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LAWRENCE'S PEOPLE:

Levels of Character in Three
of the Prussian Officer Stories

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Abstract

This thesis examines D.H. Lawrence's presentation of character in three stories from his first published collection, The Prussian Officer and Other Stories. Chapter One provides a brief historical survey of the criticism of Lawrence's work, and relates past misunderstandings of Lawrence's methods of characterization to present ones. It also attempts to explain what it is about Lawrence's art that provokes these misunderstandings.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four, through contextualised analyses of, respectively, "The Prussian Officer," "Daughters of the Vicar," and "The White Stocking," attempt to do justice to the detached, subtle, and discriminating intelligence that Lawrence demonstrates in his presentation of different levels of character. In particular, I draw attention to those distinctions he makes at the deeper levels, which critics have often ignored. Throughout, I consider the stories as firmly belonging to the body of Lawrence's great creative art.

Concluding the thesis is a brief afterword, which defends my particular method of approach to the stories. Such a method of contextualised interpretation is considered necessary to a sensitive appreciation of Lawrence's varied presentation of character.

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Chapter One: Introductory

This thesis is an examination of the ways Lawrence presents character in three short stories. Lawrence's methods of characterization still pose, I think, the biggest obstacle to an understanding of his fiction. A survey of the critical texts makes the point depressingly clear: misconceptions about his methods that were common when he was still alive are common now, despite the excellent criticism that has been written. The attitude that underlies these misconceptions can be summarised in one sentence: at the deeper levels of character, Lawrence's people are all the same. In the early criticism, this attitude was explicit. Nowadays one is not likely to find it anywhere stated, but, as I shall show, it is implicit even in the work of such recent and respectable commentators as Keith Cushman and Michael Black.

Among the early critics, John Middleton Murry exerted the most powerful influence on readers of Lawrence. In "The Nostalgia of Mr D.H. Lawrence," a review of Women in Love published in the Nation and Athenaeum, August 13, 1921, Murry began by praising qualities discernible in Lawrence's earlier work ("a sensitive and impassioned apprehension of natural beauty"; "an understanding of the strange blood bonds that unite human beings"; "a power of natural vision"), but he went on to declare that Lawrence "is an artist no longer," and to complain that "we can discern no individuality whatever in the denizens of Mr Lawrence's world."¹ In his influential book Son of Woman (1931) - described by Aldous Huxley as "that curious essay in destructive hagiography"² - Murry's criticism is vitiated rather than strengthened by his personal knowledge of, and animus towards, Lawrence. Each work becomes, in Murry's hands, another chapter of Lawrence's tormented autobiography. Murry's book was all the more influential thanks to the approving review given it by

the editor of the Criterion, T.S. Eliot (the tone of Eliot's review may be inferred from his sentence, "The victim and the sacrificial knife are perfectly adapted to each other"³).

The wealth of biographical material that was published in the years following Lawrence's death - Huxley's The Letters of D.H. Lawrence (1932), and memoirs by friends and acquaintances variously disposed towards Lawrence - enabled many critics to follow in Murry's wake. In the 1930's it became a critical commonplace to disparage Lawrence's powers of characterization. In The Spectator, November 18, 1932, Lord David Cecil could with complete confidence assert that "Mr Lawrence's strong individuality prevented him entering into other characters. His characters are expressions of varying aspects of himself."⁴ Such an assertion did not require substantiation; it was merely to state what most readers, already, took for granted. In a review of Phoenix (headed "Is Lawrence Neglected?") in The Saturday Review, October 31, 1936, Theodore Spencer affirmed that on "the descriptive level, Lawrence is a great writer," but unfortunately

the very intensity of his intuition, its demonic quality, kept him, when he went deeper than rabbits or places and tried to describe human beings, from seeing them except as examples of his own emotional problems. His characters lack the salt of objectivity. Further, in describing men and women he tried to go too far down into the dark sources of consciousness. Seeking for the fundamental springs of personality, he got below personality. He went under the Plimsoll line of identity. His novels are full of subtle human conflicts, but they are never conflicts which particularize his characters as human beings; they are examples of passions, of states of feeling, mostly in the abstract. His people, with one or two exceptions, are merely wells or rather geysers of instinct, acting from impulses so obscure that they dim, they don't illuminate, individuality.⁵

Spencer is worth quoting at some length because he brings together the related opinions about Lawrence that were commonly held at that time. The way he damns Lawrence by qualifying his praise is typical. What Lawrence had was not intelligence but "intuition," the keenness of which tended towards weirdness: it had a "demonic quality." This intuition was for the writer of nature-pieces an admirable thing to have, but it was of no use at all to the story-teller; it only got in the way. Lawrence's attempts at characterization only demonstrate what a "case" he was: his characters are nothing but "examples of his own emotional problems." They are certainly not credible as distinct individuals, because individuals are distinguishable at the level of personality, and Lawrence "got below personality." To "go too far down" is to find that, at bottom, we are all alike - a disastrous find, for the story-teller; he should confine his attention to the upper level.

Such a catalogue of misunderstandings - of unsubstantiated assertions posing as unanswerable facts - helps to explain why Lawrence was neglected. It allowed Stephen Spender, for instance, in The Destructive Element (1936), to praise "the descriptive passages in his novels, and the Nature poems in Birds, Beasts and Flowers," and to find the rest of his art "disappointing."⁶

The critical neglect, and the misunderstanding, continued in the 1940's. In "Some Notes on D.H. Lawrence" in The Nation, April 26, 1947, W.H. Auden wrote that "the poems in Birds, Beasts, and Flowers are Lawrence's greatest achievement," and he reiterated Spencer's criticism of Lawrence's characterization:

Like Blake, Lawrence was interested, not in "individuals," but in "states." In writing about nature or about strangers this does not matter, as these are only experienced as states of being, but it is a serious

drawback in writing fiction which cannot avoid the individual and his relations to other individuals over a stretch of time. ... we get bored with the lack of a character to bind the states together and give them uniqueness.⁷

One may discern, from the similar line taken by these different reviewers, the consolidation of a conventional opinion. But there were dissenting critics. Aldous Huxley, as I have already indicated, reacted against Murry; in his introduction to The Letters he declared that "Lawrence's biography does not account for Lawrence's achievement," and that "it is impossible to write about Lawrence except as an artist."⁸ Catherine Carswell's Savage Pilgrimage (1932) provided a sane corrective to some of Murry's grosser distortions, and E.M. Forster came out in protest against Lawrence's poor obituary press by saying "straight out that he was the greatest imaginative novelist of our generation."⁹ The most important of the dissenting critics was F.R. Leavis. Leavis first wrote on Lawrence in 1930, and those who have read the whole of his Lawrence criticism will have noted how his evaluation of individual works, and of their order of merit, changed over the years. But one theme remained a constant: Lawrence was a great creative artist, a great writer. In D.H. Lawrence: Novelist (1955), Leavis's stated aim was "to win recognition for the nature of his achievement as a novelist,"¹⁰ though he obviously did not regard the genius of the novelist as manifested only in the novels. The Rainbow and Women in Love are the only two he discussed at length; the other compelling instances he adduced of Lawrence's major art were some of the longer tales. In his chapter on Women in Love, Leavis refuted the criticisms Murry brought against the novel in the only way they could be refuted: that is, by critically examining the text itself. The very different characters, both major and minor, that he adduces from the novel are plain evidence that "no one could be in less

danger than Lawrence of forgetting the truth that life is a matter of individual lives."¹¹ But the nature of Leavis's enterprise meant that he needed only to examine a small number of works to make his point ("I thought that my actual choice was such as to make the particular examination of others not strictly necessary"¹²). Of the stories I examine in this thesis, "Daughters of the Vicar" is the only one to which Leavis devotes much attention; "The White Stocking" he gives one page, and "The Prussian Officer" is dismissed in a few sentences. His dismissal of the last story appears to be the result, at least in part, of an ignorance of the writing history of the Prussian Officer volume. Leavis finds it "surprising how large a proportion of that first volume ... is good," and he claims that "the title story and "The Thorn in the Flesh" are in an early Lawrence vein that he soon outgrew."¹³ In fact, as Keith Cushman points out, these "stories were the last to be written and the last to be revised."¹⁴ All the stories in the Prussian Officer, including those previously published, were revised, most of them extensively, before the volume's publication on November 26, 1914. The revised versions, then, may be judged as belonging to Lawrence's greatest creative phase - the phase that includes The Rainbow (the final version of which was completed a mere three months later) and Women in Love. Leavis's mistake was in supposing them to belong to an earlier phase - an almost inevitable error, given the state of Lawrence-scholarship at the time.

No one can now dispute that Leavis achieved his aim. The steady stream of critical texts that issued in the late fifties, the sixties and the seventies testified to a new - one can hardly say a revived - academic interest in Lawrence's art. Graham Hough's The Dark Sun (1956), which was rather overshadowed by Leavis's book of the previous year, attempted to provide a critical survey of the entire range of Lawrence's oeuvre. This allowed for

rather scanty coverage of the short stories that I examine. What criticism there is of them is, like Leavis's, impaired by a predisposition to regard them as representative of an earlier phase. And, despite his reading of Leavis, Hough could still refer to "a permanent interest of Lawrence in themes and states of consciousness rather than in the persons who move through them."¹⁵ Other influential books from this later period were Eliseo Vivas's D.H. Lawrence: The Failure and the Triumph of Art (1960), H.M. Daleski's The Forked Flame (1965), Keith Sagar's The Art of D.H. Lawrence (1966) and Emile Delavenay's D.H. Lawrence: The Man and His Work (1972). Yet apart from articles scattered among various literary magazines and quarterlies, the Prussian Officer volume still suffered from critical neglect.¹⁶ That is, it did until the publication of Keith Cushman's D.H. Lawrence at Work: The Emergence of the Prussian Officer Stories (1978). Cushman's book is a scholarly account of the process of revision by which Lawrence arrived at the final versions of the stories collected in the volume. He relies too much, however, on reference to biographical details to advance his case. An analysis of a particular passage will often lapse into something else which, whatever it is, is certainly not literary criticism. This sort of thing (the passage referred to is from "The White Stocking"¹⁷) is all too common:

This passage could be a description of the first two years of the marriage between Lawrence and Frieda. In fact it is a more apt description of their relationship than of the first years of marriage of Elsie and Whiston. ... Lawrence, whether or not he knows it, is speaking of himself.¹⁸

Cushman does not always reveal his attitude to Lawrence's art as explicitly as he does here. He reveals it implicitly, though, in what we notice as a continual movement of attention from the art to theoretical concerns,

particularly those expounded by Lawrence in the famous "carbon" letter to Edward Garnett of June 5, 1914.¹⁹ These concerns are indeed relevant to a consideration of Lawrence's presentation of character, and I will refer to them in the course of this thesis. But as I shall show, Cushman displays a tendency to assimilate scenes where he sees Lawrence employing his new theoretical vocabulary, without any regard for the differences the characters, in their uniqueness, bring to these scenes. In other words Cushman repeats in a rather less overt fashion Middleton Murry's approach, with the same neglect of Lawrence's art that this approach entails.

Michael Black's D.H. Lawrence: The Early Fiction (1986) provides a more perceptive commentary on the best stories from The Prussian Officer, and on Lawrence's other fiction prior to The Rainbow. We note the now familiar determination to regard these fictions as a prelude to Lawrence's greatest creative phase ("This book follows Lawrence's writing up to the point when it is generally agreed his maturity begins"²⁰), but we also note the determination not to read these fictions

as early expressions of ideas which later he expresses better. It seems dubious to me that important writers deal in ideas - though a reader may precipitate out an idea-like formulation. What the poet produces is collocations of words, figures of speech. Valéry called these the echoes in an internal cistern, dark reverberations which have shaped themselves as rhythms or phrases. For a novelist they come out both as imagery and as repeated gestures by his characters, repeated poses, groupings; a certain favoured scenery; related predicaments.²¹

Elsewhere, as I shall show, Black falls into over-emphasizing the repetitive element, much as the early critics had done; here, however, he captures the aspect

of Lawrence's art to which those critics, with varying degrees of hostility and incomprehension, had responded. Black stresses the creative writer's special use of language; of what Lawrence called "art-speech."²² The novelist is committed to a personal mode of expression different from that of rational discourse. Within the thought-world of a particular novelist, certain phenomena acquire an unusual significance; these phenomena will recur again and again in the art as the novelist develops and alters the significance he or she has found in them. The early critics looked at Lawrence's characters and found only sameness. In the course of this thesis I intend to show that where one finds sameness between characters, one also finds difference; that when a character appears most representative is when he or she also appears most unique. To achieve this intention I think it is necessary to enter into Lawrence's thought-world as deeply as one is able. Only in detailed examinations of the stories can both sides of the coin be plainly shown. With this end in mind, I have confined myself to close analyses of three stories: "The Prussian Officer," "Daughters of the Vicar," and "The White Stocking." I have chosen these three because they seem to me the best stories in the Prussian Officer volume, and to rank among the finest stories that Lawrence wrote. Further, these stories illustrate the diversity of mode, tone, and character that critics have tended to slight or overlook. From the sombre, intense evocation of the relationship between an officer and his orderly in "The Prussian Officer," to the light, quasi-comic portrayal of the eternal triangle in "The White Stocking," we have ever before us the flexibility and range of Lawrence's art.

Notes

- 1 W.T. Andrews, ed., Critics on D.H. Lawrence: Readings in Literary Criticism 9 (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1971), pp. 20-22.
- 2 Aldous Huxley, introduction, The Letters of D.H. Lawrence, ed. Aldous Huxley (London: Heinemann, 1932), p. x.
- 3 H. Coombes, ed., D.H. Lawrence: A Critical Anthology (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973), p. 241.
- 4 Andrews, p. 40.
- 5 Andrews, pp. 43-44.
- 6 Stephen Spender, The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs (1936; rpt. Philadelphia, Pa.: Albert Saifer, 1953), p. 183.
- 7 Andrews, pp. 47-48.
- 8 Huxley, pp. x-xi.
- 9 Letter to the Nation and Athenaeum, March 29, 1930. For the full text of Forster's letter, see Coombes, pp. 218-19.
- 10 F.R. Leavis, D.H. Lawrence: Novelist (1955; rpt. Penguin Books Ltd., in association with Chatto and Windus, 1964), p. 14.
- 11 Leavis, p. 200.
- 12 Leavis, p. 15.

- 13 Leavis, p. 257.
- 14 Keith Cushman, D.H. Lawrence at Work: The Emergence of the Prussian Officer Stories (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978), p. 202.
- 15 Graham Hough, The Dark Sun: A Study of D.H. Lawrence (1956; rpt. Penguin Books Ltd., 1961), pp. 27-28.
- 16 For a full-length attempt to remedy the neglect of Lawrence's short fiction in general, see Kingsley Widmer, The Art of Perversity: D.H. Lawrence's Shorter Fiction (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962). Widmer's book examines the stories from too restrictive a viewpoint to be useful for my purposes.
- 17 D.H. Lawrence, "The White Stocking," in The Prussian Officer and Other Stories, by D.H. Lawrence, ed. John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 158. All quotations from "The White Stocking," "The Prussian Officer," and "Daughters of the Vicar" will be taken from the Cambridge Edition, and page numbers will be given in the text.
- 18 Cushman, p. 161.
- 19 George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton, eds., The Letters of D.H. Lawrence, Volume II, June 1913-October 1916 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 182-84. All quotations from the letters will be taken from the Cambridge Edition, hereafter referred to in the text as Letters. Volume and page numbers will be given in the text.
- 20 Michael Black, D.H. Lawrence: The Early Fiction (The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1986) p. 23.

- 21 Black, p. 22.
- 22 D.H. Lawrence, "The Spirit of Place," in Studies in Classic American Literature, by D.H. Lawrence (1923; rpt. New York: The Viking Press, 1966), p. 2.