

Second in importance only to Shakespeare: Lawrence, Leavis and the living principle

by Bob Hayward

I want to begin by giving some details of my early life but let me assure you that I will relate them to the themes of this paper because I have realized that those particular experiences of mine contained the origins of my concerns with them.

My hope is that my near or actual contemporaries here, and perhaps indeed others, may be able to empathise with my boyhood confessions. If there is one thing that Lawrence has taught us, as we can say, it is that autobiography can be much more than merely personal.

In my case , then, I have to admit that, as a boy, I was never much of a reader. I could never cultivate the habit of reading literature that was written or considered suitable for children or even for teenagers. I struggled with it and found it against the grain. I preferred to be outside playing sport or indeed going to the cinema

to feed my childish imagination and pre-pubertal fantasies (probably the sweetest of all).

As result of my lack of early reading, I believe I have suffered all my life from being a slow reader. I do not have that sheer, technically ingrained ability to read (I failed O-Level English Language) which I recognise and envy in others, particularly women. I tend to think that girls, at least those sharing my early years, were more prone to reading literature.

I am not saying that I did not read at all when I was growing up but what I read I read only for a purpose. For example, not long after I passed the eleven-plus, I decided that I wanted to be a doctor and I read the medical encyclopaedias that were around the house. Noticing this, my mother said: 'You can imagine you have all sorts of things wrong with you when you read those!' That was the first telling piece of literary criticism that I ever encountered and it helpfully informed all my future reading of that clinical genre. I discovered early enough that a 'little learning is a dangerous thing'.

After a year at my rural two-stream grammar school I found that I had been put into the more academic, so called Latin, stream

but my difficulty in reading literature in English lessons in those early years continued. I must have disguised my lack of aptitude because I was never bottom of the class in the subject. I used to marvel when my sporting friends from the less academic stream (being taught by Head of English) were learning lists of adjectives to describe characters in Jane Austen novels. (Even by the time I had finished A' levels and had left the school, I could not read Jane Austen with any interested engagement whatsoever.)

After I had passed the eleven-plus, I continued my friendship with a neighbouring boy who had failed it. We had an affinity that made for friendship although we had otherwise little in common except youth and growing up in the neighbourhood but he was a reader in the ways that I was not. As a result of his enthusiasms, I read a Biggles book and a novel by Ian Fleming. I did not honestly discover any justification for reading them and read no more of them. This did not affect the friendship, to which I shall briefly return later.

Then when I was fourteen I had what I can call a literary epiphany. I suddenly realized that the sort of literature written by an

author I was reading in an English lesson was important. I call it an epiphany because the importance was self-evident and allowed no doubt. It changed me, though I did not envisage then that it would change the course of my life completely. I have used the term 'boyhood confessions' but it will seem more like a boast when I name the author of my revelatory, reading experience because it was Shakespeare; the play was Henry V. This insight into the importance of such a massively esteemed figure endorsed by our culture was the beginning of my being able to feel a personal value in my education at school, rather than simply doing what others did.

Many months after this maturing experience, my parents took me aside and advised me to discontinue contact with my close, neighbourhood friend because he had just left school and was about to enter the working world in which they knew he would be gleefully bombarded with all the ingenuities of crude sexual discourse as his rite of passage. (The teenaged Lawrence experienced the same from the factory-girls when he was clerking for a surgical goods firm.) My parents wanted to protect me from this. They always deserved my respect but this was uncharacteristic

of them and it was soon forgotten. My resistance to them here was helped by my knowledge that Shakespeare, the great revered Shakespeare, encompassed bawdry. He may, after Chaucer, be the only great English writer whose art had that freedom. (I do not here to want to invite an argument about James Joyce.)

Just before I went into the Sixth Form, I realised that I had to continue with literature and that my long and serious ambition to be a doctor had to be abandoned. I never regretted this and as a result I had, at the age of 16, my second and final literary epiphany. The school had a very enlightened English Department and we enjoyed two terms of general reading before starting our first A level text, which happened to be 'Middlemarch'. We could do as we wished as long as we kept up with the books on the list for general reading and I told the Head of English, an old boy of the school, who, he later admitted to me, had come 'under the spell of Leavis' at Cambridge, that I wanted to read all of Shakespeare's plays in chronological order. I asked him whether he would read any essays I wrote on them. He said he would and he did. One of the books on the list recommend for general reading was Lawrence's 'Sons and

Lovers' and it caused me for the first time to read into the small hours. The result was not a blinding light but it was a steady glow with which I was left. People lucky enough to have read this novel when young and impressionable may have some inkling of its impact on me. I tried even at the time to articulate what for me the revelation was. It was that there can be seen to be an inspiring dimension to life beyond the normal experiences of the daily world. This potentiality, as I realized, pervades the book and triumphs in spite of the vicissitudes and conflicts in the novel. It is, and can only be, the effect of Lawrence's art, the uplifting tendency of which he eventually matured into a vision, a conviction and a principle. But, at the time, reading this author of whom I had never heard was rather like first love, which I had already experienced and which had exhilarated me as well as made me very unhappy and no doubt helped me to appreciate 'Sons and Lovers'.

I became a committed reader of Lawrence. I do not want to give the impression that my judgement was unerring. Immediately before Lawrence and as a result of our reading list, I had become an indefatigable reader of so many of Bernard Shaw's plays and his

long-winded prefaces that a school inspector, learning the precise extent of this reading as he questioned me, sat back in his chair in amazement, not of the admiring kind, as I learned later from the senior classics master, who had been more or less a contemporary of Leavis at Cambridge and had later met him. He was also a Lawrence aficionado, once saying to me 'Lawrence is the goods', and that reading him gives one 'kicks'. I did not press him to elaborate because by then I could put an interpretation on his words.

There is just one more salient fact about my youth before I try to relate it all to the main theme of this paper. I told the Head of English that I did not want to write any essays on Lawrence and that I would be reading him for personal reasons. I later came across in Leavis a sentence that summed up my position on reading Lawrence. Leavis says of a poem by Donne as he encountered it in an anthology of Seventeenth Century Verse: "at this we cease reading as students or connoisseurs of anthology pieces and read on as we read the living". That is the spirit in which

I read Lawrence and I suspect, indeed I think I know, that it is the spirit in which he has been read by his admirers.

If I use my early experience, as given here, to generalize, I should say that the self-evident importance that I attributed to Shakespeare transfers to all great literature. One of the first things that endeared Leavis to me, and no doubt to others, is that he always writes about great literature as though its importance is unquestionable. On this truth he never capitulated, though he spent his life seeking ways to vindicate its importance in the wider culture and, crucially, as a university subject. (I remember when I was seventeen feeling at first strongly jealous of Leavis for having about Lawrence's works subtle and convincing insights that had not occurred to me. There is a boyhood confession for you!) My second generalization, to be formulated a little later, grew out of my encounter with 'Sons and Lovers' and the tension between the events of the novel and the evoked wonder of life's potentialities in which those events are set.

To display working class life in such an aura is a sophisticated, artistic achievement. We can remember here what Frieda said:

'They never called Lawrence a professional writer - always a genius. That made him angry. "That is my label -a genius- and with that I am dismissed." '. By 'professional writer' Frieda meant 'an artist', that is, someone who knew what he was doing as he drew on the resources of our language.

If, as I rather believe, we have tended to read Lawrence, not as students or connoisseurs of literature but - in Leavis's apposite clause - 'as we read the living', we might have brought Lawrence so close to us that it is less easy to see him in the wider context of the history of English literature. Reading 'as we read the living' is the ideal way of reading literature. We might even say that it is a standard for judging literature but as literature recedes more and more into the past the element of reading as students or connoisseurs becomes less and less avoidable.

The fact that familiarity (being able to read Lawrence so closely) can breed, if not contempt, a lack of perspective is of course true with life as well as with literature. I should like to illustrate this from literature, rather dramatically, and then from Leavis himself and literature, rather dramatically. In Dickens's 'Great

Expectations', Pip. unhappily trying to make his way in London, suddenly realizes how wonderful Biddy is, the girl he had taken for granted because she was always there helping him in his young, happier world. He goes home to ask her to marry him but it is her wedding day. She is about to marry Joe and Pip's intervention is unthinkable. No one can say that Dickens is not a dramatic novelist.

I do not know how many people have had my sudden awakening to literature but I suspect that Leavis did not. He had literature read to him in his home as a boy and in this way he became familiar with Dickens. When he wrote his landmark book 'The Great Tradition' on the great English novelists, he could not countenance the idea that Dickens was one. He had to put that right over two decades later in the book on Dickens that he published with his wife. (it would be more just to say that she published it with him. There are 373 pages in it to which Leavis contributed 120, 26 of which had already been published 23 years earlier in 'Scrutiny'.)

Leavis had to have two goes at Lawrence. In his first critique on him he did not, he most certainly did not, appreciate that Lawrence was a great artist. I do not know in what way he first read

him. Did he read him 'as we read the living' and therefore not get a true perspective on him? It could be said that he faltered his way finally to seeing Lawrence as a great artist and, even when he published his first book on him, 'D.H.Lawrence: Novelist', one of the great books of English literary criticism, he was still developing his perspective on him, though in that first book he was already asserting that as a novelist he could stand among the very greatest in English literature.

The title of my paper implies that I am prepared to go a little further. Leavis knew who the great English novelists were because he nominated them. They are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Dickens eventually, Henry James, Joseph Conrad and D.H.Lawrence. For what it is worth, I should not want to include anyone else, but of course, as Leavis himself knew, there are many other English novelists worth reading and I have read many of them. I have also read a large number that are not worth reading, some of whom I have enjoyed. Just in case you think I would be including Jane Austen for no personal reason, let me tell you that, in my third year at university reading for a degree in philosophy in the hope of

another revelation, when I was one day writing a set essay, a girl visited my room and, choosing to stay while I worked, found 'Pride and Prejudice' on my shelves and sat and read it to herself, silently, for a very long time. She came back the next day and finished it, saying, probably in response to a comment of mine: 'But it's so pretty!' I could never have said anything like that but I understood what she meant because by then I was well and truly smitten with Jane Austen. Leavis himself never wrote any detailed, critical appreciation of her works to justify her inclusion among the greats but he referred to her convincingly enough.

If he was still developing his perspective on Lawrence in 'D.H.Lawrence: Novelist', he obviously still had some developing to do seven years earlier in 'The Great Tradition' in which, having said : 'Lawrence, in the English Language, is the great genius of our time', he goes on immediately to say: 'It would be difficult to separate the novelist off for consideration but it was in the novel that he committed himself to the hardest and most sustained creative labour'. How did Leavis come to say that it would be difficult to separate the novelist off, presumably from being the

genius of our time and having written so much else of value? (They never called Lawrence a professional writer - artist - always a genius.) How difficult is it to separate the novelist off? Lawrence wrote eleven full length novels, as well as a number of novellas and more short stories than I care to count. This compares in volume favourably with the other novelists on Leavis's list, all of whom, except Jane Austen, lived a lot longer. Does Lawrence compare with them in artistic quality and in the highest criteria of novel writing? We know that the works of any individual novelist differ in quality one from another. If a novelist is lucky, he or she will produce two or three great novels, the others considerable as works of development or of decline or more often works impressively written under the hand of the great novelist but having a less comprehensive impact than their truly great works. Of course novellas and short stories have their own criteria and status.

I offer these reflections, not to anticipate general consent, but simply as one way of comparing Lawrence's fictional oeuvre with that of the great novelists. We can say that his oeuvre has its two great novels in 'The Rainbow' and 'Women in Love', clearly

comprehensive in intention and scope and having the seal of approval of Lawrence's greatest advocate. There are novels of development in 'The White Peacock' and 'The Trespasser' but none of decline, I suggest. 'Sons and Lovers', for all its flaws, is sufficiently a success as to remain a favourite with many readers. I wish i could pass a law forbidding literary critics (including Leavis) from recognising on our behalf historically real people in novels and putting real names to fictional places and pointing to real-life occurrences behind the incidents creatively presented unless, and only unless, such identification can be seen as unavoidable for important critical observations. Otherwise the habit is gratuitous, distracting, vacuous and ultimately vitiating to the effects and aims of the art. Has any novelist suffered from this wanton, vitiating tendency more than Lawrence? It has become an epidemic among his critics and biographers.

All novelists draw upon their own lives, if only as a guarantee of some credibility for their fiction but they also invent and, once something is in the pages of a work of art, there is a categorical distinction between fiction and autobiography. This would be a

good distinction to try to remember when considering the four novels that Lawrence published after the Great War. In these he takes considerable liberties with his originality. Leavis said that 'The Lost Girl' was unlike any other novel that Lawrence wrote and 'suggests the work of an unsentimental, more subtle and incomparably more penetrating Dickens'. (It has to be admitted that this was before discovering that Dickens was a great novelist.) 'Aaron's Rod', 'Kangaroo' and 'Mr Noon' (published posthumously) are clearly written with less discipline than he devoted to his two great novels but it would not be difficult to quote from any of them passages that manifest the hand of the great novelist. However, by the time we come to the last two novels, 'The Plumed Serpent' and 'Lady Chatterley's Lover'. we have the artist in fully committed, consistent control of his purposes. To go from his invented characters in the convincingly evoked world of Mexico to the utterly different, convincingly evoked life and landscape of the English Midlands needed so complete a shift in the sustained focus of his imagination that it easily brings into comparison the versatile genius of Shakespeare for creative concentration. This has not been

widely recognised and certainly not by Leavis who seriously undervalued these last two novels ('bad' novels, he called them) and yet he, more than anyone, was intent on letting the scales fall from his eyes to see Lawrence for the great original novelist that he is.

I will here take the trouble to disagree with an emeritus professor's recent insistence to the Lawrence Society that Lawrence was, in spite of everything, a working class writer. I see no force in this insistence and for the purposes of my theme today I feel obliged to assert that Lawrence was never a working class writer. From the very beginning, no matter how imperfectly, he wrote from his relationship with the whole culture and it is this that enables him to see and describe even working class life with such incomparable fidelity and insight.

This lack of perspective where Lawrence is concerned manifests itself in very surprising ways. Because he had no children and no marital home of much permanency, his ability to be normative about marriage is said to be compromised. This is not said about the other great writers on our list. Shakespeare had

children but how normal was his marriage? Jane Austen had no children and was a spinster. George Eliot lived with a partner out of wedlock and had no children. Henry James was a bachelor and no children have been recorded. Dickens had children in a marriage that he discontinued and had a young mistress. The aristocratic Conrad had two sons with his lower class English wife fifteen years his junior. Where is the normative in all this? Is it not the case that Lawrence analysed the marital relationship more searchingly than his predecessors did?

I will continue, therefore, with my undertaking to establish a truer perspective for Lawrence, to put him among the greatest writers of English fiction, where Leavis eventually judged him to belong, even if at first it did seem 'difficult to separate the novelist off for consideration', given how valuably his genius ranged over other vital areas of our culture. In addition, then. to the eleven novels, there are the consummately written novellas and there are the numerous short stories which Leavis considers to be among the best in the language, and who would disagree? From an early age, Lawrence wanted to be, and thought of himself as, a writer and he

found the conventional forms of fiction a suitable outlet for his aspirations and eventually for his originality. It was inevitable and natural too that, with the conventional forms there for him, he should write poems and plays. (His poetry - I mean. in the form of his poems - could on its own be the subject of another conference.) If you take away the artist, the writer of fiction, poems and plays, you take away the continually developing source of his authority as any other kind of writer at all.

You can, then, as Leavis eventually and convincingly did, separate the novelist off for consideration and you can see and assert that he is a novelist who belongs with our English greats. It will have been noted, however, that when I asked whether he compared with them in artistic quality and in the highest criteria of novel writing, I did not answer directly. Leavis certainly judges that he does. Although I know that it is helpful to me to be at ease with that judgement, as indeed it must be obvious that I am, when I am trying to make my case that he is second in importance to Shakespeare, I am not intending to be constructing an artistic order of merit.

We could have an enjoyable and lively after-dinner discussion going round in enlightening circles on that subject, perhaps in the spirit of the talkers in Plato's Symposium. I should certainly be keen to participate. It is, however, a given in our culture that Shakespeare is our greatest writer. I do not honestly know how to dissent from that. Is he greater than Jane Austen? Yes, he is. Is he greater than Dickens? Yes. Greater than George Eliot? Yes. Leavis himself judges it to be no contest with Henry James, in favour of the bard. Yes, greater than Conrad. But greater than Lawrence? In his essay on 'St. Mawr' Leavis makes four complimentary comparisons between Lawrence and Shakespeare, taking it for granted, as I think he does, that Shakespeare is our supreme exemplar of creative writing. Lawrence in a certain mood wrote a poem bluntly expressing some disenchantment with Shakespeare:

When I read Shakespeare I am struck with wonder
that such trivial people should muse and thunder
in such lovely language.

Lear, the old buffer, you wonder his daughters,
didn't treat him rougher,
the old chough, the old chaffer!

And Hamlet, how boring, how boring to live with,
so mean and self-conscious, blowing and snoring,
his wonderful speeches, full of other folks' whoring.

And Macbeth and his Lady, who should have been choring,
such suburban ambition, so messily goring
old Duncan with daggers.

How boring, how small Shakespeare's people are!

Yet the language so lovely! like the dyes from gas-tar.

In some ways I am offended by this, and I imagine I am not the only one, even if it is just a passing mood in Lawrence's collection of 'Pansies'. He certainly ought not to be debunking Shakespeare, his

father in art, in this fallacious way. The 'lovely language' originates with, is inseparable from, the artistically living moments of Shakespeare's characters. 'Lear, the old buffer'? How could Lawrence be so desensitised to the holistic quality of the art in his greatest predecessor? Perhaps he was not himself that day but we cannot entirely disown such lapses on his behalf. It was not a good example at a time when high art was coming in for facile mockery to cut it down to the size of the smaller-minded.

There is, however, in Lawrence something that challenges how we see the past and the present and maybe he assumes too much from its authority. This 'something in Lawrence' was for me in embryo in 'Sons and Lovers' in the contrast between the strained lives of its characters and the writing's cumulative effect of vitality and wonder. At some stage there coalesced in Lawrence a profound evaluation of life: Life itself is worth living but not all lives are worth living. 'Life itself is worth living' is not a truth universally acknowledged, to misquote one of our listed novelists. Most of our significant ancestors lived their lives very far from it. It was hardly the keynote of Greek tragedy and it was certainly not one of the

shibboleths of any of our great religions which have, if anything, preached the opposite, with an after-life for preference or punishment.

It is not a shibboleth of Lawrence either. 'Life itself is worth living but not all lives are worth living' is not, so far as I know, even a Laurentian formulation. He never said it but he did not have to: it is implicit in his art and is given almost an explicit articulation in his other writings. I should like to be able suggest that it is always on the threshold of our consciousness when we read him. In his art it is implicit but it becomes overt in a late work, 'The Man Who Died' in which the Christ-like figure survives his execution and slowly comes to realise that the flesh-and-blood life in the here-and-now world is better than ideas of salvation in another. With his art in this atmospheric story, Lawrence aims show the reader that it is better.

'Nothing is important but life' might be as close as he comes to formulating a shibboleth for this 'something' implicit in his art. I am not sure what to call it: a conviction, an insight, a belief, a faith, all of these. Leavis refers to his 'religious intuition of the primacy of life' and to call it religious is probably appropriate to Lawrence's sense

of it, but not strictly necessary. To call it religious is to challenge religions and it can be seen to do so. Lawrence knew that he had it and that he had to be true to it, on behalf of the race, as it were. It was in this sense a source of inspiration to him and it gave him his morality as a writer.

Aldous Huxley said that Lawrence was different in kind, not just in degree. If he were different in kind, we should not respond to him in the way that we do, he would not bring us closer to life in the way that he does and we should not feel critical when he goes too far in the way that he can.

We can elaborate on the historical and sociological factors that came together to make Shakespeare, and only Shakespeare, happen when he did. just as we can elaborate on the different factors that made Lawrence, and only Lawrence, happen in the early decades of the twentieth century. We can say that something new began with Shakespeare. Shakespeare's use of it gave the English language its fullest credentials with which a great literature could and did develop. Lawrence followed in that tradition of literary

art but with him too came something new, something not in his predecessors, not even in Shakespeare.

For Leavis it was something that should not be lost. I imagine that we all understand what Leavis means when he distinguishes between reading as students and connoisseurs of literature and reading as we read the living. If we read as we read the living, we know that something is resonant and relevant to us as human beings. When at the age of fourteen some part of 'Henry V' resonated with me (it was near enough at the time an apperception from my being human), I recognised it at once and ultimately it was something with which I personally did not want to lose contact. I said that it was self-evident and allowed no doubt. I say this to you in the hope that most of you will understand what I mean.

It would be such an advantage for the improvement of civilisation if we could demonstrate the importance of literature as we demonstrate the validity of a theorem. We should not convince everybody but perhaps fewer educated people would be able to deny it.

Having spent his adult life demonstrating the importance of literature ungainsayably in his teaching and in his writing, Leavis at the age of eighty finally published a book demonstrating it in ways that may be said more than to border on the theoretical, though in the past he was inclined to disavow theory in respect of literature. He called the book, as many of us know, 'The Living Principle' with capital letters but he wants to define a reality for a concept of 'the living principle' with small letters. He admits that for him it is a very difficult concept and intends the whole book as a means of explaining it. Obviously I do not have that scope here and so I am going to try to simplify it, perhaps in such a way that you will not recognize it or even understand it.

The word 'living' is emphasised: it is 'the LIVING principle'. Ants and bees, although alive and co-operating for a purpose, are not living at all in the sense of 'the living principle'. For human beings, life is not just a biological term, although it can be consistently used in that limited way; it is also necessarily an evaluative term. The word 'living' in 'the living principle' integrates both terms. In my.....in your....in our individuality, in our

uniqueness, in our subjectivity and our meaningful use of the single-lettered word 'I' with a capital, in being ourselves and nobody else, in our determination to live against knowing that the passing moment never returns, in having our instinct for happiness, in our natural resistance to being constrained either mentally or physically, and so on, and so on, we know the integrated meaning of 'living' in 'the living principle'; we know what the living principle is. In a sense nothing is more important. Great writers are a rare and sophisticated product of civilisation and, when they find their true originality in their consciously creative use of our language, which is communal, they can become one with 'the living principle' (Leavis said that they 'strive to realise or to become the living principle') and they test and vindicate the values of human life. 'The living principle' of the artist evaluates our lives from the inside. In our culture there is nothing MORE important than that.

'The living principle' is not the same as Lawrence's 'religious intuition of the primacy of life', to use Leavis's expression. The conviction that life is worth living belongs to Lawrence. You do not have to share it. Many people, including great writers, do not

obviously do so. Many cannot share it. You can feel that your own life is worth living without having Lawrence's generalized conviction, his universalized evaluation. This remarkable certitude that Lawrence was able to ascribe to the value of life itself deeply influenced Leavis and it is what makes me feel that Lawrence is second in importance to Shakespeare.

I asked whether Shakespeare is a greater artist than Lawrence and I did not answer it directly. They have a great deal in common, including extreme creativity with language. You feel that Shakespeare would have had no difficulty in understanding Lawrence's 'art speech is the only speech'. Neither of them is a self-conscious stylist with language, except when they have some purpose for being deliberately so. Apart from blank verse in plays and scansion and rhyme in his sonnets and poems, Shakespeare, like Lawrence, does not obsessively impose literary form on himself, does not give it priority at the expense of meaning. They were both of them vitally bold about sexuality all their writing lives. You could say that in his sonnets, Shakespeare is Laurentian in that

he is exploring the feelings of relationships that are not socially sanctioned.

We know almost nothing about Shakespeare and practically everything about Lawrence. Shakespeare is as completely a writer as it is possible to be, so is Lawrence who took 'the living principle' right into his own dying and for as long as he could wrote poetry, some of the best poems on death in the English language.

In ancient Greece, literature was seen to begin from the high point of Homer; so modern English literature can be seen to begin from the unsurpassed, high point of Shakespeare. He is a greater artist than Lawrence but then Lawrence is not just an artist.