

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

D.H. LAWRENCE

*Women
in Love*



Complete and Unabridged

WOMEN IN LOVE

D. H. Lawrence

Introduction and Notes by
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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

First published in 1992 by Wordsworth Editions Limited
Cumberland House, Crib Street, Ware, Hertfordshire SG12 9ET
New introduction and notes added in 1999

ISBN 1 85326 007 X

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Typeset by Antony Gray
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write broad-ranging, jargon-free Introductions and to provide Notes that would assist the understanding of our readers, rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

'Put out the lights, we shall see better' (p. 156). Readers of *Women in Love* might easily pass over this unobtrusive little paradox, given the circumstances in which it is uttered. Gerald Crich is about to dive again into the darkness of Willey Water, in a desperate attempt to save his drowning sister Diana. As evening falls on the Criches' water-party, the coloured lanterns create an atmosphere of ethereal beauty, until the reality of the accident harshly intrudes. 'Sudden and mechanical and belonging to the world of man', Gerald makes his practical request, as the same lanterns now prevent his eyes from adjusting to the darkness. The effort is, however, doomed to fail: the Criches are 'all . . . curiously bad at living' (p. 177).

Yet the paradox also effortlessly crystallises the novel's version of a whole cultural condition. Modern Western societies had for some time prided themselves upon a journey of seemingly inexorable progress which they defined, philosophically, as 'enlightenment'. This

philosophy was based on a belief in the emancipatory powers of human reason. Industry and technology, the fruits of reason, had made rapid advances, and seemed to promise an unending triumph over the forces of nature. While *Women in Love* was being written, however, Western Europe was destroying itself in a war which used industry and technology for the mechanised extinction of human life on an unparalleled scale. Some have since seen the war as the logical conclusion of the competitive development of advanced capitalist and imperialist powers. Enlightenment, then, had produced darkness; civilisation had produced barbarism. Better to put out the lights, so that we might begin to learn again how to see.

D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930) was grievously affected by the fact of the Great War, and the result was *Women in Love*, his most mature and profound work of fiction. In the light, or darkness, of war, the novel undertakes a reassessment of those values and institutions by which we define ourselves as ‘human’ and thereby attempt to distinguish ourselves from the rest of the natural order. But why, then, ‘Women in Love’? Readers old and new have been led by this title to expect romance. What they find is indeed a kind of love story, complete with a tragic ending, but much else besides. For, like all great historical novelists, Lawrence understood that history is not simply a matter of abstract movements, wars, revolutions, monarchies and governments, but that it is made and registered in the practices of everyday personal life. Even in sexual relationship, in the most private and intimate domain of the personal, historical changes make their mark. Thus, in *Women in Love*, sexuality, marriage, family, friendship, and also work, education, art, and even our relations with animals, all come under the closest of scrutiny, constituting as they do the cherished values of a civilisation which had thrown itself into mechanised carnage. What, exactly, *was* it to be human?

Such questions make *Women in Love* a challenging and unsettling novel. Early reviewers did not always see the challenge as invigorating; they tended to wonder what exactly was going on between the four central characters, and suspected it was something of which they shouldn’t approve. *The Rainbow*, ‘sister’ novel to *Women in Love*, had been banned on the grounds of obscenity after its publication in 1915, and Lawrence struggled for several years to find a publisher for *Women in Love* before its eventual appearance in 1921. General consensus seemed to be that, while the subject matter of the novel was relatively straightforward, the treatment was both baffling and unpalatable: in the terms of the Scottish novelist Catherine Carswell, the novel was easy to read, but hard to understand. Now, with whatever advantage

critical hindsight brings, we can more clearly see how Lawrence was trying to do something radically new, both in terms of literary history and in terms of his own fictional development. The shock of the new can, of course, be painful.

In outline, the narrative of *Women in Love* does indeed possess a striking simplicity. Two sisters and grammar-school teachers, Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen, strike up relationships with two close friends, Rupert Birkin, a schools inspector, and Gerald Crich, a wealthy and influential mine-owner, in the East Midlands colliery area of Beldover. The fortunes of each pair are tracked for a brief period, though the dynamic always involves all four characters. Ursula and Birkin struggle into a relationship of some fulfilment, and are married; Gudrun and Crich experience increasing conflict, leading to a tragic conclusion. The four having taken a holiday together in the Tyrol, Crich, stung into violent conduct by Gudrun's intimacy with the German artist Loerke, walks alone into the mountains and is killed in the snow. The novel has no 'plot' as such, nor a sense of chronological or historical movement, other than a gradual ominous approach to this end; it's organisation is episodic, each chapter structured around a symbolic event or issue. The four central protagonists reveal themselves in the intense scenes and dialogues which unfold as their relationships develop through patterns of conflict and oscillation.

The dominant, nineteenth-century tradition of fictional realism, from which Lawrence drew, used devices such as elaborate plots and structures, authoritative or 'omniscient' narrative voice and detailed characterisation to suggest that the complex, mutually determining relationship between human individuals and their forms of social organisation could be analysed and understood. The Modernist aesthetic of the early twentieth century did not dispute this suggestion so much as question the means of achieving it: for novelists like Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, the techniques of realism had settled into something more like habit or formula, their knowingness an expression of the confidence of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, now inappropriate to the uncertainties and instabilities of a post-Victorian age. Hence, in these new fictions, plot begins to disappear, the principle of a complex ordering of events tending towards an intelligible end being replaced by loose impressionistic structures and open endings – "I don't believe that," he answered' (p. 421). Authoritative narrative perspective becomes harder to locate, as the boundaries between the narrative and the perspectives of the characters become blurred. The subjectivity of characters is, as it were, experienced more intensely, yet they are harder to know in an objective sense: Crich, for example, gets

extended realist treatment in Chapter xvii 'The Industrial Magnate', and readers of *The Rainbow* are well acquainted with Ursula, and to a lesser extent with Gudrun; but what do we know of Rupert Birkin's past? Early reviews suggest that the central characters in *Women in Love* were felt to be unconvincing, perhaps unrecognisable: their philosophising, and the highly idiosyncratic vocabulary developed by Lawrence to interpret their experiences, made them blend into one, so that more peripheral characters such as Hermione Roddice and Thomas Crich are instead singled out as distinct fictional creations.¹

The move towards Modernism is equally discernible in Lawrence's own fictional development up to *Women in Love*. In earlier novels such as *The White Peacock* (1911) and his masterpiece of autobiographical realism, *Sons and Lovers* (1913), Lawrence had established a reputation as a faithful yet experimentalist observer of the life of rural and working-class communities. What set him apart from his contemporaries was, as the critic Raymond Williams has noted, that he wrote from within these communities.² Lawrence was born in 1885 in the Nottinghamshire mining village of Eastwood, the youngest of three sons in a family of five. His father worked as a 'butty' or ganger in the pit, his mother had middle-class origins; the tensions in their marriage, and the role of a certain youngest son between them, are vividly acted out in the Morel family of *Sons and Lovers*. As a beneficiary of the 1870 Education Act and a grammar-school scholarship boy, Lawrence was to become the first working-class novelist to see his work established with any lasting significance within the preponderantly bourgeois world of literary culture. In *The Rainbow*, he took on the ambitious task of charting the historical trajectory of a family, the Brangwens, across three generations, from mid- to late-nineteenth-century life on the Marsh Farm through to the emergence of the 'New Woman', granddaughter Ursula Brangwen, as she strikes out independently into the world of new opportunities in the early twentieth century. The chronological canvas of *The Rainbow* declares its allegiances both to realism and to community, yet the striking experimentalism of language, form and character in the novel suggested changing aesthetic priorities. By now – indeed, since the redrafting of *Sons and Lovers* in the second half of 1912 – Lawrence had taken up with Frieda Weekley, the wife of his university languages tutor and product of a German military family, and had embarked on an often penurious life of writing and travel. Distance, both literal and

1 Farmer, Vasey and Worthen (eds), p. lv. For full details of this and other references turn to the Bibliography at the end of this Introduction.

2 See Raymond Williams

metaphorical, is established from his past life; and the influences of a greater cosmopolitanism and cultural diversity, and of his developing friendships and encounters within the literary intelligentsia, are registered clearly in the development of more abstract forms in his writing.

The result in *Women in Love* is that Lawrence no longer seems to write from within his originating community. The novel develops an aesthetic of distance, forever gazing at or looking in on others. "Who are those two Brangwens?" asks Gerald at the Breadalby gathering (p. 79), and is mocked by Birkin when he expresses surprise at the knowledge that they are schoolteachers and that their father is a handicrafts instructor. Ursula and Gudrun are transitional figures, attaining through education and culture the relatively unprecedented class mobility which allows them to forge relationships with men such as Birkin and Gerald. Hermione Roddice 'was really so strongly entrenched in her class superiority, she could come up and know people out of simple curiosity, as if they were creatures on exhibition' (p. 136); yet, from the moment that they secrete themselves safely behind the schoolyard wall in order to watch Laura Crich's wedding, Ursula and Gudrun are also observers, looking in on the social groups between which they are poised. The sisters, we note, are apart from, yet watching with, 'the group of uneasy, watchful common people . . . chiefly women, colliers' wives of the more shiftless sort . . .' (p. 8), the same people whom we later find outside the pale of the Criches' water-party, 'looking at the festivity beyond, enviously, like souls not admitted to paradise' (p. 134). The narrative viewpoint here seems to endorse an interpretation of the 'common people' which is constantly in evidence, and which may not have endeared it to a contemporary working-class readership. Gudrun, the most consistent perpetrator, has had some success in the art world of metropolitan London, and returns to find Beldover 'like a country in an underworld', where the people 'are all ghouls, and everything is ghostly' (p. 7). Her horrified fascination becomes a 'nostalgia' to 'be among the people', to the extent that she is drawn out 'with the rest of the common women' to the Friday-evening markets where, 'like any other common lass', she finds her 'boy', the electrician Palmer. A 'horror of people in the mass' (or 'un peu trop de monde', as Ursula encodes this in fashionable French for Gerald's sake) emerges as she recounts the details of a trip on a Thames steamer and her revulsion at the young boys running into the mud to beg for coins: "really, no vulture or jackal could dream of approaching them, for foulness" (p. 138). Wryly, the narrative soon underlines her linguistic distance from the

mass, in the response to the offer of a personal picnic-basket for herself and her sister alone: ' "How fearfully good! How frightfully nice if you could!" ' (p. 139).

If Gudrun is 'outside of life, an onlooker', Ursula is a 'partaker' (p. 141), yet still subject to the detachment her mobility entails. In Chapter xxvi, 'A Chair', she and Birkin visit the Monday jumble market; Ursula 'was superficially thrilled when she found herself out among the common people', who 'seemed stumpy and sordid', and on an impulse she decides to offer an antique chair they have just bought to a young couple - she a 'full-built, slightly blowsy city girl', he 'a still, mindless creature, hardly a man at all, a creature that the towns have produced . . . a gutter presence'. After Ursula's 'rather dazzling' approach (' "Would you care for it? It's really *very* pretty - but - but . . . " ' [p. 312]), the encounter proceeds haltingly, as the class tensions surrounding the conferral of the gift make themselves felt. The offer is, however, finally accepted. ' "How strange they are!" ' concludes Ursula (p. 315), though Lawrence's witty manipulation of the couple's responses in dialect suggest how equally strange she and Birkin are to them.

At the other end of the novel's social spectrum, we watch in fascination with Ursula and Gudrun as the habits of the cultured and ruling classes are acted out. If the common people haunt the novel, so too does Hermione Roddice, 'ghastly' and 'sepulchral', 'pallid and preyed-upon like a ghost, like one attacked by the tomb-influences which dog us' (p. 75). At Breadalby, or in the London Pompadour, the kind of discussions take place which prompt Gerald to 'sniff the air with delight and prepare for action' (p. 71). To Ursula, however, drawn into the 'magic circle' of privilege and high culture, a sense of weary dissatisfaction is derived from the talk itself, which 'went on like a rattle of small artillery, always slightly sententious, with a sententiousness that was only emphasised by the continual crackling of a witticism, the continual spatter of verbal jest, designed to give a tone of flippancy to a stream of conversation that was all critical and general, a canal of conversation rather than a stream' (p. 70). Talk here is constructed, artificially, through techniques we observe in the MP Alexander Roddice, who had learned an 'easy, offhand hospitality' for his sister's friends, and who brings 'an atmosphere of the House of Commons' to the gathering - high politics and high culture combined: 'the Home Secretary had said such and such a thing, and he, Roddice, on the other hand, thought such and such a thing, and had said so-and-so to the PM' (p. 71). It is left to Gudrun to frame, in characteristic manner, the strangeness of it all, as Gerald, Sir Joshua, the Countess, Hermione and Miss Bradley bask on a wall after swimming: ' "Aren't they terrifying?

Aren't they really terrifying? Don't they look saurian? They are just like great lizards" (p. 85).

In the face of the grotesque unreality of these public contexts and social classes, *Women in Love* shows its four central characters attempting to carve out for themselves a more authentic, private world of feeling and relationship. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the novel has been seen to signal a loss of belief on the part of a novelist such as Lawrence, a retreat away from the possibility of meaningful community and towards personal fulfilment in relationship and sexuality only. His friend Catherine Carswell wanted to know why Lawrence had this time chosen people who were 'so far removed from the general run . . . so sophisticated and "artistic" and spoiled' as his representatives of the modern world.³ Raymond Williams later summarised the novel as a 'masterpiece of loss'.⁴

Undoubtedly, *Women in Love* could be seen to dramatise a number of extremely pessimistic positions, pivoting on the failure of the 'human' and the inexorable reality of the death-process. Implicit throughout is the important semantic distinction that to 'exist' is not the same as to 'live'; the Gothic imagery attaching to working and ruling classes extends to cover 'humanity' as a kind of procession of the living-dead. "Humanity itself is dry-rotten, really", announces Birkin, to an Ursula who is rather gamely trying to get to know him, and is alternately repelled and fascinated by his views: "There are myriads of human beings hanging on the bush – and they look very nice and rosy, your healthy young men and women. But they are apples of Sodom . . . their insides are full of bitter, corrupt ash . . . I abhor humanity, I wish it was swept away. It could go, and there would be no *absolute* loss, if every human being perished tomorrow" (p. 107–8). Inevitably, he is intent on giving up his line of work: "I don't believe in the humanity I pretend to be part of, I don't care a straw for the social ideals I live by, I hate the dying organic form of social mankind – so it can't be anything but trumpery, to work at education" (p. 112). Birkin's courtship technique here leaves something to be desired: Ursula is beginning to want him to talk about 'love'. But later, whilst Birkin is convalescing in the South of France, Ursula is subject to the same disenchantment: she finds she can love only children and 'best of all' animals, whereas she 'had a profound grudge against the human being. That which the word "human" stood for was despicable and repugnant to her' (p. 211–12). The philosophical equivalent of these profoundly anti-enlightenment sentiments is Birkin's

3 Carswell, pp. 68–9

4 Raymond Williams, p. 182

'dark river of dissolution', the continuing process of corruption and destruction whose paradoxical centrality to 'life' we choose to mask or ignore: "When the stream of synthetic creation lapses, we find ourselves part of the inverse process, the blood of destructive creation. Aphrodite is born in the first spasm of universal dissolution – then the snakes and swans and lotus – marsh-flowers – and Gudrun and Gerald – born in the process of destructive creation" (p. 147–8).

Such ideas and debates cannot simply be explained as responses to the war. Rather, they draw on currents of thought about modernity which date back to the mid-nineteenth century, when the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–67) was publishing his *Fleurs du mal* (1857), an interpretation of the modern condition which Birkin's words echo. *Women in Love* is equally inconceivable without the organising concept of human beings as a distinct animal 'race' or 'species', one of many, within the natural order. The work of two key thinkers, Charles Darwin (1809–82) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), both important in Lawrence's early intellectual development, must be considered in this context. In *The Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin forwarded an evolutionary theory of 'natural selection'. Challenging the creationist view of separate and divinely ordained species, Darwin posited a purely naturalistic process by which all organisms, from the unicellular to the most complex, human, variety, had evolved in a single continuum since the beginning of life on earth. On this theory, human life could either be seen to be evolving towards perfection or, like any other species, to be subject to the possibility of extinction. In Birkin's eyes, we recall, "man is one of the mistakes of creation – like the ichthyosauri" (p. 109). But why, then, a 'mistake'? For the German philosopher Nietzsche, 'man' was a 'mad unhappy animal' whose '*nature has not yet been fixed*'.⁵ Here again, the human has evolved as a particular kind of animal, its distinguishing characteristic being an advanced, conceptual and linguistic intelligence. The latter was not, however, an unconditional advantage: the cost of thought was the ability to form ideas and illusions about ourselves over and above an 'animal' condition, and thus to render our nature uncertain, 'unfixed'. We were, in the title of one of his major works, 'human, all too human', the Apollonian, or intellectual, principle, having counterbalanced the Dionysian, or sensual. Nietzsche's impassioned critique fixed in particular on the ethics of Christianity, where the injunction to 'love' threatened to distort and unbalance the natural forces to which humanity as a species was also subject. Nothing

5 Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 226; *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 88

less than a stripping bare of the illusions and metaphysics by which we construct our sense of the 'human', a 'transvaluation of all values', was necessary if, paradoxically, the human species was to transcend the difficulties of the modern age. "I only want us to *know* what we are", says Birkin, in Nietzschean spirit (p. 148).

In the more immediate context of pre-war Britain, species-thinking fed anxiety about the 'degeneration' of the human stock of modern societies. Industrial regimes of work, the rise of mass urbanised and metropolitan societies, expanding literacy and educational opportunity, and a liberalisation of sexual morality, created fears that such progress occurred at the expense of the physical and psychological 'health', both of individuals and of the body politic. In Britain, these fears were sharpened by an awareness of the rapidly modernising strength of Germany as an adversarial power, set against the corresponding decline of Britain as first industrial nation. Across the political spectrum, the ideas of eugenics or the 'science' of race culture were seriously entertained, as the need was perceived to intervene in the reproduction and development of the 'race', to encourage the 'fit' and discourage the physically or mentally 'feeble' from breeding.

These contexts help us to understand how and why *Women in Love* can seem a novel about animals as much as about people. Creatures, and the complex human encounter with them, pervade the text: Gerald's Arab mare, Mino the stray cat, Looloo the pekinese and Bismarck the rabbit, Mrs Salmon's canaries, Highland cattle, and others. "How stupid anthropomorphism is!" (p. 229), thinks Ursula, in condemning Gudrun's description of birds as 'little Lloyd Georges'. Anthropomorphism here is that tendency to translate the otherness of animal nature into the terms of human perception. The narrative voice is, on occasions, as guilty of this as Gudrun: Mino blinks 'forbearingly, with a male, bored expression' (p. 261), Looloo sits with 'contemplative sadness' and 'grievous resignation' (p. 204). However, if domesticated and anthropomorphised animals stalk the text, still more do they abound linguistically, in metaphors of the obverse kind, the creaturely human. Gudrun cries 'like a sea-gull', Gerald is 'an amphibious beast', 'his head blunt and blind like a seal's', Birkin is a 'chameleon', Hermione has a 'horse-face', Loerke is 'some strange creature, a rabbit or a bat, or a brown seal'; the text is saturated with such references to human creatureliness.

Animals anthropomorphised, humans animalised; *Women in Love* enacts a subtle dialectic, constantly reminding us that we are animals, yet showing how it is our 'nature' as animals to reinvent the natural in culture and language. In thus unsettling the boundaries between

human and animal, the novel guards vigilantly against any simple, backward-looking retrospect. "Would you have us live without houses – return to nature?"', enquires Gerald, after a typical Birkinian tirade against the modern world (p. 44). But there is no going back: anthropomorphism is an inescapable fact, condemning us to intervene in 'nature' in increasingly complex ways, and it is dramatised with savage irony in one of the novel's most intense early scenes. Enraged by Hermione's assertion that modern children are 'over-conscious, burdened to death with consciousness', Birkin launches a corrosive attack on his ex-lover:

'You are merely making words,' he said; 'knowledge means everything to you. Even your animalism, you want it in your head. You don't want to *be* an animal, you want to observe your own animal functions, to get a mental thrill out of them. It is all purely secondary – and more decadent than the most hide-bound intellectualism. What is it but the last and worst form of intellectualism, this love of yours for passion and the animal instincts?' [p. 33]

Could we turn back the evolutionary clock and 'return' to animality? Only an overactive human mind such as Hermione's could produce such a ridiculous idea. Yet the philosophies of Lawrence and Nietzsche have sometimes been prone to similar, reductive interpretations. We see the significance, therefore, of the shift towards abstract language and intellectual debate in *Women in Love*. Lawrence's earlier work established him to a large extent as a 'nature' writer; in this novel, however, vivid natural description makes way for a more self-conscious concern with how we *represent* nature, principally in the languages and techniques of art. In Nietzschean terms, there are no 'facts', only 'interpretations'. Ideas of nature, and artistic representations of it, are historical phenomena, responding and changing in complex relationship with the wider human world.

This is brought home to us most forcefully in the tragedy of Gerald Crich, whose success as an industrialist is dependent upon a distinctive attitude to the natural world. In the 'Coaldust' chapter, Gerald battles to keep his horse at the railway crossing despite the terror of a creature which, in the words of the enraged Ursula, is "ten times as sensitive as himself" (p. 96). Similarly, Gerald has mastered and subdued the living forces of production. Inheriting from his father a system whose dysfunctions are seen to be a direct result of the exercise of Christian compassion – 'he wanted his industry to be run on love' – Gerald develops a purely 'instrumentalist' view of humanity. People, workers, are simply a form of 'Matter' to be subjugated in the interests of the

unobstructed functioning of the industrial machine. His modernising reforms ruthlessly dispense with old staff as 'so much lumber'; in the end he is hated by the colliers, but has created a system so 'perfect' that he himself is almost indispensable. Yet, Gerald does not know how to live: 'I wish you'd tell me something that did matter', he requests of Birkin (p. 81). Sexual conquests and intellectual pursuits provide diversion, but cannot prevent those moments of existential fear, shared intermittently with the three other central characters, during which he doubts the substance of things, his own identity included. His affair with Gudrun, whose ironic, detached approach to her subject matter is the artistic correlative of Gerald's exploitative industrialism, is doomed from its ominously violent beginnings: neither can touch the other except in a spirit of instrumentality. Gudrun wounds and exposes Gerald, but he gives himself to the process without shame, feeling at least that the pain is a form of authentic contact. His death is less an 'accident' in the realist sense than a symbolic lapsing out – 'he went to sleep' – suggesting the extinction of human life in the icy wastes of abstraction and idealism to which the species had committed itself.

Does this then suggest a schematic quality to *Women in Love*, and the return of a kind of moralistic framework which Lawrence had ostensibly sought to expunge from his fiction? Should we set against the deathliness of Gerald and Gudrun the healthy, warm normality of their counterparts? The answer is surely not that simple. Gerald's dilemma is treated with compassion, and the complexity of the portrait can be measured against the later, cruder re-working of the emotionally crippled industrialist in the figure of the wheelchair-bound Clifford Chatterley.⁶ Increasingly, critics have drawn attention to the open and interrogative character of *Women in Love*, a pervading indeterminacy which makes it impossible to pin down any one view or position we are meant to endorse.⁷ The sentiments which Birkin attacks so viciously in Hermione are precisely those which, as F. R. Leavis pointed out many years ago, the world had been content to accept as Lawrentian 'doctrine'.⁸ Birkin himself has gained acceptance as the 'D. H. Lawrence' figure in the text. Yet the tracing of lines from life to art is always a precarious business, no more so than in a novel of such complexity. In her many dialogues with Birkin, Ursula's common-sense questioning frequently makes him look ridiculous and sententiously didactic. It is unnerving to find Birkin's rhetoric mocked so thoroughly by Halliday

6 See ed. Squires

7 See e.g. Ragussis, Fernihough

8 Leavis, p. 213

and his set in the Pompadour, in spite of Gudrun's rescue act: "Isn't that the letter about uniting the dark and the light – and the Flux of Corruption?" asked Maxim . . . ' (p. 334). When Ursula launches her attack on Loerke's aesthetic of impersonality, the sense that she is echoing the novel's own critique is tempered by the fact that we are made to feel a sense of embarrassment at her lack of self-possession, the face 'flushed and transfigured' and the fingers 'twisting her handkerchief' (p. 377).

Through such devices, *Women in Love* attains a curious balancing act. It seems difficult to deny that the novel is a prophetic exercise of high seriousness, a critique in its own right of a botched civilisation. However, none of the positions it advances remains either uncriticised or unironised; the high seriousness is punctured, and alternative perspectives are always available. Thus the charge laid against Gudrun, that 'everything turned to irony with her' (p. 365), is not far short of a comment on the novel itself. The uniqueness of Lawrence's writing lies in a risky rhetorical transformation of the everyday, particularly in the realm of sexuality, which has laid him open to satire. Who can forget, or pass over with indifference, the rhapsodic description of Ursula's caresses: 'She closed her hands over the full, rounded body of his loins, as he stooped over her, she seemed to touch the quick of the mystery of darkness that was bodily him' (p. 273)? Afternoon tea at the Saracen's Head in Southwold can rarely have been like this. Yet the Pompadour scene opens out the possibility of satire at the expense of the narrative's own language, just as Will Brangwen's exasperation at Gudrun's water-party costume – "Don't you think you might as well get yourself up for a Christmas cracker an' ha' done with it?" (p. 132–3) – provides comic recognition of the novel's curious obsession with the sisters' artificial plumage.

Thus the dark, violent and apocalyptic qualities of *Women in Love*, and the peculiar jargon of its idealised speculations about human sexuality, co-exist with a number of wry and ironic framing devices. Language, the distinguishing feature of the human animal, is the medium of this self-awareness, and if Birkin is the mouthpiece of anything, it is of the novel's reflexive sensitivity to the precarious power and subtlety of words. Birkin experiences great frustration in the struggle with meaning. He hates his own metaphors, knowing them to be the substance of anthropomorphism, and is 'irritated and weary of having a telling way of putting things' (p. 163). 'Moony' is a symbol of this frustration, a frantic attempt to dispel and fragment a meaning which always insists on reasserting itself (and again, Ursula's unseen presence puts a semi-comic frame around his eccentric behaviour). Nevertheless, language exists in intimate

relationship with the forms of social and political, just as much as personal, life; if we fail to renew or scrutinise it, those forms similarly coalesce and decay. Thus, there can be no unguarded utterance of even the most basic terms of our vocabulary. Love? "The point about love . . . is that we hate the word because we have vulgarised it. It ought to be proscribed, tabooed from utterance, for many years, till we get a new, better idea" (p. 111). I? "How could he say 'I' when he was something new and unknown, not himself at all? This I, this old formula of the age, was a dead letter" (p. 323). There is a direct line between this linguistic questioning and the novel's testing out and transgression of human norms and institutions: the debate around marriage and its 'impossibility'; the conditions in which a love between Birkin and Gerald might be realised; even the 'bestiality' of the love between Ursula and Birkin in Chapter xxix, 'Continental'.

The optimism of *Women in Love* lies not in any cosy conclusions and predictions about the human condition, but precisely in our ability to call that condition into question. Complacent assumptions about the superiority of the 'human' had created barriers, between ourselves and the natural order to which we belong, between our 'selves' and our own creatureliness. We must, insists the novel, get into *relation* with the world; 'relatedness' looms ever larger in Lawrence's vocabulary, along with cognate terms such as 'touch' and 'tenderness' – things that can occur most successfully in the dark. Yet this is not, Lawrence wishes to persuade us, incompatible with the 'progress' of human knowledge. For him, the genre or art of fiction was the most delicate instrument available for the pursuit of an open and inquisitive epistemology: 'The novel is the highest example of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered.'⁹ Fittingly, then, Birkin's intellectual commitment is to language as a physical act, simultaneously human labour and birth, and creaturely metamorphosis:

He turned in confusion. There was always confusion in speech. Yet it must be spoken. Whichever way one moved, if one were to move forwards, one must break a way through. And to know, to give utterance, was to break a way through the walls of the prison as the infant in labour strives through the walls of the womb. There is no new movement now, without the breaking through of the old body, deliberately, in knowledge, in the struggle to get out. [p. 161]

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- Angela Carter, 'Lorenzo as Closet Queen', *Nothing Sacred*, Virago, London 1982 (a playful analysis of the preoccupation with stockings and women's clothing in *Women in Love*, carrying the important suggestion that Lawrence's own gender identity was not as 'straight' as it seems; link Linda Ruth Williams)
- Colin Clarke, *River of Dissolution: D.H. Lawrence and English Romanticism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1969 (important book on the discourses of corruption in Lawrence, linking him with a radical strain of Romanticism)
- Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 1859; Wordsworth, Ware 1998
- Anne Fernihough, *D.H. Lawrence: Aesthetics and Ideology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1993 (a challenging, invigorating study of Lawrence's 'anti-imperialist aesthetics')
- Graham Holderness, *Women in Love*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes 1986 (excellent, detailed study guide to *Women in Love* for Open University students)
- Mark Kinkead-Weekes, *D. H. Lawrence: Triumph to Exile 1912-1922*, Cambridge University Press, 1996 (Volume II of the new three-volume Cambridge biography of D.H. Lawrence; indispensable)
- D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, 1921; eds David Farmer, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen, Cambridge University Press, 1987 (scholarly edition of the text, with extensive footnotes and textual apparatus)
- D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, 1928; ed. Michael Squires, Cambridge University Press, 1993
- D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers*, 1936; ed. Edward D. McDonald, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1978
- F. R. Leavis, *D.H. Lawrence: Novelist*, 1955; Penguin, Harmondsworth 1964 (Leavis was the great academic champion of Lawrence's 'creative genius', and this is the first major critical work on Lawrence.)