



"The Nightmare" (1781) by Henry Fuseli. Current location: Detroit Institute of Arts. Image from *Henry Fuseli* by Martin Myrone. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

COMPENSATORY REVERSAL AND
THE VOLUPTUOUS SUFFOCATION:
NIGHTMARE AND SEXUAL REVENGE
IN “THE BORDER-LINE”

P E T E R B A L B E R T

The influence of sexual excitement on the content of dreams can be adequately appreciated by everyone from his own experience.

—Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*

To die, to sleep—to sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there’s the rub.

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

So that was how I finally made love to her, a minute for one, a minute for the other, a raid on the Devil, and a trip back to the Lord.

—Norman Mailer, *An American Dream*

My body is like a jungle in which dwells an unseen me, like a black panther in the night, whose two eyes glare green through my dreams.

—D.H. Lawrence, “On Being a Man”

I

The notorious imbroglio in London at the Café Royal in late December, 1923 involving D.H. Lawrence, J. Middleton Murry, and various friends remains

sufficiently familiar to readers of modernist literature that it is unnecessary to recount the disparate tensions, suspicions, and motivations that lead up to this oddly confessional celebration and its farcical conclusion¹. But let me early assert what surely is suggested in the title of this essay: The substantial and catalytic importance of this event in the impinging context of Lawrence's angry and insecure emotions both preceding and following that winter evening cannot be overstated. It occurs at a legendary establishment founded in 1865 and still at Regent Street, a place that was considered at the time—Lawrence's adverse reaction to its Port wine notwithstanding—to have the greatest wine cellar in the world. What better place for him to experience a species of apocalyptic awareness that will galvanize Lawrence to soon create a memorable fictional and blatantly personal response? Or put another way to catch the full spirit of my revisionist perspective: Perhaps critics and biographers have underestimated the event's dramatic effect on his writing and temperament in that crucial period after his return from Mexico in November. The experience in London is truly urging him to convert his livid feelings into the province of literary art.

Because of Murry's oft-quoted and too self-congratulatory letter about the allegedly "honorable" restraint of their erotic urges that he describes to Frieda years after Lawrence's death, it is widely assumed that Murry—certainly as sexually energetic and opportunistic as Lawrence's randy wife—somehow avoided sleeping with a notoriously receptive Frieda during their trip together on the continent while she is separated, geographically and in spirit, from her temporarily abandoned and disconsolate husband². No *reliable* indication exists of unwillingness on Frieda's part to consummate this love affair on their supposedly friendly and unadulterous vacation. Are we really to believe that their intimacy was absolutely chaste, or did it stop with deep kissing, or heavy petting, or any form of adolescent spooning? They are experienced adults, and all the denials appear suspect to me, as if establishing a convenient record for literary posterity.

Even given Frieda's late and similar for-the-record acknowledgement of their rectitude (quoted in Ellis *Dying Game* 641), I remain skeptical about such protestations of enforced chastity in their travels over several weeks in the fall of 1923. It feels like a politic strategy, especially by Murry, to preserve some epistolary evidence of their decision not to betray Frieda's husband. As the future author of two books on Lawrence, as well as studies of other literary figures (including his wife, Katherine Mansfield), Murry conspicu-

ously remains a man always conscious of nurturing an “authentic” professional image within the protocols of the publishing world. Thus that self-serving letter of proud renunciation seems connected to an ultimate verdict that may not look kindly on the convenient cuckolding of a close friend.

But I could be wrong, with Murry and Frieda carefully examining their options on the trip and somehow indulging in foreplay that stopped short of intercourse. Thus in the spirit of factual possibility, and in generous awareness of the weight of contrary opinion, I accept the hypothetical chance that this highly-sexed couple avoided copulation during their travel in Europe in 1923. Am I still to believe, however, that in the weeks since their return to London, with Frieda restlessly alone and beguilingly available in an apartment in Hampstead, that they also refrained from making love during this extended period of close proximity to Murry and far from her overseas husband? I must take my cue here from the unusually wise and judicious perspective of the Catherine Carswell, who while she never catches them in *flagrante delicto*, is an observant neighbor and reliable friend of Frieda during this period. Based on her reported demeanor at Café Royal, and on relevant comments she makes about the event and its guests, she shares my view that the liaison was more than platonic during their recently completed trip, and ever more probably so when they returned to London. She tellingly notes, without making a conclusive judgement, that Murry was Frieda’s constant “visitor” to the apartment (Ellis *Dying Game* 148). Again, it is difficult to imagine this mutually infatuated couple merely sharing wine and conversation during those visits in a closed-door and unchaperoned room: two people sexually drawn to each other after an enjoyable and intimate trip on the continent, with the woman never apologetic or defensive during her lifetime about the existential authority of her passionate desires and her absolute right to satisfy them.

II

In this discomfiting context of D.H. Lawrence as suffering cuckold, it is understandable that he is preoccupied with concepts of manhood, sexual potency, and female seductiveness as he begrudgingly returns to London in the autumn to rejoin Frieda after her angry departure from Mexico to visit her mother in Germany and eventually to accompany Murry on their trip through Europe. Lawrence’s dyspeptic mood is evident in a short and vitriolic essay, “On Coming Home,” that he writes early in 1924 as a retrospective

rumination on his native country and his turbulent emotions during the return voyage to England several months earlier. The essay reflects an uninhbitedly choleric view of his own country as well as a severe indictment of its ineffective and emasculated men. He conveys this bitterness while avoiding any revelation of his own beleaguered emotional state and problematic sexual performance; such evasion is accomplished through the use of the common defense mechanism of projection, as he projects abundant—and often redundant—metaphors of male phallic incapacity and failures of leadership onto his fellow compatriots in England. All this transparent camouflage emanates from a proud but wounded writer who recently endured Freda's departure from Mexico and the travesty of the Café Royal dinner. David Ellis is characteristically incisive about Lawrence's state of mind as he returns to London: "In marriage, Lawrence had often insisted, it was the husband's duty to lead and the wife's to follow. Boarding the Toledo was a crushing defeat for his principles, and yet one more consequence of that overly dependent temperament for which, with increasing bitterness after 1919, he was always inclined to hold his mother responsible" (*Dying Game* 140).

In "On Coming Home," he first mocks his country for harboring "a lot of queer, insane, half female screaming men, not quite men at all," and he repeatedly argues that the men convey "the sense of impotence," and that "underneath the soft civilizedness of him, fear, impotence, and malice" (181). His indictment is unequivocal and sweeping as he attacks Englishmen for their erotic passivity, mean intentions, and disgruntled and whiny sentiments—suspiciously similar to the emotions roiling in him when he returns to London amid some early signs of his own unreliable sexual potency with Frieda brought on by his deteriorating health, and perhaps exacerbated by those disturbing issues of gender priority in his marriage³. The insistent metaphors continue in the essay even when he writes about England's financial difficulties. Note his profound inability to connect his own angry perspective to the personal implications of the very disability he metaphorically describes. The more he projects, the more he unconsciously reveals about himself: "Above all, rancour is a bad sign in a superior person. It is a sign of impotence. The superior Englishman feels impotent against the American dollar . . ." (183).

Near the end of the essay, Lawrence summarily excoriates the male population of England with an inverted phallic image that graphically makes the same indictment of impotence but without using the term: "Not a man

left inside all the million pairs of trousers" (183). It is a caustic image of libidinal emptiness, and the reference to "trousers" will be worth recalling when Lawrence's anger and frustration are reflected in "The Border-Line," that most savage and brilliant of the three "Murry stories" that he writes after his return to London. But surely Lawrence, with his acute observational skill and uncanny perception of character and motivation, would have sensed the accuracy of Catharine Carswell's belief that Frieda and Murry were more than friends. Indeed, he would have surmised their amorous entanglement when they welcomed him home at the pier, when he contemplated the oddly aloof and self-conscious bearing of Frieda at the Café Royal dinner, and when he contemplated the confessional tone in Murry's not-so-equivocal words about "betrayal." To regard Murry's emotional use of that term—no matter who first raised the issue at the dinner—is to absurdly minimize the immediate resonance of Murry's affair with Frieda as well as the inevitability of Lawrence's awareness of the liaison. Thus "The Border-Line" is written as an intense form of literary revenge directed against his wife and his friend-enemy. Lawrence reincarnates and reenergizes his battered self in this fiction to settle the score in an unconventional ghost story that encompasses murder, sex, and the demons of the unconscious.

III

In just the first two pages of "The Border-Line" Lawrence establishes the integrated thematics that inform the vengeance undertaken in the tale. At the center of this pattern is a crucial claim and its pertinent counterpoint: the lack of manliness in contemporary men (as in Philip), and the seductive yet dangerous sexual power of women (as in Katharine). Such a double-pronged attack by Lawrence, unsparingly directed at both genders, reflects not only the extent of his bitterness over the affair between his wife and best friend, but also his typical ability to derive sociocultural theoretics from personal experience and laser-like observation. Lawrence always remains aware—in his own marriage and in this story—of Frieda's (Katharine's) sensual charisma and her resourceful use of it. While not conventionally beautiful, her erotic confidence, range of intimate affairs, and flirtatious bravado explain the considerable appeal of Frieda Weekley Lawrence Ravagli throughout her lifetime. Her fictional version, Katharine Farquhar—a last name of unsubtle, coital entendre—is pertinently depicted as always receiving the doting reactions she desires from solicitous men; it is a characteristic related

to a conspicuous quality in her conveyed by a lavish word that is repeated four times in just the opening paragraphs. In this evocative adjective that Lawrence employs as part homage, envy, and warning, he is unambiguous about where the real power often resides in the inevitable gender wars: "The French porters ran around, getting a voluptuous pleasure from merely carrying her bags. . . . Their voluptuous obsequiousness! . . . getting a voluptuous pleasure from calling a taxi for her . . . the same voluptuous scramble to escort Katharine Farquhar to her seat" (77).⁴

The intrusively reiterated word is derived from the Latin *voluptas*, meaning "pleasure;" it gradually becomes associated in the early nineteenth century with a fullness of female form similar to Frieda's body-type, and later in that century it is more broadly related to sensual enjoyment. While such a feminine asset is evident in Katharine's bearing and beauty, she also combines this physical appeal with a canny strategy geared to increase the attention of men during her trip. It is also fair to assert that Lawrence has traveled sufficiently with his own wife to witness her acute knowledge of the vulnerability of men to her calibrated and accessible charm: "She sympathizes with the Frenchman's point of view: too much obvious capacity to help oneself is a disagreeable trait in a woman" (77). Lawrence is shrewd here about the inherent ironies in the Katharine-Frieda composite characterization. However much his wife or her fictional counterpart may insist on her own freedom and selfhood in marriage, she is not above catering to the sexual appetites of men in ways that enforce the stereotypes about her gender she claims to undermine. In Lawrence's projected fantasy and in the brutal chauvinism that Alan displays at the end of the story, it finally will be the return of a hard (recalling her punning name), dominating, and pitiless sex that will dispossess Katharine of her pretense of independence and primacy.

She encounters a range of men on her way to Germany. Lawrence uses a refracted perspective to convey how her perception of them echoes the sexually judgmental themes from "On Going Home," and note how the now familiar adjective is used to calibrate and evaluate the Parisian men and their "voluptuous pleasure in conveying their own kind of manliness" (77). This issue of the substance of true manhood provides a convenient link to the narrator's satiric demolition of her current husband, jeeringly described as "a little somebody in the world" (78). Lawrence quickly returns to the conflict engrained in Katharine's first marriage, as he establishes a relevant context for Alan's murderous return later in the story. Their union, as she

describes its tenure, embodied aspects of the ongoing conflict between Lawrence and Frieda, as Katharine refused to accept her late husband's patriarchal assumptions about male superiority; this "Queen-Bee" (recalling Lawrence's playful designation of Frieda in *Sea and Sardinia*) rejected her husband's claims, as she carried her own "conviction of lordiness" (78).

Thus only weeks after the Café Royal fiasco, Lawrence, in effect, rehashes the well-documented tensions in the battle for authority in his marriage—a preoccupation no doubt intensified by his suspicion about Frieda's affair with Murry. In another revealing essay from this period, "On Being a Man," Lawrence is unusually frank and even-handed about both the inevitability *and* unsolvability of the essential gender-driven conflict in any marriage, as he employs colorful Biblical metaphors to depict the archetypal struggle: "I am the son of old red-earth Adam, with a black touchstone at the centre of me. And all the fair words in the world won't alter it. Woman is the strange serpent-communing Eve, inalterable" (217). The red and black coloration will be a significant element in the story and in its developing interplay of darkness and light. In Katharine's first marriage, the tensions cumulatively exhaust both partners, and "after ten years, they had ceased to live together" (79). This time span corresponds to the duration of Lawrence's marriage until their temporary separation in 1923, providing further evidence of Lawrence's purposeful transparency about the autobiographical details and considerable animosities that inform "The Border-Line."

Lawrence's mode of characterization intentionally lacks nuance, an aggressive technique that aligns with his motivation of unadulterated revenge in this short fiction. Philip is introduced with such unrestrained descriptors as "little body" and "like a dog when it loves you" (79). Although Murry in real life is admired for his impeccable clothing and sartorial stylishness, he is noticeably shorter than Lawrence, a discrepancy in height that Lawrence will mischievously develop later in more graphic terms. For now he makes obsequious Philip render a superlative judgement about Alan that must provide Lawrence with a cruel joy, as the words ironically echo the reiterated emphasis on impotence in "On Going Home": Philip praises Alan in the one area about which Lawrence, with his own fading health, cuckolded state, and declining potency, must feel acutely insecure. He asserts to Katharine that Alan "is the only real man, what I call a real man, that I have ever met" (79). Thus Lawrence begins the process of a vindictive and compensatory projection, as he starts to make a case for himself—force-feeding the words to

Philip!—as a man fated to embody aspects of sexual power, impressive endurance, and dangerous intention. He seems to recall Birkin's hyperbolic insistence in *Women in Love* on the need for a cleansing, creative, and national revolution, insisting that Alan remains the legitimate avatar of real manliness, "embodying the cold strength of a man, accepting the destiny of destruction" (80). In "The Border-Line" there is no wise and rational Ursula Brangwen to puncture the pomposity and elitism of Alan's pronouncements. His qualities of uncanny strength and cold efficiency anticipate the merciless actions he takes in the story's harrowing conclusion.

IV

Six years after Alan's death in the war, Katharine marries Philip. The union soon brings the wife "a curious sense of degradation" (81)—a state quite different from the energizing destruction espoused by Alan and more precisely codified by Birkin. It causes in her the "numbness of her flesh," and ultimately "the suffocating sense of nullity and degradation," a sudden surge of "the strange voluptuous suffocation, which left her soul in mud" (81, 82). This issue of "suffocation" itself will prove to be a crucial and disturbing theme in the story—whether projected by Lawrence onto Katharine or, more dramatically, onto the odious character of Philip. The feeling of nothingness and corruption absorbed by Katharine from Philip's mere presence is so great that she cannot breathe, and "sometimes she gasped and gasped, from her oppressed lungs" (82). It is a suffocation that remains perversely "voluptuous" within the sensual implications of that word, as she too easily relaxes and indulgently absorbs Philip's carefully manipulated and strategic idolatry of her: "He would serve her with subtle, cunning homage" (81). It is clear that Lawrence lacks any self-consciousness about revealing the extent of his disgust with Murry and Frieda. Considerably more than the other "Murry stories" written after the Café Royal event, "The Border-Line" holds nothing back, existing in that no-rules boundary between fantasy and realism, between ghost story and horror show, between the ambiance of dream and the disequilibrium of nightmare—and always blurring the reliable lines of demarcation between the conventions of fiction and the range of human experience.

As she ponders the clever and hypocritical Philip, Katharine also recalls the often disconcerting aspects of Alan's more mercurial demeanor and more authoritarian perspective. She remembers her distinct excitement

whenever she reunites with him after any prolonged separation. This contrast with her sense of returning to Philip “with strange, disintegrating reluctance” (82) provides a segue to the most striking passage of poetic prose in the story. Here Lawrence’s frustration about the lost and revolutionary potential of a post-war world, described in “On Coming Home,” is now poignantly recorded through Katharine’s rumination as the train mournfully moves through the devastated and poisoned area of some of the most intense battles in recorded history. Might one also wonder in retrospect if her awareness of this catalogue of the buried dead also functions as the first unconscious summoning of Alan Anstruther (i.e. “more truth”?) to claim his vengeance in the land of the living?

As she looked unseeing out of the carriage window, suddenly, with a jolt, the wintry landscape realized itself into her consciousness. The flat, grey, wintry landscape, ploughed fields of greying earth looked as if they were composed of dead men. Pallid, stark, thin trees stood like wire beside straight, abstract roads. A ruined form before a few more wire trees. And a dismal village filed past, with smashed houses like rotten teeth between the straight row of the village street.

With sudden horror she realized that she must be in the Marne country, the ghastly Marne country, century after century digging the corpse of frustrated men into its soil. The border country where the Latin races and the Germanic neutralize one another into horrid ash. (82–83)

The terrain is ghoulishly anthropomorphized into a three-dimensional tableau of corroding men under a corrupted earth-cover, with the deathly pall of infected dirt holding the mayhem together in a hideous patchwork of carpet pieces. The once natural and scenic landscape has visibly become the dismembered body. This disturbing view is all the more personally dislocating for Katharine because she grimly realizes that “perhaps even the corpse of her own man among that gray clay” (83).

V

Lawrence never abandons the initial focus on Katharine’s proud awareness of the predictably observant response by men to her reliably voluptuous

bearing. As the train briefly stops at Soissons, she sits next to a young French officer; while she notices his “naïve childlike” appearance, she ponders—in the distinct and forward style of Frieda Lawrence!—“how he would give himself to a woman, if she would only find pleasure in the male he was” (83). Surely the biographical perspective here is replete with intimate fascination. The sense conveyed is that Katharine feels respect for the achievement of mature and capable masculine sexuality, and she further places the burden on the female to arouse the erotic response of the male. But it is hard to avoid a series of impinging questions within the contorted intermingling of real and fictional lives. Is this Lawrence blaming Frieda for a failure to restore his increasingly fractured sexual being? Has the “airless” experience with Phillip suffocated Katharine’s capacity for transcendence in lovemaking? Or has her disgust with Philip-Murry turned off her interest in men? Is the return of her husband’s ghost-body necessary to reconstitute her erotic desire? Is her current fictional malaise the fate that Alan-Lawrence has bestowed upon her for the affair with Murry and the marriage to Philip? In any case, “she felt herself very remote from the business of male and female and giving and taking” (83).

The distinct echo of the gender wars is evident in Katharine’s awareness of a state in Alan that Lawrence could only dream of emulating with Frieda: his “strange silent authority” (85) that he displays in his first ghostly incarnation when she encounters him in Strasburg. His power is accentuated in the overt comparison of her former husband to the isolate, erect, and dominating Strasburg Cathedral, a towering building ominously described as if from Yeats’s “The Second Coming,” as “some vast insistent beast.” The tone becomes more insistent and intimidating when Alan is further described as embracing “the silence that surrounds a wild animal” (86). From this point on in “The Border-Line,” Katharine’s abject submission—sexual as well as situational—to Alan’s authority and force will comprise an essential aspect of Lawrence’s revenge on Frieda. More importantly, to the degree his developing coercion of her can diminish Murry, all the better. Then follows a provocative passage of rumination by Katharine even before she meets Alan’s apparition, words that anticipate the appearance of a bodily ghost who will wrest from her the complete submission he demands: “She now knew the supreme modern terror, of a world all ashy and nerve-dead. If a man could come back out of death to save her from this, she would not ask questions of him, but be humble and beyond tears grateful” (87). This obsequious sur-

render suggests that Alan may be listening—a second summoning for him to appear after the train ride. It is Lawrence combining aspects of the resurrection theme from *The Escaped Cock* with the scene from *The Rainbow* of Ursula contemplating the transcendent quality of a man in the future to whom she could commit⁵. This summoned ghost and ex-husband will not only avenge by murder, but will also have sex with her—at least of a certain kind.

At Baden-Baden, Katharine and Philip are met by her sister, the husband in his unimpressive and characteristic mode—fragile and weak, and who complained earlier in Oos that one part of his body felt especially vulnerable, as “the area does something to my chest” (89). The comment signifies the return of the breathing metaphor as a major component within the concluding structure and theme of the story. It is the anticipation for Philip not of a voluptuous suffocation but of a gradual deterioration in the final scene that also functions as a psychomatic reflection of his emotional imbalance and organic fear. Again, Lawrence is gleefully transferring his own chronic pulmonary disease onto Murry—a malicious projection of Murry’s inherent unseemliness that broadens now to include an allusion to Murry’s shorter stature and (inevitably!) his shorter phallus. The sisters’ ribald banter and joyful humor reveal a seething portrait of both Murry’s mechanical erotic energy and inadequate sexual equipment. Katharine is finished accommodating Philip’s needs after the more intense experiences with her former husband:

“But the little one is quite nice!” said Marianne deprecatingly.

“Isn’t he!” cried Katharine in the same tone.

And both sisters stood still and laughed in the middle of the streets.—“The little one,” was Phillip.

“The other one was more a man,” said Marianne. “But I’m sure this one is easier.—*The little one!*—Yes, he *should* be easier,” and she laughed in her mocking way.

“The stand-up-mannikin,” said Katharine, referring to those little toy men weighted at the base with lead, that always stand up again.

“Yes! Yes!” cried Marianne. “I am sure he *always* comes up again. Prumm!”—She made a gesture of knocking him over.

“And there he rises once more!”—She slowly raised her hand, as if the mannikin were elevating himself. (90)

VI

When Philip and Katharine are alone after the sisters' satiric exchange of phallic puns, the husband makes a declaration that resembles Skrebensky's mournful appeal in the final throes of his affair with Ursula. He explains to Katharine that he does not feel “real” anymore when alone; only when he is with her can he become “the most real man alive” (92). Clearly repelled by this pathetic admission, she decides not to stay with him on this first night of their reunion in Baden-Baden, and she realizes the next morning, even amid his spasmodic coughing fits, that she “wanted really to be free of him” (92). The relatively mild chest congestion here becomes part of a developing sequence of three additional pulmonary events for Philip, with each serving as a more serious assault on his breathing evident in increasing emissions of blood. This tripartite somatic pattern is framed by three nightmare experiences in bed by Philip, with each more damaging to his emotions and body; in addition the scenes progressively encroach on the hazy borderline between nightmare and reality.

In the description to Katharine of the first dream, he recounts the sensation of Alan appearing as an oppressive incubus on his body, lying on top of his chest with a weight so heavy and constrictive that “he could hardly breathe” (93). The scene is also—as many critics have argued—an aggressive love-hate action by Lawrence's ethereal but corporeal self that in its heated intimacy seems to combine the writer's well-chronicled complex of shifting patterns of antagonistic and sexual feelings through the years about Murry, with the tightness of the bedclothes on Philip, intensified by Alan's weight, functioning “like a lead coffin shell” (93). As events develop on this day, it is important to also note the similarly linked three-part pattern of increasingly more intense actions taken by Alan against any attempt by Katharine to aid Philip. After drinking at the fountain with Alan watching, Katharine first notes the blood on Philip's chin and coat as Alan pulls her away from her husband, an interference he implements “with complete relentlessness” (94).

When Philip, on the second night with his wife, pitifully asks her if she will sleep with him, “in case I dream,” she denies his request again, as Lawrence relishes the opportunity to let Katharine infantilize him: “I'll tuck you up warm, and sit with you a while. Keep yourself all covered up” (95).

In the early morning she responds to his cry that Alan lay on top of him during the night. Philip more definitively claims it was not a dream, with pulmonary effects now more extreme: blood is running down his chin, as he mournfully asserts that Alan “burst my blood-vessels in my chest” (95). The second stage of the “restraint pattern” also develops, as her attempt to aid him is discouraged by Alan and the “stone coldness of his presence touching even his heart.” Her reluctance reflects the fact that “she knew he had power over her too” (95). Again, with each incident more blood, more reality than dream, more inhibiting of support from Katharine, and more direct assertion of Alan’s control over her.

In the third stage of increasing aggression by Alan on Phillip and Katharine, she brings a sofa-bed into her husband’s room to stay with him during the night. At his scream of terror she begins to join him in bed—only this time Alan pulls her away and initiates the first of two sex scenes with Katharine; it is significantly preceded by an ominous and intrusive narrative comment suggesting that the forthcoming lovemaking reflects an angry assertion by Lawrence-Alan of his authority and control over Katharine: “But a greater power, the knowledge of the uselessness and the fatal dishonorableness of her womanly interference made her desist” (96). The hazy perspective on this scene of intercourse has received virtually no focused analysis from critics—except for a brave and forthright admission of some perplexity from David Ellis in *Dying Game* who, while not defining the particulars of the erotic gymnastics, grants that it is intense and unusual: “the love-making Alan enjoys with his wife does not seem to involve penetration” (162). Commenting on the stipulated “not now the old procreative way of possession,” Ellis adds, “whatever way replaces the old one, it leads her to fall asleep” (162–63).

VII

I suspect that part of Ellis’s reluctance to speculate on body-positioning stems from his effort to closely interconnect (and parallel) the evidence of Lawrence’s own potency issue with the sex described in the scene, as Ellis adds and does not define: “Something quite different and unusual was involved” (162). But some key phrases that describe the act depict an opposite scenario involving a great deal of penetration. The scene conveys a special kind of artistic adoption of disguise, a defense mechanism often called compensation but here, more precisely, evoked as a compensatory reversal—

what Anna Freud calls “a turning around upon the self” (56). The standard psychological definition of compensation generally describes it as a strategy where one covers up—consciously or unconsciously—weaknesses, frustrations, urgencies, angers, desires, or feelings of inadequacy, diminishment, or incompetence in one’s life area through the gratification (or drive toward performative excellence) in another area. In the strategy of compensatory reversal in this story, Lawrence’s own physiosexual weakness is converted into the province of impressive power in the *same life area*, as Alan returns to wreak vengeance on Philip and—in blunt, vernacular phrasing—to teach his wife who is boss. Thus Lawrence becomes Alan the sexual athlete who is able to withhold his own climax to dominate and exhaust Katharine with sex through her vaginal and anal orifices. Fueled by his fury at Murry and Frieda, it is Lawrence crafting a brutal fantasy of retribution and domination. The insistent and overly-reiterative phrasing offers a clear index to the penetrative endurance and variety that is described: “He held her fast and hard, and seemed to possess her through every pore of her body. . . . After all, she belonged to the man who could keep her. To the only man who knew at all how to keep her. And only man who knew at all how to keep her, and could possess her through all the pores of her body, so that there was no recoil from him” (96).

It is evident in Lawrence’s work that he has long admired the ancient Eastern notions of transcendence, natural response, and self-discipline embodied in doctrines of Taoism from India and China. It seems likely that Alan is enacting here the feat of *coitus reservatus*, the oriental sexual technique of prolonging pleasure without climax—sometimes called today “edging.”⁶ For Lawrence in 1923 it would be the least likely achievement for his compromised libido to enact. Not only does that reiteration of “through all the pores” suggest maintaining an erection for multiple exertions of penetrative sex, but the key metaphors of cloud and air imply the inevitable presence of abundant pressure through the withholding of emission and orgasmic movement: “Not just through one act, one function holding her. But as a cloud holds a shower. The men that were just functional men: Let them pass and perish. She wanted her contentment like life itself, through every pore, through every bit of her. The man who could hold her, as the wind held her, as the air held her, all surrounded” (96–97). Lawrence completes this scene of passion with scarcely a glance at the corpse nearby, as if Katharine’s purgative sex has removed any trace of empathy from her. It may

rank as arguably the cruelest line in all of Lawrence's fiction and offers a final comment on the extent of his antagonism toward Murry: "Philip did not move her pity. He looked as if he ought to be dead, even as if he should have been long dead" (97). The same Alan who acted the role of incubus in the killing of Philip is now analogized to a nurturant force, whose "aura permeated into every vein, through all her pores, as the scent of a pine-tree" and finally, in Lawrence's fantasy of compensation, as the natural embodiment of resurrection and force, "the Tree of Life itself" (97).⁷

The story's conclusion contains one more surprise, and there is virtually no commentary on this elliptical scene. Later in the day Katharine climbs up to the Old Castle, observed below by "two men, queer wild ruffians, with bundles on their backs" (97). In their clipped dialogue and disheveled appearance, they resemble the characters of Vladimir and Estragon from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, that drama of resonant ambiguity three decades ahead, a play filled with the tragicomic vision and gallows humor glimpsed so briefly in this equivocal vignette from "The Border-Line." Lawrence's ruffians are randy and observant contemplators of their culture and of Katharine. They are especially cognizant of sexual demarcations and class divisions that existed before the war destroyed those traditional divisions and restraints in the current world of survivors and wounded. The elder one says "There are no more Dukes of Baden, and Counts and Barons and peers of the realm are as much in ruin as the place. Soon we shall all be alike, Lumpen, tramps" (97). The younger one responds with a bit of sexual excitement that Katharine hears with a pang of fear as she climbs the stairs: "Also no more Ladies . . . Every tramp can have his lady" (97).

Somehow the men have also seen Alan catching up to Katharine, and as they observe the two figures about them, they exchange comments of masturbatory sexual longing and excitement. The younger man asserts that essential erotic energy still exists in the fractured country: "Only we eat and drink still, and the men want the women still" (97). The older ruffian, perhaps beyond his years in sexual potency, responds that: "A man forgets his trouser-lining when he sees that ghost and the woman together" (98). Recall that in "On Coming Home," Lawrence makes a belittling reference to the lack of masculine force and leadership in England, with "not a man left inside all the million pairs of trousers" (183). In this short story, with the ruffian's hand buried and no doubt moving in his pocket, the absence of

potency has now descended to the level of voyeuristic titillation reflected by this battered man in Germany.

The story's last paragraph provides a further instance of Lawrence projecting himself into the compensatory guise of Alan as sexual superman and potential "natural" savior, as he again makes assertive and dominating love to Katharine. The act occurs within an organic environment of woods, trees, red roots, and pine needles, no doubt eliciting a multi-orgasmic response from Katharine that amounts to a voluptuous suffocation. The final sentence is a Lawrencian *tour de force* that integrates power, passion, and lyrical reiteration with the writer's rare gift for translating his emotional urgencies into the fabric of great fiction:

And again, as he pressed her fast, and pressed his cold face against her, it was as if the wood of the tree itself were growing round her, the hard life wood compressing and almost devouring her, the sharp needle brushing her face, the limbs of the living tree enveloping her, crushing her in the last, final ecstasy of submission, squeezing from her the last drop of her passion, like the cold-white berries of the mistletoe on the tree of life. (98)

This haunting sense in the story's last words of a cold but powerful procreative energy emanating from mistletoe is engaged in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, a book that Lawrence often studied. The terms that Frazer uses remain strikingly relevant to the season and imagery in "The Border-Line":

"In Austria a twig of mistletoe is laid on the threshold as a preventative of nightmare. . . . In winter the sight of its fresh foliage among the bare branches must have been hailed by worshippers of the tree as a sign that the divine life which has ceased to animate the branches yet survived in the mistletoe, as the heart of a sleeper still beats when his body is motionless" (768, 772).⁸

VIII

It is possible that Lawrence wrote the story with another memorable and influential work in mind. In 1782 the Anglo-Swiss artist, Henry Fuseli, at the annual Royal Academy Exhibition in London, first displayed a painting that would become his most well-known work, "The Nightmare." It portrays the

striking image of a prone and vulnerable woman who is either asleep or unconscious with an ugly incubus perched in an alarmingly casual manner on her chest. It would become famous through the decades because of the disconcerting interplay of effects it produces: a distinct erotic vibrancy combined with an ambiguous temporal and spatial context, existing somewhere between dream and nightmare. While interpretations have varied through the years, there is strong consensus about the power of its overt sexuality and kinetic “doubleness” inherent in the resonance of the frozen moment. That is, in its Gothic/Romantic style, it portrays both the lingering ambience of a dream by indicating the stark effect of that dream on the woman, *and* a captured dream-state itself by symbolically depicting the sleeper flanked and mounted by two unsettling additional images.

In the sharply illuminated but oddly imprecise center (the paradoxical texture of all dreams!) is a sleeping woman dressed in flowing, sumptuous, and revealing night-wear; she is suggestively draped over the end of a bed, exposing her neck, chest, and the abundant curves of her legs and thighs to the leering gaze of a hideous incubus who straddles her torso with his weight; it is a look that seems simultaneously lascivious and contemplative, reflecting either a completed action on her, or a moment that will initiate some undefined assault. Fuseli uses the chiaroscuro effect of the woman’s beige and light coloration set against a darker background of ochre and deepening black on the framing edge of the painting. The room appears fashionably upscale, dominated by lurking and velvety red curtains in the background. Emerging as if from a break in the curtains is the head of the horse, with unusually large, intimidating, and glinting eyes as well as awkwardly flared nostrils.

The art historian Noelle Paulson writes about the painting in both etymological and mythological terms that are conveniently relevant to the physical condition experienced by Philip in the story:

Although it is tempting to understand the painting’s title as a punning reference to the horse, the word “nightmare” does not refer to horses. Rather, in the now obsolete definition of the term, a mare is an evil spirit that tortures humans while they sleep. As Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* defines it, a mare, or “mara,” [is] a spirit that, in heathen mythology, [was distinctly sent] “to torment or to suffocate sleepers. A morbid

oppression in the night resembling the pressure of weight upon the breast.” Thus Fuseli’s painting may in fact be understood as embodying the physical experience of chest pressure felt during a dream-state. (4–5)

It is probable that Lawrence had seen this painting displayed in public auctions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during which it apparently was purchased at least twice by titled estates. Its scandalous fame extended through Lawrence’s lifetime, and he likely at least knew of the work and would have been fascinated by its technical daring and its risqué theme. Paulson further adds that Fuseli’s painting “shows the futility of light to penetrate or explain darker realms of the unconscious” (5), that intense and secret domain of instinctual, often sexual desire. Such an observation about the effects of chiaroscuro technique and the intimations of psychology recalls Katharine’s observation as she dreams on the train that “the sunshine of the world [is] an artificial light . . . like the light of torches, and things artificially growing, in a night that was lit up artificially, with such intensity, that it gave the illusion of day” (83). In Fuseli’s precocious illustration of the fluid border between dream and reality, it is not surprising that it has been reliably reported that Freud kept a reproduction of the painting on the wall of his apartment in Vienna.

The sexual desire depicted in “The Nightmare” also suggests Fuseli’s need for revenge that is at least as intense as Lawrence’s in “The Border-Line.” Many art critics convincingly maintain that Fuseli’s motivation for the work was due to an unexpected rejection of his marriage proposal by Anna Landholdt, a personal shock made even worse by her immediate marriage to a family friend. The woman in the painting is said to resemble Landholdt, and the incubus has been described as a decipherable and caricatured distortion of Fuseli. In Lawrence’s story, he has divided the objects of his revenge between two characters: Philip will more fully suffer the suffocating weight on his chest, and Katharine will receive the voluptuous suffocation induced by Alan’s sexual power. It is noteworthy that the early meaning of nightmare *always* included the sleeper’s experience of a weight on his chest combined with a constricted feeling that often involved sleep paralysis, dyspepsia, and the feeling of dread—all conditions experienced in extreme forms by Philip. Paulson further comments on the painting: “The red drapery falling off the bed suggests a river of blood as it might be symbolically enacted on a stage

in a play" (18), a metaphoric insight relevant to Lawrence increasing Philip's output of blood until his demise. Anthropologist Charles Stewart, in his study of dreams and nightmare, characterizes the sleeping woman as "voluptuous" (279) to those who first studied the painting in the late eighteenth century.

In Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1912), which Lawrence either read directly or contemplated through accounts of its content and importance, there are lines that connect the burden of Lawrence's declining health with the condition that he has projected onto the character of Philip through the mechanism of compensatory reversal. In real life, of course, it is Lawrence who acutely suffers from pulmonary distress, and it would not be surprising to Freud that he transfers the disease to the fictional embodiment of an enemy. "Sufferers from disease of the lungs dream of suffocation . . ." and related dreams "are usually short and come to a terrifying end at the moment of waking; their content almost always includes a situation involving a horrible death . . . and are remarkably subject to the familiar nightmare" (68).

Freud's daughter, however, deserves the last word on the relevance of a defense mechanism to this story. Anna Freud famously maintains that the most common reflection of "mechanisms of projection" exists "when we project our own jealousy" (133). In this regard, on Aug. 29, 1953 Frieda writes revealingly and disingenuously to Murry: "Do you know the story of L's 'The Border-Line?' The jealousy beyond the grave?" (359) Note that Frieda diplomatically does not include any comment disputing the intimate grounds for Lawrence's jealousy. But she is surely correct to sense the compensatory power of a projection that truly extends beyond the grave.⁹

NOTES

1. See David Ellis's excellent third volume of *The Cambridge Biography of D.H. Lawrence* (143-72) for the full context of the Café Royal dinner, for pertinent discussion of the "Murry stories," and for Lawrence's volatile emotions in the period after his separation from Frieda.
2. The relevant letter from Murry to Frieda is written on Dec. 18, 1955: "It was, I think, the one and only great renunciation I have made. And, I think, I'm glad I did. But it was a very *real* renunciation" (Lea 118). It is significant, however, that no return letter exists from Frieda with an *explicit* confirmation or denial of the proud and definitive assertion Murry makes in this letter. It is possible that Brenda Maddox is correct in her conjecture, reported in Ellis and rejected by him, that

“what Murry refused Frieda was future cohabitation rather than sexual intercourse: (Ellis *Dying Game* 641, Maddox 350).

3. I discuss the ramifications of Lawrence's struggle with sexual performance *and* its projected and sublimated relation to his themes and characterizations from a wide range of his works in the 1920's throughout my recent book, *D.H. Lawrence and the Marriage Matrix*.
4. The text for “The Border-Line” that I have used is the second version, published in September 1924 in both the American magazine *The Smart Set*, and in the English periodical *Hutchinson's*. It is the version published in the authoritative Cambridge edition of *The Woman Who Rode Away and Other Stories*. See Ellis (*Dying Game* 161–62) for distinctions among the three versions.
5. “Who was she to have a man according to her own desire? It was not for her to create, but to recognize a man created by God” (*Rainbow* 457).
6. See *D.H. Lawrence's Philosophy of Nature: An Eastern View*, by Tianying Zang for relevant material on the ancient Taoist belief in various forms of polarity and duality, and especially chapter vii, “Mind and Body,” with its pertinent discussion of Laozi (479 B.C.) and the origin of Taoist concepts that anticipate Lawrence's vision. Brenda Maddox also refers to the role Taoism plays in Lawrence's work, and she mentions *coitus reservatus* (367) in relation to the sex between Cipriano and Kate in *The Plumed Serpent*.
7. In Ellis's most recent and insightful book, *Love and Sex in D.H. Lawrence*, he describes the “fantasies of compensation” in the final scenes, and relates the pattern to Alan's ability to induce in Katharine that “final ecstasy of submission.” But Ellis, alert enough to isolate an aspect of the defense mechanism, does not define the important resonance of “not now the old, procreative way of possession;” he still insists on the presence of an unnamed “alternative to penetrative sex” that he regards as “very strange indeed” as he further connects it to “non-phallic forces” (131, 132). As my essay argues, the process of what I call compensatory reversal provides Alan with considerable “phallic force.” In terms of the aggressive vaginal and anal sex in the scene, recall Norman Mailer's superb insights on Lawrence in *The Prisoner of Sex*, and especially in the context of Lawrence's “upbringing” by his mother and the later complexity of his sexual life with Frieda and the coital descriptions in his fiction: “His mother had adored him. Since his first sense of himself as a male had been in the tender air of her total concern—now, and always, his strength would depend upon such outsized admiration. Dominance over women was the indispensable elevator which would raise his phallus to that height from which it might seek transcendence” (154–55). Indeed, the scene may have even more intimate biographical resonance. In her Introduction to a Penguin edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* that discusses anality in that novel, Doris Lessing writes about the sexual habits of Lawrence and Frieda that have relevance for the depiction of the passions of Alan and Katharine in “The Border-Line”: “When Lawrence discovered anal sex, things went well, for him at least, though his amiable pet name for her was ‘shithag’” (xiii).
8. Two additional critics who comment on this ending seem to reduce its meaning to the tired platitudes of the gender wars. While Cushman wisely recognizes Alan as a “modern incubus” (202), he too easily codifies Alan's “voracious embrace at the end of the story,” claiming it “dramatizes

uncomfortable ideas about sex roles and arguable sexual politics" (205). Macadre'-Nguyen asserts that the conclusion describes "where the ghost of a man can only sexually satisfy a woman by turning into a negation" (185).

9. There is an interesting and coincidental geographical connection between Freud and Lawrence worth noting. Eight years after Lawrence's death, Freud manages to escape from Austria in 1938 after its annexation by the Nazis. He arrives in London in June, where he spends the last months of his life with his daughter Anna, at 20 Maresfield Garden at Hampstead. From there it is a mere ten-minute walk to the apartment at 11 Heath Street where Frieda lived alone in 1923—often visited by Murry—after her return from the European trip with him, and where Lawrence would join her at this Hampstead address in November.

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