

# Lectures on immortality and ethics: the failed D. H. Lawrence–Bertrand Russell collaboration

by George J. Zytaruk

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THE PLAN HAD all the ingredients of an outrageous literary farce. The two leading characters could not have offered a greater contrast: one was definitely from the working class, or to use his own words “the son of a coal-miner, and very ordinary. I should probably pass as a 30/- clerk”; “married, age 30, a novelist of some small reputation, poor”.<sup>1</sup> The other was a Cambridge lecturer, “one of its intellectual stars”,<sup>2</sup> Fellow of the Royal Society, brother of an Earl, and lover of one of London’s best-known patronesses of the arts.

It was, in addition, “the worst of times”. Since August 1914, England had been at war; on 7 May 1915 the Cunard liner *Lusitania* (see *Letters*, II: 340) was torpedoed by a German submarine with a loss of 1,198 lives; there were anti-German riots in London and on 27 July 1915 Prime Minister Asquith was to announce that the total number of British casualties up to date numbered 330,995. Who would be interested in attending a series of lectures?

The proposed subject-matter was hardly likely to inspire an

<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, Vol. II: *June 1913–October 1916*, ed. George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981): 35, 397.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Delany, *D. H. Lawrence’s Nightmare: The Writer and His Circle in the Years of the Great War* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), p. 77.

enthusiastic response among the general population. Even Russell had reservations about how the subject should be approached, being “so temporal, so immediate” (*Letters*, II: 358), as Lawrence put it, and had to be persuaded “to have a real, actual, logical belief in Eternity ... a belief in the absolute, an existence in the Infinite.” Of course, for Lawrence, it was all very logical and obviously what was needed, what the times called for. Thus on 20 June 1915 he boldly announced to Lady Ottoline Morrell: “We think to have a lecture hall in London in the Autumn, and give lectures: he [i.e. Russell] on Ethics, I on Immortality: also to have meetings, to establish a little society or body around *a religious belief which leads to action*” (the italics are Lawrence’s, *Letters*, II: 359). He went on to add: “We must centre in the Knowledge of the Infinite, of God. Then from this Centre each one of us must work to put the temporal things of our own natures and of our own circumstances in accord with the Eternal God we know.” Although Lawrence already realized that his approach might not be accepted (and Frieda, he confessed, had the same trouble “as with all the Germans—all the world—she hates the Infinite, my immortality”), he was himself convinced that the “great work ... to do” that autumn (1915) was to “put aside the smaller, personal things” and to concentrate on “the big impersonal” issues, those which pertain to “the immortal world, the heaven of the great angels” (*ibid.*). All this, as I have said, he duly set down on 20 June 1915, apparently after his meeting with Russell on 19 June 1915, and at which time, as we may assume, the collaboration on the lectures was worked out. Russell was, in fact, still at the Lawrences when the letter to Lady Ottoline was written: “Bertie Russell is here. I feel rather glad at the bottom, because we are rallying to a point” (p. 358).

Lest it be thought that the lectures scheme was wholly of Lawrence’s making, we should be aware how Russell felt about it at the time. Writing to Lady Ottoline, who figures as a sort of “matriarchal confessor” in the whole enterprise, Russell reported: “We talked of a plan for lecturing in the autumn on his [i.e. Lawrence’s] religion, politics in the light of religion and so on. I believe something might be made of it” (*Letters*, II: 359n.1). And he went on to outline his own possible contribution as follows: “I could make a splendid course on political ideas; morality, the

State, property, marriage, war, taking them to their roots in human nature, and show how each is a prison for the infinite in us.” It is obvious that Russell proceeded almost immediately to draft an outline of his contribution, which he promptly sent to Lawrence. Unfortunately, the exact date on which the outline was dispatched is not known for certain—but it can be established that by 9 July 1915 Lawrence had received the prospectus and sent it back to Russell, with comments, like those of an irate university lecturer, “scribbled” all over Russell’s work. This document has, of course, been preserved,<sup>3</sup> and it would be instructive to analyze Lawrence’s criticisms, since these would provide an index to the divergence in the two views.

For his part, Lawrence was not quite as prompt in delivering his prospectus as was his collaborator. For one thing he was still struggling with his “philosophy”, which he had begun in September of the previous year and which he had already rewritten three or four times. The version he was attempting now was to be abandoned “in the middle” when he next wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell. He was completing arrangements for the publication of *The Rainbow* (the final manuscript was mailed on 31 May 1915), and he was still having problems with Frieda, who, as he reports to Koteliansky: “spends her time thinking herself a wronged, injured and aggrieved person, because of the children, and because she is German. I am angry and bored” (*Letters*, II: 343). Finally, Lawrence was still uncertain as to whether he could face the public. He had been a school teacher, of course, but lecturing in public was something outside his experience. As if to reassure himself, he wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell: “I really think I shall give some lectures on Eternity. I shrink from it very much. I am very shy, publicly. I hate publicity of all sorts. I am safe and remote when I write. It will be horrible to stand up and say the things I feel most vitally, before an audience. But I think it must be done. I think I shall do it. I don’t know” (p. 363). He “would rather have done anything else” (*ibid.*).

The lectures were to have been about “Immortality” and “Ethics”, but as we have seen, Russell already planned to speak

<sup>3</sup> It has been published in *D. H. Lawrence’s Letters to Bertrand Russell*, ed. Harry T. Moore (New York: Gotham Book Mart, 1948), App. A.

about “political ideas”, and Lawrence seems to have been focusing on “Eternity”. There being no lecture series chairman, the would-be participants were already going their separate ways. Russell was unable to “make head or tail of Lawrence’s philosophy”,<sup>4</sup> and when they met again they quarrelled bitterly—“a terrific argument but not a disastrous one”, said Russell. There soon appeared to be little real likelihood that the two men would be able to collaborate. “I told Lawrence”, confessed Russell, “that I thought we ought to be independent of each other, at any rate at first, and not try to start a school. When he talks politics he seems to me so wild that I could not formally work with him” (*ibid.*). And he adds: “He is also muddleheaded.... The trouble with him is a tendency to mad exaggeration”.

The disagreement, which occurred at the meeting already referred to above, became more vehement when Lawrence read Russell’s outline. Writing to Lady Ottoline, Lawrence said: “He sent me a synopsis of a set of lectures on Political Ideas. But as yet he stands too much on the shore of this existing world. He must get into a boat and preach from out of the waters of eternity, if he is going to do any good” (*Letters*, II: 362). On 26 July 1915, Lawrence wrote Russell: “I rather hated your letter, and am terrified of what you are putting in your lectures” (p. 370). And he continued to insist: “We must have the same general ideas if we are going to be or to do anything.... This is a united effort, or it is nothing—a mere tiresome playing about, lecturing and so on” (p. 371). And, again, in another letter, “we must unite together, not work apart” (p. 365).

Russell no doubt resented Lawrence’s hectoring (for Lawrence was not known for the quality of tact), and as he recorded later, he was disturbed by Lawrence’s repudiation of democracy: “I was a firm believer in democracy, whereas he [Lawrence] had developed a whole philosophy of Fascism before the politicians had thought of it” (*Autobiography*, II: 21). Therefore, it is understandable that as Lawrence urged Russell to “criticise the extant *democracy*”, which he called “our enemy”, the latter would be unable to agree. Nor is it likely to have helped to accuse Russell of “the inexperi-

ence of youth”, as Lawrence did in one of his letters to Lady Ottoline.

Still, it appeared that something might be done, later in the fall. About the middle of July 1915, Lawrence and Frieda had decided to move to London, and it would be when they were settled there that the plan for the so-called lectures would be finally worked out. In the meantime, Lawrence was correcting the proofs of *The Rainbow*, and reverting to a role he had given up when he became a writer, he was teaching the daughter of Monica Saleeby, sister of Viola Meynell whose cottage in Greatham was the Lawrences’ temporary home. As late as 5 August 1915, Lawrence was still writing about working matters out. Having just moved, he said: “I am *very* dislocated and unhappy in these new circumstances—but shall get all right soon. We will put our heads together directly, though” (*Letters*, II: 377).

Whether there were any more meetings with Russell is not clear, since there is no surviving correspondence until a month later (5 Sept. 1915), by which time Lawrence was headed in a new direction altogether. Later, as if trying to justify why his planned collaboration with Russell failed, Lawrence wrote (this time not to Lady Ottoline, but to Lady Cynthia Asquith): “Russell stuck by an old formula, that I hated, so I just had a violent sort of row, a thunderstorm, and went on without him. It is better so, for the present” (p. 397).

It was perhaps predictable that Russell and Lawrence would go their separate ways, and while it may seem logical to assume that the reasons were ideological, there are other factors that need to be considered. Unlike Russell, Lawrence had very little faith that anything could be done “publicly”, and he was, in addition, preoccupied with his creative efforts at the time. The proofs of *The Rainbow* had to be corrected, and there were difficulties with some of the passages. Lawrence was also revising his sketches about Italy, which he was to publish under the title *Twilight in Italy* (1916). And, having abandoned his collaboration with Russell on the lectures, Lawrence had set about launching the periodical called *The Signature*. Russell, for his part, continued to write his lectures, which he eventually delivered before audiences at the Caxton Hall, Westminster, on eight evenings in January, February and March 1916. Lawrence may have felt that Russell did

<sup>4</sup> *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. II: 1914–1944 (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968): 53.

not go far enough in calling for a revolution in English society, but “Russell’s lectures were in 1916 considered the apotheosis of revolution, and caused consternation among the directors when they arrived in the office of Stanley Unwin, who had offered to publish them.”<sup>5</sup>

What Russell had to say about “Political Ideas” is now a matter of record and well known, for he published the lectures as *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916). Although I cannot personally substantiate the assessment, “This was [apparently] Russell’s first statement of the political ideas he was to maintain with few changes for the rest of his life.”<sup>6</sup> This is not the occasion to present a critique of Russell’s ideas, nor would it be within my competence, at this moment, to attempt to expound what Russell’s views were. Russell’s lectures on “Ethics” are still there in black and white, but what about Lawrence’s lectures on “Immortality”? What would he have said to an audience, during those dark months of January, February and March in 1916?

In order to get some idea of what Lawrence was thinking, we have to go to the periodical which ran for precisely three numbers and which contained the substance, if not the form, of what Lawrence “the preacher” had to say about religion, if I may use the term here. Nor is it only the substance that is available—there is much of the style, the tone, and the spirit of the lectures that were *not* given, but which we, in some sense, are able to reconstruct for ourselves.

If one is impressed with Russell’s logical organization in *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (and one cannot help being impressed), what strikes one about Lawrence’s lectures is the poetic, symbolic way in which he attempts to express his ideas. It would be amusing to speculate which “lecturer” would have made the greater impression on his audience. The substance of Lawrence’s views, as I have already stated, appeared in the essays that he contributed to *The Signature*—but not in full, since “The Crown”, which is Lawrence’s title for the series, consists of six parts, written between July and September 1915, only three of which

were printed in 1915. The complete set of six parts was not published until 1925, but also like Russell’s *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, which Russell had hoped to “re-write ... considerably”<sup>7</sup> and did not, Lawrence’s complete published version of “The Crown” was altered “only a very little”, and in 1925—ten years later—still represented his original views: “It says what I still believe. But it’s no use for a five minutes’ lunch.”<sup>8</sup> What Lawrence says in “The Crown”, written during the fall of 1915, I contend, represents as closely as possible what he would have said at his lectures, if the collaboration with Russell had been successful.

You will recall that the subject which Lawrence proposed for himself was “Immortality”, and even a cursory examination of “The Crown” will show that its central idea is just that. Lawrence’s beginning is based on the nursery rhyme about the Lion and the Unicorn, which he uses extremely effectively to introduce the idea that all existence depends on a duality. The Lion is symbolic of the sensual element in life, the flesh, if you like, and the Unicorn represents the spiritual dimension, the rational element. It is a mistake to regard either one as the be-all and the end-all, since one cannot exist without the other. The Crown, the victory, cannot go to either the Lion or to the Unicorn. “The crown is upon the perfect balance of the fight, it is not the fruit of either victory. The crown is not the prize of either combatant. It is the *raison d’être* of both. It is the absolute within the fight.”<sup>9</sup> Or to put it in another way, this time using one of Lawrence’s best known symbols,

It is that which comes when night clashes on day, the rainbow, the yellow rose and blue and purple of dawn and sunset, which leaps out of the breaking of light upon darkness, of darkness upon light, absolute beyond day or night; the rainbow, the iridescence which is darkness at once and light, the two-in-one; the crown that binds them both. (“The Crown”, p. 16)

<sup>7</sup> *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1960), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> “Note to The Crown”, in *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1963), p. x.

<sup>9</sup> “The Crown”, *ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Ronald W. Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Cape and Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), p. 269.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

What Lawrence is trying to explain is his concept of what is eternal in the world, what is immortal. And having done that, he tries to apply this concept to the individual human being. Whether his audience would have understood him, or whether we today would agree with his view, is less important than a recognition of his sincerity, his passionate earnestness in trying to base a new society on some absolute truth. In this he is not much different from Russell, whose underlying concept in *Principles of Social Reconstruction* was as follows: "The supreme principle, both in politics and in private life, should be to *promote all that is creative, and so to diminish the impulses and desires that centre round possession*" (p. 162). Russell was convinced, "If men are to remain whole, it is very necessary that they should achieve a reconciliation of instinct, mind, and spirit" (p. 145). And as one reads both "The Crown" and *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, one does, it seems to me, begin to see that both writers sought fulfilment of the individual man and of the individual woman as the aim of a proper ordering of society. For Lawrence, "the life of man is like a flower that comes into blossom and passes away. In the beginning, the light touches the darkness, the darkness touches the light, and the two embrace.... The interrelation between them, this is the constant and absolute" ("The Crown", p. 22). Eternity or Immortality consists in achieving complete fulfilment. Russell's language is easier to accept because he speaks of impulses, desires, and spirit—Lawrence writes of crowns, rainbows, phoenixes, poppies, light and darkness, eternity, consummation, and a whole host of undefinable terms. What both men want, however, is a society inhabited by as many vital individuals as possible. To quote from Russell: "The best life is that in which creative impulses play the largest part and possessive impulses the smallest. The best institutions are those which produce the greatest possible creativeness and the least possessiveness compatible with self-preservation" (*Principles*, pp. 161–2).

Where then does the question of immortality come in? Lawrence says: "I am not immortal till I have achieved immortality. And immortality is not a question of time, of everlasting life. It is a question of consummate being. Most men die and perish away, unconsummated, unachieved" ("The Crown", p. 90). For Lawrence, the individual man or woman comes to fulfilment through

the establishment of vital relationships, first with the opposite sex, and then with everything else in the manifold universe. When such fulfilment is achieved, "this man is God created where before God was uncreate. He is the Holy Ghost in tissue of flame and flesh" ("The Crown", p. 94). Nor is this so different from Russell's concept of the need for "integration", which he explains in this way: "what is needed is a unifying or integration, first of our individual lives, then of the life of the community and of the world, without sacrifice of individuality" (*Principles*, p. 158).

Lawrence believed that a split had developed in western civilization: that some men and women were bent on fulfilment via the sensual or dark experience, and there were others who were bent on finding their fulfilment in a wholly spiritual or idealistic consummation. Both, he felt, lead to self-destruction. It was time to find a means to reconcile these opposites.

In his poetic and evangelical utterance, he would have told his audience: "We have known both directions. The Pagan, aristocratic, lordly, sensuous, has declared the Eternity of the Origin, the Christian, humble, spiritual, unselfish, democratic, has declared the Eternity of the Issue, and End.... God is not the one infinite, nor the other, our immortality is not in the original eternity, neither in the ultimate eternity. God is the utter relation between the two eternities, He is the flowing together and the flowing apart." ("The Crown", p. 89).

*Nipissing University College*