Looking back it seems, on the one hand, hard to believe that I could have wasted so much time, could have exhausted myself so utterly, wondering when I was going to begin my study of D. H. Lawrence; on the other, it seems equally hard to believe that I *ever* started it, for the prospect of embarking on this study of Lawrence accelerated and intensified the psychological disarray it was meant to delay and alleviate. Conceived as a distraction, it immediately took on the distracted character of that from which it was intended to be a distraction, namely myself. If, I said to myself, if I can apply myself to a sober – I can remember saying that word 'sober' to myself, over and over, until it acquired a hysterical, near-demented, ring – *if* I can apply myself to a sober, academic study of D. H. Lawrence then that will force me to pull myself together. I succeeded in applying myself but what I applied myself to – or so it seems to me now, now that I am lost in the middle of what is already a far cry from the sober academic study I had envisaged – was to pulling apart the thing, the book, that was intended to make me pull myself together.

I had decided years earlier that I would one day write a

book about D. H. Lawrence, a homage to the writer who had made me want to become a writer. It was a cherished ambition and as part of my preparation for realising this cherished ambition I had avoided reading anything by Lawrence so that at some point in the future I could go back to him if not afresh then at least not rock-stale. I didn't want to go back to him passively, didn't want to pick up a copy of *Sons and Lovers* aimlessly, to pass the time. I wanted to read him with a purpose. Then, after years of avoiding Lawrence, I moved into the phase of what might be termed pre-preparation. I visited Eastwood, his birthplace, I read biographies, I amassed a hoard of photographs which I kept in a once-new document wallet, blue, on which I had written 'D.H.L.: Photos' in determined black ink. I even built up an impressive stack of notes with Lawrence vaguely in mind but these notes, it is obvious to me now, actually served not to prepare for and facilitate the writing of a book about Lawrence but to defer and postpone doing so. There is nothing unusual about this. All over the world people are taking notes as a way of postponing, putting off and standing in for. My case was more extreme for not only was taking notes about Lawrence a way of putting off writing a study of – and homage to – the writer who had made me want to become a writer, but this study I was putting off writing was itself a way of putting off and postponing another book.

Although I had made up my mind to write a book about Lawrence I had also made up my mind to write a novel, and while the decision to write the book about Lawrence was made later it had not entirely superseded that earlier decision. At first I'd had an overwhelming urge to write both books

but these two desires had worn each other down to the point where I had no urge to write either. Writing them both at the same time was inconceivable and so these two equally overwhelming ambitions first wore each other down and then wiped each other out. As soon as I thought about working on the novel I fell to thinking that it would be much more enjoyable to write my study of Lawrence. As soon as I started making notes on Lawrence I realised I was probably sabotaging forever any chance of writing my novel which, more than any other book I had written, had to be written immediately, before another protracted bout of labour came between me and the idea for what I perceived as a rambling, sub-Bernhardian rant of a novel. It was now or never. So I went from making notes on Lawrence to making notes for my novel, by which I mean I went from not working on my book about Lawrence to not working on the novel because all of this to-ing and fro-ing and note-taking actually meant that I never did any work on either book. All I did was switch between two – empty – files on my computer, one conveniently called C:\DHL, the other C:\NOVEL, and sent myself ping-ponging back and forth between them until, after an hour and a half of this, I would turn off the computer because the worst thing of all, I knew, was to wear myself out in this way. The best thing was to do nothing, to sit calmly, but there was no calm, of course: instead, I felt totally desolate because I realised that I was going to write neither my study of D. H. Lawrence nor my novel.

Eventually, when I could bear it no longer, I threw myself wholeheartedly into my study of Lawrence because, whereas my novel was going to take me further into myself, the

Lawrence book – a sober academic study of Lawrence – would have the opposite effect, of taking me out of myself.

I felt happy because I had made up my mind. Now that I had made up my mind to throw myself wholeheartedly into one of the possible books I had been thinking about writing I saw that it didn't actually matter *which* book I wrote because books, if they need to be written, will always find their moment. The important thing was to avoid awful paralysing uncertainty and indecision. Anything was better than that. In practice, however, 'throwing myself wholeheartedly' into my study of Lawrence meant making notes, meant throwing myself *half*-heartedly into the Lawrence book. In any case, 'throwing myself wholeheartedly into my study of Lawrence' – another phrase which became drained of meaning as it spun round my head – was actually impossible because, in addition to deciding whether or not I was going to write my study of Lawrence, I had to decide where I was going to write it – *if* I was going to write it. '*If*' not *when* because once my initial euphoric resolve had collapsed the possibility of writing the novel made itself felt again as an attractive option. And even if I didn't decide to write my study of Lawrence I still had to decide where I was going to live because, irrespective of whether or not I was going to write my study of Lawrence, I still had to live somewhere – but if I *was* going to write a book about Lawrence then that brought in a whole range of variables which I would need to weigh up when considering where to live, even though deciding where to live was already complicated by a massive number of variables.

One of the reasons, in fact, that it was impossible to get started on either the Lawrence book or the novel was because

I was so preoccupied with where to live. I could live anywhere, all I had to do was choose – but it was impossible to choose because I could live anywhere. There were no constraints on me and because of this it was impossible to choose. It's easy to make choices when you have things hampering you – a job, kids' schools – but when all you have to go on is your own desires, then life becomes considerably more difficult, not to say intolerable.

Even money wasn't an issue since at this stage I was living in Paris and nowhere could have been more expensive than Paris. The exchange rate got worse by the month and Paris became more expensive by the month. Money *was* an issue insofar as it made me think I would rather be anywhere than Paris but in terms of where to go next, where to move to, it was almost irrelevant. What the money situation – more exactly, the exchange rate situation – in Paris did was to emphasise that although I thought I had settled in Paris, really I had just been passing through, extremely slowly. That is all anyone English or American can do in Paris: pass through. You may spend ten years passing through but essentially you are still a sightseer, a tourist. You come and go, the waiters remain. The longer I stayed the more powerful it became, this feeling that I was just passing through. I had thought about subscribing to Canal Plus as a way of making myself feel more settled but what was the point in subscribing to Canal Plus when, in all probability, I would be moving on in a few months? Obviously the way to make myself more settled was to acquire some of the trappings of permanence but there never seemed any point acquiring the aptly named trappings of permanence when in a couple of months I might be moving on, might

well be moving on, would almost certainly be moving on, because there was nothing to keep me where I was. Had I acquired some of the trappings of permanence I might have stayed put but I never acquired any of the trappings of permanence because I knew that the moment these trappings had been acquired I would be seized with a desire to leave, to move on, and I would then have to free myself from these trappings. And so, lacking any of the trappings of permanence, I was perpetually on the brink of potential departure. That was the only way I could remain anywhere: to be constantly on the brink not of actual but of potential departure. If I felt settled I would want to leave, but if I was on the brink of leaving then I could stay, indefinitely, even though staying would fill me with still further anxiety because, since I appeared to be staying, what was the point in living as though I were not staying but merely passing through?

These were all issues I intended to address, in different ways, either in mediated form in my study of Lawrence or, directly, in my novel, or vice versa, but there was an additional practical complication too. Since I was obliged to spend a certain amount of time away from wherever I lived, and since the rent on my Paris apartment was so high (and, because of the exchange rate, was becoming higher every month) I was frequently obliged to sub-let it (strictly speaking to sub-sub-let it since I was sub-letting it myself) and since, if you are sub-letting your apartment, you do not want to acquire too many valuable or personal items which might get destroyed, it then comes about that you yourself are living in conditions arranged primarily for those sub-letting from you: effectively, you are sub-letting from yourself. That's what I was doing: sub-letting

from myself (strictly speaking, sub-sub-letting), living in an apartment devoid of anything that might have made it my apartment in the sense of my home. I had conspired to arrange for myself the worst of all possible worlds and my days were spent in this unbreakable circle of anxiety, always going over the same ground, again and again, always with some new variable, but never with any change. I had to do something to break this circle and so, when Marie Merisnil from whom I was sub-letting my apartment said that she wanted to give up the apartment because she was marrying the awful Jean-Louis whom I loathed even though he had once lent me a pair of elegant, pale blue pyjamas when I was in hospital for a few days, I decided to sign a contract that would make me the official tenant (as opposed to the illegal sub-tenant). I wasn't even sure that I wanted to stay in an apartment where I had actually been extremely unhappy for ninety per cent of my stay, where ninety per cent of my stay had been dominated by anxiety about (a) whether I *was* going to stay and (b) whether I was going to start a novel or start my study of Lawrence, but as soon as the managing agents said that they were unwilling to let the place to me – a foreigner with no job and no steady income, I was a poor prospect in anyone's eyes, even my own – I became convinced that I had to stay in this apartment where I had been sublimely happy, that there was, in fact, nowhere else on earth where I could hope to be as content. Eventually my rich friend, Hervé Landry ('Money Landry', as I liked to call him), owner of several houses, including one on the Greek island of Alonissos, agreed to stand as guarantor. The managing agents relented, and I signed the lease that made me the official *locataire*.

I was ecstatic. For about five minutes. Then I realised I had taken on an awesome, not to say crippling responsibility. And far from solving the problem of where to live I had actually put a lid on it so that now my uncertainty was boiling away under pressure, threatening to blow me apart. The one thing I could be sure of was that I had to leave this apartment, where I had never known a moment's peace of mind, as soon as possible. If I stayed here, I saw now, I would fail to write both my novel and my study of Lawrence. That much was obvious. The trouble, the rub, was that I had to give three months' notice and therefore had to predict how I would be feeling three months hence which was very difficult. It was all very well deciding today that I wanted to leave but what counted was how I was going to be feeling three months from now. You could be perfectly happy today, I would say to myself, and three months from now you could be suicidal, precisely because you will see the enormity of the mistake you made by not renouncing the lease three months earlier. On the other hand, I would say to myself, you could be in utter despair today, convinced that another day in this apartment would kill you, convinced that it would be impossible to make any progress with your novel or your study of Lawrence and in three months' time you could see that it was only by remaining here that you survived the depression which will undoubtedly engulf you the moment you quit the apartment, as the rash act of renunciation committed three months previously will oblige you to do. Round and round I went, making no progress, resolving one thing one moment and another the next. 'I can't bear it any longer,' I would say to myself in the way that people always

say 'I can't bear it any longer' to themselves, as a way, that is, of enabling them to go on bearing the unbearable. Eventually I really could bear it no longer, not for another second, and so I wrote to the agents and officially renounced the flat, claiming that 'professional' reasons had obliged me to return to England. The agents wrote back acknowledging my decision to leave the apartment. I wrote back saying that professional reasons now obliged me to remain in Paris. Could I therefore un-renounce my apartment? Relieved to be free of the trouble of re-letting it, the agents agreed to let me remain in the apartment which I had just renounced. And so it went on: I wrote again to renounce the apartment 'definitively'. They sent a somewhat curt acknowledgement of my decision. I wrote back changing my definitive decision to leave to a definitive decision to stay but it was too late, I had to leave.

Now that I *did* have to leave I was faced with the terrible prospect of having nowhere to live, of having to decide where to live without delay, and only then did I realise how much this apartment meant to me, how it *had* actually become my home. Although I'd believed that I had hardly any of my things in this apartment there were actually many of my own things that I now had to find a place for. Over the years I had actually acquired quite a few of the trappings of permanence. I even owned a surprising amount of furniture, some of it rather nice. Where was I going to store it? And what about me? Where was I going to store myself? Rome was a possibility. Laura, my almost-wife, had a lovely apartment in Rome and was always arguing in favour of our settling there but though Rome was an excellent place to spend time, I

knew how depressed I always became there after a couple of months, especially during the winter. And even before I became depressed I knew how irritating I always found Rome, essentially because of the irrational closing times of shops, and the way films are dubbed into Italian. Still, Rome was a possibility – or would have been had Laura not sub-let *her* apartment. She had come to work in Paris for six months, partly to be with me, partly because this nice offer of work had come her way, but now she was back in Rome, sub-letting an apartment from someone else because her own apartment was sub-let. This is the true condition of western society on the brink of the millennium: everyone sub-letting from everyone else, no one quite sure whether they are leaving or staying, torn between being settlers and nomads, ending up as sub-letters. In the next few weeks she had to decide whether to continue to sub-let her flat or to move back in – and that depended in part on what I wanted to do because although we were used to spending a good deal of time apart we both felt that the moment had come when we should spend more time together, should even think about 'making our lives together' on a daily as well as an emotional basis. We already had our shared motto, almost shared, more accurately, because whereas Laura's version was 'Together Forever' mine was 'Together Whenever'. Laura liked the idea of us sticking together 'through thick and thin' whereas I opted for the more pessimistic 'through thin and thinner'. I was more than ready to put these semantic differences aside since if I was ever going to make any progress with my book about Lawrence – and get a reasonable shot at happiness into the bargain – I knew I would have to 'throw in my lot' with a woman as

Lawrence had done with Frieda. Besides, I had already spent far too much time on my own. If I spent much more time on my own I would end up spending the rest of my life on my own. Even my crippling indecisiveness was primarily a symptom of having spent so much time on my own. In a couple decisions are argued and debated; when you are alone there is no one to argue and debate with. To render my solitude bearable, therefore, I had internalised the dynamic of a couple who spent their time bickering ceaselessly about where to live and what to do. The problem was that the woman with whom I going to throw in my lot was also chronically indecisive and it was only my still greater indecisiveness that led her to believe that she was the kind of woman who knew her own mind and stuck to her guns. Although she often argued in favour of living in Rome, for example, she was always thinking about settling in Paris, her favourite city, and frequently pined for America where she had grown up.

I pined for it too. I thought of New York where I had lived and New Orleans where I had sort of lived, and San Francisco where I would love to live and where Laura had grown up, but even as I thought of these places I knew I would not go to live in any of them, especially New Orleans which I thought of and pined for on an almost daily basis. Even though I had such fond memories of sitting by the Mississippi I knew that I would never live in New Orleans again. Even though at some point in the day I always found myself wishing I was back in New Orleans, sitting by the Mississippi, I knew that I would never live there again and this knowledge made me feel that my life was over with. I am the kind of person,

I thought to myself, who will spend the rest of his life saying 'I lived in New Orleans for a while' when in fact what I meant was that I had spent three months there, dying of loneliness, banging away at some useless novel simply for the companionship afforded by writing.

So where *were* we to live? More exactly – habits of solitude and selfishness die hard – where was the best place for *me* to live in order to make progress with my study of Lawrence? One of the reasons I had become so unsettled in Paris was because it had only a tangential connection with Lawrence. Paris was an excellent place to write a novel, especially a novel set in Paris, but it was not a good place to write a study of Lawrence. He hated Paris, called it, in fact, 'the city of dreadful night' or some such (I had the exact phrase in my notes somewhere). If I was to make any progress with my study of Lawrence, if I was to stand any chance of making any progress with my study of Lawrence, I knew that I had to live in a place which had some strong connection with him, a place where I could, so to speak, feel the Lawrentian vibes: Sicily, for example, or New Mexico, Mexico, Australia. The choice was immense because *Lawrence* couldn't make up his mind where to live. In the last years of his life he was always writing to friends asking if they had any ideas about where he might live. '*Where* does one want to live? Have you any bright ideas on the subject? Did you get a house west of Marseilles, as you said? How is it there?' On this occasion he was asking William Gerhardie. A little later it was an ex-neighbour from Florence: 'Where does one want to live? Tell me if you can! – how do you like London?' Then it was Ottoline Morrell's turn: 'Where does one want to live, finally?'

I had made this list of examples of Lawrence's anxiety about where to live because it reassured me in my own uncertainty; either it had reassured me or it had led me to become undecided, I was not sure. It was impossible to say. Who can tell? Perhaps the inability to decide where to live which I saw as one of the factors in preventing my making any progress with my study of Lawrence was actually part of my preparation for beginning to write it.

The one place I could be sure I couldn't write my study of Lawrence was England, which was a shame because I was actually feeling drawn to England. I was thinking of English telly in fact. I had an urge to be back there, watching telly, but moving back to England meant moving back into what, in my notes, I referred to by the Lawrentian phrase 'the soft centre of my being'. Being abroad – anywhere – meant being at the edge of myself, of what I was capable of. In England, for one thing, I could speak English whereas if I went to Rome I would be linguistically stranded. Not like Lawrence who had fluent Italian. He had a knack for languages (at one point he even began learning Russian from a grammar book) and although he claimed to hate speaking foreign languages, that was late in the day, by which time he had learnt several and had become weary of shifting from one to another. For my part I had not even attempted to learn French for the first six months of my time in Paris because it had seemed inconceivable that I could ever learn a foreign language. During that period my most intense relationships were all with cats and dogs, creatures with whom I could establish a bond of non-verbal sympathy. Since then I had picked up a bit of French, rather a lot actually, enough, certainly, to

express grammatically wayward opinions. In fact now, after months of struggling to cope with the most rudimentary situations, now that I was on the brink of leaving, there was nothing I loved more than speaking French. By my standards I was fluent in French and speaking this garbled version of fluent French was one of the great sources of happiness in my life. Unless, that is, I was in a temper – which I was frequently. I could not express anger in French and this made me frustrated and angry and to express this anger and frustration I had to resort to English. In Rome I would be back to square one.

In Rome there was no chance of learning Italian because Laura is bilingual and has even more of a knack for languages than Lawrence. This is one of the things I first loved about Laura. Falling in love with Laura and all her languages was in some ways a premonition of the way that I would myself come to love speaking foreign languages, French specifically. Laura's method of learning a new language is to watch soap operas in that language. After a couple of episodes she has the simpler tenses off pat and within a week she is fluent. She is consequently a very poor teacher of Italian and I could see that after six months of watching soaps in Rome I would still speak barely a word of Italian because although I love the idea of speaking foreign languages I hate doing anything in life that requires an effort. Over the years I had got out of the habit of doing anything that required any effort whatsoever and so there was no chance of learning Italian and scarcely any prospect of getting on with my study of Lawrence which would require a massive, not to say Herculean labour.

I fretted and wondered. I sold my furniture and each day my apartment became less homely. Laura was pressing me for a decision because she had to make a decision about her apartment. Was I coming to Rome or not? More to the point, why was I even prevaricating like this? I was mad not to go to Rome, Rome was in Italy, the country where the Lawrences had spent more time than any other; it was within easy reach of Sicily where he had lived, and if I was to stand any chance of making any progress with my study of Lawrence it was probably the very best place I could be.

As soon as I arrived I knew I had made the right decision. My mind was made up: I was ready to begin my study of Lawrence. The only trouble was the heat. The heat was tremendous and nowhere in Rome was hotter than Laura's apartment. She had been so pleased to get back into her own place that she had forgotten how hot it would be. Heat is like that. In the course of winter unbearable heat cools in memory and becomes attractive, desirable. Now it was terribly hot. Even the light was hot. We tried to keep the light at bay, but it drilled through the keyhole, squeezed under the door, levered open the smallest of cracks in the shutters. My mind was made up, I was ready to work – but it was too hot to work. It was so hot we spent our waking hours dozing and our sleeping hours lying awake, trying to sleep. We were in a kind of trance. Then, one infernal night, Hervé called – a bad line – and invited us to spend the summer with him and Mimi on Alonissos, which was where he was calling from. 'What do you think?' Laura asked, but her eyes had already decided.

'I'll learn Greek,' she said. She had been eager to get back to her apartment but now she was desperate to leave. From my point of view six weeks on a Greek island, relatively speaking a *cool* Greek island, seemed a lovely prospect: the perfect time and the perfect place to begin my book on D. H. Lawrence. That's what I'll do, I said to myself, I'll start my study of D. H. Lawrence in Alonissos. It was the perfect place. I had everything I needed except my edition of *The Complete Poems* which I had left with a friend in Paris. Not that it mattered: just before the British Council Library in Rome had closed for the summer I had taken out several volumes of the Cambridge edition of Lawrence's letters and they would keep me going for a good while. I had a biography to check dates, copies of a few of the novels . . . It was perfect. According to Hervé, Laura and I would have a room to ourselves where, in the mornings, I could begin writing my study of D. H. Lawrence. It was perfect. It *would* have been helpful to have had my edition of *The Complete Poems* with me but it was not indispensable to my *beginning* the study. The important thing was that I had this chunk of uninterrupted time with no distractions. I should have taken out Volume 4 of the Cambridge edition of Lawrence's letters from the British Council Library, but Volumes 2 and 3, which I *did* get out, were certainly enough to be going on with. I was more concerned about not having my edition of *The Complete Poems* which, for my purposes, was probably the single most important book of Lawrence's, without which I would be able to make only very limited progress on my study of Lawrence, such limited progress, in fact, that it would be scarcely worth starting. My copy of *The Complete Poems* was crammed with notes and

annotations and without it I was probably better off relaxing on Alonissos, gathering my strength and marshalling my ideas on Lawrence rather than actually trying to write anything. Suddenly that book of poems which, until two weeks previously, had been by my side constantly for two months and which I hadn't even opened in that time – hence the decision to leave it in a box at a friend's house in Paris – seemed indispensable to any progress.

Fortunately a friend of that friend was flying from Paris to Rome and he agreed to pick up my copy. We met at the San Calisto, I bought him a coffee and he handed over the book. Simple as that. It was not just a good feeling, being reunited with my copy of *The Complete Poems* on the night before we were flying to Alonissos: it was an omen, a clear sign that I was *meant* to start my study of Lawrence that summer.

After retrieving *The Complete Poems*, Laura and I headed home to pack. With all the books by and about Lawrence my luggage was incredibly heavy. Not just inconveniently so but excess baggagely so. I took out a few books that I didn't need, which I had only packed because they were thin – *Mornings in Mexico*, *Apocalypse* – but these were so light as to make no difference and I put them back in the bag I had just taken them out of. I looked at the copy of *The Complete Poems* and felt suddenly sure that if I took it to Alonissos it would lie unopened for six weeks just as it had lain unopened in Paris for two months; but if I didn't take it to Alonissos I was equally sure that, once I was there, in Alonissos, I would decide that it was indispensable and that, without it, I would be unable even to start my book on Lawrence. If I take it I won't

need it; if I don't take it I will not be able to get by without it, I said to myself as I packed and unpacked my bag, putting in my copy of *The Complete Poems* and taking it out again. After a while I decided to leave *The Complete Poems* and pack the Penguin edition of the *Selected Poems* but that was a ludicrous compromise since the defining characteristic of the *Selected Poems* was that it contained none of the poems I needed, the 'Last Poems', principally, 'The Ship of Death' in particular. It was a straight choice – either the immense bulk of *The Complete Poems* or nothing – and, once I recognised that the real issue had nothing to do with whether or not I would need to refer to *The Complete Poems*, a very simple one. The value of *The Complete Poems* was talismanic: if I had it with me I would be able to begin my book; if I didn't have it with me then, even if I did not need to refer to it, I would keep thinking that I did and would be unable to begin my book about Lawrence. Put like that *The Complete Poems* was an essential part of my luggage. I had no choice but to bring it with me; whether I referred to it or not was entirely irrelevant. With that I put *The Complete Poems* on the top of the pile of essential books by and about Lawrence, pulled my rucksack's cord sphincter as tight as possible, and propped it by the door, ready for our departure first thing in the morning.

In the morning, before setting off, I took out my copy of *The Complete Poems* and left for Greece without it.

Another good decision, as it turned out. I didn't need *The Complete Poems* because once we were installed on Alonissos I had no impulse to begin my study of D. H. Lawrence anyway.

It was not the availability or non-availability of books that was the problem, it was Alonissos itself. We always have this ideal image of being on an island but actually being on an island always turns out to be hellish. For what it is worth, Lawrence wasn't too keen on islands either. 'I don't care for islands, especially very small ones,' he decided on Île de Port Cros. A week later, as if, first time around, he had simply been trying out an opinion, and had now made up his mind, he announced, definitively: 'I *don't* like little islands.'

Me neither. All you can think of when you are on a small island is the impossibility of leaving when you want to, either because the island you are on is too big and you want to go to a smaller one or because the island is too small and you want to go to a bigger one. When we arrived at Alonissos on the Flying Dolphin the island seemed so beautiful that six weeks did not seem long enough to enjoy it to the full. Hervé's house had a lovely large terrace with a perfect view of sea and sky, the kind of view you see in posters advertising holidays on idyllic Greek islands.

'This is paradise,' I said to Laura, sitting on the terrace, surrounded by sea and sky. 'I wish we were going to be here for six months.' Then, after a week, even a fortnight seemed intolerable. Except for looking at the brochure-blue sea and sky – which, after the first couple of days, we scarcely even noticed – there was nothing to do and for that reason it was impossible to get any work done. The best circumstances for writing, I realised within days of arriving on Alonissos, were those in which the world was constantly knocking at your door; in such circumstances the work you were engaged in generated a kind of pressure, a force to keep the world at bay.

Whereas here, on Alonissos, there was nothing to keep at bay, there was no incentive to generate any pressure within the work, and so the surrounding emptiness invaded and dissipated, overwhelmed you with inertia. All you could do was look at the sea and sky and after a couple of days you could scarcely be bothered to do that.

There was no use blaming my inability to get started on having left my copy of *The Complete Poems* in Rome because I had it beside me in Alonissos. Yes. At the last possible moment, with the taxi rumbling downstairs, I had dashed back up, retrieved my copy and lugged it all the way to Alonissos where, exactly as predicted, it lay unopened by our bed. Instead I found myself reading one of the books Hervé had brought along, a volume of Rilke's letters.

'*Il faut travailler, rien que travailler.*' Rilke had gone to Paris in 1902 to write a monograph on Rodin and this exhortation of the sculptor's had a transforming effect on the twenty-seven-year-old poet. In letter after letter he repeated Rodin's mantra-like injunction. Immerse yourself in your work: let life fall away, dedicate yourself to the great work. *Il faut travailler, rien que travailler.*

I found myself repeating it the way Rilke did, trying it out, enjoying the simplicity and faithfulness of the formula, luxuriating in it like a hot bath. Dwelling on it like this, however, was an evasion of work, just as my reading of a hefty volume of Rilke's letters was an indulgence. I should have been working on my study of D. H. Lawrence and instead I was idling over Rodin's words. *Il faut travailler, rien que travailler.* I should be writing my book about D. H. Lawrence, I said to myself, everything else should be subordinate to that – but

who can tell where that task begins and ends? Some huge benefit may yet accrue from reading Rilke's letters. The more I read, in fact, the more convinced I became that a better understanding of Rilke was crucial to my understanding of Lawrence. Had I gone to Alonissos to write a book about Rilke then I would, almost certainly, have been sitting on Hervé's terrace reading books by Lawrence; as it was, the fact that I was meant to be starting my study of D. H. Lawrence meant that I was sitting there reading the letters of Rilke who, though he was seduced by and persuaded of the truth of Rodin's exhortation to do nothing but work, found it difficult to submit to it in practice: 'Already I am wavering in my absolute determination to shut myself up daily, wherever I am and in whatever external circumstances, for so-and-so-many hours for my work's sake.' He also wavered about whether work and idleness could be so easily counterposed:

> I have often asked myself whether those days on which we are forced to be indolent are not just the ones we pass in profoundest activity? Whether all our doing, when it comes later, is not only the last reverberation of a great movement which takes place in us on those days of inaction . . .

Now that idea immediately took my fancy, that was an idea I liked a lot. So much so that after a few more days the Rilke letters went the way of *The Complete Poems* and lay unopened on our bedside table. Everything lay unopened in Alonissos, even the cover of my tennis racket. It was impossible to write on Alonissos, it was impossible to read, and it

was impossible to play tennis. Laura found it impossible to make any progress with Greek. It was actually impossible to do anything. I had thought that after working on my book about Lawrence in the mornings I would spend the afternoons playing tennis but there were no courts and so, having spent the mornings not writing my book about Lawrence and not reading Rilke, I spent the afternoons not playing tennis. The last time I had been on a Greek island there were regular, ill-tempered matches between the tourists and the locals. Here there was no football and no tennis. In fact there was no anything. All you could do was eat lunch and jump into the jellyfish-infested sea from the snake-infested rocks of the *plaka*. We saw a snake there on our third day. Laura and I were walking through the little wood before you get to the rocks and we saw it at the same time. All my life I have dreaded seeing a snake and on Alonissos I saw one. We both saw it at the same time, turned on our heels and fled. Lawrence in his white pyjamas had a *rendezvous* with his snake; we fled from ours. I wasn't even sure what happened: either we saw it lying motionless and then, as a result of our panic, it suddenly sidled away or it heard us and began darting away and as a result of this movement we saw *it*. It all happened too fast: it saw us and fled, we saw it and fled; we hoped we never saw *it* again and *it* probably felt the same about us. Not exactly sentiments to make a poem out of.

After that we were nervous about being on the rocks of the *plaka* because although we saw the snake in the woods it was actually on the sun-warmed rocks of the *plaka* that the snakes, like us – like us before we saw the snake – liked to bask, like sharks. We were nervous about the sea anyway,

because of the jellyfish, and now we were nervous about the rocks, because of the snakes. We were also nervous in bed. We lay there and heard slithery, rustling noises suggesting that things were slithering and rustling outside our door. We lay awake talking about what things they might be.

'I hate slithery things,' I said.

'I hate rustling things,' said Laura.

'Some things rustle *and* slither,' I said. It was an idiotic conversation and on one level I couldn't believe we were actually having it. On another level . . . on another level I still couldn't believe we were having it but eventually it wearied us to the point where we could sleep.

In the morning we had breakfast with Hervé and Mimi, an event dominated by *buzzing* things: wasps, swarms of them. They came for the honey and the jam. Mimi had a live-and-let-live policy. I wanted to slaughter them all – at least it would have been something to do – but Mimi argued that the best policy was to ignore them.

'Try ignoring them when you've been stung in the mouth, your tongue's swelling up, you're choking and you're looking round for someone who knows how to do an emergency tracheotomy,' I said. Seeing a wasp crawling over my plate I flattened it with a copy of the local, yoghurt-spotted Greek paper. Mimi looked at me. She was wearing a yellow and black head scarf which may be why I had half a mind to take a swipe at her too.

'Life is more vivid in the dandelion than in the green fern,' I said. 'Life is more vivid in the wasp than in the dandelion. Life is more vivid in me than the wasp. The wasp can devour the dandelion. I can destroy the wasp.' With that

Laura and I got up to leave. We were so bored on Alonissos that tempers were getting somewhat frayed. There was nothing to do except pick quarrels with each other and drive faster and faster on the moped along the winding roads of the island. Now that *was* fun! Even though it was only fun because of the condition of almost catatonic boredom in which we found ourselves – and was itself, therefore, contaminated by boredom to some degree – it was still fun to drive round the island at speed. One way of keeping boredom at bay would have been to make a start on my book about Lawrence in much the same way that he had translated Giovanni Verga on the way to Ceylon and Australia, but making a start on Lawrence seemed more boring than doing nothing. Even writing a postcard required more concentration than I could muster. In a matter of days chronic boredom had come to seem the natural condition of existence and the only response to it was the bored one of zooming round the island on a moped.

In Rome Laura travelled by moped the whole time, it was her way of getting around the city, but in Alonissos we drove around just for the hell of it because there was nothing else to do. We sped along the deserted roads, throttle back, sky in our hair. In Rome I had been a nervous passenger and we had quarrelled many times because I was always shouting out warnings, alerting Laura to danger and thereby, she claimed, taking the fun out of one of the activities she most loved in life which was riding through Rome on her moped. Since there was no danger on Alonissos I even did some of the driving, something I never did in Rome. We leaned into curves, swept through bends, glided down the long inclines

of hills, engine off. This proved a terrible mistake. The gradient was such that as we glided down one twisting hill, the moped accelerated with every bend until, just as Laura shouted, 'Careful!' we smashed into the cliff wall at 20 mph. Crumph! It was unbelievable. I sat on the floor, stunned. Laura was groaning. I just sat there, moaning and groaning, stunned, hearing Laura groaning.

'Did you hit your head?' I said.

'Yes,' moaned Laura. I just sat there, moaning and groaning. Whatever we didn't want to happen had already happened. It was already too late to do anything about it. One moment we were about to crash, the next moment we had crashed. The crash was wedged between these two moments. There wasn't even time for things to go into slow motion as they allegedly do in the build-up to a crash. Laura was lying on the floor, moaning, now she was sitting up and walking. I was sitting, moaning. A taxi stopped.

'We can take a taxi,' Laura said, as though we were late for a concert with no bus in sight. I got up. 'I can't move,' I said, moving towards the taxi. Everything was terrible and in the back of the taxi I kept saying sorry to Laura. Through the shock there were different kinds of hurt: the stinging of grazes which was nothing, the pain of cuts which was also almost nothing, the hurt of my hip which was less but worse, an ache in my back and, deeper within, hardly even perceptible as pain yet, there was a very dull ache of something that might be badly wrong. Laura was crying. I kept asking if she had hit her head and she said yes but there was no bump or blood or anything and so I said you can't have hit your head and she agreed. We got out, the taxi stopped and left. It was terrible,

walking into the hospital which was not even a hospital, just a kind of dressing station where there were no doctors to be seen. Then one appeared, a doctor, or at least someone in a white coat, moving unhurriedly. Laura said her ribs hurt and I said, 'I am so sorry.' I sat there, on a chair, hurting everywhere, but differently in different places. The doctor-orderly took Laura into a room and she lay down while I sat there, not in the room with her but in the waiting room. I held myself together very carefully, not moving anything. I walked into the room where Laura was lying down because the doctor said her blood pressure was way up or way down because she was in shock, and after waiting a while it came down or went up to normal. Now I sat in the room with the couch or the bed where Laura was lying down and the doctor was cleaning out the cuts on her fingers. The stuff he was putting on her fingers hurt and she kicked her heels up and down on the bed. 'My ribs hurt,' she said, 'I think I've hurt my ribs.'

'Don't worry,' I said.

Then it was my turn. The doctor did things to my arms, cleaned out some cuts. He began putting stitches in my arm and Laura left the room. I have had so many stitches in my time that they did not worry me at all. Cuts don't really matter even though they hurt. It was the bits that were broken up inside, like my spleen which might have been ruptured, that worried me. My arm was stitched. I stood up. 'My hip hurts,' I said. The doctor took off my trousers and saw my hip was all gouged up and said, 'We'd better do something about that too.'

After all these repairs we sat and waited awhile. They had no X-rays at this little hospital and so there was nothing

to be done about Laura's ribs which were hurting more and more, or my back which was beginning to hurt strangely. We sat and then we walked back home. A taxi took us back to the moped which I had thought we would ride back home but which turned out to be mangled and unrideable. We walked home and climbed in over the wall to our house. We got into bed, hurting everywhere.

From there on it got worse. As the day wore on the hurt set in. We hurt everywhere and we could not stop replaying the crash even though the thought of it made us both sick. The other thing we could not stop doing was having sex. We were in a terrible state but, for some reason, we were desperate to have sex. It was the shock I suppose. Neither of us could move properly but if we arranged ourselves, carefully, we could make each other come. I lay on my back and Laura moved over my face, saying 'Ah, my ribs!' when she came. We took it in turns to come and we took it in turns to say, 'How was it possible that we didn't hit our heads?' We kept saying this because the more we replayed the crash the more it seemed a miracle that we hadn't killed or paralysed ourselves. I kept saying, too, that I would never get on a moped again, ever, anywhere.

It was my fault, the crash, but Laura never reproached me about it. Had Laura been driving I would have held it against her, I would have nagged her about her reckless driving, how she had been on the brink of getting us killed in Rome and now, in Alonissos, had actually succeeded. As it was, the crash was my fault but at least I had taken the brunt of the impact. I had softened the blow for Laura and the reason my back hurt so much was probably because her head had

banged into my spine. The last thing I wanted to think about was the moment of impact but that word 'impact' and the phrase 'the moment of impact' kept repeating themselves in my head. That's all I could think of: the impact, the moment, the moment of impact.

The next morning I could not move. I had to be helped out of bed. I couldn't move. My back, I said, my back and my neck. My hip was murder, my hands and arms smarted, but it was my back that worried me. We went to see the osteopath, an Australian woman whose hands inched up and down my spine, her fingers performing a manual X-ray, feeling her way through the skin to the bones beneath.

'It can't be anything too bad,' she said. 'If it was, you'd be in agony.'

'I am in agony,' I said, but not the kind of agony she had in mind. It was possible I had *cracked* a vertebra but that was all and even if I had cracked a vertebra there was nothing to be done about it anyway. It was the same with Laura and her ribs: even if her ribs *were* cracked all she could do was wait for them to get better. Reassured, we shuffled back home, Laura holding her ribs and me with my chin resting in my right hand, supporting it. To everyone else on the island it looked like I was deep in thought, wrestling with philosophical problems, when all I was doing was trying to bear the awful weight of my head – which, on reflection, is what all philosophical thought comes down to anyway: how to bear the awful weight of your head.

We were keen to leave Alonissos, and Hervé and Mimi were keen to get rid of us. One way and another we had pretty well ruined their stay on the island. Before leaving I tried to

negotiate the return of at least part of my deposit from the guy who had rented us the moped. He wouldn't budge, not by a drachma. He took out great wads of drachmas from his till – mechanic's money: oil-smeared, disintegrating, held together by grease – and explained how impossible it was to make a living renting mopeds. At one point Lawrence says that 'the Italians are really rather low-bred swine nowadays'. He should have gone to Greece, should have hired and crashed a moped on Alonissos before making such an insulting generalisation – insulting to the Greeks, I mean, for they pride themselves on being swine.

Hervé and Mimi took us down to the Flying Dolphin. We had a difficult journey in front of us – boat, bus, plane, another plane, train, taxi – but not an impossible one. Luggage was a problem and so I left my copy of *The Complete Poems* behind, together with many other books by or about Lawrence. I had taken *The Complete Poems* to Alonissos and now that we were heading back to Rome where I would be housebound for God knew how long I would once again be without it. I didn't care. There was a curse on that book. I was better off without it.

Back in Rome people were using the word 'heatwave' even though it was the middle of August. I had two projects: one was to keep cool, the other not to sneeze. When I sneezed I felt like my spine was about to burst apart. Sneezing was terrifying and now that I could not do it any more I realised that I had always liked sneezing. Sneezing was one of life's little pleasures, one that I could no longer risk – like sleeping on my side. I had to sleep on my back, I had to try to sleep

on my back and, as I lay awake on my back, trying to sleep, I kept thinking what a great pleasure it was to sleep on your side, to sleep first on one side and then, while you were still asleep, to roll over on to the other side. Laura had to lie on her back too and so we lay there, on our backs, thinking about the crash which we no longer thought of as an accident but as a miraculous escape. How could it have happened, how could we have got away with it? How could we have smacked straight into a cliff wall at at least 25 mph and not banged our heads, not broken anything? We were wearing only T-shirts and shorts and yet we broke nothing: we were bruised deeply but our spleens had not ruptured and our bones were not broken. We were not paralysed, we were not cabbages, we were not dead – we just had to lie on our backs and I had to avoid sneezing. It didn't even matter that we were confined to the apartment. All I had to do to get a feel of the neighbourhood, the *quartiere*, was hold my hand under the cold tap. First the water was warmish, room temperature, then cooler, then warm, as the pipes climbed down the walls into the apartment, hot as they moved over the sun-baked roof, warm again as they descended on the other side, in shadow, becoming cooler, and then cold, lovely black-cold, as they disappeared below ground, into the past.

Slowly we began to recover. In the evenings we limped to L'Obitorio for a pizza and then to our local bar, the San Calisto, where Fabrizio, the barman, had elevated surliness to the level of a comprehensive world view. With an unrelenting scowl, he abused everything he touched, yanking the lids off the *gelato*, gouging out the *gelato*, dumping it in glasses, thumping the glasses on the counter. To perform such simple

actions with such aggression was no mean achievement but the truly remarkable thing was that he managed also to imbue them with a rough tenderness. His unfailing curtness – ah, how lovely it was to be on the receiving end of it! – was, likewise, a gesture of welcome. We liked to sit outside and listen to him preparing a cappuccino, hurling the saucer on to the zinc bar, tossing the spoon on to the saucer, chucking milk into the coffee, hurling the cup on to the saucer, and then throwing a hasty '*prego*' through the clatter and noise of his colleagues. He did this even when the Calisto was empty: it was a way of generating business, like the bell of an ice-cream van: a call to customers: 'The cappuccini are good here, we are always busy.'

We even got back on the moped. I had vowed never to get on a moped again but Laura, even in the dark days following the crash, conceded only that, back in Rome, she would be more careful, more alert. Now we were back in Rome she was eager, as she put it, 'to get back in the saddle'. Laura has a good attitude to life and that, even more than her ability to pick up languages by watching soap operas, is why I love her. I, by contrast, have a very bad attitude to life, an attitude to life that began badly and is getting worse with every passing year, but it was not difficult for Laura to persuade me to get on the moped again. Laura drove, carefully, trying to avoid jolts. In Piazza Venezia we paused to admire *il vigile*, the white-gloved policeman who directed traffic with movements of hypnotic elegance. From his podium he conducted the traffic like a symphony: beckoning, halting, directing. It was impossible to say where one gesture ended and the next began. 'Halt' – clearly stated, unequivocal – merged exquisitely into

'go' in one flowing movement. Each gesture was executed with a flourish but this flourish – this elaboration and amplification of what was strictly necessary – added to its clarity, to its geometric precision. So it was with the architectural flourishes of Rome's great baroque churches. The *vigile*'s gestures were so clear that he seemed to address cars individually, making drivers almost proud to obey his commands. The traffic responded so promptly it was easy to think he took his cue from their movements, so that his conducting became a form of dance.

From there we walked up the steps to the Campidoglio, Laura's favourite piazza.

'So what do you notice about this piazza?' she asked.

'It's full of tourists.'

'Anything else?'

'They're all wearing check trousers.'

'The *piazza*.'

'It's a perfect square.'

'And do you know why it's a perfect square?'

'No. Why?'

'Because it's not,' said Laura, explaining how Michelangelo had allowed for the foreshortening of perspective by elongating the far side of the square and compressing another part. Before I had time to wonder if a more general truth could be extrapolated from the example of the Campidoglio we were off again, heading to Lungotevere to assume our place among the twenty or thirty mopeds waiting on lights, revving. At first, because of our Attic trauma, we kept to the uncrowded back of the grid and because our moped, a Piaggio Ciao, had very little acceleration we were among the last to crawl away from the lights.