Review

D. H. Lawrence Around the World: South African Perspectives. Ed. Jim Phelps and Nigel Bell. Empangeni: Echoing Green Press, 2007. ISBN 978-0-9802501-14. xxii + 335 pp.

The book as a whole provides a scholarly overview of the central position held by the works and ideas of the English writer D. H. Lawrence in the curricula, teaching philosophies and world views of South African university English Departments in the early latter half of the twentieth century. If this suggests something of a resurrectionary enterprise – the informing spirit of the collection, Christina van Heyningen, died some decades ago – it is also true that the names of contributors read like a roll call of those South African and immigrant British academics who from the 1950s to the 1970s made some of our English Departments notable leaders in their field. Essays, old and new, have been carefully chosen and juxtaposed to reveal how and why the teaching of internationally *significant* literature (in this case the writings of D. H. Lawrence) was in those years deemed to form an essential part of the training of a maturing critical faculty with which to confront not just English literature and cognate academic subjects, but the complex world of adult human experience itself.

Some of these ideas may strike modern educators as quaint, but the author and the teachers of his work (such as Christina van Heyningen, J. C. F. Littlewood and Trevor Whittock) celebrated in this volume of essays believed that they were practising and promoting literature and its criticism as inspiring and vital necessities. Such teachers believed, in the words of Lawrence himself, that "a critic must be emotionally alive in every fibre, intellectually capable and skilful in essential logic, and then morally very honest" (qtd. in Heyningen 7). Furthermore, literature itself, taught not as a body of received opinion but internalized and assessed anew by each student through the hands-on pedagogical procedures of "practical criticism" (now much misunderstood and maligned), became a medium of experience and thought, not just a file of information. Adherents of these ideas believed that

literature mattered, and mattered deeply, in ways that can now scarcely by grasped by purveyors of "communication skills," "cultural studies," and "other fashionable fields of dubious academic merit and interest," as one contributor here puts it (64).

Yet this is not merely an archival or nostalgic assembly of ghosts from the past. The editors' Introduction brings the subject of Lawrence studies well up to date, and persuasively argues for the continued relevance not only of their author but also of the teaching and critical philosophies that are still associated with his work.

The first part of the collection reprints a number of polemical pieces of the 1950s and 60s. Not many might now agree with Christina van Heyningen that "Lawrence [is] in most ways the most necessary, the most invigorating, the most life-giving influence in twentieth-century English literature" (26), but it is salutary to be reminded of such unbounded enthusiasm for the vitality of one's subject and the recuperative value of its products at a time when literary excellence is more often pilloried than praised. Nevertheless, while the star of such enthusiastic promotion of Lawrence may have waned somewhat in South Africa, it seems to be shining brightly in other parts of the world, and the present collection should take its place in a current renewal of interest in its subject evident internationally.

Part Two reprints a selection of the corpus of Lawrence criticism produced in South Africa over the last forty years. I must confess to some disappointment here, as I would have expected the enormous enthusiasm for Lawrence during those years to have generated a more substantial crop of critical assessment. While some of the entries here, such as Jim Phelps's examination of interloper plots in Lawrence's fiction, Christopher Heywood's exciting work on Lawrence's indebtedness to Lucy Lloyd's promotion of Khoisan lore, and Mark Kinkead-Weekes's ambitious attempt to draw out lines of intersection between Lawrence and Bessie Head, are substantial studies, too many other pieces are perfunctory.

Yet the relative scarcity of such scholarship is itself another indicator of the kind of attention Lawrence (and indeed most literature) attracted in the period under discussion: the study of literature was pre-eminently an undergraduate and formative procedure, a challenge and training of young minds, an education in critical thinking, and not a testing ground for scholarly endeavour. Several essays here – for example by Trevor Whittock, Jim Phelps, and Peter Wilhelm – survey how the study of Lawrence functioned in pedagogical practice. John van Wyngaard, speaking of *Sons and Lovers* in the previous section, bears witness to the experience of several generations of teachers and students in South Africa, still relevant: "Because

it is written from and about an exact and intense phase of a young person's life, at close hand, by an author with a real gift for entering into the world of childhood and young adulthood, and evoking, with a peculiar potency, the experiences of that phase, the novel has an *immediacy* of effect and response I haven't encountered in other texts I've taught at first-year level" (71). At the same time, W. H. Bizley's essay, also from the previous section, "Tactics in Decline: Lawrence in a South African Classroom 1950-1990" (73-81), offers a sobering corrective to the sometimes naively hopeful expectations of transcendent illumination that some of my own Lawrence-inspired lecturers encouraged in those days – I was, for instance, solemnly informed in my second year that Lawrence was the most important writer in English since Wordsworth.

Part Three, "New Essays," contains essays written for this collection, though it should be mentioned that a major contribution to the previous section, Christopher Heywood's "The Impact of Bleek and Lloyd's *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* on *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*," was substantially revised for inclusion here and constitutes one of the most important and scholarly studies in the whole book. Of the designated "new essays" several are of genuinely scholarly quality, well researched, well argued and well documented.

Dawid de Villiers, in "Following 'the shifting pole-star': Frontier Metaphysics in Lawrence," establishes an important distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), the latter structured and even coercive, the former organic and potentially liberating, in order to develop an illuminating critique of Lawrence's pioneering (and rebellious) exploration of the individual's conflicted relations with the increasingly regimented socio-political world of Europe between the two World Wars. De Villiers adroitly sets Lawrence's thinking in wider contexts suggested by the work of Bataille, Spengler and Thomas Hardy, while providing an excellent explication of Lawrence's moralized – even orgasmic – view of existence, his metaphysic of a life force that explains both the enormous popularity of Lawrence's writings among the young round the middle of the last century, and the reasons for his near total neglect until a few years ago.

Just as De Villiers explores two contrastive conceptions of human society in Lawrence's thinking, the one coercive, the other liberating, so Jim Phelps, in "Conflicting Visions of the Primitive in D. H. Lawrence", proposes to look at two discordant views of the "primitive" in his work: "The former is founded on cooperative human relations, the latter on hierarchical order, and in this fundamental difference there is a conflict" (226). Phelps provides a good survey of how these opposites are held in tension in Lawrence's work,

and of how he ceaselessly sought to explore and dramatize in his essays and fiction a "spectrum of consciousness" from the intuitive to the rational, from the "blood" to the "brain." At the same time Phelps shows convincingly that Lawrence's attraction to moral authority, coupled with a high-Modernist near-disdain for ordinary people, would on occasion vitiate his propagation of an egalitarian "naïve primitivism" – see, for instance, his *Sea and Sardinia* (1921). Phelps ranges widely and confidently over Lawrence's work to substantiate his arguments.

Peter Merrington's "Lawrence, the Jutas and the 'Mediterranean' Cape" is a lively, allusive and perceptive handling of both a major theme in earlier southern African literature – namely, the trope of the Cape as a "Mediterranean" locale, both symbolically and historically – and Lawrence's predilection for what might be called allegorical geography, in which the African landmass as well as its people, fauna and flora acquired atavistic properties and significations in the broader context of his celebration of "a numinous and archaic Mediterranean" (249). These fanciful notions led in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to strange pedigrees for the Khoisan peoples, who became associated with the ancient Egyptians, Etruscans and the prehistoric inhabitants of the Grimaldi caves above Monaco. (In the United States, incidentally, adherents of Afrocentrist tenets, such as Ivan van Sertima and Molefi Kete Asante, still propagate such notions.) Merrington wisely turns from the wilder aspects of Mediterraneanism to examine the implications and developments of a relationship between Lawrence and two young South Africans, Jan and René Juta, in the 1920s and in the context of Lawrence's quest for the "primitive," as manifested in his *Sea and Sardinia* (1921). As Merrington acknowledges, the status and function of a primordial Africa in the high Modernist obsession with origins, authenticity and aesthetic renewal has rather been worked to death, but like Christopher Heywood elsewhere in this volume he makes good use of the likelihood that the Jutas' introduction of Lawrence on this very tour to Lucy Lloyd's *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* (1911) had a seminal impact on Lawrence's subsequent animal poetry.

Christopher Thurman's "Lawrence, Leavis, and Butler: Some Reflections on Appropriation, Influence, Association, and 'Redemption'" (267-92, 25 pp.) is the most ambitious and densely argued piece in the collection, not only addressing the presence and legacy in South African English studies of the of the three figures of its title, but also assessing the continuing relevance of Lawrence in the teaching of English in South African universities. He offers an overview of Guy Butler's role in the development of English studies in South Africa, and he does not gloss over uncomfortable aspects of

that legacy. Butler was fairly impatient with Lawrence in his later career, but in the 1950s and 60s he was, like Laurens van der Post, deeply persuaded by the Lawrentian creed of an archetypal dynamic between a Dionysian "African" creative atavism and an Apollonian "European" corrective rationalism. Such ideas are not popular now, and are readily deemed racist. Thurman's discussion is, however, well informed and impeccably substantiated, while remaining clearly focussed: "My point is that Lawrence was for Butler not a distinct literary influence so much as a representative literary figure associated with the rejection of those features of modernity that Butler also rejected: scientism, secularism, industrialization, urbanization" (273).

From here Thurman is able to develop an argument that reveals remarkable similarities in the thinking of Butler and, for instance, Steve Biko (275-76), even as he is able to show up weaknesses in the views of both that may be paralleled in those of Lawrence, too. Ultimately the essay is a seminal and persuasive exploration – perhaps the most important in the collection – of D. H. Lawrence's continued relevance and value not only in cosmopolitan literary studies but in the South African academy as well.

The final two parts of *D. H. Lawrence around the World* consist of useful bibliographies of Lawrence studies in South Africa, an eloquent 1969 tribute by Jacques Berthoud and Colin Gardner to the informing spirit of the whole enterprise (Christina van Heyningen), and two dedicatory poems that capture well the kind of influence that the study of Lawrence had on students of a generation ago. One of these, Norman Morrissey's "Owed to Lawrence" (295-97), declares: "I *read* my way to readiness for the alien lives thriving on my doorstep." The present reviewer can attest to the profound truth of this insight, and to its intimate indebtedness to the works of D. H. Lawrence.

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