

**Rachel Crossland, “What D.H. Lawrence Understood of “The Einstein Theory”:
Relativity in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* and *Kangaroo*.” *MHRA Working
Papers in the Humanities* 7 (2012): 24-32**

Crossland’s article sets itself two aims: to map Lawrence’s engagement with Einstein’s theory as it shows itself in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922) and *Kangaroo* (1923); and to assert that Lawrence should be more central in surveys of the relation between relativity theory and modernist writing. In terms of the former, Crossland shows clearly that Lawrence did engage with the theories in the early 1920s, although, as she acknowledges, a number of existing case studies have already made this clear. It is not really clear, though, what she is arguing is at stake in this engagement that has not been noticed before. Here, as more generally in the article, a stronger sense of the difference relativity made to Lawrence’s *writing* would have furthered the discussion and substantiated her assertion that he has a vital place in any assessment of its significance to modernism.

Crossland argues that at the heart of Lawrence’s interest in Einstein was his own developing “theory of human relativity” (27ff). She challenges Jeff Wallace’s assertion that William James was a preeminent influence in terms of Lawrence’s thinking, arguing that, while he may have taken a structure from James, Lawrence took ideas and language from Einstein. However, paying attention to the particularities of Lawrence’s writing would have helped with pushing forward this observation so that it is clear why it really matters. In his foreword to *Fantasia*, Lawrence says that, while he likes the idea of relativity, he rejects the equation constructed by Einstein in his paper on the Special Theory, $E=mc^2$. Lawrence accepted the ideas (as he saw them) but rejected the equation – the most crucial inscription of the theory – because he liked the idea that the theory trashed fixed ideas about the world, but saw the equation as refixing them. This is a very different relation to science from, say, other modernist attempts to produce a language which, like mathematics, could tell a supposedly purer truth, such as, in their very different ways, Marinetti’s *parole in liberta* or Odgen’s Basic English. It may be that this is the very point of interest in the relation between Lawrence and Einstein – that at the heart of Lawrence’s engagement with Einstein is his insistence that science should not take priority, and his powerful attempt to make literary writing tell the truths that science was unable to tell – but it is not one that Crossland really draws to the surface.

In terms of Crossland’s second aim, in questioning Lawrence’s absence from surveys, she gets near to the nub of the question of precisely what is at stake in Lawrence’s engagement with relativity, and close to a potentially very interesting addition to our ways of thinking about the relation between literature and science more generally. She suggests that “Lawrence’s approach to contemporary scientific concepts does not fit easily into standard critical models for analysing a literary author’s response to science” (30) and that it demands a new taxonomy of the reactions to new scientific discoveries. Crossland critiques Morse Peckham’s listing of the possible responses to Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) making it clear that none quite fits Lawrence’s position. Peckham’s work is very old now, though, and work on literature and science over the last decades has done much to remake and recategorise this relation, in particular, from Gillian Beer’s *Darwin’s Plots* (1983) on, to show the relation between scientific discovery and the work of rhetorical construction to be two-way. Consideration of this more recent work might have pushed Crossland’s

thinking beyond an account of how relativity made its way into Lawrence's thinking and towards an investigation of how his work speaks back to relativity. Crossland disagrees with Fiona Beckett's claim that Lawrence appropriated Einstein's theories in order to 'debunk' them, but as he powerfully suggests in his foreword to *Fantasia*, for Lawrence the novel was a place to speak the truths that science could not speak.

So here again the concentration on the details of Lawrence's appropriation of relativity mask the possibility that the answers might be rather in his writing. Might his absence from surveys not have more to do with his difficult (although interesting and significant) relation to the category of modernism more generally? For all his reading of Einstein as backing up a belief in a kind of subjective idealism, in Lawrence's writing the effects of this cannot be so clearly traced as they can in say Woolf's narrative techniques in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). It is possible that there might be something here about our category of modernism and its problematic exclusion of a more rigorously resisting relation to relativity, one that refuses to submit to the dominance of what Lawrence calls in the foreword the "science of the dead world". While Crossland's article makes clear the importance of a general concept of 'relativity' for Lawrence as a novelist, and is suggestive of a number of interesting ways that it could be thought, it doesn't really establish the significance of the relation because it doesn't focus enough on the literary writing itself.

Leigh Wilson
University of Westminster