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## D.H. Lawrence: A Single Life

John Worthen

### I

This is the end of Chapter Three in my Single Life – my single-volume life – of Lawrence, which Penguin Books have commissioned.

'On the morning of Sunday 3rd March Lawrence took the train into Nottingham, almost certainly getting off at the Carrington station he would have known from his last two years at the High School, and then walking up the Mansfield Road, into the airy, middle-class, north-eastern suburbs. The day was sunny, spring-like and warm; the walk would have taken him fifteen minutes or so. He may have arrived early, or Weekley may have been delayed in coming home; either way, his host was not there. Lawrence was shown into the drawing room, with its big windows looking out over the garden where children were playing, to be greeted by Weekley's wife. And the next half-an-hour changed his life.'

### II

No. Let me redraft those last two sentences:

'Lawrence was shown into the drawing room, with its big windows looking out over the garden where children were playing. Frieda Weekley was indisposed and did not come down for lunch. Weekley arrived late to give Lawrence advice, but the latter left the house without having met the woman whose reputation for beauty and uninhibited behaviour was legendary at the University. He never did meet her.'

So simple, so different... biographical narrative so easily makes the known the inevitable. But in our own lives we

constantly reminisce about what might have happened if, when the road forked, we had taken the other way: not just because, as Robert Frost says in 'The Road not Taken', it might have 'made all the difference' (l. 20), but because in the [I quote] 'growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent and parallel times' in which perhaps we exist, and which necessarily contain 'all possibilities' – 'Time forks, perpetually, into countless futures. In one of them, I am your enemy'<sup>1</sup> – Lawrence might only have met Frieda in one such future. I'm quoting Borges' story 'The Garden of Forking Paths'. And if Lawrence had not met Frieda this time... he walks back down the Mansfield Road, and Frieda Weekley is only a name to him. What happens down *this* particular fork, into *this* alternative future?

### III

He walks back down the Mansfield Road... and of course goes to Germany, as planned, in May 1912, to stay with his cousins the Krenkows in Waldbröl, in the Rhineland. He takes with him the almost-finished manuscript of what is still *Paul Morel*, knowing that he wants to revise it. He believes he will stay abroad 'probably a year'.<sup>2</sup> Jessie Chambers has given him some excellent advice about the novel; and so, informally, has Edward Garnett. Lawrence reckons he can probably finish the job in a month. He also intends to write essays for the *Westminster Gazette*; his acquaintance with Walter de la Mare has given him an opening that he might be able to exploit.

Lawrence's weeks in Waldbröl are deeply, profoundly uneventful; he works on his novel, flirts with his cousin Johanna, visits Bonn and the Drachenfels. He also writes a sketch for the *Westminster Gazette* describing a day when overpowering heat breaks up a burgeoning *tendresse* with a woman very like Johanna; but Waldbröl is not a good place to write journalism (nothing ever seems to happen: the passage of a pair of oxen down the main street is a major event).

By the end of May he has completed his revision of *Paul Morel* and has proudly sent it off to its potential publisher Heinemann; and, taking a break from his work, he follows the advice of the Krenkows and goes to visit Dresden, staying in a small *pension* they know of near the centre of the city. Here he writes some more German sketches, about the fashionable people he sees walking on the Brühler Terrasse, about the ordinary people staying in his *pension*, about the tourists who visit the city's churches and art galleries. To these he adds a recreation of sleepy Waldbröl, written with some distance and irony; he has every reason to be proud of what he is accomplishing, on holiday from the novel. He posts his sketches to the *Westminster*, and heads back to Waldbröl.

It is a nine-hour train journey, with two changes: and what he finds waiting for him is a letter from William Heinemann turning down *Paul Morel* flat, because it is immoral, and asking where the manuscript should be sent.<sup>3</sup> All Lawrence can do is write helplessly to Edward Garnett about what has been done to him; but Garnett comes to the rescue, as with *The Trespasser*, and sends Lawrence a list of the things he has to do, if Duckworth is going to accept the book. Lawrence gratefully agrees to do everything Garnett suggests. What he really needs now is to spend a couple of months rewriting it.

Above all he has to decide whether to stay on in Germany. He could continue to live with the Krenkows, but his letters suggest that he is no longer entirely happy there: in July he refers to Johanna's husband as 'a bit tipsy and a big fool'.<sup>4</sup> And Waldbröl is extremely dull; he does not want to base his entire experience of Germany, as a potential writer about it, on eight weeks spent in rural Rhineland and ten days in Dresden. He wants to travel; and a suggestion from Walter de la Mare proves helpful. The *Westminster Gazette* is not likely to print more than a couple of sketches of Ger-



man life of the kind he has written so far, but de la Mare has friends in Heidelberg: he suggests that Lawrence should offer the *Westminster* a monthly 'Letter from Heidelberg' describing his experiences. De la Mare believes that his friends could help Lawrence get pupils for English lessons, and they could also introduce him to student life. A monthly essay will not tax Lawrence too much; he will be able to work at *Paul Morel*; and he will also earn some money.

Lawrence sets off to Heidelberg on 15 July 1912, and with the help of de la Mare's friends the Meyers (and a small loan) he finds lodgings in Turner Straße near the South Cemetery. With the Meyers' assistance he acquires his first pupil, and settles into a routine of writing in the morning, teaching after lunch, and socialising with friends in the evening. The *Westminster* agrees to pay him £7 each for six 'Letters from Heidelberg' (the first of which will appear on 21 September 1912); and best of all, Garnett persuades Duckworth to pay him his fifty pounds for *The Trespasser*. On 1 September, six weeks after arriving in Heidelberg, Lawrence is able to repay the Meyers what he has borrowed and is secure for the rewriting of the novel.

It is in Heidelberg, too, that he finds the first woman to attract him (as opposed to the first woman who will flirt with him) since leaving England. The married sister of one of his pupils regularly comes to collect her brother at the end of his lesson, and one afternoon arrives to tell Lawrence that her brother is ill and cannot come. All that we know about what happens next comes from three letters that Lawrence writes to Edward Garnett. On the first occasion they meet, Elfriede (we only know her first name) and Lawrence go for a walk through the south cemetery (refreshing, green and shady on a hot afternoon in early August); they sit on a bench shielded by a bush from the main path, and kiss; they agree to meet there again the following afternoon. When they do, Lawrence persuades Elfriede back to Turner

Straße. What happens then we have no idea: but the letters to Garnett suggest an affair. They probably meet a number of times during the autumn (there is another reference to Elfriede in a letter Lawrence writes to McLeod in November). It seems very probable that Paul Morel's relationship with the married Clara in the re-written *Paul Morel* owes something to Lawrence's meeting and relationship with this almost unknown, married German woman.

For all the time that he is living in Heidelberg, Lawrence is hard at work on the novel. Garnett had thought it formless, without a central and controlling theme; he had also believed the opening too detailed, and the ending too weak. Jessie, too, in letters she is now starting to write to Lawrence, is arguing that Paul's relationship with Miriam should *not* be a sexual one. Lawrence cannot afford to resist Garnett's desire to help him, but he also clearly thinks that the opening would not need cutting if the theme of the son's love for his mother were brought out more strongly. By the middle of December he has finished this final version of *Paul Morel*, and writes Garnett a letter designed to show that he has done everything Garnett wanted; he also writes to Jessie admitting that Paul's relationship with Miriam has indeed become sexual: 'I'm sorry it turned out as it has. You'll have to go on forgiving me.'<sup>5</sup>

With the novel finished, but with no prospect of further money apart from the monthly £7 from the *Westminster* (and it has been made clear that there is going to be no extension of his six-month contract), and with his family urging him to come back to England – Lawrence decides to bring his life in Heidelberg to an end. He finishes his last 'Letter from Heidelberg' in mid-January, using material from a snowy excursion up the Neckar valley – 'we drink with the mountain peasants in the Gasthaus, and dance a little' he writes to Garnett;<sup>6</sup> whether he is accompanied by Elfriede or not we have no way of knowing, but a character called



'Thusnelda' appears in the last 'Letter' as the narrator's companion – and with whom is he drinking and dancing? He finishes his teaching, packs up around 20 February 1913, and takes the train back to Calais and the boat to Dover. So far as we know, he never sees Elfriede again.

## IV

On his way back to the Midlands he naturally calls in at the Cearne to see Garnett, to find the latter in the process of making a few small cuts to the novel. Lawrence is grateful for his friend's efforts, but retains his opinion of the book's merits without them. Nevertheless, he badly needs another novel in print. On 1 May 1913, *Paul Morel* is finally published – and seems to have fallen almost dead from the press. It apparently sells only 400 copies in its first six months; many reviewers are actively hostile. *The Evening News* mourns the fact that the fine writer of *The Trespasser* should have bogged himself down in a tedious family chronicle; the *Morning Post* complains that immorality in the Midlands is really just tedious; and – aggravatingly – an anonymous piece in the *English Review* complains that the book's central theme (the son's love for his mother) is not only sentimental but problematic, given what recent psychoanalytic theory has suggested: it implies that Lawrence obviously knows nothing about Freud. Nearly all the reviews complain that the book contains a great deal of unnecessary sexuality. There is, as a result, no library demand for the book, and Duckworth loses money on it. Lawrence is left distressed and angry: 'my cursed, rotten-boned, pappy-hearted countrymen',<sup>7</sup> he comments. Whilst at the Cearne, he had worked with Garnett to put together a book of poems, but after *Paul Morel*, Duckworth is in no mood to accept a poetry book, and Lawrence in no mood to hawk it around other publishers. There are also distinct signs of a cooling off in his relationship with Garnett. Lawrence blames him, in part, for the failure of *Paul Morel* and Duckworth's re-

fusal to take the poetry book, and by the summer of 1913 the two men are writing to each other only occasionally.

It has always been as a literary mentor that Garnett has been most helpful: and Lawrence's career as a writer is now in crisis. There had not been much left of the £50 for *The Trespasser* when he came back from Heidelberg (he had clearly spent rather heavily there), while Duckworth's advance of £50 for *Paul Morel* is obviously not going to be added to (and Lawrence has debts to pay off, too). Before going to Germany, back in 1912, he had considered what he might do if the German expedition came to nothing – 'come back and work as a teacher' – and this is what, a little half-heartedly, he now sets out to do. Back in Eastwood, he goes to live with his sister Ada in her lodgings in Percy Street. And he does his best to get into Secondary teaching, rather than the elementary teaching he has done so far – his German is now of a very passable standard – but has no luck at all, wherever he tries. He spends the months between March and July 1913 in Eastwood, well aware that he cannot afford to go on living with (or living off) his sister Ada. She is getting married to Eddie Clarke in August, and there is no way he is going to go and live with his other married sister Emily in Glasgow. In a desultory way he tries to put together a volume of *German Sketches*, but that seems rather pointless too. He seems to spend most of his time back in Eastwood drinking – 'Everybody in Eastwood is so jolly – I am always out' he tells McLeod<sup>8</sup> – and railing against publishers. He also spends more time than usual with his father and seems to get on quite well with him; but his father is shortly going into lodgings. Lawrence apparently makes no attempt to get in touch again with Helen Corke, and although he remains on friendly terms with McLeod, in Croydon, at no point does he suggest going down to see him. Rather more significantly, there is no evidence of his attempting to see Alice Dax, only ten miles away in Shirebrook. Their affair had petered out



before he went to Germany, and she had her second child in October 1912; Lawrence may feel that there is now no way back to the situation which had brought them together in the summer of 1911.

The drinking is nothing new in his life. In August 1910 it was obvious to someone who had known him all his life that his 'temperate habits which his mother had tried to foster in him, had now almost gone'.<sup>9</sup> He remarked in a letter 'I like very much the taste of vermouth';<sup>10</sup> and one of the things that sealed his friendship with Garnett in 1911 was drinking together. And at the end of the year, after his mother's death, he had told Louie Burrows:

Sometimes when I have the horrors – the ashy sort – I drink a little – to mend the fire of my faith and hope, you see... The Good God made whiskey, as I have rather lately discovered... too much whiskey is better than too much melancholies – and a drinking bout better than a bout of ferocious blues.<sup>11</sup>

Back in 1910 he had remarked 'Good Lord, I don't drink. Think of the paternal example.'<sup>12</sup> But when thoroughly miserable, as at the time of his mother's death, he drinks to ward off the 'ferocious blues': next year he writes to a friend how 'night after night one stumbles up, half blind with work or with wastefulness'.<sup>13</sup> May Holbrook, immediately he arrives in Germany, hears how he is 'already drinking my third pint of German beer... Lord, these German mugs'.<sup>14</sup> He reproduces drunkenness – not just how it looks, but how it feels – surprisingly often in his writing.

His one public appearance in Eastwood during these months is to address the Literary Society of the Congregational Church on 3 July, when he lectures on Germany; the account of the lecture in the *Eastwood & Kimberley Advertiser* says only that 'Mr. Lawrence sounded disillusioned with modern Germany; it is perhaps a pity that so many of

our young men today are disillusioned with their lives, and we wonder what the future holds for them'. It is a prophetic remark. Lawrence sinks into a more and more miserable state as the summer goes on, failing to get employment as a teacher, and not writing. Back in 1910, feeling the onset of [quote] 'a blank space', he would 'begin to shut my teeth' and drink: 'Gott in Himmel! The nights are rather bad...' But at least he had then had Louie Burrows to talk to and, in his own way, to love. Now, in the summer of 1913, he goes from pub to pub: 'I went in the Golden Crown and a couple of other places.'<sup>15</sup>

What might have made a difference is the fact that he is once again seeing Jessie; she is living in Nottingham. As Lawrence gets depressed over the summer, he also starts to go into Nottingham at weekends, and Jessie sometimes comes out to Eastwood. They do not seem to have had a close relationship, however; Jessie simply wants to encourage him to try and overcome his distaste for writing. In her memoir of Lawrence, she remembers her attempts to encourage him:

He crossed to the hearth and sat there in silence, elbow on knee, his head resting on his hand, staring into the fire. It was the familiar spectacle; Lawrence in the grip of forces that pulled him with equal power in opposite directions. But what I saw at the moment was his utter loneliness, his separation, as it seemed from everything else in life... Presently he said in a halting way, as if struggling to find the exact words, 'When we are not together, since we have been parted, I'm not the same man. I can't write poetry' ...his tone was the extremity of sincerity and of despair.<sup>16</sup>

He goes to her for support, for comfort, to try and re-establish some kind of link with the old days before his ill-



ness, and before his abortive trip to Germany: he deeply fears, as he tells his friend George Neville, that 'the old days have gone; gone altogether; gone beyond recall'.<sup>17</sup>

It has not often been remarked what a profoundly depressive character Lawrence had been, from his earliest years, marked as they were by his bouts of inexplicable tears as a child: he once remarked that 'really, for me, it's been a devilish time ever since I was born'.<sup>18</sup> It is so easy to be impressed by his apparently effortless creativity when things were going well – though even then his manner could be what Jessie once called it: 'painfully bright'<sup>19</sup> – that we overlook this intensely gloomy other self, regularly experiencing what he vividly calls 'cold ashes of horrors'.<sup>20</sup> The word 'ash' – and the sense of ash in the mouth – is in fact a constant reference in his writing and letters for this experience. It was very clear in his letters during 1911, for example, especially during the autumn, when he goes through something similar to what he is now suffering, in the long summer of 1913: 'I am a sad dog myself, pretty often,'<sup>21</sup> he writes, and person after person agrees: 'Lawrence often seemed very unhappy';<sup>22</sup> 'he was held back by the fact that he was not happy'.<sup>23</sup> He attends his sister's wedding on 13 August; but that is the end of his Eastwood life. He has to decide where to live and to eke out the little money he has left: something hard for a man now bout-drinking. He chooses to go into lodgings in Jacksdale, three miles from Eastwood, where there is at least one woman (her name is Pauline) whom he had got to know back in January 1912 – she may well have been the woman his sister found him 'kissing like nuts'<sup>24</sup> there: but it is also a place 'simply snyed with pubs'.<sup>25</sup> At all events, it is here in Jacksdale, with Jessie's encouragement, that he actually starts a story based on the life of Robert Burns (a working-class writer, of course, damaged by drink). He writes some thirty pages before destroying the story; he tells Arthur McLeod that it is not worth a ha'penny, of his or any-

one else's time. Just a few pages of a draft survive, sent to McLeod, and perhaps significantly they describe the Burns character's drinking habits:

He was by nature temperate. Being sensitive and emotional, his nausea prevented him from drinking too much. He felt, when he had drunk a certain amount, that his stomach was full enough, and the thought of further drinking nauseated him. But now, almost deliberately, with the greatest good-humour and apparent sanity, he began at twenty six to drink in order to get drunk... he became a bout-drinker, having at intervals these bouts of three or four days of brandy drinking, when he was drunk for the whole time. He did not think about it. A deep resentment burned in him. He kept aloof from any woman, antagonistic.<sup>26</sup>

The connection there between alcohol, anger, separateness from others and depression is made explicit.

## V

In September, his sister Ada feels obliged to start giving him money (in the first instance it can be disguised as a twenty-seventh birthday present); luckily her marriage means that she is better off than before. Lawrence survives in Jacksdale, in lodgings on the unlovely Alfreton Road, until the middle of October 1913. There are very few letters dating from his time there: one extraordinary one, to McLeod, dated 9 October, describes his feeling

like a thing whose roots are all straining on their hold, and whose elemental life, that blind source, surges backwards and forwards darkly in a chaos, like something which is threatened with spilling out of its own vessel.<sup>27</sup>



Jessie sees him for the last time after he has hitched a lift into Nottingham in a cart on Saturday 12 October. For once he is not drunk – is, rather, in his own words ‘cold-headed as mathematics’<sup>28</sup> – but he asks her, according to her memoir, ‘What does it matter?’ and answers himself ‘Nothing matters.’<sup>29</sup> Another friend had once heard him say – ‘in a voice that broke as if strangled’ – ‘Then what does matter?’<sup>30</sup> He walks back the same night, unable to afford a train, but this time in what the local paper called on the Monday ‘a tempest of wind and rain’; he presumably arrives in Jacksdale soaking wet. He is found dead in his room two days later. What has happened, we do not know. Perhaps, as in 1911, the wet clothes in which he falls asleep lead to pneumonia; though this time we can also blame depression and alcohol for his disregard of his health. The coroner holds an inquest at the Nelson Inn in Eastwood on Tuesday 15 October and decides that the death is due to ‘natural causes’. Lawrence is interred in Eastwood cemetery, in the grave where his brother Ernest and his mother Lydia are buried. His whole family attend: Emily is down from Glasgow, and Lawrence’s father Arthur is there, of course, on the arms of his two daughters, while Edward Garnett comes up from London; so does Austin Harrison of the *English Review*, and Walter de la Mare; brief obituary notices appear in a couple of London newspapers. His old friend George Neville comes down from Staffordshire, but Pauline does not attend; according to Neville’s unpublished memoir, Ada has told her in no uncertain terms to keep away.

After Lawrence’s death, Edward Garnett persuades Duckworth to bring out a volume of Lawrence’s poetry, *Love Poems and Others*; it is published on Thursday 6 August 1914, and is completely ignored (only some 80 copies are ever sold). In September 1925, to mark what would have been his fortieth birthday, his sister Ada publishes privately that notoriously rare book, *Sketches of Germany and Eng-*

land, a collection of his travel writings. In the late 1920s, too, Duckworth republishes *Paul Morel* and this time the book enjoys reasonable sales; it has been in and out of print ever since that date, and Broadview Books have recently republished it in their series Twentieth Century Classics. *The White Peacock* and *The Trespasser* have however never been reprinted, and there are a number of plays in the hands of Lawrence’s surviving relatives, as well as many poems and stories. Such a conference as this suggests that Lawrence’s reputation might indeed be recovering, and it is my ambition with this biography to help take that recovery further. In particular, Lawrence should be known as a letter writer, and it is a tribute to Frank Kermode’s acumen that he should have included a 1910 letter by Lawrence in his *Oxford Book of Letters*.

We have to ask whether, if D.H. Lawrence had met a partner who could have helped him combat his tendency to depression, his life might have taken another path. Perhaps not: pursuing what he once called ‘life single, not life double’<sup>31</sup> was probably what he was going to do in the end, come what may. Jessie Chambers apparently believed that she could, lovingly, have saved him, but that seems highly questionable: it wasn’t saving or love that he wanted. Perhaps a partner who simply, constantly, demanded relationship from him – who refused to *allow* him to be ‘single’ – would have helped most. If Garnett had stuck to him, or he had stuck to Garnett, that might have helped too: we need constantly to look to Lawrence’s problem with sustaining close relationships if we are to get anywhere near understanding him. The fact that he could be terrifyingly single and detached is perhaps the most obvious thing about him, apart from his equally tremendous, paradoxical and in the end nostalgic desire to be part of a group. Above all, if he could have continued to write, that would probably have helped him more than anything else. But it is, instead,

the thread of a tragically brief, Single, un-diverging, non-convergent Life which we are here gathered to pursue... and that would be as true if he had lived for another twenty years as it is of his death at twenty-eight.

## Endnotes

1. Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, London: Allen Lane, 1998, p. 127.
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3. James T. Boulton, ed., *Letters*, vol. i, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 421, n. 4.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 406.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 408.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 441.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 422.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 368.
9. John Worthen, *D.H. Lawrence: The Early Years 1885–1912*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 269.
10. James T. Boulton, ed., *op.cit.*, p. 206.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 218.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
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16. Jessie Chambers, *op.cit.*, p. 200.
17. G.H. Neville, *A Memoir of D.H. Lawrence*, ed. C. Baron, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 155.
18. James T. Boulton, ed., *op.cit.*, p. 421.
19. Jessie Chambers, *op.cit.*, p. 200.
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22. Edward Nehls, ed., *D.H. Lawrence: A Composite Biography*, vol. i, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957, p. 65.
23. Edward Nehls, ed., *ibid.*, p. 72.
24. James T. Boulton, ed., *op.cit.*, p. 369.
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26. D.H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, ed. Mark Kinkead-Weekes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 27:14–17; 18:37–39.

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28. James T. Boulton, ed., *op.cit.*, p. 247.
29. Jessie Chambers, *op.cit.*, p. 188.
30. Edward Nehls, ed., *D.H. Lawrence: A Composite Biography*, vol. iii, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1959, p. 619.
31. D.H. Lawrence, *Aaron's Rod*, ed., Mara Kalnins, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 128.

**Note:** Nothing in history before 3 March 1912 has been altered or added to. Extant documents subsequent to 3 March 1912 have not been altered, but events have been fictionalised, and new documents invented. All Lawrence's words are authentic, although some have been re-assigned to earlier dates, works or contexts.