

T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence : A Conflict

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There is however one contemporary figure about whom my mind will, I fear, always waver between dislike, exasperation, boredom and admiration. That is D. H. Lawrence.

— T. S. Eliot, 1961.¹

During his lifetime, D. H. Lawrence, made little or no reference to T. S. Eliot either in his essays or in his private letters despite the fact that he apparently heard frequent rumours about this celebrated young poet of his time from the literary friends they had in common, such as John Middleton Murry, Richard Aldington, Lady Ottoline Morrell, etc. It seems that he simply disregarded Eliot with such indifference mixed with slight enmity as he sometimes showed to someone who was unsympathetic to his art.

In contrast, a considerable number of allusions to Lawrence made by Eliot, even though mostly unfavorable ones, indicate how deeply he was involved with this "heretic" writer. Perhaps it is no exaggeration to say that the issue of Lawrence lay heavy on his mind to the end, especially after Lawrence's death in 1930. Moreover, his view on Lawrence was not only constantly wavering, as he himself admitted in 1961 (see the epigraph above), but it was astonishingly emotional for a cool, sophisticated person such as Eliot. What in Lawrence agitated his consciousness (or subconsciousness) so violently is to me an interesting theme, and I shall deal with it in this paper.

Since Eliot's remarks on Lawrence were mostly publicized after Lawrence's death, the latter had lost his opportunity to confute them for good. A fair reader must therefore examine each of Eliot's points carefully and then compare it with Lawrence's view on the same problem before he forms any final judgement on their conflicting points.

To begin with, I will make a short survey of Eliot's "wavering" attitude toward Lawrence, which undergoes a gradual change from a rather favorable to an unfavorable one in the process of time, and then I will discuss his criticism on Lawrence in contrast with his rival's possible answer to it.

As early as 1922, the year of the publication of *The Waste Land*, Eliot made his first remark on Lawrence in a column called 'London Letter' in *The Dial*: "One writer, and indeed, in my opinion, the most interesting novelist in England ... is Mr. D. H. Lawrence ... He still theorized at times when he should merely see ... But there is one scene in this book (*Aaron's Rod*) ... in which one feels that the whole is governed by a creator who is purely creator, with the terrifying disinter-

estedness of the creator. And for that we can forgive Mr. Lawrence his subsequent lapse into a theory of human relationships."² Although in this review the emphasis is put on a counter-balancing merit of this novel, Eliot does not overlook at least two negative aspects of the work, the one is a strong inclination to theorization, the other is an obtrusion of the author's philosophy of human relationships on the reader, neither of which Eliot likes from the beginning. His ambivalent attitude toward Lawrence does not change for some time. In 1923, he finds in the work of Lawrence, especially in *Aaron's Rod*, "the profoundest research into human nature, as well as the most erratic and uneven writing, by any writer of our generation."³ Eliot's dissatisfaction with "the most erratic and uneven writing," however, seems to increase toward the end of Lawrence's life. And that tragic 'farewell' letter of Lawrence to J. M. Murry written in May 1929, proves that somehow or other the novelist on the verge of death is fully aware of Eliot's position. "The animal that I am you instinctively dislike — just as all the Lynds and Squires and Eliots and Goulds instinctively dislike it. —"⁴

In April 1930, one month after Lawrence's death, Eliot exchanges a brief view on Lawrence with E. M. Forster in *The Nation and Athenaeum*, in which he throws doubt on Forster's opinion that the late D. H. Lawrence was the greatest imaginative novelist of our time. He says that this judgement is meaningless unless he knows the exact meaning of 'greatest,' 'imaginative' and 'novelist,' for "there are at least three 'novelists' of 'our generation' ... for whom a similar claim might be made."⁵

Eliot's first virulent attack on Lawrence is his review of Murry's *Son of Women*, which was carried in the July 1931 issue of *The Criterion*. Although some of his remarks here are groundlessly scathing and inaccurate (e.g. "He [Lawrence] would probably have been always an unhappy man in this world," which is of course an unfounded conjecture), some of his points are still very provocative, and, in my view, not yet brought to a settlement to the satisfaction of many serious readers of Lawrence. "Unwillingly in part," Eliot admits that Lawrence is "a great tragic *figure*" (my italics), but as an *artist*, he says, Lawrence is a failure, because "the false prophet kills the artist."⁶ For Eliot, he is "a strange mixture of sincerity or clairvoyance with self-deception — or rather with the effort towards self-deception," and his peculiar way of dealing with himself and the world around him seems to spring from *ignorance*.⁷ Eliot's emphasis on his ignorance is repeated in his later criticism.

In 1934, Eliot publishes a book called *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* — perhaps the most controversial and, in a sense, penetrating prose work he ever wrote. This book deserves special attention for our purpose, because it takes up Lawrence in a much wider context of religion and modern literature, and reveals for the first time the most crucial points of Eliot's criticism on Lawrence

— each concerning religion, morality and intellect.

In the first chapter of this book Eliot observes that the contrast of heresy and orthodoxy has some analogy to that of romanticism and classicism, but that the former pair is more fundamental and has a wider sense. In other words, the concept of orthodoxy and heresy includes that of classicism and romanticism, but not vice versa. For Eliot, orthodoxy is fundamentally Christian orthodoxy more or less connected with classicism, and heresy is of course a non-Christian way of thinking more or less connected with romanticism. Needless to say, the former (orthodoxy and classicism) should be defended against the latter. Here we remember his famous self-definition that he is “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion.”⁸

In modern literature, Eliot argues, the two contrasting tendencies are represented by D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce. Lawrence is “an almost perfect example of the heretic” while Joyce is “the most ethically orthodox of the more eminent writers of my time.”⁹ A characteristic of modern heretics is that “they have an exceptionally acute perception, or profound insight, of some part of the truth,” but if we cannot redress the balance, we shall go astray.¹⁰

When Eliot called Lawrence a “heretic,” not a “romantic,” he got to the very core of the problem for the first time, because in the depth of their conflict lies hardly anything but the radical difference in their attitude toward religion. Before we proceed any further, therefore, we must survey what their basic conception of religion is. In the case of Eliot, however, it is particularly difficult to cover everything within limited space, for he was a fairly prolific writer on various problems of Christianity, Christian society and Christian education. I will pick up only a few of his central ideas mainly in relation to literature.

Firstly, Eliot maintains that the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what he calls Secularism, and that it is simply unaware of the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life, of something which he assumes to be our primary concern.¹¹ Then he rightly points out that Secularism leads the modern humanist, as well as the romantic, to neglect the problem of evil and the conception of sin, and that “with the disappearance of the idea of Original Sin, with the disappearance of the idea of intense moral struggle, the human beings presented to us both in poetry and in prose fiction to-day ... tend to become less and less real.”¹² If there is an authority that can tell us what is right and what is wrong, it is Christian doctrine. In support of this view, he quotes T. E. Hulme:

I hold the religious conception of ultimate values to be right, the humanist wrong ... what is important, is what nobody seems to realize ... the dogmas like that of Original Sin, which are the closest expression of the categories of the religious attitude. That man is in no sense perfect, but a wretched

creature, who can yet apprehend perfection.¹³

Finally, if we are to accept a Christian Society, "we must treat Christianity with a great more *intellectual* respect than is our wont; we must treat it as being for the individual a matter primarily of thought and not of feeling."¹⁴

To sum up Eliot's view on religion:

- (1) His religion (Christianity) emphasizes the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life.
- (2) It is based upon the idea that man is a wretched and imperfect creature.
- (3) His religion is supposed to teach us the ultimate values of life, or what is right and what is wrong.
- (4) He believes in Original Sin in particular.
- (5) His religion is primarily a matter of intellect or thought rather than of habit or feeling.

Our next concern is to inquire into Lawrence's ideas about religion in contrast with Eliot's.

When we read Lawrence's writing, whether it is fiction or poetry or an essay, we often get a feeling that the author is a person with an extremely religious bent. In fact, his "exceptionally acute perception, or profound insight," however heretic it may appear, is partly a result of his early home education closely connected with Congregationalism. As he grows up, he becomes more independent from Christian doctrine. Strangely, however, the more antagonistic he becomes to Christianity toward the end of his life, the more acute and powerful his "religious" perception or sensibility grows, as if it is a compensatory reaction. And yet Lawrence's "religion" is so different from Eliot's, it is hopelessly difficult to find any common factors between them.

To Lawrence, as well as to the ancient pagans, "Matter, Materia, or Substantial things are God."¹⁵ To him there is no such object as is "essentially fixed and dead."¹⁶ If the sun is alive to our eyes and gives pleasure, it is God. Our body itself is part of the sun and our blood is part of the sea. There exists no such discontinuity between spirit and body, between man and cosmos (or nature), as in Christian doctrine. Both are one and undivided.

In a passage of *Apocalypse*, which reminds us somewhat of Nietzsche, Lawrence describes a basic difference between pagan religion and Christianity. The ancient religion, he says, is the cult of life, vitality and power, in which morals play only a secondary role, being reduced to social manners and decent behaviour. With the advent of Christianity, however, all religion and thought begin to turn from the study of vitality to the study of morals, death and reward *afterwards*. He repeat-

edly proposes that we should abandon "the Christian fear" and "go back, a long way, before the idealist conceptions began, before Plato, ... to get on to our feet again."¹⁷ Unlike Nietzsche, who advocates the conquest of pessimism through the idea of "Übermensch," Lawrence tries to convince us that the only way out is to regain the great sensual awareness and sense-knowledge attained by *instinct* and *intuition*, not by *reason*, and, by so doing, "to re-establish the great relationships which the grand idealists, with their underlying pessimism, ... destroyed for us."¹⁸ He continues:

Buddha, Plato, Jesus, they were all three utter pessimists as regards life, teaching that the only happiness lay in abstracting oneself from life, the daily, yearly, seasonal life of birth and death and fruition, and in living in the 'immutable' or eternal spirit. But now, after almost three thousand years, now that we are almost abstracted entirely from the rhythmic life of the seasons, birth and death and fruition, now we realize that such abstraction is neither bliss nor liberation, but nullity. It brings null inertia. And the great saviours and teachers only cut us off from life. It was the tragic *excursus*.¹⁹

To sum up Lawrence's view on religion:

- (1) His religion is a kind of pantheism more or less analogous to the one that prevailed in the ancient pagan world: fundamentally it is affirmative to life on earth.
- (2) It is based upon the idea that man can attain happiness and rapture through the perfect harmony between man and cosmos.
- (3) He holds that the Christian concept of right and wrong is not only petty, but also harmful, because it evokes meaningless horror and hatred against life in man's mind.
- (4) He does not believe in Original Sin.
- (5) His religion is primarily a matter of instinct and intuition rather than of intellect or reason.

Religion concerns our innermost needs. If there exists a great antithesis between two persons as regards it, the inevitable result is hostility or indifference to each other, and that is exactly the case with Eliot and Lawrence.

Eliot's criticism on Lawrence's moral sense is simply another aspect of his criticism on Lawrence's religion, for the problem of morals constitutes an essential part of Christian doctrine, while, in Lawrence's paganism, as we have seen already, it is only a matter of social manners and decent behaviour, rather irrelevant to the cult of life.

Thus Eliot's moral indignation is directed against *Lady Catterley's Lover*, in which he sees hardly anything but the social obsession which makes Connie, a well-born lady, offer herself to her husband's gamekeeper, "the same *morbidity* which makes other of his female characters bestow their favours upon *savages*" (my italics).²⁰ The author of this book seems to him to be "a very sick man indeed."²¹ He goes as far as to say that Lawrence's insensibility to ordinary social morality is so alien to his mind that he is "completely baffled by it as a monstrosity."²²

When Eliot says Lawrence is sick, he mainly means that Lawrence is sick in sexual morality. This sort of attack is not to be attributed to Eliot alone, for, however absurd it may seem today, it was among the commonest reactions to Lawrence's works at that time (and indeed until quite recently) to call the author "a sick man." The following quotation from his essay, "The State of Funk" (1929), tells us how resolutely he encountered the slanders and misunderstandings of the reading public without losing a sense of humour:

The papers call me "lurid"; and a "dirty-minded fellow." One woman, evidently a woman of education and means, wrote to me out of the blue: "You, who are a mixture of the missing-link and the chimpanzee, etc." ... Now I am one of the least lurid mortals, and I don't at all mind being likened to a chimpanzee. If there is one thing I insist on it is that sex is a delicate, vulnerable, vital thing that you mustn't fool with. If there is one thing I deplore it is heartless sex.²³

Undoubtedly, with unshaken faith, he believes that it is he who is healthy and they (James Joyce, for example) who are sick. To him sex and beauty are inseparable, while to many modern men and women sex is as lurid and filthy as excretion. From this morbid hatred of sex, he argues, arises the great disaster of our civilization — "the diseased, atrophied condition of the intuitive faculties."²⁴ Against the accusation that *Lady Catterley's Lover* is immoral he makes his own eloquent defense in an essay, "A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover" (1930). It is far from him, he says, to suggest that all women should go running after gamekeepers, or after anybody, for lovers. "A great many men and women today are happiest when they abstain and stay sexually apart, quite clean: and at the same time, when they understand and realize sex more fully."²⁵

As is mentioned before, Lawrence rarely refers to Eliot even in his letters, but the name James Joyce appears more often in his letters and essays, from which we can perceive Lawrence's hatred of pedantry, cynical curiosity about sexuality, a strong inclination to "niggling" self-analysis, which Lawrence thinks permeate Joyce's *Ulysses*. "Oh, dear! What a grey face!" Lawrence writes in an

essay in 1922, the year after the publication of this extraordinary work, "Through thousands and thousands of pages Mr. Joyce and Miss Richardson tear themselves to pieces, strip their smallest emotions to the finest threads ..." ²⁶ And in 1928, in a letter to Aldous Huxley, he is still grumbling with detestation, "My God, what a clumsy olla putrida James Joyce is! Nothing but old gags and cabbage-stumps of quotations from the Bible and the rest, stewed in the juice of deliberate, journalistic dirty mindedness ... what old and hard-worked staleness, masquerading as the all-new!" ²⁷

I think that there are some ground for believing that Lawrence might have pointed the same critical remarks at Eliot, too. At least, in *The Waste Land*, there are in fact a deep-seated tendency to "self-analysis," a mountain of "quotations from the Bible and the rest" and many negative images of man's sexual life. ²⁸ One of the central themes of the famous poetry is the failure of love, which the poet manipulates with cool melancholic cynicism. There are also a number of allusions to raping, impotence, weariness of life and futility of marriage, all of which Lawrence could not accept as the reality of life. He could not accept them because he had a strong faith in the sacredness of love, marriage and life. He could not accept literary pedantry, cynicism and far-fetched analytic method, either, because they kill the vital center of life. Ironically, however, the censorship of *Ulysses*, which Lawrence regarded as "dirty," had been removed (in the United States) in 1933, some thirty years earlier than the legal publication of the complete text of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

It is noteworthy that in his late years Eliot makes an important modification of his view on Lawrence's moral sense. In 1960, when the trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* took place, Eliot was even prepared to appear in court as a witness for the defense. Looking back on the case in an essay "To Criticize the Critic" (1961), Eliot confesses:

I felt then, as I feel now, that the prosecution of such a book — a book of most serious and highly moral *intention* — was a deplorable blunder, the consequences of which would be most unfortunate whatever the verdict, and give the book a kind of vogue which would have been abhorrent to the author. ²⁹

The italics are Eliot's; although they indicate that Eliot may still have some doubt about the *morality* of the novel, he at least admits that the *intention* of the author is "highly moral." Moreover, he is reported as having observed to Helen Gardner that at the period of his life when *After Strange Gods* was written it was he, rather than Lawrence, who was sick. ³⁰ One possible reason for this change is his happy remarriage with Valerie Fletcher, his former secretary, in 1957. In fact, if

there is a hidden connection between Tiresias' "I was neither / Living nor dead" in *The Waste Land* (1922) and Eliot's tragic first marriage with Vivienne H. Haigh-Wood, as some critics emphasize, there must be another connection between Lord Cloverton's "I've only just now had the illumination / Of knowing what love is" in *The Elder Statesman* (1958) and Eliot's happy second marriage which perhaps opened his eye to a new possibility of man-woman relationships and drew him closer to Lawrence's position, although I have no firm intention to persist in this surmise.

The third and last point of Eliot's criticism on Lawrence relates to his "ignorance." Ignorance? Is a man who writes such penetrating books as *Fantasia of the Unconscious* or *Apocalypse* ignorant? One might be baffled by this strong word until one knows what Eliot really means by it.

In his review of *Son of Woman*, in which Eliot uses this word for the first time, he explains that the word "ignorance" does not really imply the lack of education. "Had Lawrence been sent to a public school and taken honours at a university he would not have been a jot the less ignorant."³¹ Here he seems to say that Lawrence's ignorance is something inherent in the author which cannot be changed through any kind of ideal education. But immediately after the sentence, Eliot continues: "What true education should do ... is to develop a wise and large capacity for orthodoxy, to preserve the individual from the solely centrifugal impulse of heresy ..."³² Here is a contradiction. On the one hand, the poet's intuition in Eliot tells him that Lawrence's "ignorance" constitutes his intrinsic character as a writer, which no education can transform; on the other hand, the critic's intelligence tries to convince him that *true* education could develop (even in Lawrence) a capacity for orthodoxy. After all, what we can presume from this explanation is that for Eliot the word "ignorance" has a lot to do with "heresy," and that the antonym of "ignorance" is not "wisdom" or "knowledge" but "orthodoxy."

Eliot's allusion to Lawrence's ignorance reappears in *After Strange Gods* and in the preface to *D. H. Lawrence and Human Existence* (1951) by Father W. Tiver-ton. In the former, he stresses a lack of "the critical faculties" in Lawrence "which education should give" (as if Lawrence had not been educated properly), "an incapacity for what we ordinarily call thinking, ... lack of intellectual and social training."³³ Here again we have no clear idea of what Eliot really means by "critical faculties," "(in)capacity for thinking" and "intellectual and social training." But in the latter, his point becomes much more ambiguous and unconvincing. "Wrong he often was (I think) from *ignorance*, prejudice, or drawing the wrong conclusions in his conscious mind from the insights which came to him from below consciousness... As for his religious attitude ... we can now begin to see how much was *ignorance*, rather than hostility; for Lawrence was an *ignorant* man in the

sense that he was unaware of how much he did not know." (my italics).³⁴

His persistent attack on Lawrence's "ignorance" was in turn severely criticized by F. R. Leavis, as evidence of ignorance and prejudice on the part of Eliot himself.³⁵ It is little use, however, trying to judge which person is more ignorant or more intelligent, because, putting aside the problem of religion, the major difference between the two exists not in their relative superiority or inferiority in the "capacity for thinking" but in their manner of thinking and perception.

As a commonly acknowledged classicist, Eliot has recourse to the power of reason or intellect; and his method of writing is analytic. (It does not follow from it, however, that he lacks intuition or passion.) His style among other things proves how seriously he tried to think "clearly and distinctly."

In contrast, Lawrence simply does not put so much reliance on the power of reason or "the critical faculties." In his view, it is not reason or intellect, but instinct and intuition that can save our civilization from the great disaster in which we live. In other words, he denies the effectiveness of the modern scientific method based upon analysis, and insists on the recovery of the vast range of the sensual awareness upon which the ancient life was established.

In this respect, Lawrence is a faithful follower of the great romantic tradition in England. But in his firm, consistent faith in man's instinct and intuition, and in the ultimate triumph of natural beauty both inside and outside the man, he excels some great romantics. Unlike Wordsworth, for example, he did not turn from nature to Christianity, or did not have to, because his vivid sensibility to the mystical power of nature never declined to the end. Unlike Coleridge, he did not suffer from dualism of Matter ("that inanimate cold world")³⁶ and Spirit ("the primary and secondary Imagination," etc),³⁷ because for Lawrence Matter *is* spirit, Matter *is* God.

T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence are among the most important literary figures in twentieth century English literature, each representing one of the two distinctly opposite tendencies of literary tradition, or even of man's mind. It is almost impossible to think of any other pair of distinguished modern writers who are so different from each other in their birth, education, taste, sensibility, and their views on religion and morality. Their hostility to each other was inevitable. Besides, they had their own peculiar difficulties as modern writers. A poet in the Renaissance period, for instance, would not have been much annoyed by such problems as politics, religion, morality, education, etc. These were not in their line, so to speak. But no honest modern poet or novelist could help being involved in the turmoils caused by these problems, whether he liked it or not. This peculiarity of the time contributed to widening the discrepancies between the two.

Nevertheless, when we look back upon their major achievements over a dis-

tance of almost half a century, we can discover some strange affinities between them, affinities that can be found only among those who struggled with the same problems. They both bear the indelible marks of a tragic age. As the great explorers of human mind, they were painfully aware of the dangerous state of modern man whose mind is distorted by the mechanical characters of our civilization. As the prophets of man's fate, they saw no hope in the future of fascism, nor of communism, none the less of capitalism, because all of them stem from the same root — materialism. Nor did they see any hope in the future of mass society, because they knew the weakness of individual human beings so thoroughly. What they longed for is, it seems, a kind of aristocracy, not of heredity, but of souls, for they both had a faith in *Noblesse* inside the souls of some men. Finally, they both had a deep sense of crisis about the decay of religious tradition. Although, as we saw, Lawrence gave up Christianity and went to the ancient cult of natural potency, while Eliot insisted on maintaining Christian orthodoxy, they are exactly alike in believing that religion, be the matter what it may, is essential to man's happiness.

The conflict between Eliot and Lawrence is itself a manifestation of the modern crisis. But if Eliot had not recognized consciously or unconsciously such affinities between themselves, he would not have been so much concerned with this person. Or rather (I will venture to say) it was some truth, not fallacy, in Lawrence's writing or in his views on religion, morality and perception that made Eliot take such an emotional, ambivalent attitude toward his powerful rival.

(September 28, 1976)

Notes

1. T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic* (New York, 1965), p. 24.
2. H. Coombes, ed. *D. H. Lawrence: A Critical Anthology* (Penguin Books, 1973), p. 147.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
4. H. T. Moore, ed. *The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence* (London, 1962), p. 1154.
5. H. Coombes, p. 219.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 242 and p. 247.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
8. In the preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928).
9. T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London, 1934), p. 38.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
11. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London, 1972), p. 398.
12. *After Strange Gods*, p. 42.
13. *Selected Essays*, p. 490.
14. T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London, 1939), p. 8.
15. D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse* (New York, 1967), p. 84.

16. See Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, XIII: "It (the secondary Imagination) is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead."
17. D. H. Lawrence, '*A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover*' and *Other Essays* (Penguin Books, 1961), p. 119.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *After Strange Gods*, p. 61.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
23. D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix II* (London, 1968), p. 569.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 528.
25. '*A Propos*,' p. 89.
26. *Phoenix I* (London, 1961), pp. 517-8.
27. *The Collected Letters of D. H. L.*, p. 1075.
28. F. R. Leavis already pointed out that "T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* is preoccupied with sex." See *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist* (New York, 1968), p. 315.
29. T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic* (New York 1965), p. 24.
30. Roger Kojecký, *T. S. Eliot's Social Criticism* (London, 1971), p. 94.
31. H. Coombes, p. 243.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *After Strange Gods*, pp. 58-9.
34. See F. R. Leavis, *D. H. L.: Novelist*, pp. 384-5.
35. See *Ibid.*
36. See Coleridge, "Dejection: An Ode."
37. See *Biographia Literaria*, Chap. XIII.