

# PROMPTINGS OF DESIRE

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CREATIVITY AND THE  
RELIGIOUS IMPULSE IN THE  
WORKS OF  
D. H. LAWRENCE

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The creative, spontaneous soul sends forth its promptings of desire and aspiration in us. These promptings are our true fate, which it is our business to fulfil.

Foreword to *Women in Love*

## Preface

I would like to thank Professor David Skilton for his advice and guidance throughout the early stages of this book's composition and for his detailed comments on several of its early drafts. In the book's later stages, Professor John Worthen has been typically generous with his time, books, advice, and enthusiasm, and I am indebted to him for his inspiring support as both a teacher and a friend.

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## Introduction

D. H. Lawrence was a writer with a passionate moral purpose. He wrote with the express intention of influencing and affecting people, and of changing them—of changing their beliefs and desires, their attitudes and behavior. Above all, he wanted people actively to change *themselves*, following their own promptings from “the deep, passional soul” (*Women in Love* 485). His works testify to a belief that each individual possesses the potential for continuous creative change across the whole range of his or her existential experience. Through his art, Lawrence encouraged and exhorted people to recognize and energize this potential within them, and ultimately to turn it toward the founding of a more fulfilling mode of existence, both for themselves as individuals and for society as a whole.

It will be the main contention of this book, therefore, that the nature of Lawrence’s artistic “crusade” can best be defined by the complex of concerns circumscribed and unified by the concept of creativity. This difficult, slippery, but crucial modern term represents, I shall argue, a central theme within Lawrence’s works, and a central structuring principle of his aesthetic, ethical, and metaphysical thought. I hope to demonstrate that a proper understanding of this concept and of its interrelationship with Lawrence’s basic religious beliefs can provide us with an integrated overall perspective on his art capable of unifying it in a coherent way but also of engaging it in open-ended critical dialogue.

While my study will range widely across Lawrence’s writings, it makes no claims to be comprehensive. The intention is rather to present an integrated general reading and to propose one possible pathway for the contemporary reader through the admitted diversity and complexity of the author’s output. The pathway is only one choice among many, of course, and it will necessarily be limited by its own particular orientation,

but I hope the reader will agree that it takes us through some of the more spectacular scenery in the Lawrence landscape, and that it reveals something of its essential topography. For like the heart Lawrence talks of in his poem "The Heart of Man," his work can be characterized as a "pulsing continent" that is indeed alive with the flow of "rivers of fullness, desire and distress" (*Last Poems* 99).

## ABBREVIATIONS

Lawrence's works are referred to in the text by their main titles, or shortened versions thereof, with the exception of the following two Cambridge editions, which are abbreviated as indicated:

*Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays* STH

*Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays* RDP

Works by other authors are referred to using the author-date citation system. Full details of all works cited are given in the bibliography.



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# ONE

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## The Concept of Creativity: A Preliminary View

"this Divine, miraculous, creative power"

(Cudworth 1678; Williams 1983: 83)

It neatly accords with my overall argument that the verb *to create* came into English through the past participle *creat* (from the Latin *creare*), which had reference solely to the divine creation of the world: "The creatour . . . fro the begynning of tyme creat . . . the creature . . . of no thyng or of no matere precedent" (1398; *OED*). This original sense of *create* as "to form out of nothing" thus had a precise religious focus, and the context of divine creation remained decisive until at least the sixteenth century (Williams 1983: 82).

With the advent of Renaissance humanism, there was an extension of the term "to indicate present or future making—that is to say a kind of making by men" (Williams 1983: 82). Thereafter, the words *create* and *creation* quickly started to acquire elements of their common modern meanings, though at first only on a strongly metaphoric basis, with acts of human making being given "solemn religious associations" (Smith 1933: 91) by the underlying reference to divine creation: "Thus make they Kings to fill the Regal seat; And thus their little Citizens create" (1697; *OED*). The religious grounds of the metaphor may have been all but forgotten today, but this last quotation illustrates nicely the underlying ambivalence of the concept of creativity when seen in terms of its derivation from the concept of divine creation.

This ambivalence was thrown into sharp focus by the trend in Renaissance aesthetics which sought to portray artistic production as a God-like process—"Non merita nome di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta" ("There are only two creators, God and the poet"), wrote Tor-

quato Tasso (1544–95; Hughes 1969: 81). “In the aesthetic theory of sixteenth-century Italy,” writes M. H. Abrams,

The artist, from being a craftsman, became (in a momentous new aesthetic metaphor) a creator, for it was sometimes said that of all men the poet is likest God because he creates according to those patterns on which God himself has modelled the universe. (Abrams 1953: 42)

This essentially Neoplatonic theory, based on a belief in “pure forms” or “essences,” still saw artistic activity more as imitation of these mystic absolutes, or of nature, than as creation in the sense of original production from nothing. We also see here the tension that Pater noted in the Renaissance attempt “to reconcile Christianity with the religion of ancient Greece” (Pater 1877: 32). Thus, while on the one hand the Renaissance tended toward a greater integration of the concepts of divine and human creativity, on the other hand it continued to affirm an important categorical distinction between the two by firmly framing the latter as a metaphor for the former. As Williams says, the Renaissance sense of human creation, “specifically in works of the imagination, is the decisive source of the modern meaning,” but as the above suggests, the term remains complicated by its original context (Williams 1983: 82).

As the association of *create* and *creation* with specifically artistic activity was consolidated throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (when the word *creative* was coined to denote an aesthetic faculty) and then, crucially, into the Romantic period, the uneasy combination of the human and the divine manifested itself also in the closely related concepts of *inspiration* and *genius*. Both words clearly have religious connotations through their reference to, on the one hand, the “infusion into the mind by a superior power” (Dr. Johnson; Smith 1933: 97), and, on the other, “a guardian spirit” (from the Latin). They add a sort of causal dimension to the creativity metaphor based on the idea of humankind having been made in God’s image, with a creative ability that both reflects and derives from God’s originating power. As Sir Philip Sidney put it in *An Apologie for Poetrie* (1595):

Neither let it be deemed too sawcie a comparison to ballance the highest poynt of mans wit with the efficacie of Nature: but rather give right honor to the heavenly Maker of that maker; who having made man to his owne likenes, set him beyond and over all the workes of that second nature: which in nothing hee sheweth so much as in Poetrie; when, with the force of a divine breath, he bringeth things forth far surpassing her dooings. (Cambridge 1951: 9)

Now, while the idea of inspiration and “the inspired genius which creates” (1832; *OED*) exalts the human creative faculty by tying it to a divine source (and this was seen as blasphemous in some quarters [Smith 1933:

105]), it also cuts in an opposite direction for any more rationalistic view of creativity, and it bears the seed of a fundamental paradox for individualistic Romanticism. For though the inspired genius becomes a halLOWed figure, he also becomes a *controlled* figure, subject to the mysterious promptings of a supernatural force. Moreover, it is important for my later purposes to recognize that to define creativity as the inspirational prerogative of the god-like genius alone is to narrow and mystify the concept along elitist lines that ideologically exclude the majority of people from the sphere of creativity.

Thus, along with the progressive secularization and opening out of the concept, there remains latent within it a regressive, restrictive mysticism, and this emerges most clearly in certain strands of Romantic and late-Romantic thought and practice—specifically, in the tendency to restrict the category of genuine “individual” to only a few people, the “heroes” or the “elect,” in contradistinction to the herd-like masses. The implications of this will be important to my later discussion of Lawrence’s largely Romantic view of creativity and his deep-rooted ambivalence toward the individual as seen within a complex society.<sup>1</sup>

It was ostensibly with the Romantic movement that the concept of creativity acquired, or rather, consolidated, the cluster of ideas with which we mainly associate it today: the idea of *original* production, especially of the mind, and in particular through the workings of the *imagination*; the idea that true creativity is predominantly the attribute of the *genius*, who is very rare and who is unusually receptive to the *spontaneous* promptings of mysterious *inspiration*; and the idea that creativity is inherently *progressive* and good for both the creating individual and for society in general, and is to be highly valued. Of course, along with these grander Romantic formulations, the verb *to create* has retained its most humble metaphoric usages and its most basic and simple meanings of *to make*, *to produce*, and *to cause*: “It is always necessary before lighting the fire in the stove, to create a draught by heating the chimney” (1854; OED).

The word *creativity* itself is a twentieth-century coinage used as a general term to refer to the creative faculty. In addition to—indeed in opposition to—the Romantic connotations outlined above, perhaps the most significant new meanings gradually attaching to the word throughout the present century have all been to do with the idea of “a general human creativity” (Williams 1965: 44) no longer limited to specialized spheres of activity or to specifically “gifted” individuals (though this narrower sense of the word continues to have wide currency):<sup>2</sup>

The “creative spark” is not the exclusive property of a few rare individuals down through the centuries but rather is an intrinsic ingredient of the everyday mental activity of everyone, even the most ordinary people. . . . Creativity is part of the

fabric of all human thought, rather than some esoteric, rare, exceptional or fluky by-product of the ability to think, which surfaces every so often here and there. (Hofstadter 1982: 18)

Increasingly, in fact, among thinkers across all disciplines, the creative faculty has come to be seen as the pre-eminent defining characteristic of what it is to be human:

It is man's nature, and the history of his evolution, to be continually learning. . . . Since this continuing organization and reorganization of consciousness is, for man, the organization and reorganization of reality . . . it is clear that there is a real sense in which man can be called a creator. (Williams 1965: 38)

The biologist Henri Laborit has written similarly "that the fundamental characteristic of man is creative imagination: not merely the imagination which creates commodities, but the imagination which creates new structures to enrich his knowledge of the world in which he is submerged" (1977: 207). Like Williams—whose "long revolution" is seen to be fuelled by this capacity—Laborit places the stress here firmly on the human capacity for creating new structures of *information*. He continues,

All the progress made by this species since the beginning of human history has been the result of . . . creativity. . . . The attribute of creation, of creating information by means of the imagination with memorised experience as the starting point, is possessed from the day of his birth by every human being who is not mentally handicapped. If he loses this attribute it is his environment which is responsible. (Laborit 1977: 217–18)

The cultural revolution Williams talks of is precisely the revolution in human consciousness that has engendered for the twentieth century an "environment" ever more fully aware of its responsibilities to the "attribute of creation": "The human energy of the long revolution springs from the conviction that men can direct their own lives, by breaking through the pressures and restrictions of older forms of society, and by discovering new common institutions" (Williams 1965: 375).

If the human energy that is "creativity" has come to characterize the essential spirit of the twentieth century, then, I would argue, there is no single body of artistic work that gives sharper definition to this energy than that of D. H. Lawrence. And if it is true, as I shall maintain it is, that the concept of creativity lies at the very heart of Lawrence's work and is given full expression by it, then there is a very real sense in which "D. H. Lawrence" lies at the very heart of the twentieth-century's consciousness of itself. The creative "revolution," that is, has had no more eloquent an exponent than Lawrence. Though we continue, inevitably, to recreate him in our own image,<sup>3</sup> it is still difficult today, reading him,

to escape the feeling that it was he who largely shaped that image in the first place: Lawrence, as Williams has said, "is where in our time we have had to begin" (1970: 184).<sup>4</sup>

Critics constantly use the terms *creative* or *creativity* when discussing Lawrence's work, but rarely are we given any detailed analysis of what precisely they mean by them. Many often use Lawrence's own phrase, "spontaneous-creative fullness of being" (*Psychoanalysis* 126), or some variation of it, to identify a major preoccupation of his work, but almost always in such a way as to suggest that its meaning is quite plain and unproblematic, when, as I hope to have shown already, it begs many important questions. Moreover, as a term that seems to cut across different critical positions and value-systems, it is not at all clear that critics all mean the same thing when they talk of "creativity," beyond implying some form of general approbation.<sup>5</sup>

The only author who has tried to provide a detailed analysis of the concept is Leone Vivante, who devotes a substantial part of his philosophical work, *A Philosophy of Potentiality* (1955), to a discussion of Lawrence. In a section titled "Reflections on D. H. Lawrence's Insight into the Concept of Potentiality," he says, "If Lawrence is concerned with potentiality, even more explicitly he is with creativity, with creation—creation in and for its own value" (85). Vivante's book provides us with an invaluable philosophical perspective on Lawrence's thinking in this area, but it is primarily a philosophical work and the scope of its discussion of Lawrence is necessarily somewhat limited.

F. R. Leavis, of course, with whom the mainstream evaluation of Lawrence as being a truly creative artist is primarily associated, has written a book on Lawrence whose main title, *Thought, Words and Creativity* (1976), clearly seems to promise a full discussion of the term in question. However, the book does not bear out this promise and hardly discusses the term at all, beyond making broad generalizations and implying an "understood" normative sense of the word. More recently, Daniel Dervin (1984) has explored the formation of Lawrence's "creative imagination" from a specific stance within post-Freudian psychoanalysis. Though his study affords a fascinating insight into the possible psychological origins and phases of the creative process in the individual, it relies on a fairly specialized definition of creativity (which again is rather taken for granted than examined in its own right), and it remains largely a psycho-biographical study, rather than a study of what Lawrence's writings themselves have to say on the subject of creativity.

A need therefore exists, it seems to me, for a much more detailed and focused account of the concept of creativity as it applies to Lawrence, for not only does it crop up constantly in the work of the critics, but he himself used the term often enough in key contexts to foreground it as, precisely, a keyword in the complex configurations of his art. This is

not at all to suggest that we can reduce the diversity and complexity of his work to just this one word. However, I do hope to show that by exploring the word as the realization of a complex and wide-ranging concept, which itself is the realization of a complex philosophy of life and art, we can gain a fuller and more integrated appreciation of the exact nature of his achievement.

What I intend to do in subsequent chapters, then, is to explore various dimensions of Lawrence's art and thought as they bear upon and give substance to his concept of creativity. Although I will begin, in a moment, by formulating a working definition of this concept (which will build upon the foregoing discussion), it is important to recognize that this is only a provisional definition, and that as my overall argument progresses, the meaning of the word *creativity* will be refined and expanded to incorporate new elements of my analysis at each stage.

A working definition that I derive from Lawrence, then, is as follows: *creativity* refers to the human capacity to explore, continually throughout life, one's various changing limitations, in a committed attempt to discover ways of transcending them and of embracing qualitatively new forms of behavior and experience. This is a capacity applicable to human behavior in all its modes—physical, intellectual, social, psychological, emotional, sexual—and not just to certain special spheres of activity such as art or science. Furthermore, creativity, for Lawrence, is essentially inspired from some unknown source, and it leads also to new and therefore unknown forms of experience. Thus, it requires faith in both its inspiration and in its orientation. Finally, connected to this latter point, creativity is crucial to individual fulfillment in that it represents the consummation of one's essential humanity.<sup>6</sup>

This rather full and generalized definition condenses a number of important features of Lawrence's work. In the following chapters I aim to tease these out in some detail and to provide a systematic account of them both individually and as they interrelate to give definition to the concept of creativity.



## TWO

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### The Creative Unconscious: Self, Society, and Freedom

Lawrence placed great stress on an explorative, self-analytical dimension within the process of individual growth and fulfillment. For it is evident, he suggests, that before you can identify and strive toward new structures of selfhood, you must first have a proper understanding of the structures of your existing "self," structures that include your relations with others. Truly creative progress, that is, can emerge only from within a pre-established network of adequately assimilated knowledge and experience of both the self and its "others." "In his adventure of self-consciousness," Lawrence writes, "a man must come to the limits of himself and become aware of something beyond him. A man must be self-conscious enough to know his own limits, and to be aware of that which surpasses him" (*Pornography and Obscenity* 28). Elsewhere, he urges:

let us go down into ourselves. . . . If there is a loathsome thought or suggestion, let us not dispatch it instantly with impertinent righteousness, let us admit it with simplicity, let us accept it, responsible for it. . . . This is the condition of freedom: that in the understanding, I fear nothing. . . . Pull down the veils and understand everything, each man in his own self-responsible soul. Then we are free. (RDP 35)

Of course, such a quest for self-knowledge, "the old-fashioned struggle for identity" (Miko 1971: 196), is not a concern unique to Lawrence, but he gives it a greater weight and prominence, and a sharper focus, than do most other writers. And in his hands, it becomes also a more subtly nuanced concern through his careful delineation of what is necessary for self-knowledge, and in his clear differentiation between that process and the distinct, though related, process of self-renewal and self-tran-

scendence. Precisely speaking, it is not in fact the same thing as “the old-fashioned search for identity”: self-discovery represents only the first step, the necessary means to the further end of creatively renewing and redefining identity.

All Lawrence’s important characters “seek at once self-transcendence and self-definition,” writes Stephen Miko, and Lawrence’s aim, he suggests, is “to define the latter as a presupposition for the former” (1971: 196). Also recognizing this particular emphasis, Aruna Sitiesh places Lawrence in the Puritan tradition of English literature, a tradition that “implies a constant struggle to find something ‘beyond’ ourselves which is possible only through self-discovery after an escape from obsessions and delusions” (1975: 25–26). The depth and extent of the self-analysis necessary to escape “obsessions and delusions” should not be underestimated, however. Although the difficult process of self-definition is only a first step toward the process of self-transcendence, the two processes shade imperceptibly into one another and are both “creative” in their own way. George Panichas suggests as much when he writes that Lawrence believed that there were “vast realms of consciousness which had remained untouched and unexplored and in which the seeds of full, living experience were to be found. It was . . . this pure area that man must explore and ‘touch and wonder, and ponder’ if he were to gain a new fulfillment and awareness” (Panichas 1964: 24).

Moreover, as an integral part of the creative development of the individual, self-exploration for Lawrence is something that must occur in the context of daily personal and interpersonal behavior rather than in the context of special circumstances or of specialized activities:

Wherein are we educated? . . . In politics, in geography . . . social economy and social extravagance: ugh! a frightful universality of knowings. . . . We know nothing, or next to nothing about ourselves. After hundreds of thousands of years we have learned how to wash our faces and bob our hair, and that is about all we *have* learned, *individually*. . . . We are hopelessly uneducated in ourselves. (STH 201)

It was, I would suggest, precisely this “everyday” conception of creativity that confounded many of Lawrence’s contemporaries, for his call to people to learn to express their suppressed inner selves, their “naturally noble” selves, in everything they did, was (and still is) often misunderstood as a call to return to some primitive state of ignoble savagery. In his 1929 essay, “We Need One Another” (published posthumously in 1930), he protested,

I am so tired of being told that I want mankind to go back to the condition of savages. As if modern city people weren’t about the crudest, rawest, most crassly savage monkeys that ever existed. . . . All I see in our vaunted civilization is men