

15. Cornelia Nixon, *Lawrence's Leadership Politics and the Turn Against Women* (Berkeley, 1986), p. 22, quoted by Levenson above, p. 154.
16. *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*, p. 154.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
18. *Sexual Politics*, p. 262.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 262, n. 89. In Millett's quotation, the text reads 'The novel' and 'desires' rather than 'This novel' and 'desire'. See *Women in Love*, 630, for explanation of the different wording.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 264-5.
22. Richard Drain, 'Women in Love', in *D. H. Lawrence: A Critical Study of the Major Novels and Other Writings*, ed. A. H. Gomme (Sussex, 1978), pp. 74-5.
23. *Twilight in Italy and Other Essays*, ed. Paul Eggert (Cambridge, 1994), 144:1-4.

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Lawrence, Florence and Theft: *Petites misères* of Biographical Enquiry

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I had been lecturing on the Friday at the University in Florence, trying to say something sensible about 'the place of D. H. Lawrence in the history of the English novel'. After a month in Italy I had learned to go slowly and look continuously at the students to make sure they were following. This deprives you of variety of pace, like those footballs whose two speeds derisive fans in my home town used to describe as slow and stop; and articulating every word somehow gives an additional ring of banality to the material. Yet on this occasion the students had seemed bright and attentive enough. That is how they had seemed when I had lectured in Naples two weeks before but a colleague who interrogated them afterwards told me that they had in fact followed very little. I sympathize with their predicament. I have enough Italian to follow someone who talks at me for ten minutes, but during the next ten I am beginning to rely on key words to pick up the gist. After that, I am reduced to observing their body language, sustaining my own role with affirmative nods, and living in fear of some such sudden enquiry as, 'So you do agree, then, that chopping off the hands of these people would be the best solution to the problem?'

I had spent Saturday and Sunday with friends who live just across the river near the S. Spirito church so that Monday morning found me ambling across the Ponte S. Trinità at about 9.30, with my weekend bag slung over my shoulder. If I turned left at

the end of Santa Trinità, there was the Lungarno Corsini where Orioli had his bookshop and from where he directed the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. More or less straight on, and passing the print shop in which *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was set up, there was the station where I could catch a train back to Rome. Not knowing when I would be back in Florence again, and as if in obedience to some obscure call of duty, I turned instead right, for a last look at its more famous parts. If you have been born in Manchester, Florence imposes moral obligations of an aesthetic variety which are hard to ignore.

The next bridge up from Santa Trinità is the Ponte Vecchio. The crowd thickens considerably there and since I am on the Uffizi side I cross over to the pavement by the river in order to find some space. Sight-seeing is one of the things I do very badly: I need to live in a place for a while before I feel relaxed enough to look around properly. In the presence now of sites which I obscurely recognize as remarkable, and perhaps for that very reason oppressive (a fairly recent success in Italy was the book by one of the analysts deputed to deal with the many tourists in whom a first contact with Florence precipitates a nervous breakdown),¹ I become distracted with thoughts of my last lecture and the ones I still have to give. Suddenly I am brought back to earth by two small girls whom I remember afterwards as about ten or eleven. They are wearing T-shirts with cheap cotton skirts, have dark complexions and long, black uncombed hair. The smaller of the two is violently shaking a newspaper in front of me and they are positively yelling in a language which even I can recognize as certainly not Italian. For a second I take them to be merely beggars of a particularly vociferous kind, but almost immediately the space beggars usually respect is crossed and one of the girls has grabbed my jacket from the front while the other pulls on it from behind with a disconcerting degree of violence. Although I manage to shoo them off, it is a peculiarly unsettling encounter.

The relief of being rid of the two girls is succeeded almost at once by the realization that I have been robbed. I feel nervously in the now empty inside pocket of my jacket, and then in the zipped compartment of my bag in case I have happened to put my wallet there (something I never do). Turning quickly, I see the two girls still mingling with the crowds near the Ponte Vecchio and stride back determinedly to recover my property. They meet me with hard stares of defiance and protestations of innocence

which I feel I instinctively recognize as simulated in the same way as, when I switch on the car radio at home and hear two people speaking, I can immediately tell the difference between an interview and a radio play. With an irony beyond their years, they are wearing small plastic money bags which they open obligingly as they simultaneously twirl round in triumph like aspiring but inexpert ballet dancers. The wallet certainly does not seem to be there, which is not surprising since I am told later that the practice is to slip whatever is stolen to an older accomplice as soon as possible after the theft. Convinced nevertheless that they are the culprits I persist, whereupon one of the girls lifts up her T-shirt to her chin in order to demonstrate that the wallet is not strapped to her torso, and that, young as she is, she is not after all as young as all that. The advantage of an encounter like the one I have just experienced is that anger and alarm make you momentarily oblivious of other people: for a few precious moments you are free of that self-consciousness with which so many of us are cursed. But to have a pubescent girl stripping off before me in the middle of a crowd brings back a very sharp sense of how I might appear to others, and is more than I can handle.

There is nothing for it but to reconcile myself to the loss. I had been carrying about £250 in lire, a huge sum – far more than I would ever carry in England – but I had been paid in cash for my teaching in Florence and with anxious forethought had brought from Rome a lot more than I needed ‘for emergencies’. This is an emergency which my forethought can now do nothing about. As usual, it is not so much the money which matters but the loss of credit cards and driving licence. With the few coins the girls have left me, I ring my hostess of the weekend and ask if she could check whether I have not left my wallet in the bedroom I occupied. When she has established that of course I haven't, I explain what has happened. ‘Ah, the gypsies’, she says with the air of someone giving the all too obvious answer to a question I am not conscious of having asked. I hear the same phrase in the same tone from a sympathetic English-speaking police official at the ‘Questura’, just near the Duomo, when I go to report the theft and make what in Italian is dramatically termed my ‘denunciation’. At the time I assume that ‘gypsies’ must be the generic and politically incorrect term for all small girls who take to thieving; but a well-informed Italianist tells me afterwards that a large number of gypsies did in fact flood into Italy in the 1970s

from Yugoslavia, and that some of them then evolved a method of stealing which is by now well-established. Later that week I see two young girls much like mine working the pavement opposite the Colosseum: the flapping newspaper to distract attention, the eerie cries. Whether on this occasion the tourist they approach is simply more alert than I was, or these two Roman members of the sorority graduated from the Academy with lower marks, they are unsuccessful. I wonder as I watch them what a gypsy Fagin looks like; whether it is not my duty to call the police (but what would the police do with two minors?); and also if there is any comfort at all in the realisation that you have fallen into a trap with which everyone you meet afterwards seems almost contemptuously familiar. I decide that there is not, but that is a question which is not yet troubling me in Florence as I borrow some money for a train ticket and make my glum way back to Rome.

It was only much later I remembered that yes, of course, Lawrence also had his wallet stolen in Florence. We have his own as well as Catherine Carswell's word for this,² and there are all his characteristic hallmarks of autobiographical transcription in the experience of being robbed which he attributes to the protagonist of *Aaron's Rod* (1922). This is not a novel to which the non-specialist ever does (or perhaps ever should) pay much attention. In the opening account of the feelings and circumstances which lead Aaron Sisson – a 'checkweighman' at the local mine – to walk out on his wife and young children, there is some of Lawrence's finest writing; but after Aaron, who is presented to us as a gifted amateur flautist, has spent some time with a London orchestra and then decides to try his luck abroad, wandering to Florence in search of his 'inward destiny', the narrative develops into what by the time of his next novel, *Kangaroo*, Lawrence would have learned to call a 'thought adventure'. That is to say it is appropriated for a diary of recent personal experience (in this case Lawrence's escape from post-war England in 1919 – without Frieda, who had gone to see her people in Germany), and for an examination of pressing personal problems. *Kangaroo* deliberately and confidently starts out in this 'thought adventure' mode but, after a relatively conventional beginning, *Aaron's Rod* has slid into it, with Lawrence clearly nervous about the dangers. Towards the end, its hero writes a letter to a slight acquaintance

in which he sets out his philosophy of life. 'When a man writes a letter to himself,' the narrative voice wryly comments, 'it is a pity to post it to somebody else. Perhaps the same is true of a book.'³

It is characteristic of the novel as 'thought adventure' that the account of what in Aaron's case might be more accurately termed a mugging than it could in mine, should seem entirely gratuitous from a narrative point of view: something which simply happens to him and to which he responds. There are no perceptible consequences for the 'plot', any pretensions to which have in any case disappeared by the time of this episode. In Florence, Aaron has met several local expatriate celebrities, two of whom are quite clearly based on Orioli's friend Norman Douglas and one of the faithfuls who helped sustain Oscar Wilde in his last years, Reggie Turner. Through these contacts Aaron is introduced to an aristocratic Italian and his American wife who want to secure him for their musical evenings. One Sunday afternoon in November 1919 therefore, he goes to their house on the S. Spirito side of the Arno and plays his flute for the Marchesa del Torre. Leaving there, he crosses the Ponte Vecchio at 7.30 and decides to walk straight ahead instead of returning immediately to his *pensione* in the Piazza Mentana, which is by the river on the right just before the next bridge. (Lawrence changes the name of the *pensione* he himself had used in 1919, but not the location.) After this first meeting with the Marchesa, with whom he is soon to have a tormented affair, Aaron is in an excited state:

He had his overcoat over his arm, and in a sort of trance or frenzy, whirled away by his evening's experience, and by the woman, he strode swiftly forward, hardly heeding anything, but rushing blindly on through all the crowd, carried away by his own feelings, as much as if he had been alone, and all these many people merely trees. (228:29–34)

He walks by the Piazza della Signoria and on into what, since the abolition of the monarchy, has been known as the Piazza della Repubblica – in Lawrence's time it was the Piazza Vittorio Emanuele. As he is leaving there to head for the Duomo (the precision and accuracy of the topographical details strengthen the impression that Lawrence is dealing with his own experience), it is not gypsy girls whom Aaron encounters but, less

ignominiously, two gangs of soldiers who buffet him helplessly from one to the other. 'For some moments he struggled among the rude, brutal little mob of grey-green coarse uniforms that smelt so strong of soldiers' (228:38-40). Finally free of them, he puts on his overcoat and buttons it up to the throat 'closing himself in, as it were, from the brutal insolence of the Sunday night mob of men' (229:2-4). Turning out of the Cathedral Square into the Via del Proconsolo Aaron would have passed the police station where I filed my complaint. Further down that road, opposite the 'Bargello' (now of course a museum of sculpture), he puts his hand to his breast pocket and suddenly realizes that his wallet is no longer there:

He had been robbed. It was as if lightning ran through him at that moment, as if a fluid electricity rushed down his limbs, through the sluice of his knees, and out at his feet, leaving him standing there almost unconscious. For a moment unconscious and superconscious he stood there. He had been robbed. They had put their hand in his breast and robbed him. If they had stabbed him it could hardly have had a greater effect on him. (229:9-16)

I have been working on the latter part of Lawrence's life long enough to know that I am in no danger of falling into the classic biographer's error of excessive identification. Numerous great books apart, I have never felt that Lawrence was much like me or (to phrase it more appropriately), that I am much like him. My own response to theft had been far less acute, duller: without the intensity which makes Lawrence so many enemies as well as friends among the reading public, and which is heightened here as Aaron immediately goes on to attribute his loss to the 'power of evil'. Yet in addition to that sense of almost physical violation which so many victims of theft report, whether or not there has been physical contact, and which Lawrence conveys here through the use of an unexpected preposition ('They had put their hand *in* his breast'), there are two responses he next attributes to his hero which anyone who has been robbed will not find it at all difficult to recognize. Hurrying back to his *pensione* Aaron makes a thorough search for his wallet, even though he knows for certain it is gone. With this quasi-magical ceremony of pointless propitiation over, he begins to reflect that the soldiers must have

deliberately chosen him as a victim and then imagine how he would have seemed to them just before he was robbed: 'They must have watched him previously. They must have grinned, and jeered at him' (229:39-40). Part of the humiliation of being a victim of theft does indeed often come from being obliged to recognize (or imagine) that one has had a walk-on part as the gull, a foolish mug. When I left the Uffizi side of the Lungarno, where the density of the crowds makes the way I was to be robbed more difficult, and crossed over to the river with my weekend bag and an appearance which had previously led even the most stutteringly incompetent of the waiters in Rome to frustrate my efforts at practising Italian, my two girls (I later thought) must have felt that it was Christmas. Lawrence similarly reconstructs the moments before the loss of his money, discovering that, while he was entirely unconscious of the world, others of its members were concocting a drama in which he was to play an abject part.

That is not a pleasant prospect for anyone but it was especially painful for Lawrence because he was so unusually sensitive to the possibility of being mocked or despised. On almost every occasion he arrived in a foreign country, he would complain after a few days that the inhabitants were jeering at him behind his back.⁴ To friends of his youth who remarked on his apparently unhealthy pallor he would explain that it was simply a question of having a skin which was white and thick. Metaphorically speaking, it was in fact very thin. Yet extreme self-consciousness is in Lawrence's case complementary to one of his great strengths: the probing mobile attentiveness which, notwithstanding the temporary self-absorption he here attributes to Aaron, made him such a remarkable sight-seer. How remarkable is apparent in his travel books which also illustrate, however, that in a man preternaturally alert to his surroundings, the slightest mishap could replace the world he so vividly saw with a much less comfortable world in which he was seen. There is a paradigm for this process at the beginning of *Sea and Sardinia* when he and Frieda are waiting for the train to Palermo at the Taormina station. Lawrence produces a lively comic account of the locals there but then suddenly thinks that, since they seem to feel there is nothing peculiar about themselves, they very probably find *him* strange, and view the fact that he has a knapsack on his back 'with cold disapprobation, as unseemly as if I had arrived riding on a pig'.⁵ These reversals of perspective, when the biter

is bit, the noticer noticed, are common in both *Twilight in Italy* and *Sea and Sardinia*, and they help to explain the envying wonder with which, in the latter work, Lawrence observes a group of Sardinian workmen on the train to Sorgono:

They have no inkling of our crucifixion, our universal consciousness. Each of them is pivoted and limited to himself, as the wild animals are (88:13-15) . . . Their neighbour is a mere external. Their life is centripetal, pivoted inside itself, and does not run out towards others and mankind.⁶ (88:21-3)

It is because Lawrence's own life did run out towards others that Aaron is troubled by an image of the pitiful figure he must have cut before the soldiers robbed him. To counter the humiliation, he is described as adopting a strategy familiar enough to crime victims but pursued in the novel with characteristic Lawrentian vigor. 'Yes,' Aaron thinks,

- and if hadn't rushed along so full of feeling: if I hadn't exposed myself: if I hadn't got worked up with the Marchesa, and then rushed all kindled through the streets, without reserve: it would never have happened . . . I gave myself away. It is my own fault. I should have been on my guard. (230:8-13)

There is perhaps a distinctively Protestant need here to assign responsibility: find someone to blame, and the self is after all an altogether more available, as well as a more conveniently familiar target than soldiers, or gypsy girls. Having walked around Rome and then Naples without difficulty, it may well be (I myself had at first reflected) that I had unconsciously begun to think that I was especially favoured, immune. In England, I had refused a friend's offer of a money-bag, feeling that such a lump at the waist was too ostentatious a sign of distrust or prudence. Now I had paid the penalty for believing that the Doom of Man should be reversed in my favour. It was my own fault and I promised myself that next time I would be more careful. Taking decisions about the future - 'I'll see this does not happen again' - is an obvious form of what the psychologists call abreaction for feelings the only real alleviation of which is brought about by time. Lawrence can 'abreact' twice, by making resolutions after his own experience of theft and then writing about them in a novel. But

the resolutions he attributes to Aaron are on a much grander scale than most people in similar circumstances would be likely to feel appropriate:

But still he sat in his chair in his bedroom, dazed. One part of his soul was saying emphatically: 'It serves you right. It is nothing but right. It serves everybody right who rushes enkindled through the street, and trusts implicitly in mankind and in the life-spirit, as if mankind and the life-spirit were a playground for enkindled individuals. It serves you right. You have paid about twelve pounds sterling for your lesson. Fool, you might have known beforehand, and then you needn't have paid at all. You can ill afford twelve pounds sterling, you fool. But since paid you have, then mind, mind the lesson is learned. Never again. Never expose yourself again. Never again absolute trust. It is a blasphemy against life, is absolute trust. Has a wild creature ever absolute trust? It minds itself. Sleeping or waking it is on its guard. And so must you be, or you'll go under. Sleeping or waking, man or woman, God or the devil, keep your guard over yourself. Keep your guard over yourself, lest worse befall you. - No man is robbed unless he incites a robber. No man is murdered unless he attracts a murderer. Then be not robbed: it lies within your power. And be not murdered. Or if you are, you deserve it. Keep your guard over yourself, now, always and forever.' (230:17-35)

Although one has to remember that twelve pounds was a lot of money in Lawrence's day (about half the annual rent that he was to pay for the Villa Mirinda when he came to live on the outskirts of Florence in 1926), there are perhaps too many paragraphs like this in *Aaron's Rod* for one to want to recommend it to the general reader without reservation. Yet the note of hysteria audible in the repeated self-flagellation at least indicates how thoroughly Lawrence himself is immersed in the drama of the occasion; even if that immersion is at the expense of any credible development of the 'character' of Aaron who, as the novel nears its end, is increasingly replaced by a protagonist patently representative of Lawrence himself. Although the sentiments expressed are clearly ones which Lawrence needed to get off his chest, from the point of view of narrative art, they might be said to form part of a letter to himself which should never have been posted.

Those who are not too concerned with narrative art, and have a general interest in Lawrence, will nevertheless be glad that it was. This is partly because the paragraph will remind them immediately of an important discussion on standards of behaviour in the second chapter of *Women in Love* when Birkin is led to make a startling claim:

'No man . . . cuts another man's throat unless he wants to cut it, and unless the other man wants it cutting. This is a complete truth. It takes two people to make a murder: a murderer and a murderee. And a murderee is a man who is murderable. And a man who is murderable is a man who in a profound if hidden lust desires to be murdered.'⁷

This striking concept of the 'murderee' became well known in Lawrence's time and has been much commented on since. The passage I quote from *Aaron's Rod* shows that he was willing to extend it to robbery also. 'No man is murdered unless he attracts a murderer' but also, 'No man is robbed unless he incites a robber.'

Ways of dealing with a psychological discomfort which is subsequent on any kind of misfortune, great or small, can be roughly divided into two categories. The one Lawrence ignores involves invoking the concept of bad luck, declaring that the episode is 'one of those things', and concluding that however much philosophers might insist that nothing is ever causeless, the determinants are too complex and mysterious to bear investigation, and in any event are beyond our control. This fatalistic submission to what we can in any case do nothing about quiets disturbance and brings its own modest comfort. One of its more notable literary proponents is Gloucester in *King Lear*. He is a man inclined to believe that he lives in a world over which he has no control, and where the only sensible attitude is patiently to accept whatever comes along. Coincidentally, or perhaps not so coincidentally, Gloucester is also one of the best examples one can imagine of what Birkin might mean by a 'murderee'. In the scene where he has his eyes put out, there is a chilling symbiotic relationship between his weakness, his all too late and ineffectual show of defiance, and the sadism of Cornwall and Reagan.

Gloucester is a fatalist and for Lawrence, who often speaks through Birkin in *Women in Love*, fatalism of any variety is antipathetic. In his youth he had read and been very impressed

by a collection of Schopenhauer's essays and, although there are many more influences which help to determine his attitude in these matters, he would have approved of the sentence from *The World as Will and Representation* to which Nietzsche objects so strongly in the *Twilight of the Idols* and which reads: 'Every great pain, whether physical or mental, declares what we deserve; for it would not come to us if we did not deserve it.'⁸ Asserting the victim's responsibility in even such extreme cases as theft and murder is comforting because the individual can then feel he has retrieved control of his own destiny and, in the first (but not unfortunately the second) of the two cases, strive to do better next time. The strength of Lawrence's belief in personal responsibility is apparent in his resolutely psychosomatic approach to all illnesses (including his own); and another indication of his general attitude surfaces in chapter x of *Aaron's Rod* when Aaron and Rawdon Lilly (the second of the author's alter egos in the book) are visited by a certain Captain Herbertson who has a neurotic compulsion to talk about the horrors he has experienced during the war. Herbertson explains that none of his men was killed unless he had a presentiment beforehand that he was going to die, and he implies that you could keep yourself alive if 'you could keep yourself from having a presentiment. Perhaps there was something in it,' Lilly thinks; 'Perhaps the soul issues its own ticket of death, when it can stand no more. Surely life controls life: and not accident' (116:8-11).

For someone whose commitment to the truth of the moment made him relatively careless of self-contradiction, Lawrence was remarkably consistent in his attitude to personal misfortune. Where comfort is concerned – the return to some degree of mental equilibrium – most of us are usually not averse to a little philosophical inconsistency: playing both ends against the middle. Like Lawrence, I had blamed myself for being robbed but re-reading his account of his similar experience in *Aaron's Rod* prompted other considerations. If misfortune can always be construed as our own fault, that is partly because we have the option of being wise after the event. I lost my money because I was careless but I could have been equally careless and not lost it. As the philosophers say, the carelessness was a necessary but not a sufficient cause. (Or is it the other way round?) I could after all have walked straight to the station and, since there was nothing inevitable about my turning right at Ponte Trinità, it could be said

that I was unlucky to be robbed: to be precisely where I was when I was. As Edmund reports his father as believing in *King Lear*, some of our mishaps may well be in the sun, the moon, and the stars.

This attitude becomes attractive because of the high price Lawrence expects us to pay for his own: 'Then be not robbed: it lies within your power. And be not murdered. Or if you are, you deserve it. Keep your guard over yourself, now, always and forever' (230:33-5). To tell yourself that you will be more careful in future is one thing; but to promise to be on your guard 'now, always and forever' is a tall order. One could dismiss it as no more than rant if it were not for an obviously related passage in *Sea and Sardinia*. Lawrence finished *Aaron's Rod* in May 1921 but two or three months previously he had taken time off from its completion in order to describe his recent Sardinian trip. Near the end of his account he explains how, in Naples harbour, he has to fight through a crowd, comprised mostly of soldiers, in order to secure tickets for the boat back to Palermo:

It isn't very nice – so close, so incomparably crushed. And never for a second must one be off one's guard for one's watch and money and even hanky. When I first came to Italy after the war I was robbed twice in three weeks, floating round in the sweet old innocent confidence in mankind. Since then I have never ceased to be on my guard. Somehow or other, waking or sleeping, one's spirit must be on its guard nowadays. Which is really what I prefer, now I have learnt it. (178:12-19)

One of the thefts to which Lawrence refers here was from his unattended baggage; the other must be the experience he will attribute to Aaron two or three months after writing this passage. From a biographical point of view therefore, Lawrence's resolutions to be always on his guard in future cannot be simply brushed aside when they would seem to be confirmed in this other, non-fictional text.

As Lawrence looks back to the experience of being robbed in Florence, it is clear that he regards it as one of his life's turning points: a moment when there was a sudden and decisive change of direction. One very influential paradigm for such moments is St Paul on the road to Damascus; but the firmness with which

they are also lodged in the secular consciousness is evident from the popularity of the Dick Whittington legend.⁹ As these two examples suggest, turning points come in a wide variety of different shapes and sizes; and they do not necessarily involve any dramatic intervention from outside, the voice of God in St Paul's case, or the sound of Bow Bells for Dick. A person may well have a sudden and apparently unprompted recognition that his or her life must alter; or the revelation may involve some relatively trivial episode which comes at the end of a long but unrecognized process of change and brings home to the subject that things will never be the same again. It is hard to imagine Lawrence is asking us to believe that, when he was robbed in Florence, he changed quite suddenly from a trusting, ingenuous person to one forever on his guard: that he woke up that morning in November 1919 full of belief in mankind and then went to bed with his faith shattered. Rather we are led to imagine that the theft made him aware of a transition which had taken place, allowed him to dramatize to himself (and for his reader) the final abandonment of a naive trust in others. And yet of course that abandonment is dramatized in retrospect. There are events which are immediate turning points, irrespective of how the person to whom they have happened chooses to reflect on them: the loss of a leg for a professional footballer, the loss of an arm for a concert pianist. But as theorists of life-writing are fond of pointing out, turning points are often produced by thinking about the past, they are one of the more obvious results of autobiographical enquiry.

Turning points are necessary to many of us in thinking about our lives and particularly necessary to autobiographers. They give shape and definition. Where would Marcel be in Proust's great novel without being able to attribute the fatal decline of his will to his mother's goodnight kiss? Structurally speaking, where would the novel itself be? Yet if autobiographers, and novelists of an autobiographical tendency such as Proust and Lawrence, need such moments, that need is equally strong among biographers, buried as they often feel in a welter of insignificant detail – 'one damned thing after another'. For them, the structuring principle which the turning point provides is just as precious. With that in mind I began to wonder if the loss of my own wallet in Florence had not been providential, leading me to a recollection of Lawrence's similar loss and then to the discovery of a crucial

moment in his life previously ignored by other researchers. Through the intermediary of the gypsy girls (God bless them), had I not stumbled on an episode which changed Lawrence's attitudes for good? Of course, there is always the question here of how far biographers ought to accept the subject's own version of what mattered in his life. Dr Johnson noted that on many occasions they have no choice:

The writer of his own life has at least the first qualification of an historian, the knowledge of the truth; and though it may be plausibly objected that his temptations to disguise it are equal to his opportunities of knowing it, yet I cannot but think that impartiality may be expected with equal confidence from him that relates the passages of his own life, as from him that delivers the transactions of another.¹⁰

No one with an interest in biography could deny that there are many situations in which the subject is the only source of information, but in our post-Freudian age we are much less confident than Johnson can be about that subject's ability to see the truth of his or her own situation, and in Lawrence's case there are, I think, good reasons for not accepting that the episode in Florence did in fact change his life in any radical way.

What could these reasons be? How can we challenge the authority of the subject who is after all (as they say) the one who ought to know? Before trying to answer that question it is important to be clear about what is at issue. When Lawrence writes in *Sea and Sardinia* that before being robbed in Italy he floated around in the old sweet confidence in mankind but that, after this experience, he has never ceased to be on his guard, we take him to mean much more than that he has now learned to be careful when he travels abroad: to take travellers' cheques instead of cash. What he appears to be announcing is a watershed in his life and yet, reviewing its major episodes before Lawrence left England for Italy in 1919, there would seem to be a good many of them easier to associate with losing faith in mankind than having his wallet stolen in Florence: the expulsion from Cornwall in 1917 for example (after neighbours had denounced the Lawrences to the authorities as spies), or the final medical inspection in Derby when Lawrence was made to turn round and bend over while a para-medical looked down his anus to the

accompaniment (he felt) of titters from the rest of the company. One might have thought that this last experience especially was much more likely to put him on his guard than having his pocket picked.

It is here that the 'last straw' principle previously mentioned might become relevant. Yet if being robbed in Italy did in fact mark the end of what had been an ongoing process, what evidence is there that Lawrence was a changed man after 1919 (when he was robbed), or after 1921 (when he wrote about the experience). People commonly say of themselves or others that after some obviously traumatic experience – the loss of a loved one, a major public humiliation or some life-threatening illness – they were 'never the same again'. Assuming that the experience which triggers change does not have to be obviously traumatic in that sense, what evidence is there that after 1919 or 1921 Lawrence was also never the same?

Most momentous events in Lawrence's life find their way into his fiction sooner or later. The Derby medical inspection bursts into the narrative of *Kangaroo* during the famous 'Nightmare' chapter and the consequences of its recall are everywhere apparent in the subsequent action. In *Aaron's Rod*, Lawrence dramatizes the theft which he claims had such profound after-effects but fails to show the workings of these on his protagonist. It might be said that this is because the episode occurs so late in the novel, but he never reverts to it again in his fiction nor attempts to show how such an episode can provide a turning point in a man's life. The lack of evidence in the fiction does not mean there might not be plenty in the life itself but, if that is the case, it is hard to find. In his dealings with others Lawrence seems to follow a familiar, quasi-universal pattern. There is first of all an enthusiastic going-out to new acquaintances which is followed by proposals for closer association (including his various schemes for 'Rananim'). There then follows disappointment, a feeling of being sold and finally a retreat back into relative isolation before the next outburst of enthusiasm. As Lawrence grew older the outgoings became rarer and more cautious, and the periods of retreat longer, but there is no sign of any sudden break in this pattern. Lawrence was still trying to found communities of like-minded people in the 1920s and, in the last days of 1923, at a dinner at the Café Royal to which he had invited seven of his friends, he made an emotional attempt to persuade them to accompany him back to

New Mexico so that they could all start a new life. This occasion has attracted much ridicule, chiefly because it ended with Lawrence being sick over the dinner table; but whatever one might think of his appeal, it would be hard to associate it with a man who had abandoned trust in other human beings and was forever on his guard. Lawrence writes in one of his late essays of the need for people to retain a core of naivety and he certainly seems to have done so himself.¹¹ Of course, such are the little miseries of biographical enquiry that a memoir may one day appear in which a dying Lawrence is described as turning to its author with, 'You know, ever since I lost that twelve pounds in Florence, I have never been able to trust other people.' But the likelihood of such a discovery seems to me slight and, as my remarks on the reliability of the subject will already have suggested, it could not in any case be conclusive.

Yet if the theft in Florence was not a turning point for Lawrence, a moment when his life changed irrevocably, what led him to claim that it was in both a novel and a non-fictional text? The two claims belong to the same few weeks or months and it is likely that the first (in *Sea and Sardinia*) provoked the second. Always physically fastidious and hating – except in very favourable circumstances – to be touched, Lawrence's need to push through a crowd of soldiers in order to buy his boat ticket in Naples harbour must have brought back into his mind the memory of being robbed in Florence and shown him that, over a year later, the psychological after-effects of that experience were dormant rather than dead. To deal with them, in *Sea and Sardinia* first of all and then, shortly after, when he decided to recall the whole episode in *Aaron's Rod*, Lawrence angrily formulates resolutions which are a variation on what the philosopher J. L. Austin once termed 'performatives': phrases whose meaning is inseparable from their immediate expression ('I name this ship', etc.). He makes to himself, that is, promises about the future which have no relevance to any real future but are adopted because of their immediate assuaging power in the present. That is one explanation but another would be that Lawrence had, in any case, a dramatic imagination. Of the many reasons he gave for objecting to the common and inevitably vulgarised narrative of Darwinian evolution common in his time, one was that it made the world's history seem too predictably linear and plodding. In the first essay in *Mornings in Mexico*, he advocates with enthusiasm,

as well as with great wit and charm, the Aztec view of evolution whereby the end of one phase and the beginning of a new is effected by a huge explosion. 'This pleases my fancy,' he writes, 'better than the long and weary twisting of the rope of Time and Evolution, hitched on to the revolving hook of a First Cause. I like to think of the whole show going bust, *bang!*'¹² With this preference for seeing the past as punctuated by dramatic events, it is no surprise to find him conceiving the narrative of his own life in a dramatic way.

The more dramatic a life the more turning points it will contain; or perhaps, the more turning points one can find, the more dramatic it can be made to seem. One reason why Lawrence's writings are full of decisive moments is that he was someone continually in the process of remaking himself or (to use his own favourite metaphor) being born again. An additional reason for claiming that some of those moments may not have been as decisive as he claimed is that people must sometimes be bad judges of turning points in their own lives when those lives are so subject to change. 'Call no man happy until he is dead', say the Greeks who – though their literature does not always suggest it – would presumably have agreed that we ought not to call him unhappy either. Only when lives are finally over can those who have lived them be certain which moments have been decisive – which means of course that they can never be certain at all. This points to at least one advantage that, *pace* Dr Johnson, the biographer has over people who tell their own life stories. When I review Lawrence's life in the 1920s, I cannot honestly recognize his being robbed in Florence in November 1919 as a turning point whereas there was one episode which took place there almost exactly eight years later which does, in my view, qualify for that title. On 17 November 1927 Lawrence came into town from Scandicci and had lunch with Orioli, as well as (very probably) with Norman Douglas and Reggie Turner. 'This novel of yours that you can't get published,' Orioli must have said to him, referring to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, 'why don't you do what Norman does and have it published privately here?' That moment was decisive because, up until then, Lawrence had been increasingly worried about his financial future – 'It's not cheap, being ill and doing cures' he had told his agent (*Letters*, vi. 222). Once he had begun to act on Orioli's suggestion, he was never to be seriously troubled by financial problems again. By March 1929, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was already showing a profit of over £1,000.

On 17 November also, before or after he had talked with Orioli, Lawrence was walking by the Arno when he bumped into an old friend from the war years called Dikran Kouyoumdjian. Since he had last seen him, Kouyoumdjian had very wisely changed his name to Michael Arlen and become rich and famous as the author of the international best-seller, *The Green Hat*. About a week later, stimulated by the idea that his novel would be published after all, Lawrence began to rewrite *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and introduced into what was now its third version a totally new character called Michaelis, who was clearly based on Arlen, and who changes the dynamic of the novel completely. It is the combination of these two events which, in my own narrative of Lawrence's life in the 1920s, led me to propose 17 November as a turning point in his life;¹³ yet I have to confess it is a pretty commonplace and banal one. This is not what we are usually looking for when we talk about turning points. What we want is some radical change in our all too drearily familiar temperament and feelings: a response to the shock of being robbed (for example) that would dramatically transform us from being a person who was 'robbable' into someone forever alert, with eyes in the back of his head. Chance, as they say, would indeed be a fine thing.

Because prudence, practicality and ethics prevented Lawrence from throttling those who robbed him (as indeed they had prevented me), he dealt with the discomfort of the experience by proposing to forge for himself a whole new personality. He 'abreacted' with a characteristic vigour. I have already described my own response as much more feeble and, once deprived of the consolation of believing the event might be providential for my career as a biographer – no, I had to admit, being robbed in Florence was not after all a turning point in Lawrence's life that others had been too obtuse to notice – I simply tried to forget the two gypsy girls. Yet with that weakness for decisive moments from which we all suffer, I can remember an incident shortly after which was like a shower of rain at the end of a hot and dusty day, and which made me aware that my own disturbance was beginning to settle. Most of the begging in Rome is done by women who in general appearance might well be the mothers of my two girls, and who carry babies at their breasts. Before coming to Florence, I had seen a group of them early one morning in the underground, chatting in an animated fashion to each other, entirely oblivious of the potential sources of income around them,

and looking as if any money you might be tempted to press into their hands would be refused on the grounds that they were closed. They did not want to be bothered when they were on their way to work any more than I did. Shortly after I got back, I was walking with an Italian colleague when one of these women approached us. 'No', said the colleague, firmly putting her hand on my arm as it made a nervous move to the pocket, 'You have already made your contribution.' Suddenly my recent loss appeared in the light of a convenient scheme for the distribution of wealth and myself as someone who had paid his dues in advance. Since that moment, the memory of the gypsy girls has ceased to bother me, and I have hardly given the discomfort of being robbed in Florence a second thought.

NOTES

1. Graziella Magherini, *La Sindrome di Stendhal* (Florence, 1989).
2. See Catherine Carswell, *The Savage Pilgrimage* (Cambridge, 1981), 119. Carswell thought that Lawrence was robbed as he was 'getting on to the crowded train at Fiesole', but his own evidence, in letters as well as in the passages I shall quote, suggests that this was a mistake.
3. *Aaron's Rod*, ed. Mara Kalnins (Cambridge, 1988), 264:4–6.
4. 'I find all dark people here have a fixed desire to jeer at us: these people here. They jeer behind your back,' Lawrence wrote from Ceylon in April 1922. In August of the following year he wrote to Amy Lowell from an address in New Jersey, 'But I don't care for New York. I feel the people one sees want to jeer at us. They come with a sort of predetermination to jeer.' See *Letters*, iv. 225, 487. Similar responses follow Lawrence's arrival in Sydney, Taos, Mexico City and Chapala.
5. *Sea and Sardinia*, ed. Mara Kalnins (Cambridge, 1997), 12:33–4.
6. I deal at more length with the connections between Lawrence's powers of observation and his self-consciousness in the fourth chapter of David Ellis and Howard Mills, *Lawrence's Non-Fiction: Art, Thought and Genre* (Cambridge, 1988).
7. *Women in Love*, eds David Farmer, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen (Cambridge, 1987), 33:15–20.
8. See vol. 16 of the *Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy (New York, 1974), the section on *Twilight of the Idols* entitled 'The Four Great Errors' (p. 40). George Eliot has a more moderate version of Schopenhauer's thought in chapter 58 of *Middlemarch*, apropos of Lydgate: 'It always remains true that if we had been greater, circumstances would have been less strong against us.'

9. For drawing the Dick Whittington case to my attention, I am very grateful to Michael Sheringham who has an excellent analysis of autobiographical turning points in the first chapter of his *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires* (Oxford, 1993).
10. *The Idler*, no. 84 (24 November 1759).
11. 'While a man remains a man, a true human individual, there is at the core of him a certain innocence or naiveté which defies all analysis, and which you cannot bargain with, you can only deal with in good faith from your own corresponding innocence or naiveté.' 'John Galsworthy', in *Phoenix*, ed. Edward McDonald (London, 1936), p. 540.
12. *Mornings in Mexico* (London, 1927), p. 15.
13. David Ellis, *D. H. Lawrence: Dying Game* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 385–8.

6

Play and Carnival in
Sea and Sardinia

Mara Kalnins

The art of D. H. Lawrence's travel writings has received increasing critical recognition in recent years, acknowledging that the travel books are complex and highly wrought works which embody Lawrence's 'metaphysic' as much as the fictional writings and essays do. As several critics have persuasively argued,¹ Lawrence uses a wide range of sophisticated linguistic devices to create for the reader the illusion of participating in the minutely detailed chronological experience of travel. Eschewing the benefits of hindsight, he records with absolute fidelity to the experienced moment the fluxes and reversals of mood, emotion and thought which are inevitably generated by encounters in a foreign land, scrupulously and often humorously transmitting the traveller's self-conscious perception of himself as an outsider. The cinematic quality of *Sea and Sardinia* – an earlier title had been 'Sardinian Films' – with its shifts between the dominant present tense narrative, which generates the illusion of spontaneously living in the present, and the past tense with its flashbacks as memory and reflection impinge on the moment, has been further clarified by the new Cambridge edition,² which has restored Lawrence's original line breaks between key paragraphs. Throughout, narrative voice and dialogue counterpoint each other, conveying the strangeness of communicating in a foreign language, as when Lawrence translates the Italian into deliberately unidiomatic English ('There isn't it any more' (92:25); 'This makes the tasty bit' (103:1)) or relives a triumphant victory over a pushy commercial traveller: "'Oh," said I. "I know. We have that language in England. It is called thieves' Latin – *Latino dei furbi*"' (104:21–2). To these techniques he adds the vivid and exact evocation of a landscape, its