

The Glyph and the Gramophone: D.H. Lawrence's Religion

Luke Ferretter

Bloomsbury: New Directions in Religion and Literature

2013, 173 pp

Dr. Catherine Brown 5th November 2013

Ferretter, author of the 2003 *Towards a Christian Literary Theory*, gives every sign of possessing a religious disposition. Yet the contention which runs through *The Glyph and the Gramophone* like a name through rock – that D.H. Lawrence was always and fundamentally a religious writer - is not the result of authorial projection; it is attestable fact, and the cause, not the result, of Ferretter having chosen him as a subject. Of course, that contention requires that one allows Lawrence to redefine, and continuously readjust his definition, of religion. Today's English readers come to Lawrence on the far side of the Bishop of Woolwich's revisionary Anglican theology (*Honest to God*, 1963), of the New Age Movement, and of the experience of living in a multi-religious society. We, it might be thought, are particularly open to Lawrence's reimaginings of God and man's possible relationships to it or Him. However, Ferretter's book makes clear how much Lawrence's theology was coloured by earlier and contemporary thinkers. His contemporary readers, who were more likely than us to have read and been influenced by the same, might all the more readily have understood his religiopoiesis, and classified it as such. One of the functions of the scholar is to recreate the intellectual *milieu* which helps to form a writer, and against which his or her originality, heterodoxy, and courage may be measured. Ferretter serves this function admirably.

That is - always provided that the reader is familiar with both Christianity in general, and its influence on the early Lawrence in particular. This strictly chronological book starts in *media res* in 1915, one outcome of which is that no account of Lawrence's Congregationalist upbringing is given. The book's subtitle, 'D.H. Lawrence's Religion', therefore places a heavy stress on the possessor. The book investigates *his* religion, *as distinct from* his inherited Christianity. This approach makes an assumption of the greater familiarity to the reader of Anglicanism than theosophy, Congregationalism than Native American religion, which might still be justified, but

one wonders for how long (I write as someone who teaches ‘Christianity in Victorian literature’ to undergraduates with no background whatsoever in the former concept).

Ferretter’s dual narrative is one of both stasis and change. He insists on Lawrence’s perpetual apophatic deism, but rejects Poplawski’s claim that Lawrence’s religious thought remained the same from *The Rainbow* onwards. Rather, he contends that Lawrence developed the concept of a dark God, manifest particularly in *Kangaroo* and *The Plumed Serpent*, as a result of the War. Meanwhile his theorisation of natural aristocracy evolved over the nineteen-twenties from a political to a spiritual form (the latter being found in *Apocalypse*).

Ferretter charts these changes with reference to a gallery of influences, including William James (whose definition of religion fits with Lawrence’s own), Herbert Spencer (who argued for the underlying truth of all religious perceptions), Heraklitus (in his advocacy of the rule of a wise man rather than the *demos*), Anaximander (in his belief in the origins of life in the separation of opposites), Helena Blavatsky (in her apophaticism), James Pryse (in his theosophical physiology), James Frazer (in his accounts of native American human sacrifice which influenced ‘The Woman Who Rode Away’), and George Dennis (from whose accounts of the Etruscans as gloomy and despairing Lawrence sharply departed). The preceding summaries necessarily lose the nuances of Ferretter’s accounts, but it is worth noting that the book itself – in accordance with the format of Bloomsbury’s ‘New Directions in Religion and Literature’ series - is not long, that it covers a huge amount of intellectual and literary history, that it wastes not a word, and that it might occasionally move too fast for certain tastes. A certain level of detail is necessarily sacrificed in a book of 160 pages on ‘Lawrence’s religion’ – about which, as the book itself argues, there is so very much to say.

Nonetheless, the book’s argumentation is tight enough to allow it to effect several reappraisals, especially for readers whose understanding of Lawrence had hitherto been relatively godless. For example, Ferretter argues that Ranim was conceived primarily as a religious community in a secular world. He makes an extended investigation into the etymology of its name, and reminds us that the community’s badge was to be ‘an eagle, or phoenix argent, rising from a flaming nest of scarlet, on

a black background' – which makes sense of the dramatic (not to mention National Socialist) colour scheme of the Cambridge Edition of his works. Lawrence's arguments with Bertrand Russell are most often paraphrased in terms of political disagreement, but Ferretter stresses their religious dimension, and the fact that Lawrence not only tried to pull Russell into a sense of the infinite, but expected him to devise the new metaphysic on which a new state might be constructed. He probes the extent to which Lawrence's characterisation of 'The Hopi Snake Dance' in New Mexico was based on Lawrence's witness of such a dance, and finds that it was in fact strongly coloured by his reading of Frederick Carter's occult astrology. Ferretter's delineation of such influences also allows Lawrence's originality and self-confidence in departing from them to become apparent - notably in his adaption of James Pryse's physiology into his own map of the human ganglia, first mentioned in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, properly developed in *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*, and defended from ridicule and more accessibly restated, in *Fantasia of the Unconscious*.

The book has many further virtues. The writing is clear, unselfconscious, and jargon-free. The personal views of the writer are held firmly and modestly out of sight; the religion of *Lawrence* is its sole focus. Appropriately for a book in a series on religion and literature, there is no scholarly self-importance; references are unobtrusively bracketed in the text; there are neither footnotes nor endnotes; the message is all. In his discussion of 'The Ship of Death' Ferretter develops a sophisticated concept of the interrelation of imagination and faith, and how the first can involve a version of the latter if employed with sufficient emotional urgency. Patient and explicatory attention is paid, despite the book's brevity, to areas of Lawrence's religious writing which many readers find intellectually, aesthetically and morally difficult – notably in the Mexican novels. Ferretter acknowledges an incoherence here, in the fact that whereas Cipriano wants to spread the Quetzalcoatl religion by force, Don Ramon disagrees, and Lawrence himself is torn between his desire and his sense of the possible. Ferretter weighs moral arguments judiciously, and his judgments are never shrill, even when, in one case, it is the following: 'The higher level of relationship between the sexes than equality posited in the sexual politics of the Quetzalcoatl religion is a patriarchal fantasy, which has no reference in the real world.'

However, he goes on to make the argument that this fact does not condemn *The Plumed Serpent* from a political or a feminist point of view. He bases this on two points: that natural aristocracy is not the basis of the Quetzalcoatl religion (although it can be derived from it), and the novel itself is undecided about the politics it portrays - therefore the aesthetic failure of Kate's submission to Cipriano 'is precisely the ethical strength of the novel'. In contrast to Virginia Hyde, he finds 'in the constant play of writing and re-writing of the final chapter, and in the constitutive ambiguity of the final line, not a reluctance but a series of attempts to resolve its two plots; rather than being dialogic'. As he concludes with reference to Lawrence's famous dictum in 'Morality and the Novel': 'the novel gets up and walks away with the nail of the authoritarian politics of the Quetzalcoatl religion'. Yet the whole quotation from Lawrence, as cited by Ferretter, is as follows: 'If you try to nail anything down, in the novel, either it kills the novel or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail.' To observe that Lawrence fails aesthetically whenever he is most troubling politically - which could be argued to be generally true across his *oeuvre* - surely demonstrates that there the novels have been killed or wounded, rather than walking away with the nail? And, that being the case, should Lawrence be politically and morally excused?

Another query I had was that Ferretter at times overstates the consistency of Lawrence's positions. His acknowledgment of conflict in the Mexican novels is a rare case. More often, the compression enforced on him by the shortness of the book seems to have impelled him to draw out a single position where several are present. He claims that Ramon sounds like Lawrence in his articles of 1923-24 for John Middleton Murry's *Adelphi*, but his quotations from each do not bear that out. The same point can be applied to his discussion of single works. Birkin in *Women in Love*, for example, changes his position repeatedly; as Ursula points out to Hermione, 'he always contradicts himself'. Lawrence accepts this changeability as naturally involved in what he calls, in the American Preface to *Women in Love*, 'the passionate struggle into conscious being'. This limitation is avoidable. Less so, however, is Ferretter's involvement in the contradiction which he rightly identifies between 'the glyph and the gramophone, of the "God" who Lawrence believes cannot be known or spoken about and his constant and passionate effort to speak about it nevertheless'. A critic must speak, and a critic undertaking the current project must make comprehensible someone else's attempts to speak about the incomprehensible. One

way out of the contradiction would be to restate it in terms of consciousness, and then adopt Murry's solution: 'We have to learn, through consciousness, how and where to be unconscious – learn it, and pass this on.' Ferretter, however, concentrates on Lawrence's *God*, as opposed to the mode of its perception, and therefore does not enter into the huge, analogous, and causally connected issue in Lawrence: his passionate struggle into consciousness of the dangers and limitations of consciousness. But whereas Lawrence has art at his disposal with which to articulate his apophaticism, Ferretter does not, and therefore falls into a stronger contradiction between the God being described, and the mode of its description. For example, as early as in *Sons and Lovers*, Paul Morel argues: 'It's not religious to be religious [...] I reckon a crow is religious when it sails across the sky. But it only does it because it feels itself carried to where it's going, not because it thinks it is being eternal.' The point here is not that Paul is speaking as one character to another, in a particular situation, in a novel; Lawrence articulates similar points to similar effect as a narrator and in his non-fiction. The point is that he is able to make his point deictically by pointing to a crow – whereas a critic is impelled towards theological paraphrase of the same point. This is unavoidable, but it is part of this book's rigorous economy and absence of self-consciousness that the point is unacknowledged.

One other point which the book does not confront explicitly is the nature of Lawrence's monism. He was fundamentally a monist for whom spirit and matter were interfused – yet he also had a category of nonliving, nonspiritual matter, which included for example the dead stallion which Rupert remembers whilst looking at Gerald's corpse. Mere matter produces mechanical dreams (such as Freud describes), as opposed to the (minority of) soul dreams; it is involved in Birkin's illnesses, which are not narrated - but not in that of Ursula at the end of *The Rainbow*, which is also an illness of soul. Mere matter was the medium of the tuberculosis which killed Lawrence - about which he did not want to think or write. In his writings he unifies spirit and matter, never forgetting the physical side of this union. Therefore when Ferretter claims that The Man who Died feels, on rising, 'physically and emotionally, the *contemptus mundi* he had spent his life preaching', I feel that a simpler point is being overlooked. The man has been tortured to death; now his body is 'numb, and cold, and rigid, and full of hurt, and tied up. His face was banded with cold bands, his

legs were bandaged together'. These are physical facts, prior to any attitude such as contempt.

The near-excision of any account of orthodox Christianity means that the anticipations of later developments in Lawrence's religion, to be found in the earlier works, are not noted – for example Paul Morel's 'crow' comment, or Lydia and Anna's apophaticism; Lydia 'had some beliefs somewhere, never defined. She had been brought up a Roman Catholic. She had gone to the Church of England for protection. The outward form was a matter of indifference to her. Yet she had some fundamental religion. It was as if she worshipped God as a mystery, never seeking in the least to define what He was. And inside her, the subtle sense of the Great Absolute wherein she had her being was very strong. The English dogma never reached her: the language was too foreign. Through it all she felt the great Separator who held life in His hands, gleaming, imminent, terrible, the Great Mystery, immediate beyond all telling.' The exception to this is in the account of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which rightly emphasis the novel's use of Christian sacramental terms, and its rediscovery of an ancient form of Catholicism which reverently embraced the body, and was one reason for the Bishop of Woolwich's defence of the novel at its trial. Again, the book's economy does not allow the author to fully defend the decision to begin his account in 1915 (despite the continuities of Lawrence's thought and writing, including in relation to religion, before and after). Nor is mention made of the principles of inclusion of works subsequent to *The Rainbow*: *St Mawr* is included but not his other animal novellas; *Aaron's Rod* and *David*, despite their obvious Biblical aspects, are not discussed; the only poems included are a few of the 'Last Poems', which excludes the Evangelistic Beasts of *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers*. Moreover the hammer blows against Lawrence's – as against so many of his predecessors' and contemporaries' – Christianity: higher criticism and evolution, Renan and Darwin, are not discussed, despite the fact that they not only shook the Congregationalist faith of his childhood and made room for his own religion to develop, but provided ingredients for that religion: his reimagining of Christ's resurrection in 'The Man who Died' applies certain realistic, higher critical principles to a revisionary biography of Christ.

Another implication of largely excising Christianity is that Lawrence's relationship to Christ is largely excluded. As for Nietzsche, Christ was Lawrence's lifelong alternative and rival. Throughout his life people likened him to Christ for reasons connected both to his (bearded, increasingly gaunt) body, and his prophetic, preacher's spirit – for which reasons he was perceived by Cecil Gray as possessing a 'regiment of Mary Magdalenes', and Murry consciously took on the role of Judas in *Son of Woman: The Story of D.H. Lawrence*. In this he psychoanalyses Lawrence as 'a Jesus-haunted man' who demanded physical rather than spiritual resurrection, and who was therefore the priest of an impossible religion: 'If Jesus was right, Lawrence [...] is wrong; if Lawrence is right, Jesus is wrong.' Lawrence would have agreed. But the fact that Ferretter's book pays relatively little attention to this aspect of Lawrence is not only a function of its attenuated attention towards Christianity in general, but of the fact that it does not take a holistic biographical approach. It is about Lawrence's religion as arising from his reading, not from his experiences as a married, travelling, TB-suffering man. This is fine; the book could not do everything; but it is a factor of which to be aware.

Perhaps a larger, final, reservation is that Ferretter, like so many admirers of Lawrence from the nineteen-fifties onwards, excises nearly all of Lawrence's humour. The biggest exception is when Ferretter acknowledges that the ideas which *Kangaroo* takes most seriously are all exposed to ridicule. However, it is not only in dialogism – Harriett's ridicule of Somers, Ursula's of Birkin, or the Pompadour crowd's of Birkin's prose (quoting it in 'the sing-song, slow, distinct voice of a clergyman reading the Scriptures') - that Lawrence's sense of humour meets his religion. So far from being always antithetical, Lawrence frequently expresses his own religious sentiment with humour. Ferretter quotes from the essay 'On Being Religious', but not in a way which exposes its full humorous savour: 'The Great God departs from the heaven where man has located Him, and plumps His throne down somewhere else. Man, being an ass, keeps going to the same door to beg for his carrot'. We find a profounder kind of laughter in the religious poem 'Bare Fig Trees', of the early 1920s:

Let me sit down beneath the many-branching candelabrum
That lives upon this rock
And laugh at Time, and laugh at dull Eternity,
And make a joke of stale Infinity
Within the flash-scent of this wicked tree

That has kept so many secrets up its sleeve,
And has been laughing through so many ages
At man and his uncomfortablenesses,
And his attempt to assure himself that what is so is not so,
Up its sleeve

This is divine laughter – that of the laughing Buddha, in whom Lawrence had a considerable interest. This is the wisdom next to which all human wisdom is but folly.

But if there is in Ferretter's prose none of Lawrence's own frequent *juissance*, it has the virtue of taking Lawrence completely seriously. Whereas some readers are inclined to find humour where none was intended, for example in *The Plumed Serpent*, Ferretter treats reverently the results of Lawrence's tremendous fight – fought so much harder than most of us can even conceive of – to work out what is actually going on. It is a compliment to this book to say that I wanted it to be much longer. It, and the series of which it is part, are signs of the very welcome 'religious turn' in criticism, which allows Lawrence to be recognised for what he undoubtedly is: *homo religiosus*. The book's findings are of interest not only for the sake of a more accurate understanding of Lawrence, but for visions which may inspire certain readers - with the critic serving as mediatory priest to Lawrence's religion. For example, the pre-Socratic, pre-theistic 'cosmic-religious' worldview articulated particularly in *Apocalypse*, of people living 'breast to breast, as it were, with the cosmos', may be deeply attractive to some people living in the present, third, 'philosophic-scientific' stage, which has lost track of God in the universe. Terry Eagleton once said that Lawrence manages 'to communicate a richer sense of God than almost any other twentieth-century author'. I, and implicitly Ferretter in his serious and valuable book, would agree.

