1 The White Peacock

Why did D. H. Lawrence become a writer and a novelist? And why did he start by writing The White Peacock? I ask the unanswerable questions simply to stress how being a writer is a matter of choice, of situation, of need and compulsion, rather than of destiny. The psychology of a writer is only one element among many; his background, upbringing and early experience of the world can help us to understand those choices, such needs and compulsions.

Biographers have pointed out that Lawrence's maternal grandfather was a noted hymn-writer, and that his mother is known to have written poetry. Such things probably matter rather less than the importance which his upbringing gave to the written and printed word. In Lawrence's case, reading and writing were activities valued particularly by his mother for the chance they provided of an escape from the life she herself had known—the chance of getting out of the working class. Lawrence's father could barely read, and when a copy of The White Peacock arrived at the family home he 'struggled through half a page, and it might as well have been Hottentot'. What struck him most forcibly was the money his son was getting paid for it. 'Fifty pounds! An' tha's niver done a day's hard work in thy life' (Phx 232). It was a shrewd thrust at the son whose education had freed him from the world his father inhabited.

But Lawrence was not the first in his family to make headway with books. His elder brother Ernest had been locally famous for his love of books as well as for his striking ability to 'get on' in life; part of the obituary for him in the local paper made that very clear.

At the Eastwood library there was no more familiar figure than his, he was a great reader from a boy, and in his early teens he had become acquainted with most of the present day writers and many of the past. . . . His knowledge for a young man was considerable, London's gaiety could not wrest from him his love for work and his keen desire to get on.¹

We tend to link the young Bert Lawrence's passion for reading with his friendship for Jessie Chambers, because it was she who recorded the books they read together, and his enthusiasms. But when she and Lawrence chose books together at the Mechanics' Institute Library in Eastwood, they were getting books for their own families as well as for

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¹ J. Worthen, D. H. Lawrence and the Idea of the Novel
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themselves. Lawrence's mother read a good deal; her son's rather unflattering memory of her reaction to *East Lynne* and *Diana of the Crossways* (*Phx II* 593) should be balanced by our knowledge of her reading Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, albeit with 'a severe look of disapproval' as Lawrence told Grace Crawford (04 viii 1910). On the evidence of *Sons and Lovers*, which can probably be trusted on such a point, she also wrote the occasional paper to be given at meetings of the Womens' Guild: 'It seemed queer to the children to see their mother, who was always busy about the house, sitting writing in her rapid fashion, thinking, referring to books and writing again. They felt for her on such occasions the deepest respect' (*SL* 68). Serious attention to reading and books was a natural interest for a son who was not only academically clever, but who was particularly encouraged by his mother to better himself and 'get on' as Ernest had done; it obviously fell to Lawrence to take up, in some measure, the role of Ernest in the Lawrence household after 1901.

But the young Lawrence was also haunted, even obsessed, by that other family out at the Haggs farm. For the Chambers family, literature was not an instrument to self-improvement, but as natural an interest as farming. Books and reading in the Lawrence household inevitably became a focus of the division between the mother and the father, exactly as the spoken word was, with the children caught between the 'King's English' of the mother, and the dialect of the community which they spoke outdoors but of which she could never speak so much as a sentence (*Phx II* 592). At the Haggs farm, no such tensions existed. Mr Chambers would read out loud the serialisation of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in the newspaper, for the benefit of his wife and any of the children old enough to appreciate it. As a family, they not only read but talked about their reading. When Mrs Lawrence and her son visited the farm, what she had in common with the Haggs' household quickly emerged. Jessie Chambers remembered how 'the conversation had turned upon books';

*My parents adored Barrie, The Little Minister and A Window in Thrums*. The talk was lively and Mrs Lawrence seemed to be the pivot upon which the liveliness centred. . . .

'Who likes Scott?' I asked.

'I do,' Mrs Lawrence replied, beaming encouragement upon me. (*ET* 24–5)

In that 'book-loving household' (*ET* 25), the whole family would take part in charades and play-readings; Jessie remembered her father playing Macduff and stopping in horror over his final speech to Macbeth: 'Oh dear, oh dear! How awful!' (*ET* 108). Friends of the family would