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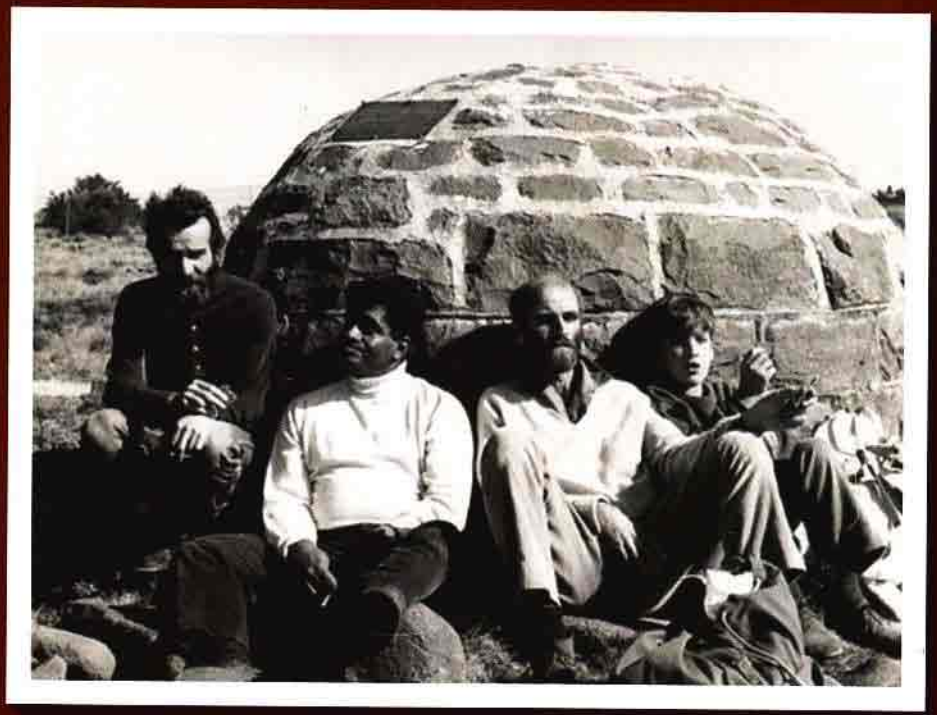

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‘A MAN IN HIS WHOLENESS WHOLLY ATTENDING’: REVIEW OF *D. H. LAWRENCE AROUND THE WORLD: SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES* Edited by Jim Phelps and Nigel Bell

Merle A. Williams

Francois Hugo ends his piece on the teaching of D. H. Lawrence at the (former) University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg with an apt quotation from the poem, ‘Thought’: ‘Thought is a man in his wholeness wholly attending’ (70; *Complete Poems* 673). This, Hugo suggests, is the quality of engagement which should be brought to bear on Lawrence’s work – and, in fact, on literary studies in general. The contributors to *D. H. Lawrence around the World* have sought in a variety of ways to meet this taxing standard of open receptiveness and critical acuity. The collection of essays is at once carefully compiled and a useful scholarly resource. The book effectively fills a gap in Lawrence studies and redresses the omission of South African material from Takeo Iida’s 1999 volume on *D. H. Lawrence around the World.*

This collection fulfils several interrelated purposes. It pays tribute to the incisive writing of Christina van Heyningen, whose compelling teaching influenced a generation of students from the Universities of Stellenbosch, the Witwatersrand and Natal fifty years ago. Material published during the 1950s by van Heyningen and J. C. F. Littlewood in the local journal, *Theoria*, is recuperated for contemporary consideration. South Africans who became distinguished Lawrence scholars, such as Hillel Daleski, Mark Kinkead-Weekes and Christopher Heywood, offer reminiscences and reflections. There is, moreover, a thorough assessment of the teaching of Lawrence at a range of South African universities, including those already mentioned and the Universities of Cape Town, Pretoria, Port Elisabeth and Zululand. From these accounts, it appears that the influence of F. R. Leavis has been particularly strong; only the report from the University of Pretoria explicitly records approaches to Lawrence from different theoretical perspectives, such as psychoanalytic, Marxist, and feminist investigations (85).

The selected essays cover a fairly wide spectrum of Lawrence’s literary production, from his fiction to his poetry, with commentaries on his essays and travel writings dispersed across the contributions. *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* are frequently discussed, as are *The Plumed Serpent* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. F. H. Langman provides a subtle appraisal of Lawrence’s relation to form in his poetry, as well as his gift for dramatisation and his striking technique of distanced statement in bringing closure to a piece (‘Dramatic Form in the Poetry of D. H. Lawrence’, 93–105). Both Trevor Whittock and Jim Phelps discuss the poems about school

DOI: 10.1080/00138398.2010.533850
Merle.Williams@wits.ac.za

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in terms of their implications for crafting poetic insight and for tracing out complex educational processes. Peter Wilhelm's lively and iconoclastic 'A Book that Changed Me' wilfully debunks Lawrence's attempt at finding a unique linguistic register for describing sexual encounters, while linking *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to the burgeoning industry of women's romances designed to appease a growing desire for intimate fulfilment (173–77). Christopher Thurman neatly exposes the implicit injustice of holding Lawrence accountable for the 'emotional expectations' of twenty-first century women, together with the disconcertingly successful Mills & Boon phenomenon; yet Wilhelm's acerbic piece tellingly encapsulates a set of sceptical reactions to Lawrence.

A section of this collection is reserved for poetic responses to Lawrence. Norman Morrissey's 'Owed to D. H. Lawrence' is fresh and moving, especially when it recalls the poet's struggles towards physical and emotional maturity or his proxy travels facilitated by immersing himself in the 'romance' of 'Lawrence's restlessness' (295–97). Jim Phelps's text regrettably slips into inherent parody and self-parody. As Annie Gagiano observes, 'two visiting "Green Mambas" are exterminated in what one cannot but feel is an unfortunate travesty (poetically as much as morally) of the encounter so beautifully evoked in Lawrence's own "Snake"' (95). The book concludes with a couple of bibliographical lists and a biographical extract that contextualises Christina van Heyningen's literary-critical achievement.

While the preceding synopsis gives a general overview of the scope of *D. H. Lawrence around the World*, it may also serve as the basis for considering three significant themes which seem to me to characterise this collection, emerging as they do in different shapes and settings across the range of essays. These pervasive concerns are: the relationship between D. H. Lawrence and F. R. Leavis; Lawrence's metaphysic, with its concomitant religious connotations; and shifting understandings of the primitive, especially 'blood consciousness'.

In their Introduction, Jim Phelps and Nigel Bell argue that their book aims to 'recapture the period in South Africa when the engagement with Lawrence was at its most vigorous and productive, by letting it speak for itself through examples of its critical output'. They therefore caution against treating the reprinted material as simply 'overtaken by history and theoretical change' (xv–xvi). This warning is salutary, both in estimating Leavis's fearless innovation and in attempting to disentangle Lawrence from Leavis (or perhaps Leavis from Lawrence). In fact, Francois Hugo's recently commissioned treatment of 'Judgement and Maturity in *Sons and Lovers* and *The Fox*' (185–93) shows the method of close reading in its full strength and persuasiveness, as the tension between ambivalent fictional dramatisation and explicit authorial comment in the first novel is poised against an integration of narrative, tone and symbolic resonance in the later text.

Trevor Whittock's reprinted discussion of 'The Best of School' also exhibits these attributes of flexible responsiveness, yet the concluding sentence prompts close scrutiny. Whittock suggests that 'the poem is truly educational in that meaning of education the poem itself reveals and delineates: to read the poem and really experience it is to undergo part of the process of ripening, discovery, fulfilment and wholeness' (iii). Apart from the risk of circularity of explanation, what do these claims actually *mean*? In 'Criticism and Philosophy', Leavis asserts that the 'critic of poetry' is the 'complete reader: the ideal critic is the ideal reader'. He goes on to propose that 'the critic's aim is, first, to realize as sensitively and completely as possible this or that which claims his attention; and a certain valuing is implicit in the realizing'. (212–13). Such consequences may flow from appreciating the 'concreteness' of poetry, which is inimical to the 'abstraction' of philosophy (Leavis 212), but there seems to be little anchorage for literary assessments outside of the individual reader/critic's sensibility.

W. H. Bizley addresses these fundamental problems in 'Tactics in Decline: Lawrence in a South African Classroom 1950-1990' (73–81). While clearly alive to the benefits of close reading, he highlights the dangers of allowing Leavisite practical criticism to slip into a formulaic credo, which in certain South African institutions came to '[require] the reiteration of belief, from the converted, so to speak' (79). He argues convincingly that 'the literary critic should surely not get himself into the position where discriminating exegesis becomes a sort of one-to-one imitation of the original, so that value judgement is less and less able to report back to its own synchronic growth (for want of a better term) – the way it converses with its own milieu, or with the ever adjusting, ever-flexible canon itself' (75; see also Gagiano 93). Bizley instead recommends that the mature critic should locate his or her assessments within an evolving evaluative nexus, thus accepting Leavis's argument for the organization and 'placement' of textual reference points (95; Leavis 213). His investigation of *Women in Love*, however, pushes distinctly further by identifying that novel as 'post-industrial' and 'virulently post-organic', thus insisting on a discursive awareness of social and historical progression which destabilizes comfortable, self-referential commentaries.

While Bizley's appraisal is helpful in distinguishing Lawrence's fiction from a particular style of British New Criticism, Christina van Heyningen embarks on a vivid, proto-deconstructive interrogation of the intertwined relations between Leavis and Lawrence. Reacting to the resolute championing of the novelist by Leavis and his critical adherents, she percipiently cites Lawrence's 'partisanship towards [one of] his own creations' in *Women in Love*. Here Birken irritably insists to Hermione that he is copying a Chinese drawing of a goose because this enables him to 'know what centres they live from' (27). Van Heyningen comments:

> Does he mean that to draw a goose well you must be able to imagine so thoroughly what it feels like to be a goose that you imagine how the creature in the cold mud and water feels itself to be full of hot and stinging life-blood? That would make some sense. But Lawrence goes further. He talks of 'the curious bitter stinging heat of a goose's blood'. What does, what can he or any man know about that? ... surely such language is little more than meaningless? (28)

Van Heynigen as 'complete reader' uses the full force of Leavisite close reading to dismantle this practice and to expose from within the uncertainty of its assumptions about critical sensibility. The philosopher, Thomas Nagel, was to take on a closely associated question in 'What is it like to be a bat?' some eighteen years later (435–50). He argues that a human might imagine how it would feel for him or her to behave like a bat; but he rules out the possibility of a human's ever grasping how it feels for a bat to be a bat. Nagel does not discount imaginative projection within appropriately sketched parameters, the kind of projection that Van Heyningen searchingly explores in Ursula's sickening classroom confrontation with the need to discipline Williams in *The Rainbow* (31–32). Yet he points to the lack of suitable objective measures for describing specific types of uniquely subjective consciousness. Van Heyningen's pragmatic common sense, with its grain of philosophical abstraction, thus makes her wary, whereas Littlewood quotes Aldous Huxley quite literally: '[Lawrence] seemed to know, by personal experience, what it was like to be a tree or a daisy or a breaking wave or even the mysterious moon itself' (37).

This investigation of the limits of knowledge and empathetic identification leads into my second theme, Lawrence's metaphysic and his struggle to encompass a religious drive which did not attenuate or warp the plenitude of lived experience. Phelps notes Lawrence's

quest for a philosophical vocabulary to embrace both the intimately felt quality of his artistic endeavour and the form of consciousness, referring to the parallel enquiries of figures such as Nietzsche, Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty ('Conflicting Visions of the Primitive in D. H. Lawrence', 228). It is worth mentioning in passing that Merleau-Ponty's treatment of embodied consciousness in his *Phenomenology of Perception* might well stimulate a fertile dialogue with Lawrence's poetry or fiction, particularly in view of the existential-phenomenological emphasis on human rootedness in the world, compounded by a destiny of sustained meaning-making. 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence' in its turn evokes the spontaneously integrated evolution of thought as creative language or inaugural perception as the processive making of visual art.

In this collection, however, Lawrence's impulse towards the philosophical and his sense of the passionately religious are most effectively canvassed in Dawid de Villiers's 'Following "the shifting pole-star": Frontier Metaphysics in Lawrence' (194–225). This accomplished and rigorously argued paper maps Lawrence's thinking against Oswald Spengler's contentious and rigidly systematic *The Decline of the West* (1918), while foregrounding Lawrence's preoccupation with the individual. The notion of 'vital relation' (195) is also captured by drawing on Georges Bataille, who juxtaposes an alienating and homogenizing society (*Gesellschaft)* to the idea of 'community' (*Gemeinschaft*), which can accommodate heterogeneous customs and modes of collaboration. It is in the awareness of relation to places, cultural histories or other people that Lawrence's physical and spiritual yearnings find the possibility of expression. De Villiers tracks Lawrence's understanding of the human being as a perpetual adventurer, striving towards God as the diverse unknown or 'not-self'. Thus Lawrence argues that the soul burns in the luminal space between material and spiritual, as the flame of a lamp burns between the oil and the oxygen in the air (216–17). While the objective of this discussion is clearly to elucidate – probably even to defend – Lawrence's position, which is assumed not to aspire to the tightness of a formal philosophical analysis, it is unfortunate that the enquiry is not taken a stage further. For Lawrence's vision, despite its potential emotional attractions, *is* problematic. It unnecessarily complicates a mind-body dualism. It aspires to originality while playing around the edges of established notions of the numinous and the sublime. It promotes a cult of radical individualism which deracinates subjects from an apparently inhospitable society in the interests of a new set of vivifying relationships, relationships that would nonetheless seem to require some kind of cultural formulation. Moreover, the writing sometimes approaches the sort of flabby linguistic obfuscation that van Heyningen terms 'cant'.

Lawrence's acute interest in borderline or luminal states of consciousness is, nonetheless, closely linked to my third theme, his fascination with the primitive. This prompts him not only to cross spatial borders in order to make contact with the aboriginal potentialities of Australia or Mexico, but also to test temporal configurations. Jim Phelps attempts to balance Lawrence's blood consciousness against contemporary understandings of the intellect by adopting David Lewis-Williams's construct of a 'spectrum of consciousness', which can embrace ordinary psycho-somatic functioning as well as heightened states of introversion, reflection or creative fantasy ('Conflicting Visions of the Primitive in D. H. Lawrence', 229). Although Phelps works to contrast this naturally transforming and transformative mental condition with the more hierarchical and perhaps sinister view of the primitive given in Lawrence's 'leadership phase', his account of San-style hunter-gatherer communities seems to me not quite to connect with the specificities of Lawrence's writing. A far more poised approach is provided by Christopher Heywood in his revised article on 'The Impact of Bleek and Lloyd's *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* on *Birds,*

Beasts and Flowers' (155–67). Heywood follows the route of cultural influence and exchange, demonstrating consistently how Lawrence's reading of San narratives might have affected his sense of the mutability of the natural world, the affinities between humans and animals, and the pervasiveness of the numinous. These deductions in turn gain purchase in a subtle interpretation of the ways in which pictorial representation, repetition, rhyme and rhythm reshape Lawrence poetry in sympathy with his San sources.

Christopher Thurman engages with a different culturally located perspective, taking on directly the extent to which Lawrence may legitimately be charged with essentialism, racism and unconsidered prejudice against the other. The strongest part of an ambitious and extended essay examines the thinking of Guy Butler, whose 'The Republic and the Arts' (1962) directly opposes the characteristics of black and white South Africans in terms of the Apollonian and the Dionysian (271). Following a scrupulously historical line of reasoning, Thurman points to the prevalence of such binary oppositions even in those writers who were troubled by the sharp polarisations of colonial discourse. In Lawrence's case, he sees the stark conceptual discriminations of his essays as more revealingly handled in the dynamic dramatic ambiguities of a novel such as *The Plumed Serpent* (282-83). All these contributions point to the vividness, energy and persistent urge to transcendence in Lawrence's *oeuvre*, while identifying the undermining effects of authorial intervention or overstatement, as well as a disconcerting tendency to lapse into self-indulgent cant. If Lawrence's diverse artistic production calls for a 'complete reader', then perhaps it would also benefit from more finely tuned philosophical scrutiny, a possibility which even Leavis grudgingly admits might 'make a critic surer and more penetrating in the perception of significance and relation in the judgement of value' (213).

In closing, it seems apposite to return to the title of this collection, which draws attention to 'South African Perspectives'. While the contributors generally record a decline of Lawrence's importance in our curricula, there is relatively little discussion of the pertinence Lawrence might currently have for South African students or general readers. Christopher Thurman, quoting the cantankerous Mid-Western Judge in *The Plumed Serpent*, rather superficially compares his vindictive assimilation of the Mexican Labour movement to crime with the complaint of an '"unreformed" white South African' about the ANC (287). John van Wyngaard outlines the rapid and disorientating social changes described in *The Rainbow*, connecting these to a 'roller coaster' ride 'through to a modern age of urban disinheritance' which has probably been shared by many black students of literature (72; see Gagiano 92). Jim Phelps treats the experience captured in 'The Best of School' as suggesting guidelines for educational policy in this country, so that our pupils too may 'climb up to their lives' (124–25). These views are disappointing in their lack of depth and thoughtfulness (in the Lawrencian sense), since they fail to take due account of the comprehensive and singular contexts in which class stratification, socio-economic development and teaching practice deserve to be examined. Nor do they touch with any nuance on the destructive history of racial tension that has become interwoven with the fabric of South African experience.

Yet Jim Phelps makes a far more modest educational statement in recalling his years at the University of Zululand. He mentions conversations with former students, now themselves teachers, who 'remember[ed] with pleasure my teaching of Lawrence and other authors' (84). It was the insight and infectious enthusiasm of an individual lecturer that drew his students to Lawrence. Whether a vibrant new space can be created for Lawrence in a global curriculum of literatures in English, allowing for a polyphonic interplay of multiple voices, is a challenge that this collection sidesteps. Yet it offers a variety of other intriguing resources to both South African and international readers of D. H. Lawrence.

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