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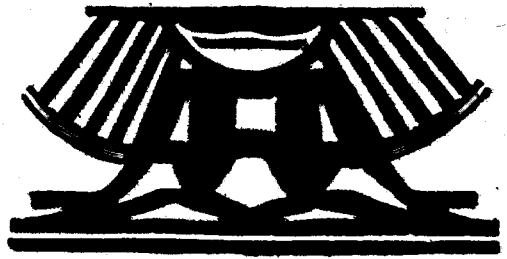
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Mary Freeman



D. H. LAWRENCE PREVIEW OF A BASIC STUDY

EVERYTHING in the world is relative to everything else. And every living thing is related to every other living thing."¹

All of Lawrence's writing might with justice be regarded as explorations within this premise. Certainly his dominant characteristic is the recognition that no experience escapes its context, no man his limitless connections. The search for man's place in the scheme of things, a trade practice of philosophy, found in Lawrence, the writer, expression peculiarly vivid, for in his work extension rarely destroys focus on the specific, and universality finds its most acute expression in extreme timeliness.

Lawrence was deeply disturbed by the tendency of our prevailing philosophies and religions to separate daily life and universal truth. To him the succession of experiences constituted not only the apotheosis of our relations with all we see and touch but also with whatever may penetrate, encompass, or lie beyond, known or unknown. "If we look for God, let us look in the bush where he sings."² This was not, however, a plea for isolated concentration under the bush, for Lawrence's Infinite was, if anything, lively and social. He expressed this numerous times, frequently with his light touch so characteristic and so often overlooked, as in the dialogue between fowls in "Song of Evolution":

¹ D. H. Lawrence, "Aristocracy," in *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays*, Philadelphia, 1925, p. 223.

² "Democracy," in *Phoenix*, New York, 1936, p. 708.

Each said to the other: till I came across you
I wasn't aware of the things I could do!⁸

It was Lawrence's most pervasive aim to link experiences in his writing as they are seldom linked in our thinking and in so doing even to reveal an ethos at once individual, social, and, perhaps, universal. This led him to many of the speculations on values that have grown ever more frequent and urgent during the eighteen years since his death. Lawrence was spurred in this effort by World War I; in order to identify what men should be willing to die for, he felt it essential to know first that for which man can live. Impending death argued most cogently for an interim, at least, of more abundant life.

Lawrence soon concluded that abundant life was not to be found in the main currents of our culture, neither in determined service to material progress nor in hot defense of words of good repute. He found inadequate also the current versions of social reform and revolution. It seemed to him they failed to liberate themselves from the flaws of the past; too often humane motives took a form too lean, too arid. Neither our old culture nor our ready-made panaceas for its ills appeared conducive to individual life. Nevertheless Lawrence felt no individual could or should escape his fellows or his age. Man lived within a social context; without it he died. But why should social movements sharpened for action so frequently mutilate the integrity of most adherents? Could social hate ever create individual good? Could individual pain purchase social ease? Was it necessary that men live at the expense of man? It became an obsession with Lawrence to find a category of understanding that reconciled these apparent contradictions. What was the nature of this relatedness, at times so flexible, at times so rigorous? If our culture had become too complex to be compatible with individual viability, Lawrence foresaw, at best, an apocalypse.

⁸ "Him With His Tail in His Mouth," in *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays*, p. 134.

The effort to arrive at understanding at once extensive and intensive led Lawrence to sacrifice precision in many areas and to be frankly individual in his choice of materials, traits taken as proof of his mystic insight on the one hand and of his intellectual impotence on the other. For the most part, however, the range of Lawrence's interest has been disregarded, and he has been characterized most frequently by a supposed and specific eccentricity. Open season has prevailed for spotting the key idea, the hidden motive, the dominating maladjustment that seems to promise unraveling the whole man. Consequently, numerous Lawrence ghosts have been evoked to stand between the writer and the reader.

The wraiths most in evidence until recently have arisen from Lawrence's so-called "sex obsession." Sex is certainly a legitimate subject for literature; even a "sex obsession" would not necessarily reduce the status of an author; yet the fact remains that Lawrence's interest was not so limited but was exceptional in its breadth as well as depth. The disturbing peculiarity of his handling of that conventional topic lay in his unconventional integration of sex with other aspects of experience usually regarded as unrelated—a broad view which was not regarded as such but was seen only as a perverse extension of an interest in sex. Actually Lawrence frequently came close to presenting perception, not as we like to rationalize it, but as it comes to us, with its incongruous juxtapositions, intricate relationships, and obscure emotions, composites which, because unnamed, appear somehow abnormal and forbidden. Moreover, in style Lawrence not only shed tradition but also abjured cynicism. The resulting unmannered honesty seemed to many a breach of taste to say the least—"sinning against art" as Katherine Mansfield put it. The incidents he chose to write of were too ordinary, their ramifications and implications too extraordinary and elusive, to be immediately palatable to a wide public. Words that had seemed hard and flat and unmistakable became in Lawrence's writing

gravid with nuance. Unconsidered trifles, as familiar as dinner at home, built arches and naves in a cathedral to some looming unknown that readers felt might contain anything: demoniac religions, weird perversions, whatever the dazed imagination could fetch from its own hinterland. It became typical of Lawrence enthusiasts to hedge against contamination by a tone of malicious love or tender malice.

This creative exuberance of Lawrence's, besides adding color and comedy to literary criticism, provided a lush field for the amateur analyst. Behind such passionate effusion must lie complexes of purple virulence. Much was made of Lawrence's close tie with his mother, his attraction to men, his struggle for sexual maturity, and, lately, of his inability to conform to the mores of any social group even though he acknowledged his deep need for contact with others. Since he was never able either to find conclusive answers to his own questions or to achieve resignation, it was assumed that his whole outlook was the extrusion of one or more personal defects. The solid structure of Lawrence's work is only too easily lost in hypotheses regarding its genesis unless it is kept in mind that although maladjustment may give emotional impetus, and even direction, to any creation, the achievement is more than the distillate of abnormalities.

Beyond a doubt Lawrence suffered deep maladjustment, to some extent both sexual and social, but, when we consider the frequent misery of the man in the street, it seems likely that Lawrence appeared more tortured only because he was more expressive. It should be kept in mind also that if life frequently appeared bad to him, it was because he could conceive of it as good; if his black moods were blacker than we deem reasonable, his bright moods were brighter than most of us find possible. Certainly Lawrence should not be disposed of by pity so long as maladjustment is pandemic, nor by patronage so long as the problems he fell short of solving are still marked urgent on the docket of our most significant writers.

Beside the Lawrence who means to so many readers a perverse, heroic, or pathetic preoccupation with sex, or, to others, chronic rebellion, there hovers another evoked Lawrence ghost that should be laid at once: that arising from Lawrence's descriptions of characters in terms of animals, in effect linking them with a totem; his admiration for "Dusky, slim, marrow-thought of slender, flickering men of Etruria"; his lament that

. . . in the dust where we have buried
The silenced races and all their abominations,
We have buried so much of the delicate magic of life.⁴

This is Lawrence the supposed atavist who proved an irresistible lure to potential cultists. While it is true that Lawrence wished to regain some of what he referred to as the buried "delicate magic of life," yet it is just as true that he knew time never rolled backward and asserted that while we should take "a hint from the relics our scientists have so marvellously gathered out of the forgotten past" we should not try to "revive dead kings, or dead sages," but should instead "from the hint develop a new living utterance."⁵ If the terms "atavist" and "primitivist" so frequently assigned Lawrence are to do more than obscure him, it is necessary to qualify the words out of their customary usage. Just as one cannot consider the parsimony of modern art primitive in the literal sense, for it is grounded in sophistication where that of the primitive springs from naïveté, so one cannot without inaccuracy regard even Lawrence's deliberate "animism" as identical with, or truly imitative of, that of the savage, for it too derives from profound understanding rather than from crude assumption.

⁴ "Cypresses," in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers, Collected Poems*, London, 1932, pp. 35-37.

⁵ *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, London, 1923, p. 10. Further illustration of Lawrence's opinion that no culture of the past is adequate for the future may be found in the following: "Indians and an Englishman," in *Phoenix*, 1936, p. 99 (first published Feb., 1923, in *Dial*); *Studies in Classic American Literature*, New York, 1923 (August), pp. 201-204; "On Human Destiny," in *Assorted Articles*, London, 1930 (first published in *Adelphi*, March, 1924); and *Mornings in Mexico*, London, 1927, p. 103.

A more and more frequently heard characterization of Lawrence is summed up in the word "reactionary." Liberals regard his complete independence from any altruistic "line" and frequent attacks on what appear our most humane sentiments disturbing to say the least. They point out that he presents some of the ideas that have been used by fascists in their rationalizations, that he even has been hailed as a brother fascist. It is difficult to reconcile these facts with the deep humanity animating much of Lawrence's work, and one is tempted to regret his frequent excursions into politics and economics. A way out for humanitarians loath to relinquish good literature was provided by Lawrence himself when he wrote:

The great social change interests and troubles me, but it is not my field. I know a change is coming—and I know we must have a more generous, more human system based on life values and not on money values. That I know. But what steps to take I don't know. Other men know better. . . . My field is to know the feelings inside a man, and to make new feelings conscious. What really torments civilized people is that they are full of feelings they know nothing about; they can't realize them, they can't fulfill them, they can't live them. And so they are tortured. It is like having energy you can't use—it destroys you. And feelings are a form of vital energy.⁶

But Lawrence did not and could not leave alone that "great social change" which he said was not his field. Hence the delusion of accepting him as a great writer devoid of political implication. Lawrence found "the feelings inside a man" so intimately connected with what went on around him that his books are sequential efforts to understand the complex forces affecting those feelings as well as to track them as they in turn determine our social history. He saw with remarkable thoroughness the relation between individual and group satisfaction, between the feelings in people and their political slogans and economic conditions. He pointed out that the social effectiveness of our finest

⁶ "The State of Funk," in *Assorted Articles*, New York, 1930, pp. 113-114.

thoughts is negligible if contrary to our emotional hungers. As he wrote to Aldous Huxley, apropos the latter's *Point Counter Point*: "It is as you say—an intellectual appreciation does not amount to much, it's what you thrill to."¹ He knew how boredom created addiction to emotional jags. He insisted that we recognize the detours by which our sharpest thoughts so frequently lead to brutal conclusions. In the progress of Lawrence's writing we can see presented with startling authenticity how, at this time, the worst and the best in life so frequently brood in the same nest.

Few writers, even now, stir up more revolutionary speculations than does Lawrence, and few are concerned with problems more crucial in understanding our times. He was not alone in his rebellion against mechanism, or in his insistence on the relativity of "good," or in his call for a drastic revision of our whole civilization, but he ventured where few dare in the complex integration of these ideas as they develop and apply in daily experience. It is fortunate for the reader, if not for Lawrence, that he played fast and loose with other people's specialties. His temerity exposed not only the mutilation of individuals resulting too often from rigorous application of even the most beautiful ideals, but also the social dangers of adjustments which in more arid fiction possess deceptive charm. He went so far as to disclose the dangers of some of his own attitudes. What at first appears an uncritical assimilation of reactionary thinking is often found to be the exploration of some yet insoluble psychosocial snarl.

These special gifts endow Lawrence with much of the prophetic significance for which he hankered. Believing himself one of the few aware of the finger of death under the crust of habit, his feeling of personal responsibility for events lent him Messianic intensity and sometimes an apostolic manner. This set him apart from established society, not as a self-pronounced misfit, but as one who believed our social order misfitted mankind.

¹ *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, New York, 1932, p. 765.

All the "isms" mushrooming in the last century spawned on the confusions that troubled Lawrence and offered their respective solutions, but Lawrence regarded those "isms" likewise poorly tailored for men. This set him apart from contemporary iconoclasts as well as from conventional society. But it should be noted that it was Lawrence's insights more than his desires which made him unique. He deplored, as do we all, that life is too often empty or brutal. He wanted, for the most part, what others want: a full life, a warm-hearted relation to others, and no more pain than man can assimilate. If he thought it took a new mode of consciousness to achieve this, he conceived of this consciousness as springing from a no more esoteric source than the depths of man himself.

"You are your own Tree of Life, roots and limbs and trunk. Somewhere within the wholeness of the tree lies the very self, the quick: its own innate Holy Ghost. And this Holy Ghost puts forth new buds, and pushes past old limits, and shakes off a whole body of dying leaves. And the old limits hate being empassed, and the old leaves hate to fall. But they must, if the tree soul says so. . . . The whole responsibility is on your shoulders all the time, and no God which man has ever struck can take it off. You *are* yourself and so *be* yourself. Stick to it and abide by it."⁸

Come a Laurencian world we should see few things more odd than those we now accept as possible, for example: the dream of a benevolent economic man in a free market, of intellectual giants in a self-induced optimal environment, or even a government by paragons of wisdom perfectly responsive to majority opinion. Lawrence's sensually alert men and women often appear less fantastic. Certainly in the bulk of his work Lawrence represents an unusual approach to usual experience—not a strange world where unheard of people do ecstatic things mumbling obscene words—but ordinary life seen with extraordinary sensitivity.

⁸ *Aaron's Rod*, New York, 1930, pp. 342-344.

Lawrence's inclusive viewpoint—which left the moralists deploing his sensuousness, the literary purists his taste, the conventional his instability, the modernists his primitivism, the specialist his irreverence in special fields, the reformer his excursions into politics—also alienated rationalists by its presumed mysticism. Out of his efforts to reconcile the daily contradictions of living—beauty and ugliness, pleasure and pain, men and society, life and death—grew strange elusive thoughts. Although he insisted on the relativity of values, on a dialectic of history, on partisanship as a mark of vitality, nevertheless, he had the Romanticist's longing for omniscience, for becoming, or at least understanding, more than a fragment of universal life, for feeling at one with it all. This desire led to frequent confusion and lessened his social effectiveness, but it led to a fruitful integration of many diverse things, carried his explorations into the uncharted wilderness between life and logic, and was in this way the source of his characteristic and unique insights. Whether these wide and uncontrolled explorations tailor Lawrence to fit the term "mystic" depends on the accepted definition of that elusive word. Certainly Lawrence disliked the term, but, of course, that dislike would constitute proof of his bent toward mysticism only to those who are convinced, as is Dr. Tindall, that Lawrence's aversions betray his greatest debts.⁹ More significant, however, is the incompatibility of his ideas with any of the established mysticisms, and the fact that he sought truth ultimately, not in a transcendent God, but in the perceptions of man. Actually such an effort might be said to place him among those searching for a more adequate "rationalism."

⁹ *D. H. Lawrence and Susan His Cow*, by William York Tindall, New York, Columbia University Press, 1939.