

T. E. Lawrence: Writing a Life

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Never before has shame been sung like
this, in so proud and haughty a manner.

Gilles Deleuze

T. E. Lawrence's writing predates but resonates with contemporary developments in autobiographical lifewriting, such as those that give voice to women and validate witness testimony and trauma writing. During World War I, Lawrence observed and participated in horrific events—he was both perpetrator and survivor. The trauma of those experiences shaped Lawrence's postwar personality and his efforts to represent reality through his writing. Because of the insights he gained into himself and the cultural ideology he took with him into the war, Lawrence is partially aware of and resistant to preexisting generic structures. In his writing, Lawrence struggles against the authorial—and authoritative—conventions of autobiography as he chronicles his world, and in making sense of his life, moves toward fictive modernist techniques of representation.

The Historical Question

Seven Pillars of Wisdom (1926), T. E. Lawrence's account of his experiences in Arabia in World War I, has long raised questions of historical accuracy. During its long and tortured revisions, Lawrence

was struggling to understand and give voice to his revolt against the conventional notions of historicity that had contributed to his own part in the war and its subsequent problematic peace accords. His repeated reworking of the text marks his turmoil, and his method of expression moved the account away from more usual military records. While we may no longer consider historiography a transparent “window on the past” complete with archival documentation and footnotes (LaCapra 2001, 2–6), the status as history of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* continues to concern critics, albeit in increasingly sophisticated ways.¹

Lawrence first conceived of the book as an historical account. As early as 1917, he thought of writing a book that would make “other people see” his experiences (Brown 1988, 121). Later, he realized an accurate account would be “not likely to be written for publication, since some of it would give offence to people alive, (including myself!)” (Garnett 1938, 271). Still he pushed ahead, thinking his unique view of the Arab Revolt an important document. In a letter asking George Bernard Shaw to read a draft, Lawrence emphasizes his historical motive:

I was brought up as a professional historian, which means the worship of original documents [...] it became a professional duty to record what happened. I started out to do it plainly and simply [...] and then I found myself bogged in a confusion of ways of saying the easiest things, [...] and then problems of conduct came along [...] and the job became too much for me, [...] It’s long-winded, and pretentious, and dull [...] [but] it is history, and I’m shamed for ever if I am the sole chronicler of an event and fail to chronicle it: and yet unless what I’ve written can be made better I’ll burn it. (Brown 1988, 200)

Here the historian struggles against the writer: if it were accurate, what matter its length, pretensions, and dullness? But “ways of saying” interfere with that desire. The letter shows Lawrence’s ambivalence toward an account that was primarily historical. Already Lawrence felt the impossibility of language as a neutral, transparent medium.

Seven Pillars went through many drafts, and each took it further from the immediacy of notes, diaries, and memories.² We see here what Paul Antze (1996) calls the “dialectical relationship between experience and narrative”: “our memories are shaped in part by the narrative forms and conventions of our time, place, and position. But

as they do not appear to come to us in such a mediated fashion but to be simply what they are, convention is concealed" (xvii). No one can know what changes took place between the earliest drafts, but in *Seven Pillars* (1926) Lawrence states that between the Oxford typescript and the finally printed subscribers' edition of 1926, the "single canon for change was literary" (26): Jeremy Wilson (1990) decided to publish the Oxford text because it contained "important historical material omitted from the final version" (966). It seems likely that Lawrence's revisions took the text further from a chronicle and therefore closer to a revelation of the chronicler. Although he writes E. M. Forster, "If I invent one thing I'll spoil its *raison d'être*" (Garnett 1938, 456), when Lawrence received proof corrections from Charlotte Shaw that affected "the spirit as well as the letter of the book" (Dunbar 1963, 246), his adoption of them demonstrated that his goal was no longer simply historical.

Seven Pillars' first published incarnation was as a limited edition, carefully bound "beautiful" book, complete with specially commissioned modernist portraits of many of its subjects. Lawrence had had as one of his goals to write a "Titanic" book, "distinguished by greatness of spirit" such as *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Moby Dick*. (Garnett 1938, 360). This evidence suggests that Lawrence was striving to transform his experience into art and places *Seven Pillars* in a literary context.³ Such an aim explains his turning to writers such as Hardy, Garnett, Shaw, Graves, Sassoon, and others for comments.

In *A Prince of Our Disorder* (1976), his biography of Lawrence, the Harvard psychiatrist John Mack explains that Lawrence's "inconsistencies are symptomatic of the ambivalent attitude he retained toward his book and toward the events it described" (283). The book revealed him, Lawrence wrote to Charlotte Shaw: "it's an apology for my first thirty years, & the explanation of the renunciation which followed them" (Dunbar 1963, 244). It was as an autobiographical account that the historical chronicle failed: it was in quest of self-representation that Lawrence sought other models of writing.

From History to Memoir

In the near century since Lawrence struggled with *Seven Pillars*, the understanding of autobiography has undergone a revolution. The "classical" model of autobiography, centered on an autonomous and integrated male "self" revealing his intellectual development, has

given way to a model of lifewriting so little the exclusionary precinct of the famous and noteworthy that community colleges and senior centers offer courses in “how to write your life.” The unified text of the solitary man of genius has come to seem formulaic or opaque to its own problematics, and accordingly, materials such as letters and diaries have been taken up: rich, dialogic texts presenting the lives, often, of women—the unrevealed and silenced voices of embodiment (see, for example, Henke 1998, xiii ff.). While the great autobiographies of the past continue as touchstones for discussion of the genre, they often serve as examples of models we have now moved beyond in ways more egalitarian and inclusive, in ways more aware of social construction, in ways more sophisticated about the construction of subjectivity.

As an autobiography, *Seven Pillars* seems to hark back to the mode dominant when Lawrence was writing—appropriately enough, given Lawrence’s desire to model himself on earlier belle lettrists. It concerns a central self; it is chronological; it presents events often from an almost omniscient view; and it presents—as Edward Said (1979) has pointed out—stereotypical summaries of “racial” others (237 ff.). It isn’t, of course, “A Life”: Lawrence was only thirty when the war ended. In that way, it corresponds more closely to a memoir.

Helen Buss (2001) states that the “essential act of memoir” is “when public and private history are melded” (596). In *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art* (1997), Judith Barrington (1997) suggests that while autobiography tries to “capture all the essential elements of” a life—a daunting task!—memoir selects “a theme or themes that will bind the work together” (22–23). Jane Taylor McDonnell (1998) makes a further interesting distinction between autobiography, which is a “responsible reporting of one’s life history, and memoir, which is a *shaped* narrative” (104, my emphasis). A world of implicit assumptions dwells in these adjectives. Kathryn Rhet’s more provocative definition of memoir, that it is “is about the complex connection between an old self and a new one,” especially for “crisis memoirists, who are writing about radical, transformative events” (1997, 9) nicely illuminates Lawrence’s later work, such as his translation of *The Odyssey*. Too, it offers a refreshing contrast to the tone of A. O. J. Cockshut (1984), who describes the difference between the “formless” shape of pedestrian autobiography and the “great autobiography,” which has an “indispensable unity between the describer and the described [...] subject and object,

the voice of the writer and the person described are experienced by the reader as a living unity” (216–17).

Buss also points to the tangible quality of the memoir in “its preoccupation with the physicality of a materially located place in history and culture” (595). Aptly for Lawrence “of Arabia,” Bill Roorbach states the point bluntly: “Memoir is a report to others from foreign territory” (10). But *Seven Pillars*’ territory is not foreign to everyone: a common experience of soldiers who suffer post-traumatic stress disorder is losing “the very ideals that caused them to join the military in the first place” (Matsakis 1996, 47). *Seven Pillars* is a poignant depiction of such a loss of faith, as it shows Lawrence’s development from the archaeologist dreaming of great Arabian civilizations to the soldier realizing that the carnage he experienced meant very little in the World Powers’ settlement of Arab territory.

Written in Blood

Postmodern theory scoffs at essentialist notions of self or representability. But Dominick LaCapra (2001) points out that such skepticism may at times threaten to erase historically significant moments that may need “transformative sociopolitical practice” (68; see also 62, 73, 80). The historical specificity of Lawrence’s work is denied by critics who use his writings and life actions as examples of a theoretical position. They forget that Lawrence was participating in a war. His “eccentricities” are not simply the result of his personality, nor just a reflection of contemporary social conditions. Instead, they reflect one man’s reactions over time to physically and psychologically extreme experiences. Each term requires qualification. “One man,” with all the complexity of subjectivity that entails; “reactions,” themselves not fixed, but marked by narrative shapings and the vagaries of memory, especially memories of trauma. Over time that included the Great War and its subsequent social disruptions, the mythologizing of that war, and the buildup to a new war; finally, felt “experiences” that were both by definition beyond representation and, because traumatic, unspeakable. Each of Lawrence’s major writings demonstrates an effort to reconstruct a meaningful reality out of the lost coherence caused by trauma.

Mortality framed Lawrence’s years in Arabia. Two of his brothers died in the war, and his father died in the influenza pandemic of 1918. On the way to Cairo after the war, Lawrence survived a plane

crash that killed all others on board (Brown 1988, 164). Spared the horrors of Europe's trench warfare, which led to the coining of the term "shell shock" (Herman 1997, 20), Lawrence instead experienced culpability for planning and implementing guerrilla warfare. Other accounts of the Arab Revolt do not condemn Lawrence as he condemned himself, and some may call his sense of guilt monomaniacal. Or, one might call it conscientious, for he saw that complicity in war atrocities cannot be done away with by simple dismissal. If, in memoirs, "both factual truth and emotional truth are important" (Barrington 1997, 65). *Seven Pillars* tries to provide emotional truth that is as disturbing as it is disruptive to a conventionally "heroic" image. Lawrence acknowledges that "My nerve had broken; and I would be lucky if the ruin of it could be hidden" (*Seven* 607).

Seven Pillars recounts, among other things, the following: a point-blank execution; the planning and carrying out of the Tafileh ambush; the blowing up of trains; the mercy killing of Farraj after injury from a detonator; the laying out of dead Turks in the moonlight; and the Tafas massacre of retreating Turkish soldiers. It also describes, although in ambiguous terms that have sparked considerable debate, Lawrence's torture when he is captured by Turks in the city of Deraa.

The book is so faithful to darkness that Lawrence was ambivalent about publishing it. To Charles Doughty, whose *Travels in Arabia Deserta* has been cited as an influence on *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence wrote, "I must apologise for the nature and tone of the book. My experiences in Arabia were horrible, and I put them down as they happened to me. Consequently the book is not fit for general reading" (Garnett 1938, 459). "As they happened to me" suggests that Lawrence felt the effects of the abstract ideologies in bodies broken and bloodied around him, in the breaking of his own body—flesh, muscle, and nerve.

The palpable quality of *Seven Pillars* illustrates Lawrence's awareness of physicality, of what Sidonie Smith (1993) calls the "clear boundedness of bodies," which separates us and falsely seems to validate the master discourse of autobiography (128, 18). But Smith sees autobiographical writers who emphasize their bodies as "engag[ing] in a process of critical relationship of [the writer's] specific body to the cultural 'body' and to the body politic" that "prompts cultural critique" (130–31). Smith is discussing women's work, but Lawrence's vivid insistence on the bodily, which creates much of the tension in *Seven Pillars*, similarly "prompts cultural critique" (Smith 1993, 131).

Reviews of *Revolt in the Desert* (the abridged version of *Seven Pillars*) differed in descriptions of the writing style, ranging from “gnarled” to “breezy” (Garnett 1938, 513). *Seven Pillars* contains many styles because it is torn between competing modes of presentation: from a chronicle with its absent author to a nineteenth-century model of autobiography that inscribes the self as an autonomous subject “free from the constraints of any social context” (Danahay 1993, 7), to witness testimony of unspeakable events perpetrated by and upon Lawrence (Carchidi 2003, 278–79). By containing aspects of all such modes, it can be (and primarily has been) read as endorsing rather than criticizing the cultural assumptions young men took to the war. But Lawrence’s evocation of physicality—of the landscape, camels, and bodies—is a sharp rebuke to the bloodless assumptions of mind over matter underlying western culture.⁴

Some critics equate Lawrence’s awareness of embodiment with reductive notions of sexuality. They displace his felt experience—of the horrors of the ideology he incarnated—onto a myth of heterosexual normality⁵ and locate his experience as “queer” and outside that “norm.” Such insistence on the simplifying of Lawrence’s bodily experiences requires enormous effort. For example, it forces Gillian Swanson (2000) to rewrite the complex description of what happened in Deraa in Chapter LXXX, which caused Lawrence so much trouble. Swanson’s version provides great clarity: “while in Arab disguise,” Lawrence was “tortured and subjected to anal rape by soldiers. [...] Lawrence’s experience of anality is universally seen as the cause of a recurring nervous condition and a continuing sexual ambivalence” (203). Such critical efforts eradicate the ambiguity that Lawrence keeps ever before us. To describe Lawrence’s Arab dress as merely a “disguise” obviates with one stroke discussion of what others have seen as more complex (see Silverman [1992] for such a view). For Swanson to claim that hers is the “universal” version reflects a wish to remake reality. In fact, views of Lawrence’s account vary as much as do views on Lawrence. The question of whether the torture included rape is just that—a question.

In *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), Judith Herman points out that the trauma experienced from combat and from rape can be similar:

Traumatic events violate the autonomy of the person at the level of basic bodily integrity. The body is invaded, injured, defiled. Control over bodily functions is often lost; in the folklore of combat and rape, this loss of control is often recounted as the most humiliating aspect of the trauma. (52–53)

This parallel is useful. It indicates that survivors of both have been made inescapably aware of their bodies and powerlessness. Thus, it makes clear that the issue of rape, per se, really begs the question. We cannot know from the text what the torture was, nor do we need to know: what is inescapable is that Lawrence experienced trauma that embodied him.

That so many critics focus on this torture, and want to define it as rape, forces the question of what is at stake. One obvious point is that it enforces a form of phallic sexuality onto Lawrence, who was, most evidence suggests, celibate. To amalgamate Lawrence's wartime experiences with rape preserves master narratives of omnipresent sexuality consistent with the post-Victorian obsession with sexuality as personally definitive, as shown by Swanson's conclusions that such an experience "caused" Lawrence's "continuing sexual ambivalence." Such interpretations mark rape as defining the victim, or embrace simplistic Freudian equations of "passive," "feminine," and "masochistic" with homosexuality.⁶

Valorizing Lawrence's alleged homosexuality functions in the same way, as valorization and demonization equally contribute to the opposition of homosexuality and heterosexuality and posit this opposition as absolute. For example, Kaja Silverman (1992) writes, "Lawrence's sexuality—or to be more precise, his homosexuality—is enormously complex" (300). Why such a qualifier? More interesting analyses look at Lawrence as a feminized male hero (Dawson 1994, e.g.); but even to use such terms is to preserve the very binary that otherwise calls for reconsideration.⁷

These approaches deny the possibility of asexual celibacy. They also deny the possibility that masochism—which Lawrence also apparently engaged in—may result from social or ethical pressures that require investigation of more than sexual urges. Further, by focusing on this event of victimization, such approaches escape explorations of the trauma caused by inflicting damage, which Lawrence acknowledges elsewhere.

In short, the focus on the torture at Deraa attempts to sexualize both Lawrence and trauma, and thereby escape the cultural critique of power and its abuses that runs through Lawrence's life and writings. A similar mechanism distances critics from disturbing aspects of *Seven Pillars*, which are read as evidence of Lawrence's "perversion," whether it be sadism, masochism, or both. Herman (1997) points out that traumatic memories "are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images" with a "predominance of imagery and bodily sensation" (38). The graphic description in *Seven Pillars* is appropri-

ate to what is being written about: the almost unimaginable, almost unspeakable nature of what occurs in wartime. To transmute that into some eccentric idiosyncrasy is to blind ourselves to the critique that the work presents.

Refuge: Writing, the RAF, Repetition

In his post-Arabia period, Lawrence turned away from action and toward writing as a way to make sense and order out of experience. As he enlisted in the Royal Air Force (RAF) in 1922, he began to consider writing an account of the growth of this new service. The account became *The Mint* (1935), subtitled “Notes Made in the R.A.F. Depot between August and December, 1922 and at Cadet College in 1925. Regrouped and copied in 1927 and 1928 at Aircraft Depot, Karachi.”

But the revelation that Lawrence had enlisted as a common air-craftsman under the name Ross hit the press. Unhappy with the publicity, the RAF asked Lawrence to leave. He next enlisted in the Tank Corps—of which he wrote, in a series of confessional letters to Lionel Curtis that, unlike the RAF,

Here every man has joined because he was down and out: [...] We are social bed-rock, those unfit for life-by-competition: and each of us values the rest as cheap as he knows himself to be. [...] I can't write it, because in literature such things haven't ever been, and can't be. To record the acts of Hut 12 would produce a moral-medical case-book, not a work of art but a document. [...] [T]he end of this is that man, or mankind, being organic, a natural growth, is unteachable: cannot depart from his first grain and colour, nor exceed flesh, nor put forth any thing not mortal and fleshly. (Garnett 1938, 412–14)

The lessons of embodiment Lawrence had learned in Arabia are repeated in the baseness of life in the Tank Corps, without the alleviating aspect of the RAF's vision of a proud new service. Lawrence in fact doubts his sanity, wondering “how far mad I am, and if a mad-house would not be my next (and merciful) stage. [...] It's terrible to hold myself voluntarily here: and yet I want to stay here till it no longer hurts me: till the burnt child no longer feels the fire” (Garnett 1938, 416).

Lawrence explains his masochistic desire in a response to a letter that apparently suggested he leave the Corps:

your letter [...] tempts me to run away from here, and so doing it marches with all my wishes against my will. Conscience in healthy men is a balanced sadism, the bitter sauce which makes more tasteful the ordinary sweets of life: and in sick stomachs the desire of condiment becomes a craving, till what is hateful feels therefore wholesome, and what is repugnant to the moral sense becomes (to the mind) therefore pure and righteous and to be pursued. So because my senses hate it, my will forces me to it ... and a comfortable life would seem now to me sinful. When I embarked on it, a year ago [...] I thought it a mood, and curable: while today I feel that there is no change before me, and no hope of change. (Garnett 1938, 417–18)

He is aware of the unhealthiness of the “condiment” of guilt, and pursuing self-punishment. But by October of 1923, Lawrence wrote that while the Tank Corps work irked him deeply, it gave him “a wholesome secure feeling that I am harmlessly employed,” and that he “would create nothing more my own” (Garnett 1938, 434). This desire to make himself harmless, as well as his conscientiousness taken to extremes of masochism, both partake of post-traumatic efforts. He was finding a safe harbor for himself, one of the stages of coming to terms with life after trauma (Herman 1997, 162).

From the desire to create nothing more of his own, Lawrence turned to other forms of writing. He had been asked to translate *Le Gigantesque* by Adrian Le Corbeau, a novel about a giant sequoia tree. In *The Forest Giant* (Lawrence’s title), the eponymous tree progresses through the vicissitudes of fate, from its seed, “rocked by soft winds and hurled dizzily into the air [...] with the same submissive, invulnerable apathy” (Lawrence 1924, 13) to its “gaping wound where once lightning had struck and gashed the tree” (Lawrence 1924, 96) to its final death. Jerome Bruner points out “the evident truism that any text can be read as revelatory of the author” (1993, 42), and this translation provides an objective correlative for Lawrence’s frame of mind. On some level, the tree’s travails echo Lawrence’s efforts to maintain coherence from his youthful idealism through his military experience to his service in the ranks.

Certainly, this work proved more congenial than did his own writing. When he went to revise *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence was appalled by it (Wilson 1990, 734), writing to Forster, “it stinks of me” (Garnett 1938, 462). In part, that disgust resulted from reliving the war. He wrote to Edward Garnett about a first attempt at what eventually became the publicly available *Revolt in the Desert*: that he had “read the whole surviving text from end to end last night. [...] It was

half an hour before outside things came home to me once more” (Garnett 1938, 383)—the memories overwhelmed reality.

The trauma lingered. In 1924, Lawrence wrote Robert Graves about the war’s persistence: “What’s the cause that you, and S[iegfried] S[assoon] and I [...] can’t get away from the War? [...] It’s like the malarial bugs in the blood, coming out months and years after in recurrent attacks” (Garnett 1938, 463). He then offered to send Graves a copy of *Seven Pillars*, writing that its length was appalling, but

its sincerity, I fancy, absolute, except once where I funk'd the distinct truth, and wrote it obliquely. I was afraid of saying something, even to myself. The thing was not written for any one to read. Only as I get further from the strain of that moment, confession seems a relief rather than a risk.” (Garnett 1938, 463)

To Charlotte Shaw, he wrote, “I funk'd it, in the death of Farraj, my man; faced it in the plain narrative of my mishaps in Deraa, the night I was captured” (Dunbar 1963, 242). To Robert Graves, then writing a biography of him, Lawrence writes, “It seems to me nearly unbearable that you should publish the story of the death of Farraj” (Garnett 1938, 495, n. 1). Indeed, Lawrence does not write it: he describes Farraj’s last words, and the killing of his camel (1926, 528–29). But the death of Farraj was, finally, unspeakable.

Like Siegfried Sassoon, whose experience of “shell shock” is one of the most famous (Herman 1997, 22), Lawrence too suffered recurrent effects of battle fatigue, or what is now called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Lawrence’s later life shows his ongoing efforts to “work through” the trauma of war. To include such material as autobiography can be justified, since “living and telling a life are not as different as has traditionally been assumed” (Freeman and Brockmeier 97). In Lawrence’s case, the connection is particularly easy to make because he was always also writing: letters, notes, essays, and his major published work.

Writing a Community

A modernist essay on Lawrence’s experiences in the RAF, *The Mint* (1936) is self-consciously literary. Its structure, descriptions, and psychological insights offer much information about Lawrence’s life. He felt that it failed to be an epic treatment of the fledgling Service, but it is very moving as an account of Lawrence’s continuing

efforts to find both penance and a sense of community. He wrote to Charlotte Shaw that it was “so raw: deliberately so raw. Everything in it designed to emphasise the flesh of man, leading a life which is only of the body, & therefore growing, as I see it, very natural souls” (Dunbar 1963, 267).

Responding to Edward Garnett’s assertion that he had “put much of myself into it,” Lawrence wrote,

It is not true. The S.P. is unbearable to me, because of the motley I made myself there for everyone’s seeing. That’s why it won’t be published, in my living. The Mint gives nothing of myself away: personally, I shouldn’t mind its appearing to-morrow: but the other fellows wouldn’t understand how I’d come to betray them: and Trenchard would not have it. It would hurt him. [...] His R.A.F. is bigger than my Mint, and I’d not dream of doing any thing which would imperil the R.A.F.” (Garnett 1938, 608)

Similarly, to Charlotte Shaw he wrote, “What is given away is not myself, as in the Seven Pillars, but my fellows” (Wilson 1990, 815). Paul Eakin (2004) points out that “life writers are criticized not only for *not* telling the truth [...] but also for telling too much truth” (3; Eakin’s emphasis). In *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence presents the “mangy skin” of his will at work upon others (1926, 581). *The Mint* instead ends, “Everywhere a relationship: no loneliness any more” (1935, 250). Lawrence has become part of a community, another stage in overcoming trauma.

Another mark of *The Mint*’s difference from *Seven Pillars* is that Lawrence was happier with the writing: “its style well fitted its subject.” In keeping with his merciless self-criticism, though, he also judged it “pretty second-rate, like me and my works: it’s the end of my attempts to write, anyhow” (Wilson 1990, 825). Lawrence evokes James Olney’s autobiographical writer,

who would say *I*, would say the self—and did say it, especially early on, but who discovered that it was not the task of a moment or a single book but a life’s work, which could be accomplished only by *not* saying *I* and which, in the end, was destined to be an endless series of failures

redeemed only by failing differently each time (Olney 1998, 266; Olney’s emphasis). Lawrence’s ambitions again come up against the unrepresentability of events, although *The Mint*’s modernist, im-

pressionistic style offered a break from the heavy-handed authority of conventional autobiographical representation.

Shortly thereafter, Lawrence set himself a real task of engaging with the cultural conventions that he had held before the war: he undertook a translation of *The Odyssey*. One of the foundation texts of empire, *The Odyssey* also evoked for Lawrence his prewar work as an archaeologist. He wrote that he had special knowledge useful for understanding the epic: “I have handled the weapons, armour, utensils of those times, explored their houses, planned their cities. I have hunted wild boars, watched wild lions, sailed the Aegean” (Garnett 1938, 710). Of course, he had closer experience—lived, rather than imagined—with the hand-to-hand combat that marks the *Iliad*, an epic closer to *Seven Pillars* in its problematic relationship to the fighting it portrays. Again, Lawrence did not select the text but was offered it; nonetheless, “if the writer is always, in the broadest sense, implicated in the work, any writing may be judged to be autobiographical” (Anderson 2001, 1). In rewriting a text about a soldier making his way home from the war, Lawrence is also writing out his own return to civilization after trauma. Maren Cohn (2002) writes that Lawrence “tried to resolve problems through art” (88), and with Stephanie Nelson (2002) describes his interpretation as a “prosaic” approach to greatness. They call Lawrence’s translation more of an anti-*Odyssey*, with a “deep suspicion of heroism” (126). The task took years, and by the end Lawrence finds other parallels to himself: in the translator’s note to the book he writes, “this Homer lived too long after the heroic age to feel assured and large” (1932 “Translator’s Note,” n.p.).

At the same time that he was translating *The Odyssey*, Lawrence began writing his last completed work—a handbook to 37½-foot motorboats of the 200 class. David Garnett (1938) describes it as “a masterpiece of technology, running to some eighty foolscap pages” (725). In those pages, Lawrence no longer has to deal with himself or the psychological abyss of humanity; instead, he writes as a master craftsman, not disappointed but proud of the workings of the boats that he had helped develop, in part in response to a crash (Mack 1976, 392). He writes to Robert Graves, “the ancient self-seeking and self-devouring T. E. L. of Oxford (and T. E. S[haw] of the Seven Pillars and Mint) is dead. Not regretted either. My last ten years have been the best of my life. I think I shall look back on my 35–45 period as golden” (Garnett 1938, 759). Eakin points out that “it is hard to maintain a distinction between the material of a life [...] and the autobiographical act,” which “can be understood as an exten-

sion of a lifelong process of identity formation, and it mirrors experiential reality” (1992, 52, n. 19). Thus Lawrence’s reaction to his forthcoming discharge from the RAF can be seen as part of his autobiographical act. He had no plans of what to do with himself. He wrote to a friend that he hoped to find himself “in possession of a quiet mind” upon discharge. “I do not often confess it to people, but I am always aware that madness lies very near me, always” (Brown 1988, 511). The legacy of trauma is not easily shed.

Conclusion

Lawrence’s traumatically developed awareness of his own embodiment made him partially resistant to narrative structures of authority in conventional autobiography, structures that erase embodied others, whether of race, sex, or class. Lawrence’s postwar life demonstrates patterns of repetition and alienation symptomatic of post-traumatic stress disorder, as he struggled to work through his experiences in his writing. His autobiographical writings, his translations, and his life choices all contribute to his efforts to shape and make sense of his life. That against this complex figure has been erected a coherent myth of “Lawrence of Arabia” impoverishes us as it denies awareness of the valuable cultural critiques Lawrence’s work offers. Mikhail Bakhtin sees autobiography as a battlefield “on which the self struggles to establish presence” (qtd. in Couser 2001, 74). Critical views that overwrite Lawrence’s complex, ambiguous work make it a lost battle.

Kali Tal (1996) also uses the metaphor of warfare:

The battle over the meaning of a traumatic experience is fought in the arena of political discourse, popular culture, and scholarly debate. The outcome of this battle shapes the rhetoric of the dominant culture and influences future political action. If survivors retain control over the interpretation of their trauma, they can sometimes force a shift in the social and political structure. If the dominant culture manages to appropriate the trauma and can codify it in its own terms, the status quo will remain unchanged. (7)

When we choose to ignore the complexity of Lawrence’s lifewriting, we resist his call to change the status quo that led to the First World War.

The figure immortalized by popular culture is “Lawrence of Arabia,” even though the wartime period in Arabia took less than ten

percent of Lawrence's life. That popular action-figure image ignores Lawrence's name change to Shaw and his other writing. It ignores as well his substantial work in developing RAF boats and working on an early prototype of the hovercraft. Such a focus suggests that our culture values war over life and sees history as the large changes of peoples rather than the intimate struggle to live one's individual life without harm. In Lawrence's personal life, we focus on sexuality as an explanation and excuse for all that is anomalous in him, instead of seeing his flagellation as a repetition of trauma that, as Judith Herman (1997) points out, is a common element of PTSD (39). Our own sex and death instincts are at work in readings of Lawrence. But as Carl Jung (1933) points out, reducing our world to these two instincts does not take into account spiritual life (117–18). It also does not account for what Robert Weber (2000) calls "choice" in our creations of our selves (10)—how we decide to respond, as Lawrence did, to the pressures in his life. Post-structuralism criticizes traditional beliefs about autobiography, such as that "the self is a full constituted plenitude preexisting language and capable of being expressed in it" (Eakin 1992, 30)—but at moments we each must pause and take a stand. Linda Anderson (2001) wonders whether a "position can be sustained without it solidifying into an identity, with all the problems of privilege and exclusion that that raises" (110), but quotes Stuart Hall, saying we can take moments, "arbitrary closures which are 'not the end' as necessary fictions which make both identity and politics possible" (115). It may be in that way, in small moments of coherence in the midst of his fragmentation, that Lawrence was able to build a provisional identity for himself, one that was built around community and an affirmation of life rather than dominance, bloodshed, and power politics.

Possibility is the other aspect we deny ourselves if we read Lawrence as more coherent and limited than his writing suggests: the possibility of breaking out of such oppressive dynamics as male–female, self–other, mind–body, center–margin. In his writing, Lawrence resists both sides of such oppositions, instead calling them into question. His writing carries the arrogance that Gilles Deleuze (1997) speaks of (see the epigraph to this essay) mixed with humility; awareness mixed with an inability to get beyond what he is aware of. While analyses of Lawrence's writing have become more post-modern and playful, using him as an instance of a range of modernist or psychological errors fails to acknowledge the historically specific trauma he was working through in his writing and life. Leigh Gilmore (2001) points out that "trauma is never exclusively personal";

it exists “within a social and cultural context [in] a spreading network of connections” (886). Whimsical readings of Lawrence’s work, while intellectually engaging, do a disservice. They obscure the complex position Lawrence held as victim, witness, and perpetrator of atrocities, and the possibility he offers for redefining our lives, our social contexts, and our use of power in new and humane ways.

Notes

1. In the 1950s, Richard Aldington declared the book—and its author—“a systematic falsification” (12; see Crawford [1998], 200–05, for a good account of the cost and difficulty to Aldington of getting his “Biographical Inquiry” into print; for a summary of biographical views of Lawrence, see Carchidi [2003] 276–79 and Carchidi [1987], 83ff.). In the 1990s, the authorized biography—written by Jeremy Wilson, a historian who did consult archives and luxuriously if not exhaustively footnoted—concludes that *Seven Pillars* was a largely accurate historical account (see Carchidi [1994] for an analysis).

2. Lawrence wrote the first draft of *Seven Pillars* in 1919 from wartime notes he destroyed as each section was completed (Lawrence [1926], 21). Most of this draft was apparently stolen at a railway station. In an intense spate of concentrated work, Lawrence rewrote the book in 1920. This second draft he later reportedly burned after writing a third draft, which became the 1922 Oxford edition (Garnett [1938], 295). Eight copies of the Oxford edition were printed in newsprint type, and it was this edition that Lawrence asked G. B. Shaw, among other writers, to read.

3. For discussion of epic and elegy, see Chapters 2 and 3 of Carchidi (1987).

4. Deleuze (1997) calls Lawrence “one of the great portrayers of landscapes in literature” (116). See Carchidi (1987) for a discussion of Lawrence’s depictions of camels and bodies.

5. See Michie and Warhol (1996), 344. Although their work concerns a different context, the insistence of many of Lawrence’s friends that he should have children indicates the prevalence of this norm in Britain at the time.

6. This is not to deny that some may find such equations reflective of their sexuality; we each configure our sexual lives differently. But while Freud’s work is remarkable, to cite him on sexual practice is akin to citing him on the benefits of cocaine.

7. My argument does not take issue with the clear facts of Lawrence’s homosociality and horror of heterosexuality. It merely challenges the conclusion that these two data equal homosexuality, as if that were the only choice left.

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