

A little Lawrence is a dangerous thing

Leavis on Lawrence on Shakespeare

The title of Lawrence's, ostensibly counter-Nordic, *Twilight in Italy* (TW) is nevertheless *Germanic*, derived from Wagner, *Twilight of the Gods*, or Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, or both. The extended reflections on Shakespeare, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in the *Theatre* chapter, like *A Study of Thomas Hardy*, and *The Rainbow*, are also one of those parts of Lawrence's writing indirectly most influenced by Jung, channelled by Otto Gross and Frieda. And, like so many others then, including TS Eliot, Freud and Jung, he was also buried in the depths of JG Frazer's crypto-Casaubon-ish Key to All Mythologies, Also Known As *The Golden Bough*. There is, accordingly, a dialectical spaciousness, and a capacity to live with contradiction - as Keats and Whitman recommend - in all this, and in contemporary writings, such as *A Study of Thomas Hardy* - something which returns in full measure in the final work, *Apocalypse*, and other late non-fictional writings.

This (TW) is the work which then Leavis picked up and used in *English Literature in Our Time and The University* (ELU). I believe - if we put on one side the post-Richmond Lecture politicking - this is his critically most quintessentially perfect book after *Revaluation*. In it he comments compellingly on this chapter of Lawrence's. Following his extraordinary and masterful account of TS Eliot's significance as poet and critic, and his defence of Eliot's highly relevant, and indeed parallel, concept of 'dissociation of sensibility', he then suggestively juxtaposes - or opposes! - Eliot with Lawrence in terms of their accounts of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This juxtaposition/opposition, as so often with Leavis, the master of critical epitome, is potently elegant and coercively compelling. For a long time, I felt that it resolved the critical issues. But now I am asking myself, what if, for powerful and indeed intractable reasons, it actually simply holds them, masterfully, at bay? This is the dilemma I now find in this dialectic. If this is true, what are the reasons for it, and in what way might they, in a manner, be valid? And what does he, in some sense, miss about (or hold at bay) what Lawrence actually sees in Shakespeare?

I begin with a caveat. Leavis makes upon Lawrence the, to me, extraordinary comment (one among several significantly deprecatory, even hesitantly academic, ones in the same vein) on this chapter of Lawrence's, that (ELU, p. 161):

The emphases are not those of criticism.

But perhaps, paradoxically, that does, however, apply to *Leavis* himself, in part, in the sense that this is a partly polemical and partly teaching text, where, indeed, *he* is not trying to give, what he says of Lawrence (ELU, p. 161):

....an essay on the play, concerned to give a balanced account of it.

So, thus cautioned, let us see what we can infer from both what he does say, and what he does not say.

Leavis takes one of Lawrence's emphases and makes it central: the contrast between the mediaeval, divine right, 'old' King Hamlet, and the 'modern', 'introverted', Montaigne-influenced, 'young'

Prince Hamlet. (And likewise, - implying, *inter alia*, a necessarily very deep relationship between life and work, - also the Montaigne-influenced *author* of *Hamlet*.) First he remarks:

I'm bound to add that I don't see why it should be dismissed offhand as gratuitously Laurentian and obviously absurd. (ELU, p. 163)

Coming after all those disclaimers, do we perhaps wonder about this, with Freud, whether there may not be no 'not' in the unconscious? Why all this caution here, what does it mean? Perhaps! but *continuons!*

The murdered elder Hamlet is insistently and potently evoked as essentially the King, the ideal King and Father - worthy embodiment of the traditional idea and potency. No acceptable account of the Shakespearian significance can ignore that datum. Young Hamlet idolizes his father, but is presented, surely, as, in the qualities which make him what he is, essentially inconceivable as a second god-like Hamlet..... Shakespeare, having undertaken to rewrite the old *Hamlet*, could with profound imaginative force realise Hamlet the King, but he was also, as we say, a 'modern' - certainly not in the lag of his age. Shakespeare's Prince Hamlet didn't - couldn't - 'in his involuntary soul' (I use Lawrence's phrase) *want* to be King and Father, supreme I, Hamlet the Dane, the Danish Fortinbras. (ELU, pp. 163-4)

Pausing for a moment, we wonder, in passing, whether the device of *the Ghost* is not, paradoxically, part of that modernity, and whether the egotism, and unconcern about his supposed son, a callousness transferred osmotically to Hamlet, the ostensible Ghost displays, is not an essential part of Hamlet's problem? And whether, whatever its excesses, psychoanalysis has not taught us, at least, that we are prone to idealise where, in another mode of ourselves, we hate, fear, and resent?

Leavis then reverts to his argument with TS Eliot about the reductionist concept of significance involved in the 'objective correlative' formulation, which is part of his diminishing of Eliot by comparison with Lawrence (ELU, p. 64):

...who today will suggest that such a significance can't be.... in the play....?

Could this, valid as far as it goes, but not necessarily decisive enough to underpin *an entire critical indictment*, (especially as Eliot, as we shall see, flips the other way up by the end of *his* essay), be a red herring, an inadvertant displacement and distractor from something Eliot and Lawrence *have in common*?

To be sure, Leavis goes on (ELU, p. 164):

Of course, there is more in *Hamlet*, which is certainly very complex, and in such a way, that the difficulty in arriving at an account of it which satisfies one's total sense of it, justifies one's thinking of it as peculiarly a 'problem'.

- the sort of remark which indeed makes one think wistfully of Leavis's never-to-be-written book about Shakespeare. But it makes one, as well, be cautious about what his account may, or may not, implicitly exclude. But *this* disclaimer does not tell us, so we must infer from other indicators.

So, earlier Leavis has, - very rightly and impressively, in my view, - appealed to Gilbert Murray's *Hamlet and Orestes* British Academy address of 1914

<https://ia600309.us.archive.org/11/items/hamletorestesstu00murr/hamletorestesstu00murr.pdf>

and to Dame Bertha Philpotts' *The Elder Edda* (1920), as invoking a second ritual/dramatic origin of tragedy in the North, to parallel the Greek (with JG Frazer in the background, in the process *arguably implicating Shakespeare in a living knowledge of Greek drama*):

Miss Philpotts' book... establishes that there was a second ritual origin of tragedy in the North, and that a continuity of dramatic traditions runs down through the Middle Ages to Shakespeare, who therefore is at the point of intersection - or junction - of the two lines.
(ELU pp. 162/3) [my italic]

He then says (ELU p. 163):

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. No one approaching that chapter in the spirit of my suggestion will be in danger of taking it anything but critically - but the finding 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*.

It seems to me there is a strong *suggestio falsi* here, the implication that Murray is the mere academic, who does not engage with the life issues, the existential issues, the living issues. But this, *prima facie*, enables Leavis to by-pass something which is to be found in all four of Murray, Philpotts, Lawrence, and TS Eliot - and also in the Wagner *Der Ring der Nibelungen* (huge influence on Nietzsche and Jung and Lawrence) which (as Levi-Strauss recognised) profoundly redacts the Norse materials, and also again, more recently, but congruently with all these, Ted Hughes, in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*.

This something is what Murray brings out by drawing attention to the huge difficulties both Orestes and Hamlet are portrayed as having with *women*, a partial and certainly ambivalent, but also itself murderous (c.f., *Sonnet 129*) misogyny, which is, however, also present in *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, and *Othello*. On all this Lawrence writes (TW) in *Twilight*, making it clear as he does that this in Shakespeare is *not* a mere external taking over of elements from the traditionary materials:

Hamlet's father, the King, is, like Agamemnon, a warrior-king. But, unlike Agamemnon, he is blameless with regard to Gertrude. Yet Gertrude, like Clytemnestra, is the potential murderer of her husband, as Lady Macbeth is murderess, as the daughters of Lear. The women murder the supreme male, the ideal Self, the King and Father.

This is the tragic position Shakespeare must dwell upon. The woman rejects, repudiates the ideal Self which the male represents to her. The supreme representative, King and Father, is murdered by the Wife and the Daughters.

What is the reason? Hamlet goes mad in a revulsion of rage and nausea. Yet the women-murderers only represent some ultimate judgement in his own soul. At the bottom

of his own soul Hamlet has decided that the Self in its supremacy, Father and King, must die. [my italic] It is a suicidal decision for his involuntary soul to have arrived at. Yet it is inevitable. The great religious, philosophic tide, which has been swelling all through the Middle Ages, had brought him there.

The question, to be or not to be, which Hamlet puts himself, does not mean, to live or not to live. It is not the simple human being who puts himself the question, it is the supreme I, King and Father. To be or not to be King, Father, in the Self supreme? And the decision is, not to be.

And again:

The King, the Father, the representative of the Consummate Self, the maximum of all life, the symbol of the consummate being, the becoming Supreme, Godlike, Infinite, he must perish and pass away. This Infinite was not infinite, this consummation was not consummated, all this was fallible, false. It was rotten, corrupt. It must go. *But Shakespeare was also the thing itself.* [my italic] Hence his horror, his frenzy, his self-loathing.

‘The thing itself’ - significantly taken from the kenotic, self-emptying, moment (KL, III, iv) when Edgar as poor Tom, as ‘unaccommodated man’, is confronted by the now mad King Lear - is here, for Lawrence, not pure unaccommodated man, but the apparent reverse, *mediaeval aristocracy*. (But, in that *kenosis*, it is *aristocracy, noblesse oblige*, which is emptied - c.f., ‘**poor naked wretches, whereso’er you are**’ etc, just a moment before, - and ‘poor Tom’ is of course really Edgar.) Shakespeare is therefore by Lawrence conceived as either an aristocrat - one of the ‘wolfish earls’ themselves, - or some ‘born descendant and knower’, as Whitman puts it, concerning the History Plays, in *November Boughs*: <http://www.bartleby.com/229/5005.html>

Conceiv’d out of the fullest heat and pulse of European feudalism - personifying in unparallel’d ways the mediæval aristocracy, its towering spirit of ruthless and gigantic caste, with its own peculiar air and arrogance (no mere imitation) - only one of the “wolfish earls” so plenteous in the plays themselves, or some born descendant and knower, might seem to be the true author of those amazing works - works in some respects greater than anything else in recorded literature.

Shakespeare, too, is also ‘the thing itself’. So, psychologically, was Lawrence - a ‘born descendant and knower’, - although Lawrence’s life does fit his works, in spades, as William of Stratford’s manifestly fails to.

This recoil is associated by Lawrence with the interiorisation of woman-ness as Other, as not-Self, as Thou, as *alter*. Indeed, we recognise certain notes in this as ones presented more personally in *Women in Love*, *Kangaroo*, and elsewhere:

This is the tragic position Shakespeare must dwell upon. *The woman rejects, repudiates the ideal Self which the male represents to her.* [my italic] **The supreme representative, King and Father, is murdered by the Wife and the Daughters.**

These are elements which are writ large by Middleton Murry in *Son of Woman*, and which are clearly registered by TS Eliot in his responses to Lawrence, along with the more favourable and fascinated ones, such as CE Baron (*Lawrence’s Influence on Eliot*, Cambridge Quarterly, Spring 1971) noted in recognising how deeply *Four Quartets* is pervaded by Lawrentian echoes and

resonances. We may add, they are in part expressed also in *After Strange Gods* itself, where *Fantasia of the Unconscious* is recognised as a masterly critique, to be read and re-read, of the modern world. (Once more, Eliot is here again endorsing a stance Murry has taken.)

It seems to me that Lawrence is quite clearly implicating *himself*, in the Coleridgean mode Eliot purports to repudiate, in this dialectic, when he says:

For the soliloquies of Hamlet are as deep as the soul of man can go, in one direction, and as sincere as the Holy Spirit itself in their essence. But thank heaven, the bog into which Hamlet struggled is almost surpassed.

To be sure this is a moment of his relative optimism, as in later chapters of *Women in Love*, but surely ‘**as deep as the soul of man can go, in one direction**’ must imply that *Lawrence’s* own soul has been there? Without going all the way with Middleton Murry’s partly lop-sidedly bereaved and rageful analysis, we can surely go so far as to say, this complex of issues was a lifelong struggle, never fully resolved, for Lawrence?!

One might say, Leavis has a certain tendency to idealise Lawrence, and *only* to see the archetypal and Frazerian dimension of Lawrence - but one which, as such, is neutralised in a peculiar way I shall come to. Thus, he hesitates to follow Lawrence into his animism!! In *A Study of Thomas Hardy* Lawrence writes (amongst similar notes, invoking the cosmic archetypal power of Egdon Heath):

Oedipus, Hamlet, Macbeth, set themselves up against, or find themselves set up against the unfathomed moral forces of nature, and out of this unfathomed force comes their death. Whereas Anna Karenina, Tess, Sue and Jude find themselves up against the established system of human government and morality, they cannot detach themselves and are brought down.

But it is clear from such a work as *Twilight* - and *A Study of Thomas Hardy* itself - that Lawrence does not think this is *in antithesis to the personal*, rather that we should not *merely* see the personal. In parts of *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, and *Apocalypse*, Lawrence endorses a degree of animistic belief into which Leavis cannot follow him. *Consequently* Leavis is drawn into a degree of transmuting Lawrence into a kind of Lawrentian Humanism, to set against the Christian nihilism, as Leavis sees it, of TS Eliot (Leavis turns Bunyan, and Cecil Sharpe’s Appalachian Puritans, into Humanists also). This is more George Eliot than TS Eliot; something of Lawrence is lost or neutralised here (Nietzsche has relevant comment on George Eliot in *Twilight of the Idols*). And therefore Leavis’s stance has elements of a belief position, rejecting the degree of affinity between TS Eliot and Lawrence, in the Flaubertian dimension, and in the archetypal dimension, and in their conjunction. The Aeschylus/Orestes note explored in Eliot’s *The Family Reunion*, which picks up just where the last part of Eliot’s essay on *Hamlet* left off, is relevant here, and I will just refer to that ending in passing (where Eliot duly and typically clearly reverts to his own variant of the Coleridgean position, overtly repudiated at the start of the essay) before stating what I think is Leavis’s essential dilemma:

We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble puzzle; under compulsion of what

experience he attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible, we cannot ever know. We need a great many facts in his biography; and we should like to know whether, and when and after or at the same time as what personal experience, he read Montaigne, II. xii., *Apologie de Raimond Sebond*. We should have, finally, to know something which is by hypothesis unknowable, for we assume it to be an experience which, in the manner indicated, exceeded the facts. We should have to understand things which Shakespeare did not understand himself.

It seems to me that this is nearer than Leavis allows to Lawrence here (the final sentence, which emphasises, being the clearest affinity to Eliot's struggle):

For the soliloquies of Hamlet are as deep as the soul of man can go, in one direction, and as sincere as the Holy Spirit itself in their essence. But thank heaven, *the bog into which Hamlet struggled is almost surpassed.* [my italic]

So now I come to Leavis's unsolved dilemma, which I believe makes sense of both the awareness of incompleteness in this criticism, with his attempts to resolve it by polarisations, - and the extraordinary recognition of the modern dilemma which underlies it, if we pass beyond the polarisations.

As with *DH Lawrence: Novelist*, even here, Leavis's Lawrence remains more Eliot - George Eliot - than Lawrence. A little Lawrence is a dangerous thing. What do I mean?

Bertrand Russell once published a book entitled: *Why I am not a Christian!* Is the ultimately dismissive analysis of *Four Quartets* in *The Living Principle* Leavis's version of this?!

But, thinking next of Lawrence, one might add, in relation to Leavis's reserve about *The Plumed Serpent*: *Why I am not a Pagan!*

Thinking of *Kangaroo*, and the essay on Dostoevsky's *Grand Inquisitor*, also of Yeats and Heidegger, one might add: *Why I am not a proto-Fascist!*

Thinking of Russell himself, one can add again, emphatically: *Why I am not an Enlightenment Rationalist or Empiricist!*

But, then, also, one may add, against TS Eliot: *Why I am not a Feudal Mediaevalist!* Leavis's contempt for ersatz mediaevalism, and all ersatz archaism, is obvious.

But the problem is: Leavis is *Enlightenment Man*, but he is one with a Feudal-Pagan *analysis*, apart from his, always superb, recognition of those supreme moments of conjunction, transcending single epochs, which make possible the greatest poetry or poetic writing, for instance, that of Donne, that of TS Eliot, the author of *Portrait of a Lady*, and that of Mark Twain, the author of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

But, because of Leavis's implicit doctrine of 'enactment', 'realisation', or 'creating realities', or however we choose to label it, Leavis is enabled to both keep many of his positions in a tacit, implied, phenomenological *epoche*, mode, and, secondly, not to draw the logical conclusions of certain of the things he says, and of the positions he does take up. One might call this methodology Socratic, or an expression of Negative Capability, if it were not for the fact that Leavis so often

assumes his own positions are actually unassailable, and can be taken as implied, since the process further does not actually put them in question.

But there *is also* a genuine Socratic element, and it comes out in the ‘letting the poetry speak for itself’ of his greatest criticism - such as: *Judgement and Analysis* (in *The Living Principle*); the chapter on *Little Dorrit* in *Dickens the Novelist*; and this critique of Eliot in *ELU*, though *not* the one in *The Living Principle*, which certainly does have ‘an axe to grind’.

How to look through three lenses at once, through Leavis, through Lawrence, and through Lawrence to Shakespeare?! Yet is there a connection between this enigmatic, one-part-Socratic, aspect of Leavis, which one does not always associate with him, yet is, once noticed, clearly there, - and the present attempt (which indeed mirrors his own) to see through the three lenses at once? Leavis, overtly, is associated in the popular mind with a strident opinionatedness and categorical definiteness of attitude. But what we have here, in this enigmatic half-realisedness of his expressed vision, is something intrinsically elusive, *and this we would associate with Eliot, and Eliotic post-modernism, stoicism, which Leavis relates to Flaubert, rather than associating it with Lawrence*. But, then, if we look at Lawrence, at least in part, through Middleton Murry's lens - yes, for sure lop-sided indeed as being part of his mourning Lawrence's death, his coming to terms with his relation to Lawrence, and also primarily personal, mostly disregarding, crucially, the cosmic-archetypal dimension - then *the Flaubertian dimension, the dimension of the intractably creative life-flaw, applies to Lawrence also*.

On the one hand, despite Leavis's critical genius, and his brilliant ability to catch on the wing some of the most marvellous features of Lawrence's writing, and the huge service he did for Lawrence, is there an aspect of Lawrence, the primally cosmic conjoined with the human flaw, the gothically gruesome, and uncanny, element, the ‘tentacular roots reaching down to the deepest terrors and desires’ (TS Eliot, *Ben Jonson in The Sacred Wood*), which, unacknowledged, is essentially alien or foreign to Leavis, something he simply cannot stomach? Is this an element of *enshrining* Lawrence in Leavis? Yet, on the other hand, does he, in his implicit profound critical positioning of the modern dilemma, indeed take us to a point where Moses-Leavis himself cannot follow, but yet *we* can see Canaan, the promised land?

Is he, in fact, more at home with Eliot, and with Eliot's ‘overwhelming question’? Dare I ask, if some of his animus against Eliot is a recoil from something in himself? But does he at the same time *evoke* the protean dilemmas Lawrence, - who plays with them all one by one! - raises in us, by *enacting* the questions? In coming to grips with Lawrence, and Lawrence's Shakespeare, though Leavis's lens, *are we even driven into moving to a more post-modern, and pluralistic, Leavisian-ism?*

Having just been to the Globe *King Lear*, when the sole previous *King Lear* I had been to was the great Paul Schofield/Peter Brook *King Lear* of, I think, 1962, at the Aldwych, I say with deep conviction, that it is hard, in a thoroughgoingly democratic and populist epoch, to recognise the actuality of Shakespeare, or of DH Lawrence, who are, or whose vision is, in a broad sense, aristocratic.

These things have become virtually undiscussible. Perhaps this post-modern Leavis we may have glimpsed, can take us towards becoming able to discuss them again.