Destinies of Splendor

Sexual Attraction in D. H. Lawrence

DOUGLAS WUCHINA

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Douglas Wuchina

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Friendship between a man and a woman, as a thing of first importance to either, is impossible: and I know it.

D. H. Lawrence, letter to Dorothy Brett

A deep attraction between two people is a sacred, mysterious thing and Lawrence's real belief and point.

Frieda Lawrence, letter to F. R. Leavis

"There are destinies of splendor," he said to the night, "after all our doom of littleness and meanness and pain."

The Escaped Cock

Contents

1: Partnership Marriage versus "Dynamic" Sexuality 1
Partnership versus Attraction. The Lawrencian Level of Insight. Lawrence and the Sexual Revolution. Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus. D. H. Lawrence, Philosopher.

2: Literature—and Freud 21
Artist and Scientist. The Question of Character. Character in Psychoanalytic Case Studies. Narcissistic Character and Relational Character. Idealism and the Sensual in *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*. Idealism and Attraction. Therapy and Culture

3: "Flesh" and "Word" in *Sons and Lovers* 45
The Précis versus the "Foreword." "Flesh" and "Word" in the "Foreword." The Morel Marriage in *Sons and Lovers* and Ancillary Texts. Miriam in *Sons and Lovers* and "The Soiled Rose"/"The Shades of Spring." Clara and "Attraction."

4: "The World Was Changing": The Sensibility of Siegmund in *The Trespasser* 71
Romantic Holiday. "steady progressiveness." "a face suggesting strength." The Sapience of Siegmund. The Heartbeat of the World. The Gorse Scene (1). The Sobbing Woman. The Gorse Scene (2). Hampered Hampson. The Disillusionment Scene. Narcissism and Relatedness. Tragic Decline?

5: Back to the Farm in *The Rainbow* 93
Lawrence Theorising the Sensual. Tom Brangwen's Sexual Development. Power within Estrangement. Lydia's Dubious Role in the "Transfiguration." The Hero versus the Phallic Man. The Enclosedness of Will's Will. Will's "Indoor" Sexual Development. Ursula and the Mass Mentality. Skrebensky's Secret. The Moon-Presence. Back to the Farm.

6: Passional Electricity in *Women In Love* 127
Can We Believe It? Gerald and Gudrun within the Envelope. Program and Practice in the Ursula-Birkin Relation. What Happens in "Excurse"? Priest and Postulant.

7: *Mr. Noon* and "the Incalculable Throb of Passion and Desire" 149
Mr. Noon in Lawrence's *Oeuvre*. The Soul's Unfolding. The Sensual Soul. The Calculated Incalculable. The Glowing Woman.

8: *The Lost Girl* and the Enemy of Idealism 159
"tacit admission of difference." Ciccio Arrives. Vital Extinction.

9: *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: Marrying on the Vibe 171
Catching the Vibe. The Power Phase Continued. The Broken-Backed Snake. "having jerked off his brake." Clifford as Techie. The Orgasm Question. Sex and Talk.

10: The Resistance to Lawrence's Sexual Views 199

Notes 205

Bibliography 219

Index 227

1: Partnership Marriage versus "Dynamic" Sexuality

Partnership versus Attraction

It is a commonplace that genius is misunderstood. But one would have thought that after more than half a century of vigorous critical activity on D. H. Lawrence—admittedly much abated in recent years, for a variety of reasons—no central aspect of his work would have remained unexamined or overlooked. In the area of Lawrence's sexual theory, because of its intrinsic interest, one might have expected the effort of elucidation to be stronger than elsewhere. And yet the situation today remains essentially the same as it was over fifty years ago when Frieda Lawrence, after reading F. R. Leavis's *D. H. Lawrence, Novelist* (1955), wrote to Leavis that "[n]obody seems to have an idea of the quality of Lawrence's and my relationship, the essence of it.... The deep attraction was there and that was what counts" (*Memoirs* 374). Frieda was right; Leavis had scanted the aspect of Lawrence's work that deals with sexual attraction as such, and, surprising as it may seem, critics have continued to treat the specifically sexual issue in Lawrence with little more than passing mention.[1] "Attraction between people is really instinctive and intuitional, not an affair of judgment," Lawrence wrote in his major late essay, "Introduction to These Paintings." "And in mutual attraction lies perhaps the deepest pleasure in life" (*LEA* 190).[2] Strange—it is a pleasure that appears to have been only vaguely familiar to over two generations of Lawrence critics.

Lawrence was of course frequently explicit about sex and love. A couple of almost identically titled articles, one published in the early 60s shortly after the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* obscenity trial and another more recently, show how easy it has been, in spite of all Lawrence's proselytizing, to overlook his specific claims about sex. The first article is titled "D. H. Lawrence and Sex" (1962) and the other "Lawrence and Sex" (2003). The latter hardly engages its announced subject, only noting at the close that Lawrence's premise is the happy discovery of a "suitable mate" and that he is able to "track the birth and development of such attraction in a delicately responsive way" (Mencher 354).

That is indeed true, but why not say more? The earlier article considers Lawrence's sexual theory in detail and even quotes at length a critical (and frequently overlooked) passage on sexual attraction from "A Propos of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*." But, having quoted the passage, the author is content to make the following exclamation in lieu of analysis: "We can see how far removed Lawrence's idea of 'sex' and 'sexual desire' is from that of most modern people and most modern novelists!" (Nazareth 40).

"Sex is the balance of male and female in the universe, the attraction, the repulsion, the transit of neutrality, the new attraction, the new repulsion, always different, always new" (*LCL* 323). So Lawrence states in "A Propos of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*," the explanatory essay he wrote a year and a half after the novel was published. Throughout marriage, he says, there remains "some unseen, unknown interplay of balance, harmony, completion, like some soundless symphony which moves with a rhythm from phase to phase" (*LCL* 324). That is perhaps too rhapsodic (or symphonic) for some. Lawrence adds that the "soundless singing" is that of "two strange and incompatible lives, a man's and a woman's" (*LCL* 324). Incompatible? Why use *that* word to describe marital success? Lawrence continues:

> But—and this *but* crashes through our heart like a bullet—marriage is no marriage that is not basically and permanently phallic, and that is not linked up with the sun and the earth, the moon and the fixed stars and the planets, in the rhythm of days, in the rhythm of months, in the rhythm of quarters, of years, of decades and of centuries. Marriage is no marriage that is not a correspondence of the blood. (*LCL* 324)

Crashes through our heart *like a bullet?* Lawrence seems to refer to some deeply ingrained resistance. But how to assimilate readily a definition of marriage that takes for granted a linkage to "the fixed stars" (as distinguished from the planets, moreover), or that assumes the marital "rhythm" to be a matter not just of decades but centuries? In any case, here is how Lawrence goes on to define the typical modern marriage, the "counterfeit" counterpart to the "blood" marriage, in the passage that is often overlooked:

> Modern people are just personalities, and modern marriage takes place when two people are "thrilled" by each other's personality: when they have the same tastes in furniture or books or sport or amusement, when they love "talking" to one another, when they admire one another's "minds." Now this, this affinity of mind and personality is an excellent basis of friendship between the sexes, but a disastrous basis for marriage. Because marriage inevitably starts the sex activity, and the sex activity is, and always was and will be in some way hostile to the mental, *personal* relationship be-

> tween man and woman. It is almost an axiom, that the marriage of two *personalities* will end in a startling physical hatred. (*LCL* 325–6)

Lawrence suggests here that the "blood" relation is apparently not something that seems as stable as sexual friendship, that the participants cannot have the same comfortable "hold" on it. Marriage as Lawrence defines it evidently requires a certain kind of magnanimity in both parties, an ability to see beyond the "personal" relation and to allow the forces inherent in sexual attraction to work of themselves, to allow, in effect, the force of sexual attraction to take priority over sexual friendship.

In speaking of the marriage of "personalities," Lawrence has indeed identified a clear "modern" tendency. We now call it "partnership marriage" or "peer marriage." To demonstrate the validity of his categorization, I cite a recent review in *The New Republic* of the letters of John and Abigail Adams. The reviewer, historian Gordon Wood, characterizes the Adams marriage as fundamentally different from the marriages of the other American Founding Fathers in its "almost modern" quality (38). The Adams marriage, Wood says, was "an emerging new kind of marriage," a "companionate marriage": "The Adamses were not just spouses and lovers; they were also each other's best friend and intellectual partner" (38). Wood observes that, in comparison, Thomas Jefferson's marriage appears to have been "traditionally patriarchal" since Jefferson did not regard his wife as an "intellectual companion" (39). Alexander Hamilton's wife "was never his intellectual partner" either (Wood 39).[3]

It would not be accurate to say that Lawrence's own marriage was not in some way "companionate." Frieda may not have been Lawrence's "intellectual equal," but Lawrence certainly valued her opinion and regularly discussed his work with her, to the extent the Frieda could say in her memoir that she "felt deeply responsible for what [Lawrence] wrote" (*Not I* 136). The two were intellectually compatible on a basic level. For example, Frieda took what appears to have been an intelligent interest in *The Trespasser* shortly after meeting Lawrence (*L* 1: 425): she had the well-developed romantic sensibility typical of the time. (And it was a more aristocratic time—there are several mentions in the *Composite Biography* of Frieda's giving the strong impression of "a lady"[4]; all too often, in the present democratic age, ideology takes the place of sensibility.) So Lawrence wasn't recommending that a cultivated man marry a barmaid (or, like Joyce, a chambermaid). Yet the clear tendency of Lawrence's arguments in "A Propos," as well as in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922), an earlier work

that takes a similar position *passim*, is that in marriage intellectual interchange can never be primary. *The New Republic* reviewer seems to take it for granted that love and friendship are readily achievable in equal intensity in a marriage. But Lawrence consistently emphasizes the difficulty of realizing a strong authentic attraction. If the attraction is legitimate, he assumes, it will affect the whole self—intuitively and instinctively, beyond judgment—and will therefore not be simply an affair of expressed ideas; that is, it will require some "affinity of mind" but will be based primarily in the physical emotional self. Yet, typically, in the more modern marriage, as Lawrence explains in *Fantasia*, "We find a woman who is the same. We marry because we are 'pals.'... And at the great dynamic centres nothing has happened at all. Blank nothing" (*PU* 148–9). Lawrence is concerned to protect this "dynamic" larger self in sexual relations, which, in addition to having a literal somatic force (more on this shortly), must respect basic differences between the sexes. As he says elsewhere in *Fantasia*: "On mixing with one another, in becoming familiar, in being 'pals,' [boys and girls] lose their own male and female integrity. And they lose the treasure of the future, the vital sex polarity, the dynamic magic of life. For the magic and the dynamism rests on *otherness*" (*PU* 132).

It won't do to conclude that the desiderated "dynamism" was an idiosyncrasy of Lawrence's and therefore all right *for him*. Nor should the dynamism be seen as essentially expressed in the fierce quarrels that we know were a common occurrence between Lawrence and Frieda. Lawrence presents his observations about marriage as having a general validity that takes into account fundamental emotional and sexual realities.

Lawrence's view of "modern" marriage assumes a general deficiency of emotional capacity, a decline in vitality, as he calls it. Lawrence recognizes that most people simply never *feel* an attraction on the level that he describes it; all their lives they take sexual friendship as *the* form of marriage. "Vitally, the human race is dying," he writes in "A Propos." "It is like a great uprooted tree, with its roots in the air. We must plant ourselves again in the universe" (*LCL* 330). But again, how can we be expected to understand what being "planted in the universe" means when Lawrence links it to feelings nobody has—"the magic connection of the solstice and the equinox" (*LCL* 323), for example—or to "rituals" nobody practices—"We *must* once more practice the ritual of dawn and noon and sunset" (*LCL* 329)? "We have to go back, a long way," he says, "before the idealist conceptions began, before Plato, before the tragic idea of life arose, to get on to our feet again" (*LCL* 330). But we're not

there yet. And in any case it's not clear that the going back will be only that. The kind of sensibility Lawrence describes seems to owe something to the very "idealist conceptions" he regards as superseded, since he also argues in "A Propos" that the Catholic Church was responsible for establishing marriage as a private institution beyond the sway of the state. "Mankind has got to get back to the rhythm of the cosmos, and the permanence of marriage," Lawrence says (*LCL* 328). But that should not lead us to assume that the particular kind of sexual relation he describes has ever been the race's common experience of marriage.[5]

The Lawrencian Level of Insight

The problem with Lawrence's conclusions about sexual attraction is that they are the product of his own highly developed capacity for assimilation and realization. Perhaps there is no better example of Lawrence's capacity in this respect than Rupert Birkin's statements to Ursula Brangwen about "sensational" experience in the 1916 draft of *Women In Love*, published in the Cambridge edition of Lawrence's works as *The First "Women In Love."*[6] Ursula complains to Birkin in what would become the chapter "An Island" in the finished novel that men are conceited in their cleverness. "If only they'd stop knowing, and realise that the unknown is all right," she says (*FWL* 118). When Birkin replies that knowledge is a necessary aspect of being, Ursula says that if she knows in her feelings, "why should I be forced to know in my head!" (*FWL* 118). To which Birkin responds:

> "What you feel *is* knowledge—sensational knowledge. And that's like a bud—it has to burst open into a flower of conscious knowledge. And *then* the seed can fall into the unknown, be delivered over to the unknown like a seed that goes into the dark underground. But you've got to know everything, before you can escape from knowing, before you can be a spontaneous spark of creation fanned up to a fire, by the unknown."
>
> "But why, why must I know everything? It is most horrible. I am sick of knowing already. I *do* want something else."
>
> "Somebody has to know, or we all rot in the bud. And you're not sick of knowing—you're only sick of the mechanical confinement which fixes the terms of your knowing. What you desire is *sensational* knowledge, which is called living. But sensational knowledge isn't living unless it passes on into the blossom of conscious knowledge." (*FWL* 118–9)

Birkin adds that if Ursula makes conscious her experience "to the very last" she will find she has "escaped the burden of self-consciousness" (*FWL* 119).

Lawrence dropped this passage and a few similar ones from *Women In Love*, perhaps because Ursula's statements and attitude reveal that she is beyond the reach of Birkin's argument, at least at this point.[7] But the deletion does not mean that Lawrence rejected Birkin's formulation.[8] The process that Birkin describes essentially summarizes Ursula's development in *The Rainbow* (an Ursula based on Lawrence himself; the Ursula of *Women In Love* is based more directly on Frieda). Lawrence had given a similar account of creative understanding in "The Crown" (1915) and would do so again in "The Reality of Peace" (1917). The passage quoted here is notable because it is specific on a few important points that Lawrence never elaborated elsewhere. The overcoming of "self-consciousness" was a fundamental issue for Lawrence. By "self-consciousness" he does not mean merely youthful self-consciousness, which is partly excess or untamed consciousness, but a common adult state that might best be described as narcissism.[9] In one of the earlier discussions of "knowledge" in the 1916 text of *Women In Love*, Birkin distinguishes the "accomplished I" or "Ego," which "wishes to crystallise for ever upon itself," from the more receptive I which "is only a point of equilibrium, unstable equilibrium at that, in the everlasting flux of creation" and thereby a "point of pure relationship" (*FWL* 27). It is obvious to Birkin that Ursula has not reached this level of relational receptivity.

I ask the reader to contemplate the following part of Birkin's statement, which I quote again: "you're not sick of knowing—you're only sick of the mechanical confinement which fixes the terms of your knowing. What you desire is *sensational* knowledge, which is called living. But sensational knowledge isn't living unless it passes on into the blossom of conscious knowledge." Birkin knows Ursula well enough to see that she is not seeking a creative experience but only wants, as the popular phrase has it, to "get out of herself."[10] And he knows that the desire "to get out of oneself" is only a symptom of the common state of being too much *in* oneself, the narcissistic "mechanical confinement" of a cliché "sensational" knowledge. If the capacity for fulfilment in knowledge is lacking—which will have to do with the quality of the knowledge and the intelligence of the knower—the advance beyond narcissistic sensationalism never occurs.

Who can reach this creative state that is an "escape from knowing"? Only Birkin-Lawrence himself? Only a genius? I take it that what Lawrence describes here is sufficiently accessible to a general understanding to justify the attempt at definition. By "knowing everything" Birkin does not, apparently,

mean encyclopedic knowledge but something like a reasonably astute and honest worldly intelligence, and his definition of conventional "living" suggests a good deal more than, say, the word Philistinism. An educated and cultivated person might give all the appearance of "living" and yet be in a state of relative backwardness according to Birkin's standard of "conscious knowledge." Birkin describes a state of maturity when the tension of striving for knowledge falls away. Once accumulated knowledge functions as a kind of second nature through having been fully realized, there is a greater relational capacity in the present (the "unknown"). One must become fully conscious before one can live unconsciously, "like a seed that goes into the dark underground." So Lawrence the great opponent of mental consciousness was also a champion of it. Birkin-Lawrence may have reached the state of conscious unconsciousness earlier than most, but others can reach it. That their numbers are small does not disqualify Birkin's claim as unintelligible vatic rant. It is only necessary that his remarks arouse a sense of recognition among Lawrence's more sensitive readers.

That is the Lawrencian level of insight. Lawrence was not content to analyze ideas and attitudes in themselves; he typically looked for some sensual state that accompanied an idea, in Ursula's case the "sensational" impasse that lies behind her hankering for excitement.

He would later apply the same standard to more specifically sexual states. In a series of promotional letters soliciting subscriptions for *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lawrence repeatedly defined normal sexuality as "mental processes reflected down on to the physical activity" (*L* 6 335). The form of sexuality that begins in the brain in what is called sexual fantasy Lawrence regarded as illegitimate for the purposes of creative realization. Elsewhere he quotes the Egyptian saying "God enters from below" (*IR* 216). That cannot be interpreted crudely in light of Lawrence's obvious anti-mentalism in sex, which sees the lewd and the lustful for what they are. "Lust is sexual, love is spiritual," it will be said. Lawrence would say the opposite; it is lust that is spiritual in so far as it derives from an idea in the mind. Only a sexuality that begins in the emotional self is genuine, but emotional reception requires a certain quiescence of the mind, or better said, an assimilation of the mind to emotional ends. That is no simple achievement, since, as Birkin implies, the mind cannot be quiescent until it is trained and assured in its conscious assimilative capacity. And Lawrence did believe in "the spirit": "It is in the spirit that mar-

riage takes place" (*TI* 177)—though as he increasingly realized the "sensual" cast of "spiritual" states, he warned that the terms "may be unwise" (*PU* 88).

One of Lawrence's most quoted phrases is "sex in the head," but it is rarely placed in its context. Lawrence uses the phrase most frequently in *Fantasia* while discussing his theory of the "dynamic" bodily centres—e. g., the solar plexus, the thoracic ganglion, the hypogastric plexus—where he thought emotional consciousness was located. (Some will wish that Lawrence had spared us all the talk of plexuses and ganglia. Yet when, in "Introduction to These Paintings," he more plausibly speaks of "physical intuitional perception" (*LEA* 191), he alludes to the same phenomena he describes in *Fantasia*, and it is not clear that the absence of anatomical specifics helps his case.) The primary significance of "sex in the head," in the stricter anatomical sense that Lawrence defines it, has to be seen in relation to his statement in his earlier book *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921) that "all love, real love" is "primarily based" in the abdomen (*PU* 28). I leave aside for the moment the question of the validity of this claim; for now let it be noted that Lawrence could not speak with such assurance about his physical impressions if his conscious capacities had not reached a high level of development. Here we have a hint of the adept in Lawrence. As Lawrence's unrecognized *gran amigo* José Ortega y Gasset noted: "human life is not only a struggle with nature; it is also the struggle of man with his soul. What has Euramerica contributed to the techniques of the soul?" (*History* 161).[11]

"If we gave free rein, or a free course, to our living flow of desire, we shouldn't go far wrong. It's quite different from giving a free rein to an itching, prurient imagination" (*RDP* 343). This is another of Lawrence's sensual insights. Although "itch" and "flow" are metaphors, they should be seen as describing actual developmental phases in the individual which are likely to have different physiological manifestations. "[I]t is not until the stream of desire overflows and goes running downhill into the open world, that the individual has his further, secondary existence" (*RDP* 339). Again, the metaphor of the overflowing "stream of desire" ought to be seen as describing a psychic achievement that is also a physical state. It is not merely as a result of the physiological changes in puberty that sexuality "overflows." There can be no fruitful movement toward the "open world" without a genuine awareness of it, and that awareness depends on mature developed perception and assimilation, a welling up of real understanding.

A suggestive example of this kind psychic and physical insight appears in *The Social Basis of Consciousness* (1927) by Dr. Trigant Burrow, the heretical psychoanalyst with whom Lawrence corresponded in the 20s. Owing to the superficiality of our "objective" (i.e., personal) attitudes, Burrow says, "the genital stimulus in man is limited to the superficial tactile organs. It does not radiate to the deeper visceral structures constituting its nuclear terminus—in the male the rectal, prostatic and crural zones, in the female the rectal, the deeper vaginal zones and the cervix uteri (the homologue in the female of the prostate in the male)" (215-16). Perhaps it is this often vestigial status of the prostate (to consider only the male side of the equation)—the result of a deficient *psychic* adjustment—that explains some of its much-advertised malfunctions.

Lawrence and the Sexual Revolution

Lawrence is simultaneously charged with promoting the sexual revolution and with being rendered obsolete by it. But Lawrence always sought the individual realization of sex, a difficult and complicated process that has only a tangential relation to the broad social trend. Oliver Mellors, the gamekeeper in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, who is often viewed as a vehicle for the advancement of the sexual revolution, rejects the life of free sexuality he has experienced. He has been "sexually active" (to use the contemporary expression, with its hint of barbarism, or at least of pandemic inauthenticity) and has retreated to celibacy, disillusioned by the egotism and emotional fakery of sex pursued as a pleasurable activity in disregard of real relationship. As for Lawrence's reputed sexual backwardness, his view of sex is matter-of-fact and still by and large our own. Very little in his writings sounds dated today. Lawrence was not "repressed," nor was he "split"—no, not more than the rest of us, probably less so in fact: his very clarity of vision testifies to that. Nor did he overrate sex in reaction to the recent collapse of Victorian mores. The atmosphere of ideas of the educated classes of the 20s (Eastern religion, anthropology) was generally that of the 60s (the Depression and World War II being a protracted interlude) and is still current. But what about the Pill? The increased sexual practice it has made possible leads many today to regard Lawrence condescendingly as a champion of sexual activity itself, which had been thwarted in the past for fear of pregnancy (so the argument goes), or as an outdated defender of marriage (they *had* to believe in marriage back then, so another argument goes). But Lawrence is more subtle than that. He always recognized

that sex is not properly a matter of a mere reaction against "repression" and a movement toward "freedom." It was for him a question of the fulness of the experience rather than of the "experience" itself.

"Ours is the day of realisation rather than of action," he wrote in "A Propos."

> Today, the full conscious realisation of sex is even more important than the act itself. After centuries of obfuscation, the mind demands to know and know fully. The body is a good deal in abeyance, really. When people act in sex, nowadays, they are half the time acting up. They do it because they think it is expected of them. Whereas as a matter of fact it is the mind which is interested, and the body has to be provoked. The reason being that our ancestors so assiduously acted sex without ever thinking it or realising it, that now the act tends to be mechanical, dull, and disappointing, and only fresh mental realisation will freshen up the experience. (*LCL* 308)

By "fresh mental realisation" Lawrence does not mean more sex-in-the-head but rather "a balance between the consciousness of sex and the act of sex" (*LCL* 308). This will require "a proper reverence for sex, and a proper awe of the body's strange experiences" (*LCL* 309). But the body cannot have a reverential, realizable experience of sex outside authentic individual sexual attraction. Acting sex is not realizing sex. If there is to be a real sexual revolution, it will consist in the realization of "deep" sexual attraction on an individual level—"individual" here implying a process of creative development, physical as well as imaginative, and the recognition that a significant correspondence in sexual love (such as is commonly assumed in friendship) really exists.

Meanwhile the signs of inauthentic, mentally provoked sexuality are all around. The sensationalist tendency of the sexual revolution was already discernible among the educated in the 50s in such books as Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* (1959). The arguments of both these books break down in their endorsement of "polymorphous perversity," of sexual practice with no individual focus or goal. Brown calls Lawrence "that paradoxically conservative philosopher of sexuality," "paradoxically" because sexuality for Brown is at base variegated play (181). But Lawrence is in this respect "conservative" only to the extent that he was novelistic, that is, to the extent that he had a highly developed level of individuality and had no choice but to act on that individual level, where possibilities were limited by his own particular nature but where the capacity for significant experience was proportionately higher. In *Fantasia* Lawrence writes:

> [T]hough we have a potential dynamic sexual connection, we men, with almost every woman, yet the great outstanding fact of the individuality even of the blood makes us need a corresponding individuality in the woman we are to embrace. The more individual the man or woman, the more unsatisfactory is a non-individual connection: promiscuity. (*PU* 186)

Lawrence's concession that even promiscuity can be satisfying, albeit relatively, should be enough to establish the broad-mindedness in sexual matters of this reputed Puritan. The charge of Puritanism arises in part from Lawrence's constant assumption of a gradation or hierarchy of response according to the individual—he will rail at false and falser. Frieda said that Lawrence was sexually "fastidious" (*Memoirs* 141), but the hesitations and discriminations that that word implies misrepresent, I suspect, the actual case; Lawrence had no choice but to be himself and to respond spontaneously as he could.[12] The key is to understand what Lawrence meant by spontaneity.

Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus

Some readers will have noticed the sexual division suggested in the passage just quoted—"*we men*." The neoconservative Victorian historian Gertrude Himmerfarb has referred to Lawrence as "that arch-antifeminist" (198). The designation is inadequate, for to call Lawrence anti-feminist (in fact Lawrence hardly mentions feminism as such) puts the lesser before the greater. Whatever the merits of whatever form of feminism, Lawrence always proceeded on the knowledge that the love possible between the sexes was unique and the primary sexual reality. He sought the best first and let the rest take care of itself, so that, in his case at least, a valid distinction may be drawn between the vital (primary) and the ideological (secondary) in love.

Sons and Lovers (1913) shows that at one point in his early youth, with Miriam Leivers-Jessie Chambers, Lawrence had no firmly formulated objection to the partnership marriage that he would later criticize. Although *Sons and Lovers* is still often seen as demonstrating the existence of the Freudian Oedipus complex, it should perhaps be seen primarily as an account of Lawrence's eventual rejection of the partnership sexual relation. (I deal with the question of Freud in the following chapter.) *The Trespasser* (1912) already shows Lawrence, in the months before he met Frieda, with an extraordinarily healthy (in my reading at least) natural sexual sensibility. It took a feminine type like Frieda—the force of her distinctive femininity has been underrated—to help him to develop that sensibility to its full in a more "dynamic" relation.[13]