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978-0-521-11579-7 - D. H. Lawrence's Non-Fiction: Art, Thought and Genre  
David Ellis and Howard Mills

Excerpt

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## Introduction

IT was Catherine Carswell who in 1932 called Lawrence 'the most prolific writer our country has had since Sir Walter Scott'.<sup>1</sup> Her own Scottish ancestry and the high critical standing Scott still enjoyed in her time must have made a comparison with that novelist seem natural. Nowadays one would be more likely to think of Dickens or, moving somewhat down the critical scale, the Trollope who so surprised Henry James – no unproductive slouch himself – by being able to maintain his large daily quota of words on a 'pitching Cunarder' steaming across the Atlantic.<sup>2</sup>

The tone of James's remarks on Trollope warns us that quantity means nothing without quality. But the most distinctive feature of the remarkable amount of work Lawrence managed to produce during his short life is not the very high proportion of it which is good, but its diversity of form. None of the four great writers just mentioned practised so many different kinds of writing. As Carswell puts it, in reference to Lawrence's 'just twenty years of writing life', 'in addition to a dozen full-length novels he wrote short stories, essays, translations, pamphlets, books of travel and of philosophy, plays and many poems. Over the same period his correspondence, whether measured by interest or by bulk, bids fair to rival the correspondence of our most communicative English men of letters.'<sup>3</sup> The passage of time, and all the work done on Lawrence since Carswell's biography, enable us to lengthen her list of the different kinds of work Lawrence wrote whilst making it more precise; and they also make it possible to confirm her guess as to the interest and bulk of his correspondence. (In the new Cambridge edition, the *Letters* will fill eight large and absorbing volumes.) But neither time nor recent work can lessen the difficulty caused by the way so much of Lawrence's astonishing output falls into the category which, for want of a better term, it is usual to call non-fiction. Towards the beginning of one of his non-fictional works

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– *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* – Lawrence points out that ‘The word unconscious itself is a mere definition by negation and has no positive meaning.’<sup>4</sup> Non-fiction is similarly a definition by negation and suggests how critically ill-equipped we are to deal adequately with that large part of Lawrence’s work for which the methods and approaches developed during many years of novel criticism seem inappropriate. The difficulty is felt most perhaps when the non-fiction involved is (to use Carswell’s terms) an essay, pamphlet or book of philosophy: a work, that is, in which Lawrence is likely to be tackling some familiar issue in intellectual life and competing with specialists in a specialist field.

One such instance is the examination of the Book of Revelation which Lawrence was writing in the last months of his life.<sup>5</sup> A friend from his Croydon days, Helen Corke, was so challenged by this work that she wrote a fictional dialogue in which she and Lawrence argue out their views on Revelation.<sup>6</sup> In 1933 she sent this publication to Jessie Chambers, whose response incorporated the two main charges which it later became common to level against Lawrence’s non-fiction. She couldn’t, Jessie Chambers explained, ‘wax enthusiastic’ about Helen Corke’s book ‘because it is concerned with that aspect of D.H.L. that I have always found least interesting. As an artist, when he is dealing with the immediate and concrete, he is superb, but when he assays to be a thinker I find him superficial and unconvincing, and quite soon boring.’ The Book of Revelation itself, she went on, had never really attracted her.

As a fragmentary and mutilated account of mankind’s early attempts to understand his place in the universe, it *is interesting, but that was not really D.H.L.’s concern with Revelations*. His concern was to find some means of escape from the narrow prison of his own ego, and to do that he was prepared to assault the cosmos. So, whenever I read his almost delirious denunciations of what he pretended to regard as Christianity, I only see the caged panther lashing himself into a fury to find some way out of his strait prison.<sup>7</sup>

There are signs of both resentment and prejudice here, most of which Jessie Chambers succeeded in excluding from her moving *D. H. Lawrence: A Personal Record*. But the complaint that she voices – that Lawrence’s concern with Revelation is really only a concern with himself – has had a long history and is still heard

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time and time again whenever his essays or travel writings are in question. The three or four recent monographs on the travel writings all take this alleged solipsism more or less for granted. The spirit of their authors' approach harks back to Rebecca West's pronouncement, in the year of Lawrence's death, that what he wrote was true 'only of the universe within his own soul' to express which he 'rifled the seen of its vocabulary', this or that place providing 'as good a symbol as any other'.<sup>8</sup> It is central to the purpose of our book to examine this issue, just as it must be to face Jessie Chambers's charge that Lawrence is a superficial and unconvincing thinker.

This second task is complicated by having been so often undertaken before, if not in relation to the formulation Jessie Chambers uses then to one of T. S. Eliot's which his opponents in this matter succeeded in making very well-known. One doesn't have to have read much in Lawrence criticism, or to be very familiar with the controversies which have always surrounded him, in order to know that it was Eliot who thought Lawrence had 'an incapacity for what we ordinarily call thinking'.<sup>9</sup> The reply to this indictment has taken two forms. In the 1950s, both Graham Hough and F. R. Leavis demonstrated that the working-class chapel culture which Eliot, in a strange fit of ignorance or snobbery, had characterized as beneath contempt was in fact a nourishing source of strength for Lawrence, and the provider of an environment from which he was able to emerge – according to all the conventional criteria one chose to apply (including the passing of examinations) – an exceptionally intelligent man and no less proficient at 'what we ordinarily call thinking' than Eliot himself.

This insistence was salutary and easily verified by reference to many episodes in Lawrence's life and hundreds of passages in his work. But it necessarily nudged to one side the occasional awkward presence in that work of what seem like manifest absurdities, and the associated phenomenon of Lawrence's deep suspicion of those processes of ordinary thought which he could be shown to have mastered. Early in his life he had learnt to mistrust the triumphant conclusions of a supposedly scientific cause-and-effect rationalism and the logical procedures which found themselves bolstered by it. The second form of reply to Eliot (not always easily reconcilable with the first) emphasized

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this mistrust and pointed out what we *ordinarily* call thinking was rarely Lawrence's chief concern. That argument is developed most impressively in Leavis's later work and is evident in remarks like these from *Thought, Words and Creativity*, where the issue is C. H. Rickword's contemptuous dismissal of 'Mr Lawrence's metaphysics' in a review of *The Plumed Serpent*:

But the basic fallacy of this quotation from [Rickword's] review challenges us flatly in its first three words: 'Mr Lawrence's metaphysics'. As I tried to make plain in my opening chapter, his approach to his theme, and his mode of developing his thought, are nowhere a philosopher's, and his aphorism, 'Art-speech is the only speech', bears not only on those imaginative creations of his that are in the full sense creative works, but on his discursive writings too; it is a conclusion (with which I agree, and which I am undertaking to enforce) of the most important kind about the nature of thought.<sup>10</sup>

It was the challenge and stimulus of remarks like these which provided much of the motivation for this book. In the present instance challenge is the right word, since the aphorism of Lawrence's nearest to the one Leavis offers, 'Art-speech is the only *truth*', is found in a context not easy to associate with Lawrence's discursive writings. It occurs at the beginning of *Studies in Classic American Literature*, very near another well-known maxim, 'Never trust the artist. Trust the tale', and serves with it to mark a distinction, most obviously relevant to fiction, between a writer's conscious purpose or moral prejudice and all the elements in his work which transcend or evade them.<sup>11</sup> In the dozen essays on American writers which make up the *Studies*, Lawrence clarifies the nature of this distinction by applying it with great practical effect; but it is, in its initial formulation, too cryptic to allow ready transfer to a different context or easy resolution of its bearing on what Leavis calls 'the nature of thought'. No less difficult to decide is quite where to draw the line between Lawrence's discursive writings and those which are 'in the full sense creative'. Our solution to problems like these has been to try to emulate Lawrence's own characteristic procedures – his practical spirit in the *Studies* – and explore the issues raised by Leavis (and other critics who have stressed what is productively anti-rationalist in Lawrence) in close relation to a number of specific non-fictional texts. Our hope in doing so is to work some alteration in Lawrence's

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general 'profile': the sense one has about any writer of what matters most in his or her work and of how any one text stands in relation to the others.

The generally agreed view of that profile has changed very little in the last twenty or thirty years. An ever-increasing degree of attention devoted to Lawrence has meant that there is now a fair amount of critical writing on his non-fiction but, as the spate of centenary monographs showed, its place in his work as a whole is regarded very much as it was by the editors of *Phoenix II* in 1968:

The essays and sketches of D. H. Lawrence take on a particular importance in any view of his imaginative, primary writings. Because his major achievements, his fiction and poetry, are so often prophetic – that is, closely related to Lawrence's passionately held beliefs – the secondary work is of greater significance than is the case with most writers. The material of the present volume, *Phoenix II*, offers special clues to Lawrence.<sup>12</sup>

This was prefatory to a volume which brought Lawrence's 'Introduction' to *Memoirs of the Foreign Legion* by Maurice Magnus before a wide public for the first time. Its editors are warm in their praise of this text but, in the passage above, they nevertheless offer a division of Lawrence's work into primary and secondary which is paradigmatic of the way his non-fiction has usually been treated. It is in the spirit of this division that Frank Kermode distinguished between the major novels as art and 'the unqualified, uninspected dogmas of the treatises and letters';<sup>13</sup> and it is largely as a result of it that the 'Study of Thomas Hardy' has become 'a recognised stopping-place for critics of Lawrence en route for *The Rainbow* and seeking some help with the "ideas" which inform that novel'.<sup>14</sup> It is no part of our intention to suggest that there should be a simple reversal of the priorities which the division implies – those which would make a mediocre novel inevitably and necessarily more worthwhile than the Magnus introduction (in Lawrence's own reported view, the best single piece of writing he had ever done<sup>15</sup>) – but we do want to suggest that what is primary and secondary cannot always be solved by an automatic appeal to traditional hierarchical notions of genre. It was because he was so convinced of poetry being 'the crown of literature'<sup>16</sup> that Matthew Arnold failed to recognize the full importance of

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Dickens, Flaubert and Tolstoy. Yet in an essay where he first cited with respect Wordsworth's elevation of creative writing over criticism, he made what for our purposes is a significant sideways move by weighing Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* against his *Irene* and asking whether there was less profit for the world in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* than in Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*.<sup>17</sup>

The texts discussed in this book illustrate how imprecise a term 'non-fiction' is. The established library categories with which they can be associated include travel writing, memoirs, literary criticism, philosophy and psychology, although the association is in practice often very loose. We also include a discussion of Lawrence's verse. This is made to seem surprising only by the traditional assumption that (to echo the editors of *Phoenix II*) poetry is, like fiction, a primary, imaginative mode from which a writer's secondary work needs to be distinguished. That way of thinking is one which we have set out to challenge but, even if we hadn't, there would be a case for a chapter concentrating mainly on Lawrence's late poetry. He himself thought that the poems he wrote after *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923) marked a radical departure from his earlier, more 'lyrical' endeavours and by calling his last collection *Pansies* – from the French *pensées* – he suggested that its contents should above all be regarded as 'thoughts'. At the same time, he said that 'a real thought . . . can only exist easily in verse, or in some poetic form'.<sup>18</sup> How radical the departure really was and what relation there is between thought and verse are, we maintain, questions most conveniently approached by considering *Pansies* in the context of Lawrence's poetic career as a whole. But the main point is that to write about these later poems, in a book where the connections between Lawrence's thought and art must continually be at issue, is as appropriate as writing about any other of his non-fictional texts.

There is neither threat nor promise but mere illustration of the all-embracing nature of 'non-fiction' in saying that another book of equal length could be written under this one's title. It demonstrates how Carswell's list of Lawrence's writings could be lengthened to suggest that it would include chapters on *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 'Introduction to these Paintings', the essays on the novel written in the middle 1920s,

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*Apocalypse*, the *Letters* and, possibly, *Movements in European History*. Although there is some reference to all these works in what follows, no one of them is treated at length. To regret or apologize for exclusions is pointless when there is so much else which might have been included and our intention has in any case never been to attempt a survey. There are certainly general questions which are raised by all of Lawrence's non-fictional works but it seemed to us that they could only be answered in relation to specific texts and that an answer which might work for one did not necessarily work for another. Since the very term non-fiction itself has – as Lawrence said of the unconscious – nothing positive in it, there can be no general formula applicable to all cases.

Carswell's admiration for Lawrence as a prolific writer only becomes meaningful if the non-fiction can be rescued from its automatically secondary status. But that is not to say that all the non-fiction is primary or that individual texts are free from disconcerting variations of quality. It is a mistake, however, to confuse the latter with the lack of rounded completeness which Paul Delany laments when he says that 'a definitive statement of [Lawrence's] principles always seemed to elude him'.<sup>19</sup> Certainly Lawrence felt the intermittent urge to achieve such a complete and theoretical formulation, reflecting what he called the need to 'fix it, and have a foothold, to be *sure*',<sup>20</sup> 'the absolute need which one has for some sort of satisfactory mental attitude towards oneself and things in general [which] makes one try to abstract some definite conclusions from one's experience as a writer and as a man'.<sup>21</sup> In the war years especially, no doubt partly to refute those who in anticipation of Eliot told him he couldn't think,<sup>22</sup> he strove to abstract from the 'Study of Thomas Hardy' some formal expression of 'a constructive, synthetic, metaphysical process'.<sup>23</sup> After a series of abortive attempts he wrote one text (since lost) which prompted him to tell his friend Koteliensky that 'I have written into its final form that philosophy which you once painfully and laboriously typed out [as the "Study"] . . . Now it is done'.<sup>24</sup>

*Perfectum est* . . . Lawrence's more characteristic attitude comes out in his own play on the words *perfect* and *done* in the original 'Study' which 'Kot' typed out in 1914. 'Turner is perfect' he says, in one of the chapters where he is discussing

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painting. The very word is like a bell that tolls Lawrence back to the necessary opposite, from light to substance, particularly to his own body, not least to his knees. 'But I cannot look at a later Turner picture without abstracting myself . . . if I look at the "Norham Castle", and remember my own knees and my own breast, then the picture is nothing to me.' Equally, in front of 'the completed symbol', the 'dead certainty' of Raphael, 'I know I am the other thing as well'. For 'whenever art or any expression becomes perfect, it becomes a lie. For it is only perfect by reason of abstraction from that context by which and in which it exists as truth.'<sup>25</sup> This same suspicion of the static and finished led him at the end of his career to admire the Etruscans for having built impermanent wooden temples and to suggest that paintings should be periodically taken down from the walls and burnt so that new ones could be put up.<sup>26</sup> His hostility to those notions of art which his Imagist friends popularized by so often relating the writing of poetry to sculpture means that, as his career progresses, there are in his works an increasing number which quite deliberately juxtapose the perfectly conceived with suggestions of the rough-and-ready.

Nonetheless, it would be foolish to deny real or inadvertent unevenness of quality in the non-fiction. On the intellectual plane, the more characteristic Lawrence justifies the wholly favourable implication in Leavis's insistence that his approach and procedure 'are nowhere a philosopher's'; yet one still has to recognize that passages of striking penetration and originality can often be succeeded by others which scarcely appear to make good sense. But then, as Dr Johnson said, 'good sense alone is a sedate and quiescent quality, which manages its possessions well, but does not increase them'. He contrasted with this faculty a definition of genius which suits Lawrence very well. What was involved, he said, was

a mind active, ambitious, and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring; in its widest searches still longing to go forward, in its highest flights still wishing to be higher; always imagining something greater than it knows, always endeavouring more than it can do.<sup>27</sup>

This definition is echoed in Lawrence's own dictum: 'Man is a thought-adventurer'.<sup>28</sup> All of the texts we discuss in the following pages are thought adventures. To be an adventurer means

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taking risks and, in art as in life, Lawrence was nothing if not a risk-taker. It was unavoidable that he occasionally came to grief, but these chapters would not have been written if we did not feel that the number of times this happens is insignificant in comparison with those when a supposedly secondary literary form becomes the vehicle for manifestations of great creative power and originality.

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# 1 'Slightly philosophicalish, mostly about Hardy': 'Study of Thomas Hardy'<sup>1</sup>

'**B**OTCHED and bungled'; 'clumsy efforts to push events into line with his theory of being', a theory which is 'almost silly': so says Lawrence of Hardy (pp. 100, 93). In appraising the 'Study', however, many commentators have suggested that Lawrence should be beaten with his own stick.

'Rum stuff' was one of Lawrence's own phrases for the piece: 'queer stuff – but not bad' (*Letters* 2, pp. 210, 212). As for his calling it his philosophy, did he himself not come to dismiss philosophy, at least when split from fiction as it had been since Plato, as 'abstract-dry'?<sup>2</sup> John Worthen, in a spirited and comprehensive attack, accordingly dismisses the 'Study' as 'ideas in a vacuum'.<sup>3</sup>

We need to step back for a moment and consider the circumstances of composition, the occasion. The work exemplifies the way much of Lawrence's discursive prose, not least the handful of brief pre-war pieces, are occasional – rising to an occasion, taking up an invitation to write on something specific and for somewhere specific (with those earlier pieces, for a home-town discussion group, a Croydon literary circle, a magazine). In the summer of 1914 he was approached by a publisher to write what Lawrence called in a letter to his friend Edward Marsh 'a little book on Hardy's people' (*Letters* 2, p. 198); in reply Marsh sent him a late wedding present of Hardy's complete works, together with *Thomas Hardy: A Critical Study* written by Lascelles Abercrombie two years earlier, in opposition to which Lawrence formulated his own views. But as he got down to work the 'little book' became more ambitious, in length (ten chapters totalling, in the Cambridge Edition, 122 pages) but also in scope. He felt it taken over by that element of personal apologia or manifesto which had been strong but subsidiary in earlier pieces (the 'Foreword to *Sons and Lovers*', never intended for publication, was a special case). And he ended up prefer-