

CHAPTER ONE

*The Destruction Phase of
Lady Chatterley's Lover*

In late October 1926, two weeks after telling Frieda he would “never write another novel,” Lawrence began writing *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.¹ He finished the third and final version in January 1928. His letters from that period indicate he powerfully identified with the novel and considered it as precious and frail as his self. Fearing public outcry and government censorship, he initially had no desire to publish the manuscript. Only after considering private publication did he resolve to rewrite and publish the work. While some critics have considered the novel one of the worst of his major fictions, he thought it a consummation of his creative efforts:

It's what the world would call very improper. But you know it's not really improper—I always labour at the same thing, to make the sex relation valid and precious, instead of shameful. And this novel is the furthest I've gone. To me it is beautiful and tender and frail as the naked self is, and I shrink very much even from having it typed. Probably the typist would interfere.²

In contrast to this positive self-assessment, even so extreme an advocate as F. R. Leavis considers the novel overly “deliberate” and “calculated.”³ And Michael Squires, who has studied the novel's composition, deems it “schematic” (168). My analysis of the novel's language shows that despite the sexual explicitness, the somewhat schematic structure, and the occasional stylistic heavyhandedness, the representations of eroticism are much more complex and subtle than has been realized. While the plot is

14 *D. H. Lawrence's Language of Sacred Experience*

relatively straightforward, and most of the characters—with the exception of Connie and Mellors—are flat, the literary devices and discourses are carefully crafted. Indeed, these techniques serve a two-pronged religious intention: to purge the reader's consciousness of conventional sexual ideas and emotions and to generate new numinous responses.

What critics have generally overlooked in *Lady Chatterley*, and what I stress, are the techniques that Lawrence uses to effect transformations of the reader's consciousness. There have been few studies of the novel's structure and even fewer of its technique. The investigations of structure generally focus on its content and neglect its texture.⁴ And the studies of technique usually fail to relate technique to artistic intention.⁵

An interesting textural analysis of the novel's structure is offered by Joan Peters. She proposes that its "quality of language and tone" indicate it has two narrators: a Cliffordlike narrator who narrates the first half of the novel, and a Mellorslike narrator who narrates the second half.⁶ However, while Peters is justified in identifying more than one narrator, she overlooks the fact that the "Clifford" half of the novel contains many moments of vital consciousness, and the "Mellors" half contains many scenes of deadening consciousness.⁷ She fails to realize that two types of narrative consciousness in fact oscillate, the one waning as the latter waxes. She also does not detect hybrid or intermediate forms of narratorial and figural consciousness which occur as Connie's sexual initiation is in its early stages.

I believe it is the neglect of the reader that has kept Peters and other investigators from seeing the novel's waxing and waning structure.⁸ My claim is that one set of devices and discourses is intended to mortify the reader's consciousness while another set aims to energize and unify the reader's awareness and thereby evoke a sacred experience. In the first half of the novel, the first set dominates; in the second half, the second set dominates; but both sets are present throughout because the purification and vivification phases are oscillating, the former waning as the latter waxes. In this chapter, I analyze the disintegrative devices; in the next chapter, I examine the sacralizing techniques. Both chapters focus on Lawrence's detailed concern with selecting and arranging language at the levels of scene, paragraph, and sentence and show how complex forms are used to channel reader responses. This detailed shaping at the local level contrasts with the somewhat schematic simplicity of the plot. Even at the local level, however, the prose sometimes becomes overly calculated, as we shall see. In structuring this and other novels, Lawrence had to steer between imposing a rigid form and writing without any forethought. The novels had to be organized enough to guide his readers' responses through

THE DESTRUCTIVE PHASE

15

the phases of transformation but not so orderly that they took on the stultifyingly mechanical shape he sought to destroy.

The destruction phase begins with the opening chapter and is most intense in the first half of the 19-chapter novel. Chapters I–IV are completely dominated by scenes with a mortifying aim, and such scenes also predominate in Chapters V–IX. While these scenes also occur in the novel's second half, they do so with much less frequency and duration. Conversely, vitalizing episodes achieve maximum frequency and intensity in the novel's second half. The sex scenes between Connie and Mellors do not start until Chapter X, but the vitalization phase is perceptible as early as Chapter V, when the sacred diction and vivifying techniques are used to introduce Mellors to the reader. This overlapping of the mortifying and vivifying phases resembles the overlapping subjective and objective phases in Yeats's symbolic model of personal and collective development.⁹ While Yeats represents this overlapping of the "antithetical" and "primary" phases as two interpenetrating gyres, Lawrence uses the image of a snake sloughing off its skin: the new flesh emerges as the old flesh disintegrates.

The novel's mortification devices have both conceptual and emotive functions. The main conceptual function is to make readers aware of the destructive and deadening features of their sexual consciousness and action and to induce them to repudiate these nonvital modes of knowing and relating. Lawrence developed devices that call attention to the splits in the reader's consciousness between self and other, mind and body, ego and unconscious. Some of the novel's techniques exaggerate the verbal and visual features of modern consciousness associated with these splits: dualism, verbosity, visuality, reflexivity, conceptualization, objectification, accentuated time-space sense. By using devices that amplify the splits in the reader's consciousness, Lawrence in effect completes the splintering process: he shatters, kills off, the reader's moribund erotic ideas and orientations and prepares the way for new, more vital and integrative forms of consciousness. Thus, Lawrence uses the analytic tools of the modern mind against itself. In fact, he thought the great benefit of critical self-reflection was its ability to dismember itself by realizing its own limitations and fabrications. For him, the ultimate self-purification is to realize that the sacred energies of life, especially those experienced in passionate encounters, cannot be known conceptually. Critical reflection is thus most useful when it gives rise to silence, thereby paving the way for ineffable numinous experiences.

It is important to emphasize that Lawrence's attack on logocentrism and ocularcentrism is implicitly anti-masculinist. Feminist attacks on

16 D. H. Lawrence's Language of Sacred Experience

Lady Chatterley have generally overlooked the subversive implications of its formal structures. For example, Simone de Beauvoir, who criticizes the novel as masculinist, does not seem to realize that Lawrence shares her belief that the dualistic thinking inherent in patriarchal language is responsible for the construction of "woman" as "the Other."¹⁰ Kate Millett supports her critique of the novel by citing masculinist statements made by Mellors but ignores passages that undercut those messages.¹¹ She also fails to attend to broader negational structures that undermine all dogmatic assertions made within the novel.¹² Recent feminist thinkers have cited dualistic thought and language as responsible for generating and enforcing sexist structures in Judaism and Christianity.¹³ They have also linked ocularcentrism to male domination.¹⁴ Lawrence's hyperbolic use of dualistic modes of consciousness to dismantle those very modes is analogous to feminist appropriations of traditionally masculine rhetorical devices in order to subvert male power.¹⁵

The main emotive function of the mortification devices is to evoke in readers various forms of emotional repulsion toward modern sexuality: boredom, irritation, anger, rage. Many of Lawrence's Christian readers had been reared to repress rage. He believed that the more visceral the reader's repulsion, the more likely it was to be a "really new feeling" (*Study of Thomas Hardy* 155). Lawrence's desire to release the reader's rage has feminist implications since critics such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar have argued that feminist literature positively values female expressions of anger.¹⁶ Repulsion is also a form of suffering, and Lawrence thought that suffering could be either purgative or obstructive. He believed that a "really new novel" produces pain and resistance, but the resistance can be overcome.¹⁷ By stripping away readers' defensive, egoistic shell—what Wilhelm Reich calls "character armor"—the narrator of *Lady Chatterley* places them in direct contact with the suffering brought on by their sexual, asexual, or antisexual attitudes and practices.¹⁸

The mortifying function of *Lady Chatterley* is implied in the narrator's description of the novel's power to lead the reader's sympathy away from old, dead things:

It is the way our sympathy flows and recoils that really determines our lives. And here lies the vast importance of the novel, properly handled. It can inform and lead into new places the flow of our sympathetic consciousness, and it can lead our sympathy away in recoil from things gone dead. Therefore, the novel, properly handled, can reveal the most secret places of life: for it is in the *passional*

THE DESTRUCTIVE PHASE

17

secret places of life, above all, that the tide of sensitive awareness needs to ebb and flow, cleansing and freshening. (101)

In the novel's first "rhythm," the narrator seeks to repulse and "cleanse" the reader's consciousness; in its second rhythm, a second narrator, with a very different consciousness and style, tries to "properly handle" language to "freshen" the reader's "sensitive awareness," much as Mellors and Connie channel the flux and reflux of their sensual energies by the proper handling of each other's bodies. The fact that "the tide of sensitive awareness needs to ebb and flow" indirectly informs readers that the novel's narrative texture will itself oscillate as the two narrators alternate: one narrator seeking to lead readers away from dead things, and the other attempting to lead them toward living beings. The emphasis on sympathy is reminiscent of the sentimental novel, but unlike the sentimental novelist, Lawrence is not trying to evoke conventional sympathetic responses to familiar social situations, but to elicit compassion in just those areas excluded by nineteenth-century fiction: sexual relations.

Disintegrative techniques occur in the descriptive, narrative, and dialogal modes of the novel and are most prominent in the narrator's representations of the characters' sexual attitudes, actions, and speech. The highly mediated psychonarrations reflect the narrator's own "modern" consciousness as much as the characters'. The novel's mortification phase is thus narrated by a "modern" critical narrator, who, like Clifford, "was really clever at that slightly humorous analysis of people and motives which leaves everything in bits at the end. But it was rather like puppies tearing the sofa cushions to bits: except that it was not young and playful, but curiously old, and rather obstinately conceited" (50). This narrator tries to tear to bits the reader's split consciousness. A different narratorial consciousness is used to depict the sexual relationship between Connie and Mellors because only a new or transformed narrator can reinvigorate the reader. Destructive devices can be found in: (1) the narrator's general satiric and parodic approach and excessive time-consciousness; (2) the head-centered narration of the youthful sexual activities of young Connie and Hilda; (3) the ocularcentric portrayals of Clifford and Michaelis and of Connie just before she meets Mellors; (4) the vision-dominated representations of Connie's affair with Mick; and (5) the hyperintellectual discussions of sex by Clifford and his Cambridge friends.

Throughout the mortification phase, the narrator often resorts to satire when describing a character's behavior. The distinguishing features of satire make it useful for Lawrence's disintegrative intention. These features include: narratorial distance, irony, dissection, ridicule. Each feature

18 *D. H. Lawrence's Language of Sacred Experience*

represents a cut or split. Distance is perhaps the primary characteristic because the other qualities follow from it. That is, the narrator's distant point of view—what Lawrence calls “knowing in terms of apartness”—establishes a profound rupture between the observing narrator and the observed characters (“Apropos of *LCL*” in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* 331). Into the gap opened by irony, the narrator pours invectives against figural consciousness and action. The characters are ridiculed to the point of caricature or character assassination. Significantly, the narrator describes satire as a mode of sympathy: “one may hear the most private affairs of other people, but only in a spirit of respect for the struggling, battered thing which any human soul is, and in a spirit of fine, discriminative sympathy. For even satire is a form of sympathy” (101). But the severity of narrator's representations often violates the very standard he sets forth. He does not seem to respect or even want to sympathize with such struggling, battered souls as Clifford and Michaelis. When describing them, he usually slides from discrimination to dissection. In fact, some critics have suggested that the satiric representation of Clifford is virtually devoid of sympathy. Michael Squires shows that the successive versions of the novel reveal Lawrence progressively winnowing the sympathetic qualities in Clifford as well as trimming Connie's and the narrator's sympathetic responses to him. I would argue that this paring was done in large measure to meet the novel's destructive aim. This aim is often pursued so relentlessly that sympathy is abolished. By assassinating the characters, the narrator also commits a self-destructive act, for he has negated his own compassion. Lawrence thus reveals that when satire—even his own—is pushed to the extreme, it becomes self-defeating. He was particularly antipathetic toward the irreverent satire of the Bloomsbury circle, here approximated by Clifford's circle of Cambridge friends.¹⁹

The narrator's severity indicates an unconscious hostility, the very hostility that Tommy Dukes diagnoses in himself and his comrades. The narrator's intellectual spite toward the characters suggests he has not only repressed the fundamental connectedness between himself and the characters but has also projected his own malevolent qualities onto them. That is, as a dualistic thinker, he experiences the same repression and projection as the characters he dissects.²⁰ The narrator hates in the Cambridge crowd the very qualities he hates—half consciously, half unconsciously—in himself. Thus, he represents them in two ways: he not only portrays them but is also their representative (he is one of them). In the depictions of Connie and Mellors's erotic relationship, which are intended to revitalize the reader's consciousness, the new narrator has a

THE DESTRUCTIVE PHASE

19

different view of satire and sometimes admonishes Connie's biting reactions to the lovemaking. For example, in Chapter XII, when Connie ridicules Mellors's sexual "performance," the narrator comments, "Cold and derisive her queer female mind stood apart" (172). This new or renewed narratorial consciousness is aware that satiric corrosiveness might go so far as to destroy a person or relationship.

An important function of Lawrence's mortification techniques is to make readers aware that their modern sexual consciousness has a larger psychosocial context. By using discourses from modern science, commerce, and art, the narrator subliminally tells readers that a "mental" consciousness not only shapes their erotic lives but also structures most modern institutions. Thus, Lawrence highlights what Foucault would call the "episteme" underlying the discourses that define and control sexuality.²¹

Throughout Chapter I, the narrator uses the language of science to satirize young Connie and Hilda and parody the omnipresent scientific mindset. Scientific discourse emphasizes categorization, explanation, prediction, and control. The overuse of abstract words, compound-terms, and noun phrases suggests that the sisters' erotic experiences have been filtered, reduced, and governed by their rational minds.²² What "mattered supremely" to Connie and Hilda was not "the sex thing" or "love experience" but "the impassioned interchange of talk" (7-8). "Sex thing" suggests the scientific tendency to objectify phenomena, and "impassioned interchange of talk" reads like jargon from a social psychology textbook. Hyphenated phrases like "sex-thrill" and "love-making" resemble chemical compounds, and the hyphen accentuates the dualism built into scientific thought. The plethora of conjoined abstract nouns is precisely what George Orwell will later identify as one of the "mental vices" of writers living in an age wedded to scientific abstractions and political orthodoxy.²³ In *Lady Chatterley*, the continued repetition of these abstract phrases is intended to have an annoying effect on readers. This annoyance could intensify to anger or modulate to boredom.

In fact, the narrator repeats "sex" ad nauseam in order to indicate its nearly null meaning and to further negate any lingering sense. In two short, successive paragraphs, "sex" is repeated six times: "sex business . . . sexual love . . . sex thing . . . sex . . . sex thing . . . sexual intercourse" (7-8). The insistent repetition acts like the blows of Mellors's hammer that startle and shatter Connie's consciousness. In Chapter VI, "sex" is said to be one of "the great words" that, "it seemed to Connie, were cancelled for her generation" (62). The novel's destruction phase tries to cancel out the dead or deadening meanings of these once great words so that they can be later invested with some of the religious power

20 *D. H. Lawrence's Language of Sacred Experience*

of pagan fertility rites. In short, "sex" will be redefined, revalued, and recharged in the erotic scenes involving Connie and Mellors.²⁴ The repetitions of "sex" also indicate the ubiquitous presence of this term in scientific and popular discourse during the first decades of the century.

To the sister's scientific minds, the words "sex" and "love" are so abstract and empty that their semantic differences are almost nonexistent. The narrator reinforces the sense of interchangeability by placing the words in alternating paragraphs: "It was obvious in them too that love had gone through them: that is, the physical experience. . . . In the actual sex thrill within the body, the sisters nearly succumbed" (9). Sex and love have been reduced not only to each other but also to a "physical experience." That is, their meanings have been limited to those assigned by the mechanistically oriented physical sciences. Lawrence tends to use the adjective "sensual" rather than "physical" when valorizing an unselfconscious bodily experience; he sometimes uses "sensuous" to describe the self-conscious, physical experiences that he depletes.²⁵ Freud had hoped to reduce psychoanalysis to a physiological science, expressing this aim as early as 1895 in "Psychology for Neurologists" and as late as 1920 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.²⁶ P. D. Ouspensky, an important influence on Lawrence's understanding of the relations among religion, science, and philosophy, considered physicalism the defining characteristic of positivist science: "positivism looks for causes of biological and psychological phenomena in physico-mechanical phenomena."²⁷

A scientific or commercial consciousness that can lump diverse phenomena is itself lumpable—that is, generic and therefore fungible. In fact, the narrator lumps Connie and Hilda together as he describes their sexual behavior. In thirteen successive paragraphs the girls are usually treated in the plural: "They had to be taken to Paris and Florence. . . . So they had given the gift of themselves. . . . Both sisters had had their love experience. . . . They loved their respective young men. . . . In the actual sex thrill within the body, the sisters nearly succumbed" (6–9). The extensive use of summary in these paragraphs also suggests the abstractness of the sisters' lives. In effect, the narrator presents the scientific "results" and "conclusions" of their teenage years. This general tendency toward abstraction reinforces the reduction, and thus assists the subjugation, of women. The abstractness and interchangeability of the sisters' experiences also suggest that they and their experiences have become commodified. Even the modern woman is portrayed as a commodity: Tommy Dukes, a spokesman for Lawrence, criticizes Arnold Hammond for allowing his "strong property instinct" to govern his relationship with his wife Julia, who "is labelled *Mrs. Arnold B. Hammond*" (32). Lawrence

THE DESTRUCTIVE PHASE

21

thus links the categorizations and reifications in science to those in business.

Minds wedded to naming things come to love words more than the things they represent, to prefer talk to action, and to use language to exploit people. The narrator emphasizes the sisters' logocentric preference for intellectual discourse over sex, which is considered "only a sort of primitive reversion, and a bit of an anti-climax" (7). Words are so important to Connie and Hilda that they require verbal engagement before they can be sexually aroused, for neither is "ever in love with a young man unless he and she were verbally very near: that is unless they were profoundly interested, *talking* to one another" (8). Words are thus conceptual tools that induce or coerce a physical response. The instrumental value of words is related to the instrumental value of sex partners, who are "merely a tool" for achieving orgasm (8). In current theoretical terms, the manmade logos that subjugates women's bodies and experiences can also be used by women to control men; it is a weapon in the hands of either sex. Yet when the word dominates in sexuality, all suffer. The sisters' lives are so shaped by verbal intercourse that their sexual encounters can be seen as textualized:

And if after the roused intimacy of these vivid and soul-enlightened discussions the sex thing became more or less inevitable, then let it. It marked the end of a chapter. It had a thrill of its own too: a queer vibrating thrill inside the body, a final spasm of self-assertion, like the last word, exciting, and very like the row of asterisks that can be put to show the end of a paragraph, and a break in the theme. (8)

The sisters' lives have become books divided into chapters, and they treat sex as a conversation ending a chapter. Sex is thus represented as part of and defined by a larger social script. For the sisters, there is no spontaneity, no unpredictability, and the whole erotic process is prescribed, set under way by language. Sex-after-talk is as "inevitable" as effect-after-cause in a scientific experiment. A woven intellectual product—a text—determines the pattern for the weaving together of human bodies. And an orgasm ("a final spasm") is textualized as a row of asterisks ending a paragraph or indicating a thematic break. Rather than culminating a deep emotional and tactile connection, it ends a verbal one. Instead of producing a new "theme," it constitutes a break. Energy is depleted, bled out, not created. By describing the sisters' textualization of sex, the narrator implicitly signals readers to be aware of how sex is textualized in the novel—and in their own lives.

22 *D. H. Lawrence's Language of Sacred Experience*

The positivistic science of Lawrence's day emphasized the measurement of time and space. It sliced up the world into discrete phenomena and objects and thus assigned qualities and magnitudes to what is actually a seamless, ever-fluctuating time-space matrix. Moreover, scientists measured past events and predicted future outcomes while often slighting the present moment.²⁸ In Chapter I, the narrator's own preoccupation with past time-space events is revealed by the dizzying weaving back and forth from one discrete year to another, and from one isolated place to others. This zigzagging strategy is intended to disorient readers and make them realize how their own thought processes operate. The opening paragraph refers to Connie's tragic view of modernity sometime after World War I, but the specific period and location are not indicated. The narrator then joltingly shifts between the youth and young adulthood of Connie, Clifford, and their siblings. The vague sense of the present moment, together with the dizzying narratorial movements in this short (8-page) chapter, enacts Lawrence's view of the modern consciousness: unrootedness in the now, and aimlessly wandering and wondering in memory and expectation. In fact, both retrospection and speculation, as their common Indo-European root *spek* ("to observe") indicates, are cognitive processes strongly tied to visuality. In Proust, Lawrence saw the fullest fictional expression of these zigzagging processes.²⁹ Mental wandering through past and future is the temporal analog of the trope of the wandering hero; but whereas the ancient hero succeeded in transforming himself through his deeds, the modern protagonist often seems to get nowhere in his mental travels.³⁰ Lawrence's narrator in effect parodies Proust.

Lawrence's attack on the reader's ocularcentrism is particularly strong in Chapters II and III. The general strategy is to flood the reader's consciousness with visual, especially specular, language. The narrator's descriptions of Connie's adult consciousness emphasize her hypervisual subjectivity prior to meeting Mellors. Specular metaphors are used to characterize her perception of the world and herself. She experiences the Wragby household as "spectral" and the wood as "like the simulacrum of reality" (18). The oak leaves appear as if "seen ruffling in a mirror," and she appears to herself as "a figure somebody had read about" (18). Like Tennyson's Lady of Shallott, she experiences self and surroundings at a distance, mirrored in mind, cut off from a felt sense of reality. This ocularcentrism is associated with past- and word-centered experience: the primroses seem "only shadows or memories, or words" (18).

But while the mirror of Connie's mind prevents her from experiencing the cosmos, an actual mirror enables her and readers to see the signs of damage done to her by Wragby's mental lifers. In the mirror she sees

THE DESTRUCTIVE PHASE

23

how masculine logocentric culture has harmed the female body. As she carefully inspects her body in a “huge mirror,” readers are introduced, through her thoughts, to the language of the weak, debilitated, immature body: “And she thought . . . what a frail, easily-hurt, rather pathetic thing a naked human body is; somehow a little unfinished, incomplete!” (70). When the narrator depicts her specific body parts (breasts, belly, thighs), he uses adjectives indicating organic decay and stunted growth: “greyish,” “sapless,” “opaque,” “unripe,” “bitter,” “dull,” “slack, flat, meaningless” (70). Cumulatively, these adjectives are intended to depress the reader. In fact, Connie’s self-inspection leaves her feeling “immensely depressed and hopeless” until suddenly she hates “[t]he mental life” for being a “swindle!” (71). To contemporary readers familiar with the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan, the scene might suggest a regression to the mirror stage in which the child identifies with her image in the mirror, but here the image is degraded, not ideal.³¹ It is as if Connie, nearly destroyed by subjection to the oedipal law-logos of the father, returns to the preoedipal mirror to observe the damage done to her bodily identity. Connie’s hatred constitutes a self and social criticism that facilitates the breakdown of her old mode of consciousness, thus further preparing her for a new one. Lawrence wants readers to undergo a similar deterioration and renovation of consciousness. The mirror’s usefulness in reflecting bodily decay indicates the mind’s role in diagnosing the symptoms of the modern malaise. This is a disease the mind has wrought, can detect, and can even dissect but cannot cure.

Some of the novel’s narrative devices, especially those related to point of view, are designed to call attention to the sensory, cognitive, and communication organs of the head—brain, eye, mouth, and to a lesser extent, the ear. The reader thus comes to realize that a verbal-visual consciousness gives undeserved priority to the activities associated with one part of the body—the head. This partial but dominant form of consciousness is both too “heady” and too imperious: it belittles or blocks the modes of knowing and being associated with the rest of the body. Thus, Lawrence saw the Western project of Enlightenment, which Freud sanctioned as the ego’s rational conquest of the id, as a despotic enterprise in which the head subjugated all other organs and limbs. It is also a fetishistic project that endows undue power and prestige to head-driven activities.

The psychonarrations of Clifford and Michaelis underscore their head-dominated consciousness, particularly their hypervisuality. The narrator implies that their ocularcentrism is linked to sexual ennui, impotence, violence, and possessiveness. This eye-centeredness is suggested

24 *D. H. Lawrence's Language of Sacred Experience*

by the use of specular metaphors to represent the ways these “modern” men perceive the world and present themselves in it. Vision metaphors are used to characterize Clifford’s perceptual and affective relations to the world. He sees the “field of life” as “largely an artificially-lighted stage” (16). And since his “extraordinary and peculiar” powers of “observation” have “no actual contact” with the subject matter, “[i]t was as if the whole thing took place on an artificial earth” (16). His desire for human connection has been sublimated into a scopically structured interest in people: “He was remotely interested: but like a man looking down a microscope, or up a telescope” (16). Both instruments, by extending the powers of the eye, intensify the tyranny of sight.³² Readers of *Lady Chatterley* are implicitly accused of sharing Clifford’s vacuous, visual approach to living, for his “stories were curiously true to modern life—to the modern psychology, that is” (16). Finally, Clifford’s very instincts are permeated by hypervisuality: he has a “publicity instinct” that enables him to “discover new channels” for “advertis[ing]” himself (21). This is a desire to be seen, rather than to see. Clifford continues to crave anonymous attention because he cannot experience personal fulfillment. The narrator insinuates that Clifford’s craving for self-display has sexual origins: the erotic instinct that once sought to allure particular females has been transformed into a “blind, imperious instinct to become known . . . to the vast amorphous world he did not himself know, and of which he was uneasily afraid” (21). It is as if his castration anxiety fuels a desire to be seen by many, rather than touched by one.

In the portrayal of Michaelis’s consciousness, theatrical discourse is also tied to scientific discourse, and the two languages are connected to distance, analysis, control, and deception. Laura Mulvey has emphasized the active, controlling, narcissistic, and sadistic dimensions of the scopophilic male gaze.³³ Mick is a scopophilic playwright with a “look of pure detachment” (24). While observing Connie, he “was estimating her, and the extent of the impression he had made” (24). And like a panoptic camera, he “saw everything, registered everything” (25).³⁴ Mick not only sees the world through the camera eye; he also wants to be seen through it. The narrator’s detailed depiction of the playwright’s frozen facial expression suggests that Mick is posing for a photograph: “sometimes as he looked sideways, downwards, and the light fell on him, he had the silent, enduring beauty of a carved ivory negro mask, with his rather full eyes, and the strong queerly arched brows, the immobile, compressed mouth” (23). The visual and analytical complexity of the description reflects the intellectualized ocularcentrism of both character and narrator. The curiously old narrator of the destructive phase will give

THE DESTRUCTIVE PHASE

25

way to a more playful and rejuvenated narrator as the relationship between Connie and Mellors escalates.

The ocularcentric metaphors involving the men are associated with the public domain—*theater, advertising, photography, and scientific laboratory*—whereas the mirror metaphor involving Connie is related to the private realm of the bedroom. This difference suggests that she has greater access to the interior life, even though her awareness is also becoming increasingly specular. The men's vision metaphors are also more active and invasive.

The narrator's representations of the three sex scenes involving Connie and Mick make use of ocularcentric and logocentric devices that highlight the splits not only in the characters but also in the narrator. The narrator exploits the satiric potential of the psychonarrative technique and injects scathing comments about the characters' consciousness, but these comments belie a split consciousness similar to the ones under attack. Moreover, the narrator's attacks on figural consciousness are implicitly assaults on the reader's consciousness. It is as if the narrator takes a hammer to the reader's already-cracked mirror-mind in order to shatter it to pieces. In effect, the narrator tries to hasten the mind's own slow self-splintering process. The first two sex scenes occur in Chapter III, and the last is set in Chapter V. They are meant to be samples of modern sexuality and to leave readers as bored, irritated, angry, and shattered as the characters are.

Michaelis does not appear in the novel's first two versions. While writing the final version, Lawrence must have decided it was essential to contrast Connie's fulfilling erotic relationship with Mellors to an unsatisfying affair with a "modern lover" like Mick. The playwright is a kind of unparalyzed Clifford who gives readers a glimpse of what Connie's marital life might have been like if Clifford had not been physically injured. We have already seen that the two men have highly similar modes of knowing and relating. The failure of Connie's affair with Mick thus suggests that her marriage to Clifford would have failed even if he had not been paralyzed.

The narration of the foreplay to the first intercourse stresses Mick's reflexive, logocentric, and ocularcentric activities. He verbally feigns sympathy for Connie's aloneness (" 'Aren't you by way of being a lonely bird yourself?' ") and then extorts a sexual response from her womb with his gaze ("fixing his eyes on her . . . and sending out an appeal that affected her direct in her womb"); finally, he forces a tactile connection that is more maternal than romantic when he kneels beside her and buries his face in her lap ("the infant in the night was crying out of his

26 *D. H. Lawrence's Language of Sacred Experience*

breast to her") (25–6). Conversation, gaze, and embrace all evidence ruptures: the verbal split of irony; the visual divide between coercer and coerced; and the tactile imbalance between mother and child. Mick's actions shift from verbal to visual to tactile, much as Connie's youthful affairs were initiated by talk.

The narrator's description of the first intercourse focuses on Mick, but the perspective blends the points of view of narrator and playwright. This perspective is detached, vague, overpunctuated, synoptic. It conveys the encounter's brevity, disembodiedness, disconnectedness. The entire exchange is represented in a single-sentence paragraph—a sentence without a mate, as if Mick were sentenced not to be Connie's future mate: "He was a curious and very gentle lover, very gentle with the woman, trembling uncontrollably, and yet at the same time detached, aware, aware of every sound outside" (26). Narrative action is reduced to static description: Mick's coital activity is represented as a state, the stative replacing a strong action verb. The sole movement directly rendered is his trembling body. He is incapable of complete immersion in the moment: his attention is divided between Connie and external sounds. The superfluity of "at the same time" calls attention to his excessive time-consciousness. It is a dualistic form of simultaneity that does not lead to the sense of living beyond time. The word "curious" subliminally suggests his and the narrator's intellectual detachment.³⁵

When the perspective briefly shifts to Connie, the narrator reveals that the intercourse "meant nothing" to Connie "except that she gave herself to him" (26). She gave but did not receive; it is not a reciprocal, mutually satisfying relationship. Significantly, the psychonarration emphasizes her semantic response ("meant nothing") rather than her feelings. Throughout the mortification phase, the dominant verbs of consciousness involve thinking, talking, or seeing. In the erotic episodes with Mellors, verbs referring to feeling and touch predominate.

In describing the second intercourse, the narrator offers another external, nonnuanced account with little attention to figural feelings. The focus begins with Mick's action and then shifts to Connie's reaction. The seriality rather than simultaneity of their behavior reflects the linear, time-bound, cause-effect logic of modern sexual behavior. A single paragraph portrays this brief activity in flat, analytical language:

He was the trembling, excited sort of lover, whose crisis soon came, and was finished. There was something curiously childlike and defenceless about his naked body: as children are naked. His defences were all in his wits and cunning, his very instincts of

THE DESTRUCTIVE PHASE

27

cunning, and when these were in abeyance, he seemed doubly naked and like a child, of unfinished, tender flesh, and somehow, struggling helplessly. (29)

The summarizing quality of “He was a trembling sort of lover” reduces Mick to a mere type. The passive voice (“whose crisis . . . was finished”) reflects what in a subsequent paragraph will be called Mick’s “erect passivity” (29). Only the first sentence narrates his sexual activity, and the sense of motion is mitigated by the omission of details and by beginning with the stative (“He was the . . . sort of lover”). The second sentence comments on an aspect of the first: his body is childlike and defenseless. And the third sentence comments on an aspect of the second: his defenses are his wit and cunning. Thus, the three sentences create a recursive structure, from quasi-action to analysis to meta-analysis. In effect, the narrator uses psychological commentary to progressively dissect Mick’s sexual body. Dorrit Cohn has shown that Thomas Mann often uses psychological commentary in his psychonarrations to create dissonance between narrator and character, whereas James Joyce minimizes explicit narratorial comment and instead relies on narratorial style to remark implicitly on figural consciousness.³⁶ Lawrence’s narrator creates both dissonance and consonance through his psychological commentary: his assault on the playwright creates a sense of conflict and at the same time indicates he shares Mick’s attacking mind. The narrator’s overly heady analysis combats Mick’s head-centered “defenses”: wit and cunning are what Nietzsche might call the “reactive” strengths of the weak. Lawrence is suggesting that the reader’s intellectual defenses must be dissolved if transformation is to take place. The protracted analysis of Mick’s defenses in comparison with the foreshortened description of his sexual performance indicates that his minimal erotic activity is compensated by excessive mental reactivity. His premature finish is clearly related to his “unfinished, tender flesh,” and his halting performance is suggested by an overpunctuated first sentence: there is an unnecessary comma in “whose crisis soon came, and was finished.” The promiscuous overpunctuation in the novel’s early chapters implies that words, like the people who use them, do not fully connect because they are separated and diminished by superfluous conventions.

Michael Squires argues that “child,” “defense,” and “naked” are the “pivotal words” around which this passage exfoliates. He calls this narrative device Lawrence’s “loop method” since the narrator “uses significant words as a springboard to additional details . . . then rounds back to these words to achieve clarity and coherence” (155). The strengths of this

28 *D. H. Lawrence's Language of Sacred Experience*

method include, according to Squires, "its capacity to thicken Lawrence's prose and to enclose the reader in a felt sense of order"; the weaknesses involve its contribution to the novel's "hardened characterizations, . . . strident tone, and . . . schematic nature" (168). What Squires does not notice is how the different features of this technique are used to produce the novel's intended effects. I am arguing that Lawrence capitalizes on the hard and strident features in the mortifying scenes and on the thickening and emotive features in the vivifying ones. In this passage, the repetition of pivotal words is intentionally annoying. They are verbal battering rams. The mechanical repetition is as abrasive as the belabored analysis.

When the narrator shifts the focus to Connie's reaction, the perspective is more subjective, but the language is still abstract and explanatory. And Connie's moment to moment experience is not reported. Instead, readers are told of her "dazed, disappointed" state after intercourse (29). Masculinist sexuality elides female subjectivity.

The third and final coupling between Connie and Mick occurs at the end of Chapter V. This location is significant: the act of intercourse takes place soon after the introduction of Mellors to Connie—and to the reader—in the first part of Chapter V. With this introduction, Lawrence begins his attempt to rejuvenate the reader's consciousness.

The narration of the third intercourse is a small-scale repetition—a mini-parody—of the second. The miniaturization intensifies the previous sense of the brevity and emotional insignificance of their liaisons. The episode is deflated not only by sarcasm but also by the mechanical repetition of words from earlier scenes: "excited," "naked," "come," "finished," "craving," "crisis," "wild" (53). None of these words are put into new relations with other words but are instead repeated in drearily similar, though more condensed, semantic contexts. They are organized by the mechanical law of the paternal logos, not by the semi-otic, spontaneous play of what Julia Kristeva calls the maternal *chora*.³⁷ For example, "He was the trembling excited sort of lover" in the second sexual encounter becomes "He was a more excited lover"; and "wild, craving physical desire" becomes "a certain craving passion." Mechanical action and time consciousness are also implied by the participants' serial actions: Mick finishes his activity and then Connie begins hers, just as they did during the second coupling. The repetition of action and miniaturization of scenes emphasize that the relationship deteriorates because there is no new influx of sacred energy to make it grow.

The lack of orgasmic simultaneity is what causes Michaelis to explode verbally. The very strength of his verbal explosion contrasts with the weakness of his orgasm. The contrast shows how much of his vital energy

THE DESTRUCTIVE PHASE

29

has been concentrated in his head, at the expense of the rest of his body. The explosion is small in duration but scathing in effect: "When at last he drew away from her, he said, in a bitter, almost sneering little voice: 'You couldn't go off at the same time as a man, could you? You'd have to bring yourself off! You'd have to run the show!' " (53). Like other scopophilic males, Mick punishes the woman for arousing his castration anxiety.³⁸ His reference to the intercourse as a "show" underscores his own detachment and explains his stage fright. He clearly has dodged his own responsibility and put the blame for their sexual failure on her. "Show" also echoes Dukes's reference to "the mental life" as "the rotten old show" (37). From this episode, readers learn that the consequences of inadequate sensuality are not merely ennui, frustration or irritation; rather, erotic incompetence and dissatisfaction can create emotional turmoil, which in turn can trigger verbal vehemence. Mick's "unexpected piece of brutality" proves to be the last blow of the critical consciousness against Connie's own investment in "[t]he mental life" (54). His speech "killed something in her," and her "whole sexual feeling" for him and for "any man" collapses that night (54). That is, her libidinal investment in modern sex has been unconsciously withdrawn. Her erotic feeling is now fully mortified. The scene closes with her—and the reader—wondering if there is a way out of the nihilism of modern living. Still unconscious of Mellors's influence and of the potential for a shared future with him, Connie considers a Stoic attitude: "To accept the great nothingness of life seemed to be the one end of living" (55). William James, an important influence on Lawrence, had described Stoicism as one of the highest moral-emotional attitudes that can be adopted short of full religious conviction based on conversion.³⁹ Many modernist texts would have ended here: on a note of negation.⁴⁰ But for Lawrence, negation is only one phase of the "double rhythm" of art. He intends that Connie and the reader be revitalized—twice-born.

Finally, head-centered techniques are used in Chapter IV to structure the two conversations about sex by Clifford and his Cambridge comrades. In the first discussion, when the characters talk about how they see sex as talk, they enact a recursive structure of talking about talk. Moreover, since the narrator has already described the sisters' textualization of sex, the arguments implicitly reflect upon the earlier psychonarrations. Thus, during the disintegration phase, the novel itself is split and recursive, enacting the narrator's divided consciousness. Moreover, the argumentative form itself creates combatants in an abrasive contest, not participants in a connective exchange. Their verbal activity is governed by a frictional, mechanical logic, the very logic that structures their sexual

30 D. H. Lawrence's *Language of Sacred Experience*

interactions. Their frictional energy is intended to abrade the reader's conventional consciousness. In *John Thomas and Lady Jane*, the second version of *Lady Chatterley*, this energy is described as "the frictional, seething, resistant, explosive, blind sort, like that of steam-engines and motor-cars and electricity and of people such as Clifford" (*The First and Second Lady* 371).⁴¹

The second discussion involves a meta-analysis of the first one, thereby adding another recursive layer. In particular, the discussants reflect on the spite they had displayed earlier. Dukes begins the reflective process by commenting that "the mental life seems to flourish with its roots in spite" (36). Sexual repression produces both physical and verbal aggression. One of Dukes's main roles in this conversation is to reflect upon the strengths and limitations of critical self-consciousness. He reveals the purgative value of criticism—its positive function as negation: "My God, the world needs criticising today—criticising to death. Therefore let's live the mental life, and glory in our spite, and strip the rotten old show" (37). Dukes provides the reader with the rationale for the structure and content of the novel's mortification rhythm: the corrosive techniques are intended to strip the reader's old ways of knowing and relating. Readers are meant to experience these conversations as Connie does: "it was a little irritating" (35). Through irritation, the narrator tries to rub out the reader's restrictive identification with "the mental life."

In Chapter VI, in the episode where Connie's womb has a vision of Mellors bathing, the reader will encounter a brief deployment of vitalizing devices and discourses. From this scene onward, the novel will then shift its emphasis to the positive transformation of Connie and the reader. To do this, a new type of narrator or narratorial consciousness is needed: one capable of suggesting the nondual organismic awareness of the characters and of evoking a similar awareness in the reader. The creation of this new type of narration is the impossible task Lawrence attempted. It required that he use language to move the reader beyond language. It required a body-centered narration capable of touching the reader's somatic awareness. The purgation phase is not over, will never be fully over, for Lawrence knows the reader's dualistic thinking and dissociated sexual actions are recalcitrant habits.⁴² The attacks on the reader's consciousness continue as Mellors derides modern civilization, and the narrator ridicules Connie's resistant, satiric mind. But Lawrence's attempt to revitalize the reader has begun.