

Tetsuji Kohno, *Paintings and Writings of D.H. Lawrence*, Tokyo: Sogensha, 2000, pp.421, Y 6000

*George Hyde*

Every Lawrentian will want to possess this book. It is in Japanese: but the reproductions of Lawrence's pictures, and Lawrence's copies of other people's pictures, leap off the page, speaking a language altogether their own. The reproductions, though on the small side, are sharp and vivid, and the colour range is excellent, with rich flesh tones predominating of course, making us wonder all over again at Lawrence's vitality, against all the odds, and the range of his genius. It is a great dance of life, with people embracing and laughing and dancing and pissing and fucking or just minding their own business, 'possessing their own souls in silence'. Even Lawrence's copies of other people's pictures are (like Lawrence's critical writings, or his translations) radiant with his irrepressible, sometimes wicked spirit of discovery.

Professor Kohno has collected these images with love, and assembled his collection with scholarly tact, so that what we have here is the richest harvest so far of Lawrence's intensely personal work as a painter and as a graphic artist. Does this body of work illuminate his writing? Well of course it does! It reminds us of his eternal urge to bring dead language back to life, and to confront the overweening Word of Scripture with the risen Flesh of experience. Without a real sensitivity to this process we cannot read Lawrence the way we should. Whatever the scholars may have discovered, and whatever the unborn and the dead may know (as Leavis used to repeat in his last classes at Cambridge), they cannot know the delight of being alive in the flesh.

Professor Kohno has also given us, in English, a valuable essay of his own which he dedicates to Saki Karavas.

He raises again here the question of Lawrence's technical competence as a painter, but he rightly doesn't spend too much time on it. These paintings are not incompetent. But their appeal is the appeal of a personal vision, an imperative need to express something urgent through a language which Lawrence has, in a sense, invented, and which Professor Kohno calls 'colour-speech'. Swiftly and deftly, Professor Kohno summarises the nature of Lawrence's very substantial engagement with the history of painting: the real point being, as far as Lawrence was concerned, the terrible fear of the body which (he tells us) had afflicted the English (and not only the English) as early as the sixteenth century. That is why his 'naked paintings' (as Professor Kohno calls them) matter so much.

There are definite similarities here with some Expressionist paintings, and there are some narratives in certain paintings which clearly echo classical myths which have been painted better by greater painters, but all of these paintings explode from the canvas with an utterly individual life. Maybe that is why they had to be suppressed, in Lawrence's lifetime, and why even now the art-historical world is rather sniffy about them. There is even a poem by Lawrence about this very thing, which Professor Kohno quotes, called 'Give me a sponge' (ie so that he can wipe his picture clean of the filthy marks left by 'sordid people' – the policemen and others involved in closing the Warren Gallery exhibition in 1929).

Ask your bookseller to contact the publishers or their agents, and brush up your Japanese!