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MASCULINITY IN THE MARGINS: HIDDEN NARRATIVES OF THE SELF IN T. E. LAWRENCE'S *SEVEN PILLARS OF WISDOM*

Abstract

Recent work in the field of life writing has insightfully studied texts that blur the line between fiction and nonfiction in self-reflexively constructing (narratives of) the self. One of the more productive lenses for studying life writing has been that of gender, but it has primarily focused on texts by women. Men, for centuries perceived as the "unmarked" gender, have, paradoxically, eluded academic analysis as embodied gendered beings and thus seem to call for more critical attention. The present paper seeks to do so by looking into a hybrid life narrative, T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and analyzing the way in which it, in a dialogue with Lawrence's letters, inscribes masculinity. The analysis, proceeding from the work of Gagnier (1990) and Gilmore (1994) and extending it to the study of men, focuses on what statements about the self, explicitly expressed or confined between the lines, do within the narrative and in the self-creation of the author. The main attention is given to the representations of the body and their intersection with the Victorian codes of masculinity. It is argued that the very denial of the body makes the body present throughout the text, as a narrative trope and a moral presence. Such an analysis, it is hoped, will help to reassess the multilayered presence of corporeality in men's life narratives and its relationship with discourses of masculinity.

Key words

Masculinity studies; gender studies; life writing; corporeality

Recent work in the field of life narratives has resulted in a rich crop of analyses of texts that blur the line between fiction and nonfiction in more or less self-reflexively constructing (desired) narratives of the self. These hybrid texts help shed light on the conceptualization of selfhood within the cultural codes of a given era as well as the narrative means for expressing or subverting them. One of the

more productive lenses for studying life writing has been that of gender, but in this area middle-class white heterosexual men's embodied selves have largely eluded analytical attention.

The present paper will look into a hybrid narrative, T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, a text usually not treated as a narrative of self, and analyze the inscription of masculinity in it, in a dialogue with his other autobiographical sources, especially personal letters. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, today often dismissed as a manifestation of British imperialism, is also a surprisingly personal text, voicing an ambivalent but at times very open narrative self, contesting with himself and his masculinity. The analysis, proceeding from the work of Gagnier (1990) and Gilmore (1994), focuses on what statements about the embodied self enact within his narrative of his self and how these images intersect with the Victorian codes of masculinity. It is argued that the very denial of the body and sexuality makes both present throughout the text. In fact, the compulsion to deny the body makes Lawrence thematize the body, in a rather dramatic manner, to prove his mind's ability to defeat it. The analysis hopes to help to reassess the multilayered presence of corporeality as a part of men's life narratives and its relationship with discourses of masculinity.

The re-evaluation of life narratives, with increasing focus on hitherto marginalized voices and experiences – women, racial/ethnic, sexual minorities, etc. – has, inadvertently, helped to reify the canonical nature of the narratives of the white middle-class men who remain the unnamed norm against which other voices speak. That is to say, by looking at the margins we have overlooked potential sources of ambivalence in the center where, as Trev Broughton (1999: 10) points out, “intertextual valences were not as straightforward, their influence as irresistible, nor their relationship to male power as direct as is commonly supposed.” As Julia Swindells (1995: 5, qtd. in Broughton 1999: 13) has perspicaciously pointed out, “whilst the men have undoubtedly been over-exposed, has it been to the type of critical argument which would show and challenge the intricate workings of male claims to authority?” Or, rather, in the present context, the claims to authority of certain kinds of masculinity. By not subjecting representatives of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005) to a gendered analytical lens we are in a way re-producing the troubling genderlessness of such masculinity and its supposedly monolithic nature. (We are, in this process, certainly overlooking the considerable cost of the ideals of hegemonic masculinity on the male psyche and body.)

This pattern of thinking appears in autobiography studies, too. Western male autobiography has been assumed to be built around the model of sovereign, centered, unified selfhood. Women's autobiographies have, as a counterpoint, been seen as more dispersed and decentered, embodying what Sidonie Smith (1993: 155) has called “the politics of fragmentation.” This creates a somewhat untenable dichotomy, neatly summarized by Leigh Gilmore (1994: xiii):

[m]en are autonomous individuals with inflexible ego boundaries who write autobiographies that [...] place the self at the center of the drama. Women,

by contrast, have flexible ego boundaries, develop a view of the world characterized by relationships [...] and therefore represent the self in relation to “others.”

This too overarching a dichotomy in analyses of life narratives now valorizes female fragmentation – but seems to overlook the fact that the supposed inflexibility of male ego boundaries is a cultural ideal, rather than necessarily a cultural reality, and thus conveniently misses the fragmentation present in men’s narratives as well.

Liz Stanley (1992: 3) has pointed out that life narratives among other things present “ideological accounts of lives which in turn feed back into everyday understandings of how ‘common lives’ and ‘extraordinary lives’ can be recognized.” The narrating “I” is therefore also an ideological “I” – both in the center as well as the margins, if we understand ideology as “the ‘cultural,’ ideational aspects of a particular social and political system, the ‘grand narratives’ characterising its existence, structure, and historical development” (Blommaert 2005: 159). The present paper proceeds from Regenia Gagnier’s (1990: 4) argument that we should approach life narratives from a pragmatic perspective, which asks us to not search for the truth of statements, but rather for what they do, seeking to “locate the purpose an autobiographical statement serves in the life and circumstances of its author and readers.” In the present paper, the pragmatic function is assumed to be T. E. Lawrence’s attempt to create himself as the appropriate hegemonic masculine self, a project that is necessarily full of slippages and gaps as it comes against fragmented and chaotic experience.

What is of central interest to the present paper is T. E. Lawrence’s relationship with his body. As has been noted by many life-writing scholars, “bodies rarely feature in canonical male autobiography” (Moore-Gilbert 2009: xvii). As Gilmore (1994: 84) also notes, if the body does appear, it tends to function as “a metaphor for soul, consciousness, intellect and imagination,” not as lived experience. While in women’s autobiographies, the body has been found to be a rich ground for analyzing questions of identity and social belonging, that type of work has hardly been performed on life narratives by men and, especially the representatives of hegemonic masculinity, the putative unified subject-selves of Western culture. Troublingly, this recreates the old binary of the woman as body and man as mind, a binary that cannot be destabilized without investigating men.

T. E. Lawrence was a man who clearly had lost control of the narrative of his self when he started to write *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* – a cultural icon, Lawrence of Arabia, the blonde Bedouin, a man mythologized and enshrined in public narratives. Although he was a man of considerable vanity, he was at the same time very protective about his private life. At the height of his fame – paradoxically using the connections his celebrity had given him – he sought anonymity by hiding himself in the ranks of the RAF and tank corps. According to Jeffrey Meyers (1989: 9), Lawrence’s “obsessive interest in himself is matched by his love of appearing in multiple disguises of the spirit, and by a pervasive sense of mischief

which makes it hard to tell when he is in earnest.” This game of disguise appears also in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, a fragmented narrative of a fragmented self, which, nevertheless, has a stable core that centers on the struggle between the body and the mind – and through that, the quest for the hegemonic male ideal.

Leo Braudy (2003: 410) argues that in Lawrence there was a “radical cleavage between the body that was looked at by others and the inner self that was ashamed of the gaze after which it lusted.” The combination of attention-seeking and shame will be made evident all through the present paper. The cleft self appears in his letters but also in the narratives of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, where descriptions of military campaigns are interrupted by introspective passages that are full of suggestion, but frequently frustrating in their obscurity and elusiveness. The need to tell – but not too openly – is key here. Braudy (2003: 410) thinks that the writing of the book helped Lawrence to turn himself into a “third person,” to “punish the derelictions of the first person,” in other words, to objectify himself for failing to live up to the subjecthood ideal of the Victorian era in which he was raised or perhaps the Victorianized notions of chivalry he transposed onto the Middle Ages in his student years. We can now ask what was the pragmatic function of such a divided self-creation, in the context of hegemonic masculinity, which valorized unified narratives of coherent subjecthood.

Since *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is too sprawling a text to enable a full analysis in a brief article, the focus here will be on only one episode, perhaps the most analyzed fragment in Lawrence’s narratives of the self in the book, the Deraa incident. It has been chosen as the case study for that very purpose. According to the version presented in the book, Lawrence was captured on a reconnaissance mission behind enemy lines, tortured and possibly raped by Turkish guards, after his having turned down the homosexual advances of the Bey. Lawrence covers this traumatic event in surprising length, in opaque language (almost six pages), as if desiring to make his rational observation of the suffering flesh a personal triumph of the will, in a way re-creating the narrative of self-control appropriate to a white upper-class man of his era. He has the need to tell – yet is also restrained by the social taboos that surround the inviolability of the white male body. This episode might be “over-written in its self-conscious striving to be ‘titantic’” (in the more than scathing rendition by Aldington 1955: 201), but also strangely empty. The unpleasantness of the (homo)sexual advances is conveyed clearly, as is violence, but the body whose experiences are narrated is controlled by a distancing and divided mind.

His inner debate is revealed in his letters. For example, in his comments to his friend Edward Garnett, from the time of writing (qtd. in Meyers 1989: 15):

If that Deraa incident whose treatment you call severe and serene (the second sounds like a quaint failure to get my impressions across, but I know what you feel) had happened to yourself you would not have recorded it. I have a face of brass perhaps, but I put it into print very reluctantly, last of all the pages I sent to the press. For weeks I wanted to burn it in the manuscript:

because I could not tell the story face to face with anyone, and I think I'll feel sorry, when I next meet you, that you know it. The sort of man I have always mixed with doesn't so give himself away.

The focus here is clearly on loss of status in the homosocial world of hegemonic masculinity. In another context, he describes the incident as the time when the "citadel of my integrity had been irrevocably lost" (qtd. in Mack 1976: 231). The trauma here need not be only that of the humiliation (homosexuality, rape, moreover, rape of the white man by the nonwhite (the racial element has been discussed by, e.g. Sedgwick 1985 or Krishnaswamy 2002)), the failure to conform to the stoic ideal of hegemonic masculinity, but possibly, of discovering desires for the bodily in himself, revealed in a form that society – as well as Lawrence himself – found unacceptable. After all, after a graphic description of the beating and humiliation, he writes the following: "I remembered smiling idly at him, for a delicious warmth, probably sexual, was swelling through me: and then that he flung up his arm and hacked with the full length of his whip into my groin" (Lawrence 1962: 454). (It is also generally agreed among his many biographers that he sought to re-live the episode in his later life and paid a serviceman to whip him for years afterwards, in what can be seen as punishment for the desires he found in himself.)

Although the scene is thematized in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and in the letters of the time of writing, it does not appear in his notes from the period. The veracity of the incident has been strongly challenged by several biographers (e.g., Knightley and Simpson 1971, James 1994, Barr 2006): Lawrence was probably 100 miles from Deraa at the time of the incident. The biographers have interpreted it as a fantasy of martyrdom or an attempt to provide sado-masochistic satisfaction to the author. However, the truth or the motivation of the claims is not of interest here. That Lawrence included this scene in his volume is a fact, as are his recurrent references to it in his letters. It is a narrative fact and we can ask what aspect of the narrative of his self this was supposed to frame/respond to. The creation of a trauma, especially in an age when sexual "deviation" was anything but tolerated, raises an ideological question that brings masculinity out of the margins into the center of discussion. The following will focus on the language Lawrence used in different tellings of the episode, to arrive at a sense of his work on a desired self at the time.

Lawrence's failure of the will, losing bodily integrity, succumbing to the body, appeared as a defining element in his self-narration, constantly re-narrated. Lawrence clearly felt the need to excuse the failures of his body and mind. He constructs it as soiling his moral character, a failure that required a physical counterpart. As he wrote to Charlotte Shaw (Brown 1992: 290): "I want to dirty myself outwardly, so that my person may properly reflect the dirtiness which it conceals." The need to confess to an incident that was probably a fantasy can be seen as an act of making public his failures of the will, as a form of homosocial expiation (he was not a religious man).

The Deraa incident is described as follows in a letter to Charlotte Shaw, almost seven years after the supposed rape took place:

You instance my night in Deraa. Well, I'm always afraid of being hurt: and to me, while I live, the force of that night will lie in the agony which broke me, and made me surrender. [...] For the fear of being hurt, or rather to earn five minutes of respite from a pain which drove me mad, I gave away the only possession we are born into the world with – our bodily integrity. It's an unforgivable matter, an irrecoverable position: and it's that which has made me forswear decent living, and the exercise of my not-contemptible wits and talents.

You may call this morbid: but think of the offence, and the intensity of my brooding over it for these years. It will hang about me while I live, and afterwards if our personality survives. Consider wandering among decent ghosts, hereafter, crying, "unclean, unclean!"

(Letter to Charlotte Shaw, March 26, 1924)

The latter phrase is a reference to the pariah-leper in Leviticus 13:45. This suggests that Lawrence felt his uncleanness to be a cause for social ostracism – and primarily a punishing regime against himself. The uncleanness here probably does not refer to the stigma of homosexuality – after all, in the first chapter of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Lawrence 1962: 28), he uses the phrase "clean bodies" when describing Arab homosexuality during the desert campaign, describing male homosocial (and perhaps also homosexual) practices as something "sexless and even pure." Elsewhere, Lawrence has used cleanness to indicate "attainment of identity in action" (qtd. in Cook 1989: 100) and this seems especially telling here, where Lawrence's sense of his not having taken action, a key signifier of masculine agency, seems to require the degradation of the published rape-narrative.

Although the Deraa incident appears only on page 451 of the 700-page book, the tone of sexualized bodily threat and the need for the mortification of the flesh appear at the very beginning of the book. The very first chapter begins with a reference to the "evil of my tale" (Lawrence 1962: 27) and, when describing the aforementioned "pure" homosexual practices of his companions, he also seems to be referring to himself, guised as "several" others, who thirsted "to punish appetites they could not fully prevent," something that required physical degradation in suffering. This sets the tone of the following narrative.

The desert provides a perfect setting – as well as image – for this quest of disciplining or even annihilating the body, a form of self-mortification. In Lawrence's case, his expiation is not religious, despite his life-long interest in the Crusades – his fascination was with a self-constructed form of idealized chivalry, not the religion behind the previous Western escapade in the Middle-Eastern desert. The need to deny the body seems to spring from cultural and gendered ideologies. Lawrence lovingly writes about his quest against the environment, his desire to conquer it and not let his body weaken. As he puts it on one occasion:

For my own part, I always rather liked a khamsin, since its torment seemed to fight against mankind with ordered conscious malevolence, and it was pleasant to outface it so directly, challenging its strength, and conquering its extremity. There was pleasure also in the salt sweat-drops which ran singly down the long hair over my forehead, and dripped like ice-water on my cheek. (Lawrence 1962: 254)

At the end of the paragraph he admits pain and suffering, and succumbing to the deprivations of the desert. Yet this is not the point for him but the act of struggle, of mind asserting itself over body, man over nature. Notions of self-discipline and pain are means for taming the body, for character-testing and character-building. The desert is described as a clean moral space, a tabula rasa free from taints of civilization, an arena where masculinity could re-find itself (similar to the West in the American imaginary – cf Bederman (1995) on Theodore Roosevelt). The body can be revealed when tested or when it is suffering (cf almost the same ideology in Rambo films in Tasker (1993)). Making his body abject seems to help Lawrence come to terms with his embodiment and physicality, as abjection proves its baseness and its ultimate surrendering to the mind.

Lawrence was obsessed, throughout his life, starting from his boyhood, by the subjugation of the body to the will through exercise, asceticism, starvation, flagellation, to the extent that it can almost be called masochism. That is to say, he seems to live out the classical mind-body duality in which the body is viewed as an uncontrolled animal force that has to be severely suppressed. At the same time, the body is a source of mixed pleasure. As he puts it in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, “I liked the things underneath me and took my pleasures downward. There seemed a certainty of degradation, a final safety. Man could rise only to any height, but there was an animal level beneath which he could not fall” (Lawrence 1962: 564). The fear of falling is obvious here, as is the seemingly illogical opposite impulse to degrade himself as much as to not be able to fall further. This helps to explain the appeal of abjection, when it was served up in a context where the hegemonic masculine ideal could be seen to overcome it – or at least to battle with it.

Lawrence’s attitude to the body also colors his attitude to women, for him the embodiments of the full animality of the human race, whose sexuality was threatening to bring out the bestial in men as well. He had close women friends (especially Mrs. Shaw), but he was more comfortable in the homosocial worlds of the army, which gave him a legitimate leave from the world of women and their threatening sexuality. As Lawrence explained in a letter (qtd. in Meyers 1989: 24):

You remember me writing to you when I first went into the RAF that it was the nearest modern equivalent of going into a monastery in the Middle Ages. That was right in more than one sense. Being a mechanic cuts one off from all real communication with women. There are no women in the machines, in any machine.

The image of the machine, its sense of control, contradicted everything in the seemingly untamable physicality of the (female) body. There is always an inner guardian that keeps disciplining Lawrence, not letting him achieve the release he so obviously craves. He put this as follows in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*:

The lower creation I avoided as a reflection upon the failure to attain real intellectuality. If they forced themselves on me I hated them. To put my hand on a living thing was defilement; and it made me tremble if they touched me or took too quick an interest in me. This was an atomic repulsion, like the intact course of a snowflake. The opposite would have been my choice if my head had not been tyrannous. I had a longing for the absolutism of women and animals, and lamented myself most when I saw a soldier with a girl, or a man fondling a dog, because my wish was to be as superficial, as perfected; and my jailer held me back. Always feeling and illusion were at war within me, reasons strong enough to win. (Lawrence 1962: 563–564)

There is a craving for the simplicity of carnal and emotional ties but also almost a phobic fear of defilement and – interestingly – loss of intellectuality, in a re-creation of the mind-body duality ever-present in Lawrence’s work. The bodily signifies loss of control, surrendering to animal instincts and thus losing masculine integrity. As Lawrence stated in a letter, he felt the need for “birth control for us, to end the human race in 50 years – and then a clear field for some cleaner mammal” (qtd. in Meyers 1989: 26). That is to say, he consistently separated the emotional and intimate dimensions from heterosexual love and reduced it to the mechanical and physical, with what could be characterized as the scatological attitude of a schoolboy (Mack 1976: 421). What this strong abjection suggests is hard to assert with anything resembling certainty. The emotional and the bodily would destabilize the solid world of male homosociality, of control and dominance. Mack (1976: 438) believes that his self-mortification was his attempt to destroy his sexuality. He craves the loss of control, but also fears it. His attitude to sexuality certainly should not be read as simple misogyny. As he wrote to Ernest Thurtle:

Women? I like some women. I do not like their sex: any more than I like the monstrous regiment of men. There is no difference that I can feel between a woman and a man. They look different, granted: but if you work with them there doesn’t seem any difference at all. I can’t understand all the fuss about sex. It’s as obvious as red hair: and as little fundamental, I fancy.

(qtd. in Mack 424).

He not only shuns the female, but the body – or perhaps the uncontrollable that the body represents in general. His ideal is one of discipline and, in running away from the bodily, he seems to be wanting to make himself into a machine. As he writes to Robert Graves in 1935: “I went into the RAF to serve a mechanical

purpose, not as a leader but as a cog of the machine. The key-word, I think, is machine. [...] One of the benefits of being part of the machine is that one learns one does not matter!” (Brown 1992: 522). This understanding not only recreates the ideology of the body as a machine, but, much more interestingly, also idealizes the annihilation of the individual self. In many ways the heaviest burden for Lawrence was the problem of his flawed self, because his innumerable inner conflicts did not let him develop a coherent masculine identity that would be in accordance with the social norm of his time or one that would consciously rebel against it. He is aware of this inability, but does not seem to have the courage to reject the ideal. Instead, he punishes himself for failing to live up to it. It seems that to him giving up the masculine ideal of a coherent integrated narrative sense of self is a smaller sacrifice than entering into a full critique of the ideologies of hegemonic masculinity that have obviously failed him (and other men) as individualized human beings.

The burden of the self is eased by the denigration of the self, publicly depriving it of its integrity via *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and yet this can only be achieved by celebrating the survival of the body. Confessing to a made-up sin makes it a narrative fact – and thus a justification for further self-denial. Paradoxically, of course, by attempting to suppress his body and its urges – sexual and other – Lawrence keeps the body in the center of his narrative of the self, despite its supposedly marginal status in his self-ideal. Writing the self, confessing its failures becomes a way of legitimizing the need to tame the body, to discipline it. He recognizes fragmentation in his self and his ideals but does not know that he does not embrace them but instead seeks to subdue what he sees as being contrary to the reigning ideal of masculinity. Braudy (2003: 411) argues that “only through his writing, it seems, could Lawrence for a brief time subdue his incredibly baroque inability to accept himself as he was.” His having made up the Deraa incident could be one of the attempts to explain an animal side of his nature, to create an originary narrative that explained his urges for sexual gratification and the attendant need to mortify his self and the flesh. It is easier to find a flaw in one’s body and punish it for failure than to accept the 20th century concept of the divided self, which hides dark undercurrents of subconscious desires that the ego cannot control. This is especially likely in the case of the masculine self, especially one that lived in those worlds where the deconstruction of gender ideologies was discouraged. Lawrence thus carried in himself an unresolved desire to “be a man among men while fearing to be a man attracted to men,” fearing to err over the allowed boundaries in the continuum of the homosocial, homoerotic and homosexual (Braudy 2003: 412).

As such, his narrative also reveals the disintegration of the ideology of hegemonic masculinity, embodied in the ideal of the inscrutable British gentleman, and its movement towards the revelation of the fragmentation so focalized in the 20th century. He continues to fascinate because he embodies many of the “basic contradictions and anomalies in masculine nature, vintage late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but in some ways still current” (Braudy 2003: 411). Or, as Christopher Isherwood put it (qtd. in Haynes 1977: 191), “the hero suffered in

his own person, the neurotic ills of an entire generation.” He is, indeed, to echo John Mack, “a prince of our disorder.” Constructing one’s masculine self is in the center of both Lawrence’s narrative and of its many disorders. Hélène Cixous (qtd. in Moore-Gilbert 2009: xviii) believed that “by writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into an uncanny stranger on display.” This pragmatic attempt to create an authentic self in autobiographical narrative is by no means a female privilege, for, as can be seen in the case of Lawrence, the male body, too, has been made stranger to itself and it is harder for a man to reclaim the pride of a gendered and sexed body than for a woman, because of the very marginalization of the body in the hegemonic ideologies of masculinity.

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