

Lawrence's war

by Bruce Whiteman

Paul Delany. *D. H. Lawrence's Nightmare: The Writer and His Circle in the Years of the Great War*. New York: Basic Books, 1978. Pp. xviii, 420; 23 photographs. US \$15.95. Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester, 1979. Pp. 297. £15.50.

"THE NIGHTMARE" WAS Lawrence's phrase, in *Kangaroo*, for the First World War and all it represented. It was a very difficult time for him. He had come to hate England, but the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand caught him and Frieda on a visit to his homeland from Italy, a trip which they had undertaken partly so that she might secure a divorce from Ernest Weekly, and partly so that Lawrence might attend to placing *The Rainbow* with a publisher. With the declaration of war, their hopes of returning to Europe evaporated, and Lawrence found himself sequestered for the duration of the war in a country that was inimical both to his developing ideas and to their public expression in his books. The suppression of *The Rainbow* in 1915 was only the first of the many disappointments and set-backs which were to be Lawrence's lot during his enforced stay in the country on which he thought he had turned his back for good.

It is this difficult and dreary period of Lawrence's life which Paul Delany has chronicled in *D. H. Lawrence's Nightmare*. It is a well-written and well-researched book, and goes some way toward convincing even the most recalcitrant reader of literary biographies that the lore of a writer's life can be useful in interpreting his work. In too many cases this value is frequently in danger of disappearing beneath a load of gossip. For instance, when Paul Levy, in his recent book on G. E. Moore, points out that Bloomsbury had an important influence on the tastes in holidays and cooking which would later find favour among the trend-setters of London and New York, one is inclined henceforth to avoid reading anything *about* a novelist or poet and to stick to the works themselves, admitting, with a sigh of relief, that less is more. Delany's book (perforce, as it takes over 400 pages to deal with only four years of Lawrence's life) contains its share of gossip, particularly as a good part of its story concerns Lawrence's stormy relations with his friends of the time, especially Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield, Lady Ottoline Morrell, and of course Bertrand Russell. (The book seems to treat almost every day in Lawrence's life during the period, and Russell's interactions with

him are set in a very detailed context of considerable value to Russell scholars.) Yet Lawrence's work, if not always the central concern, occupies an important place in Delany's text. This was the period of *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, two of Lawrence's greatest fictions. It was also the time of *Studies in Classic American Literature* (a major work of twentieth-century criticism), of several of his less read works (such as *The Crown*), and of the poems collected in *Look! We Have Come Through* (many of which actually predate the war years).

Lawrence's life during the war, if it was not merely a staggering from one crisis to another, certainly was characterized by turbulence and disruption. Though not a pacifist, the slaughter in Europe affected him deeply, and confirmed the desperate and frightening elements in his already Manichean view of life. Throughout much of his life Lawrence would talk—sometimes airily and sometimes earnestly—about war as a metaphor for life: the war between men and women and the war in the individual between the mind and the passions. This antagonism was what he came to call, in the *Last Poems*, strife: "the conflict [which] is a communion." But the European war "was not strife;/ it was murder;/ each side trying to murder the other side/ evilly." These lines represent only a vague and unparticularized denunciation, but they do reveal Lawrence's basic feelings about the war. His relationship with Russell, which from our vantage seems so hopeless and destined for the acrimony with which it in fact terminated, began in a mutual condemnation of the war. Their friendship, initiated by Lady Ottoline Morrell, started out with each of them hoping to command from the other what he lacked in himself, "unreason" in Russell's case and the opposite in Lawrence's. The idea for a series of collaborative lectures (which Russell in the end presented on his own and published as *Principles of Social Reconstruction*) eventually emerged, but as quickly disappeared when Lawrence returned Russell's outline proposals with a variety of caustic 36-point interlineations. It was another six months before the two men made a final break, but Lawrence's characteristically proselytizing approach to his friends—to say nothing of the radical difference of personality of the two men—had doomed their relations almost from the start.

A good deal has been written about the Lawrence–Russell relationship, some of it by Russell himself. The *Autobiography* and *Portraits from Memory* contain severe comments on the direction and content of Lawrence's philosophy, and Russell has been justly censured, by Harry T. Moore and J. L. Jarrett among others, for suggesting that Lawrence's theory of blood-consciousness "led straight to Auschwitz". In chronicling the strange friendship, Delany helpfully fills out the story which has been more briefly told by Ronald W. Clark and James Jarret, and

obliquely in Moore's edition of *D. H. Lawrence's Letters to Bertrand Russell*; in so doing he rescues Lawrence from Russell's too hasty condemnations. Lawrence, for all his talk, was basically an apolitical writer, and there is more than sufficient evidence to prove that he would not have countenanced Nazism, despite his talk of the need for a "Caesar" and despite *The Plumed Serpent*. Lawrence himself probably summed up most succinctly and accurately his differences of opinion with Russell in a letter to the latter written on 17 November 1915: "After all, my quarrelling with you was largely a quarrelling with *myself*, something I was struggling away from." This was not his last word, of course, for he would later use Russell as the basis of two of his fictional characters: Sir Joshua Malleson in *Women in Love*, and Bertie Reid in the short story "The Blind Man". Neither of them flattered their prototype.

If there is a danger in literary biography, it is that one may be overcome with knowledge of the life and read the work of a writer as little more than slide projections of his immediate experience. While Delany does not blush to point out the autobiographical elements in Lawrence's writing (and these are extensive in any case), he is never merely psychoanalytic or reductive. The war did have a powerful influence on Lawrence's view of man and his view of English society, and this influence Delany has investigated with a good deal of skill and knowledge. *D. H. Lawrence's Nightmare* is a valuable contribution to the literature both of Lawrence and of the war.

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