

TREMULATION ON THE ETHER:
VERSIONS OF INSTINCTUAL
PRIMACY IN THE ESSAYS OF
D. H. LAWRENCE

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The Bad Side of Books: Selected Essays by D.H. Lawrence.

Edited and with an introduction by Geoff Dyer.

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By life, we mean something that gleams, that has the fourth-dimensional quality.

—D.H. Lawrence, “Morality and the Novel”

Yet, he was a man more beautiful, perhaps, than we can guess, and it is worth the attempt to try to perceive the logic of his life.

—Norman Mailer, *The Prisoner of Sex*

THE TALENTED WRITER, GEOFF DYER, has edited and introduced a well-designed anthology of selected essays by D.H. Lawrence. He remains an excellent choice to assemble the volume, for among his previous books is *Out of Sheer Rage*, a hilarious and incisive travel-saga that follows his obsessional trek through several countries to ponder the life and art of D.H. Lawrence. It reads as both a scenic excursion and a neurotic record of sustained searching and sleuthing about his complex subject. Dyer’s selection of thirty-six essays of varying length and subject matter spans Lawrence’s career from 1912

to 1930, ranging from “Christ in the Tirol” to the “Introduction to the Grand Inquisitor,” published in the year of his death.

The catchy title for the book duplicates the title of a short essay from 1924 that is included in the volume, in which Lawrence composes a variously poignant and dyspeptic introduction to a meticulous bibliography of his own works compiled by Edward D. McDonald. The piece reveals evidence of Lawrence’s impatience about the bureaucracies of publication and the inane emphasis by some collectors on first edition markings. More importantly, it provides anecdotal reiterations of his own fraught relation to his parents. Thus *The Bad Side of Books* functions as a resonant signature for the entire collection and for the essay, for both provide an accessible window into Lawrence the writer *and* the often misunderstood and besieged son.

The essay is especially memorable for its understated depiction of the depressing reactions of Lawrence’s parents to the publication in 1911 of his first book, *The White Peacock*: “I put it into my mother’s hands when she was dying. She looked at the outside, and then at the title page, and then at me with darkening eyes. And though she loved me so much, I thought she doubted it could be much of a book, since no one more important than I had written it” (207). The response of the father to Lawrence’s achievement serves as a stark indication of their understandably different perspectives on life, as the coal-miner reacts to the revelation of how much money his son received for the book: “‘Fifty pounds!’ He was dumbfounded, and looked at me with shrewd eyes, as if I were a swindler. ‘Fifty pounds! An ‘tha’s never done a dog’s hard work in thy life’” (208).

As Lawrence dramatizes so movingly in *Sons and Lovers*, his family life was filled with tension and frustration that often exhausted him physically and emotionally. Yet as he also reveals in such relevant essays as “Return to Brestwood” (1926), “Myself Revealed” (1928), and “Nottingham and the Mining Countryside” (1929), there is abundant resentment about his parents’ failures and his own: “Oh my dear and virtuous mother, who believed in a Utopia of goodness, so that your own people were never quite good enough for you—not even the spoiled delicate boy, myself” (“Return to Brestwood,” 294). By 1929, Lawrence’s earlier anger about his father, dramatized in *Sons and Lovers*, has long dissipated, and in “Nottingham and the Mining Countryside” he contemplates him with knowledgeable empathy and a powerful metaphor:

If I think of my childhood, it's always as if there was a lustrous sort of inner darkness, like the gloss of coal, which we moved and had our own real being. My father loved the pit. He was hurt badly more than once, but he never would stay away. He loved the contact, the intimacy, as men in war loved the intense male comradeness of the dark days. (455)

Thus amid this livid darkness—acutely real and symbolic at the same time—Lawrence finally recognizes that he shares with his father comparable patterns of love and hurt: it is their unspoken form of secret sharer.

A major reason for the success of this eclectic volume resides in Dyer's decision to forgo the customary organization of an anthology by thematic categories. The essays are arranged in a straight-line chronological order, so that a reader's experience, without the intrusive subject-headings, gradually and *organically* absorbs the repeating preoccupations and stylistic signposts of Lawrence. Subjects and metaphors reappear with meaningful variations that are inherently connected to Lawrence's growth through the years as writer and man. It is a simple and effective way to organize the table of contents, and it is surprisingly not used by editors often. I must add one major concern about Dyer's introduction. Although clearly an aficionado of Lawrence's work, he writes the following: "As a novelist, it could be argued, Lawrence peaked early, with *Sons and Lovers*. His former friend John Middleton Murry went further, arguing, in a review of *Women in Love*, that Lawrence was one of those novelists who appear to have passed their prime long before reaching it" (xi). What argument could possibly support such an absurd judgement of his work, with those monuments of modernism, *The Rainbow* and *Women In Love* a few years ahead, not to mention the brilliant novellas and short stories? Dyer also should know that vindictive Murry with his snide comments is the last person to provide persuasive evaluation of Lawrence's work, and especially of *Women in Love*.

Many of the essays recapitulate, in different ways and with varying urgency, Lawrence's visionary perception of life. Dyer pertinently quotes a seminal passage from a Lawrence letter that asserts the limitations of the mind in favor of "a belief in the blood, in the flesh, as being wiser than the intellect" (viii). The implications of that perspective reverberate throughout the essays, informing Lawrence's characterizations and digressions about family, friends, acquaintances and countries, his edgy evaluations of works

by Tolstoy, Hemingway, Verga, Hardy, Flaubert and Joyce, as well as his lyrical ruminations on flowers, trees, animals, landscapes, and even inanimate objects.

Lawrence's essential cosmology insists that the world is "open" to be engaged by one's unfettered instincts and unrepressed emotions, and that such existential priority remains the imperative for an active and productive life. In this context he maintains that character—in the real world and in fiction—must be fluid, unprogrammed, and inevitably receptive to the disruptions of unpredictable change and growth. In a crucial passage from "Why the Novel Matters" (1925), readers of Norman Mailer will note how precisely Lawrence's lines (quoted below) anticipate Mailer's words in *The Deer Park* about the "law of life" which insists "that one must grow or else pay more for remaining the same." Mailer has generously acknowledged the extent of Lawrence's influence on his own work and outlook. Here is Lawrence exactly thirty years before Mailer's novel, as he conceptualizes his belief in eminently personal terms: "If the one I love remains unchanged and unchanging, I shall cease to love her. It is only because she changes and startles me into changes and defies my inertia, and is herself staggered in her inertia by my change, that I can continue to love her. If she stayed put, I might as well love a pepper-pot" (357).

To avoid "change" for Lawrence is to risk sentimentality, a pernicious quality that, in effect, insists that one can merely apply established pattern and easy repetition to the rhythms and demands of relationships and circumstances. Thus Lawrence's prescient review of Hemingway's first major work, *In Our Time*, recognizes that the resistance to change functions as the sentimentalist's primary flaw, a failure, that—as Hemingway demonstrates explicitly about his own father in "Fathers and Sons"—can be destructive to one's health. Lawrence's review of *In Our Time* and its portrait of Krebs recognizes the essence of Hemingway's aversion, as the British novelist states it with an unembroidered economy of style that even sounds like Papa: "It is really honest. And it explains a great deal of sentimentality. When a thing has gone to hell inside of you, your sentimentalism tries to pretend it hasn't. But Mr. Hemingway is through with sentimentalism. 'It isn't fun anymore. I guess I'll beat it.' And he beats it, to somewhere else" ("Review of *In Our Time* by Ernest Hemingway," 1927, 303).

Within this context of sentimentalism and its inherent opposition to growth, one could maintain, concerning Lawrence's much admired memoir

of Maurice Magnus (included in this collection), that Magnus's death is intrinsically connected to an indefatigable and obstinate reluctance to adjust the habits of his life to the new "realities" that tragically pursue him. In Lawrence's incisive understanding of the intricacies of personality, Magnus is content to keep playing the same hustle and scam as food for his relentless yet vulnerable ego. Like all sentimentalists, he is the last to know when the game is over: "But there you are—there was his power to arouse affection and a certain tenderness in the hearts of others, for himself. And on this he traded. One sees the trick working all the way through the Legion book" ("Memoir of Maurice Magnus," 1921–22, 355).

The essays demonstrate Lawrence's insistence on the value of instinctual primacy and its ultimate connection to what he variously calls "the fourth-dimension," involving a transcendent perception of "tremulations on the ether" ("Why the Novel Matters," 254). In a critical section of that essay, he privileges the genre of the novel for its intrinsic ability to embody such relevant synthesis of immanence *and* transcendence, and thus the novel for him is "the one bright book of life," for only "the novel as a tremulation can make the whole man alive tremble" (255). Lawrence's commitment to his visionary emphasis on the "gleam" in life extends even to inanimate objects. The following passage remains too easy to caricature, but it represents Lawrence's unqualified adherence to the perceptions of instinct and the messages of tremulation:

We have to choose between the quick and the dead. The quick is God-flame, in everything. And the dead is dead. In this room where I write, there is a little table that is dead; it doesn't even weakly exist. And there is a ridiculous little iron stove which for some unknown reason is quick. And there is an iron wardrobe trunk, which for some still more mysterious reason is quick. And there are several books, whose mere corpus is dead, utterly dead and non-existent. And there is a sleeping cat, very quick. And a glass lamp, alas, is dead. ("The Novel," 1925, 141)

It is a short distance from the God-flame of immanence radiating from inanimate objects to Lawrence's instinctual imperative. The following words are from "The Novel and the Feelings" (1925), and again they conspicuously prefigure Mailer's own existential perspectives: "We've managed to keep clear of

the darkest Africa inside us, for a long time. . . . But there it is, a strange dark continent that we do not explore, because we do not even allow that it exists. . . . Yet unless we proceed to connect ourselves up with our own primeval sources, we shall degenerate" (262, 263, 264 respectively).

Lawrence's notoriously pungent reviews of other writers—included through many essays in the volume—are shrewd, revisionist, and often reflective of his own visionary priorities. He is especially drawn to Thomas Hardy's fiction because the protagonists, despite their many flaws of character, are "struggling hard to come into being" (*Study of Thomas Hardy*, 1914, 25). Lawrence regards their essential struggle as consistently revealing those tremulations from the ether that—as *The Rainbow* so powerfully dramatizes—must energize and humble those who engage this "unknown." In that same essay, Lawrence clarifies this arena of the transcendent: "a great background, vital and vivid, which matters more than the people who move upon it ... the vast unexplored morality of life itself, what we call the immorality of nature, surrounding us in its eternal incomprehensibility" (15). Lawrence similarly admires Whitman's poetry in "Poetry of the Present" (1919) for its "sheer appreciation of the instant moment, life surging itself into utterance at its very well-head" (80). In Giovanni Verga's fiction about Sicily, he finds comparable reasons for praise: "you can't read *Mastro-don Gesualdo* without feeling the marvelous glow and glamour of Sicily and the people throbbing inside the glow and the glamour like motes in a sunbeam" ("Introduction to *Mastro-don Gesualdo* by Giovanni Verga," 1927, 339).

Lawrence excoriates several much-admired writers for what he regards as intrinsic failures of characterization, texture, and power, inadequacies that he discusses, of course, in the context of his own stipulations about fiction. While recognized as a brilliant and unorthodox literary critic, Lawrence at times overstates his personal biases in ways that too cavalierly diminish the works under consideration. Although he praises the complex artistry of Thomas Mann, he criticizes *Death In Venice* because the work has "none of the rhythm of a living thing" ("Review of *Death In Venice* by Thomas Mann 1913, 14), and he faults *Madame Bovary* because he discerns a major problem with its "realistic method," arguing in an Aristotelian manner that "individuals like Emma and Charles Bovary are too insignificant to carry the full weight of Gustave Flaubert's profound sense of tragedy" (*Gesualdo*, 332). In "The Future of the Novel" (1922-23) he gleefully attacks two modernist exponents of radical fictional techniques because he believes the works are

boring and overrated. Here he uses an elongated trope of fabric and mummification to turn consensus notions of their talent and importance virtually inside-out. In effect, he “dresses” them to take them apart: “Through thousands and thousands of pages Mr. Joyce and Miss Richardson tear themselves to pieces, strip their smallest emotions to the finest threads, till you feel you are sewed inside a wool mattress that is slowly shaken up, and you are turning to wool along with the rest of the wooliness” (179). In “The Novel” (1925) he maintains that *War and Peace* is marred by Tolstoy’s unpersuasive valorizing of “the fat fuzzy Pierre” (246), a character whom Lawrence regards as a “domestic sort of house-dog” (246). Such a caustic assessment is related to Lawrence’s belief that the portrait of Pierre denies the fundamental necessity of any character in fiction: Tolstoy “wasn’t true to his *own character*” (246). What is such “truth” to Lawrence? He returns to a version of the tremulation metaphor and the doctrine of change: “Character is a curious thing. It is the flame of a man, which burns brighter or dimmer, bluer or redder, rising or sinking or flaring according to the draughts of circumstance and changing air of life, changing itself continually, yet remaining one single, separate flame, flickering in a strange world” (246).

Throughout the essays there are moments of luminous insight by Lawrence that indicate his instinctual grasp of the present and his prescient sense of the future. In “A Letter from Germany” (1924) he virtually predicts the cataclysm that soon will engulf the world. Tremulations are in the air: “But at night you feel strange things stirring in the darkness, strange feelings stirring in the darkness, strange feelings stirring out of this still unconquered Black Forest Out of this very air comes a sense of danger, a queer bristling feeling of uncanny danger. Something has happened. Something has happened which has not yet eventuated. . . . It is the father of the next phase of events” (191-192). In “Paris Letter” (1924) he acerbically anticipates a nation’s passivity and appeasement that will manifest itself in the coming war: “Men, particularly Frenchman, have collapsed into little, rather insignificant, rather wistful, rather nice and helplessly commonplace little fellows who should be tucked away and left to sleep, like Rip Van Winkle, till the rest of the storm rolled by” (185). In “Art and Morality” (1925) he warns of the developing alliance between technological advancements and the blandishments of the ego; he criticizes “civilized man” for his lack of a visual creative imagination, as he increasingly displays “the slowly formed habit of seeing just as the photographic camera sees” (223). Indeed, Lawrence perhaps becomes the first

and mournful predictor of the epidemic of the iPhone: “Man has learned to *see* himself. So now, he is what he sees. He makes himself in his own image The identifying of ourselves with the visual image of ourselves has become an instinct, the habit is already old. The picture of me, the me that is *seen*, is me” (225).

The vitality and “quickness” of Lawrence’s prose—what he often connects to the “livingness” of life—is especially evident in his evocation of the “spirit of place.” While Dyer does not include the essay of that name from Lawrence’s study of American literature, I close with a poetic example of such “spirit” from the “Magnus” essay. It is a poetic passage that integrates the personal and the scenic with the mythical nuances of literary history. I urge you to read through the essays to find more of the same:

In early April I went with my wife to Syracuse for a few days, with the purple anemones blowing in the Sicilian fields, and Adonis-blood red on the little ledges, and the corn rising strong and green in the magical, malarial places, and Etna flowing now to the northward, still with her crown of snow. The lovely, lovely journey from Catania to Syracuse in the spring, winding round the blueness of that sea, where the tall pink asphodel like a lily showing her silk. Lovely, lovely Sicily, the dawn-place, Europe’s dawn, with Odysseus pushing his ship out of the shadows into the blue. Whatever had died for me, Sicily had then not died: dawn-lovely Sicily, and the Ionian Sea. (117)