

# The Language of D.H. Lawrence

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#### To Sarah and Ruth

#### **Preface**

Lawrence was one of the most prolific of modern writers. His work covers fiction, poetry, drama and essays, as well as several volumes of letters. This book is not intended to be an exhaustive description of the language of D.H. Lawrence through all the forms of his writing. It is an introduction to the study of one writer by way of the linguistic resources available to him. This necessarily involves some discussion of the contexts of his writing - for example, of the state of literary language during the first two decades of the twentieth century, of Lawrence's own background, and of his attitudes towards literature and towards society. I have also tried, when looking at specific textual examples, to keep a clear focus on their meaning and significance within the context of the whole work. I have concentrated almost exclusively on Lawrence's fiction, and have therefore largely confined myself to discussion of the language of prose. This has enabled me, however, to spend some time on the language of his letters and of his non-fictional prose. The plays are omitted altogether, but I have made space for one chapter on the language of poetry. I have kept to a minimum the use of linguistic terms. Those that have been essential are clearly explained when they first arise, and their application demonstrated through examples. I have used Penguin editions of Lawrence's writing, but have also been alert to textual changes registered in the Cambridge text.

I am grateful to the many friends, colleagues and students who have helped and stimulated this work through discussion and interest. My thanks are especially due to Annie Bergonzi, Jill Fenwick and Jan Hewitt, all of whom read through my manuscript and provided me with valuable suggestions and invaluable encouragement. Finally, I am grateful to Norman Blake for the opportunity to contribute to this series, and for his interest and help.

Newcastle, 1989

A. S. INGRAM

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## 1 Lawrence's Writing and the Context of Modernism

This is Lawrence writing to a friend from his cottage near St Ives. It is the spring of 1917.

The weather is very hot and lovely. I go about in a silky shirt you gave me, and a pair of trousers, and nothing else. Today I hae been cutting blackthorn and gorse to make a fence to keep the lambs out of my garden. I loathe lambs, those symbols of Christian meekness. They are the stupidest, most persistent, greediest little beasts in the whole animal kingdom. Really, I suspect Jesus of having had very little to do with sheep, that he could call himself the Lamb of God. I would truly rather be the little pig of God, the little pigs are infinitely gayer and more delicate in soul. — My garden is very beautiful, in rows. But the filthy lambs have eaten off my broad beans. The salads are all grown, and the scarlet runners are just ready for the spring. (Letters, III, 124)

The most striking characteristics of this description are typical of Lawrence at his best as a writer of fiction. It is lively, it is spontaneous, and above all it is personal. The effect of the passage depends upon a playful mixing of the language and tones of two normally incompatible moods, the conversational and the passionate. We have conventional remarks about the weather followed by the account of Lawrence's appearance and activities. But the tone of 'Today I have been cutting . . . ' is immediately undermined by the violence of his outburst, 'I loathe lambs', by the extension, in a typically Lawrentian fashion, of his own opinions to become an implicit criticism of the entire Christian religion, and

by the accumulated weight of the three superlatives, 'stupidest, most persistent, greediest'. When the familiar tone returns with 'Really', it is to introduce a sentence in which Lawrence's criticism of Christianity is made explicit, albeit flippantly. The subsequent introduction of the 'little pigs' is a masterstroke, for not only does it allow the humour of the passage to predominate over the passion, but it also provides a lively picture to be contrasted with the lambs. The pigs, frequently associated with greed, are given the qualities of gaiety and delicacy that are more normally attributed to lambs. What is more, the delicacy of the pigs is then used to add force to Lawrence's thunderous return to 'the filthy lambs', making us understand the word 'Ilthy' not only in a rhetorical sense but also quite literally.

The passage is light-hearted and not intended for critical analysis. It does demonstrate, however, Lawrence's natural feel for language, for its rhythms and the control that rhythm can exert over emotion. His manipulation of his reader's responses, even writing without time for revision, is so sure that we forget the lambs and the strength of Lawrence's feelings against them for two whole sentences while he writes in praise of pigs and in straightforward description of his garden. 'My garden is very beautiful, in rows' recalls the structure of the opening sentence, 'The weather is very hot and lovely', and shares, therefore, in its serenity and stillness, with the added attraction of showing the results of Lawrence's labour in its orderly 'rows'. The impact of the returning lambs in 'But the filthy lambs have eaten off my broad beans' is consequently made more frustrating, more amusing, for their temporary absence from our attention. Lawrence's prose, in fact, in its energy and tonal control, has not only described but emotionally recreated the persistence of the lambs and his own passionate response to them.

Lawrence's vitality as a novelist is the vitality of intense personal commitment. One aspect of this commitment is his alertness to the life that is in people and creatures, his recognition of their nature and individuality, be it a man on a barge or a boy in a classroom, both of whom we find in *The Rainbow*, be it a stallion, as in *St Mawr*, or, as here, the lambs in his garden. Each example of life makes its own demands on the linguistic resources of the novelist if it is not to be misrepresented. At the same time Lawrence is also committed to his own emotions and

opinions and is ready to write from the energy they provide. He can be certain of their validity for the unashamed reason that he feels or thinks in this way. This, above all, is responsible for the sense of spontaneity we experience in reading Lawrence at his best and most characteristic, the sense that the novelist is feeling and thinking this now, this minute, as he writes. Personal opinions and personal emotion, however, make their demands on the writer's control of language and its arrangement if they, too, are not to be distorted in the passage. It is Lawrence's achievement, as I shall argue, that he is able to exploit the resources of language, and to exert control over the intensity of personal commitment, without sacrificing the vitality drawn from strong feelings.

Michael Bell says of Lawrence that the 'personal dimension in his writings frequently gets him into trouble', and it does. A second example from his letters demonstrates Lawrence's capacity for producing deeply offensive material, yet it is written with the same intensity and sense of personal commitment as the lambs letter, and even with something of its conversational casualness. This is from his first letter to the American writer Waldo Frank, whom Lawrence had never met. It is in reply to a letter from Frank. Lawrence talks first about The Rainbow, then about the situation in Europe in 1917. This leads him to the subject of purity of thought, which he illustrates by reference to the Gadarene swine, and to his desire to escape to America. (B.W. Huebsch was one of Lawrence's American publishers.)

I shall come to America. I don't believe in Uncle Samdom, of course. But if the rainbow hangs in the heavens, it hangs over the western continent. I very very wery much want to leave Europe, oh, to leave England for ever, and come over to America.

I hear Huebsch is a Jew. Are you a Jew also? The best of Jews is, that they *know* truth from untruth. The worst of them is, that they are rather slave-like, and that almost inevitably, in action, they betray the truth they know, and fawn to the powers that be. But they know the truth. Only they must cringe their legs and betray it. The material world dominates them with a base kind of fetish domination. Yet they know the truth all the while. Yet they cringe their buttocks to the fetish of Mammon. peeping over their shoulders to see if the truth is watching them.

observing their betrayal. – I have got Jewish friends, whom I am on the point of forswearing for ever. (Letters, III, 144)

After the phraseology of the first paragraph, the 'Uncle Samdon', the rainbow hanging in the heavens and the almost childlike yearning ('very very') to leave Europe and the war, the bluntness of 'I hear Huebsch is a Jew. Are you a Jew also?' is forcefully felt. The casual tone, too, as if Lawrence is inquiring about Frank's holiday plans, makes the actual matter of the question more arresting. The remainder of the paragraph is based on an apparent weighing of the pros and cons of Jewishness. Lawrence's insistence that Jews the pros and cons of Jewishness. Lawrence's insistence that Jews 'know the truth' places a value on them, and is in keeping with his belief in the importance of religion and ritual in providing modern man with spiritual roots. But the language of his main accusation against the Jews, 'slave-like', 'fawn', 'cringe their legs', 'cringe their buttocks to the fetish of Mammon', 'peeping over their shoulders', makes it clear from the outset that this is no real weighing. The judgement has been made already, and we realise that the force of it must be present in the statement 'I hear Huebsch is a Jew.' The 'best' side of the argument, in fact, reappearing in similarly structured sentences through in fact, reappearing in similarly structured sentences through the paragraph ('But they *know*... Yet they *know*...'), can finally be seen less as a real factor on behalf of Jews than as an additional reason for their condemnation. These sentences become a kind of chorus balancing with their familiar pattern the passionately visual language of the accusatory sentences, and providing the appearance of a rational reason for condemning them: they have betrayed the truth over and over again. The rather archaic tone of 'forswearing' is the last touch, for it gives to Lawrence a finality of judgement and at the same time a sense of spiritual rootedness of his own from the strength of which he can pronounce his verdict.

My point here is not that Lawrence should be regarded as irredeemably ant'-semitic, for that is not the subject of this book. It is rather that the same skill in the manipulation of language is evident both here and in the lamb passage, and in each case the skill derives from the same qualities of passionate commitment and spontaneity of expression. In writing to Frank, Lawrence is clearly writing with feeling, with deep personal conviction, oblivious of the possibility of giving offence to a man he had never met — or

perhaps even courting that possibility. He is giving the truth as he sees it. He is even giving the truth about Jewishness as he sees it, the nature and individuality of being a Jew, as he sees it. Writing with passionate conviction about lambs, however, gets no one 'into trouble', whereas writing about Jews can do. Frank (whom Lawrence addresses as 'Mr Frank'!) was apparently not offended, for the correspondence continued.

There are a variety of ways in which the personal can be seen to intrude into Lawrence's fiction, distorting in some way, getting him into some kind of trouble, or running counter to his declaration in 'Morality and the Novel' that 'When the novelist puts his thumb in the scale, to pull down the balance to his own predilection, that is immorality' (Phoenix, p. 528). To give just a few examples, there is a passage of almost a page in Chapter XI of The Rainbow (p. 329) in which Lawrence sets out his own argument against the belief of one of his characters, Anton Skrebensky, in 'the highest good of the community'. There is no attempt to present the arguments through the opinions or example of another character, as there is in other parts of the novel. It is as if Lawrence has become so impatient with his own created character that he cannot wait to answer Skrebensky's beliefs with his own. Again, in St Mawr there is a long passage (pp. 76-9) after Rico's fall during which his wife Lou rides for help. As she rides she experiences a vision of the evil that afflicts the world, a vision that only occasionally allows us to remember that it is Lou, and not Lawrence himself, whose mind is being portrayed.

There it was in socialism and bolshevism: the same evil. But bolshevism made a mess of the outside of life, so turn it down. Try fascism. Fascism would keep the surface of life intact, and carry on the undermining business all the better. All the better sport. Never draw blood. Keep the haemorrhage internal, invisible. (p. 78)

It is perhaps characteristic of visions that they are described in language that is not the normal language of the character who is experiencing them. We are not likely to be convinced, however, if the language used is in the polemical style of the novelist. And again, the character of Birkin in Women in Love is, as F.R. Leavis puts it, 'obviously very near to a self-dramatization of Lawrence',2 and as such is frequently held to be too often a mere mouthpiece for Lawrence's own views.

If the personal is sometimes artistically damaging to Lawrence, though, it is vital to recognise that it is also a source of his greatest strength, not only as a novelist but as a writer of all kinds of literature, from sequences of poems to letters, from short stories to works of travel. No other major English writer of the twentieth century has come close to Lawrence in the range of his writing, or succeeded in remaining so completely individual while practising across a variety of forms. If an output that stretches over many forms can be a sign of a writer's not having found the right one, or even of his following the trends of the day, it can also be evidence of an energy, of a capacity to exploit the different emphases afforded by different forms, and of a personality so alert that each experience, each emotion, becomes material demanding appropriate literary expression.

We can return to Lawrence's lambs for a while, and see how treatment in a different form, novel rather than letter, will allow different features to be found in a common topic.<sup>3</sup> In Chapter VI of *The Rainbow*, 'Anna Victrix', Anna Brangwen is sitting beside her husband, Will, in the little church at Cossethay. She looks up at the 'little stained window' and sees there, set in 'the ruby-coloured glass', the 'familiar yellow figure of the lamb holding the banner'. Lawrence continues:

She had always liked the little red and yellow window. The lamb, looking very silly and self-conscious, was holding up a forepaw, in the cleft of which was dangerously perched a little flag with a red cross. Very pale yellow, the lamb, with greenish shadows. Since she was a child she had liked this creature, with the same feeling she felt for the little woolly lambs on green legs that the children carried home from the fair every year. She had always liked those toys, and she had the same amused, childish liking for this church lamb. Yet she had always been uneasy about it. She was never sure that this Lamb with a flag did not want to be more than it appeared. So she half mistrusted it, there was a mixture of dislike in her attitude to it. (pp. 159-60)

Will, on the other hand, is observed as 'motionless, timeless, with the faint, bright tension on his face' (p. 160). The most obvious

difference between this and Lawrence's letter is that here the feelings are those of a character, not necessarily of Lawrence himself. The surface of the paragraph, however, has as much variety as Lawrence's mixing in his letter of the casual and the passionate, except that here the mix is of more subtly distinguished varieties of language. The impression is created of a character whose mind has settled on one item of her surroundings, the lamb, which is then allowed to lead to the contemplation of a series of memories and emotions while she neglects the real purpose of being in church. A high proportion of the verbs take the pluperfect form ('She had always liked . . . '), which has the effect of pushing the focus of the emotions away from the present of the scene but at the same time of rooting those emotions in a past that stretches back to early childhood. The picture of the children carrying their woolly lambs home from the fair gives visual form to what would otherwise be simply a catalogue of imparted information. The static nature of the scene itself, sitting in a church, imposes constraints, forcing Lawrence to focus on the thoughts of the character rather than on actions, again unlike the activities of the letter. The mixing of verbal forms, pluperfect with past continuous ('The lamb . . . was holding'), provides variety here, as well as implying the continuity in Anna's feelings: she had felt this, she was continuing to feel it. But other features are isolated, separated out from being solely the focus of Anna's attention. The lamb 'looking very silly and self-conscious', because Lawrence has used the present participle rather than the simple past, 'looked', is given a permanence and authority that does not depend on it appearing to Anna as silly and self-conscious. More strikingly, the sentence 'Very pale yellow, the lamb, with greenish shadows' stands out alone with no verbal form at all, as if not dependent on any agent's seeing or thinking it.

When we turn to consider the actual object of Anna's and Lawrence's dislike, we begin to find closer parallels between letter and novel. In both cases more than one kind of lamb is involved in the treatment of the topic – real and symbolic in the letter, and depicted, toy and symbolic in the novel – but each turns out at bottom to have a strong religious significance, even in the letter where the religious side is very much forced in. Anna's uneasiness is clearly based upon a suspicion about interpretation, that 'this Lamb with a flag' might want to be 'more than it appeared',

that it might, in other words, represent a range of meaning that was above her and beyond her rather than being simply what it looked like, as the toy lambs of her childhood did. At this point we can see how Lawrence is using a single detail to develop one of the novel's main patterns, the way in which characters relate to, or fail to relate to, the unknown, to that which is vaster and more enduring than themselves. We might recall Tom Brangwen, Anna's adoptive father:

But during the long February nights with the ewes in labour, looking out from the shelter into the flashing stars, he knew he did not belong to himself. He must admit that he was only fragmentary, something incomplete and subject. There were the stars in the dark heaven travelling, the whole host passing by on some eternal voyage. So he sat small and submissive to the great ordering. (p. 40)

Tom, his wife Lydia, her granddaughter Ursula, all have the capacity to see themselves in the context of the unknown without fighting back, without terror of annihilation. Other characters, like Anton Skrebensky, Uncle Tom Brangwen, Winifred Inger, and Anna, see the unknown as so threatening that they are impelled to resist it, even to deny its existence. In doing so, they deny a large part of themselves, remaining creatures who have turned their backs on the rainbow. So Anna suddenly sees what the lamb means.

Suddenly it gleamed to her dominant, this lamb with the flag. Suddenly she had a powerful mystic experience, the power of the tradition seized on her, she was transported to another world. And she hated it, resisted it. (p. 160)

The rather sedate language and rhythms of the earlier paragraph, taking their tone from the fact that Anna and Will are in church, have disappeared now, and we have the beginning of a gathering surge of emotional uplift with the promise of 'Suddenly', and again 'Suddenly', the second introducing a sentence of three main clauses, three powerfully impressed stages in the experience. Indeed, the word 'power' itself contributes to the surge, appearing first as an adjective modifying the complement in 'she had a powerful mystic experience', and then being picked up in the following clause and promoted to subject, 'the power of the tradition seized on her'. This naturally builds energy into the structure of the passage, suggesting a rising pattern supported by the vitality of its own elements. Anna, conversely, is demoted from subject in 'she had' to complement in 'seized on her'. Here, of course, mirrored in the language, is the nub of Anna's fear: she is threatened by forces more powerful than herself: her personality, that which is uniquely her, is in danger of being dismissed, as she sees it, as insignificant. And the gathering momentum of the paragraph is suddenly halted by the change in language, by Anna's change to resistance: 'And she hated it, resisted it.' The two main verbs reassert her sense of agency, frustrating the prose rhythms, while the threat of the lamb is reduced by the harsh, concise pronoun, repeated, as if to keep the creature firmly in its place. That Will seems so absorbed by the lamb ('What was he doing? What connexion was there between him and the lamb in the glass?') not only makes the threat more distasteful to Anna, but also reminds us that the fear of possession by another person is one of the root causes of the failure of their marriage at this time.

Naturally, we hardly expect to find such extensive and careful rooting of attitudes within larger patterns when we read a letter to a friend, so the description of the lambs in Cornwall is rightly treated in a far lighter vein. It is nevertheless the case that Lawrence straightaway moves to a religious dimension, as if he, like Anna, resents the capacity of the lamb to symbolise a plane which he feels is somehow a detraction from the way things ought to be. The passage is amusing, and its stylistic devices bring out the 'silly' and the entertaining rather than being concerned with character analysis and integration into a pattern of themes. Lawrence, all the same, has been labouring to set his garden in order. His idea of 'beautiful' is represented by the 'rows' of his vegetables. The lambs in their actual presence are an encroachment on his self-expression just as the qualities they symbolise in the Christian religion are an encroachment on his spiritual personality. So, he is working 'to make a fence' to keep them out. He has to preserve his personality, just as Anna does, whether in the order of his garden, where he builds fences, or in his assessment of what is of spiritual value, where he resists with humour and mockery.

Each form, then, novel and letter, has features which permit the writer to develop different facets of his topic, features like the relation assumed between writer and reader, the implications of this relationship for the kind of language that is appropriate, and, in the case of the novel, the existence of an intermediary, the character, between the emotional attitudes portrayed and the emotional response expected from the reader. At the same time, however, we can acknowledge that one predominant issue underlies Lawrence's writing in these two passages, the threat to personality and the response to that threat. Comparing the two, we realise that the Lawrence whose personality has been asserted in the letter is also the Lawrence who has rendered Anna Brangwen's personality with all the forcefulness and delicacy necessary for her particular situation. Here is one significant measure of his success as a novelist of deep personal convictions. We do not doubt that it is Anna who is feeling these things, even when we know that Lawrence felt something like them himself. The force of his own sense of personality, in other words, has been subjugated to the artistic necessity of allowing proper expression of the force of Anna's. If the passage draws on Lawrence's own feelings, thereby gaining in vitality, it is not at the cost of allowing those feelings to show through. (The letter was actually written some three years later than Lawrence's first draft of The Rainbow, but the feelings expressed from St Ives are hardly unique in Lawrence's life, or in his correspondence. What he writes in 1917 is typical of the kind of man he was.)

The distinctiveness and value of Lawrence's writing are clarified if we now consider the relation between his work and that of his most significant contemporaries. Lawrence's era was the period of literary modernism. The techniques developed by such writers as Conrad and Joyce, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, were ones designed far more to disguise or conceal the personality of the author than to reveal it. When Stephen Dedalus speaks of the role of the artist in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, it is in terms of the removal of the creator from what he has created.

The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.5

The stylistic changes throughout A Portrait are adopted in order to reflect, first and foremost, the development of Stephen's mind and of his linguistic sophistication. They also, however, act as a kind of denial of authorship. Joyce himself has disappeared behind the linguistic devices that can tell us all we need to know about Stephen and his way of seeing and thinking. Conrad, too, disappears behind narrative devices, behind narrators like Marlow in Heart of Darkness and Lord Jim, or behind the opinions and experiences of a constantly changing series of characters, as in Nostromo. Henry James, in many ways a more traditional novelist than either Conrad or Joyce, is nevertheless a highly influential practitioner of the art of focusing the experience of the novel not through his own eyes but through those of a central character. Here, for example, is James speaking in the preface to The Portrait of a Lady of his conception of the role of his central character, Isabel Archer.

'Place the centre of the subject in the young woman's own consciousness,' I said to myself, 'and you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you could wish. Stick to that - for the centre; put the heaviest weight into that scale, which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself. Make her only interested enough, at the same time, in the things that are not herself, and this relation needn't fear to be too limited.'6

When we are brought to judge Isabel, it is because she is judging herself, not because James stands back and tells us, and the evidence we weigh in framing our judgement is evidence that has come to us through her own experience and of which she, too, is in full possession. Personality, where it is an issue - as it is with Isabel, and with Martin Decoud in Nostromo, and Doctor Sloper in Washington Square - is a matter of the character's relation to him or herself. It is the strengths and shortcomings of personality that are under analysis at the same time as they provide the momentum for the progression of the novel - Isabel's urge for experience, Decoud's political vision,