



# Upending the Telescope: D.H. Lawrence as Ecocritic and Birdwatcher

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## ► To cite this version:

Shirley Bricout. Upending the Telescope: D.H. Lawrence as Ecocritic and Birdwatcher. Études Lawrenciennes, 2021, D. H. Lawrence and the Anticipation of the Ecocritical Turn, 53, 10.4000/lawrence.2513 . hal-03500904

**HAL Id: hal-03500904**

**<https://univ-montpellier3-paul-valery.hal.science/hal-03500904>**

Submitted on 23 Feb 2024

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**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/lawrence/2513>

DOI: 10.4000/lawrence.2513

ISSN: 2272-4001

**Publisher**

Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre

Brought to you by Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3

**Electronic reference**

Shirley Bricout, "Upending the Telescope: D.H. Lawrence as Ecocritic and Birdwatcher", *Études Lawrenciennes* [Online], 53 | 2021, Online since 07 December 2021, connection on 23 February 2024.

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lawrence/2513> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/lawrence.2513>

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## Introduction

- 1 The scarcity of studies devoted to Lawrence's criticism is mainly due to ambivalent receptions of his critical pieces which are, to say the least, unacademic. In *D.H. Lawrence: Novelist*, F.R. Leavis notes briefly that Lawrence "was a very remarkable literary critic – by far the best critic of his day" (14). David J. Gordon's *D.H. Lawrence as a Literary Critic* published in 1966 offers a thorough analysis concerned with formulating Lawrence's aesthetic while assessing the limitations of his ideological criticism. And more recently, Tajindar Singh, in *Literary Criticism of D.H. Lawrence* published in 1984, foregrounds Lawrence's "striking vitality and unacademic incisiveness, informality, and [the] immediacy of his critical perceptions" (2).
- 2 The latter appraisal matches Lawrence's own definition of criticism to be found in his essay on John Galsworthy written in 1927: "Literary Criticism can be no more than a reasoned account of the feeling produced upon the critic by the book he is criticizing [...]. The touch-stone is emotion, not reason" (STH 209). Lawrence's concern with emotion and life explains that a properly equipped critic "must be emotionally alive in every fibre, intellectually capable and skilful in essential logic, and then morally very honest" (STH 209). Throughout his critical pieces, what Lawrence looks for is a sustainable ethical agenda which meets his mystical philosophy, in Singh's words "the moral vision of life which he, the critic-moralist-prophet, perceives as struggling to emerge, with varying degrees of success, from all truly valuable literature relevant to the modern man" (2).
- 3 Such an outlook is prominent in Lawrence's posthumously published *Study of Thomas Hardy* quoted above, but it is more relevantly coupled with ecological awareness in his

articles about choice American authors. First published in the *English Review* between November 1918 and June 1919, these articles were to be later collected in a revised form in 1923 under the title *Studies in Classic American Literature*. So I propose to upend the telescope of the ecocritical approach and rather than study Lawrence's nature writing, I will assess to what extent Lawrence qualifies as an ecocritic when he tackles other writers' nature writing. In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, William Howarth's comments on the Greek terms "oikos" and "kritis" frame an ecocritic as "a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action" (69). Just as we are looking back at Lawrence from the vintage point of our ecological concerns, Lawrence was gauging at the time a variety of authors' representations of and relations to nature. In his *Studies* while praising some of the depictions of birds, beasts and landscapes, Lawrence nevertheless questions the writers' anthropocentric views which hamper fulfilled relationships with the natural environment. In this way, he defines the ethics of nature writing, the eco-responsibility of literature being itself at stake.

- 4 I will also show how Lawrence's critical readings affected his own art by focusing, though not exclusively, on *Studies in Classic American Literature* which he revised between 1919 and 1922 while writing the novel *Kangaroo* and the poem "The Humming-bird" included in *Birds, Beast and Flowers*. A study of Lawrence's keen observations of exotic birds in particular will foreground how ecological awareness brings about a shift in language to confront its inadequacy to formulate a non verbal cosmic experience.

## Ecological awareness

- 5 In the first and final versions of *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Lawrence establishes a strong link between writing and place. The fledging national values he points out mirror the dealings of man with nature, American expanses, and Native Americans. On the postwar backdrop of asserted patriotism, the American reception of his *Studies* ranged from enthusiasm, Lawrence's critical insights being rated as "a foundation for a new American literature" (SCAL lxii) to resentment, his essays said to be offering a "reductive, homogenising reading of the American past" (SCAL lxii). Assuredly Lawrence's unacademic conversational style proved difficult to get through, however his contribution undeniably accredited an American literary canon at a time when, as Mark Morrisson argues in *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism*, "many American writers (modernist or not) were grappling with the 'American-ness' of their own writing, seeking to understand what could define their literature as a national literature and not simply as a provincial footnote to English literature" (12). In the first version of *Studies* written between 1918 and 1919, Lawrence similarly states: "It is natural that we should regard American literature as a small branch or province of English literature. None the less there is another view to be taken." He continues writing: "It is time now, for us, who have always looked with indulgence on the decadent or uncouth or provincial American literature, to open new eyes, and look with respect, if not with fear" (SCAL 167).
- 6 Among Lawrence's choice authors, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Richard Dana and Herman Melville are praised for their celebration of man's relation to nature. While the latter two remain in awe of the ocean that their characters will never master,

Crèvecoeur's farmer, called James, indulges in an instrumental command of nature, as he tills the soil and cultivates it. Due to space limitations, I will focus here on Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* which were written over a period of seven years and published in English in 1782 while Crèvecoeur was himself also farming land in New York State.

- 7 Lawrence finds fault in the relationship between man and his environment when he pits the authentically emotional perception of surrounding nature against an intellectual one; in this way he opposes the voice of the true artist to that of the man with an ideal; by doing so, he reveals how literature and its vehicle, language, are equally engaged in the struggle to formulate a form of ecological awareness. "NATURE," repeatedly capitalised in the chapter on Crèvecoeur, betrays the resistance of language to formulate environmental ethics (SCAL 33). The critic inveighs against the environment's representation as "Nature-sweet-and-pure" which he says "is only another effort at intellectualising" (SCAL 34), an opposition reminiscent of the Arnoldian dichotomy of the moral and the obscene, of truth and lies that Ileana Cura-Sazdanić evokes in her study of Lawrence's criticism (1-12). The false connection to the environment is further epitomized in the clichés related to the settler's farming aspirations and Lawrence's generic use of American Farmer, Amiable Spouse and Offspring all capitalised.
- 8 Nevertheless, two passages have indeed struck Lawrence as conveying an authentic vision which he relates to "the aboriginal Indian vision carrying over" (SCAL 35). The latter phrase highlights the limits of language as it stems from a distinctively polarized perspective, designed here not to naturalize Indian culture but to marginalize the settlers' world. The first inkling of authenticity which the critic is seeking to experience as a reader occurs with the mention of king-birds and eagles to be found in the second *Letter*: "The glimpsing of the king-birds in winged hostility and pride," Lawrence writes (SCAL 35). In fact, the farmer mentions many more birds, such as thrushes, tamed wild pigeons and catbirds that Lawrence values greatly as signs of authentic attunement with the environment (Crèvecoeur 23-24).

## The Humming-Bird

- 9 Lawrence whole-heartedly celebrates the aesthetic beauty of two excerpts from *Letter X*, one depicting a humming-bird and the other a fight between two snakes. The aesthetic beauty lies in the life urge of the birds and beasts that emerges as a creative force bringing forth the literary description of the encounter. What is striking here is that Lawrence does not place these extracts in context; he focuses solely on the aesthetic qualities of nature writing that concur with his mystical philosophy, a philosophy that he advocates as a political manifesto. He avoids mentioning *Letter IX* which sketches the horrors of slavery with revolting details. In order to appraise this omission, I suggest we renounce the Lawrencian perspective and turn to research related to *Letters from an American Farmer*. Indeed, studies have noted how, compared to the first descriptions of birds in Crèvecoeur's *Letter II* which lay the emphasis on their socially organized behaviour, the humming-bird is unpredictably prone to violent outbursts. Douglas Anderson in particular remarks that the "humming-bird's extraordinary beauty combined with its 'lacerating flowers into a hundred pieces' echoes the contrast between the beauty of James's initial vision of America and the

lacerations of the slave master's whip" (53). Anderson reads the scene together with the fight between the snakes as marked with "nearly allegorical clarity" (53) since the farmer sets to write about it soon after he witnesses a slave's brutal fate. In a more recent article entitled "Des esclaves et des bêtes" ("Of Slaves and Beasts"), Agnès Derail-Imbert hinges her reading onto the social contract and natural law when she finds parallels between the humming-birds lacerating flower and the punishment of slaves. "This page consisting of a willful digression comprises subtly calculated pictorial and literary effects which, once more, connect it tacitly to the slavery scene," she writes.<sup>1</sup> She draws similar conclusions about wild pigeons which have been deprived of vision to be tamed, like a slave who loses his sight (Crèvecoeur 23).

- 10 In Lawrence's critical response, the absence of any comment on slavery is quite puzzling; however this hiatus could be due to his consistent celebration of the anti-anthropocentric stance taken in the depiction of the animals. Discarding any allegorical reading, he seems to give in to the text he is criticising when he quotes at length from the tenth letter the two long descriptions of the humming-bird and the two snakes that he praises for their "primal dark veracity" (SCAL 37). What is ironical though is that, according to Thomas Philbrick's research on Crèvecoeur, mentioned in Anderson's work, many details of the humming-bird scene were "in fact, cribbed from the work of Crèvecoeur's patron, the naturalist Abbé Raynal in his *Histoire Philosophique*" (53, see also Philbrick 95) to whom Crèvecoeur dedicated the *Letters*. Both accounts of the bird compare its beak to a sewing needle, Raynal writing "Its beak is long, and pointed like a needle" (390) and Crèvecoeur "Its bill is as long and as sharp as a coarse sewing-needle" (134); they both dwell on the bird's passionate and quarrelsome ways, Raynal describing birds "fighting together with great fury and obstinacy" (391) while Crèvecoeur expands the description with a comparison "They often fight with the fury of lions" (135); and both mention the ripped remnants of flowers and leaves, though Crèvecoeur conveys intensity thanks to an added superlative, "it will tear and lacerate flowers into a hundred pieces for, strange to tell, they are the most irascible of the feathered tribe" (135).
- 11 Though Lawrence must have read Crèvecoeur's dedication to his mentor, surely he was unacquainted with the Abbé's *Histoire Philosophique*. In fact, Lawrence was even unacquainted with humming-birds. As Keith Sagar points out "Humming-bird" "is the only poem in the collection [*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*] about a creature Lawrence had never seen. The actual encounter was Crèvecoeur's, not his" (61) and he suggests that the poem was probably written in 1920 while he was revising the essay.
- 12 As Lawrence reminisces in *Studies*, he had also read the illustrated works of Henry Walter Bates and William Henry Hudson, both famed British naturalists (SCAL 36). Bates, embraced Darwin's ideas and the latter included a section about Bates's research on animal mimicry in his fourth edition of the *Origins of Species*. Hudson also gained Darwin's admiration for his avian discoveries on the American continent. In his eponymous poem, Lawrence borrows or recycles Hudson's idea of a "diminutive, curiously-shaped, bright-tinted, flying reptile of arboreal habits that lived in some far-off epoch in the world's history" (Hudson 209) in order to find the linguistic means to elicit pure aesthetic emotion. The primeval world in which the scene is set pertains to this linguistic quest, as it conjures up other possible environments; the poem reads, "Probably he was big / As mosses and little lizards, they say were once big / Probably he was a jabbing, terrifying monster" (*Poems* 324). Lawrence's achievement is to

contrast the empty stillness of the Earth with the quivering life of the bird, which seems to dash through the poem thereby conveying the pure primeval emotion that, as a critic, he teases out from Crèvecoeur's depiction; indeed, in the poem the bird "races down the avenues" and goes "whizzing through the slow, vast, succulent stems" (*Poems* 323-24). The slow unwinding words "some otherworld / primeval-dumb [...] / in that most awful stillness" and the "heave of matter" contrast with the short sharp vowels in "a little bit chipped off in brilliance" (*Poems* 323-24). Thanks to the disrupted pace of the lines, the bird's life urge emerges as a creative force bringing forth the poem itself.

- 13 The amplification of size, "a jabbing, terrifying monster," is an invitation to abandon an anthropological view of nature and to accept its otherness, a reading confirmed by the penultimate line "We look at him through the wrong end of the long telescope of Time" (*Poems* 324). The reference to evolution is one of many illustrations of how Lawrence fashions another temporal dimension, for he is not endorsing Darwinism but exploring how a new sustainable relationship with nature may be conjured up. In fact, the anti-anthropocentric stance raises questions about our world-view. He had stated previously in *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, "I do not believe in evolution, but in the strangeness and rainbow-change of ever-renewed creative civilisations" (*PFU* 64).
- 14 Lawrence rehearses the phrase in his essay "Corasmin and the Parrots," written at the beginning of his stay in Mexico, in the winter of 1924. In place of the theory of evolution, he appropriates the creation cycles of the Aztec Suns and spells out an invitation to upend the telescope in order to achieve a whole new perspective not only through the prism of another culture but also of other animal species. He had written to Baroness Anna von Richthofen about some parrots which by imitation "bark as the little dog that lies under my table" (*Letters* V 178). As the essay unfolds, the parrots appear as primeval creatures which have survived cosmic time cycles. The writing itself becomes cyclical, peeling away the time periods to grant the parrots cosmic knowledge and ultimately to recover the essence of life. The point of view shifts from the writer sitting on his verandah to that of the birds which see in the curled-up dog a "wingless, beakless, featherless, curly, mis-shaped bird's-nest of a Corasmin" (*MM* 15); so it displaces or marginalizes the human to build an anti-anthropocentric view of the encounter. Confronted with the inability of language to convey the experience of cosmic attunement with the environment, the writer capitalizes on the parrot's faculty to imitate the successive species in order to foreground the need to abandon an anthropological view of nature. Just as Lawrence, the critic, had found an aestheticised form of cosmic consciousness in Crèvecoeur's depiction of the humming-bird, so does his own shaping of a new dimension gradually emerge from the Mexican essay to highlight the relativity of human beings.

## The kookaburra

- 15 Echoing his assessment of Americans' connections with their environment as depicted in American classical works, Lawrence remarked about Australia in a previous letter to Baroness Anna von Richthofen "but the land has a 'fourth dimension,' and the white people swim like shadows over the surface of it" (*Letters* IV 238).
- 16 Lawrence started writing the novel *Kangaroo* just as *Studies* was being revised for publication. And in fact, as Dennis S.R. Welland points out in his revaluation of *Studies*

in *Classic American Literature*, “The values that he [Lawrence] finds in American literature all correspond in some degree to those that his own novels seek to establish” (4). At the start in *Kangaroo*, anthropocentric frameworks prevail and language itself is affected by such standpoints; the flora and fauna, and more specifically birds are described with linguistic approximations, sometimes generic terms, as in “That is another of the charms of Australia: the birds are not really afraid, and one can really communicate with them” (K 87).

- 17 Somers’s second visit to the botanical gardens confirms that rebirth is taking place. Released from the hold of the confusion of the world which he calls the Babel, Somers finds the accurate words to name the animals and the plants. “Wrens,” “cockatoos,” “love-birds,” “emu,” “peacock” (K 205), all commune with Somers, who fully connects with the Australian environment. Although linguistic operators such as “like,” “suggestive of,” “sort of” (K 177-178) are still pervasive in the description of the encounter, they are no longer indicative of lexical approximations. On the contrary, once the character’s awareness is complete, creative analogies are set free in the narrative. Somers has indeed recognized a specific bird, “a kookaburra,” but he willfully contrives similes to emphasize its specific scruffy look, its ruffled feathers: “a bird like a bunch of old rag, with a small rag of a dark tail, and a fluffy pale top like an owl, and a sort of frill round his neck” (K 178). Although the operators are graphically the same words, just as Somers is the same character, they are no longer signposts of anthropocentric frameworks. The analogies have entered a symbolic cycle which promotes creatively sustainable connections.
- 18 To draw to a conclusion, in *Studies in Classic American Literature* Lawrence teases out the creative life-force that resonates in other writers’ passages by upending the telescope of literary criticism. In fact, he endeavours to pit against a mechanised or unattuned society a primeval earth that can trigger sought-for connections with the environment. In this sense he may be called an ecocritic, even though Ralph Maud draws our attention to how “Lawrence deals not so much with what the writers were trying to say, but with what they ought to have said, and what their works said for them unwittingly” (240). Nevertheless, Lawrence remains true to his creed which runs “The touch-stone is emotion, not reason” (STH 209), since his sensitivity to nature permeates his writings across a range of literary genres including criticism, thereby creating an organically coherent *oeuvre*.

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## NOTES

1. My translation of “Cette page, en forme de libre excursus, n’est pas dénuée d’effets picturaux et littéraires très calculés, qui, de nouveau, tissent un lien tacite avec la scène de l’esclave” (Derail-Imbert parag. 21). Both Raynal and Crèvecoeur address the question of slavery. As Crèvecoeur’s farmer gives a factual record of the institution of slavery and its evils in South Carolina, the tone of his letters grows more somber. Linking literature and politics, some readings also suggest that slavery had a symbolic meaning which exposed the relationship between Britain and the colonies (see Saar 194-196).

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## ABSTRACTS

Though he may have been wary of -ism labels, in this paper I would like to assess to what extent Lawrence qualifies as an ecocritic and how his activity as a literary critic affected his own writing. Indeed, his critical output reveals that his primary concern was the quality of pulsing life immanent in a work, what he called the moral vision in a novel, rather than aesthetics. I will focus, though not exclusively, on *Studies in Classic American Literature* which he revised between 1919 and 1922 while writing the novel *Kangaroo* and the poem “The Humming-bird” included in *Birds, Beast and Flowers*. Echoing his assessment of Americans’ connections with their environment as depicted in classical works, Lawrence remarked about Australia in a letter to Baroness Anna von Richthofen “but the land has a ‘fourth dimension,’ and the white people swim like shadows over the surface of it” (*Letters IV* 238). In the novel *Kangaroo*, an epiphany in the Australian bush enables Lawrence’s alter-ego, Somers, to discard his ethnocentric views, the so-called “Babel” inherited from the country’s colonial past. By studying Lawrence’s keen observations of birds in particular, I hope to show how ecological awareness brings about a shift in language so that the “Babel” may be transcended in order to achieve “something beyond,” i.e., a cosmic ideal.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** authenticity, awareness, life urge, cosmic time, sustainable connections

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Shirley Bricout’s field of research is D.H. Lawrence and the Bible. The translation into English of her first book was released in 2015 under the title *Politics and the Bible in D.H. Lawrence’s Leadership Novels* at the Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée.

She has guest-edited a special issue of the *Journal of the Short Story in English* devoted to Lawrence which is due to be published on-line next June.

Shirley Bricout has contributed articles and book reviews to *Études lawrenciennes* (Paris Nanterre), *Les Études britanniques contemporaines* (Montpellier III) and to *The Journal of D.H. Lawrence Studies* (Nottingham, UK).