

## Review of a Review

*D. H. Lawrence Around the World: South African Perspectives,*

edited by Jim Phelps and Nigel Bell, Echoing Green Press.

Reviewed in *D. H. Lawrence Society Newsletter* Number 82, Summer 2008, by Mbuh Mbuh Tenu (University of Nottingham)

“The association of Lawrence’s work,” the review begins, “with the Midlands and its impact on Anglo-European consciousness has, in recent years, been enriched by the discourse of travel.” We should be heartened by this opening, because it offers some sort of new, fresh thinking. If we know nothing about “the discourse of travel”, let alone of the way it has “enriched” “the association of Lawrence’s work with the Midlands and its impact on Anglo-European consciousness”, even if we have no very clear understanding of what Anglo-European consciousness may be, we are offered a new discourse. Well, that’s fine; but hasn’t Lawrence had readers from beyond his own context from the beginning? All that was needed was an ability to read English or read it in translation. Besides, the English-speaking world has been very numerous for many generations now. But one’s interest is still aroused by this new “discourse of travel”.

The reviewer deplors the “silence” about Africa in Lawrence studies, though giving what may seem like an explanation, that Lawrence never went to Africa. This new travel discourse, however, “now revamps the textual perspective of his novels in particular, in order to give more meaning to his restive vagrancy as a multicultural phenomenon.” Hitherto, Lawrence was a cultural phenomenon, one that has (we are told) given rise to a “locationist Lawrence criticism, one that offers a familiarisation with and

appropriation of Lawrence and his work in localised critiques.” At this point hope and anticipation, not for the first time in contemporary criticism, begin to give way to bafflement. There is, it seems, some criticism being done—“criticism”, “critiques”—but “appropriation” makes one nervous. What does this all mean? In particular, what is a multicultural phenomenon and how is Lawrence one? What would he have said if somebody had called him a cultural phenomenon, let alone a multicultural phenomenon? If “locationist” is more or less connected with what Lawrence calls “spirit of place” does it mean that multicultural Lawrence studies take place somewhere that is not a place?

An essay whose title promises some actual literary criticism is parenthetically if politely dismissed from consideration: “(François Hugo’s ‘Judgement and Maturity in Sons and Lovers and The Fox’ does not quite fit here as it dwells on Eurocentric themes such as relationships and sexuality that are rather removed from the multicultural and post-colonial concerns of the collection.)” Africa, it seems, is a place strange to us Eurocentrics, a place where relationships and sexuality, if they are found at all, are not what make life interesting. What should grip us is multiculturalism and post-colonial thoughts. The latter, we have learnt elsewhere, are the consideration of works of fiction from a particular political point of view, according to

which for instance *Heart of Darkness* is a racist work.

Lawrence's own ventures into the political novel, in *Kangaroo* and *The Plumed Serpent* are not very good, but political power is surely one of the central themes of some great novels including *War and Peace*, and it does not breathe much fresh air into literary criticism to tell us so. But multiculturalism is not the same as the kind of deep interest Lawrence had in a number of non-Western cultures. Multiculturalism is the cohabitation of different cultures in one state. Lawrence's travel books are the often amazingly vivid explorations of foreign cultures by an Englishman.

Lawrence himself may encourage a propensity to roam intellectually over different fields of knowledge and experience, through his taste for speculation; but modern academic critics have less interesting minds than the man who wrote *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, or who created the Welsh groom in *St Mawr* speculating about the stars and the significance of folk belief and fairy tale, or who extrapolated from what he had read and what he saw in Tuscany the life-rhythm of the ancient Etruscans.

In the end what matters is how far and how well criticism improves your

understanding of books and keeps you attuned to the voice of the author; for wisdom is in the book, not in some other academic discipline. That review is in the journal published for people with such a special interest in Lawrence that they join a society. The reviewer talks about Lawrence, of all people, in this strictly meaningless jargon. Put the review beside, say, *Studies in Classic American Literature*[1] and if that is criticism, what our reviewer writes isn't. And it seems the people so interested in Lawrence that they join a society don't notice. If there is complete discontinuity between the voice of the author and the voice of the critic, and the minds of the admirers of the author, what is supposed to be going on?

There is at least one name mentioned in the review that we can vouch for, and that is J. C. F. Littlewood, author of *Tradition and Renewal: D. H. Lawrence, The Major Phase* (Brynmill). Our reviewer gives him a rather ambiguous mention, making him sound like a naïve cheerleader for Lawrence rather than the sensitive, lucid critic he is.

#### NOTE

1 The Edgeways edition is at proof stage—Ed.