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TIM PARKS

# The Fighter

Essays

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## The Fighter

[D. H. Lawrence]

'Now a book lives', wrote D. H. Lawrence, 'as long as it is unfathomed. Once it is fathomed . . . once it is *known* and its meaning is fixed or established, it is dead.'

If this is the case, Lawrence need not have feared for his own works. Seventy-seven years after his death they are all in print and the critics continue to debate, often to fight, over what they might mean. The proliferation of biographies is likewise remarkable, this despite the fact that Lawrence had as little desire to have his life 'fathomed' as his books: 'I hate "understanding" people,' he wrote in 1921, 'and I hate more still to be understood. Damn understanding more than anything.'

But if we are not to understand Lawrence, what is our relationship with him to be? Perhaps we can find a clue in the man's belligerence. Whether dealing with his dog, his doctors, his wife or his closest friends, Lawrence's relationships were characterised by an alternation between intense intimacy and ferocious conflict. In general, the more important a relationship was to him, the more likely it was to be punctuated by violent, even traumatic battles. The present essay will be nothing more than an attempt to understand if not Lawrence, then at least his literary longevity as a function of his passion for conflict. 'I've just done the last proofs of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*,' he wrote in 1928. 'I *hope* it'll make 'em howl — and let 'em do their paltry damndest, after.'

As might be expected, the fighting started at home. 'When I was a small boy, I remember my father shouting at my mother: "I'll make you tremble at the sound of my footsteps!"' Fourth of five children born to a Nottinghamshire coal-miner in 1885, the young David

Herbert was terrified, but also 'felt it was splendid and right'. His mother was not impressed. 'Which boots will you wear?' she asked her husband wryly. The man was deflated. The boy learns that threats without action are empty. Sick in bed in his early thirties, Lawrence wrote to a friend of his relationship with his wife: 'I suppose I'll get strong enough again one day to slap Frieda in the eye, in the proper marital fashion. At present I am reduced to vituperation.'

Any battle can be seen from at least two sides. In the fictionalised version of his parents' relationship in *Sons and Lovers* (1913), Lawrence wrote of a sensitive, middle-class mother obliged to wrest her children's upbringing from a brutish working-class father. The young writer himself had not been wanted by his parents, was merely the result of Father's drunken, animal lust. Later in life, he could invert the situation: in some of Lawrence's writings, the mother is a manipulative snob who imposes her self-righteous, middle-class values on a simple man with honest male instincts, so monopolising the children's affection that their father becomes an exile in his own home.

For biographers recounting such bitter clashes, it's hard not to take sides. In *D. H. Lawrence: A Biography*, Jeffrey Meyers is pleased to quote research that brings new ammunition to the father's defence: Lawrence's mother was *not* it seems, as we all grew up believing, from a higher class than her husband. The myth of her being a school-teacher was all arts. Slum-bred, Lydia Beardsall was the merest factory worker when she met the handsome miner, Arthur Lawrence.

Meyers, who loves to close his otherwise excellent chapters, always well documented and convincingly told, with dogmatic little summaries, as if one more period of his subject's life had now been safely stowed away, seems to miss the importance of this discovery. There was no inevitable clash between classes in the Lawrence household. Rather, a spurious class struggle was invented to mask an antagonism of pure willfulness. Their marriage has been one carnal, bloody fight? Lawrence wrote in 1910. Much of his writing would dramatise conflicts between partners – Gudrun's against Gerald's in *Women in Love*, Lou's against Rico's in *St Mawr* – but in such a way as to strip them of social alibis

and circumstantial explanations. A typical scene in *Women in Love* describes Gerald, the industrialist, face down on his bed refusing to speak and Gudrun the bohemian artist determined not to let him escape confrontation in this way: 'Her mind wondered over his rigid, unloving body. She was bewildered, and insistent, only her will was set for him to speak to her.' With this prevalence of the individual will over social settings, the characters in Lawrence's novels can seem shill and insubstantial, or, alternatively, they gather the archetypal force of figures in myth. Either way, they are never Dickensian.

Two questions force themselves on biographers: how was it that the son of a coal-miner became one of England's foremost intellectual and cosmopolitan writers? And what prompted a man brought up in the rigid moral framework of English Methodism, who 'had the Bible poured every day into my helpless consciousness', to become a prophet of sexual revolution?

Lawrence's elder brother, William Earnest, the second son and his mother's favourite, died when Lawrence was sixteen. David Herbert, or Bert as he was called, replaced him, her favourite at last, but only after a rival had been seen off. The boy's chronic lung problems and general physical frailty made it easier for his mother to draw him away from his father's world of sweat and coal dust. When Bert proved too weak even for the position of clerk in a surgical appliances manufacturer, he could be sent to train as a teacher.

Thus Lawrence's education was part of Mother's struggle against Father. Far from being a neutral quality, heightened consciousness was understood to be in direct opposition to masculine instinct. His sickness assisted his mother's project, and so was soon associated with intellectuality. The boy's choice of friends fitted too. Mother accepted his relationship with Jessie Chambers and her family on a farm outside their mining village because the boy and girl seemed to spend most of their time reading, talking about books and in general procuring themselves an education.

But it wasn't a sex education, and despite all Lawrence's learning

and frailty, masculine instinct could not be contained. The problem being that Jessie, like Lawrence's mother, seemed so spiritual. Young Bert was confused. In the event he went off and had sex with another man's wife, which allowed him, at least in the fictional version in *Sons and Lovers*, the added pleasure of a very masculine, potentially erotic fight with the wronged husband, a man who in some ways resembled Lawrence's father. In 1910, long before time and distance might have allowed him to form a less idealised image of her, Lawrence's mother died of cancer. He was heartbroken: 'For me everything collapsed, save the mystery of death and the haunting of death in life.'

Like many people desperately seeking to understand the world but getting nowhere, Lawrence turned out to be an excellent teacher. Between 1908 and 1911 he taught in a working-class school in Croydon, South London. He was full of theories and experimental methods. The pupils were instructed to express themselves freely, but to observe the strictest discipline. Lawrence opposed authority in general, his headmaster observed, except when he himself was imposing it: with the rod. 'School is a conflict,' Lawrence wrote to a friend, 'mean and miserable – and I hate conflicts.' Not many years later he would explain why he had run off with another married woman: 'She [Erica] is the only possible woman for me, for I must have opposition, something to fight or I shall go under.'

So Lawrence hated fights but needed them to keep him in form for other fights. With sickness for example. In 1911 he fell desperately ill with pneumonia. Just as a previous illness had got him out of clothing, so this one freed him from teaching. Physically, he was fit for nothing, it seemed, but writing. And that would be one long battle from beginning to end.

Alongside the huge body of work (a dozen long novels, many volumes of shorter fiction and poetry, three plays, four travel books, three full-length critical works and scores of essays), Lawrence also found time in his forty-four years to write literally thousands of letters. He could leave no acquaintance, however casual, alone. He was always

ready to invite people to join him in some utopian, conflict-free community, or to curse them for refusing to join him, or for having rejected his work, written a bad review, or in some other way not lived up to his standards. Afterwards, he would write again to make up. One had imagined that the wonderful seven-volume Cambridge University Press collection of these letters was complete. Now an eighth volume of addenda has appeared, with hitherto unpublished material from more or less every period of the author's life. Far from trivia, we find gems like this as early as page three: responding, in 1909, to a typescript of Lawrence's first novel, *The White Peacock*, Ford Madox Ford, the first literary man to pay the author any attention, writes: 'As you must probably be aware, the book, with its enormous prolixity of detail, sins against almost every canon of art as I conceive it.' But Madox Ford goes on to say that he believes Lawrence has great talents and a great future.

This ambivalent response to his work would soon become so familiar to Lawrence that he began to adopt it himself. Presenting his second novel, *The Trespasser*, to his publisher, he described it as 'excrucible bad art'. Nevertheless he was confident the editor would accept it. Lawrence, wrote his close friend (but also bitter enemy) the critic Middleton Murry, 'gave up, deliberately, the pretence of being an artist... His aim was to discover authority, not to create art.'

'To discover authority'. What does Murry mean? No novelist has been both so highly praised and so frequently attacked as Lawrence; no literary reputation I can think of is so vast and so compromised. Two new critical introductions to his work, each excellent in its style and scope, *The Cambridge Companion to D. H. Lawrence* and *The Complete Critical Guide to D. H. Lawrence*, both feel the need to include chapters on see-sawing critical reactions to the writer over the years. While he was alive his work was met with incomprehension, contempt, censorship and adoration. His ability to convey a sense of place, to have drama explode from the apparently mundane was undisputed. His candour was admirable if disquieting. But his conclusions, and the violence with which he insisted on them, the lecturing tone

he assumes, were, to many, completely unacceptable. Immediately after his death, Middleton Murry wrote a book that dismissed his friend as a psychological cripple destroyed by mother love. Aldous Huxley then attacked Murry's position as 'a slug's eye view'. T. S. Eliot joined the fray announcing that Lawrence might have been a good writer if only he had had a proper education. As it was, he displayed 'an incapacity for what we ordinarily call thinking'.

Eliot's authority threatened to settle the quarrel, until F. R. Leavis declared Lawrence the finest and most 'life-affirming' novelist of the century. Only *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was 'false', Leavis thought, and he declined to give evidence when the book's publisher was tried under the Obscene Publications Act in 1960. Worse than false or obscene, according to Simone de Beauvoir, the novel was irritatingly the work of a male chauvinist. In her book *Sexual Politics* (1969) Kate Millet elaborated de Beauvoir's position and condemned Lawrence as hysterically misogynist. Others ran to his defence. From this point on, the number of studies of Lawrence multiplied. Yet however important and brilliant he is considered, every critic has his or her reservations. The novelist Rebecca West, who compares Lawrence to Dante and St Augustine, nevertheless feels that *Women in Love* was a failure. The biographer Philip Callow greatly admires *Women in Love* but decides that *St Mawr*, which Leavis thought Lawrence's best work, is no more than 'an assault on the reader by pastering contrived symbolism over the tale with impatient crudeness.' Even the English novelist Geoff Dyer, who, in *Out of Sheer Rage* has written one of the most perceptive, idiosyncratic and affectionate accounts of a reader's relationship with Lawrence, remarks that 'some of Lawrence's works would have benefited from thorough, careful revision.'

From Madox Ford's comment on the first typescript right down to the present day, what is remarkable is the critics' assumption that they know what it means to create art and that their irritation on reading much of Lawrence indicates a shortcoming on his part, a refusal to be the artist. Yet rereading his work today one can't help feeling that this embattled critical heritage was *exactly* what Lawrence

wanted. Here after all was a man who would start writing spirited responses to the bad reviews he expected even before they appeared. 'All truth', he wrote, '— and real living is the only truth — has in it the elements of battle and repudiation.' A book, for Lawrence, marked the beginning of a fight. Art, in the sense of the tidy, the manageable, the mellifluous, was the bolt-hole of the weak-hearted.

In 1912, recently returned from death's door, Lawrence met Frieda Weekley, née Richthofen, the aristocratic, German-born wife of an English history professor and a mother of three. Six years older than Lawrence, Frieda was bored to death. Less than two months after their meeting, she and the writer ran off together to Germany, then Italy. 'Can't you feel how certainly I love you and how certainly we shall be married . . . ?' he wrote to her. She couldn't quite, but Lawrence burnt her bridges for her by writing to her husband about the affair. Frieda lost custody of her children. To prove she was a free agent, she betrayed Lawrence immediately and openly. He hung on. So dramatic for both of them was the break with their past, with respectability, with financial common sense, that their relationship and eventual marriage had to be made into a myth to compensate for what both had lost. They were man and woman forged by sex into a couple against the world.

Before meeting Lawrence, Frieda had briefly been the lover of the unorthodox psychoanalyst Otto Gross. She introduced Lawrence to a new range of reading in modern psychology. Over the next five years, under her influence, he wrote his two most substantial novels, *The Rainbow*, an account of changing marital relations over three generations, making a transition from traditional to modern mores, and *Women in Love*, which picks up the story of two of the young women in *The Rainbow* and brings it into contemporary times. While writing these books Lawrence was formulating the ideas which, with regular variations and volte-faces, would feed his work to the end. They can be crudely summarised thus: the traditional community in which man lived in close relation to the natural world is now for ever gone. The mental life has triumphed over the physical. Freud is the

culmination of this disaster, reducing the unconscious as he does to an exclusively mental repository of dirty secrets and simply ignoring the life, conscious and unconscious, of the body.

With nothing natural remaining, society is now divided into the industrialised masses, 'a poor blind, disconnected people with nothing but politics and bank holidays to satisfy the eternal human need of living in ritual adjustment to the cosmos', and an intellectual elite whose exclusive interest is the cultivation of their arid personalities. 'Now men are all separate little entities. While kindness is the gift order of the day . . . underneath this "kindness" we find a coldness of heart . . . Every man is a menace to every other man . . . Individualism has triumphed.'

Lawrence, in short, was anticipating the thinking of those anthropologists (Louis Dumont, for example) who would see the passage from traditional to industrial society as a move to a situation where relationships would inevitably be characterised by conflict. With the old ordering of the world gone, the search was on for some new authority that might transcend mere individual willpower.

Writing in the grim years of World War One, contemplating wholesale slaughter across the Channel, suspected – thanks to his pacifism and his German wife – of being a spy, reduced to poverty, it wasn't difficult for Lawrence to imagine that doomsday was at hand. A futuristic note began to creep into his work. Old codes of behaviour were irrelevant, or at best a weapon to use against those still gullible enough to respect them. Real authority was conspicuous by its absence. The opening of the novella *The Fox* (written, though not published, in 1918) is typical: two young women are sitting in their lonely house on the farm that inexplicably and without any experience they have decided to run. Comes a knock at the door. 'Hello?' Immediately one of the women picks up a gun: menace, conflict.

In the event, it is only a returning soldier who imagined that his grandfather still owned the place. The women are aware that according to the rules of years ago, the man ought to go and find a bed in the

village. Instead they offer to put him up. The villagers will gossip, but who cares? After only a few days the soldier abruptly asks one of the women to marry him. The reader, like the woman, is disoriented by the lack of preamble. 'Why shouldn't I?' is the man's constant refrain. There are no rules. He likens his stalking of the woman to his hunt for the fox that has been disturbing the farm animals. Even courtship is conflict.

If English society really was in the state Lawrence described, then of course it had to be saved, or destroyed. Lawrence wasn't sure which. Saved by being destroyed perhaps. In any event something radical was required and where else could it start but with the one-to-one relationship? Here, sex was crucial. Sex was the single thing that might put man and woman, perhaps man and man too, in touch with the deeper forces of nature. It thus became necessary to narrate sexual encounters in candid detail, to follow the interplay between psychology and sensuality, the surrender, or refusal to surrender, of the frantic individual mind.

Very soon Lawrence began to reverse the biblical sense of the verb 'to know' in reference to sex. Rather than 'knowing' another, a positive sexual encounter became an 'unknowing', a shedding of self in oneness. The values he hated, Lawrence was aware, were encoded in the language. He would have to do battle with that too. 'Gudrun lay wide awake, destroyed into perfect consciousness' he says in *Women in Love* when one couple's lovenaking has been nothing more than two willful individuals rubbing against each other. 'They could forget perfectly' he says of the effect of his preferred kind of sex. Standard syntax and lexical values are attacked, reversed, regenerated. Writing *The Rainbow* Lawrence declared that it was 'a novel in a foreign language I don't know very well.'

But if the goal was 'unknowing', why engage in all this speculation? With Lawrence the intellect is always constructing its own defeat. 'Don't ever mind what I say' he writes in 1913. 'I'm a great boshier and full of fancies that interest me.' The novel, in so far as a story must be grounded in reality, open to incident and multiple interpretation,



becomes the vehicle that will disarm his dogmatic theorising, a weapon against himself. 'Never trust the artist, trust the tale,' he says.

On the other hand, Lawrence really did want to sort out the question of how a man and woman should behave once they had succeeded in shedding their personalities in sex; the problem being that the society around them was not a traditional one in which such relationships might flourish. What was needed then was a favourable micro-community. Again and again, in novels and life, Lawrence mooted the project of 'a few men with honour and fearlessness' sailing the South Seas or working the land. Or, if that couldn't be arranged – and it never could – he might at least have one male friendship based not on talk and opinions, but on a physical and permanent bond, something that would provide context for the marriage between man and woman. To bemused friends Lawrence proposed a *Blutbrüderschaft*, an eternal friendship that would survive complete frankness, assert stability *despite* conflict. But Lawrence's frankness was notoriously brutal. 'You are a dirty little worm,' he wrote to Middleton Murry, perhaps the most serious candidate for blood brother. Not surprisingly, no one came on board.

Meantime, despite their sexual union, man and woman continued to hold different opinions. He would not be bullied, Lawrence yelled at Frieda. She would not be bullied either. They fought bitterly. Lawrence appreciated the comedy in this, the bathos of petty domestic wrangling after the mind-altering sensual experience, the high-flown rhetoric of social regeneration. 'It is the way our sympathy flows and recoils that really determines our lives' he decided. By the time he was writing *Women in Love* this was the rhythm of the novels: the genius lies not in any one scene, and certainly not in the overall form, but in the 'flow and ebb', the constant shifts of tone, biblical apocalypse, sitting-room knockabout.

In 1915 *The Rainbow* was banned for obscenity. 'I curse my country with my soul and body' Lawrence announced. America, he decided, was the place for him. And he began to write *Studies in Classic American Literature*, a book of megalomaniac ambition which offers brilliant insights into, for example, Fenimore Cooper's wish-fulfilment in fantasised

friendships between white and native Americans, or, again, Hawthorne's ambivalent presentation of moral purity in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Of course many critics have written perceptively on the literature of another nation without ever visiting it, but what is astonishing about the *Studies* is Lawrence's aggressive confidence, already hinted at in the book's provocative title (many at the time would have seen the collocation of 'classic' with 'American' as oxymoronic), that living as he then was in a remote Cornish village he could grasp not only the essence of this or that author, but the relationship between their writing and the whole dynamic of American history, in short what made these writers 'classically' American.

As always, the book's style is characterised by Lawrence's willingness to offend. Opening with a claim that the original American vision of freedom was nothing more than the escaped slave's eagerness to be rid of a master, he gives us a paragraph that would not seem inappropriate to the present debate about the West's right to impose democracy on every corner of the world:

Men are free when they belong to a living, organic, believing community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled, perhaps unrealised purpose. Not when they are escaping to some wild west. The most unfree souls go west, and shout of freedom. Men are freest when they are most unconscious of freedom. The shout is a rattling of chains, always was.

In 1917, just when Lawrence had decided he must go to America to assist in turning this negative freedom of escape to the positive freedom of the 'believing community', the British authorities withdrew his passport. He was a possible German sympathiser. In the event it was 1919 before he was able to leave England, never to return except for brief visits.

At this point the writer's story is picked up in the most attractive of recent Lawrence biographies, Philip Callow's *Body of Truth*:

D. H. Lawrence - *The Nomadic Years, 1919-1930*. Despite the rich detail, a pattern rapidly emerges. Always obliged to count the pennies, suffering from pneumonia, malaria, tuberculosis, Lawrence travels from Italy to Ceylon, to Australia, New Mexico and Mexico in search of communities still in touch with the natural world, still observing older hierarchies and accepting traditional authorities. Wherever they go, he and Frieda seek to establish that small benevolent group of like-minded folk that in some modern way might offer the vital sustenance for their marriage that Lawrence feels is unavailable in mechanised, industrial England.

As it turned out, the only thing that did not disappoint was the landscape, the flora and fauna. For however eager he was to be impressed by pre-modern communities, Lawrence's unsentimental clear-sightedness never failed him. After long observation of the native Indian tribes of New Mexico, he concluded: 'The consciousness of one branch of humanity is the annihilation of the consciousness of another branch . . . And we can understand the consciousness of the Indian only in terms of the death of our consciousness.' The impasse is dramatised in the story 'The Woman Who Rode Away', where a disaffected American wife rides off to live with an Indian tribe, only to find herself drugged and sacrificed to native gods in a fertility rite.

In Mexico, meanwhile, so abject, as Lawrence saw it, was the fate of the indigenous people under an alien Christianity, that he wrote a novel describing the rise of a new, local religion that might give hope and positive freedom to the Mexicans. *The Plumed Serpent* mixes Lawrence's flair for observation and description with a tone that is visionary, even apocalyptic. Depending on what one is after in Lawrence, this is the best or the worst of his books. Certainly it is the one where Murry's claim that Lawrence's real aim was 'to discover authority' makes most sense.

But the perplexity generated by the peoples he visited was as nothing to Lawrence's puzzlement with the problems of forming an ideal community of his own. In *Living at the Edge: A Biography of D. H. Lawrence & Frieda von Richthofen*, Michael Squires and his

wife Lynn Talbot set out to offer a biography of the marriage. What emerges, though the authors never quite say as much, is Lawrence's one truly massive blind spot in his personal life: while he and Frieda thought of themselves as building a beneficent micro-community, they were in fact seeking in the company of others the friction necessary for keeping their own relationship alive. Ever since Lawrence had taken his wife away from her first husband, their love always fed on the tension provided by a third and interested party. They almost never lived alone.

Middleton Murry and his wife Katherine Mansfield, the poet Wither Byrner, the painters Esther Andrews and Dorothy Brett and the journalist Mabel Dodge Sterne (later Luban) were among scores of friends invited to live with or near the Lawrences. Obligated to witness the couple's savage, often physically violent marital arguments, they soon found themselves taking sides, becoming confidants, combatants, in some cases even imagining themselves possible future partners of one or the other. But no sooner did a third party presume too much, than he or she was brutally dismissed. Very soon they would be reading unflattering descriptions of themselves in Lawrence's next book. In response, many wrote their own accounts of the experience, all mixing venom, affection and incomprehension. Such was Lawrence's utopia. As a publicity machine for his work, it was extremely effective.

Accused of clumsy repetition in the prose of *Women in Love*, Lawrence came up with the famous response that 'every natural crisis in emotion or passion or understanding comes from this pulsing, fictional to-and-fro which works up to a culmination.' But this appeal to the artist's mimetic function was actually something of an afterthought. Immediately prior to this and rather more belligerently, Lawrence defended his style thus: 'The only answer is that it is natural to the author.'

So what was 'natural' to this author? Fighting. 'Whoever reads me will be in the thick of the scrimmage' Lawrence wrote. Critics take this to mean that he was eager to draw us into the mess of life intensely

lived. This is true. But the most urgent scimmage is between author and reader.

What kind of fight is it and where does it lead? In *Women in Love*, Birkin, the character who most resembles Lawrence, invites his friend Gerald to enter into a *Blutwiderschaft*. Gerald refuses, but he does agree to wrestle, naked, with Birkin. Needless to say, it is Birkin who chooses the form of combat and teaches Gerald how to fight according to his rules. Gerald is physically stronger, but Birkin is subtle, with an iron will. Nobody wins. At the end both men are so exhausted they fall into a trance, 'quite unconscious', but with Birkin lying on top.

This is the experience Lawrence would like his readers to have at the end of his books. This is the purpose of that rhythmic, seductive, irritatingly repetitive style. It leads us to what can best be described as a catharsis of exhaustion. For the weariness of exhausted combatants is the only oneness, the only brief overcoming of conflict that Lawrence can imagine in the modern world. In her autobiography, Frieda wrote: 'We fought our battles outright to the bitter end. Then there was peace, such peace.'

In 1925 Lawrence suffered his first lung haemorrhage in Oaxaca, Mexico. In a fit of combative energy, between 1926 and 1928 he produced three different versions of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, proud that his last novel was guaranteed to prove a monumental scandal. Meantime, in a desperate effort to impose authority, he refused to admit that he had tuberculosis, as if belligerent denial could determine the truth. Shortly after his death Frieda and the relatives began to fight over the estate. Then there was a tussle over the future of his ashes. To avoid their being stolen Frieda had them set in cement in a little shrine in Taos. An image of the phoenix was placed on top. Lawrence would rise again from the critical conflagration that was about to begin. Art or no art, nothing, life had taught him, is more seductive than a fight.