

# D. H. Lawrence

## Then and Now

'We must confess the faults of our favourite, to gain credit to our praise of his excellencies.'

Dr Johnson, letter to Charles Burney, 16 October, 1765.

# D. H. Lawrence Then and Now:

## *An A to Z of Lawrence Studies*

By

David Ellis

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D. H. Lawrence Then and Now: An A to Z of Lawrence Studies

By David Ellis

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D. H. LAWRENCE 1929

from a Self Portrait

For John Worthen

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## INTRODUCTION: PHOENIX RISING?

For a man who spent several weeks of every year in bed, dealing with problems associated with his 'weak chest', the phoenix was an appropriate personal symbol but it can also be linked with Lawrence's critical reputation which has seen some remarkable ups and downs. One recent indication of a revival is the prominence and warm welcome given to three books published at the beginning of this decade. Frances Wilson's *Burning Man: The Ascent of D. H. Lawrence* appeared in 2021 and was hailed by Geoff Dyer, no mean expert in this field, as 'utterly enthralling' while Richard Holmes, perhaps the best literary biographer of his generation, described it as 'brilliantly unconventional'. Lara Feigel's *Look! We Have Come Through!: Living with D. H. Lawrence* appeared a year later and was also favourably reviewed. Like Dyer in his brilliant *Out of Sheer Rage: in the Shadow of D. H. Lawrence*, published all of twenty years ago, Feigel took as her starting point the promise she had made to herself and others that she would write a book on Lawrence yet, whereas the sophisticated joke in Dyer's case is that the book never gets written, even if he manages to say many interesting and original things about Lawrence along the way, Feigel's does. Also using an autobiographical framework — in her case of a young mother recently separated from her husband who is living in the country during the COVID restrictions, there is in her book a lot of what in old money would be called literary criticism.

It is interesting that Feigel often chooses to focus her critical attention on some of Lawrence's less frequented texts: her title echoes the one Lawrence gave to a collection of poems which appeared during the First World War and in which he mainly chronicles the tensions in his turbulent relationship with Frieda Weekley who, having been previously married to his professor of languages at Nottingham, had become his own wife in 1914. These poems were the target of a famous if now shop-worn quip by Bertrand Russell — 'I'm glad he has come through but why should I look?' — and have usually been thought well below the standard set by his finest book of poetry, *Birds, Beast and Flowers*. But Feigel can find much to admire in them and is also unusual in her willingness to take Lawrence on as a thinker about (for example) psychoanalysis, in which she herself is well versed. The key text for her is nevertheless *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and she ends her book with a confession of still liking this novel in spite of Kate Millet's blistering attack in her *Sexual Politics* and the long line of

feminist critics who have since followed her in denouncing its male chauvinism. Angry with the way Lawrence often criticised his wife's maternal feelings, she welcomes his celebration of motherhood in his last novel and particularly admires (as do many critics) the gentle lyricism of Connie's encounter with the pheasant chicks.

Given how justified many aspects of the feminist assault on Lawrence undoubtedly were, it is significant that the third author whose recent work was received with an enthusiasm that indicates a revival in his fortunes is also female, and an admirer of *Lady Chatterley*. Alison Macleod's *Tenderness* came out in 2022 but is of course a novel, a worthy successor to Helen Dunmore's 1993 *Zennor in Darkness* which dealt with the time the Lawrences spent in Cornwall during the middle war years. The central concern of Macleod is *Lady Chatterley*, one of Lawrence's alternative titles for which had in fact been *Tenderness*. She traces its biographical background, assuming that the model for Connie was Rosalind Thorneycroft whom Lawrence first met during the war and who was afterwards the subject of his only recorded extra-marital affair; but also dramatizes how, in 1959 and 1960, the novel triumphed over attempts in both the American and English courts to stop an unexpurgated edition appearing. This success is seen by Macleod as a victory for liberal values over conservatism, a parallel to Kennedy's defeat of Nixon in the 1960 Presidential election, although she has done too much background research to be unaware that *Lady Chatterley* is not everywhere as romantic in feeling as her own novel. Tracing its fate in America, she describes how, in the year before the election, Kennedy's wife Jackie attended a hearing in which the government was attempting to ban the novel and happened to meet there the celebrated literary critic Lionel Trilling. This leads to a scene in Cape Cod where she and Trilling debate Lawrence's strengths as a writer and during which he suggests that any great novel will have weaknesses and reflect the times in which it was written, as well as 'the personal shortcomings of the author':

'The gamekeeper, Mellors — for example, makes a sickening comment about black women in Chapter Fourteen, and he has an absurd view of lesbians. There's an unpleasant remark or two about Jews as well.'

He shrugs. 'We must be honest: these comments may belong to the character Mellors only, or they may represent Lawrence's own vileness and ignorance. Sometimes there's no denying the dross of an author's biography, and the cultural impurities we all carry at some point in our lives, but I would contend that there is something in a *great* work of literature which is indelible and animate. Something mysterious which exceeds the author. Something big-spirited and alive. It vibrates with life, across time, and *that* for me, is literature. That's what we need to hold onto.'<sup>1</sup>

Rather than saying that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a great work of literature despite its shortcomings, the Trilling figure has taken its greatness as an unargued premise that absolves them; but like Feigel (although rather more fulsomely) Macleod is here registering indirectly the novel's rehabilitation after years in the critical doghouse.

All three of the authors I am considering were either once, or still are academics. In very successfully writing books that have reached a far wider public than academics usually command and have what publishers like to call 'cross over' appeal, they all acknowledge, though with varying degrees of openness, their reliance on a tradition of academic research which has been rumbling along since the death of Lawrence in 1930. That event had a mixed reception in the literary world with the sceptics finding a crucially influential spokesman in T. S. Eliot. There was no obituary of Lawrence in the *Criterion*, the journal Eliot edited, but when E. M. Forster wrote to another periodical claiming that Lawrence was the greatest imaginative novelist of his generation Eliot, at a level of childishness surprising in a great writer, took the trouble to intervene and claim that these words made no sense unless you defined what you meant by greatest, imaginative and novelist (the last at least ought to have been evident to him). He made his feelings clearer in a review of Middleton Murry's biography of Lawrence, *Son of Woman*, which did appear in the *Criterion* and also in lectures he gave in America in 1933 where he elaborated on his view that Lawrence was an essentially ignorant man, badly educated, badly brought up and without any sound moral sense. This was after having previously declared, in a betraying remark discreetly tucked away in a French journal, that when Lawrence's characters have sexual intercourse, they do so without any of the refinements that countless generations have developed to make it tolerable.<sup>2</sup>

The hostility Eliot typified is important to remember when F. R. Leavis was in the vanguard of those English academics trying to bolster Lawrence's reputation since it led Leavis to make a number of unsustainable claims, that Lawrence was without class feeling, for example (in opposition to those who said he was obsessed with his own social background), or that his two so-called 'psychology books' were models of lucid exposition and argument, even though Eliot had claimed that their author had no capacity for 'what is ordinarily called thinking'. But counter-suggestiveness apart, the appearance of Leavis's *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist* in 1956 did have one unusually positive effect as far as Lawrence's fortunes were concerned. A young admirer was Michael Black who, after achieving an influential position at Cambridge University Press, went on to launch the Cambridge edition of Lawrence's complete works, the first

volume of which appeared in 1980 and the last in 2018. Together with an eight-volume edition of his letters, and a biography in 3 volumes, they have proved a useful academic resource for writers on Lawrence, up to and including the three more recent ones I have been discussing and some aspects of whose work I consider in what follows.

Leavis's efforts on Lawrence's behalf would not have had anything like the effect they did without the paradoxical assistance of the *Lady Chatterley* trial in 1960. I call it paradoxical because, by that time, Leavis had decided that this novel was a bad book which violated one of its author's own critical principles, namely that a novelist, having created a number of characters, should then allow the action to play out according to the emotional logic in them and not direct it to favour any message he or she wanted to convey. In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Leavis claimed, the author had (borrowing Lawrence's own metaphor) put his thumb in the scale. When in 1930 he had attempted his first overall review of all Lawrence's work, confessing that he found novels like *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* 'hard to get through' and declaring a preference for *The Lost Girl*, he had nothing but praise for *Lady Chatterley* and this remained the case until the trial. What he said then about disliking it is therefore almost as big a volte-face as the more well-known conclusion he came to that Dickens was not just a popular entertainer, as he had once maintained, but a great novelist. Not that his change of heart about *Lady Chatterley* did much to lessen the impetus that the publicity surrounding its trial gave to Lawrence's reputation.

Even at the time, as the 'swinging 60s' got under way, there were however other voices expressing scepticism about the suitability of Lawrence as a champion of open, free heterosexual relations. The head of a famous Oxford college, for example, wrote a commentary on the trial in which he pointed out that in one chapter of *Lady Chatterley* there are unmistakable references to anal intercourse, perhaps thereby hinting at Lawrence's own bisexuality, a topic not raised by the prosecution (and certainly never mentioned by Leavis). Kate Millett's objections to the misogyny in the book may have gained little purchase at first but gradually gathered momentum. In an article on 'Rereading *Sons and Lovers*', which was published in *The Times* as recently as February 2024 and is yet another sign of the Lawrence revival, Alice O'Keefe, after praising this early work as 'wise and beautiful', referred to Millett's detection of 'sadistic pornography' in *Lady Chatterley* and suggested it had led to Lawrence's 'cancellation before that was a thing'. Support for that view can be found in Francis Wilson's report that her tutor at Oxford refused to teach anything by him. This height of feminist disapproval, combining

with the realisation by a largely left-wing academic establishment that, although Lawrence had a working-class background, many of his political views were far distant from the left, threatened to turn the Cambridge edition of his works that was gradually accumulating into a white elephant (something like the fine, scholarly edition of the complete works of Walter Savage Landor one used to see on university library shelves). It is this prospect that recent books like those of Wilson, Feigel and Macleod help to diminish.

One of these works is a biography and the other two are full of biographical information. Yet as even Leavis admitted, at the height of the fashion for practical criticism and 'the words on the page', and when there was developing over the Atlantic an attack on a phenomenon known as the 'biographical fallacy', 'it is impossible to study the work and the art [of Lawrence] without forming a vivid sense of the man, and touching the facts of his history'.<sup>3</sup> A gradually developing feeling that the picture of Lawrence's 'work and art' that Leavis had succeeded in projecting, and which is still current in many quarters, had serious omissions or distortions is one of the reasons for this book (that Leavis was able to write so much about Lawrence while hardly mentioning his interest in sex was a remarkable achievement), but it also addresses what would seem, from the three authors I have named, and many other recent writers, could be its future shape. In the long dramatization of the *Lady Chatterley* trial which provides the climax for *Tenderness*, for example, the words of the participants are often cited just as they appear in the transcript of the trial Penguin published in 1961. Interpolated into this action, however, are the memories of Rosalind Thornycroft, imagined as being present, and who, with the help of a few extracts from *Lady Chatterley*, recalls Lawrence as the love of her life just as she was of his. This disconcerting mixture of fact and fiction gives what is in my grumpily dissatisfied view an impression of Lawrence and his work which is as distorted in its own way as that of Leavis so that what I am attempting to present here is something I believe is closer to the truth, a series of modifications that I hope can have the cumulative effect of coming closer to an accurate picture.

If each one of these modifications is brief I must trust it is not only because of my own limited attention span but rather the result of having attended too many literary conferences where the speakers have made their essential points and then gone on elaborating to 'fill the time allowed' (and often well beyond). Although there are some obvious cross-references in what follows, I have made few efforts to pull the whole thing together, to give it more 'form', relying on each reader to do that for me and that old principle of academic research '*qui cherche trouve*' or, in one of its looser

English renderings, 'you always find what you're looking for'. Form was of course one of Lawrence's major preoccupations when he first began to make a name for himself in the London literary world and was told to study Flaubert if he wanted to learn how a novel should be constructed. It would be hubristic of me here to dwell on one of his responses which has been much admired, that the form he was seeking for the characters in the novel he was writing was like the patterns which emerge when you draw a violin bow across a tray of sand, especially as he then went on to write a novel as essentially formless as *Aaron's Rod*; but if I were challenged to say what I think the main *theme* of these reflections is, perhaps it would be that Lawrence was a much stranger person than is usually acknowledged. Shortly before his mother died, he confessed to a friend that his relations with her had made him 'in some sense abnormal'. What often made him appear so, apart from his relations with his mother, were abilities quite out of the ordinary which prompted his contemporaries, friend *and* foe alike, to refer to him habitually as a genius. Yet abnormal in a quite different sense were some of the ideas he was willingly to entertain about himself and the world around him.

Quite how strange — 'weird' would be the fashionable word, some of these were has to my mind received surprisingly little attention from writers on Lawrence. Partly this was because they were chiefly concerned, as Leavis and his followers certainly were, to direct attention to how exceptionally well Lawrence could often write, yet there were also two minor factors which may have played their part. One of these is a commonsense in Lawrence, sometimes accompanied by a pawky, often self-deprecating sense of humour, which seems to exist alongside his willingness to entertain extravagant notions (that it is human individuals who keep the sun alive, for example, and not vice-versa); but another is a technique he has of countering his own 'abnormality' in his novels which has often been commented on and has received much praise. The classic example here is the refusal of Ursula in *Women in Love* to accept Birkin's explanations of how men and women can be simultaneously apart and together in sex or marriage ('stellar polarity'); but clearer is the scorn Harriett Somers pours on her husband's efforts in *Kangaroo* to insist that, if you imagine marriage as a ship, a husband should always be its captain. In *The Plumed Serpent* the heroine's sensible criticisms of the attempts by Cipriano and Ramón to establish a new religion flicker occasionally like a badly connected light bulb but (and this is the point) do not stop Lawrence endorsing them any more than Ursula's scorn prevents Birkin from holding fast to his views on marriage, or that of Harriett Somers stops her husband from continuing to believe that men should always take the lead.

In Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*, there is a great scene in which Parolles regrets that he has boasted of being able to recover a regimental drum from the enemy when he knows he has not the courage to do so. 'Is it possible', says a soldier who overhears him, 'that he should know what he is, and be what he is?' Lawrence was aware that some of the views he held would seem strange to many and was ready to show, in his fiction, how they might be criticized; but this did not mean he was willing to relinquish them or stop him trying to demonstrate ways in which — and it was he, after all, who wrote the novels — they might triumph.

PS: My decision to organise the following brief chapters alphabetically came largely after and not before they had been written: that is to say only one of them was the result of my being short of an entry for a particular letter (z). I freely admit, however, to having occasionally played fast and loose with titles, 'On putting people into books' perhaps being the most flagrant example. This is because for me there is nothing especially mysterious about the alphabet which I have treated here as just one short step from the principle of the bran tub. Part of the appeal of Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage* came from its indebtedness to Roland Barthes who was especially and justly admired in the 1990s. When Barthes published his autobiography, he included this defence of the way it was organised:

The alphabetical order erases everything, banishes every origin. Perhaps in places, certain fragments seem to follow one another by some affinity; but the important thing is that these little networks not be connected, that they do not slide into a single enormous network which would be the structure of the book, its meaning. It is in order to halt, to deflect, to divide this descent of discourse toward a destiny of the subject, that at certain moments the alphabet calls you to order (to disorder) and says: Cut! Resume the story in another way.<sup>4</sup>

Alert as he was, Barthes must have known that no one who writes about his own life can avoid what he calls here the destiny of the subject and that no autobiographical text has lines so close together that an astute reader cannot read between them. Given that this book is not an autobiography, however, and that I regard its alphabetical order as no more than an inevitably clumsy convenience, I would be only too happy if it had readers who connected up the dots in any way they found reasonable ('studies' in the subtitle is meant less in the sense of university curricula and the midnight oil than the sketches artists make in preparation for a full-scale portrait). Insofar, moreover, that this compendia is offered as a modest and *I hope* less expensive alternative to the various 'handbooks' or 'compan-



ions' which publishers favour nowadays, I take comfort from that fact that it will at least have a unity they lack, and which comes from all of it having been written by the same person.

To avoid too many endnotes I have included references to quotations from Lawrence's works and letters in my text, using the cue titles which are listed on pp. 193-4.



A  
'ANTHROPOMORPHIC LUST'



Lawrence in the Florence countryside

From the beginning of his literary career Lawrence was admired for his descriptions of Nature. The quality of these was based on two of his major attributes. Many of his contemporaries commented on what an extraordinary experience it was to go walking with him in the countryside. This was in the first place because he was so preternaturally observant, pointing out features they would never have noticed on their own but, in the second, because he always knew the names of what he observed. He came from a home where both parents were interested in Nature and botany was his favourite subject at college. With his move to Europe, his knowledge was only increased. One demonstration of that is an essay first published in T. S. Eliot's *New Criterion* called 'Flowery Tuscany'. A friend he went on a walk with him in the hills around Florence later reported that he named to her at least thirty varieties of plants and flowers. Perhaps the most genuinely philosophical fiction Lawrence ever wrote is the short story called 'The Man Who Loved Islands'. This describes how someone who, growing increasingly misanthropic, moves from island to island in order to avoid human contact. Alone on the final island, he notices some birds he had never seen before: 'His old impulse came over him, to send for a book, to know their names ... But the desire left him, and he merely watched the birds as they wheeled and walked around him'. A little later he even tears the 'brass label off his paraffin stove' in a final rejection of the language which binds together so much of the human world and descends into madness. (WWRA, 168-70)

When Lawrence describes the natural world in his early writings he often makes his readers aware of what Ruskin once defined as 'the pathetic fallacy', the attribution of human feelings to plants as well as animals. There is a particular egregious example of this in his second novel, *The Trespasser*, when the male protagonist, who is called Siegmund, is walking alone down to the seashore for his morning swim:

The morning was exceedingly fair, and it looked at him so gently, that his blue eyes trembled with self-pity. A fragment of scarlet geranium glanced up at him as he passed, so that amid the vermilion tyranny of the uniform it wore, he could see the eyes of the flower, wistful, offering him love, as one sometimes sees the eyes of a man beneath the brass helmet of a soldier, and is startled. Everything looked at him with the same eyes of tenderness, offering him, timidly, a little love. (T, 134)

One could argue here that, given Ruskin's claim that the pathetic fallacy illustrates a 'morbid state of mind',<sup>5</sup> what we are being offered in Siegmund is a *characterization* of someone who is mentally unstable and will later go on to commit suicide. But the habit that the passage illustrates can

often be found in Lawrence's first novel (as well as his second), and in his early poetry. A typical example in the poetry is called 'Weeknight Service' and describes the 'sliver moon' as being 'up there in the sky / Serenely smiling at naught', while 'patient Night / Sits indifferent, hugged in her rags', and 'The wise old trees / Drop their leaves with a faint, sharp hiss of contempt'. (1*Poems*, 23-4) The general effect is of a man purporting to describe the outside world but in fact always talking about himself. In the new mood of rigorous self-investigation prompted by the outbreak of the war, and life with his wife Frieda, Lawrence diagnosed this solipsism as a dangerous weakness. 'I was so weary of the world', he wrote in 'New Heaven and Earth', 'I was so sick of it / everything was tainted with myself, / skies, trees, flowers, birds, water'..., and he went on to describe how touching his wife in bed allowed him to escape from self-enclosure into a 'new world', a 'new earth' of difference where he could properly recognise the otherness of people and objects in his environment. (1*Poems*, 210, 213)

In what became known as the Fenwick note to the ode on 'Intimations of immortality in early life' (a poem Lawrence almost certainly knew) Wordsworth says, 'I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature.'<sup>6</sup> 'New Heaven and Earth' suggests that its author was aware of his own solipsistic tendencies and he was helped to identify them by his recognition in Whitman, a poet who in many other respects became his model for writing poetry, of what he stigmatised as 'merging'. 'I embrace ALL', he derisively quotes from Whitman at one moment, 'I weave all things into myself'. (SCAL, 423) Certainly, as Lawrence developed he made more of an effort to recognise and record the difference between his own nature and the Nature around him. So much is this the case that one of those responsible for what was (before the Cambridge edition) the standard collection of his complete poems could talk of how in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, much the best of the books of poetry Lawrence published during his lifetime, its author managed to capture the 'divine otherness' of the subjects referred to in its title.<sup>7</sup> He was no doubt thinking of the much anthologised 'Snake' or the excellent 'Mosquito' and also, though this might be considered cheating a little, 'Fish', in the course of which Lawrence writes: '*This is beyond me, this fish. / His God stands outside my God*'. (1*Poems*, 293). It is true that in all these three poems, as in many others in this collection, the gap between the observer and the observed is sharply differentiated but of course it remains stubbornly the case that a good deal of anthropomorphism is evident, as it must be in any description of non-human phenome-

na in human language. Humour is one way Lawrence has of at least recognising this problem. Of the six magnificent tortoise poems in this collection, for example, perhaps the best sequence of poems Lawrence ever wrote, one is called 'Tortoise Family Connections', the joke being that these intriguing creatures do not seem to give any indications of having any:

His mother deposited him on the soil as if he were no more than droppings,  
And now he scuffles tinily past her as if she were an old rusty tin.

A mere obstacle,  
He veers round the slow great mound of her—  
Tortoises always foresee obstacles.

It is no use my saying to him in an emotional voice:  
This is your Mother, she laid you when you were an egg.

He does not even trouble to answer: 'Woman what have I to do with thee?'. (1Poems, 309-10)

Here, a member or perhaps constituent would be a better word of the animal world is incorporated into human culture in its Western, specifically Christianised form while at the same time we are made comically aware of how inappropriate that incorporation is.

According to Lawrence, the time he spent in New Mexico, and in Mexico itself, produced a dramatic change in his attitude to Nature: it meant that he no longer regarded 'her' as a mother in what he tended to believe was a Wordsworthian fashion, but recognised how cruel and hostile she could be. This feeling, which he usually claimed to welcome because it put him more in touch with what was 'real', appears to have been confirmed when, towards the end of his stay in the new world, he briefly became a farmer, planting on the Kiowa ranch in the foothills of the Rockies, that he had been given to Frieda by Mabel Luhan, a field of alfalfa and even acquiring a cow. A number of essays he wrote at the time explore what difference this farming experience had made to his sense of how he related to the natural world. In 'Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine', which later gave its name to the collection of these and other essays he soon published, he ponders the effort it cost him to have to kill a porcupine because of the damage they do, and decides that there is a hierarchy in Nature, human and otherwise, according to the lesser or greater degree of 'life' one species or individual possesses in comparison with another, and that this gives the higher life-form an authority to take measures against the lower (extreme ones in the case of the porcupine). Insofar as this is a

reformulation of his frequent diatribes against equality, one has to hope he is not advocating the extension to humans of those extreme measures against lower forms of life that farmers feel obliged to take against animals they regard as pests although the very idea of 'lower forms' can sometime be an embarrassment to those recent critics who have sought to enrol Lawrence in ecological movements of which he otherwise seems such an obvious and natural member.

More relevant here than the essay which gave its name to the collection is one called '...Love was once a little boy' which begins with Lawrence revisiting, in a disillusioned tone, the issue of how a man and woman who fall in love can nevertheless each maintain their own individuality ('Love, as a relationship of unison means, and must mean, *to some extent*, the sinking of the individuality'). The essay then moves on to how Lawrence feels he can establish relationships with the animals on his farm, and particularly with Susan, his cow. There follow fine descriptions of Susan, which would not be out of place in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, and a recognition that the cow is a separate entity outside his own imaginative world. Somewhat surprisingly, the contrast he then chooses to draw is with how someone might approach, not an animal but a primrose. Lawrence is thinking here of well-known lines from Wordsworth's *Peter Bell*, 'A primrose by the river's brim / A yellow primrose was to him / And nothing more', although Ruskin also uses the example of how one might approach a primrose, perhaps because he too had Wordsworth in mind, in his chapter on the pathetic fallacy in *Modern Painters*. 'So a man can go forth, even to a primrose', Lawrence eventually comments,

But let him refrain from falling all over the poor blossom, as William did.  
Or trying to incorporate it into his own ego, which is a sort of lust. Nasty anthropomorphic lust. (RDP, 343)

The phrase is a striking and memorable one for something Lawrence had often been guilty of in his early days, more immediately comprehensible to a modern ear than Ruskin's, although it is of course also wholly irrelevant to what Wordsworth is trying to illustrate in *Peter Bell*.

Lawrence may have found an effective substitute for 'pathetic fallacy' in 'anthropomorphic lust', and successfully overcome his own solipsistic tendencies in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, but there are nevertheless several episodes in his writing when the relation to Nature is strangely and uncomfortably close. Immediately following the scene in *Women in Love* in which his former lover, Hermione Roddice, has nearly killed Birkin by hitting him over the head with a paperweight, for example, he retreats to the countryside. Although it is raining, he takes off all his clothes and rolls

among the primroses making sure they touch all parts of his naked body and that he can saturate himself with their contact. When they prove too soft, he goes on through the long grass to a group of young fir trees and moves among them, allowing their branches to 'beat his loins with their clusters of soft-sharp needles'. He then lies down and rolls in the 'sticky, cool young hyacinths' where the fine wet grass is as 'soft and more delicate and more beautiful than the touch of any woman'. He decides he has made a mistake in imagining he needed people, or a woman, and feels he now knows where to 'plant himself, his seed:—along with the trees, in the fold of the delicious, fresh growing leaves'. (WL, 106-7) The eroticism of this is surely blatant with Birkin deciding that plants and trees provide a more than adequate substitute for female company.

Birkin's escape into the countryside is a striking example of what one might call making love to Nature, lustfully or not, but there are other instances in Lawrence's work where it is Nature which is expected to take the initiative, or actually seems to do so. In the conclusion to *St Mawr*, for example, Lou Carrington has retreated with her mother to a ranch in New Mexico which, from Lawrence's detailed description, is modelled on the one that had been given to Frieda by Mabel Luhan. Separated from her husband and rejecting the possibility of an affair with her mother's servant, Phoenix, Lou declares that there is something in her new environment that 'loves me and wants me', a spirit 'more real to me than men are'. 'It craves for me', she insists, 'And to it, my sex is deep and sacred, deeper than I am, with a deep nature aware deep down of my sex'. (SM, 155) Although the genders are here reversed, this is (as it were) only a *theoretical* gloss on what Birkin is actually performing in *Women in Love* but in a short story Lawrence wrote around the same time as *St Mawr*, and called 'The Border-Line', what it might mean in practice is strikingly if bizarrely illustrated. In the conclusion to this story the ghost of the female protagonist's first husband appears while she is in bed with her second. Dragging his successor out of the bed, he then makes love to his former wife in the guise, as it were, of a fir tree: 'He was hard and cold like a tree, and alive. And the prickling of his moustache was like the prickling of fir-needles'. A little later, he makes love to her again:

And again, as he pressed her fast, and pressed his cold face against her, it was as if the wood of the tree itself were growing around her, the hard live wood compressing and almost devouring her, the sharp needles brushing her face, the limbs of the living tree enveloping her, crushing her in the last, final ecstasy of submission, squeezing from her the last drop of her passion, like the cold white berries of the mistletoe on the tree of life. (WWRA, 96,98)



Whether or not this is a practical illustration of what Lou is expecting from Nature in *St. Mawr*, it is clearly in a different category from the mistake Lawrence claims Wordsworth makes in his relation to primroses. In 1928, when Lawrence was preparing a collection of short stories in which ‘The Border-Line’ was to appear, the proofs came from the printers with the conclusion missing and he was obliged to write a new ending. There is no intercourse with a tree in the rewritten version although at one moment the heroine does sense the presence of her first husband’s ghost among some trees and glances ‘with beating heart at a great round fir-trunk that stood so alive and potent and ... wanted to go and press herself against the trunk’. (WWRA, 448) In an internet site devoted to tree-hugging, its proponents emphasize not only its psychological but also physical benefits, suggesting that the practice can sometimes result in a biochemical interchange. Yet at no point is there a claim that trees can make love and it would surely suggest someone whose own anthropomorphic lust was so deeply ingrained that it was always likely to re-emerge, to propose that they can.



B

BODY AND MIND



In 1913, Lawrence wrote a 'Foreword' to *Sons and Lovers* that effectively disposes of what for the more empirically minded is the comforting idea that his later forays into metaphysics and abstraction, in works such as the *Study of Thomas Hardy* or *The Crown*, were a result of the difficulties he experienced after the outbreak of the First World War. Much more an afterword than a foreword, the opening of this short text indicates what was going to be a major theme of his more philosophical thinking. 'John, the beloved disciple', he writes,

says 'The Word was made Flesh'. But why should he turn things round? The women simply go on bearing talkative sons, as an answer. 'The Flesh was made Word'. (SL, 467)

This witty reversal of the biblical order settles the competing claims of body and mind by insisting that body must always come first and can be associated (this is not an area that encourages fine distinctions) with a famous letter Lawrence had sent to Ernest Collings in January 1913 in which he writes: 'My great religion is a belief in the blood, the flesh, as being wiser than the intellect. We can go wrong in our minds. But what our blood feels and believes and says, is always true'. (1L, 503)

John's two basic principles of flesh and word are given many different names as Lawrence's philosophical thinking develops, including God the father and God the son or, more simply if more enigmatically, Law and Love. The results are sometimes paradoxical. God the Father, for example, turns out to represent a female principle (in the opening to the Foreword Lawrence is reminding us that it is women who have the babies) while the person he often thinks of as best representing the masculine principle of God the son is Shelley, largely on account of 'To a skylark' with its references to *disembodied* beauty ('bird thou never wert'). The meaning of 'flesh' remains reasonably constant for him, but apart from intellect and mind, 'word' also takes on ideas of spirituality and hence its link with the son of God who in Lawrence's mind is associated with the notion that we should love others more than we love ourselves, subordinating the needs of our own flesh to those of someone else's.

In these opening words of the Foreword is prefigured the enthusiasm and detail with which, in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* especially but also elsewhere, Lawrence would later elaborate what he is at pains to call the 'biological psyche'. Insofar as this involves the flesh becoming word via a series of 'chakras', or nerve centres, it is a concept that sits uneasily with his belief in the blood as the seat of consciousness, given that the blood has no specific single location, but the primacy of the physical is still upheld. Both ideas would appear at first to nestle comfortably into that

general area of philosophy known as materialism but one does not have to know much about Lawrence to realise that this is not the case.

There are plenty of instances of his rejection of materialism but the most familiar one occurs in *The Rainbow* when Ursula is at college and examining a unicellular organism through a microscope. Her biology teacher is a woman whom, in what may well be a reference to a work not by Shelley himself but his wife, he calls Dr Frankstone. She can see no 'special mystery' about life and thinks there is no reason for not believing it consists 'in a complexity of physical and chemical activities, of the same order as the activities we already know in science'. But as Ursula examines her specimen, she decides that there must be something more than 'limited mechanical energy, ... mere purpose of self-preservation and self-assertion'. (R, 408-9) The 'creative mystery' is how this other thing is often described in Lawrence but later, in *Fantasia*, he is prepared to call it the soul although what place the soul then occupies in the biological psyche is not made clear. If he had read Descartes he might have opted for the pineal gland but this is one great name which does not appear to have been on his long and heterogenous list of reading.

The opening sentences of the Foreword set Lawrence on the path to the biological psyche but they also committed him to finding an explanation for the origin of life other than the one the Bible offered: to explaining what more precisely there was in the beginning if it was not the Word? This is a problem he was never able to resolve, perhaps because it remains irresolvable. In trying to deal with it, he made several attempts to rewrite Genesis and showed an interest in many other religious systems apart from the Christian. 'But primarily I am a passionately religious man' he declared in 1914 (2L, 165) but his dilemma was like that of many other young people of his generation whose belief in several other parts of the Bible, in addition to Genesis, had been destroyed by science. If the 'theosophy' of Madame Blavatsky and similar writers of her indigestible ilk had such a strong appeal for them, it was because it offered to reconcile scientific thinking with traditional religious feeling (partly by pointing out that there were other 'sciences' in addition to the Western variety).

The extent to which Lawrence was interested in theosophy or the occult, from the time he first became properly aware of it in 1915 up to and including the period when he was writing *The Plumed Serpent*, has been an embarrassment to some critics who have been faced with the choice of either discreetly ignoring its influence or ploughing knee-deep into its murky details. His contemporary Yeats presents a similar although harder challenge given that his commitment to theosophical ideas was stronger. In Lawrence's case, a liking for *The Occult Review* combined with

influences that included an enthusiasm for the pre-Socratic philosophers as well one or two Christian mystics. One general effect was to bolster an anti-materialism which can reach strange heights. In his first 'psychology book', for example, *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*, Lawrence remarks almost casually 'the fixed and stable universe of law and matter, even the whole cosmos, would wear out and disintegrate if it did not rest and find renewal in the quick center of creative life in individual creatures'. (PFU, 20) It is difficult to know how far his elaboration on this claim in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* should be regarded as confirmation or partial qualification of this claim. In a foreword to this second work, he insists that 'instead of life being drawn from the sun, it is the emanation from life itself' which nourish it, and in chapter 13 explains further:

It is the peculiar dynamic polarity of the living soul in every weed or bug or beast ... that maintains the sun alive.... The sun is materially composed of all the effluence of the dead. But the *quick* of the sun is polarised with the living, the sun's quick is polarised in dynamic relation with the quick of life in all living things, that is, with the solar plexus in mankind. (PFU, 64, 169-170)

In rejecting the common scientific belief that all 'mind' must somehow derive from matter, there are hints here of a mutual dependence; but what helps to make this extract so disconcerting — shortened here for convenience but much longer in its original state — is the contradiction Lawrence cannot resolve between wanting to assert the priority of flesh over the word while still retaining the notion of the soul.

Prioritising body over mind involved Lawrence in trying to square more than one circle, as he himself was often aware. Carlyle, he tells us, wrote fifty volumes on the value of silence (1L, 504) while he himself was committed to denouncing the encroachments of the mind in what were essentially the products of his own. He urged people to spend more time mindlessly while most of his was spent writing. That was an endless and perhaps unavoidable contradiction which pursued him all his life and runs through a great deal of his more theoretical writings. When critics talk of these writings they often use the words 'dialectic' or 'dialectical', but that would suggest that the nature of Lawrence's thinking involves the opposition of two principles from which a third term emerges that allows the thought to advance whereas, although it is certainly an ingrained habit of Lawrence's to think in antimonies, there is rarely any convincing resolution in sight. An illustration in the psychological field is the 'stellar polarity' referred to my introduction. This is an attempt to solve the conflict in *Women in Love*'s Birkin, and indeed in Lawrence himself,