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# Introduction

Paul Eggert

In the mid-1950s F. R. Leavis called Lawrence 'one of the great masters of comedy' but failed to develop the claim, intent as he was on eliciting a body of truths about the life-enhancing, religious and normative potential of Lawrence's writings. In the reconstruction of values which attended the cold-war, industrialist and existentialist climates of the period, *that* particular Lawrence – once established, and answering felt needs – held good for a couple of decades.[1] The construction still deserves respect as testimony to the way in which Leavis and others powerfully responded to energising qualities they discovered in Lawrence's writings. But the result was to construe those qualities as redemptive values of which post-1960s generations of readers, differently attuned, would feel little need. However, the intellectual relativism of the late twentieth century is helping us to recognise another Lawrence. Understanding the place of comedy in his works – particularly those of the 1920s, generally cast as poor relations of the 'great' works of the 1910s – will be central. This, the first book devoted to the subject of Lawrence and comedy, is intended as a contribution to the project. Inevitably this collection of essays, all but one freshly written for the volume and previously unpublished, will not exhaust it; the present Introduction sketches the background and points towards further possible lines of enquiry.[2]

## I

The earnestness of the Lawrence-figure we have inherited leads many people, understandably, to assume that 'Lawrence' and 'comedy'



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are self-contradictory terms. This is a misconception which even a little reflection on Lawrence's prose of the 1920s readily displaces. These writings are usually seen as a restless attempt on Lawrence's part, after the disillusionments of life in wartime Britain, to find another or primitive civilisation with alternative values. The approach is congruent with Leavis's Lawrence and usefully answers in some respects to elements of the writing; but it leaves out Lawrence's changed and changeable mode of address to his subjects. The first publication of *Mr Noon* in 1984 underlined this failure of attention; it made inevitable the present, more wide-ranging re-evaluation of the Lawrence narrator's new self-consciousness, the facetious play with his audience, the badgering wit, the flippant rhetoric, the mock-heroic stances in his poems.

These were not present in the writing of the 1910s. Lawrence's comedy was a more familiar and less challenging thing; whether joyful, drolly embarrassing or intense, it was always securely distanced. Witness Tom Brangwen's speech on marriage at Anna's wedding in *The Rainbow*. It comes shortly below the account of the 'angels' which children *will* get up their noses. Witness also Lawrence's admission in *Twilight in Italy*, in 'The Theatre', of his absurd vulnerability to the emotive appeal of Lucia di Lammermoor-type heroines; the description in 'The Lemon Gardens' of the Signor di Paoli's attempts to fasten the door-spring; and the brittle, sardonic embarrassments in 'The Christening'.[3] It was not that, in his personal life, Lawrence did not have a funny side. He did – as John Worthen's biographical account below of his irrepressible powers of mimicry, and Mark Kinkead-Weekes's account of his uncensored mockery in private letters, make abundantly clear.[4] But he did not find extensive use for it in his writings. He gave up his experiment with writing comedies of manners (*The Merry-go-Round, The Married Man, The Fight for Barbara*, 1910–12) just as he turned to write the final version of *Sons and Lovers*. The definition of character in terms of external event, class and manners, and the social affirmation of endings (even if ironic) necessary to comic drama must have felt restrictive to a writer galled by the 'visualised' (i. 511) realism that Duckworth's reader, Edward Garnett, wanted him to write.[5] Finishing *Sons and Lovers*, he returned briefly to playwriting. In a letter of 12 January 1913 to Garnett he defended a play he

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had just written (*The Daughter-in-Law* – 'neither a comedy nor a tragedy') as 'quite objective . . . laid out properly and progressive' (i. 500–1). Despite the Oedipal and working-class air of entrapment, a line of strong if gloomy comedy flows through the homespun female wisdom of Mrs Purdy and Mrs Gascoyne. Their dialect nevertheless acts to distance them from the middle-class audience Lawrence must have had in mind as he wrote the letter; 'I *do* think this play might have a chance on the stage', he added (i. 501).

*Women in Love*, written 1916–17 with revisions in 1919, proved to be the turning point. It was the last novel in which Lawrence could still believe (against the evidence) that he could address an audience capable of attending seriously to the philosophical and historical reach of his cultural diagnoses. Even here, he built into the work the mocking voice of Ursula. In his essay, Howard Mills traces a process of 'mischief and merriment' and shows how the 'dangerous flamy sensitiveness' of the novel's humour, if given its due weight, tells sharply against Birkin. John Bayley remarks, in his chapter on Lawrence and Larkin, that for both of them 'the point about life and fun was immediacy. Nothing can be preserved, and nothing should be.' Birkin's intellectuality according to Mills is, in Blake's words, an attempt to 'bind . . . a joy, and the winged life destroy'. Ursula's is not, of course, the only voice of mockery in the novel: Gudrun is wickedly satirical about Birkin, as is Halliday. While the mockery gives a vertiginous edge to the writing, the question of how far the ironic undoing applies only to Birkin's preachifying manner as against how far it extends to his analysis of the novel's present in relation to extreme poles of creation and corruption remains an open one.

Lawrence's attitude toward his audience, if already changing in *Women in Love*, changed decisively thereafter. In some basic way, he lost belief in it. He was still exposing himself as a deeply committed analyst of cultural forces in the early versions of *Studies in Classic American Literature* published in the *English Review* in 1917–19. But by late 1922 when he revised the essays for book publication, an astringently mocking disposition had replaced the earlier one. Throughout the twenties, variations on this comic stance would remain in a tense, epidermal relationship to irrupting, thematic elements evolving from the earlier

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writings. Comedy served as the means by which the pressing seriousness could be kept momentarily at bay; the narrator's comic stances are temporary, dangerous, prickly, cunning. They enact a natural but simultaneously controlled irresponsibility, Bayley claims, to which critics are now just beginning to accommodate themselves, having tried to save Lawrence from himself for too long.

The comic stances do not wisely point up the follies of a third party nor provide the reader with a secure position above the comic-serious fray. The narrator engages in self-mimicry (more typically Lawrentian, Worthen maintains, than we have yet been prepared to grant); he mocks or appropriates voices – or dialogically marshalls them, as George Hyde has shown in relation to *The Lost Girl.* Although he does not say so, the process Hyde describes is curiously midway between modernist and postmodernist; the work of art never settles for long enough to become a finished artifact, and the reader's expectations are trifled with: 'At every stage [in *The Lost Girl*], Lawrence's text draws attention to its own coming into being, its "mode of production", by means of a gesturing, self-dramatising narrator who, like a music-hall entertainer, enacts the disconcerting switches of code that frustrate and disorient passive readerly expectations.'[6] Such expectations may be appropriate to Arnold Bennett's provincial realism (which, Hyde shows, Lawrence is mocking in his portrayal of Woodhouse), but they do not make sense of *The Lost Girl*'s deliberate discontinuities in tone and address.

Reacting in part to some derogatory reviews of *The Lost Girl*, Lawrence turned the second part of *Mr Noon* into a 'furious comedy': in her essay in this volume, Lydia Blanchard shows how the novel's 'gentle reader' is goaded by an irritable narrator into reaction. In becoming 'ungentled',[7] the reader loses caste as anonymous audience member seated safely above the fray, and must instead participate 'in the thick of the scrimmage' – as Lawrence would characterise it in a letter to the Italian critic Carlo Linati (v. 201). Obviously, we need to attend differently than we are used to do if we are to do justice to this kind of art. That is also the burden of Holly Laird's essay on *Birds, Beasts and Flowers.* She shows that the poetic sequences have been misread, with individual poems treated as crystallisations of the unique otherness of the various

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creatures. This is to ignore what she argues is the essentially mock-epic nature of the narrating poet's encounters and to glide over the range of ironic tones directed outwards and at himself.

## II

On 12 February 1915, in a letter to Bertrand Russell, Lawrence wrote: 'I am ashamed to write any real writing of passionate love to my fellow men. Only satire is decent now' (ii. 283). We have seen that it took a few years before he acted on this belief; the 'passionate love' is something he would rather have expressed. Catherine Carswell, reviewing *Phoenix* in 1936, regretted the eventual effect: '"Never yield before the barren" was one of his articles of conduct, and satire was a yielding because a waste of life . . . Some of the items [in *Phoenix*] . . . have a bright slanginess that is unpleasing.'[8] Not everyone agreed (Leavis, for instance, did not in his review for *Scrutiny*); and indeed Lawrence's reviews retain a 'mocking vivacity', as Leavis called it,[9] that at the time must have been surprising to some people, given the conventions of the literary essay by the gentleman-scholar who would characteristically seek to formulate an authoritative position in relation to the subject-in-hand by exploring and measuring its characteristics against a shared climate of assumptions.[10] In his short essays and reviews in the 1920s, however, Lawrence had learned to exploit the potential of informal, tentative, quirky, spoken-voice writing. As a vehicle of thinking, it allowed him to free-wheel, brake hard, shout abuse from the windows, and even acknowledge the 'traffic cop'.[11] Typically in the reviews and essays, satirical, exasperated or disillusioned voices generate tension or heat – but with a comic edge. The serendipity of the form helped him to introduce his binary oppositions and, half-playfully, yet very seriously, apply and develop them, even as his antics quote or foreground voices which his satirical one trips up or mocks.[12] Comedy, in other words, was by no means only a defence mechanism: it freed Lawrence up, released voices in him, allowed him to function parodically, sarcastically – to be protean. Take this for instance – the response of a man who could visit Paris and be unimpressed:

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> Oh, those galleries. Oh, those pictures and those statues of nude, nude women: nude, nude, insistently and hopelessly nude. At last the eyes fall in absolute weariness, the moment they catch sight of a bit of pink-and-white painting, or a pair of white marble fesses [buttocks]. It becomes an inquisition; like being forced to go on eating pink marzipan icing. And yet there is a fat and very undistinguished bourgeois with a little beard and a fat and hopelessly petit-bourgeoise wife and awful little girl, standing in front of a huge heap of twisting marble, while he, with a goose-grease unctuous simper, strokes the marble hip of the huge marble female, and points its niceness *to his wife*. She is not in the least jealous. She knows, no doubt, that her own hip and the marble hip are the only ones he will stroke without paying prices, one of which, and the last he could pay, would be the price of spunk.[13]

One feels Lawrence working himself up into a lather ('nude, nude, insistently and hopelessly nude'; 'points its niceness *to his wife*'). The writing is seriocomic in its deliberate staginess. Lawrence wants to generate the ideological energy that will make his plea for the retaining of a lost, instinctual aristocracy seem urgently needed, an inevitability. The passage is from his 'Paris Letter' which he wrote in 1924 for the iconoclastic magazine, *Laughing Horse*, run by his friend Willard Johnson in New Mexico. But equally in his book reviews, Lawrence was apt to pounce on evidence of postwar emotional self-consciousness. In his review of *A Second Contemporary Verse Anthology* he describes its 'sounds' as 'sweetly familiar, linked in a new crotchet pattern' and finds this disappointing in a volume that touted itself as 'the spiritual record of an entire people'. He quotes, and then he demolishes:

> Why do I think of stairways
> With a rush of hurt surprise?
>
> Heaven knows, my dear, unless you once fell down.

His seriocomic exasperation opens the door to an alternative: 'Man is always, all the time and forever on the brink of the unknown.'[14] And then he has his favoured theme and he is away.

In other essays – such as those on the novel of 1923–5[15] – we, as readers, are imperiously addressed or satirically implicated as he splinters

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the discursive air, pricking us with its arrows, rather than adopting a disinterested third-person position in which we can guiltlessly join. Comedy and seriousness combine at nearly every step in this endeavour. At other times he vituperates or insults us; but, in counterbalance, we can feel him enjoying a deliberate working-up of venom:

> Amon, the great ram! Mithras, the great bull! The mistletoe on the tree. Do you think, you stuffy little human fool sitting in a chair and wearing lambswool underwear, and eating your mutton and beef under the Christmas decoration, do you think then that Amon, Mithras, mistletoe, and the whole Tree of Life were just invented to contribute to your complacency?
>
> You fool! You dyspeptic fool, with your indigestion tablets! You can eat your mutton and your beef, and buy sixpenn'orth of the golden bough, till your belly turns sour, you fool. Do you think, because you eat beef, that the Mithras fire is yours? Do you think, because you keep a fat castrated cat, the moon is on your knees? Do you think, in your woollen underwear, you are clothed in the might of Amon?
>
> You idiot! You cheap-jack idiot![16]

This is not ranting, although at first it can be mistaken for it. It is comedy but not comedy that is mean to amuse or assuage. Rather, as a form of knowing, comedy is part of the tissue of the case he is making about a modern failure of the mystic impulse. It is tempting to isolate the message from its comic vehicle, but Lawrence does not. If we acknowledge the controlled, comic fibrillation in his writings, especially of the 1920s, we will have a better chance of getting him right.

## III

It must be said that the changing relationship of narrator with audience in Lawrence's works which I have been describing scarcely meshes at all with classic accounts of comedy, laughter and wit – although Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of laughter, as I show below, does offer some assistance. Northrop Frye distinguished between the Old Comedy of Aristophanes and Menander, still in touch with ancient rituals of death and revival, and the New Comedy in the plays of

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Plautus and Terence adapted by Molière and Jonson. In New Comedy, Frye comments:

> As the hero gets closer to the heroine and opposition is overcome, all the right-thinking people come over to his side. Thus a new social unit is formed on the stage, and the moment that this social unit crystallises is the moment of the comic resolution . . . The freer the society, the greater the variety of individuals it can tolerate, and the natural tendency of comedy is to include as many as possible in its final festival.[17]

Despite the social reconciliation of its endings, Shakespearean comedy – still in touch with the drama of medieval folk ritual – only partially accepts this movement.[18] It 'begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green world [of the forest], goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world' (p. 80). In addition, elements of the older patterning of death and rebirth in the yearly cycle occur in all the comedies.

Bakhtin comments of the Renaissance that laughter was respected as affording access to 'certain essential aspects of the world',[19] but by the seventeenth century its function was corrective and its characters are of the lower or corrupt orders of society. Tragedy, in contrast, dealt with kings and heroes. But by Congreve's time at the end of the seventeenth century, the ludicrous – 'ridiculing Natural Deformities, Casual Defects in the Senses, and Infirmities of Age' – was less welcome: 'I could never look upon a Monkey', he confesses, 'without very Mortifying Reflections.'[20] Preconceptions about stage decorum gradually prevailed, so that by the early nineteenth century Charles Lamb was having to defend comedy on the grounds that it has 'no reference whatever to the world that is. No good person can justly be offended as a spectator, because no good person suffers on stage.'[21] For Baudelaire, writing in 1855, laughter is 'the consequence in man of his own superiority'. It is therefore 'Satanic . . . one of the numerous pips in the symbolic apple'.[22] This made it no less interesting to him, but he was acknowledging that the contemporary climate of opinion was set against the vulgarities of comedy.

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Later in the century George Meredith was able to defend witty comedy (e.g. of the Restoration stage), even though grosser forms of comedy engendering contempt remained, for him, simply out of the question. Nevertheless he discussed the group functioning of comedy at its lower levels, thereby recognising its continuing, neoclassical function as a corrective: 'Taking them generally, the English public are most in sympathy with this primitive Aristophanic comedy, wherein the comic is capped by the grotesque, irony tips the wit, and satire is a naked sword. They have the basis of the comic in them – an esteem for common sense. They cordially dislike the reverse of it.'[23]

At the end of the century Henri Bergson found a way of defending laughter. He saw it acting as a social discipline, restraining eccentricity: 'rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective'; laughter 'appears to stand in need of an echo . . . [it] is always the laughter of a group'.[24] For this vitalist philosopher, laughter was also a spiritual corrective for automatism or mechanical uniformity. The latter represent the refractory tendency of matter with which the soul must always wage battle, for 'a really living life should never repeat itself' (p. 82). Comedy confirms rather than discovers: it 'depicts characters we have already come across and shall meet with again . . . It aims at placing types before our eyes' (p. 166). It is 'not disinterested as genuine art is. By organising laughter, comedy accepts social life as a natural environment; it even obeys an impulse of social life' (pp. 170–1). Bergson makes a useful distinction between the comic person and the wit. The latter does not forget himself as a good actor will: 'We always get a glimpse of [him] behind what he says and does. He is not wholly engrossed in the business, because he only brings his intelligence into play' (p. 129). In Bergson's terms, the 1920s Lawrence is more the wit than the comic. Although in *The Boy in the Bush* he can enjoy an innocent laugh at the boy who complains that 'They've frowed away a perfeckly good cat' (a dead one that could have been skinned),[25] and although he could dramatise the comic confusions of the Ellis baby being forced to swallow castor oil after having been (as it turns out, unjustly) suspected of eating possibly poisonous narcissus bulbs, Lawrence rarely allows us to laugh with him in easeful joy. These situations seem heavily dependent on his joint author for that novel,

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Mollie Skinner. More usually, Lawrentian comedy is on edge, for other things are simultaneously and pressingly at stake *in* the comedy. John Bayley quotes a good example from 'The Captain's Doll': Hepburn's conversation with Hannele about the mistake he made 'undertaking to love'[26] – said, or shouted, on the noisy, swerving bus as they return from their excursion to the glacier.

Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* of 1905 was written for a professional audience of like mind and background.[27] Its confident manner of shared cultural reference makes this clear; and there is frequent recourse to the first-person plural. When Freud explains comedy of movement (e.g. in pantomime), he says we register it as an excess expenditure of energy – that is, as a deviation from a norm we have long ago internalised as sufficient for the action in question. Freud's argument throughout relies on a calculus of pleasure and pain. The calculus idea naturalises, by implicitly universalising, the discharge of unconscious or pre-conscious inhibitions involved in the joke and, more broadly, in the comic. The discharge is seen by Freud as a form of 'psychical economy'. Jokes, like dreams, give us access to a source of pleasure available in childhood, but later complicated and baffled by the dictates of reason and civilised standards of conduct. Jokes (i.e. jokes made rather than just repeated) and dreams, according to Freud, are alike in this way.[28] Thus hostile jokes allow satisfaction of revengeful impulses towards 'our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously . . . the joke *will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible.* It will further bribe the hearer with its yield of pleasure into taking sides with us without any very close investigation' (p. 103). Freud's model assumes an audience on the same side as the joke-teller. Lawrence's 'hostility', however, is partly towards his material (e.g. respectability, the claustrophobic aspects of family life), but partly also towards his readers. His sense of an audience was not secure in the way that Freud's or even George Eliot's was; the relationship shifts and twists. Usually in the 1920s, Lawrence was only momentarily and illusorily confederate with his audience.

Although Lawrence denounced Freud's archaeological model of the

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