

Lawrence, the Mind of Europe, and the English Canon

Why has Lawrence not been generally recognised as a great articulator of the Canon concept, and of the Canon? Well, first we need to recognise that while he thinks *systematically*, he writes *contextually only*, and so appears fragmentary. Secondly, we need to remind ourselves of the context in which he grew to maturity as a writer, in which he outgrew the perception of his contemporaries too fast. I am mainly going to appeal, synoptically, to very familiar things here.

First, when we see the novels in England which were being published in Lawrence's time, even great ones, *Great Tradition* ones, like *Nostramo* and Henry James's novels, and then note the qualitative leap which occurs with *Sons and Lovers*, and, even more, with *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, there is a leap of genius here, and it is not surprising that, for *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, adequate categories were not available till the 1950s. Becoming available at last, especially in Leavis's work, published in *Scrutiny* and then *DH Lawrence Novelist*. Comparable relevant qualitative leaps in English are to be found in *Ulysses*, GM Hopkins, and the work of TS Eliot (but not fully on this scale till *The Wasteland* - and Yeats's greatest work was later). But, for things on the same scale, with a comparable degree of modernity, we have to turn to *Interpretation of Dreams*, Jung's *Psychology of the Unconscious* (now available as *Symbols of Transformation*), American literature, especially Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, and Whitman, Russian literature, French Symboliste poetry, Thomas Mann and Rilke, and Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (and the still mainly unknown Kierkegaard). But Lawrence is doing something different even from all of these (perhaps the nearest to him is Melville).

By the time he reaches *A Study of Thomas Hardy*, which essentially lays down the major template, - his Empedoclean dialectic of man and woma! - for his vision of the Canon, only varied inessentially thereafter, and then the first versions of *Studies in Classic American Literature*, and in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, by the middle of the WW1 decade, Lawrence has already attained an assurance that what he is doing involves a level of live understanding and innovation unique at that time in England, and, in many ways, in Europe. (He is confident enough by now to be able, however reluctantly, to defy his mentor and editor, Edward Garnett, who, quite on cue, just didn't 'get' *The Rainbow*.)

Now, in relation to his articulation of the Canon, in the *Study of Thomas Hardy* and later, this is, further, easy to forget for two strangely opposed reasons, - both too much, and too little, as it were:

1. On the one hand, he is now too familiar to us, paradoxically, precisely in his critical centrality. Thus, for instance, in such cardinal paradigms, which Leavis picks up, of the classical felicities of the *Phoenix* collection, as the essays on Galsworthy, on Hardy himself, or Wells's *The World of William Clissold*. So we take for granted that there is nothing unique here; it is assimilated forthwith into the *status quo*.

2. On the other hand, there is a criticism of Eliot's, which Leavis dismisses a little too cavalierly (since it provides a special opportunity). It is often repeated; thus we have it in what he quotes from Eliot (an essay in an organ called *Revelation*) in *The Wild Untutored Phoenix*:

“ For Babbitt was by nature an educated man, as well as a highly well-informed one: Lawrence, even had he acquired a great deal more knowledge and information than he ever came to possess, would always have remained uneducated. By being " educated " I mean having such an apprehension of the contours of the map of what has been written in the past, as to see instinctively where everything belongs, and approximately where anything new is likely to belong ; it means, furthermore, being able to allow for all the books one has not read and the things one does not understand — it means some understanding of one's own ignorance.”

Leavis dismisses Irving Babbitt, saying finally: “How can Mr. Eliot thus repeatedly and deliberately give away his case by invoking such standards? It is an amazing thing that so distinguished a mind can so persistently discredit in this way a serious point of view.” This, of course, sadly, if significantly, is *ad hominem*. Eliot’s point, right or wrong, is a *bigger* point than Leavis’s *ad hominem* response makes it. To address a first water mistake, even, with a ‘yes but’, as JL Austin intimates in *IFS and Cans*, is an opportunity. Similarly, David Ellis has argued that, when talking of the biological psyche, Lawrence reasons with blatant inconsistency. True: but this is mostly confined to his pseudoscience, and I do not believe it is necessary to defend that, to justify his position in relation to Eliot’s argument, though it contributes of course to Eliot’s denial to him of ‘what is ordinarily called thinking’. I continue, then,

The implicit core of Eliot’s argument is that, in his view, Babbitt *has* the concept of a *Canon*, and Lawrence does not. Eliot makes the same point in general terms (not about Lawrence but articulating the concept) in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, which speaks of ‘the mind of Europe’, and latterly, specifically again, even thus late, in his introduction to Father Tiverton’s *DH Lawrence and Human Existence* (<http://www.unz.org/Pub/Scrutiny-1951jun-00066?View=PDE>), of 1951, which includes the phrase, ‘for Lawrence was an ignorant man in the sense that he was unaware of how much he did not know’.

For, without an *order of valuation*, grounded in organised ‘contours of the map of what has been written in the past’, there is no ‘seeing instinctively where everything belongs’, in the wider sense, and that implies an actual Canon. Clearly, also, Eliot believes, as does Leavis, that such a Canon must by its nature be non-arbitrary, that it is valid absolutely and apprehensible in some sense (because otherwise Eliot could not *exclude* Lawrence from the grasp of it). One might have a ‘relative’ Canon concept of sorts - ‘the psychoanalytic Canon’, or ‘the Protestant-Calvinist Canon’, ‘the Pali Canon’, - but those would be localised (but nevertheless purportedly non-arbitrarily, to the point of being the subject of heresy-hunting - ‘Jung is not part of the psychoanalytic Canon’, etc) within the frame in question. However, one could still ask, ‘Is the Psychoanalytic Canon part of the Western Canon?’ and so on, thus recognising that this is a wider and general concept, or heuristically by its nature, and in the Kantian sense implicit in Leavis’s work, seeks to be as such.

But the Canon also changes with the addition of the new. And it is likewise changed by each new attempt to define it. Later on Eliot wrote: “Sensibility alters from generation to generation, in everybody, whether we will or no, but expression is only altered by a man of genius.” And to change expression is to change consciousness. Eliot indeed says, in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*:

“He must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which *changes* [my italic], and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen.”

That is, supposedly, it assimilates. Though, - as this instance graphically shows, - it's more rocky than that.

But, to be blunt, Eliot's concept of the mind of Europe is nevertheless overly mentalistic. It is also too orthodox, - and too psychologically insecure, perhaps, if Leavis is correct, but that is secondary - to be able to assimilate Lawrence. Eliot's positive concept and metaphysic of the Canon is classical and Catholic Christian, profoundly shaped by Aquinas and Dante.

Lawrence's is indeed supremely and radically religious or transcendent, but not in a way Eliot can engage with. So Lawrence is *too novel* for Eliot. In that, is he also too eclectic to imply Canonical organisation and geography? I believe not. The special recognition which Lawrence has re-awoken, after two and a half millenia, and which, from the *Study of Thomas Hardy* right up to its apotheosis in *Apocalypse*, is his touchstone, is an at least partly pagan, pre-Socratic, or Spinozistic, vision in which *everything is gendered, and everything is divine* ('*All things are full of gods*', Thales). (Perhaps Russell's greatest favour to Lawrence was pointing him towards Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy*.)

Eliot could not easily tolerate that degree of gender-pervaded pantheism. If we read Lawrence vertically, especially as he is simultaneously defiant both of religion and science, - both of orthodox Christian tradition, and of a good deal of modern cosmology and anatomy/physiology, - we can inevitably disagree and argue with him, - and this is where Eliot gets stuck, and pre-empts a judgement based on his assumptions about Christian Classicism.

But if we think about Lawrence horizontally, what do we find? We find, in spades, the Canon! I'll just list some links to some miscellaneous headings, mostly obvious and well-known; there is a mass of them, with a mass of sweeping, effortlessly fluent, unifications, and this is the merest sketch (I am not qualified to do justice to his references to art and painting, but they are most emphatically there):

So then:

Evolution of Consciousness and Dissociation of Sensibility (*Movements in European History*, *Study of Thomas Hardy*, *Twilight in Italy*, *Introduction to These Paintings*, *A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover*, etc);

Thomas Hardy (*Study of Thomas Hardy*, *The Rainbow*);

Herakleitos and the Pre-Socratics (*Study of Thomas Hardy*, *Apocalypse*);

The Bible (*Apocalypse*, *Phoenix*, *The Rainbow*, *Study of Thomas Hardy*, and much else);

Christian Tradition (*Study of Thomas Hardy*, *The Rainbow*, *Apocalypse*, *A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which is actually very near to Roman Catholicism);

George Eliot (*The Rainbow*);

The Brontes (*The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*);

Dickens (*The Lost Girl*);

Fielding and Richardson, and the early English Novel (*Study of Thomas Hardy*, *Introduction to These Paintings*, etc);

The evolution of English Poetry from Chaucer onwards (*Study of Thomas Hardy, Introduction to These Paintings, The Rainbow*, etc);
 Richard Wagner and the Scandinavian and Icelandic Edda (*The Sisters - The Rainbow and Women in Love*, which are modelled on Scandinavian Epic, almost as much as *Hamlet* is);
 Shakespeare and the Greek Tragedians (*Twilight in Italy, Study of Thomas Hardy, Galsworthy, Introduction to These Paintings*, etc);
 The American tradition: Hawthorne/Melville/Poe/Cooper/Franklin/Whitman, et al (*Studies in Classic American Literature*);
 Dostoevsky, Mann, Flaubert, Galsworthy, Verga, etc (*Phoenix*, in spades);
 Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (*Study of Thomas Hardy, Twilight in Italy, Aaron's Rod, Kangaroo, Plumed Serpent*);
 Tolstoy, especially *Anna Karenina* (*The Rainbow, Fantasia of the Unconscious*);
 Freud, and Jung, JG Fraser, and Trigant Burrow (*Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious, Fantasia of the Unconscious, Phoenix - Review of The Social Basis of Consciousness, The Rainbow, and Women in Love*).

So, to repeat, if we read Lawrence vertically, as it were, we can disagree and argue with him. But if we think about him horizontally, we find, in extraordinary measure, the Canon. And this, in turn, opens up another view of his 'metaphysic'. What is striking about Lawrence is how implicitly systematic he is, not a quality we commonly think of in relation to him. We are faced with the realisation that *Lawrence is one of the most systematically Canon-based writers in the English tradition*. Possibly the most systematic and comprehensive since Johnson and Coleridge. Ultimately, any Canon-based author has to have an implicit philosophy, and Lawrence of course has. So, although he is lacking in classical scholarship, in the sense of massive detail, his grasp of fundamentals is so radical and synoptic, that he alters our sense of history and the historicity of the Canon, not as dramatically as Hegel does, for Hegel was overtly systematic on a giant scale, but in similar mode, in terms of his dialectical gender pantheism. The initial template, the remarkable *Study of Thomas Hardy*, is his most dialectical and Hegelian analysis.

So, once we have grasped this, we can go back to the question: what lies behind the Canon, for Lawrence? His metaphysic, to which he gave such sustained and repeated attention. But we must make a broad distinction between the *detailed content* of the metaphysic, - concerning which there is scope for a veritable antheap of specific disagreements, which can overwhelm a more orthodox thinker like Eliot, - and the fundamental *formal ground* of the metaphysic.

The latter, despite the claims of Lawrence himself, and of Leavis, is of high generality and high abstraction. But it belongs to a tradition, to a perennial philosophy, of unity beneath dualities. It is epitomised in passages such the following from *Fantasia of the Unconscious* "Primarily we know, each man, each living creature knows, profoundly and satisfactorily and without question, that *I am I*. This root of all knowledge and being is established in the solar plexus; it is dynamic, pre-mental knowledge, such as cannot be transferred into thought. Do not ask me to transfer the pre-mental dynamic knowledge into thought. It cannot be done.

The knowledge that *I am I* can never be thought; only known."

This, like Freud's formula, *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*, reads like a piece of Herakleitos, or Empedocles, or Protagoras, and that, in neither case, is an accident.

Let us briefly remind ourselves of the cross-connections of such a statement. What is he saying?

When he says, it can never be thought, only known, he is close to thinkers like Bergson and Coleridge - and to Schopenhauer, and the later Wittgenstein. Schopenhauer writes: *The World as Will and Representation*, Book I, §2: “But the subject, *the knower never the known*, does not lie within these forms [of time, space, and causality]; on the contrary it is always presupposed by these forms themselves, *and hence neither plurality, nor its opposite, namely unity, belongs to it*. We never know it, but it is precisely that which knows wherever there is knowledge.”

We can open up, more widely, the sweep of this tradition of a certain appeal to individual feeling as intuitive knowing, prior to reason, - what we might call, developing remarks of Leavis in *Johnson and Augustanism*, the tradition of primordial enactment or enactivity, - with such names as: Luther, Hobbes, Pascal, Vico, Hume, Rousseau, Hamann, Schelling, Coleridge, Blake, Keats, Dickens, Kierkegaard, Newman, FH Bradley, Heidegger, Derrida, Auerbach, McLuhan, and the Eliot himself of *Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca*; perhaps this is enough to place Lawrence's vision in connection with the tradition.

I am running out of time. I can end with epitomising a greater sense of Lawrence's remarkable rethinking of the Canon, by reference to what Leavis does with it, Lawrence's, contribution. In a very characteristic way, in an intimation, Leavis comes within a hair's breadth, a typically tantalising hair's breadth, of making explicit Lawrence's articulation of the Canon. This is an ostensibly fragmentary comment, in which, further, Leavis partially backpedals, or appears to backpedal, excessively, on Lawrence, in a way which subtly masks what Leavis is opening the way to recognising about him.

But, when its implications are concretely filled out, it actually stunningly confirms, convergently, from a different angle, what I am saying about Lawrence. The remark I am picking up upon comes in the *Clark Lectures: English Literature in our Time and the University*, when Leavis, having in the previous chapter compared Eliot's understanding of *Hamlet* with Lawrence's own in the chapter on *The Theatre of Twilight in Italy*, sketches his concept of how to use representative critiques of the play, including Gilbert Murray's comparative study, *Hamlet and Orestes*, from 1914.

Those fortunate enough to have listened in person to his *Clark Lectures*, when they were delivered, will poignantly remember how Leavis, after nigh two and a half lectures on Eliot, after shaping, in the light of the concept of ‘dissociation of sensibility’, an implicit and profound articulation of the Canon, and after developing the canonical conception of Eliot as the paradigmatic English poet of the era, and also after articulating subtly, and in terms of examples from Eliot's own work (*La Figlia Che Piange*), his life *limitations*, next remarked: “But there is a more positive way of putting it: though still talking about Eliot I was not the less thinking about Lawrence, and I hoped that my audience would be too. There you have my intention: it was that the relevance of Lawrence, though I did not name him, should make itself felt, so helping me in the difficult business of suggesting how Lawrence comes in.” That sense of precipitated unification, that sudden making explicit of the implicit, was overwhelming, and breathtaking in its felicitousness.

But, in the light of where we have now got to, we can now further see, that, in that instant of fusion, of crystallisation, Leavis has united the Eliotic vision of the Canon, in terms of the formula *dissociation of sensibility*, with the *Laurentian* vision of the canon, organised here around the nucleus of Tragedy, Greek Tragedy and Shakespeare, and the dual traditions of Greek, and Scandinavian, Epic.

So here, taking his point of departure from Gilbert Murray, is what he says about Lawrence: “Now Murray is delicately and very intelligently suggestive. But the student won’t, from reading his lecture, have learnt how the significance of what he finds there can be shown to be important for the appreciation of Shakespearian tragedy - how it can enter into the understanding of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. *The only help towards that I know is Lawrence*. [my italic] No one approaching that chapter in the spirit of my suggestion will be in danger of taking it anything but critically - but the finding of essential insight in work about which one has to have critical reserves is a most important order of educational experience. And there *is* insight, decisive prompting insight, in Lawrence’s commentary on *Hamlet*. One may question the particular formulation he gives of the significance he finds, but the hint and the clue are compelling, and one realises that in the tragic Shakespeare - and in the greatest art - there is significance of that order conveyed. Shakespeare is not only a greater writer than Racine, but a greater kind of writer.”

And then a moment later he adds: “But I’m bound to add that I don’t see why it should be dismissed offhand as gratuitously *Laurentian* and obviously absurd.”

Now, this is not 1951, but 1967! Leavis was then lecturing nationally, busy articulating polemical follow ups to the Snow lecture, finalising the massive evolution of stance on Dickens, and the link with Blake (*Clark Lectures*, pp. 105-108), and working his way towards what he thinks of as his definitive commentary on *Four Quartets* in *The Living Principle*. Yet the formulaic qualifications are repeated several times. There is something strangely hidden in Leavis here, to continue to tease us, like Keats’s Grecian Urn. However, it does not prevent us recognising the cardinal point; Leavis has fused and integrated *his* development of the *Laurentian* Canon into a single whole, with his understanding of the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ based Eliotic poetic Canon (which is somewhat out of alignment with Eliot’s Anglo-Catholic Classicist one). Why do I say this?

Characteristically, it is there in the single sentence: *The only help towards that I know is Lawrence*. He is implying that Lawrence instinctively understands or presupposes the double ritual origin of Shakespeare via the lines of the Greek epic and the Scandinavian epic, to which he has just adduced Bertha Philpotts’ *The Elder Edda*, and Gilbert Murray’s *Hamlet and Orestes*. He is implying, in his, Leavis’s, own mastery of both Canons, the Eliotic and the *Laurentian*, and he is tacitly *endorsing the validity, reach, and wider inclusiveness of the Laurentian Canon*.

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