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Lawrence and Leavis

In the current *D. H. Lawrence Newsletter*, no. 84, Keith Sagar, in conversation with Dave Brock, said (on p. 29):

> . . . there was a sudden explosion of interest in Lawrence in 1950 for which one man can be given the credit, and that's Alan [*sic*] Lane because he decided in 1950 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Lawrence's death, which no one else had noticed, by publishing virtually all of Lawrence's work in Penguins at 1/6d each.

We no doubt owe a debt of gratitude to Allen Lane, the publisher of Penguins, for making us more aware of Lawrence's presence, but huge debts of gratitude for making us understand Lawrence's genius—by getting him read in schools and colleges—required more than more Penguins. It required the sustained effort of critical appreciation, going very much against the tide, made by Leavis, initially through the medium of *Scrutiny*. (The series of essays that developed into *D. H. Lawrence, Novelist* began before the Penguin initiative.) I suppose that Sir Allen's motives must have been at least partly commercial, and indeed, by publishing, a little later, the "pornographic" *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Penguin books made a sensational killing.

So, it is hard for someone like me to keep quiet when I am called upon to forget the decades of Leavis's poorly paid university teaching, to provide for his family, in order to praise one of the most successful publishers of his generation, and to be told that he had done more for Lawrence than anyone else.

Leavis got as deeply as a man could into the blood and mire of the First World War—he was 19 when it started—watching death continually, knowing, in contradiction of those intellectuals who spoke of the Freudian death-wish, that the young men he knew did not want to die, that their unspeakable experiences placed them beyond the clichés of heroism and the superficialities of empty cynicism. He came back from the War, spiritually wounded as any participant must have been, but with a pudeur, a sensitive reticence, an almost aristocratic self-restraint, which would be indelibly marked in his sensibility ever after, and which influenced the course of his life, both professionally as a literary critic and privately as a man.

That was one half of his cultural landscape; the other was the inheritance of writings which at that time formed the classical treasure-house of thought about life, art, morality, aesthetics, etc. crystallised in the work of Matthew Arnold, Carlyle, Ruskin, Coleridge, Dr Johnson, Henry James . . .

By the time Leavis got round to reading, extensively, D. H. Lawrence, in 1919 (he had begun before the War), he found that serious thought about these matters could be conducted in the idiom of ordinary men—that, in short, the nineteenth century was over, the world had changed. How keep the legacy of the past whilst remaining open to the new influences of the present? He did that, not by imitating Lawrence's style but by letting the insights it provided permeate and penetrate the expression of his more formal masters. Another vital element in forming Leavis's style and approach was the challenging presence of "Forbes of Clare", a dynamic teacher of English who brought a new energy of thought and judgement to the Cambridge English Tripos.

Leavis saw himself as belonging not entirely to the Devil's Party (he was not a poet), but he did exercise a freedom of judgement which would cause him to challenge the presence of many sacred cows in his cultural world; and, as a writer, he did have several styles. His notorious *Two Cultures?* lecture is both satire and polemic; his verbal portrait of Ludwig Wittgenstein is a masterpiece of condensed yet extensive commentary. He was a Huguenot, too, by tradition, and a supporter of the Commonwealth as opposed to the Monarchy—which he interpreted sometimes in the parochial sense of Cambridge *versus* Oxford. With the Great War behind him, and the moral concerns of the nineteenth century helping to form him before that, it's no wonder that he despised dilettantism and belle lettresism; and for one whose style derived substantially from that of Matthew Arnold on the one hand and Henry James on the other, it was really something of a miracle that people went

on reading him well into the nineteen sixties. Both those writers had charms for me, as a student: Arnold's urbane disinterestedness, James's probing intelligence filled with so many vibrant and creatively fruitful by-ways. Then came Lawrence. Leavis, whose style was almost self-consciously academic, could respond to that Lawrentian freshness, affirm its spiritual health, and reach out to students like myself, coming from a cultural world very different from either Lawrence's working class or Leavis's bourgeoisie—Lawrence, so different from Arnold or James, but as well-read as anyone could be, and assuming a natural equality of status with the best that had been thought and said in the world. Yes, they made a family these three authors, ready to welcome any aspiring student. We began to see the larger shape of English Literature through these men; and we remain grateful to this day.

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