

D. H. LAWRENCE AND THE BIBLE

T. R. WRIGHT



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Abbreviations

All references to Lawrence's work, unless otherwise stated, are to the Cambridge Edition of the Letters and Works of D. H. Lawrence, published by Cambridge University Press, using the following abbreviations of their titles:

- A* *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation*, ed. Mara Kalnins, 1980.
- AR* *Aaron's Rod*, ed. Mara Kalnins, 1988.
- BB* *The Boy in the Bush*, ed. Paul Eggert, 1990.
- CP* *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts, 2 vols, London: Heinemann, 1962.
- EC* *The Escaped Cock*, ed. Gerald M. Lacy, Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1978.
- EE* *England, My England and Other Stories*, ed. Bruce Steele, 1990.
- EP* *Sketches of Etruscan Places and Other Italian Essays*, ed. Simonetta de Filippis, 1992.
- Fant* *Fantasia of the Unconscious and Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.
- FLC* *The First Lady Chatterley*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.
- Fox* *The Fox / The Captain's Doll / The Ladybird*, ed. Dieter Mehl, 1992.
- JTLJ* *John Thomas and Lady Jane*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.
- K* *Kangaroo*, ed. Bruce Steele, 1994.
- LAH* *Love Among the Haystacks and Other Stories*, ed. John Worthen, 1987.
- LCL* *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, ed. Michael Squires, 1993.
- Letters* *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. James Boulton and others, 7 vols, 1979–93.

- LG** *The Lost Girl*, ed. John Worthen, 1981.
MEHa *Movements in European History*, ed. James T. Boulton, Oxford University Press, 1971.
MEHb *Movements in European History*, ed. Philip Crumpton, 1989.
MM *Mornings in Mexico and Etruscan Places*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960.
MN *Mr Noon*, ed. Lindeth Vasey, 1984.
Phoenix *Phoenix, The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Edward McDonald, London: Heinemann, 1936.
Phoenix II *Uncollected, Unpublished and Other Prose Works*, ed. Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore, London: Heinemann, 1968.
Plays *The Plays*, ed. Hans-Wilhelm Schwarze and John Worthen, 1999.
PM 'Paul Morel', the manuscript of the second version of the novel at the Humanities Research Center at Austin, Texas.
PO *The Prussian Officer and Other Stories*, ed. John Worthen, 1983.
PS *The Plumed Serpent*, ed. L. D. Clark, 1987.
Q *Quetzalcoatl: The Early Version of 'The Plumed Serpent'*, ed. Louis L. Martz, Redding Ridge, CT: Black Swan Books, 1995.
R *The Rainbow*, ed. Mark Kinkead-Weekes, 1989.
Ref *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays*, ed. Michael Herbert, 1988.
SCAL *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.
SL *Sons and Lovers*, ed. Helen Baron and Carl Baron, 1992.
SLC *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Anthony Beal, London: Heinemann, 1967.
SM *The Symbolic Meaning: The Uncollected Versions of 'Studies in Classic American Literature'*, ed. Armin Arnold, Arundel: Centaur Press, 1962.
SS *Sea and Sardinia*, ed. Mara Kalnins, 1997.
StM *St Mawr and Other Stories*, ed. Brian Finney, 1983.
STH *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, ed. Bruce Steele, 1985.
T *The Trespasser*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield, 1981.
TI *Twilight in Italy and Other Essays*, ed. Paul Eggert, 1994.
WL *Women in Love*, ed. David Farmer, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen, 1987.
WP *The White Peacock*, ed. Andrew Robertson, 1983.

WRA *The Woman Who Rode Away and Other Stories*, ed. Dieter Mehl and Christa Jansohn, 1995.

All biblical quotations, unless otherwise stated, are taken from the Authorized or King James Version, with standard abbreviations of individual books. Abbreviations of the titles of other works by Friedrich Nietzsche and Helena Blavatsky will be found in the references at the end of the book.

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Closer to home, I would like also to acknowledge the patience of my family, my children Andrew and Catherine and my wife Gabriele, who put up with such a huge demand on my time. Finally I would like to pay tribute to my father, who died in June 1999. It was in his somewhat battered Penguin edition that I first en-

countered Lawrence's works. He would not have liked this book that much, I fear, never having understood my fascination with the Bible or with theories of intertextuality. But it is largely to him that I owe my enthusiasm not just for Lawrence but for literature in general. May he rest in peace.

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CHAPTER I

'The Work of Creation': Lawrence and the Bible

In one of his *Last Poems*, 'The Work of Creation', Lawrence makes the familiar Romantic comparison between the divine creation of the world and the artistic process of writing. 'Even an artist', he claims, knows that the 'mystery of creation' is not a conscious or controlled process, the deliberate realisation of a carefully planned intention:

he could never have *thought* it before it happened.
A strange ache possessed him, and he entered the struggle,
and out of the struggle with his material, in the spell of the urge
his work took place, it came to pass . . . (CP 690)

The poem characteristically reverts to the somewhat archaic biblical phrase, 'it came to pass', from the King James or Authorized Version, where it occurs more than thirty times (Cruden 1954: 99), to introduce the idea that even God 'knows nothing before-hand' but acts spontaneously: 'His urge takes shape in the flesh, and lo! / it is creation'. 'Lo', of course, has an equally biblical ring, which is again appropriate, for much of the material with which Lawrence's own writing struggles is biblical. It is a commonplace of modern literary criticism that all writing is intertextual, that every text involves the 'absorption and transformation of another text' or texts (Newman 1995: 2). It is equally a commonplace of Lawrence criticism, of course, that the Bible is the text which his own work most obviously and most often reworks. His writing, at all stages of his career, contains frequent references to biblical characters and symbols while, even when not invoking any particular passage from the Bible, his language is permeated by the rhythms of the Authorized Version. The aim of this book is to explore this truism more carefully, to pay close attention to the details of this 'struggle' of

creation, to see what 'comes to pass' in Lawrence's work as a result of this creative and critical struggle.

There is a broader concern here too, for this intertextual wrestling, as I hope to demonstrate, amounts to a powerful, wide-ranging and sustained critique of the Bible in the light of modernity, the application of the most 'enlightened' thought to the foundational text of western civilisation. Lawrence, I will argue, anticipates many of the problems facing all of us belated postmoderns as we enter the new millennium, in particular in the west, as we are forced to address the complexity of our relationship to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. However much we may struggle against it, we define ourselves, we understand ourselves, whether in acceptance or rejection (or somewhere in the spectrum between these two poles) in terms of its language and mentality. One of the discomfiting aspects of reading Lawrence is that he reminds us of this. Even if we lack his detailed familiarity with every part of the Bible, we are forced by his constant reference to it to reassess our own attitude to it. We are forced to reread it as well as him. Lawrence's 'decidedly radical stance' both towards what he saw as 'a limiting Christian orthodoxy' and towards scientific modernity, 'the secularist and rationalist ideologies of bourgeois society', offers a challenge to all of us. For he pressed the truth 'that God finally transcends language . . . to an unacceptable extreme' while still managing 'to communicate a richer sense of God than almost any other twentieth-century author' (Eagleton 1973: 87, 100).

Lawrence's relationship to modernity in the sense of 'progress' and technology, of course, was as ambivalent and problematic as his attitude to the Bible. In some respects, he can more accurately be described as a precursor of postmodernism than as a modernist. His playful reworking of biblical material, redeploying fragments of the crumbling Judaeo-Christian tradition in his own creative writing, can be read as a form of postmodern bricolage, building provisional beliefs with the otherwise discredited tools that lie to hand. His deconstruction of the western metaphysical tradition, as I hope to show, anticipates (in a less technical, more accessible way) the work of such postmodern theorists as Derrida. His reading of Nietzsche, chronicled in chapter 4, provides perhaps the most significant bridge to Derrida. He was familiar, however, as I show in chapter 3, not only with the results of higher criticism and the pioneers of religious anthropology such as Frazer, but also with less 'scientific' religious

writers such as Madame Blavatsky and other theosophical revampers of rabbinic and kabbalistic traditions. His own reworking of the Bible accordingly combines a thorough-going 'scientific' critique characteristic of modernity with a bold freedom of interpretation more often associated with postmodernity.

The Bible, of course, in Northrop Frye's phrase, itself borrowed from Blake, is *The Great Code* of western civilisation, the prime source of literary meaning, the model from which much other writing proceeds (Frye 1982). As David Lyle Jeffrey says in the preface to his *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, it has been 'foundational for Western literature', in particular English literature from the earliest reworkings in Anglo-Saxon of the books of Genesis and Exodus through the mystery plays to Milton and the Romantics. It continues, of course, to feed much of the literature of the modern period (Jeffrey 1992: xiii). Lawrence is clearly a part of this broad tradition and it is in this sense that the Bible can be said to be a major component in the genesis of his fiction, a stimulus to his imagination, what Bloom calls a precursor-text or poetic father which his own writing attempts to emulate. His work can even be seen as a Derridean supplement to the Bible, both adding to and attempting to supplant the original. Bloom and Derrida's theories of intertextuality, as I will explain in the following chapter, along with those of Bakhtin, provide a particularly appropriate framework within which to place him, recognising as they do the creative rivalry involved in all literary influence, the tensions set up within the text by competing and often conflicting citations.

This is how Lawrence will be found to struggle with his material, wrestling with the Bible, as Jacob with the angel, to use one of Bloom's favourite analogies, often transforming it into something almost unrecognisably different. But with Lawrence, as with the Bible as he read (and rewrote) it, nothing is fixed. As he wrote in the introduction to the American edition of his *New Poems* of 1920, he wanted 'nothing fixed, set, static' (*Phoenix* 219). Or as he wrote in relation to 'Art and Morality' in 1925, characteristically subverting a biblical image of permanence and stability, 'We move and the rock of ages moves . . . Each thing, living or unliving, streams in its own odd, intertwining flux, and nothing, not even man nor the God of man, nor anything that man has thought or felt or known, is fixed and abiding' (525). Even the Bible, in other words, has to be rewritten, to be understood differently, in each generation, a view to

be found in the rabbis responsible for creative midrashic interpretation of the early centuries of the Christian era as well as in their postmodern descendants such as Bloom and Derrida.

What Lawrence found most objectionable about his upbringing, as he complained in *Apocalypse*, was the uncritical way he had been taught to read the Bible:

From earliest years right into manhood, like any other nonconformist child I had the Bible poured every day into my helpless consciousness, till there came almost a saturation point. Long before one could think or even vaguely understand, this Bible language, these 'portions' of the Bible were *douched* over the mind and consciousness till they became soaked in, they became an influence which affected all the processes of emotion and thought. So that today, although I have 'forgotten' my Bible, I need only begin to read a chapter to realise that I 'know' it with an almost nauseating fixity. And I must confess, my first reaction is one of dislike, repulsion, and even resentment. My very instincts *resent* the Bible. (A 59)

The fact that 'the interpretation was fixed', Lawrence insists, led to all interest being lost. For 'a book lives as long as it is unfathomed. Once it is fathomed, it dies at once . . . A book lives only while it has power to move us, and move us *differently*; so long as we find it *different* every time we read it', discovering new levels of meaning on each occasion. 'The Bible,' he concludes, 'is a book that has been temporarily killed for us, or for some of us, by having its meaning temporarily fixed' (59–60).

An earlier draft of *Apocalypse*, published as an Appendix to the Cambridge edition, develops this point, that it is not the Bible that is dead but we who have failed to recognise its vitality, 'years of narrow monotheism' having contributed to a widespread misreading:

We have taken the Bible out of its setting, cut it off from the contact with history and the living races it plays amongst, and set it in unreal isolation, as an absolute. We have been wrong. We have taken the Old Testament at its own value of a One God of a Chosen People cursing and annihilating everybody else . . . (158)

The nonconformist tradition in particular, according to Lawrence, inherited from Judaism a narrow model of being the 'chosen people, . . . the elect, or the "saved"' (63). I will return in chapter 13 to a more detailed consideration of *Apocalypse* as illustrative of the way in which Lawrence had learnt by the end of his life to read the Bible differently, to appreciate its own complex intertextuality, its tendency to rework earlier material within its pages as well as material from

other religions. The point to emphasise now is that, however narrowly he may have been taught to read the Bible, he did as a child imbibe a deep and thorough knowledge of it along with powerful if ambivalent feelings towards it.

Literary critics such as Hartman and Bloom employ both the biblical metaphor of wrestling with the angel and an Oedipal model of ambivalence and rivalry for the process by which a writer struggles creatively with his or her precursors. Lawrence also wrote of the process of writing as one in which he had to 'wrestle' with his 'Angel' (*Letters* II 669). He was well aware of the importance of the Bible to his work, even poking fun at his own pretensions to rewrite it. 'I do think it is wonderful,' says the drunken Halliday in *Women in Love*, reading out one of Birkin's more pompous, almost Pauline letters in a clerical voice. 'It almost supersedes the Bible' (*WL* 382-3). 'Almost supersedes' here, like the supplement of which Derrida writes, is ambiguous. Halliday implies that Birkin tries to replace the Bible but fails while Lawrence, I suggest, is nudging his readers (albeit ironically and with a certain endearing self-deprecation) towards a recognition of the deeply religious mission on which both Birkin and he are engaged. In a similar way, readers of the *Daily Express* in 1929 may initially have registered some surprise at the lengthy quotation there of his defence of his paintings in which he cites the Song of Solomon as an example of a great poem whose 'loveliness' was 'all interwoven with sex appeal' (Nehls 1959: 374). It is not only the recognition of eroticism in the sacred text which is important here but the implicit bracketing of his own work with the Scriptures.

A number of critics, from Richard Aldington onwards, have found Lawrence's continued use of biblical symbols and images objectionable, considering 'how far he had . . . gone in repudiating Christian ethics and beliefs' (Aldington 1950: 129). As a character in Compton Mackenzie's *West Wind of Love* complains of Rayner, the thinly disguised Lawrence-figure in that novel, it appears somewhat strange to base his own writing on the Bible when he claims to have 'exhausted the Christian faith,' refusing to accept its doctrine and regarding its moral teaching as 'impotent' (Nehls 1958: 27). It is, of course, the case that he stretches the meanings of many biblical terms, going well beyond what could be regarded as 'orthodox'. But then, as he will be found frequently to argue, even the most basic religious words cannot be tied to a 'signified' or 'mental concept'

that is in any sense adequate. He continually agonised over words such as 'God', at one point, when revising his *Collected Poems*, carefully removing all uses of the term (Ellis 1998: 384). His play *David* also finds an astonishing array of alternative terms for the unpronounceable sacred name. Having declared only a few years earlier that he found God 'an exhausted concept', he surprised Earl Brewster in his last few months by announcing not only that he did not 'any longer object to the word God' but that he intended to find Him (Brewster 1934: 224). Anyone looking for systematic theology in Lawrence will be disappointed; he didn't think systematically, regarding all such attempts to 'capture' the 'truth' about 'God' as seriously misguided. One of the ways in which he anticipated postmodernism was in placing scare quotes around such problematic words; another was his recognition of the way this particular word functions as a 'glyph', derived from the Greek for carving, an act of linguistic sculpture whose representation of ultimate reality is necessarily approximate, dependent upon the limitations of its medium (*Ref.* 187). Lawrence clearly appreciated the fact that the Bible made no systematic theological claims, embodying its religious insights in a range of self-conscious literary forms: story, fable, myth, epic, history, poetry, letter and vision.

Lawrence's love of the Bible found expression throughout his life in his letters and in records of his conversation, which are full of references to all parts of the Bible, from the Book of Genesis to the Apocalypse. My chronological analysis of his writing will draw attention to the extent to which it can be seen to reflect the structure of the Bible itself, beginning with creation and ending with apocalypse. The early chapters of Genesis are perhaps the most dominant not only in his writing but in other forms of art. Like Will Brangwen, for example, he planned a wood carving of the 'Temptation of Eve, with painted apples on a painted tree, and Eve with rabbits at her feet, and a squirrel looking at her, russet, out of the apple tree', about which he wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell in 1916 (*Letters* II 597–8). He also painted Adam and Eve on the door of the Del Monte ranch (Luhan 1932: 174). Dorothy Brett describes a plasticine version of the Garden of Eden for which she was allowed to make the trees and apples and John Middleton Murry the snake. Lawrence, however, insisted on having responsibility for Adam and Eve, producing an Adam which scandalised his co-workers, who forced him to 'snip off his indecency, and then mourn him for his

loss' (Nehls 1958: II 311-12). On another occasion, Brewster recalls Lawrence pouncing upon a marble statue of Eve and subjecting it to a mud-bath on the grounds that she looked 'too demure after her fall' (Brewster 1934: 277). It is characteristic of Lawrence, on the last two of these occasions, that he should insist on drawing attention to aspects of the biblical story of creation, in particular its celebration of the flesh, overlooked or bowdlerised by conventional Christian reading.

Lawrence's critique of conventional Christianity and its moralistic reading of the Hebrew Bible (misreading, as he would have it, since it failed to appreciate the celebration of the flesh which pervades Genesis) also dominates his many retellings of the supposed 'Fall' of man. Frieda and he, expelled from conventional respectable society in 1912, will be seen to have enjoyed playing Adam and Eve around the world, searching for a route back to paradise, a theme which runs all the way through Lawrence's writing from his early novels and poems to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Frieda, of course, brought her own expectations to the role of Eve, having heard (probably from her earlier lover Otto Gross) of the fall into bourgeois domesticity and the need to recover paradise through polymorphous perversity (Green 1974: 44-5). *Not I, But the Wind* admits how fanatically she believed 'that if only sex were "free" the world would straightway turn into a paradise' (Jackson 1994: 103) while her fictional account of her relationship with Gross has the central autobiographical figure give a 'quite different' version of the story:

The Lord can't have been such a bad psychologist as not to have known that Eve would want the apple the minute it was forbidden. He really wanted Adam and Eve to eat it. And when they had eaten it, they weren't ashamed of their nakedness at all. 'Look, Adam. There is a pool down by those willows and we will have a swim, and then we'll dry ourselves in the sun. Hurrah! I shall have a small Adam, and you will make him a cradle out of the willows, and then you'll work to get us something to eat while I sing to the baby.' (212-13)

Frieda could here be imitating her husband (there are, as we shall see, passages in *Studies of Classic American Literature* quite similar to this). The point to emphasise, however, is the freedom and exuberance with which both of them responded to the original biblical text.

That exuberance emerges also in an episode described in H.D.'s novel *Bid Me to Live*, in which the Lawrence character Rico arranges a charade based upon the opening chapters of Genesis. Rafe and

Bella (Richard Aldington and his then mistress Arabella) are cast as Adam and Eve with Vane (the adulterous Cecil Gray) playing the angel preventing their return, brandishing an umbrella in place of a flaming sword. Julia (H.D. herself), having been given the role of the apple-tree, is instructed by Rico (Lawrence) on her dance while Elsa (Frieda) is told to 'growl and writhe' as the serpent. 'Serpents don't growl', she objects before 'she obligingly plumped herself flat on the floor and wriggled on the blue carpet'. Lawrence inevitably casts himself as 'Gawd-a'-mighty', taking up 'a Jehovah-like pose by the fire-place' and chanting from an imaginary scroll before he is interrupted by the others and reprimanded for departing too far from the original (H.D. 1984: 111-12). This, of course, is an objection to which much of his reworking of the Bible is open; he both challenges his readers to question their own interpretation of the sacred text and risks their rebellion against his own.

Biblical charades, it is well documented, were one of Lawrence's favourite pastimes. Jessie Chambers' younger brother David recalled how Lawrence played the part of Pharaoh at Haggs Bank 'with the milksile on his head for crown, and hardened his heart ineluctably against the pleas of Moses and the children of Israel', while David Garnett remembered Frieda and Lawrence performing Judith and Holofernes at Mayrhofen in 1912 (Nehls 1957: 47-8 and 177). Another of Lawrence's favourite roles, repeated for Brewster as well as for the Chambers family, was that of St Peter on Judgement Day, filtered through the mind of a revivalist preacher (Nehls 1959: 131 and 603). A similar scene, of course, is enacted by Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers* while in *Women in Love* Gudrun and Ursula are made to perform a balletic version of Ruth. It is evident from these accounts how Lawrence appreciated the drama of the Bible, responding imaginatively and with a splendid sense of humour to some of its more outrageous episodes.

Lawrence's sense of humour, emphasised by Brenda Maddox in her portrait of him (Maddox 1994), is less evident in his letters, where, as Cynthia Asquish recalled, he was 'more of a Jeremiah . . . than in his talk' (Nehls 1957: 440). Mark Rampion, the Lawrence-figure in Aldous Huxley's novel *Point Counter Point*, styles himself 'a Jeremiah pervert', lambasting his society for its many failings (Huxley 1933: 564). This prophetic role was one in which many of his contemporaries cast him. Bertrand Russell, for example, both deplored his religiosity and acknowledged his 'amazing powers of

discernment. He is like Ezekiel or some other Old Testament prophet' (Kinkead-Weekes 1996: 190). John Middleton Murry ended some verses sent to Lady Ottoline Morrell addressing Lawrence directly as 'My mouse-haired, intolerant prophet' (822). This identification with the prophets may have been encouraged by the beard, grown during illness in October 1914.

Christ, it has to be said, was Lawrence's favourite role, especially in the war-years, when the metaphor of crucifixion became irresistible. 'The War finished me,' he wrote to Cynthia Asquith, 'it was the spear through the side of all sorrows and hopes'. He proceeds to describe his soul as lying 'in the tomb – not dead but with the flat stone over it' before claiming to have 'risen' full of hope and a 'new shoot of life' (*Letters* II 268). Lawrence's identification with Christ in the years of the war could take on absurd proportions, as on his visit to Augustus John in 1917, when, having muttered, 'Mortuus est. Mortuus est', he repeated the lugubrious refrain, much to the painter's puzzled amusement, 'Let the DEAD PAINT THE DEAD!' (Nehls 1957: 44). His identification with Jesus, like Nietzsche's, has been called 'the bond of one tablet-breaker with another'. Nietzsche and Lawrence can be said paradoxically to imitate Christ most when they rebel against Christianity, the conventional religion of their own time (Goodheart 1963: 2). Neither of them could ever forgive Jesus for being first with the good news. In addition, they held him personally responsible for the fear of sexuality inherent in Christianity. The Lawrencian Mark Rampion in Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* identifies Christ's 'disease' as 'hatred of sex' (Huxley 1933: 161–6) although when Cecil Gray accused him of 'playing Jesus Christ to a regiment of Mary Magdalenes' Lawrence claimed that 'the pure understanding between the Magdalen and Jesus went deeper than the understanding between the disciples and Jesus' (*Letters* III 176 and 179–80). He was, of course, to write a novella, *The Escaped Cock*, on the subject of Jesus learning the significance of sexuality only after his resurrection. This and other late narratives of the Risen Lord will be the subject of chapter 12.

Examples of Lawrence being cast by others in the role of Christ include the famous 'Last Supper', the dinner at the Café Royal when Lawrence returned to England in 1923. Middleton Murry's version of the story has Lawrence putting his arms around him (Murry) and saying 'Do not betray me!' while Catherine Carswell expanded the narrative even further (in her later gospel), giving