

Review Essay

Reappraising Lawrence's Later Years

Carol Siegel

Ellis, David. *D.H. Lawrence: Dying Game, 1922-1930*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1997. Pp. xxxvi + 780. \$44.95

Beginning with Lawrence's journey to Ceylon, this last in the three-volume Cambridge biography covers one of the currently most controversial times of Lawrence's life. It encompasses the so-called leadership period in his work that so many critics have read as both proto-fascist and extremely misogynist. It is also the period in which Lawrence's travels to Asia, Australia, the United States, and Mexico inspired writings on race that many have found objectionable. During this period Lawrence produced some of the writings that have been least popular with critics, including *The Plumed Serpent*, "The Woman Who Rode Away," and *St. Mawr*, as well as texts officially deemed obscene, most famously *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and paintings still banned from exhibition in England. A number of Lawrence's past biographers and critics perceive him as irrational, if not deranged by side effects of his tuberculosis, most notably impotence, during these years. Contemporary biographies, even those produced by followers like Dorothy Brett, do little to mitigate the impression of Lawrence in his last years as a raging madman mercilessly beating a terrorized Frieda, railing against human rights, and stomping his little dog Bibbles. Consequently Ellis's even-handed treatment of this part of Lawrence's life is all the more impressive. His biography is neither apologetic nor antagonistic; instead, it speaks to those who care about Lawrence in a voice that sounds encouragingly like that of an exceptionally well-informed friend.

Most who have written about Lawrence's life and opinions note his ambivalence and his frequent extreme changes of opinion, but few treat this aspect of Lawrence's personality with the sympathy Ellis shows when he compares Lawrence to Middleton Murry thus: "Lawrence was hardly a happily integrated personality and he had been known to change his mind, but there was a directness in his dealings with his feelings

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which helps to explain why his essay-writing is so much more satisfyingly specific than Murry's, and why he did not have that power of easy rationalisation which allowed Murry to negotiate a succession of messy situations with his self-regard intact, frequent public gestures of self-abasement notwithstanding." As the quote shows, this is a partisan biography that sets out not to expose Lawrence's foibles, but to explain why, in spite of all his weaknesses, he remains admirable to a huge number of readers not merely as an author but also as a man.

From the book's opening, Ellis establishes Lawrence's complexity in political matters. He sketches in Lawrence's racial position as "full of contradictions" with references both to his condemnation of "dark races" of colonized people as intrinsically lacking "any sense of liberty, in our meaning of the word" and his refusal to exploit their desperate poverty by allowing Achsah Brewster to hire him a rickshaw driver, despite his near fainting with illness in the heat of Ceylon. Ellis illuminates often-ignored nuances in Lawrence's relation to the colonized through discussion of the events that informed Lawrence's theories about Native American life, such as the 1922 Bursum Bill, which Lawrence joined his neighbor John Collier in protesting because it seemed aimed to "force the [Pueblo] Indians into the mainstream of American economic life." Ellis pays close attention to details, revealed in various texts, of Lawrence's identification with and admiration of Mexicans, like his servant Rosalino, thus making a good case for serious consideration of *The Plumed Serpent* as a contribution to post-colonial studies, rather than simply as an object for hostile analysis within this field, despite the novel's depiction of a "far from liberal" solution to Mexico's political problems. Ellis never lets us forget that Lawrence opposed liberal values as both bourgeois and deathly and that this opposition, more than the racism endemic to his times, determined his responses to oppressed, nonindustrialized, and tribal people.

Part of the immense task Ellis faces is making an audience who now think of freedom and material security/success as synonymous understand how differently Lawrence thought about freedom. Now the political discourse of the Cold War has fixed freedom's meaning into the paired oppositions under the heading Communism/capitalism, so that we deem every battle for entry into capitalist consumerism a fight for freedom. Lawrence lived in cultural landscapes different from this. On the one hand, as Ellis's reading of the essay "Getting On" makes clear, Lawrence came from a desperately poor working-class world in which success could only be defined as survival in financial terms. And Lawrence's "guilt at having escaped the common working-class fate must have played at least some part in Lawrence's unusual industriousness." But on the other hand, Lawrence remained to a large extent faithful to the neo-Romantic tradition, based on valuing "a more intense feeling of being alive [over] material prosperity,"

that causes Yeats, in "September 1913," to oppose "fumb[ing] in a greasy till / And add[ing] the halfpence to the pence" to "Romantic Ireland" and heroic revolution. If we remain mindful of this tradition, some of the major shifts in Lawrence's political views seem less strange. Ellis makes it easy to see how Lawrence's exposure to the "radicalisation of working people" during his 1926 visit home to England could result in his depiction of Parkin as "a committed Communist" and also how this character later transformed into the vocally apolitical Mellors when the seizure of Lawrence's paintings under a Labour government forced him to abandon the rather naive hope that "'a bolshevist revolution'" might improve the common people's access to beauty, nature, and the art that celebrated both most directly. Lawrence's abandonment in his later work of any "attempt to reconcile conflicting political attitudes but simply expressing each one as the mood took him" looks more reasonable than eccentric in the context Ellis creates through detailed discussion of the extreme changes in Lawrence's personal fortunes in his last years and the crises in artistic identification they aroused for him. As Ellis shows, through years of frightening and often humiliating poverty followed by sudden disorienting success, Lawrence was always true to his own concept of the artist as a person who above all else struggled to be free and to free others.

One of the book's greatest strengths is the depth of Ellis's historicization of the political cultures through which Lawrence moved, at least in respect to race and class. He consistently disrupts the simple dichotomies in which lesser biographers confine Lawrence's ideas. Ellis has similar deconstructive work to do in the area of gender politics, but here the book is somewhat less successful at revealing the complexity of the terrain Lawrence traveled through. It is nice to learn that Lawrence was asked by the editor of the *Evening News* to write on the dismal topic, "Women are Cocksure but Never Quite Sure," rather than coming up with it on his own, but Ellis's conclusion that the essay reflects that Lawrence "was (or had become) fundamentally conservative on women's issues" seems unwarranted in light of Ellis's depiction of the far from ordinary views about gender that Lawrence held throughout this period.

Nowhere do Lawrence's views on women and the actions that resulted seem less "conservative" and ordinary than in his relation to Frieda, which Ellis covers exceptionally well. The Lawrences did not have a conventionally happy marriage; they argued constantly, he "sometimes physically attacked her" and she "respond[ed] in kind" according to numerous "sources." But they were not conventional people. That "the often compliant Frieda" made it much easier than it could have been otherwise for Lawrence to indulge his urge to wander, seek new visions, and scorn material success is well illustrated throughout the book.

More interestingly, Ellis explores the after-effects on Lawrence's aes-

thetic and gender philosophy of his response to Frieda's attempt to leave him in 1923. Ellis seems right to speculate that "[m]anly authority and self-reliance were such powerful Lawrentian ideals that it must have been shattering for him to realise that he was disoriented without Frieda and would have to submit to her will." Given the addition of his more and more apparent illness to this "crushing defeat for his principles" and forced confrontation with his own "overly dependent temperament," it seems plausible that by early 1924 Lawrence might have "stopped having sexual relations in the normal sense of the term" with Frieda because "he now found her increasingly intimidating and overpowering." The darkly comic Brett episodes, as well as the disturbing displacement of conflicts with Frieda onto abuse of animals, including the notorious mistreatment of Bibbles, are also understandable, if not excusable, in this context.

Lawrence may have become "disillusioned" about love and passion, as Ellis claims, but he also makes clear that Frieda's skeptical, often selfish, independence of thought and action were beneficial to Lawrence, and that Lawrence recognized this. And not only was Frieda useful in providing an opposition which Lawrence's noncomplaisant nature craved, their marriage often gave Lawrence a safe place to retreat from a world that never shared his values the way his wife sometimes could, as Ellis illustrates with the accounts he includes of an ailing Lawrence cuddled in Frieda's arms. Even "that instinctive physical repugnance" Lawrence suspected in her at the end resonates with his own hatred of anything deathly. In some ways, as Ellis frequently suggests, the whole story of Lawrence's life and death is an account of a man unwaveringly committed to the regarding "the human body" as locus of truth. The importance of Frieda's agreement with this philosophy seems to have far outweighed her disagreement with the philosophy that wives should be led by their husbands.

There is much that is unfathomably mysterious in any human life, let alone one as determinedly oppositional as Lawrence's, and Ellis is characteristically realistic about this. Typically, when faced with conflicting accounts of an "episode" he will admit that he cannot know the answer, and after ruminating about the impossibility of any biographer defining Lawrence's "essential self," he refreshingly decides, "All one can do is try to tell a reasonably complete story and leave the reader to draw his or her own conclusions."

I agree with Ellis in considering Lawrence's last years to be primarily about the "search for love" in the broadest and yet most personal sense, played out as a "childlike, although not childish" pursuit of "real human contact." Ellis notes that those who value such contact as "one of the few substantial happinesses of life will not be inclined to call [Lawrence] immature [or crazy], or dispute his claim that it was the general state of life in society which deserved to be considered 'abnormal' rather than his own."

We are perhaps too accustomed to seeing Lawrence's last years depicted in terms of rage, hatred, bitterness, and failure. This much-needed biography provides a powerful alternative vision of a nonconformist of heroic stature, staying brave and dying game.

