

A Reader's
Guide to

D.H.
LAWRENCE

Philip Hobsbaum

A Reader's Guide to D. H. Lawrence

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THAMES AND HUDSON

For Alisdair Gray *poet and painter*

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. . . he who wishes to see a Vision, a perfect Whole,
Must see it in its Minute Particulars, Organized . . .

Blake, *Jerusalem*: IV

'Things are so split up now. There can never be
another Shakespeare' — Lawrence, quoted by Jessie
Chambers, *D. H. Lawrence: a Personal Memoir*

'Lawrence was not Shakespeare, but he had genius,
and his genius manifests itself in an acquisitiveness
that is a miraculous quickness of insight, appre-
hension and understanding' — F. R. Leavis, *The*
Common Pursuit

Preface

As the epigraphs to this Reader's Guide will suggest, the vision of D. H. Lawrence exists in the organization of particulars. I have chosen to consider his writing in terms of recognizable genres such as poems, stories, tales, novels, travel-books, philosophy, criticism and (in an appendix) the plays. But I have also taken chronology into account and separated the poems and stories into two periods and the novels into three. The dates in chapter headings refer to the years in which books or collections of stories were published, and the dates in the body of the text refer to probable times of writing and revision. Here it is a pleasure to acknowledge the historical scholarship of Keith Sagar and Charles L. Ross, among others who have done a great deal to clear up the vexed issue of the dating of the canon. I must also refer with gratitude to the work, as teacher as well as writer, of my old master F. R. Leavis, as well as to more recent writings, some of them unpublished, of Gāmini Salgādo, Evelyn Bertelsen, Christopher Pollnitz and B. R. Buckley. Nearer home, my thanks are due to the staff of Glasgow University Library, especially to the ever-helpful Miss Mary Sillitto; to Mrs Valerie Eden, who typed with skill and understanding various versions of this text, including the final one; to my wife, Rosemary, for all her patience and forbearance; and to my friend, the dedicatee of the book, who exemplifies in our own time the versatility and integrity which I respect so much in the life and work of D. H. Lawrence.

Contents

	PAGE
PREFACE	7
1 POEMS (1905–19): <i>Love Poems, Amores, Look! We Have Come Through!, New Poems, Bay</i>	8
2 STORIES (1907–19): <i>The Prussian Officer, England, my England, Love Among the Haystacks, A Modern Lover</i>	23
3 NOVELS (1906–13): <i>The White Peacock, The Trespasser, Sons and Lovers</i>	42
4 NOVELS (1913–16): <u><i>The Rainbow, Women in Love</i></u>	52
5 NOVELS (1913, 1920–28): <i>The Lost Girl, Aaron's Rod, Kangaroo, The Boy in the Bush, The Plumed Serpent, Lady Chatterley's Lover</i>	72
6 TRAVEL, PHILOSOPHY, CRITICISM, PROPHECY: <i>Twilight in Italy, Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious, Sea and Sardinia, Fantasia of the Unconscious, Studies in Classic American Literature, Mornings in Mexico, Pornography and Obscenity, À Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover, Apocalypse, Etruscan Places, Phoenix, etc.</i>	87

7 TALES (1911, 1921–27): <i>The Ladybird, St Mawr, The Woman Who Rode Away, The Escaped Cock, The Virgin and the Gipsy</i>	104
8 STORIES (1924–29): <i>The Woman Who Rode Away, The Lovely Lady</i>	120
9 POEMS (1920–29): <i>Birds, Beasts and Flowers, Pansies, Nettles, Last Poems, Fire</i>	131
APPENDIX: PLAYS	149
A SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY	152
INDEX	157

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1 Poems (1905–19)

Love Poems (1913); *Amores* (1916); *Look! We Have Come Through!* (1917); *New Poems* (1918); *Bay* (1919)

In his earlier years, Lawrence wrote verse continuously. This work constitutes a kind of informal diary. It therefore assumes a sequential aspect. There are, between 1905 and 1919, something like ten groups of pieces. Each is clustered about a single theme. Taken in quantity they have the raw appeal of autobiography. But only a few of the items involved are articulated to the extent that they could be detached from their plasm of experience and so be termed poems.

Lawrence began, when he was a pupil-teacher in Derbyshire, with 'Champions' and 'To Guelder Roses'. 'Any young lady might have written them and been pleased with them; as I was pleased with them' (Preface to *Collected Poems*, 1928). The early influences are obvious: Tennyson's *Maud* and Rossetti's *House of Life* *passim* –

The unclouded seas of bluebells have ebbd and passed
And the pale stars of forget-me-nots have climbed to the last
Rung of their life-ladders' fragile heights.
Now the trees with interlocked hands and arms uplifted hold
back the light . . . ('Champions', 1905)

The ^{clumsy}clumsiness here is characteristic of the very early pieces. In all too many instances, the rhyme determines the sense. Yet, callow, though they are, these items look forward – most immediately, to the lyrical descriptions of nature in Lawrence's first novel, *The White Peacock*, and, more remotely, to the grave, sculptured poems of Lawrence's last period: 'Red Geranium and Godly Mignonette', 'Glory of Darkness' and its final version, 'Bavarian Gentians'. Imperfectly articulated the early pieces may be, but

they manifest several of the images and themes which were to concern Lawrence through his career. Many of them were written when Lawrence was studying for a teacher's diploma at Nottingham University College. His sympathy with all living things is seen in 'Dog-Tired', 'Renaissance', 'Study', 'Twilight' and especially, 'The Wild Common' (c.1905):

Rabbits, handfuls of brown earth, lie
Low-rounded on the mournful grass they have bitten down
to the quick . . .

The psychological notation manifest in the great novels of 1915-16 is also prefigured in this remarkable piece:

So my soul like a passionate woman turns,
Filled with remorseful terror to the man she scorned,
and her love
For myself in my own eyes' laughter burns . . .

Even so, the rhythm of the verse does little for the sense: there is too heavy a pause for an enjambement to take place after the word 'love'. The syntax, too, is functionlessly contorted. This item, like others of the period, is associated with the figure of 'Miriam', Lawrence's first love, Jessie Chambers. It survives, as the others do, mostly in terms of casual glimpses of nature imagery. Moreover, in this piece, as is true of almost all the pre-war verses, the earlier drafts are the better. In revision, even the simile of the soul as a passionate woman vanishes. It is replaced by an unfocused meditation on shadow and substance. This is the version, the version of the much-revised *Collected Poems* of 1928, that tends to be promulgated. But one can see the reasons for Lawrence's dissatisfaction. There is uncertainty here, as in all these early pieces linked with 'Miriam'. Lawrence was still in search of a theme.

Sometimes the search took the form of an exploration of roots – the young poet's local mores, the dialect of his native Derbyshire. This can give rise to intensely dramatic effects couched in dialogue which is pithy, tactile, even kinaesthetic:

Dunna thee tell me it's his'n, mother,
Dunna thee, dunna thee.