“The Woman Who Rode Away”

Written in New Mexico during the summer of 1924, first published in *The Dial* in 1925

primitivism: A belief in the value of what is simple and unsophisticated, expressed as a philosophy of life or through art or literature. (Oxford English Dictionary)

Surrealist André Breton’s apartment at 42 rue Fontaine, Paris in 1968 (cibachrome photograph)
Defining primitivist discourse:

To study the primitive is to enter an exotic world which is also a familiar world. That world is structured by sets of images and ideas that have slipped from their original metaphorical status to control perceptions of primitives—images and ideas that I call tropes*. Primitives are like children, the tropes say. Primitives are like our untamed selves, our id forces—libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous. Primitives are mystics, in tune with nature, part of its harmonies. Primitives are free. Primitives exist at the “lowest” cultural levels”; we occupy the “highest,” in the metaphors of stratification and hierarchy commonly used by [Bronisław] Malinowski [the famous 20th century anthropologist] and others like him. The ensemble of these tropes—however miscellaneous and contradictory—forms the basic grammar and vocabulary of what I call primitivist discourse, a discourse fundamental to the Western sense of the self and Other. (Torgovnick 8)

*trope: a figurative or metaphorical use of a word or expression
Defining primitivist discourse:

Those who study or write about the primitive usually begin by defining it as different from (usually opposite to) the present. After that, reactions to the present take over. Is the present too materialistic? Primitive life is not—it is a precapitalist utopia in which only use value, never exchange value, prevails. Is the present sexually repressed? Not primitive life—primitives live life whole, without fear of the body. Is the present promiscuous and undiscriminating sexually? Then primitives teach us the inevitable limits and controls placed on sexuality and the proper subordination of sexuality to the the needs of child rearing. Does the present see itself as righteously Christian? Then primitives become heathens, mired in false beliefs. . . .In each case, the needs of the present determine the value and nature of the primitive. The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it. It is our ventriloquist’s dummy—or so we like to think. (Torgovnick 8-9)
Torgovnick on how Lawrence’s thematic concerns turned to the primitive:

Like many moderns, Lawrence freely substituted “the primitive” for other categories that had obsessed him from the beginning of his career. The main set of substitutions progressed chronologically in this order:

- miners/working-class men
- vital masculinity (dependent on the “right” kind of femininity)
- phallic power
- “the primitive”
- natural harmony (attunement with the sun) (Torgovnick 159)
Torgovnick’s reading of the “doubleness” of Lawrence’s view of the primitive:

Lawrence’s gendered versions of the primitive retell in personalized terms the two major stories about primitive peoples he inherited from the nineteenth century: primitive people as dangerous and irrational, something to be feared; primitive peoples as the idealized noble savage, something to be emulated. The first, for Lawrence the “feminine” version, is the primitive as degeneration, as a cautionary tale for the modern West; the second, “masculine” version, is the primitive as regeneration, as the last best hope for the modern West. (Torgovnick 159)
Lawrence’s epistolary account of the west coast of Mexico:

There is a blazing sun, a vast hot sky, big lonely inhuman green hills and mountains, a flat blazing littoral with a few palms, sometimes a dark blue sea which is not quite of this earth—then little towns that seem to be slipping down an abyss—and the door of life shut on it all, only the sun burning, the clouds of birds passing, the zopilotes [buzzards] like flies, the lost lonely palm-trees, the deep dust of the roads, the donkeys moving a gold-dust-cloud. In the mountains, lost, motionless silver-mines. Alamos a once lovely little town, lost, and slipping down the gulf in the mountains, forty miles up the awfullest road I’ve ever been bruised along. But somehow or other, you get there. And more wonderful, you get out again.—There seems a sentence of extinction written over it all.—In the middle of the little covered market at Alamos, between the meat and the vegetables, a dead dog lay stretched as if asleep. The meat vendor said to the vegetable man: You’d better throw it out. The veg-man looked at the dead dog and saw no reason for throwing it out. So no doubt it still lies there.

Lawrence in a letter to Witter Bynner
Summer 1922, Navojoa, Mexico
And in his battered Ford car her husband would take her into the dead, thrice-dead little Spanish town forgotten among the mountains. The great, sun-dried dead church, the dead portales, the hopeless covered market-place, where, the first time she went, she saw a dead dog lying between the meat stalls and the vegetable array, stretched out as if for ever, nobody troubling to throw it away. Deadness within deadness. (Lawrence, “The Woman Who Rode Away” 5)
“Because our men are the fire and the daytime, and our women are the spaces between the stars at night,” he said.
“Aren’t the women even stars?” she said.
“No. We say they are the spaces between the stars, that keep the stars apart.”

He looked at her oddly, and again, the touch of derision came into his eyes.

“White people,” he said, “they know nothing. They are like children, always with toys. We know the sun, and we know the moon. And we say, when a white woman give herself to our gods, then our gods will begin to make the world again, and the white man’s gods will fall to pieces.” (Lawrence, “The Woman Who Rode Away” 27)
Only the eyes of the oldest man were not anxious. Black, and fixed, and as if sightless, they watched the sun, seeing beyond the sun. And in their black, empty concentration there was power, power intensely abstract and remote, but deep, deep to the heart of the earth, and the heart of the sun. In absolute motionlessness he watched till the red sun should send his ray through the column of ice. Then the old man would strike, and strike home, accomplish the sacrifice and achieve the power.

The mastery that man must hold, and that passes from race to race. (Lawrence, “The Woman Who Rode Away” 37)
apocalypse: (1) (often the Apocalypse) The complete final destruction of the world, especially as described in the biblical book of Revelation. (2) An event involving destruction or damage on an awesome or catastrophic scale. (Oxford English Dictionary)
There is hope too. I know that, in the end, we will turn slap round against this world, and choke it. It is time to be subtle and unified. It is a great and foul beast, this world that has got us, and we are very few. But with subtlety, we can get round the neck of the vast obscenity at last, and strangle it dead. And then we can build a new world, to our own minds: we can initiate a new order of life, after our own hearts. One has first to die in the great body of the world, then to turn round and kill the monstrous existing Whole, and then declare a new order, a new earth.

Lawrence in a letter to Katherine Mansfield
September 1916, Cornwall

Phoenix at Lawrence’s Kiowa Ranch outside Taos, one of his favorite symbols
Apocalyptic longing in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922):

There is no way out of a vicious circle, of course, except breaking the circle. . . . What are we to do? Just wait for the results of the poison-gas competition presumably.

Oh ideal humanity, how detestable and despicable you are! And how you deserve your own poison-gases! How you deserve to perish in your own stink.

[...] Once we really consider this modern process of life and the love-will, we could throw the pen away, and spit, and say three cheers for the inventors of poison-gas. Is there not an American who is supposed to have invented a breath of heaven whereby, drop one pop-cornful in Hampstead, one in Brixton, one in East Ham, and one in Islington, and London is a Pompeii in five minutes! Or was the American only bragging? Because anyway, whom has he experimented on? I read it in the newspaper though. London a Pompeii in five minutes. Makes the gods look silly! (Lawrence 162)
Apocalyptic longing in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922):

If it were not for this striving into new creation on the part of living individuals, the universe would go dead, gradually, gradually, and fall asunder. Like a tree that ceases to put forth new green tips, and to advance out a little further. But each new tip arises out of the apparent death of the old, the preceding one. Old leaves have got to fall, old forms must die. And if men must at certain periods fall into death in the millions, why, so must the leaves fall every single autumn. And dead leaves make good mold. And so do dead men. Even dead men’s souls. So if death has to be the goal for a great number, then let it be so. If America must invent this poison-gas, let her. When death is our goal of goals we shall invent the means of death, let our professions of benevolence be what they will. (Lawrence 189)