

Claudia Lainka. *Analysing Masculinities: Konstruktionen von Männlichkeit bei D. H. Lawrence und John Cowper Powys.* Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2012, 404 pp., € 28.00.

That to identify as a man has become deeply problematic today seems a truth universally held, to the extent even that Google's autocomplete function offers 'crisis' as an apparently self-evident complement to the word 'masculinity'. Countless volumes on precarious constructions of masculinity and their eventual ineffectiveness have been published since the 1990s, culminating perhaps in Hanna Rosin's much hyped recent treatise on *The End of Men*. Pundits from all corners of cultural life seem in agreement that manhood is going to hell in a (designer) handbag, as decades of feminist activity have finally come to fruition and have relegated de Beauvoir's notion of man as the 'Subject' and 'Absolute' to the scrapheap of cultural history.

It is one of the achievements of Claudia Lainka's book to show that such prophecies of doom are by no means exclusive to the here-and-now. D. H. Lawrence, one of the two subjects of her study, is repeatedly on record as invoking the end of manhood. "For man has fallen", he declares in his essay "The Real Thing" (1930), specifying that it "would be difficult to point to a man in the world to-day who is not subservient to the great women-spirit that sways modern mankind". Likewise, the speaker in his poem "The Snake" is baffled by the sudden appearance of the eponymous phallic animal, and in extension by his own animality, and muses: "And voices in me said, If you were a man/You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off". Eventually, he only manages to haphazardly throw a log after the virile beast, which just at that moment suggestively puts "his head into that dreadful hole". Unsure if he actually managed to hit the snake and repulsed by this mean and petty act, his manliness is literally left hanging in the balance.

Much of Lawrence's writing can be understood as attempts to recover manhood from this black hole, as symbolic endeavours to "let a man go to the bottom of what he is, and believe in that", as Lawrence wrote in a letter to E. M. Forster in 1916. It is these endeavours which Lainka tries to reconstruct. Her book positions itself as part of a wide-ranging trend, "das weite Feld der 'Männer in der Literatur' respektive literarische Ausformungen von Männlichkeit neu aufzurollen" (10f.) and takes as its focus two novels each by Lawrence (*The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*) and John Cowper Powys (*Wolf Solent*, *Weymouth Sands*), to which it applies Lacanian theories about subject formation and Connell's influential typology of masculinities and the dimensions of interaction between them. While this reader was convinced by the close readings of the individual novels, which make a valid case for the fragmented nature of early

20th-century masculine imaginaries, Lainka's book unfortunately exhibits quite a number of strategic, aesthetic and formal inadequacies, which compromise its, admittedly rather audacious, mission statement: “[L]iterarische Konzeptionen von Männlichkeit ... erstmalig im Zuge einer längeren Arbeit darzustellen, sondern auch diese Resultate ... mit lebensweltlichen Konzeptionen von Männlichkeit zu korrelieren” (12f.). I will return to some of these shortcomings after briefly delineating the book's argument.

Lainka prefaces her very detailed and profound discussion of Lacan and Connell with a more general introduction of masculinity as a multi-dimensional concept and a very brief outline of the path that led from Parsons's social-action theory of the late 1970s via the academic institution of Men's Studies in the 1980s and 1990s to poststructuralist revaluations of masculinity by the likes of Butler, Halberstam and Haraway. On the basis of this genealogy, she argues for a 'decentring of the male subject' as a key principle that informs *New Men's Studies* (cf. 34). In order to substantiate this claim, Lainka quite sensibly uses a conceptual pincer attack. She approaches the male subject from a figurative as well as a pragmatic perspective by combining Lacan's analysis of the symbolic processes that generate a – deceptive – notion of male subjectivity with Connell's practical inquiry into the relationships and interactions which constitute one's individual and collective gendered identity. Lacan's *méconnaissance* and Connell's material approach combine very neatly to demonstrate that masculinity is always fluid and fabricated, a struggle against the void which Lawrence's speaker so acutely feels at the end of “The Snake”.

The author begins her analysis of Lawrence's novels by stressing the importance of natural (male) corporeality in his work. She proposes the argument that only by returning, in an almost Rousseauian fashion, one's attention to the body and sexuality can man connect to his 'natural self', can in other words become a subject 'more aware of himself' (cf. 91). Relating this claim back to Lacan, Lainka constitutes the nostalgic ideal of the natural self, as a form of presymbolic consciousness directly linked to and springing from unadulterated corporeality and sexuality, as the *objet petit a*, the fundamental but eventually unattainable desire, of Lawrence's masculinities. Through this elegant move the interpretation of *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* is safely anchored within a sensible and persuasive analytical framework, even though some of the premises of this framework may be debatable. For one, any notion that bodily and sexual awareness itself might be the result of symbolic interactions (as Butler claims), is strategically downplayed. Also, one could take issue with Lainka's assessment of sexuality as a “Metapher für den Wunsch nach (körperlicher) Anerkennung, wobei Alterität und Intersubjektivität in den Vordergrund treten

(98)”, as Lawrence himself repeatedly emphasises, most comprehensively in his magnificent poem “Manifesto”, that he sees sexuality as a way towards a heightened form of individuality, “a pure balance of two single beings”, as Rupert Birkin in *Women in Love* has it.

This criticism notwithstanding, the close readings of the two novels that follow present a meticulous and very perceptive inventory of the fragmented male role configurations that pave the way towards this new, old natural superman. *The Rainbow* looks back and reveals the hollowness of Victorian and Edwardian ideals of masculinity by demonstrating how Tom and Will Brangwen and Anton Skrebensky in their turn fall short of social and emotional expectations. It also chronicles the eventual futility of their respective counterstrategies (regression, aggression, subordination), so that in the end it is the female principle, in the shape of Ursula Brangwen, who embodies the promise of a “world built up in a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heaven”.

This new world order is duly tested out in *Women in Love*, with Ursula and her sister, Gudrun, embarking on relationships with two very different incarnations of masculinity. Gerald Crinch is heir to the social, economic and emotional expectations of what it meant to be a man in Victorian England. Lainka convincingly shows how the triangle of desire between him, Gudrun and Loerke enacts the predicaments of this role ascription *in nuce*. Gerald’s replacement by Loerke, physically diminutive and sexually ambiguous, “mehr Kreatur als Mann” in Lainka’s words (216), his own misrouted, sadistic sexuality, the eventual malfunction of his ultimate male weapon, violence (when he fails to strangle Gudrun), and his subsequent death in the wilderness of the Alps make a strong case that this kind of male hegemony indeed “hat den Kampf der Geschlechter endgültig verloren” (217). The field is left to Rupert Birkin, who sees sexuality and sexual identification as a site of experimentation, of necessary instability and who finds a suitable partner to explore this dark matter in Ursula. For Lainka, this makes Birkin into a ‘premodern *gender warrior*’, who “regt ... eine neue Form von Männlichkeit an, die sich abseits binärer und oppressiver Geschlechterstrukturen und geschlechtlicher Normen ansiedelt und gerade aus der Ab-sage an traditionelles Geschlechterdenken ihre Legitimität erhält” (235).

Although this reviewer sympathises with the effort to establish John Cowper Powys as a noteworthy literary voice of the early 20th century, the analysis of his novels *Wolf Solent* and *Weymouth Sands* does not add too many significant insights to the author’s argument. In a way, the chapter on Powys recapitulates the one on Lawrence, with the main variation that the deconstruction of traditional images of masculinity, which Lawrence stretches over three generations, is here encapsulated in one single character, the eponymous protagonist of *Wolf*

Solent, while the fragmented, tentative, individualistic and therefore visionary new masculinity embodied by Rupert Birkin is, in *Weymouth Sands*, spread out over a variety of characters, from the oedipally challenged Magnus Muir to the enigmatic and deviant Jerry Cobbold. Ultimately, all these different roles are shown to be either deficient or masquerades, strategies to paper over the loss of meaningful ways to live one's 'natural' male self.

The readings of both novels are again very discerning and thorough and the connection back to the theoretical framework of the book convincing. In particular, Lainka makes a strong case that Wolf's inability to communicate his internal struggle throughout the novel mark him out as a Lacanian *sujet barré*, "das die Bedeutung der Welt, aber auch die eigene Bedeutung als Mann, nie völlig begreifen kann und wird, sondern diese immer schmerzlich verfehlt" (283). Nevertheless, Powys's protagonists can never shed their male carapace with such abandon as Rupert Birkin or fail quite as spectacularly and emblematically as Gerald Crinch, which renders both Lainka's analysis of his works comparatively less compelling than Lawrence's and might give rise to the assumption that Lawrence indeed was the more visionary and significant writer.

In her conclusion, the author recapitulates that Lawrence's and Powys's novels reveal the state of masculinity as lacking in shape, aim and conviction. All male characters exemplify in different ways the incompatibility of traditional male roles with individual designs for life in a post-Victorian, modern Britain, which inevitably leads to various renegotiations of such roles. They exhibit the essentially paradoxical and performative nature of any identity category, as described by Butler, insofar as "das Männerbild bei Lawrence und Powys durch Protagonisten geprägt ist, die weder auf eine 'natürliche' Männlichkeit, ein körperliches Ur-Substrat noch auf eine *core-gender-identity* zurückgreifen können" (366). At the same time, however, Lawrence in particular postulates a return to natural selfhood and sexuality "als eine Art sinnvoller Umweg hin zu einem neuen Körper- und Selbstbewusstsein" (366). The lasting contribution of this book is that Lainka depicts this nostalgic quest for a new male self-confidence as the fundamental and fundamentally unrealisable *primum movens* of the modern man, as Lacan's *objet petit a* of male subject identification.

All in all, this reviewer thinks that Lainka's book succeeds in its claim to use literary 'acts of self-discovery' in order to "Mann als Terra incognita fundiert zu erhellen" (24) only in certain parts. The literary text work (especially with regard to Lawrence) is illuminating and its theoretical foundation in Lacan and (to a lesser extent) Connell sensible and functional. The book is impeccably and comprehensively researched, evidenced by more than 1220 footnotes and an impressive apparatus of secondary sources. There are, however, considerable shortcomings both in formal and structural terms. A rather cava-

lier approach to editing and layout combined with occasionally clumsy or unwieldy phrasing at some points interfere with the scholarly gravity of the argument, as does the constant shift between English source material and German, which is reversely reproduced in this review. As far as the structure is concerned, the link between Lawrence and Powys is not sufficiently developed and the power of the argument suffers from intermittent attempts to connect readings from early 20th-century novels to the present day (cf. 233) or a tendency to indulge in wild speculations, such as the question “ob eine Mann-Mann-Beziehung eine Alternative gewesen wäre, die speziell Gerald vor dem Tod bewahrt hätte” (217). In Lawrence’s case it might also have been a good idea to include other texts, such as his poetry and/or essays, which might have extended the scope of the book. The objective, theoretical foundation and analytical procedure of this book, however, are sound and make this book a valuable, though not essential, contribution to the on-going stock taking of the crisis of masculinity.

Wolfgang Funk, Universität Hannover
E-Mail: wolfgang.funk@engsem.uni-hannover.de