

D. H. Lawrence and the phallic imagination :
essays on sexual identity and feminist misreading

Peter Balbert.

Also by Peter Balbert

D. H. Lawrence: A Centenary Consideration
(editor with Phillip L. Marcus)

D. H. Lawrence and the Psychology of Rhythm

D. H. Lawrence and the Phallic Imagination

Essays on Sexual Identity and Feminist

Misreading
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TO A BEVY OF WONDERFUL WOMEN:

Lynne	my wife
Rebecca, Rachel, Reika, Risa	my daughters
Marjorie	my mother
Diana	my sister
Maria	my typist

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Introduction

I

This study interprets five fictional works by D. H. Lawrence through his fundamental notions about sexual identity and self-definition. In each essay my argument is based on an integrated analysis of Lawrence's artistic technique and informing doctrine, with the underlying unity of his poetic intuition and philosophic thought always the prime concern. This organic methodology – an approach surely consistent with Lawrence's claims as a visionary artist – also expresses two correlative preoccupations that are persistent sub-themes in my criticism: I am interested both in related patterns of feminist misreading of the fiction, and (in more secondary fashion) in several suggestive speculations by Norman Mailer on a recognizable dialectic of love, sex, and ego in Lawrence's art. While my essays are arranged in the chronological order of Lawrence's fiction, they are not offered as the interlocking links in a progressively developed thesis; rather, each essay functions as a contributing piece of evidence, employing similar methods of critical investigation and pointing towards a verdict that highlights the profundity of Lawrence's achievement and the inadequacy of many recent commentaries by his most outspoken detractors. (My response to feminist misinterpretations of Lawrence's achievement remains a consistent but subordinate mandate, as it is always the art of the fiction which is central to each chapter. It is in that spirit that my explicit rejoinders to critics are limited to their misreadings that impinge upon my own thematic discussion of each Lawrence work.

By now critical studies of Lawrence that present a unified approach to his fiction and ideology are not uncommon. My own perspective in this volume is different both in the narrow range

of its concern and in the precise issues that frame each of the essays. Indeed, I employ a 'selective intensity' of both scope and approach (that is, five fictional works, and one major theme) to relate moments in the fiction to the power of Lawrence's craft, to the meaning of his ideas, and to the errors of a distinct body of committed criticism. I have focused on several scenes in each work for extensive discussion; that selection process is based on my attention to those special qualities of a *dramatized* power in Lawrence's art and doctrine that receives insufficient recognition or understanding today. In short, it is my belief that this organic achievement by Lawrence in fiction, at its best, is as powerfully kinetic as it is expressly dialectic; despite that impressive fusion of the theoretical with the theatrical, it is still the latter appeal that needs more attention from the critics even as they clarify doctrine. Above all, Lawrence values the novel over the discursive essay because fiction captures the elusive 'man alive'.¹ Surely he acknowledges here that it is the montage of moving, passionate moments in the stories and novels that must captivate us before we respond to the sexual ethos that further illuminates a scene. In this regard my approach often highlights Lawrence's kinetic method by slowing the action of his fiction – that is, by freezing a particular vignette from which the novelist's vision gets its initial meaning. My intention is to suggest how a series of riveting episodes in Lawrence's four major novels and most controversial tale become resonant with significance when they are sufficiently 'suspended' to permit an additional clarification of the drama and doctrine that *jointly* inform the art.

Invariably the scenes I select for extensive analysis have an essential relation to Lawrence's vision; because of this integral connection to his 'metaphysic', such scenes tend to attract considerable feminist comment, and – as is often the case in my study – those critics invite responses to their misreadings. In the pages that follow I linger over such prototypical Lawrencian moments as Paul and Miriam's hypnotic fascination with the moon, Walter's poignant response to the news of William's death, Lydia Brangwen's childbirth at home, Anna Brangwen's dance of nullification, Ursula Brangwen's destructive consummations with Skrebensky, Birkin and Ursula's delicate communion at a pond, Connie Chatterley's evocative response to Mrs Flint's baby, and the revealing first reactions of the 'woman who rode away' to her captors. My study does not intend to function as any statement

on the complex development and modification by Lawrence through his career of all his relevant notions on sexual identity and self-definition. I am not concerned with a delineation through his complete work of precise shifts in Lawrencian belief; it is the evocation and explanation of his bedrock ethic in selected fictions that I wish to convey. As the titles and preoccupations of several of my chapters suggest, and as the correlative arguments in the notes often indicate, it is through an engaged discussion of Lawrence's fundamental vision – what I call 'the phallic imagination' – that much of the feminist displeasure with him can be revealed as reductive and misleading.

My choice of the four novels is dictated by their recognized central significance in Lawrence's canon and by their documented susceptibility to an interrelated pattern of misreading. My selection of one 'long' short story quite simply reflects my desire to rescue its tarnished reputation from the persistent attacks of its detractors. In each of the essays my analysis of the fiction also suggests that a variety of feminist zeal and ideological sermonizing among critics has resulted in a litany of basic misinterpretation of character and technique, such as the following: an inadequate appreciation of Paul's intrinsic strengths and a sentimentalizing of Miriam's profound emotional flaws in *Sons and Lovers*; an inability to comprehend both Tom's important growth in *The Rainbow* or the archetypal dimensions of his struggle with 'the unknown'; a failure to fully note the purgative role of Ursula's self-defining sex with Skrebensky in *The Rainbow*, and her crucial corrective function in *Women in Love*; a general disinclination to understand both the central theme of marriage in *The Rainbow* and the emphasis on female instinct in *Women in Love*; a tendency to avoid a discussion of the connection between Connie Chatterley's appreciation of Mellors's mode of loving and her previous conditioning in Fabian pieties; a blindness to the incisive evaluative vision of the woman who rode away and an insensitivity to the extent of Lawrence's antagonism to her killers.

II

It may be helpful here to provide a short history of published feminist antagonism to aspects of Lawrence's visionary imagination. Its most standard case against him appears a year after his

death, and it is argued, ironically enough, not by a woman but by an ex-friend and former collaborator of Lawrence's, J. Middleton Murry. In *D. H. Lawrence: Son of Woman*, Murry essentially claims that much of Lawrence's fiction (as well as the novelist's character) is flawed by evidence of his 'hyper-sensitive masculinity'.² His vindictive study attempts to reduce Lawrence's writings to the service of a transparent, futile effort to compensate for unresolved oedipal longings, which invariably emerge – in Murry's facile blue-printing – as Lawrence's need to make all women 'subject again' and to 'annihilate the female'.³ Murry's criticism remains notable as the first formulation of an attack against Lawrence that is echoed constantly by many contemporary feminist critics: that Lawrence's phallic preoccupation is the signature of his psychological weakness and inveterate sexism. Yet in the quarter century after Murry's study, there is little sustained criticism of Lawrence along such lines; not that feminists applaud his work in the ensuing decades, but that his relatively low literary reputation seems to exempt him from much attention at all during this period. Prompted by that belated rediscovery of Lawrence around mid-century (a renewal of interest and admiration spurred by – among others – F. R. Leavis, Harry T. Moore, Mark Spilka, and Dorothy Van Ghent), a second wave of feminist displeasure is initiated by Simone de Beauvoir in 1953 in her short but engaged chapter on him in *The Second Sex*. Although often respectful and even admiring on aspects of his creative achievement, de Beauvoir echoes Murry and anticipates the objections of the coming women's liberation movement when she argues that Lawrence's 'phallic criticism' is demeaning to women; she concludes with the simplistic assertion that the goal for a woman in relation to other men in his fiction is 'for her to bow down before their divinity'.⁴

In the formalistic literary climate of the 1950s and amidst the insulating directives of the reigning 'new criticism', de Beauvoir's speculative look at Lawrence inspired minimal attention from critics and little momentum for further feminist reconsideration of him.⁵ This period of relatively unpoliticized criticism of Lawrence ended abruptly in 1970 with the publication of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, a seminal tract that contains a frontal assault on the fictional vision of such alleged male chauvinists as D. H. Lawrence, Norman Mailer, and Henry Miller. Millett displays little patience for moderation in her argument and scant concern for crucial, subtle nuances in Lawrence's fiction; she is avowedly and unab-

ashedly on an ideological hunt for male demons, as she concludes that Lawrence's work is reactionary and unwholesome for its 'absorption in "phallic consciousness"' and a 'doctrinaire male-supremacist ethic'.⁶

Despite the occasional acknowledgment today of the qualities of overstatement and narrow partisanship in much of Millett's study, the lack of any sustained, documented response to *Sexual Politics* (except from Norman Mailer) at the time of its publication was not surprising.⁷ Her work appeared precisely on the crest of that popular cause known as 'women's liberation', and the wave of movement support in 1970 was spreading into both the academic and commercial publishing markets. Thus her extreme analyses were ready to be received by many editors and feminists as an awaited theoretic manual as well as a retributive piece of revisionist criticism. Indeed, just two years before Millett's staid, heavily annotated text, Mary Ellmann's more breezy and often ironic study, *Thinking About Women*, received appreciative reviews from literary critics and cultural commentators. Her work is less about literature and society than it is about the urgencies of Ellmann's own revolutionary goals, as she continually makes exhortations in the familiar language of the late 1960s: she urges women to free themselves from the perils of misogyny by undergoing a metaphysical transformation of self-image and ambition. For my purposes here the book is noteworthy not only for its antagonistic obsession with Norman Mailer, but also for its casual, passing mention – as if it were beyond question – that Lawrence claims 'the most a woman can do' is to be a baby-carrier and 'inspire the man'.⁸

✓ Such an unscrutinized radicalism by Millett and Ellmann suggests the hospitable market by the early 1970s for their fervour. It became not only academically *de rigueur* for a woman to attack writers like Lawrence and Mailer, it was also rewarded in the market place. In 1971, for instance, Germaine Greer's fashionable best-seller, *The Female Eunuch*, sold thousands in hardcover on her version of the myriad institutions, habits, and societal forces that create the catchy oxymoron of her title. Greer's unprobing comments about Lawrence are instructive about the extent of the conformity in criticism induced by the mandates of feminist revaluation. Her remarks about him seem to proceed almost against her better aesthetic instincts, as if she feels the awkward obligation to her sister critics to establish her own credentials with the required

Lawrence slur. Greer first objects to what she calls Lawrence's 'inflated imagery'; then she revealingly states that she 'was not sure what was wrong with it' until she became sophisticated enough to understand how such language is part of a systematically manipulative ideal that invariably places women in 'imprisonment in the bourgeois temple'.⁹ It is difficult to imagine any criticism of D. H. Lawrence more wide of the mark, as Greer preposterously employs a disingenuous cultural Marxism (a perspective that Lawrence despised) to paint him as the protector of the middle-class values that his fiction seeks to undermine.

Similarly, even the more determinedly academic studies by 1973 of purported sexism in literature reveal the ideological simplifications in the air about Lawrence's achievement. Carolyn Heilbrun's well-received *Towards a Recognition of Androgyny* contains a phrase so dated as to provide a reliable index to the easy trendiness of her critical procedure. Heilbrun (who a few years later would serve as President of the Modern Language Association) asserts – and does not even try to demonstrate – that Lawrence is 'a male chauvinist', and she then proceeds to refashion the ending of one of his major novels to suit the needs of that appeal embodied in her study's title.¹⁰ Although such transparent misreadings and trite slogans of more than a decade ago by Greer and Heilbrun have lost much of their appeal today, there are now new critical tools that are often used both to support the programme of feminist critics and to continue the derogation of Lawrence. As has often been noted by observers of literary culture, beginning in the late 1970s the radical and often ahistorical biases of semiotics and deconstruction find an easy alliance with a variety of pet antagonisms held over from the women's movement of the previous decade. Robert Scholes, for instance, recently makes claims about Lawrence's 'fear of feminine sexuality', an assertion that he deduces from an insufficiently analyzed reference to Lawrence's hostility to clitoral orgasm in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.¹¹ Scholes proceeds on the mistaken assumptions that such an alleged aversion can be considered apart from the sexual vision that organically informs the entire novel, and that Mellors's standard of sexual preference is some final word by D. H. Lawrence on the aesthetics of erotic appreciation.

The relative lack of response by critics and the academy to nearly two decades of unequivocal distortion of Lawrence's work carries with it a considerable risk in the province of education. Such

silence can sound like community acquiescence to the charges of the revisionists, and that appearance of consensus can open the way to totalitarian 'reforms' that may permanently affect the structure of study in the liberal arts. For instance, the Associate Dean at a fine women's college recently mailed (with open administration endorsement) to each faculty member two attached and revealing items: a well-publicized *Newsweek* article that glowingly discussed the increasing momentum in 1983 towards curriculum revision at colleges to accommodate feminist priorities, and a copy of a more formal academic report, written under the auspices of the Association of American Colleges, titled 'Feminist Scholarship – the Extent of the Revolution', by Florence Howe.¹² Howe's report has a prominent concern with D. H. Lawrence; her perspective sounds like Germaine Greer's, except in the 1980s she writes with the tacit support and advisory power of an academic committee, a national organization of higher education, and a professional journal. In short, goals that once were regarded by idealistic revisionists as merely utopian and theoretical are now provided with mainstream attention and the sanctions of college leaders. In the report Howe explains that early in the 1960s she 'enjoyed reading Lawrence with students', even though 'he is shaped by a male vision that precludes women loving women or even managing deep and life-lasting friendships with women'.¹³ In reference to her request for 'women loving women', it is never clear precisely what Howe wants or expects from Lawrence. On the associated issue of friends, one is hard pressed throughout his fiction to find much friendship even between men. Such a scarcity of enduring companionship is part of Lawrence's persistent emphasis on the difficulty of maintaining close relationships in the modern, mechanical world. Howe's remarks gradually develop into an advertisement for the kind of revised literature offerings discussed in the popular pages of *Newsweek*, and there is a real question whether any course slots have been saved for Lawrence in this sanitized curriculum of the future. She openly wonders whether he is fully relevant to the present decade, a period in which, she argues, women work, obtain friendships with women, and are generally liberated from the constrictions she believes Lawrence approves. She concludes her report by quoting out of context from *Sons and Lovers* to highlight her version of Lawrence's supreme ignorance about the basic sexual realities today.

In this contemporary world of burgeoning women's studies in

academia and fashionable androgyny in consumer culture, Lawrence's mystical emphasis on intense polarities between the sexes appears out of style. Thus Howe's confident revisionist zeal can both influence the direction of college curricula and – through her university report's semi-official status – attract positive notice to her subject by a gossip news story in a popular middlebrow magazine. Even a talented writer like Edmund White uses a prominent review to express admiration for a female novelist through an opinion formulated in the mistaken pieties of 1980s revaluation; here he not only contorts the truth of Lawrence's achievement, but he also parades the misjudgment as recognized fact: 'Unlike Lawrence, she recognized that women are as complex and varied as men'.¹⁴ Similarly, consider the concluding passage in a recent admiring review by a teacher of women's studies at a major university, as she contemplates a new study of 'sexual contradictions' in the life 'of a contemporary professional woman'. The reviewer's expressed idea of the good life cannot be dismissed as the eccentric hobbyhorse of an isolated academic, for her enraptured piece appears (as does White's essay) in that reliable index to acceptable liberal notions in America, the *Sunday New York Times Book Review*. Through the tortuous jargon of its praise, note that the vision extolled is precisely the horror that Lawrence satirizes in the perverse utopianism of the talkers at Wragby estate in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*:

Ms. Dimen touches on the foundations of a new feminism when she points out that women must be free to assert their sexual desires directly and to infuse their capacity for emotional connections and empathy into an impersonal public sphere. Calling for a new round of feminist utopian thinking, Ms. Dimen offers a vague but intriguing proposition. She asks us to imagine a world without gender where sexual events occur between individuals of any persuasion and eroticism infuses everyday life with pleasure.¹⁵

III

I do not wish to argue either that the contemporary attack against Lawrence has gone totally unanswered, or that all feminists interpret him in a narrow and partisan manner. Indeed, as early as

1932, Anaïs Nin's modestly titled *D. H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study*, a work written in part as a response to Murry's bit of published revenge the previous year, provides a lively and sympathetic reading of Lawrence's vision and craft. Her perspective on him is from that of the alert and isolate 'female' contemplator – a stance, of course, that she will celebrate more famously in her diaries. Nin sees Lawrence's phallic obsessions as not only invigorating for men but also unthreatening, even liberating, to women. In this earliest of feminist appreciations of him, she praises Lawrence's fiction for its seminal understanding that 'it is inequality of sexual power which causes disintegration in sexual relationships. Each man and woman must find his own level';¹⁶ she frequently finds in his work 'an extremely sympathetic feeling for the problems of the modern woman'.¹⁷

After Nin's appraisal and that extended period of dormancy in Lawrence studies, the 'rediscovery' of Lawrence by mid-century did not need to respond to feminist objections, for that adversarial view was not yet fully articulated. By the early 1960s the admiring Lawrence critics seemed to have won – or at least engaged – all the central aversions to Lawrence except those to be generated shortly by the issue of sexual politics. For instance, Mark Spilka's informative introduction in 1963 to the first major collection of essays by disparate hands on Lawrence provides a balanced summary of the history of critical response to him during the generation after his death. There is understandably a celebratory tone to Spilka's remarks and to the volume's essays, as both editor and contributors appear secure that the case for Lawrence has been made, and that he 'enjoys more widespread popularity and esteem than he knew in his lifetime'.¹⁸ It is noteworthy that in Spilka's relevant litany of the antagonistic groups – 'possessive memorialists, sex cultists, hostile liberals, and religious purists'¹⁹ – from whom Lawrence's reputation has been rescued, there is no term precise enough to anticipate the 'ideological feminists' who wait around the corner. Even Spilka's convenient bibliographical listing of relevant controversies over Lawrence as of 1963 does not suggest the imprisoning strictures of the new dogmatism from which Lawrence would need liberation in the next decade.

It was not until the first period of publicized feminist revisionism – from 1965 to its peak in 1973 with the absurd media event of the King-Riggs tennis match – began to subside that any extended, reasoned response to its attack on Lawrence appeared. Articles in

1975 by Lydia Blanchard and Charles Rossman provide the first more balanced overviews of Lawrence's depiction of women and of his unimpressed critics; both essays attempt some mild counter-attack against the ideologists. Blanchard's argument essentially separates herself from Millett's extreme revaluations, although she often undercuts her critical intuitiveness by a diplomatic willingness to see both Millett and Mailer as equally illegitimate, contrary poles of response to Lawrence. Yet Blanchard admirably seeks to praise Lawrence by demonstrating, in effect, what Florence Howe would not see a decade later: 'the power in his descriptions of intelligent women trapped by a society that provides them inadequate outlets for their talents and energies'.²⁰ Rossman's longer essay intelligently indicates where ideological hysteria has often demeaned the process of literary criticism with its use of 'reductive formulas and static phrases like "male supremacy" and "guide-books for women"'.²¹ But both Blanchard and Rossman's preliminary answers to a then unexamined body of feminist critiques are clearly self-conscious and tepid about their implicit mission to set the record straight. There is still an apologetic air about their own consideration of 'the woman issue' in Lawrence, as if in some sense Millett's contempt is often justified, and that Millett can be dismissed only if Mailer can be equally lambasted. There is also the inclination in both essays to applaud the most polemical arguments of feminist criticism as correct. For instance, Blanchard and Rossman are in a hurry to agree with the emphatic, unprobing attack against Lawrence's apparently vulnerable tale, 'The Woman Who Rode Away'. Rossman even sounds a bit like a righteous Millett when he argues that the tale 'suggests an animus against women verging on sadism',²² and Blanchard affirms that it is surely the story with the most 'evidence for an indictment against Lawrence's attitudes toward women'.²³

Apparently it continues to be difficult even in the 1980s for intelligent critics to drop the ideological baggage of a previous decade. For instance, Hilary Simpson's well-researched and often impressive book, *D. H. Lawrence and Feminism*, is a 1982 work that attempts a badly needed synthesis in Lawrence studies: Simpson supplies both an historical overview of Lawrence's relation to his own contemporary feminist culture, and a selective interpretation of his works in light of feminist ideas today. But her work is demonstrably strongest when it summarizes the relation of Lawrence to women's issues in England from 1914 to 1930, and predict-

ably weakest when it seeks to denigrate Lawrence's fictional achievement by the current standards of emancipation ideology. Although more reasonable and sensitive than the doctrinaire feminists of the early 1970s, Simpson frequently misreads key moments in his novels by submitting them too willingly to the scrutiny of Millett's directives rather than to the more nurturant impulses of Lawrence's framing vision.²⁴ As my comments on the workings of 'the phallic imagination' in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* will indicate, I am quite willing to commend Simpson's study for its unusual willingness to argue that phallic preoccupations in Lawrence's fiction do not suggest that he is anti-woman. But once she establishes that essential understanding (lost to female critics since Anaïs Nin's study), Simpson often supplies consensus feminist doctrine rather than probing literary analysis of the works.

The first unequivocal response to that ideological disparagement of Lawrence was in a highly publicized set of essays by Norman Mailer, *The Prisoner of Sex*, first published in *Harper's Magazine*, and in book form several months later in 1971. The work is a significant rumination by a major writer (who is also the subject of feminist wrath) on sexuality, modern society, and the sense of self; his lyrical defence of D. H. Lawrence achieves a special power because of Mailer's wise strategy of advocacy: he willingly pits his own style of a passionate, speculative informality against the doctrinal resentments evident in Millett's reductive approach to life and literature. Above all, Mailer isolates with epigrammatic precision the essential direction of Lawrence's life and creative labour. That is, he identifies the dominant existential strain behind Lawrence's obsession with love and identity; he further relates that novelist's often enigmatic use of the 'unknown' to Lawrence's correlative mandate to lose one's ego in the act of sexual transcendence. Aspects of such a reading of Lawrence have occurred to other critics through the years. Yet it is only Mailer who – spurred no doubt by the urgencies of sexual politics and by the perception of Lawrencian influence in his own work – effortlessly demonstrates, in effect, Lawrence's fusion of the transcendental drift of mid-nineteenth-century romanticism with the existential *angst* of the modern world.

Thus Mailer rebuts Millett, not only by isolating several precise errors in her reading and methodology but also by suggesting that her one-track criticism leads to an obliviousness of the literary and philosophical traditions embodied in Lawrence's work. Perhaps

what is more unusual about Mailer's provocative summary of Lawrence is the scant attention it has received from critics. Full-length studies of Lawrence or Mailer in the last fifteen years rarely do more than briefly acknowledge the *Prisoner of Sex* as a curious footnote in the history of Mailer's inevitable front-page skirmishes.²⁵ I do not pretend to offer in my essays more than various interrelated applications of Mailer's analysis to my own stated concern with Lawrence's fiction and patterns of feminist misreading. But there is often in my approach to Lawrence the implicit acknowledgement of the fundamental accuracy of Mailer's judgement of him, and I remain concerned that his criticism has still not received its necessary due.

IV

The record of the last decade in Lawrence criticism may show that it was left to me – by the virtual default of the academy – to supply a missing voice in response to feminist charges. Thus I add the following personal notes in this introduction to explain more fully the relevance of the essays in this volume, the motivations that produced them, and the several preoccupations they share. In 1975, the late Harry T. Moore, a pioneer Lawrence biographer and critic, prominently and generously reviewed my first book on Lawrence, which was a formalistic study of what I call 'the psychology of rhythm'. In the next few years my approach to Lawrence became less structural in its emphasis, as I felt an impatience with the ideological disparagement of Lawrence that was increasingly popular in the early 1970s. At that time I also wished to acknowledge my own debt to the inspiring defence offered by Mailer in *The Prisoner of Sex*. As my first major expression of these preoccupations, an essay of mine was published on *Sons and Lovers* that considered the issues of sexual identity and self-definition in relation both to the metaphoric structure of that novel and to feminist revaluations of it.

Harry T. Moore immediately sent me a warm letter of support for that article's argument, and he also conveyed his sad speculations about the relative silence in academia in the last decade to that extreme revisionism spear-headed by Millett. A few months later he invited me to give the featured lecture (as a late replacement for Leslie Fiedler) at the largest international conference on

Lawrence ever convened – a four-day, NEH sponsored event in 1979 at Southern Illinois University. I chose as my topic an unambiguous answer to the harsh recent attacks directed at the sexual ethics of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. My intention was to provoke response not by denying the eminently phallic vision of the work but by stipulating the targets of Lawrence's emphatic attack in this fiction. I wished to demonstrate how the phallus as metaphor, participant, and metaphysical centre of the novel suggests Lawrence's renewing and existential view of love and sex. In that heyday of apparent acquiescence to feminist assaults, my remarks produced a storm of controversy and publicity along heated partisan lines, and the resulting skirmishes and tensions at that conference have been chronicled frequently in Lawrence journals and conferences through the years. The several other essays in this volume are a further testament to the concern that I uncomfortably carried from Illinois: if an academic consensus was so unsettled by my articulated response to feminist fervours, is it possible that any spirited defence today of Lawrence's sexual dialectic is perceived as a revisionist position?

There is another relevant circumstance that fuels my desire to elaborate on this theme of Lawrence's visionary imagination. The first versions of these essays appeared during my tenure as a Professor of English at Wells College, an excellent and venerable women's college in upstate New York. Like many women's colleges in the late 1970s, Wells had gradually accommodated aspects of its mission, curriculum, and campus life to the ideals and agenda of the women's movement; in my view such revisions were not always beneficial to the spirit both of liberal arts and the inquiring student mind. Motivated in part by my desire to teach against the grain of what I felt was a trendy accommodation, I had initiated an upper-level course at Wells in 1973, titled English 354, 'Studies in Fiction: Lawrence, Hemingway, and Mailer'; it has grown to be a popular if somewhat controversial elective through the years. In the spring of 1984 my scholarship, teaching and residence at Wells were all conjoined in an unusual and pleasant circumstance: Norman Mailer graciously responded to me after I had written a variety of articles on my perception of the influence of Lawrence and Hemingway on his work. I informed him of the intense interest in him and his work at Wells, and he cheerfully agreed to undertake his first visit to an all-women's college in about fifteen years. During his stay he delivered a series of provocative

remarks to a packed auditorium, provided a revealing reading of his own work, and met many of the current and former members of English 354, including many middle-aged alumni who had travelled many miles for the session. It is here that I wish to acknowledge a special debt to those students through the years who pushed me to battle them in class and forced me – on penalty of certain death – to defend many of the notions embodied in this study. A special thanks is here inscribed to Norman Mailer, both for his inspiring work and for tolerating the lovely chaos of that autumn visit.

Notes

1. Lawrence, 'Why the Novel Matters', in Edward D. McDonald (ed.), *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence* (New York: Viking, 1972), 538.
2. J. Middleton Murry, *D. H. Lawrence: Son of Woman* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), 72. Hilary Simpson reaches the same point about Murry's early 'feminist' evaluation of Lawrence, but she is scrupulously non-judgemental about Murry's conclusions. Hilary Simpson, *D. H. Lawrence and Feminism* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press; London: Croom Helm, 1982), 13.
3. *Ibid.*, 118.
4. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 223.
5. Although by no means a feminist critic, Eliseo Vivas in 1960 objects to Lawrence's term 'phallic marriage', and wonders why it should not be replaced, or augmented, by a female term, *D. H. Lawrence: The Failure and the Triumph of Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), 268.
6. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970; London: Virago, 1977), 257.
7. An unusual exception is the characteristically blunt Midge Decter, who speaks of Millett's 'specific assertions and points of attack' as radiating 'a vulgarity almost not to be credited in this age of mass higher education'. In a related long footnote Decter documents the extent of Millett's faulty and manipulative appropriation of the Adam and Eve myth, in *The New Chastity and Other Arguments Against Women's Liberation* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1974), 100.
8. Mary Ellmann, *Thinking About Women* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 16.
9. Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York: McGraw-Hill; London: Paladin, 1971), 181, 182.
10. Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Towards a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 102.

11. Robert Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 140.
12. Howe's essay is from 'Liberal Education and the New Scholarship on Women: Issues and Constraints in Institutional Change', from the *Report of the Wingspread Conference*, Association of American Colleges, 1981. The accompanying *Newsweek* article is entitled 'Out of the Academic Ghetto', from the issue of 31 October 1983.
13. Howe, 'Liberal Education and the New Scholarship on Women: Issues and Constraints in Institutional Change', 6.
14. Edmund White, 'The Woman who Loved Memory', *The New York Times Book Review*, 25 May 1986, 7.
15. Patricia McBroom, 'Envy in the Afternoon', *The New York Times Book Review*, 2 November 1986, 41.
16. Anaïs Nin, *D. H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1964; London: Black Spring Press, 1985), 27.
17. *Ibid.*, 50.
18. Mark Spilka (ed.), *D. H. Lawrence: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1963), 1.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Lydia Blanchard, 'Love and Power: A Reconsideration of Sexual Politics in D. H. Lawrence', in *Modern Fiction Studies* 21 (1975), 443.
21. Charles Rossman, '“You are the call and I am the answer”: D. H. Lawrence and Women', in *The D. H. Lawrence Review* 8 (1975), 257.
22. *Ibid.*, 257.
23. Blanchard, 'Love and Power: A Reconsideration of Sexual Politics in D. H. Lawrence', 441.
24. As a glaring evidence of this pattern, note Simpson's approval of Millett's silly statement that Paul 'nonchalantly disposes of' Clara. So nonchalant, one is tempted with pain and irony to remind Simpson and Millett, that Paul willingly undergoes a painful beating as the evidence both of a lack of concern and an absence of emotional stress. See Hilary Simpson, *D. H. Lawrence and Feminism*, 29.
25. Even Robert Merrill, in what stands as the most in-depth and sympathetic treatment of Mailer's work up to 1978, can say little more than 'the best that can be said about *The Prisoner of Sex* is that it is much better than its critics have insisted', in *Norman Mailer* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 141. Similarly, Richard Poirier's earlier study of Mailer makes many scattered references to *The Prisoner of Sex*, a work that Poirier considers an uneven recapitulation of themes Mailer treats in greater depth elsewhere. There is little effort by Poirier to grapple with the full range of Mailer's argument and the structure of the work; an admiring passing reference to Mailer's reading of Lawrence is all Poirier offers on the issue of Mailer's unusual criticism of that novelist, in *Norman Mailer* (New York: Viking, 1972).

1

Forging and Feminism: *Sons and Lovers* and the Phallic Imagination

'Oh, I wish he would *stand up*.'

D. H. Lawrence, on seeing a statue of the Buddha.¹

I

The seminal importance of the preoccupations and techniques of *Sons and Lovers* remains relatively unstated in recent years. Lawrence's emphasis on a 'priapic' ethos of masculine assertion and independence is widely regarded as inappropriate to the fashionable androgyny of contemporary culture. Clearly, this early work is a hymn to the phallus, as the shape of *Sons and Lovers* – from plot to moralism to metaphor – reflects Lawrence's purging effort, as artist and prophet, to dramatize his insistence on Paul's required Sunderings; such 'separations' by Paul are depicted as part of the necessary struggle for mature and healthy sexuality both in the male protagonist and – by that felt extension of the doctrine and autobiography integrated in this novel – in the novelist and in his readers. What is purged before the novel can be completed is no less than a young man's accumulated experience of emotional and sexual confusion. The Lawrence–Paul character concludes his battle for identity not with any sentimental

security about the future, but with the knowledge, finally, of an ordered and resolved past.

(Feminist critics make allegations about Paul's confident 'faith in male supremacy',² or his 'overtly manipulative'³ strategies, or his purported status as 'conqueror'⁴ at novel's end, or his supposedly 'brilliant condition'⁵ on the last page; these commentators mistake the hero's implicit promise and brave resolution for a self-confidence he cannot possess. Paul does gather together his resources as he heads toward the glowing city. There is no indication of some adamant strength in his character in the last chapter, although such a trait is asserted by the feminists to be one measure of the novelist's chauvinistic commitment to his fictional persona. Lawrence's notorious delay in finishing *Sons and Lovers* is partly a result of his instinctive sense that this novel would predict his coming manhood as much as it dramatized his growth through boyhood and adolescence.⁶ He had to get it right. In writing his version of the pubescent youth who struggles to become a sexually emancipated adult – that is, in deriving a damaged but potent Paul Morel, Lawrence, in effect, has derived himself as artist. He is then free to speak poetry and doctrine to the world, for he has made poetry in *Sons and Lovers* out of the tangled indoctrinations of his own formative years.

But today there is reticence to discuss the fundamentality of the phallic urgencies in *Sons and Lovers*; there is even less inclination to justify Paul's difficult but necessary decisions to break off ties with women who, in very different ways, have loved him and have contributed to his growth as artist, lover, and man. Indeed, as Alfred Kazin perceptively implies in an attack on the anti-literary bias of so much current 'women's literature', such reticence may be the symptom of cultural disease as well as of the vagaries of critical disfavour.⁷ Doctrines about phallic assertion are dismissed as merely *macho*, or branded as the product of subversive sexual politics – 'at a time when Freud's Victorian illusion that women have penis envy has been replaced in up-to-date America by penis hatred'.⁸ Reconsideration of *Sons and Lovers* is central in the current feminist momentum to camouflage, dislocate, and misrepresent Lawrence's art and doctrine. Florence Howe's casual dismissal of Lawrence's relevance for women in the 1980s, in her glowing college commission report on 'The Extent of the Revolution' in feminist scholarship,⁹ is representative of the narrow ideological attacks this novel provokes today. Howe criti-

cizes Paul's pertinent questioning of the motivations in Miriam for her persistent preoccupation with her own career and with the issue of 'work' for women. Howe fails to note that Paul's scepticism about Miriam's answers results from his painful, developing understanding both of the nature of her emotional insufficiency, and of her attempt to mask her organic imbalance with lame excuses about institutional biases against women.

Other feminist critics are even more unprobing in their reactions to Lawrence's dramatized impatience in *Sons and Lovers* with merely political explanations for personal failure or inadequacy. In its most common form, such criticism of this novel reaches a variety of conclusions, most of which trivialize Lawrence and often allege nearly criminal behaviour on the part of Paul and his creator:

Instead of examining the interactions of real men and women, what Lawrence actually wrote about was the relationship between men and a series of female stereotypes.¹⁰

Lawrence is a ruthless user of women . . . the mother, Miriam, and Clara are all manipulated in Paul's painful effort at self-identity, the effort to become himself.¹¹

Paul kills or disregards the women who have been of use to him.¹²

Readers . . . similarly allow themselves to be victimized by the narrator of *Sons and Lovers*.¹³

As usual in Millett's criticism, there is much of a certain kind of truth in this savage account of the end of the novel.¹⁴

In short, Lawrence is often read today to see whether he fits into the straitjackets of feminist ideology, and consequently he is dismissed with condescending remarks about his deviation from our culture's latest celebration of party propaganda. To read or teach *Sons and Lovers* in this revisionist climate – 'in the teeth' of what Mailer acidly calls 'a growing piety in the treatment of women'¹⁵ – is to sense the validity of a remark by a perceptive female critic, who warns that 'the trouble with feminist critics is that anything that passes for celebration of the male can be read as denigration of the female'.¹⁶

Even the more academic and undoctinaire approaches to *Sons and Lovers* too frequently are unsatisfactory. Often the significance

of the repetitive patterns of tension in Paul's sexual apprenticeship receives insufficient attention. Much of the criticism of *Sons and Lovers* is disturbingly fragmentary, refusing in a variety of ways to reckon with the cumulative burden of emphasis that unifies Paul's tripartite phallic struggle. It remains easier, apparently, to discuss his individual entanglements with Miriam, Clara, and Gertrude than to stress how the interrelating design of these involvements suggests the adumbration of Lawrence's sexual ethic in the novel. The standard analysis of *Sons and Lovers* offers insight into Paul's relationship with one or more of the women, but the reiterated insistence of Lawrence's ethics – not to mention that supportive symmetry of his various metaphors of love and sex – all this unified superstructure of the novel largely is ignored.¹⁷ Recent studies of this novel, despite various strengths in their critical perspective, tend to minimize an awareness of Lawrence's fusion of art and prophesy in favour of the more politicized issue of 'blame' for the negative nature of Paul's relationships.¹⁸

The direction of Paul's experience seems obvious enough: Paul Morel becomes sufficiently 'involved' with three women so that he finally recognizes, and for different reasons for each woman, the urgency of his need for sexual emancipation from them. Perhaps the reasons for D. H. Lawrence's emphasis on sexual survival is best stated by Norman Mailer, in his remarks on Lawrence in *The Prisoner of Sex*:

And sexual transcendence, some ecstasy where he could lose his ego for a moment, and his sense of self and his will, was life to him – he could not live without sexual transcendence. . . . Each time he failed to reach a woman, each time he failed particularly to reach his own woman, he was dying a little. It is hopeless to read his books and try to understand the quirky changeable fury-ridden relationships of his men and women without comprehending that Lawrence saw every serious love affair as fundamental do-or-die: he knew he literally died a little more each time he missed transcendence in the act. It was why he saw lust as hopeless. Lust was meaningless fucking and that was the privilege of the healthy. He was ill, and his wife was literally killing him each time she failed to worship his most proud and delicate cock.¹⁹

Mailer's apocalyptic analysis is appropriate for the urgencies of

Sons and Lovers – Lawrence's early *Bildungsroman* of phallic worship and sexual baptism. The novel is insistent in its equation: Paul Morel will not have enduring love, or fulfilling work, or abiding faith, or meaningful friendships, or good relations with his family without the experience that Mailer calls 'sexual transcendence'. And Paul cannot transcend 'his ego . . . and his sense of self and his will' until he recognizes that the threats to him posed by Miriam, Clara, and Gertrude are different versions of the same problem. Each woman seeks to cripple that fundamental source of energy in him which I shall call his 'phallic imagination'. In this regard, Kate Millett's sneering description of Paul as 'the perfection of self-sustaining ego'²⁰ describes a state of power and confidence in him that never exists; in the essential paradox that fuels the poignant tensions of this novel, the three women who nourish his ego also provide emotional traps that nearly doom him to egocentric patterns of failure.

Thus each woman, by limiting or perverting the scope or quality of the love she offers Paul, also short-circuits Paul's ability to respond – as a confident male and with that proud existential assertion of self – to the daily challenges posed by work, family, and friends. The instinctive execution of such assertion by a male signifies organic health to Lawrence. Or put still another way, to catch the precise paradox of Lawrence's demand when it is subjected to Mailer's provocative terminology: Paul cannot surrender his ego to the realm of transcendent sex until he has confirmed, for himself, that bottom-line power of the self to discard the spurious appeal of bad love. Thus the demands of Lawrence's ethics, with all their categories of judgement, are vigorously puritanical: no transcendent sex without the death of bad sex, and no creative man until there is transcendent sex. It is in this prescriptive sense, once we grasp the full implications of Lawrence's sexual dialectic, that *Sons and Lovers* must speak to us of biographical secrets. It reveals how Lawrence–Paul promises to make love at least well enough to write his novel, as he learns to abandon those counterfeit passions which nullify the force of his phallic imagination.²¹ Critic Faith Pullin has her own priorities here; she conveniently overstates Paul's erotic ability, as she refers contemptuously to Lawrence's alleged need to show how Paul's lover is 'swept away by [his] expertise'.²² Such a view of him ultimately misses the tentative, baptismal nature of Paul's sexual awakening with Clara. Even through his most indulgent sex-play

with her, Paul never appears even vaguely like a stud, for he cannot sustain himself with mere egoistic forays into manipulative passion. He remains a young man who senses – to use Mailer's distinction in the quotation above – that he can only *do* (and not *die*) when he fully exorcises those demon lovers who come to hinder his emergence into independent manhood. Feminists tend to misconstrue Paul's sexual experiences as achievement, while a cautious Lawrence depicts them as risky, necessary way-stations towards that ideal of transcendent, polarized sex he demands and describes in *Women In Love*.²³

II

✓ Just a few pages into *Sons and Lovers*, Gertrude Morel significantly reveals how ferociously at the age of only nineteen she holds account of a male's manhood. She has just ignored a suitor's praise of her hair and then directed their conversation to the issue of job choice. Now she cuts through his expression of vocational powerlessness with her unequivocal assertion of the sexual ethic that obsesses her throughout the novel:

She held her head erect. He was rather timid before her.

'But my father's so stiff-necked. He means to put me into the business, and I know he'll do it.'

'But if you're a *man*?' she had cried.

'Being a man isn't everything,' he replied, frowning with puzzled helplessness.

Now, as she moved about her work at the Bottoms, with some experience of what being a man meant, she knew that it was *not* everything.²⁴

So even as a young woman Gertrude Coppard speaks with the energy and discontent that characterize her throughout the novel. Her insistence with timid John Field is only partly to her credit and only partially correct. Surely she is right to claim that manhood should mean a great deal, particularly in the often callous but unequivocally 'man's' world of competitive industry and coal mining in late nineteenth-century Nottingham. But even here, when her disgust appears legitimate, Gertrude comes off as a bit of a phallic taskmaster. She urges a similarly demanding ethic on