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Peter Balbert, *D. H. Lawrence and the Marriage Matrix: Intertextual Adventures in Conflict, Renewal, and Transcendence*.

**Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016.
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Reviewed by Marina Ragachewskaya

Peter Balbert's book provides a new and refreshing outlook on Lawrence's work, a suggestive bridge between century-old considerations about marriage and contemporary echoes and resonances. Dwindling in popularity, relevance and esteem today, and losing its legal and social value, the institution of marriage cries out for renewal – a key term in Balbert's book, which identifies the "marriage matrix" as the motif, the basis, the foundation from which conflict, renewal and transcendence spring, and describes how this matrix shapes Lawrence's work. "Marriage thus functions, in effect", he argues, "as both the obsessive subject and the thematic center of Lawrence's writing" (1). Marriage is not idealised in Lawrence's work. It may lead to depression, codependency, destruction and atrophy. The methodological approach is accordingly quite complex, as it incorporates psychoanalysis, psychobiography, rhetorical analysis, historical context and close reading to elucidate "the excellence of fiction" (3). Balbert thus declares himself "an advocate, in the Leavisite tradition, for the unparalleled nature of Lawrence's achievement", and he asserts the crucial, if now unfashionable, importance of understanding, studying and attending to transcendence. The chapters are grouped into two parts: the first, longer section deals with some of Lawrence's fiction published in the 1920s – *The Lost Girl*, *The Captain's Doll*, *The Fox*, *The Ladybird*, *St. Mawr*, *The Princess* and *The Virgin and the Gypsy* – and the second, offering an intertextual reading of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, also brings personal experience of teaching and research to the critical terrain.

In Chapter One, rather unexpectedly from a critical point of view, the “matrix” originates in the coccygeal continuum as a physical, bodily, spiritual and mystical spot/area/ganglion/chakra from which arises the dark power of individual assertion in the world of other people. Lawrence’s most intense speculation about the need of “male primacy” is perceived to coincide with the problems arising in his own marriage; for instance, Frieda’s “lengthy absence” in 1918 and the ensuing productive period when he was able to revise many texts and write new ones, including *The Fox* (14). However, it is in *The Lost Girl* (1920) that “his *fundamental* (in its most literal sense) *chakra* gains a more explicit sexual significance for Alvina and Ciccio” (19). Ironically, it is Alvina who overcomes her alienation from the world of men and sex and achieves this coveted instinctual fulfillment in marriage, while the initially confident and assertive Ciccio is strangely drawn away from fulfilling “independent selfhood”. Balbert concludes that this chakra is the “route to maturity and transcendence – a journey initiated by the Italian but characteristically completed by his stronger and more confident wife” (54).

In Chapter Two, the author discards assertions of “comedic aspects” in *The Captain’s Doll* to argue that the “sober design of the marriage matrix” is “centre-stage” (59). A disarmingly precise interpretation of the main character’s actions and psychological make-up concludes that Captain Hepburn’s downward depressive turn is occasioned by the death of his wife, and his revival – very much in line with Lawrence’s doctrines – by intense involvement with other people. The novella’s rich intertextual tapestry associates Hepburn with a man-god and the myth of Balder. For the marriage matrix, it is this manhood that is put to the test and reasserted by Hannele, a stabilising agent of her lover’s emotional life.

Chapter Three discusses further preoccupation with manliness in *The Fox*, where, as Balbert argues, palimpsestic fiction – “consciously supported by Frazer and unconsciously illuminated by Freud” (91) – makes up the marriage matrix. The symbolic functions of the animal as understood by Frazer, and Freud’s

metaphors of the unconscious, inform analysis of the marriage matrix as a fight for possession, that is not so much sexual as spiritual. This novella, according to Balbert, is the only one where the marriage matrix and its related themes of renewal and transcendence “are conspicuously connected to issues of maturity and experience” (110). The author also makes apt references to Lawrence’s own marriage and echoes of his doctrines in essays and other fiction, but mostly in the two psychological books.

Based on Lawrence’s friendship with Cynthia Asquith, Chapter Four considers *The Ladybird* to be very revealing about Lawrence’s “secret and passionate desire” and manages to resituate a very disturbing – “adamant and politically incorrect” (123) – text in our time without condemning or discarding it. Male primacy, as the critic shows, loses its adamant and absolute quality; rather, it is transformed into a carefully planned seduction by Count Psanek, as exposed by analysis of the seventeen episodes detailing his encounters with Lady Daphne. Referring again to Frazer, Balbert demonstrates how “the Count’s desire and rhetorical ability participate in the seduction of Daphne” (137), as well as the mystical functioning of certain symbols, such as the thimble. Balbert also offers a psychobiographical reading of *The Ladybird* which claims that: “The passion of the coal miner’s son for the aristocratic and glamorous Cynthia remains an unrealizable illusion that cannot square with the reality of her class consciousness, practical caution, and unconsummated liaisons” (149). The chapter ends, then, by posing the provocative question of whether Lawrence himself embraced the “nerve-thrilled excitement which passes for sensuality” that he condemned so much (152)?

Chapter Five offers a fresh and innovative view of *St. Mawr*, which accepts the preoccupation with phallic manliness alleged by other critics but refocuses on the unification of humans and animals by “a bond of human sympathy” (159), as influenced by Frazer (who Lawrence was reading at the time). Indeed, the novella’s depiction of the mystical forces of nature and further estrangement of the major female characters from men reveals the rhetorical

transition from panophilia to phallophobia. Archetypal and seminal connections to the landscape, which are read alongside Lawrence's essay 'Pan in America', articulate not only the procreative but also the destructive component of the landscape: "The phallophobia so intrinsic to this novella is a reflection of postwar malaise and of the wounded state of Lawrence's body and soul" (169). This reading also emphasises the importance of otherness – in this case the "spirit of place" – for human transcendence and the renewed soul, while simultaneously applying a clear psychobiographical analysis of the story as a projection of the writer's "traits and emotions" attributed to someone else (176).

Chapter Six traces connections with Pan mythology in *The Princess*, combined with an intertextual reading of 'Introduction to These Paintings' (addressing national character, medical trauma, and Lawrence's emphasis on the outbreak of syphilis in Europe), which draws on a metaphor of an "infectious psyche" to illuminate a fear of sex and the gradual loss of Pan energy (as Lawrence saw it). This accounts for Dollie's stasis, her inability to change, let alone to transcend, and illustrates the marriage matrix disconnected from its sexual elements in the character's inner perception. As a result of Romero's "morbidly and defeatism" and Dollie's "immaturity and narcissism" (198), there is no understanding by the protagonist of her parents' pathological and un-renewing marriage. Images of Lawrence's paintings supplement this chapter, as it is *The Princess* that "reveals the consistency of the connection between Lawrence's doctrines about painting and his fiction" (196).

Chapter Seven closely analyses *The Virgin and the Gypsy* as a novella which portrays a "temperamentally cautious, silently charismatic, but distinctly isolate male, a frustrated and vulnerable female, as well as an instinctual connection between them that crosses the boundaries of class and culture" (207). The biographical context and its substantive analysis (Lawrence was "mired in a post-traumatic writer's block" [211]) helps to elucidate a form of renewal in the writer in the process of creating the story. Balbert's case for reevaluation of this undervalued fiction articulates

Lawrence's creation of the "fourth dimension" – a special timeless, fairy-tale-like quality of the narrative, as well as, perhaps, its main female character's transcendence, or even, Yvette's and the gypsy's instinctual oneness against "easy moral judgement and mechanical time" (226). Also, as Balbert observes, Lawrence's treatment of the marriage matrix takes on a decidedly negative cast.

Chapter Eight ventures enlightening comparison between Lawrence (*Lady Chatterley's Lover* in particular) and Norman Mailer's *The Deer Park*. In itself this is a valid contribution to Lawrence studies, but it also suggests a vital link tying Lawrence's inheritance to our present time. Mailer's admission of Lawrence's influence is discussed at length to show that he absorbs from Lawrence "how a novelist can portray, with variety and insight, society's entrenched habits of cheap sex, manipulative passion, and aggressive posturing" (255).

Chapters Nine and Ten are not directly about Lawrence, but they are timely and topical for their discussion of the contemporary situation of the humanities, teaching literature and paying homage to our mentors. Balbert's analysis of the notion of renewal, which is so crucial to Lawrence, proves illuminating. Projected onto the contemporary realm of academic research these chapters are a stimulus as well as a case study. Overall, this ambitious work by Peter Balbert offers so much more than it claims or than the reader anticipates.