

MATERNITY, ABJECTION, LOVE, AND REVOLUTIONARY LANGUAGE: A
KRISTEVAN READING OF D. H. LAWRENCE'S NOVELS

by

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(Under the Direction of Adam Parkes)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores Kristeva's theoretical work on individuation, relationships, encounters with horror, and art and artisanship, as they are anticipated and dramatized in the novels of D. H. Lawrence. In contrast to the modernist and feminist scholars in the last few decades who have criticized both Lawrence and Kristeva for an apparent tendency towards essentialism, in this project I counter that both novelist and psychoanalyst attempt to destroy such binary oppositions as man / woman, body / mind, and emotion / reason, even as both make statements that at first may appear to be self-contradictory. By examining the novels of Lawrence alongside Kristeva's theories, I show points where Lawrence's work can benefit from a psychoanalytic approach that relies on more neo-Freudian and neo-Lacanian modes of understanding. The arrangement of the dissertation's chapters will follow a developmental model, beginning with Lawrence's characters in their childhood encounters with the mother, moving through their efforts to forge separate identity while encountering the universal horror of the abject, exploring their desires to merge with another in romantic union, and finally discussing their perspectives on motherhood and their roles as artists, both conventional and revolutionary.

INDEX WORDS: D. H. Lawrence, Julia Kristeva, modernism, psychoanalysis, French feminism, abject, subject-in-process, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family: my mother, who is brave and genuine; my father, whose integrity I am always trying to emulate; my brother Jeff, who meets people where they are; and my sister Rhea, whose sharp tongue and tender heart I will always miss. Finally, I dedicate my dissertation to Damon: my co-conspirator, my conscience, my childhood friend, my sounding board, my inspiration, my love, and my complement.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At the conclusion of one of the oddest and most beautiful love scenes in all of modernist literature, the “Water-Party” chapter from D. H. Lawrence’s novel *Women in Love* (1920), Rupert Birkin and Ursula Brangwen have their first passionate sexual encounter, a union that the novel declares is “as inevitable as death, beyond question” (180). That this romantic interlude happens immediately after the drowning of Diana Crich and her would-be rescuer Doctor Brindell seems to be no accident, given the close proximity of love and death that characterizes the entire novel, and in fact almost all of Lawrence’s fictional oeuvre. Birkin’s response to their tryst illustrates how powerfully these seemingly opposite forces roil within Lawrence’s characters: “Then, satisfied and shattered, fulfilled and destroyed, he went home away from her, drifting vaguely through the darkness, lapsed into the old fire of burning passion” (180).

For these characters, love entails both fascination and disgust, attraction and repulsion, with one emotion often following immediately on the heels of the other. Appropriately, in the same chapter, Ursula leaves Birkin and returns to the now-drained lake, with its “horrible raw banks of clay, that smelled of raw rottenish water” (181); there the two drowned bodies have been found intertwined in a manner that eerily mimics a lovers’ embrace. For Ursula too, then, love, passion, and sexual desire are bound together closely with death, decay, and disgust. Gudrun Brangwen and Gerald Crich’s relationship is no less troubled: tellingly, their sexual affair commences just after his father’s funeral, when Gerald comes to her bedroom with the foul-smelling clay of the grave still clinging to his skin and clothes. In almost all of Lawrence’s

canon – which in effect dramatizes the French phrase for orgasm, *le petit mort* (“the little death”) – love is likewise very much like a death, whether that death means a literal, physical dying, as in the case of Gerald, or a more metaphorical obliteration, as in the “death” of the individual selves of Ursula and Birkin, when the two become one.

Lawrence’s depiction of the close relationship between these two apparently dissimilar forces – union and obliteration – recalls Freud’s account of the sex and death drives, which he views as so closely related as to be sometimes indistinguishable. These contradictory but also corresponding impulses are central to Freud’s theory, especially when he claims in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) that the human species is characterized by a “struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction” (119). Such a juxtaposition existed during several important moments in Lawrence’s own life – particularly his engagement to Louie Burrows, which commenced a mere few days before his mother’s death. He wrote after her funeral to his fiancée: “It certainly feels like one of the kingdoms of death, where I am. It is true, I have died, a bit of me – but there’s plenty left for you” (*CL* 1 199). Julia Kristeva finds the relationship between these two drives to be more complex than Freud does, asserting in her work *Tales of Love* (1987) that: “if Eros opposes Thanatos they are not evenly matched in their struggle. For Thanatos is pure while Eros has, since the beginning, been permeated with Thanatos, the most deep-seated drive being the death drive” (31).

Lawrence’s own ambivalent relationship with psychoanalytic theory – particularly Freud – is well documented. In *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921), Lawrence presents his most sustained critique of Freud’s work, acknowledging his initial hope (and simultaneous anxiety) that psychoanalysis might finally explain or uncover the unconscious, that “stream of hell which undermined [his] adolescence” (203). However, after Freud’s journey “into the cavern

of darkness, which is sleep and unconsciousness,” Lawrence laments that instead of illumination, we have been left with only “a huge slimy serpent of sex, and heaps of excrement, and a myriad repulsive little horrors spawned between sex and excrement” (203). Eschewing the idea that psychoanalysis is the “talking cure” that will erase our psychic ills, Lawrence calls it the “white garb of [...] therapeutic cant” (202). Nevertheless, in a letter written after the publication of *Sons and Lovers* (1913), he betrays some belief in the cathartic potential of writing, one version of what might be called this “talking cure”: “One sheds ones [*sic*] sicknesses in books – repeats and presents again ones emotions, to be master of them” (CL 2 90). Whether or not such mastery is really possible, again and again Lawrence’s writing seems to demonstrate a practical faith in the beneficial act of uttering language, as the highly autobiographical *Sons and Lovers* illustrates.

Indeed, he spent much of his career attempting, through literary means, to represent the distortion and repression of sexuality he had experienced at the hands of religion, rationalism, and his own upbringing – particularly his intimate, yet troubled relationship with his mother, which had an extreme effect on his romantic attachments to other women.¹ Lawrence had not been introduced to Freud’s theory before writing *Sons and Lovers*, yet he had for years before “been in lucid possession of the idea that his mother’s love for him had damaged him” (Worthen, *D. H. Lawrence: The Early Years* 443).² We can reasonably speculate along with Worthen that it likely provided “some comfort and reassurance to find that he had been thinking along the same lines as a revolutionary European intellectual” (443). All the same, as so many of Lawrence’s sentiments indicate, he was explicitly skeptical about Freudian psychoanalysis, protesting its

¹ We can see this clearly in his relationship with Jessie Chambers, which was fraught with conflict because of his mother’s disapproval and his own sense that he could not at the same time love a woman spiritually and physically. Lawrence’s portrayal of the love triangle among Paul Morel, Miriam Leivers, and Clara Dawes in *Sons and Lovers* dramatizes this apparent need to separate sexual love from spiritual love – largely because he associated his mother with the latter. For his part, Lawrence wrote of her simply: “She is my first, great love. She was a wonderful, rare woman – you do not know” (CL 1 195).

² He writes in an October 5, 1913, letter to Mitchell Kennerly, “I never did read Freud, but I have heard about him since I was in Germany” (CL 2 80).

overemphasis on sexual dysfunction and on the intellect as opposed to the deeply physical, “passional” self (*FTU* 111-12).

In his ambivalence, Lawrence anticipated the generations of scholars since who have found Freud’s theories both compelling and frustrating. Of these, Julia Kristeva’s reconsideration of Freudianism seems to remedy some of what Lawrence found objectionable. Kristeva does credit Freud with “raising the veil of mystery the nineteenth century had held over sexuality,” thus revealing “sexuality as the nexus between language and society, drives and the socio-symbolic order” (*RPL* 84). She asserts that Freud’s discovery of the unconscious in particular paved the way for a new kind of literature, one divorced from the old, “fetishized” poetic conventions, that “could not only be made radical, but could also have the objective and social impact it was aiming for” (*RPL* 84): a revolution in signification. In her own work – particularly such texts as *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), *Powers of Horror* (1982), and *Tales of Love* (1987) – Kristeva expands the discipline to include what she believes was missing in its first incarnation: a dynamic model of subjectivity, a study of language’s crucial role in identity formation and in relationships, and a reexamination of the pre-Oedipal drives. She resembles Lawrence not only in her revisionist project vis-à-vis psychoanalysis but also in the very language she uses to pursue it: revolution, flux, separation, merging. Kristeva also identifies an important missing piece in Freud’s theory, commenting that though the mother is an important figure in traditional psychoanalysis, she is often the object rather than the subject of study, and thus, “among the patients analyzed by Freud, one searches in vain for mothers and *their* problems” (*Tales of Love* 254, emphasis added).

The mother’s perspective represents a gap that Kristeva attempts to address in works like *Tales of Love*, which speaks explicitly of her own experience of pregnancy and childbirth, and

Black Sun (1989), which discusses melancholia as it affected several of her female patients who were also mothers. More importantly, Kristeva suggests that Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic paradigms are misguided in setting up the paternal function as the hostile presence which drives the infant out of the safety of the womb and into signification. Rather, she suggests, the maternal function prefigures these paternal threats because the logic of signification is already operating within the infant's experience of the mother's body and its materiality, even before he or she becomes a speaking subject, because the mother gives but can also withhold nourishment, love, and her very presence. Watching his mother's slow death, Lawrence confirmed the lingering power of her physical body when he wrote to Louie Burrows: "My heart winces to the echo of my mothers [*sic*] pulse" (*CL* 1 195). He continued to acknowledge the importance of the mother's experience through his many literary depictions of women who carry that title, including Gertrude Morel, Kate Leslie, and Anna Brangwen.

In addition to a shared criticism of Freud and a common concern with motherhood, points of juncture between Lawrentian novels and Kristevan psychoanalysis abound. A side-by-side examination of their works reveals a dialogue between their ideas that is even more rewarding than traditional Freudian readings – which tend to focus rather narrowly on male characters' "mother troubles" – because of the intriguing combination of congruities and incongruities that emerges. This study will endeavor such an exploration, by considering Kristeva's theories in light of the fictional and theoretical works of Lawrence and vice versa, in order to discover their points of correlation and contention. By doing so, I hope to show that Lawrence's fiction dramatizes Kristeva's theories as often as it complicates and problematizes those ideas. It is telling but not surprising that, like Lawrence's imperative to "shed one's sicknesses" through

writing, Kristeva's almost identical language declares: "Literature has always been the most explicit realization of the speaking subject's condition" (*RPL* 82).

Lawrence's novels often comprise extended family and individual narratives, and because Kristeva's theory works from a similar model of progressive self-development, this study will be organized accordingly, in terms of the life stages described by psychoanalysis. I first will discuss the mother's early role in the child's formation of identity, followed by his or her first encounter with what is other and thus threatens the borders of the self. Next, I will show how facing this abjection is a necessary precondition of entering into a love relationship with another. Because many of these unions lead to marriage and children, the chapter that follows will accordingly explore Lawrentian mothers' experience of bearing and rearing children. The final chapter will investigate the creative (as opposed to procreative) efforts of Lawrence's characters and show how these artistic aspirations function both as political statements and as attempts to articulate the unspeakable.

Lawrence and Kristeva

Building on the ideas of both Freud and Lacan, Kristeva emphasizes the intimate relationship between language and selfhood, addressing not only the child's perspective of individuation but also the mother's experience of birth and separation from the child. In *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*, Lawrence argues that identity, and therefore personality, comes from the conscious self. On the other hand, he posits that the infant inhabits another kind of subjectivity that is not "personal." Instead, Lawrence describes the stage of infancy as a time when "life bubbles up in us, prior to any mentality" (212). Because it is preconscious, it is an experience that cannot be verbalized. His account of infancy resembles Kristeva's description of

the semiotic, a pre-Oedipal state that precedes the infant's entrance into signification and reappears later in those aspects of language that exceed denotative meaning, like prosody and puns. Lawrence likewise insists on a life force that resists direct expression, and he uses the same metaphor Kristeva habitually does, in order to suggest that this vitality "bubbles up" in various ways as the individual matures, disrupting the smooth surface of self-consciousness and rationality.

For Lawrence, language figures centrally in the process of coming to selfhood, as he argues in his foreword to *Women in Love*:

Man struggles with his unborn needs and fulfillment. New unfoldings struggle up in torment in him, as buds struggle forth from the midst of a plant. Any man of real individuality tries to know and to understand what is happening, even in himself, as he goes along. This struggle for verbal consciousness should not be left out in art. It is a very great part of life. It is not superimposition of a theory. It is the passionate struggle into conscious being. (*WL* viii)

This struggle to individuate finds its way into this novel in the form of Ursula's and Birkin's corresponding attempts to establish distinct selves but also achieve an amatory connection with one another. Yet, more widely, it is also a feature of almost all of Lawrence's other fiction. We might think of Paul Morel's wrangling with Miriam – a relationship, he reassures Clara, in which "it's only words that go between us" (*SL* 403).

Daniel Albright contends that Lawrence's "characters are engaged in a perpetual struggle of self-definition; their main business is the determination of exactly where they stop" (22). These individuals must also protect the self from the simultaneously irresistible and annihilating potential of a close relationship with another. This simultaneous preoccupation with self-

definition and the yearning to lose oneself means that maturation is no simple task for Lawrentian characters. As they make their way towards effective separation from their parents (especially the mother), successful amorous relationships with others, and productive life pursuits (both creative and procreative), they encounter entities and persons who inspire a complex admixture of disgust and fascination. They must engage with and overcome this sense of abjection in order to become mature individuals capable of experiencing love, bearing children, and articulating themselves through words and art.

Perhaps the most important belief that both Kristeva and Lawrence have in common arises out of their radical rethinking of art. In similar ways, they both champion a dynamic model of identity that is, like revolutionary writing, provisional, fluid, and constantly in the process of becoming something else. In his short essay “Why the Novel Matters” (1925), Lawrence asserts, “All things flow and change, and even change is not absolute” (2272). He goes on to say specifically of individual identity: “In all this change, I maintain a certain integrity. But woe betide me if I try to put my finger on it. If I say of myself, I am this, I am that!—then, if I stick to it, I turn into a stupid fixed thing like a lamp-post. I shall never know wherein lies my integrity, my me. I *can* never know it” (2272). Lawrence’s model of flux finds its counterpart in Kristeva’s corresponding theory of the *sujet en procès*, a phrase that contains a French pun on the word *procès*: the individual is constantly “in the process [of becoming]” as well as “in crisis” and “on trial.” Kristeva makes use of both senses of the word, showing how the subject never gains a fixed, permanent sense of selfhood but rather is always evolving into something else. For Kristeva, this evolution happens through a kind of recurrent internal trial in which the subject is always questioning, testing, and discarding old identities, beliefs, and modes of expression and then adopting new ones. Each stance or identity is then negated in favor of further provisional

identities, and then negated again, and replaced with new models – and the process continues infinitely.

Through his life and art, Lawrence undoubtedly epitomized this model of the destabilized self, and it seems an apt characterization of a figure who endured social, personal, and even legal trials³ – yet through constant rebellion, contentiousness, and self-questioning never stagnated in terms of his thinking and writing. Though his career included some arguably problematic phases in which he did experiment with what seem to be misogynistic, fascist, and even violent philosophies (a novel like *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) or a short story like “The Woman Who Rode Away” (1925), whose ending Millett famously called “the death fuck” (410), immediately come to mind as specific examples of his more troubling fiction). Thus, readers have struggled to ascertain his ultimate set of values, yet his relentless self-revision and contradiction have made such a determination famously difficult.

Both Kristeva and Lawrence argue that art is the principle instrument of *revolt* or *flux*, though neither offers a comforting vision of art. The repeated negation of old identities, which Kristeva and Lawrence endorse, does create uneasiness, and both figures acknowledge this discomfort as a necessary condition of existence. Lawrence embraces dissonance, exclaiming: “Life cannot pass without these ruptures, severances, cataclysms; pain is a living reality, not merely a deathly. Why haven’t we the courage of life-pains?” (*PTU* 221). Similarly, Kristeva argues that a destabilized identity does create an anxiety that one must become accustomed to, though she is careful to distinguish her use of the word “anxiety” from its more negative association with neurosis. She theorizes that being able to keep oneself in the midst of restless

³ In yet another connection between Kristevan theory and D. H. Lawrence, *Modernism and the Theater of Censorship*, Adam Parkes alludes to the actual obscenity trial precipitated by the publication of *The Rainbow*, using the same language as Kristeva does in delineating the subject-in-process/on trial when he describes “Lawrence’s understanding of his relationship with the British public as theatrical and antagonistic, as an ongoing *trial*” (39, emphasis added).

self-questioning – a state of conflict that nevertheless can impart a certain amount of pleasure or jouissance – protects the individual from becoming either a paralyzed, pathological depressive or a robotic, complacent consumer. This is where art – poetic speech, in Kristeva’s parlance – becomes a dynamic force in shaping the subject (*RSS* 105). In her description of the fluid identity of the subject-in-process, Kristeva identifies the artist’s role, asserting: “Midway between these two solutions” – deathly melancholia or mindless consumerism – “lie intellectual works and art. These are the actual sites of this anxiety and revolt. The artist’s goal is to find the representation of this state of anxiety. It’s not a question of claiming that this does not exist or to accept living in marginality, but to represent this revolt in order to survive” (*RSS* 105).

Kristeva’s phrasing, in describing this transformative capacity of writing, is almost identical to Lawrence’s wording. Like him, Kristeva contends that:

In his work, the artist performs the “right” kind of violence: by appropriating what lies outside him, he achieves a balance between the self and the world. This very delicate alchemy, whose value we often underestimate, is an act of creation that takes place precisely at this interstice between the individual and the world—a privileged space where metaphor, metonymy, and other rhetorical figures come into play. The artist’s role is not to make a faithful copy of reality but to shape our attitude towards reality. This balance, this harmony, this genuine act of revolt is not about domination or concealment, but about the interstice, about appropriating and being possessed, about the resonance between the self and the world. (*RSS* 122)⁴

⁴ The violence Kristeva alludes to here seems to resemble that which Freud describes in *Civilization and Its Discontents*: “I take up the standpoint that the tendency to aggression is an innate, independent, instinctual disposition in man, and I come back now to the statement that it constitutes the most powerful obstacle to culture. [...] The natural instinct of aggressiveness in man, the hostility of each one against all and of all against each one,

To be sure, if we return to Lawrence's original quotation about his "sicknesses," we can see how his very choice of words has larger implications for an productive talking cure. As Jeremy Tambling puts it in *Confession: sexuality, sin, the subject*: "Lawrence 'repeats' his emotions confessionally. The word, fitting Freud's repetition compulsion in *Beyond the pleasure principle*[,] suggests that the aim of mastery is bound to be flawed; that the 'sicknesses' remain" (158). Because these conflicts are recurrently operating within the individual, whether "confessed" or not, any salutary effects of the talking cure tend to be ephemeral. This is why the idea of being "in process" is so crucial to both Kristeva's and Lawrence's ideas: identity cannot be fixed because it is in a continual state of evolution. Kristeva indicates this mutable quality of identity in her appropriation of the word *revolt*, drawing upon the word's etymology, which encompasses the complex meanings of "revolve," "overthrow," and "overturn." Kristeva's aesthetics requires the literary artist, as Lawrence puts it, to "shed [old] sicknesses" and adopt new identities through the revolutionary use of words.

Finally, Kristeva and Lawrence view sexuality in intriguingly consonant ways, if only because both seem to concur on the importance of language in erotic experience. For her part, Kristeva does not aim to "rehabilitate" sexuality, but rather to shift the way it is verbally expressed: "to improve the patient's ability to articulate his pattern of response, to enable him to control and process (*métabolise*) his sexual feelings" (*IBWL* 48). This characterization of sexuality seems to apply particularly well to a writer whose frank depiction of physical love aroused such public outrage. Kristeva insists that:

psychoanalysis is neither a manifesto for sexual liberation nor a method of enforcing some sort of "normal" sexuality. [...] [Sexuality] is a central part of the

opposes this program of civilization" (49). For Kristeva, such violence is appropriately transmuted through art, and specifically literary art, into a form that articulates these instincts and drives productively.

human being viewed as an open system, and when it goes wrong, suffering is the result, suffering to which psychoanalysis responds. In doing so psychoanalysis reveals the intrinsic perversity of human sexuality. “Perverse” is no doubt too pejorative a word to apply with a clear conscience to the commoner forms of sexuality. Yet it is accurate: we are narcissistic, incestuous, masochistic, sadistic, patricidal, and naturally attracted to or repelled by physical and moral types different from our own, hence aggressive toward others. But we can “make do” with human nature as it is. In any event we have no other choice. (*IBWL* 48)

Lawrence’s unwillingness to either sugarcoat or debase sexuality indicates his similar predisposition; while at points he admittedly condemned masturbation and hardcore pornography, he nonetheless also wrote that there was “nothing wrong with sexual feelings in themselves, so long as they are straightforward and not sneaking or sly” (*PO* 240). He indicts both modern vulgarity and Victorian morality as our most sinister “trick[s] of doing dirt on sex” (241).

Readers of Lawrence’s novels have long noted his novels’ preoccupation with both normal and “aberrant” sexualities, gender roles, and family relationships. Whether he was conscious of it or not, his literary concerns would appear to have originated to some extent from his own struggles in those areas. The task of critics, then, has been to try to divine how his literal biography relates to his literary representations of maturation, relationship, and artistic expression. Kristeva’s revisionary psychoanalytic texts can help in our understanding because they investigate the psyche as it negotiates the processes of individuation, abjection, sexual merging with another, motherhood, and aesthetic creation. In doing so, these theories provide a narrative to account for some of the more problematic or ambiguous issues in Lawrence’s longer

fiction. These include the novels' alternating homoeroticism and homophobia, their occasional brutal violence, their complex family relationships, their depictions of characters' struggles to achieve stable selfhood, their frequent moments of horror and revulsion, and their ambivalent romantic relationships.

Psychoanalytic and Feminist Criticism of Lawrence

Despite Lawrence's censure of psychoanalysis, scholars of his work have not been reluctant to use its approach in looking at his fiction. Many have pointed out how early-childhood dynamics, particularly those that exist between the child and the parents, seem to determine much of what happens in the Lawrentian individual's later adult relationships. Thus, psychoanalytic theory has occupied a prominent place in scholarly treatments of his work, and has warred with biographical and historical criticism as the preferred approach to what some see as the classic Oedipal novel. From the beginning, with explicitly psychological studies like John Middleton Murry's 1931 work *Son of Woman*, numerous publications have explored Lawrence's novels in light of his relationship with his mother, his attitudes toward women, and his unconventional union with a wife and mother of three who left her family to marry him. Because of scholars' tendency to focus on these issues, feminist critics of Lawrence in particular have been careful about how they positioned themselves in relation to his work. One of the first such readings of Lawrence, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), discusses the novels in terms of their depiction of the myth of woman as other. In the equally famous work *Sexual Politics* (1970), Kate Millett presents an even more strident indictment of Lawrence's alleged misogyny and fascism – a reading which has profoundly influenced the academy's less-than-laudatory perception of him for the last four decades.

As these studies indicate, the thorny psychological issues that continually surface in the novels offer a wealth of raw material for analysis, particularly for feminist critics. In *D. H. Lawrence and the Devouring Mother*, for instance, Judith Ruderman examines the ways in which Lawrence's psychological issues informed his leadership politics in the later years of his literary career, couching her study in the psychoanalytic terms of his coexistent "longing for merger and [...] fear of merger" (148). Cornelia Nixon takes a more historical approach to his work in *Lawrence's Leadership Politics and the Turn Against Women*, identifying what she sees as a fear of female power that emerged early in his career. In *Mothering Modernity: Feminism, Modernism, and the Maternal Muse*, Marylu Hill examines the importance of mothers in *The Rainbow* (a departure from the usual choice of text, *Sons and Lovers*). Barbara Mensch adds to the debate by suggesting that accusations of fascism against Lawrence must be considered in light of the difficulty in defining this term, the history of its use (which was initially not necessarily pejorative), and the distinctions that must be made among fascism, authoritarianism, and totalitarianism. In all of these critical treatments of Lawrence, the authors have rightly identified the sense his works (and his life itself) give of being motivated by complex psychological dynamics. These works likewise represent attempts to reconcile the art and life of a writer who ultimately resists pigeonholing.

Critics continue to theorize about a constellation of troublesome questions in Lawrence's work. For instance, how should we understand his attitude toward women – are they the bearers of a new, life-affirming consciousness (as in *The Rainbow*), the practitioners of a smothering love that spells death (as in *Sons and Lovers*), or symbolic figures who should stand aside as men reclaim their power through a politics of military leadership (as in *The Plumed Serpent*)? How do we account for Lawrence's periodically violent revulsion toward homosexuality, bearing in mind

that he also produced such lyrical and even tender scenes of homoeroticism as the ones that exist in *The White Peacock* and *Women in Love*? What do we make of his frequent reversals and re-reversals of earlier literary, psychological, sexual, and political positions he has espoused? Should we consider him an experimental modernist, a misplaced Victorian novelist, or a misogynistic polemicist? It is no wonder that many studies of modernism that deal with Lawrence at any length include a disclaimer that justifies their choice to write about him.

The critical stakes for the feminist psychoanalytic critic are even more perilous. In the introduction to her study, *D. H. Lawrence and the Paradoxes of Psychic Life*, Barbara Ann Schapiro provides a kind of apologia of the relationship between “Lawrence and This (Female Psychoanalytic) Reader.” She confesses her chagrin at one particular point in his unfinished novel *Mr. Noon* (1921), at which the narrator suddenly expostulates: “Therefore you sniffing mongrel bitch of a reader, you can’t sniff out any specific why or any specific wherefore, with your carrion-smelling psycho-analysing nose, because there is no why and wherefore” (MN 260). Schapiro goes on: “But Mr. Lawrence, I want to protest, you yourself are supremely interested in the whys and wherefores, in all the intricate play of conflicting passions and multiple, competing motivations beneath the conscious surface of our lives” (Schapiro 1). While she makes an important point about his self-contradictory method, Schapiro’s psychoanalytic study – and, I would argue, Millett’s even more well-known one – is not Lacanian but relational, and it thus lacks the emphasis on language that I believe is crucial to any reading of Lawrence’s work.

As Robert Burden rightly observes (in a chapter appropriately named “*Sons and Lovers and the Possibility of a Psychoanalytic Criticism*”), in D. H. Lawrence, psychoanalytic criticism must contend with a writer whose life and work existed in complex relationship to one another. Critics have always been anxious to discover how closely or loosely the novels reflect the

biography. Lawrence paradoxically provides a species of answer to that question in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), insisting, “An artist is usually a damned liar, but his art, if it be art, will tell you the truth of his day” (8). He goes on to utter the oft-quoted lines:

The artist usually sets out – or used to – to point a moral and adorn a tale. The tale, however, points the other way, as a rule. Two blankly opposing morals, the artist’s and the tale’s. Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it. (8)

To be clear, this study is intended to be neither a diagnosis of the author nor an attempt to “save” the novels from him. Rather, I hope to explore the ways in which Lawrence’s work – not merely its content, but also, in many ways, its formal innovations – practices the kind of art and subjectivity that Kristeva describes as revolutionary, even while it also points up some perils and potentially troubling implications of these models of selfhood and aesthetics. Lawrence’s unconventional use of poetic and metaphorical language demands that we not only pay attention to the psychology and relationships of characters but also, and equally fully, that we attend to *how* these dynamics are depicted by the author’s language: his repetitions, contradictions, puns, and prosody.

The critical conversation about Lawrence’s writing has long suffered under a reductionist tendency to search for the “one meaning” of his work.⁵ Even shortly after his death, in 1932, Catherine Carswell noted critics’ almost unanimous adoption of Murry’s reading of Lawrence, citing one reason for their endorsement of the heavily Freudian study: “It is one of the marks of those who dislike [Lawrence] that they evince a lust for simple and final pronouncements”

⁵ Here I quote James Thurber, whose facetious essay on “meeting” Lawrence is reprinted in *The Overwrought Urn*: “I cannot truthfully say that any part of that relationship was satisfactory, and therefore I am trying to forget D. H. Lawrence, which makes me about the only writer in the world who is” (168).

(xxxviii). Feminist and psychoanalytic studies, in particular, have tended to focus on content while ignoring particularities of the text – paradoxes, inconsistencies, and irregularities – that may interrogate or even deconstruct the apparent meaning of the author’s words.⁶

To date, no full-length Kristevan examinations of Lawrence’s work have been published, though her theories have been usefully applied to other modernist writers, both by Kristeva herself and by other critics.⁷ Her approach works particularly well with modernist literature, because so many texts from the period attempt to convey experience through radical linguistic innovation. Another benefit to her approach is that, unlike Lacan, whose theories concentrate more specifically on the subject’s entrance of language at and after the Mirror Stage, Kristeva brings attention to the instinctual stages *before* signification, identifying these pre-linguistic processes as a site of revolt. Modernists likewise were often engaged in writing that accesses illogical, irrational, and non-linear psychological states. We can look to Kristeva’s post-

⁶ One recent reading of *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922) might serve as an example of this discrepancy between Lawrence’s professed intent and his method of expressing himself. In a study exploring bioscience in literary modernism, Craig A. Gordon argues that intent and expression in Lawrence are distinctly at odds with one another, citing the author’s own very literal suffering from tuberculosis as perhaps one reason he returns again and again to a physical explanation of consciousness, even as he outwardly rejects such an account as too mechanistic. Lawrence’s main beef with Freudian psychoanalysis is what he perceives as its pretensions of science – whereas he paints his own theory as a more organic model of the unconscious. Gordon argues: “it seems that Lawrence’s biological psyche—purportedly an ineffable source of spontaneity and site of resistance to the determining effects of medical scientific discourse—is all too consonant with the mechanistic model of embodiment he identifies as belonging to medical science itself” (95). In other words, Lawrence begins with a critique of medical or materialist conceptions of the unconscious but then employs a system of describing the unconscious that itself refers almost exclusively to the ways in which structures (or “plexuses”) in the body relate to one another in predetermined ways in order to create the drives. He thus wrangles as strenuously as Kristeva and other feminists do with the Cartesian dualism of mind/body.

⁷ Two examples of such treatments include Makiko Minow-Pinkney’s book on *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (1987), as well as Miglena Nikolchina’s more recent study entitled *Matricide in Language: Writing Theory in Kristeva and Woolf* (2004). Kristeva herself writes at some length about Woolf (“Oscillation Between Power and Denial,” 1974), Beckett (“The Father, Love, and Banishment,” from *Desire and Language*, 1980), and Joyce (*Revolution in Poetic Language*, 1974), yet never addresses Lawrence’s work in any depth, perhaps because of his anomalous status in modernism. Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson employs some Kristevan theory to analyze the novels in her book *Writing Against the Family: Gender in Lawrence and Joyce* (1994). She argues that Lawrence uses language techniques that might be considered revolutionary by Kristeva’s definition because they are attempts to express the unconscious, pre-linguistic aspects of the pre-Oedipal stage. However, Lewiecki-Wilson contends that ultimately Lawrence does not seem to believe (if he is even aware) “that consciousness is a function of, or delimited by, language” (115), as Lacan and Kristeva would argue that it is. These examples, I believe, illustrate of the brevity and dearth of Kristevan analysis of Lawrence.

