THE PORTABLE

D. H. LAWRENCE

BY DIANA TRILLING

THE PORTABLE
D. H. LAWRENCE

EDITED AND
WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY DIANA TRILLING

PENGUIN BOOKS

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth,
Middlesex, England
Penguin Books, 40 West 23rd Street,
New York, New York 10010, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood,
Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Limited, 2801 John Street,
Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road,
Auckland 10, New Zealand

First published in the United States of America
by The Viking Press 1947
Paperbound edition published 1955
Reprinted 1956, 1957, 1958, 1959 (twice), 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963,
1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968 (twice), 1969 (three times),
1971 (twice), 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976.
Published in Penguin Books 1977
Reprinted 1978, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1985

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA
Lawrence, David Herbert, 1885-1930.
The portable D. H. Lawrence.
I. Trilling, Diana. II. Title.
PR6023.A93A6 1977 828'.9'1209 76-54705
ISBN 0 14 015 028 5

Printed in the United States of America by
Kingsport Press, Inc., Kingsport, Tennessee
Set in Linotype Caledonia

Contents

Editor's Introduction

D. H. LAWRENCE was only forty-five when he died in Vence, in the south of France, of the tuberculosis that had long been threatening him. His life, although relatively short, had been strikingly active and full of dramatic contrasts. Born in a small English mining-town, he had travelled over a large part of the world—on the Continent, in Australia, India, the United States, and Mexico. The son of a coal-miner, he had married Frieda von Richthofen, of an old German feudal family. Brought up in the confines of an inordinately tight family group, he had come to know people of many nationalities and distinctions. Never robust, he had lived with titanic energy and produced an enormous quantity of work.

At his death in 1930, Lawrence left behind him close to fifty volumes of novels, long and short stories, plays, poems, essays, and travel journals, not to mention an extensive personal correspondence and a mass of material that has been published posthumously. It is an unusually large production, among the largest in English letters. It is also an unusually varied and fascinating body of work, the fruit of one of the very great literary talents of our time.

If Lawrence had been only a novelist, he would still claim a permanent place in literary history for his ten full-length novels alone. Or if he had written nothing except his long and short stories, not even his novels, he

would still have made a major contribution to modern fiction. But apart from the novels and stories, there is Lawrence's poetry—some of it, it is true, careless or uninteresting, but a good part of it of extraordinary quality and there are his critical writings which offer an embarrassment of riches to the editor who would choose among them.

The abundance of Lawrence's production is not the result of merely a literary impulse—the desire of the artist to multiply his creations. It is the expression of Lawrence's urgent temperament, and of the immediacy with which he responded to the world. Lawrence lived, of course, in the years which gave birth to so many of our present-day social and political confusions. What he saw around him drove him to extremes of loathing and fear: writing was his means of exorcizing his own demons and of trying to exorcize the demons of the rest of mankind. It was a work to which he brought an eccentric but remarkably acute intelligence. He saw and recorded the first appearance of the telephone, the motor-car, the movies, the airplane, the radio—and had a deep, bitter intuition of their role in our culture. He reached the height of his powers during the First World War, to which he was opposed with more than conscientious objections. He estimated, more accurately than any of his contemporaries, the social and moral cost of an increasingly dominant industrialism, and the price the modern "free" spirit must pay for its assertions.

There have been few writers in any era, and certainly none in ours, who have combined as Lawrence did the gifts of the creative heart and the penetrations of the critical intellect. Poet and prophet, novelist and polemicist, mystic and pamphleteer, he was a richly complicated human being, profoundly committed to the life of the Word at the same time that he so rigorously

attacked the perversions of life that have been communicated in language.

In view of Lawrence's unique interest, the condition of his literary reputation requires explanation. For between his achievement and his fate as a writer there is certainly a serious disproportion. Even while he lived, Lawrence met great popular and critical resistance. He was never read as widely as he deserved and seldom read properly; he had many difficulties of publication; the problem of earning a living was a constant harassment. In fact, I suppose that of all modern authors Lawrence has generated most prejudice and suspicion. And since his death, his fate has become even worse. A literary position that was never secure seems to be steadily weakening. In the short space of a decade and a half, a writer of the first rank gives evidence of becoming a peripheral figure—someone whom the younger readers among us neither know nor feel they need to know and whom the older readers among us remember with a touch of awkward indulgence for their own youth.

No doubt accident has played its part in this history of a reputation. A very uneven writer, Lawrence is peculiarly at the mercy of where we chance to make his acquaintance. His work varies considerably in the success of its art and, what is even more important, it gives an often disturbing play to Lawrence's temporary moods. The non-mystical reader who first meets Lawrence when he is very advanced in mysticism is little likely to search for the reality from which this mysticism derives and to which it was directed; or the reader who comes on certain of Lawrence's political ideas before he has a context for them, will scarcely seek out a context before formulating judgment. Nor does Lawrence ever suggest that a first acquaintance is a sampling. His personality is so pronounced that he

seems always to be making final pronouncements, and we do not look for the corrections and modifications that would be expectable in a person of less passion.

But the misunderstanding of Lawrence's intention that arises from inadequate knowledge cannot alone explain the antagonism his work has roused. This must in large share be accounted for by the character of the work itself. And even an admirer must admit the justice in some of the charges that have been made against Lawrence. But what anyone who recognizes his enormous interest and value as well as his faults and shortcomings is also aware of, is the illegitimate uses to which his weaknesses have been put, the way in which criticism has concentrated on his shortcomings in order not to have to see his truth. Measured against his achievements, his faults make but a poor indictment. One need not hesitate to name them. Lawrence, in fact, is pre-eminently the kind of writer who can only profit from objective appraisal.

The first, and probably the most justified, reason for distrust or dislike of Lawrence is his intemperate tone. It is not to be denied that Lawrence often presents himself as an emotionally undisciplined writer, especially in the work of his middle and late years. There are the pages of black mood in such novels as *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, and *Aaron's Rod*; the extravagance of conception and statement in the novels *The Lost Girl*, *Kangaroo*, *The Plumed Serpent*; the aggressiveness of much of his poetry; the too-great intensity of much of his critical writing. His emotional excess and the nature of his fantasy are bound to disturb the unoriented reader; even to the reader schooled in Lawrence, they are uncongenial. By offering his startling ideas in such a startling manner, Lawrence gives an easy handle to disapprobation.

But if this intemperateness is the first cause of hostility, I think it is also the most superficial cause. I suspect Lawrence's extravagances could be edited out of his work and the work would still excite a quick antagonism. For the real source of our hostility lies well beneath the surface of Lawrence's eccentricity, at the very heart of his genius. We could no doubt forgive him the excess of his virtues if we could but forgive the virtues themselves, which so disquietingly challenge all our accepted ways of thinking and feeling.

From the very start of his career, already in *The White Peacock*, published when he was only twenty-six, Lawrence sounded the revolutionary note in his art which was to be emphasized until, by the end of his career, one would be hard put to it to name another writer, unless among the extreme *avant-garde* of this century, who so thoroughly rejects the moral and emotional premises of modern life—not alone the traditional literary forms, but also the whole modern Christian ethos. The mature James Joyce, for example, is far more revolutionary in technique than Lawrence, but except in so far as any technical innovation must be regarded as a new moral assumption, Joyce's work does not break with the moral assumptions of the past; it is a commonplace to speak of Joyce as a Catholic writer. It is only the post-Joycean writers, the formulated aim of whose technical innovations, unlike that of Joyce, is complete discontinuity with the modern tradition rather than a renewal or renovation of our awareness of the traditional, who can be said to bear any inner moral kinship with Lawrence.

But these innovators turn their backs on the past, whereas Lawrence confronts it in a fierce and fearless attack, carrying the ark into battle against all our modern imperatives. The assault that Lawrence makes

upon the imperative of the modern individual will, of the modern social will, of the modern Christian will, is wide and relentless, unalleviated by any real hope of change, improvement, or reform. It is therefore misleading even to speak of him as a revolutionary—since in our present-day society it is the revolutionaries who are the great guardians and proselytizers of hope. And certainly in the limited contemporary political use of the word, Lawrence, who saw so little to please him in the Russian Revolution or in any projected uprising of the proletariat, was anything but a revolutionary. On the other hand, neither was he a reactionary, or any other order of political man. He canvassed the modern social-political organization because he wished to search out as many as possible of the origins and manifestations of the modern spirit, but he never deceived himself that the new form of *being* which he demanded could be legislated into existence. Like his inquiry into Freudian doctrine, his research into various kinds of political doctrine had its conclusion as its point of departure.

Lawrence studied the contemporary politic as he studied the contemporary psychology, the more surely to be able to discard it as incompatible with his personal vision. Whatever sympathy for one social order as against another he may temporarily indicate, there is finally no new order he would substitute for our present order; there is no new political system with which he would replace any of the familiar systems; no reform program for the reconstitution of a civilization. To Lawrence, all orders, systems, programs are equally suspect as mere reshufflings of the modes of a worn and fruitless way of being. For what he is seeking is not a new form of organization, but an entirely new form of consciousness. He sees a terrible error in our modern institutions, but he is certain that our institutions only

reflect our erroneous conception of man's nature. For a new form of consciousness, man requires a new notion of the self; or, to take it the other way round, a new self can be created only out of an entirely new form of consciousness. Because all of modern civilization as we have known it in the Christian era is founded on "ideal" values, on mental consciousness and the denial of the body, on a denial of the "blood-consciousness," he is sure it must be destroyed if man is ever to realize his human possibilities.

In *Kangaroo,* his Australian novel, Lawrence describes himself as "a kind of human bomb." The figure is an accurate one; the bomb-like effect is the effect to which he aspires. Like his talismanic symbol of the Phoenix which rises to a new life from its ashes, Lawrence's bomb image suggests the total annihilation of Christian civilization which is his condition for a new birth. And his instrument, both for this act of destruction and the act of re-creation, is the sexual mystery. It is in man's sexual impulse, taken out of the mental consciousness and returned to the body and the blood where it belongs, that Lawrence finds the clue to salvation. Not the "sex in the head" of "advanced" people, of the modern theorists of sex; not the sensation of sex, which is what is sought in the decadence of civilization; not idealized sex, as it is allowed by the Christian religions; but sex as it is understood by primitive peoples, before the body has been "purified" and de-energized, civilized out of existence. According to Lawrence it is when man fulfills his sexual nature that he attains his highest human destiny, and achieves godhood.

"I am a profoundly religious man," Lawrence wrote in a letter. But his religion is, of course, as little connected with religion as we commonly know it as his revolution is connected with our usual notions of political change. It

has nothing at all to do with organized faith, with a religion of doctrine, covenants, and churches. It derives from neither the Old Testament nor the New; quite the contrary, it is deeply opposed to both Hebraism and Christianity. Indeed, Lawrence concentrates most of the blame for our basic ills upon Christianity. It is because modern man follows the word of Jesus that he lives by a false prophecy. Seeking a new revelation for the world, Lawrence finds it in the religion of the pre-Christian, pre-Judaic mysteries, in an invocation of the "dark gods" of certain primitive civilizations.

The relation between Lawrence's religious ideas and the whole of his personal, social, and political thinking is integral. Just as his only god is the god of the sexual mystery, the god in man's own blood, so his only social and political criterion is whether man is permitted his godhood or robbed of it. This is the test by which Lawrence appraises us in our private lives, and finds *us* wanting, and it is the test by which he judges, and condemns, both our social theory and our social practice. The revolution to which all of his work is dedicated is a revolution of our inner values, out of which will naturally spring a thorough revision of political and social institutions. It is an attitude so deeply antithetical to the spirit of our time, to our modern faith in social progress, as to suggest not revolution but counter-revolution. And when we confront, as well, Lawrence's conviction that the modern democratic ideal destroys rather than creates this spiritual revolution, we begin to glimpse some part of our present-day need to stand firmly against his ideas.

Yet the fact is that Lawrence's thinking is intended less to offer us a set of new ideas than a totally new experience—the experience of a wholly new way of feeling. It is a distinction to which Lawrence himself is

very alert as he writes: "The world doesn't fear a new idea. It can pigeonhole any idea. But it can't pigeonhole a real new experience." But the world can of course try to destroy a new and fearful experience by trying to pigeonhole the ideas which are the vehicle of its expression—and this is exactly what has happened in Lawrence's case.

Lawrence's ideas are essentially poetic ideas, by which I mean that they suggest more than they state and that, read literally, they are read mistakenly or inadequately. But Lawrence is always being taken as literally as if he were a systematic thinker—a philosopher, a theologian, a political theorist, or a theoretical psychologist. The responsibility for this mistaken approach is not ours alone; Lawrence invites us to it. He himself constantly confuses us as to whether he is talking poetry or hard, polemical prose. All but his young works, *The White Peacock*, *The Trespasser*, *Sons and Lovers*, the early poems and stories, hover on the edge of social-political formulation, and some of them, such as the play *Touch and Go* or the novel *Kangaroo* or the novel *The Plumed Serpent*, go well over the edge. There are few controversial issues of his and our day—the relation of capital and labor, the ideologies of communism and socialism, Freudianism, sexual problems, feminism, education—to which he fails to address himself. Surrounding and supporting his poetic insights are opinions in our immediate world of reality with which we may sometimes agree but which frequently do violence to our own most cherished opinions. Thus, he will discuss democracy in terms that are bound to offend the modern democratic spirit; or he investigates the class structure of our society with all the bias of his own disquiet about his proletarian origin. And if there is nevertheless a truth in his analysis of our democratic assump-

tions that democrats of any spirit do well to ponder, and a profound perceptiveness in his anatomy of the master-man relationship, we can benefit by these insights only by making a separation that Lawrence himself never finally makes—between his poetic vision and its application.

In other words, himself far too passionate to be very elastic, Lawrence requires a great elasticity of his reader. He demands a double approach—to the polemicist and to the poet. And this demand must surely generate much of our suspicion of him. For the current of modern feeling is peculiarly against the making of double judgments. We want both our literature and our politics to deal in absolutes. We want truth all in one piece, and we resent having to pick our way to it, taking a bit here and a bit there, or being compelled to admit that a subtle truth can inhere in what has all the appearance of falsehood. We prefer to discard truth with untruth, especially when, as in Lawrence, the truth itself is of such a disturbing kind. And Lawrence's poetic perceptions touch the very quick of the modern sensibility, penetrating all the layers of disguise and self-deception with which we cover our personal and social fears. It is because Lawrence hits so directly at our weaknesses that we rush to the attack upon *his* weaknesses, manifest or imagined, and try to dismiss him as reactionary, as fascist, as death-worshipping, as sexually abnormal.

The last is the most frequent avenue of attack—naturally, since it is in the sexual sphere, where we are most self-protective, that Lawrence speaks to us most often and pointedly. We may dismiss a public which, never having read Lawrence, yet disapproves of him as a sexual writer, as even a sort of shady character. Or we may dismiss the people who have read *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as a work of pornography. There

still remains the large group of presumably responsible readers who, though they may grant Lawrence a seriousness which should preclude sensationalism, themselves sensationalize or otherwise distort his sexual content. No aspect of Lawrence's thought has been more over-responded to, or more misrepresented, than his sexual ideas. On the one hand, he is accused of an absurd, almost obscene, emphasis upon the physical act of sex—an advocacy of "more and better copulation," as one critic has recently put it; on the other, he is denounced for rarefying sex out of any possibility of ordinary normal enjoyment; and between these two extremes, he is made the victim of almost all our modern sexual confusions. The Lawrence record is combed for evidences of personal abnormality, and where any hint is found or guessed at, it is presented not for the better understanding of his work, but against his sexual authority.

Only less common than the attack upon Lawrence for his sexual ideas, and equally ungrounded, is the attack upon him as a death-worshipper, as a negator of our life energies.

Turn away, friend, from a man who fled from himself, in a year
When the nations were turning like giants in slumber, O far and near
For the mythological war of the world, and this one with a sneer
Sailed away to a Mexican death which was all that his genius held dear.

The lines are from a poem called "D.H.L.," by one of our younger poets. They expose as much ignorance of Lawrence as hatred of him. For the "otherness" of which Lawrence was so sensible, his invocation of the dark, hidden forces of the universe, may borrow—in the