REVIEWS

Linda Ruth Williams - *Sex in the Head: Visions of Feminity and Film in D.H.Lawrence*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1993
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This is a book which pays Lawrence the compliment of taking him thoroughly seriously as a writer who prioritised feeling, as a creator of visually explicit fiction who also anathematised the visual, as one who insisted that sex in the head was the wrong kind - but who wrote fiction after fiction about imagined sexuality. Linda Ruth Williams takes these contradictions very seriously, just as they should be taken. I suggested some years ago that Lawrence might usefully be seen as one of the great twentieth century writers about the experience of self-consciousness, and that his career could be seen as a lifelong attempt to suppress the highly conscious, "knowing" intellectual that he was (at least in part) and to prioritise - and release - the instinctive being he wished to be. Linda Ruth Williams' book shows in detail how his writing did this, though her starting point (and finishing point) are by no means the same as mine. Her use of the language and attitudes of feminist film studies turns out to be marvellously useful, though I wish she had explained the word "scopophilic" (first appearing on p.9, but also *passim*), which appears in no dictionary that I know of (it apparently means "voyeuristic").

Her book - in spite of its considerable intelligence, its range, its incisiveness, its thoughtfulness - also however reveals at times an almost obsessive desire to categorise Lawrence as ideologically male (as well as, obviously, male gendered), stereotypically blind and monomanically phallic - while simultaneously offering, gallantly, to rescue him from that very fate by showing how often and how completely he transgresses his own personal and cultural determinants. On the one hand: fine, it is an interesting and unusual position for a feminist critic to inhabit. Yet - if Lawrence really *does* transgress those determinants - then why categorise him in the first place, except as a politically correct gesture? Why not write of his work as irredeemably complex from the start? Would he actually need rescuing if he had not so frequently and so unceremoniously been dumped in the s*** by the very attitude which then offers him a ladder to clamber out again?

The reason, I suggest, does not lie with any fault on the part of Linda Ruth Williams. She is honest, highly intelligent and extremely articulate: her book is one of the best books on Lawrence of the last decade. Yet the subject of Lawrence and sex is one that continues to haunt this generation. It is always

founding fathers who get most savagely attacked for being patriarchal, of course; and I think it has now become impossible to address Lawrence's work without either going on to the defensive or the attack in relation to his attitude to sexuality: whether from the feminist, masculinist, homosexual, heterosexual, bipartisan or (indeed) any other point of view.

Linda Ruth Williams shows one way through the dilemma: agree that all the hateful sterotypical attitudes are there in the writing, and that they are every bit as bad as one might expect; but then show how the writing does not actually enact or enforce them as one would expect.

But *are* the sterotypical attitudes there, just as simply as even a book like this will accept? It is worth reminding ourselves that Lawrence's contemporaries found him remarkably advanced in his attitude towards men, women and sexuality. I confess that I hate arguments that address a writer of some seventy years ago with all the comfort and security of attitudes developed long since their (at times) heroic life endeavours, and then pat them on the head for being sensible or tick them off for not seeing further than they did. If we cannot be historical in our attitude towards the past, what hope do we have of understanding it (or ourselves, as its products)?

It seems to me, moreover, that, over and over again, Lawrence surpassed in insight and understanding everything that might have been expected of a man of his generation, class and cultural background; and that he saw, seventy years ago, more clearly into many of our continuing dilemmas about sexuality than most of our own contemporaries, even though his positions were clearly historical and seem to some extent historically defined. He believed, for example (to take him at his most apparently conservative) that, on the whole, women should take care of children and home. Is this an example of a conservative, patriarchal, repressive or chauvinist attitude? No. In an age when most women's possibilities of paid employment were as poor as they were (Lawrence's knowledge came mostly from England before the World War I, we should remember), such an attitude to everyday concerns might be regarded as nothing less than sensible. It certainly did not stop Lawrence from thinking through - on the one hand - what he chose to characterise as *female* qualities in all human beings: and his version of the female was very far from being the housebound *mater familias*. Nor did it stop him - on the other hand - creating fictional heroine after fictional heroine who, unconstrained by their ability to earn, nonetheless chose to live the lives they chose to live, in spite of ruling conventions and social mores.

Where Linda Ruth Williams is especially good is on the subject of the "female gaze" in Lawrence: the way in which the attitude to the self and other which the fiction so often characterises as inimical to relationship is, nevertheless, the

very attitude which the narrator of the fiction constantly occupies. However, she does not pay sufficient attention to the possibility that Lawrence's writing about women, about mirrors, about knowing, about the "female gaze", is not a masculine, would-be-superior and rather inconsistent theology of sex but (rather) a desperate attempt to salvage feeling from its shipwreck on the terrifying shores of the all-knowing mind: a mind which clearly Lawrence knew through and through, from his own experience, and regularly attempted to *write himself out of*. Not for nothing did he invent in his first truly autobiographical fictional hero, Paul Morel, a man who is clearly incapable of coping with his knowing, intelligent mind, and therefore has to be created as a painter, not knowing in words but feeling in paint. As late as 1926, Lawrence himself turned to painting in a rather desperate attempt to escape the words that came too easily and too triumphantly encompassed the world as he knew it (and wished he did not know it, but felt it instead). Masturbation and pornography were to him the best examples of how the mind was capable of knowing sexuality and revelling in it - and the reasons why they (somehow) had to be outlawed, if sexuality was ever to be what his own experience and ambitions had long wished to make it and his profound insight told him it could indeed be.

Linda Ruth Williams also makes much of the fact (and is rather amused by it too) that Lawrence's interest in anal intercourse (seen, for example, in both *Women in Love* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, as well as in the unpublished 1918 Whitman essay) was both so covert and so unclearly expressed - she says that "anuses cannot even be spoken of in coy euphemism"(108). She ignores the historical fact that not only was the matter of anal intercourse by far the most taboo of all the varieties of sexual writing in which Lawrence engaged (and by 1916 he knew to an inch just how far he could go and could not go); but that, in the real world, it could actually lead to hefty prison sentences, whether as a practice between men and men or men and women. The liberal 1990s, and their politically correct outspokenness, are no guide to what was for most people literally unthinkable in the 1920s.

Nevertheless, Lawrence thought it: and wrote about it, albeit carefully. The reason, however, was not because he was, as Linda Ruth Williams ironically and pityingly calls him, "the sodomite, the closet queen, the anally excited, the playful sado-masochist"(108). None of those categories are in the least bit useful for thinking about what Lawrence was doing as a writer. They are just the mental games an intelligent but here unthinking writer of the 1990s plays. It seems to me that the most mindless of all the sex acts in Lawrence's writing and - probably - imagination was that which was most taboo, darkest, least seen and seeing: and that was anal intercourse. He was trying to write about - and make his readers conscious of - areas of experience where consciousness was to all intents and purposes

impossible. There are times in his writing when what Linda Ruth Williams terms "the primary Lawrentian organ, the penis" is more like the enquiring mind than it is like the blindly aware anus. For all the penis's extravagantly obscene entry upon the stage of the English novel in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, therefore, strutting and showing-off as it does, the so-to-speak fundamental phallic weakness is its very knowingness. The penis has its own consciousness, it is cocky and self-determining. It needs to meet its proper (rather than priapal) "other", the well of loneliness, the core, the root, "the black of the corrosive humus"(109-110), if it is to experience the mind closed to mental sex and open to actual feeling. And while women have arses, then, men have balls: both of them appropriately blind alleys, not all-seeing eyes.

And there is, consequently, simply no point in suggesting, knowingly, that Lawrence was "really" a repressed homosexual or (in Linda Ruth Williams' phrase) the "closet queen". Few people and fewer writers have known themselves as chillingly well as Lawrence did, for better and for worse. And though as a young man he found men more attractive then women (and a great deal more prepared to have their beauty admired than their female equivalents), he remained distinctly more heterosexual than homosexual: though (again) always prepared to write his way into the opposite attitude than the one he actually inhabited, to see where it would lead him and what experience it would take him into. He would have regarded that as his responsibility as a writer, even if it had not (probably: but only probably - he was such a good writer) been his own attitude as a human being.

To take one of Linda Ruth Williams' most telling examples, then; if a woman is to be, like Constance Chatterley, "a passive, consenting thing, like a slave, a physical slave"(110), then it is not because women are gendered like *this* while men are gendered like *that*, but because anal intercourse requires the utmost giving up of personality, acquiescence, relaxation and mere blindness: and Lawrence thinks his way through the position of the woman who consents to this experience. Linda Ruth Williams also sees this, but she explains it as Lawrence's fiction knowing better than its writer. I see it as intrinsic to the enterprise in which Lawrence was engaged: the recovery, for language and consciousness, of the means to be unconscious, to be given and taken, to experience self and other at their maximum. I suggest that the next step in Lawrence studies might well be to show how, in detail, Lawrence not only inhabited attitudes he is both popularly and critically supposed to have opposed, but the deepest paradox of his writing is that it attempts to put to sleep the very consciousness which is, simultaneously, its acutest reader. To some extent, Linda Ruth Williams does show that, and her book is to be applauded for it. But there is a lot more to do, as we recover our own immediate intellectual history and Lawrence's place within it.