumental function within the commercial and tourism framework of contemporary Britain. In other words, the politics can be interpreted as a means to a commercial end, rather than the commerce as a means to a political end. This line of perspective for the consumer culture leads us to the re-interpretation of the final lines of “Elephant” in which the Lawrence figure “I” weaves a fantasy which most critics have judged to be an authoritarian vision (See, for example, Marshall).

2. The Politics of Royal Tourism by the Prince of Wales

The Prince’s visit to Ceylon in 1922 was a part of the world tours sent off by Prime Minister Lloyd George, who saw the royal journeys as exercises in “political showmanship” that would entrance the dominions and make their rulers more tractable: “The appearance of the popular Prince of Wales might do more to calm the discord than half a dozen solemn Imperial Conferences” (James 446–47). In August 1919, the young Prince, aged 24, embarked for Canada for the first time. During the next nine years, he successively visited the West Indies, New Zealand, Australia, India and Ceylon, Canada again, and many parts of Africa. In June 1922, *The Review of the Reviews* reports the Prince’s return from his first Asian tour, and comments on the significance of his “political showmanship” as follows:

The magnificent reception accorded to the Prince of Wales on his return from his world tour expressed the mind of Britain on that ideal of duty and service which he has fulfilled since the days of war and beyond. . . . The throne has acquired new qualification and prestige

in recent years as standing above and remote from all party politics. It represents the British Empire and unity of the most surprising combination of variegated states ever seen in the world. . . . No one has led a more devoted life in the service of the State than our present monarch, and no one has more attracted the hearts of the people than the Prince of Wales. (“The Prince’s Return” 1)

The main purpose of the Prince’s world tours was to reconfirm and strengthen the tie between Britain and the Empire in the inter-war years. He was expected to be a representative of the imperial power for the people in the colonies and dominions as well as Britain.

In terms of the politics of royal tourism, the Pera-hera ceremony with the Prince of Wales’s presence as a guest of honour from the mother country was not so much a purely religious festival as an imperial performance enacted in the colony. Lawrence unexpectedly witnessed the political and cultural form of the spectacles of the Empire at its periphery, and his poem “Elephant” was a so-called by-product of the royal imperial tour. “Elephant” should, therefore, have captured a colonial situation in which the Prince exercised his authority over the dancing Ceylonese and their elephants walking in procession paying homage to him.

3. The Prince’s Motto, “Ich dien,” in the Colonial Context

In “Elephant,” however, the Prince of Wales is a feeble figure watching the colonial crowds nervously, very far from a representative agency of the imperial rule. He lacks both dignity and confidence, and therefore seems to be unable to carry out his duty as “royalty”:

Elephants after elephants curl their trunks, vast shadows,
and some cry out
As they approach and salaam, under the dripping fire of
the torches,
*That pale fragment of a Prince up there, whose motto is
Ich dien.*

Pale, dispirited Prince, with his chin on his hands, his
nerves tired out,
Watching and hardly seeing the trunk-curl approach and
clumsy, knee-lifting salaam
Of the hugest, oldest of beasts in the night and the fire-
flare below.
He is royalty, *pale and dejected fragment up aloft*.
And down below huge homage of shadowy beasts; bare-
foot and trunk-lipped in the night. (388, italics mine)

The repetition of the Prince of Wales's motto, "*Ich dien*," in the poem makes explicit the absurd nature of the spectacular procession organised for the "pale dispirited" Prince. The origin of the motto is historically explained in *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* as follows:

Ich dien (German, 'I serve') The motto of the PRINCE OF WALES since the time of Edward the BLACK PRINCE (1330–76). It is said, without foundation, to have been adopted, together with the three white

ostrich feathers, from John, king of Bohemia, who fell at the Battle of Crécy in 1346.

The Prince's motto has two contradictory functions in "Elephant." On the one hand, the phrase "*Ich dien*" reminds us of the long victorious history of England because it derives from a battle against France in the fourteenth century, the time of Edward the Black Prince. It originally belonged to John the king of Bohemia. When the Bohemian king fell at the battle of Crécy in 1346, the Black Prince took over the opponent's motto with three ostrich feathers on his helmet. The adopted motto and feathers, which would constitute the Coat of Arms of the Prince of Wales, symbolised the conquest (Barber 68–70). This historical signification of "*Ich dien*" is appropriate for the guest of honour at the Pera-hera as an imperial performance in the twentieth century. On the other hand, the literal sense of the motto, "I serve," lays bare a rather disturbing view of the Prince's role visiting the colony not as *the subject* of the imperial rule but as just *a medium* that "serves" to tie the Empire fast to Britain. So the Prince, who was there to serve, not to be served, "couldn't take it [the homage of the kindled blood of the east]" (389):

They had come to see royalty,
To bow before royalty, in the land of elephants, bow deep,
 bow deep.
Bow deep, for it's good as a draught of cool water to bow
 very, very low to the royal.

And all there was to bow to, a weary, diffident boy whose
motto is *Ich dien*.

I serve! I serve! in all the weary irony of his mien— ‘*Tis I*
who serve!

Drudge to the public. (391)

In the political context of the Empire, the striking contrast in appearance between the “wispy,” “diffident” and “pale” Prince of Wales and the energetic “dark” Ceylonese represents the disturbing mood of the time in South Asia. It is worth remembering the fact that the Prince of Wales visited Ceylon after his stay in India. He had been faced with the Indian nationalist movement for independence, a non-corporate and non-violent action, led by Gandhi. When the Prince of Wales arrived at Bombay in November 1921, Gandhi organised a general strike. The Indian resistance to British rule reached its peak during the Prince’s stay, and more than ten thousands people were arrested. The English mass media reported a series of incidents of confusion in India and the Prince’s alleged safety there: *The Review of Reviews* published, one after another, the articles entitled “Conditions in India,” “The Prince in India,” “Bad to Worse in India,” “The Indian Situation,” “The Prince and India,” and “The Trouble in India.” The discourses on the colonial disturbance surrounded the text of “Elephant” which negatively described the Prince of Wales in Ceylon overwhelmed by “the kindled blood of the east.”

4. “Elephant” in *The English Review* and Its Imperial Contexts

The anti-colonial aspect of “Elephant” published in the April 1923 issue

of *The English Review* apparently conflicts with the editorial policy the periodical developed in the early 1920s, for it continually strived to support British Imperialism as having the bright prospects of the condition of England. It carried quite a few articles on imperial matters at that time. “The Future of Empire and of England” in the June 1922 issue, among them, argued that the ideal of “a great and united Empire” was vital for the “prosperity” of England (Harrison 446).

The review’s policy was officially introduced afresh by Ernest Remnant in June 1923 when he took over the chief editorship from Austin Harrison. Remnant writes:

If a man were asked to describe in one word the dominant characteristic of English politics since the war, the term most applicable might be “*confusion*.” We see *confusion* of thought, *confusion* of theories, and *confusion* of ideals. . . .

In this state of mental anarchy and of conflicting desires, the necessity is manifest for *a clear voice and a definite basis of political belief*. Amongst the journals and periodicals which honourably strive to supply this need, *The English Review*, under its new auspices, hopes to be numbered. *Its title will betoken its objects. It will stand for England and for the interests of England*, which include in their far embrace *the Empire of which she is still the heart and core*. (497, italics mine)

Nine months later, referring to the above essay, Remnant submitted his imperial perspective on both England and *The English Review* for the readers’ approval again: “Readers of *the Review*, since the month of June last,

will be aware that its policy has been *definitely and strongly Imperial*" (225, italics mine).

The English Review found a suitable opportunity to carry out its policy in 1924: it was the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in London. In the November 1922 issue, Austin Harrison had already pointed out the significance of the event: "In 1924 the British Empire Exhibition will reveal to the country the astonishing capacity of supplies produced and producible with the Empire; the object of this article is to focus attention on the vital need of making it a colossal success" (446). In fact, the Exhibition at Wembley, an "unfashionable" suburb of London, was the greatest of all the imperial ones in terms of area, cost, extent of participation, and popular impact (Judd 273–96). *The British Empire Exhibition, 1924: The Official Guide* describes its primal principle as follows:

The fundamental purpose of the British Empire Exhibition is serious. It is to stimulate trade, to strengthen the bonds that bind the Mother Country to her Sister States and Daughter Nations, to bring all into closer touch the one with the other, to enable all who owe allegiance to the British flag to meet on common ground, and to learn to know each other. It is a Family Party, to which every part of the Empire is invited, and at which every part of the Empire is represented. (1)

From March to November in 1924, *The English Review* carried a series of articles entitled "Empire Supplement" every month, and provided the readers with a brief and useful summary of various issues on broad imperial interests. The chief editor expected the series to "disseminate authoritative

views and influence opinion upon Imperial questions.” In other words, it was a means to continually instill an imperial ideology – “the great ideal of a united British Empire” – into the readers’ minds: “Until the close of the British Empire Exhibition, especial prominence will be given to matters relating to that display of Imperial industry and production and also to the Fellowship of that Exhibition, a body of Britishers imbued with the common aim of fostering and spreading the great ideal of a united British Empire” (MacMahon, 393–94).

“Empire Supplement” in the May 1924 issue describes the Ceylon Pavilion at Wembley as “the Kandyan style of architecture”: “The towers flanking it on each side are modelled upon the well-known ‘Temple of the Tooth’ at Kandy, and the panels surrounding the entrance porches are copies of characteristic figures in the Kandyan decoration.” It was at the Temple of the Tooth that the Prince of Wales had observed the procession of the Perahera in the spring of 1922. In “Elephant” Lawrence writes: “a pale little wisp of a Prince of Wales, diffident, up in a small pagoda *on the temple side* / And white people in evening dress buzzing and crowding the stand upon the grass below and opposite” (387, italics mine). Those who read the poem in the April 1923 issue knew the features of “the Kandyan style” by reading “Empire Supplement” in the May 1924 issue, and might have gone to see the replica of the Temple of the Tooth at the Exhibition.

5. “I” of “Elephant” in the Imperial Consumer Culture

The British Empire Exhibition was actively promoted through various media, one of which was *Metro-land*, an annual publication from 1915 to 1932 by the Publicity Department of the Metropolitan Railway which would

become part of London Transport in 1933. “Metro-land” was a title devised as “a catchy marketing brand name” for the northwest areas of London served by the line. The company had, besides the London Underground system, “an important Extension line” from Baker Street which ran out into “the delightful country” situated in Middlesex, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire – the “happily named Metro-land” (“An Introduction to Metro-Land” in *Metro-land* v). The guidebook, *Metro-land*, was originally designed to promote those suburban areas for leisure excursion travel from London. More significantly, it was also intended to stimulate new residential developments for middle-class commuters who would travel to and from London daily by the Metropolitan’s service. The 1924 edition of *Metro-land*, “British Empire Exhibition Number,” had the extra purpose of promoting the huge national event at suburban Wembley of “Metro-land” when the leisure and property boom was under way.

The opening of the Exhibition, whose nearest tube station was Wembley Park of the Metropolitan Railway, was a big opportunity for the company to get more customers. So it is the economical and commercial attractiveness, not the political one, of the event for tourists that the “Introduction” to the “British Empire Exhibition Section” of the *Metro-land* 1924 edition puts a special emphasis on:

The grounds at Wembley will reproduce in miniature the entire resources of the British Empire. . . . In a single day you will be able to learn more geography than a year of hard study would teach you, and see in each case the conditions of life of the country you are visiting.

Maybe, you have often wanted to travel round the world. At Wembley

you will be able to do so at a minimum of cost, in a minimum of time, with a minimum of trouble, studying as you go the shop windows of the British Empire. You will be able to go behind those windows and see how the goods are produced and meet the men and women who produce them. Every aspect of life, civilised and uncivilised, will be shown in an Exhibition which is the last word in comfort and convenience. (12)

This suburban area of London was indeed a substitute for the real Empire during the Exhibition, and was becoming a place to stimulate and partly satisfy the desire for tourism of those who “often wanted” to go abroad but in reality could not go. For the Metropolitan Railway, the political significance of the Exhibition was not so important: the pavilions were “the shop windows of the British Empire.” Promoting the British Empire Exhibition, a means to disseminate the ideal of the united Empire in the case of *The English Review*, makes for the commercial and tourism framework of the discourse in *Metro-land*. In other words, it is the readers’ desire for tourism that bridges the gap between the political effect and the economical effect of those advertising campaigns.

In terms of this conjunction of the politics and the economics of the touristic desire for the Empire, we should historically re-read the final lines of “Elephant” in which the Lawrentian figure “I” weaves a fantasy:

I wish they had given the three feathers to me;
That I had been he in the pavilion, as in a pepper-box aloft
and alone

To stand and hold feathers, three feathers above the world,
And say to them: Dient Ihr! Dient!
Omnes, vos omnes, servite.
Serve me, I am meet to be served.
Being royal of the gods.

And to the elephants:
First great beasts of the earth,
A prince has come back to you,
Blood-mountains.
Crook the knee and be glad. (392)

In this fantasy, “*Ich dien*” (I serve) eventually turns into “*Dient Ihr!*” (Serve me!), “Drudge to the people” into “royal of the gods.” Most critics have judged this re-writing of the Prince of Wales’s motto and his attitude as representing Lawrence’s infamous authoritarian vision, the worst form of which can be identified in *The Plumed Serpent*. This line of thought seems fairly understandable.

But how should we think of a partial identification with, and a partial denial of, the Prince of Wales by “I”, one of the tourists at the Pera-hera? More significantly, what effect does the play of identification/denial enacted in the colony exert on the readers of *The English Review*?—These questions about the psychological mechanism of constructing identity will lead us to reassess the position of the modernist literature in the imperial consumer culture.

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