

'Love and sex in D.H.Lawrence' by David Ellis

REVIEWED BY BOB HAYWARD.

Neither this book nor this review is for the prudish or squeamish. Since no reader will identify as such in their private persona, I anticipate none being deterred by my warning, though they might be repelled by what they read. Love and sex, however, belong very much to the private persona and the artist has usually been valued for trying to give them public expression. Many will instinctively and even on principle prefer the artist to, say, the psychologist or the moralist, though these latter cannot be denied their voice, less disinterested though it might sometimes be.

David in this book would like to ally his voice with a philosopher's, with Wittgenstein's 'suggestion that when we are puzzled or challenged by a phenomenon, we should not seek new knowledge, but rather put into order what we already know'. Any 'phenomenon' inviting a philosopher's attention, however, would not normally be one as complex as love and sex in Lawrence. David acknowledges as much when he says that the approach has to be 'followed in the spirit rather than the letter', by which he means: followed without the discipline of strictly valid reasoning from guaranteed premisses. For David assumes the freedom to seek clues to Lawrence's private persona in his art: in his fiction, his poetry and even his paintings. The ordinary intelligent reader might speculate along similar lines but David wants to join the artistic 'evidence' with the biographical evidence to compose a picture of 'deep, true justice' to the dead author. Of course no philosopher on his game would dream of constructing a theory out of such hybrid data but, so important are love and sex in Lawrence, that David ventures to engraft relevant fiction, poetry and painting upon the facts in order to explore any qualms about the credentials of this artist's sexuality.

An hour after Lawrence's life had ended, Frieda re-entered the room and recorded: 'I looked at his face. So proud and manly and splendid he looked'. No picture to vie with Frieda's emerges at the end of David's examination which is, he admits, 'unlikely to enhance his reputation' (Lawrence's, that is). Indeed at the end of the book, David finds himself in a position to doubt whether Frieda was 'quite the best thing that ever happened to Lawrence', whether without her he would have 'continued to feel that sex was the key to all mythologies' or 'whether she was the right woman to deal with all the unusual forms sex took in Lawrence'. As for the view that he 'is the champion of sexual liberation or the passionate advocate of wholesome sexual intercourse as the key to a successful marriage or relationship', there is, according to David, 'some but not very much' justification in his life and writings.

In his very last paragraph, he admits that he is not 'under the illusion of having been able to describe Lawrence's case "objectively" (basing it on fact and fiction, how could he?)yet I have tried to put enough material on view'. This last is an understatement. Rarely can such a compendium of pertinent, chronological material have been achieved within 183 pages of a book. It is in this sense an intellectual tour de force that any reader will admire and be grateful for. However, in order to try to be scrupulous with his intermix of art and life, he is forced into an equivocal style in which very little can be confidently asserted. I will give an example that also illustrates, I think, one of the factors relevant to his qualms about Lawrence.

Reporting that Lawrence's writings contain no descriptions of fellatio or cunnilingus, he writes: 'The probability is therefore that, whatever Lawrence's other sexual problems, he was not fixated in what Freudians like to call the oral stage and that oral sex was not appealing to him' (P.158). (Such reasoning obviously strains probability to breaking point.) David can be equivocal even about Freudian concepts but he deploys them and they haunt the book with what may be called their abnormative spirit. ('Castration anxiety', for example, is invoked for the boy-Parkin's recoil from the sight of 'Black hair!' when the teenaged Bertha Coutts invites him to touch her vagina. P 164) Strictly speaking, we cannot say whether David disapproves of oral sex but, if not, he is certainly careless in implying that it can rank among sexual problems.

His very next sentence reads: 'Anal intercourse is another matter and the question it raises is whether Lawrence's interest is an indication of a repressed homosexuality'. He has already conceded (P53) that such an idea 'would come as a surprise to those heterosexuals who make it a part of their own love-making and certainly to a large part of the porn industry', Relating it to that branch of film-making is hardly an unambivalent endorsement of its acceptability. As to the question of whether Lawrence's interest in it indicates repressed homosexuality, he does not answer it. I should like to believe that he realises that it cannot be answered but on the next page he is still toying with it. He quotes Mellors in his brogue eulogising on Connie's woman's 'arse' and then refers to a painting of 'The Rape of the Sabine Women' ('a study in arses' —Lawrence) and writes: 'This feature of the female anatomy definitely attracted Lawrence but whether it is a sure and certain indication of repressed homosexuality must be very doubtful'. This is as close as equivocality can get to being unarguable without being categorical.

Before this David has already surprised the reader by remarking: 'My earlier conclusion was that Lawrence was indeed bisexual'. Among all the equivocal twists and turns, how did one miss a definite conclusion, especially when he continued to speculate about repressed homosexuality? I take it that he is referring to pages 114-5 where he reports that, after Somers de-

cides in 'Kangaroo' that he does not want a special male friendship after all, the subject ceases to matter very much in Lawrence's fiction and this suggests 'that his bisexuality became much less of an issue for him as he grew older'. I do not recall being privy to the formation of this conclusion but I shall return to Lawrence and homosexuality a little later.

On page 53 David writes: 'Anal intercourse will become a recurrent theme in Lawrence's writingQuite what the general significance of this practice should be — how it should be interpreted — is difficult to say given that the fictional contexts in which it occurs vary a good deal'. What is difficult to see is how, in his time, he could have been more unequivocal about it. The very fact that he expresses it in art must mean that he has insight into its validity as potentially universal experience. You cannot have a more 'general significance' than that but, in order to appreciate any literature, a reader must have minimum levels of empathy in which David is obviously lacking for these areas of Lawrence's vision. He says (P80): 'Why, moreover, it should be the coccygeal centres where "the deepest and most unknowable sensual reality breathes and sparkles darkly in unspeakable power" is not clear'. Lawrence is trying to convey what is for him, and for others, a fact of experience. David describes as an 'epiphany' what in 'Women in Love' takes place before high tea between Ursula and Birkin involving 'the darkest, deepest, strangest life source of the human body at the back and base of the loins'; it is indeed an epiphany for the lovers but David can give it no credence at all.

On this subject he has of course to deal with 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' and prays in aid John Sparrow and, not for the first time, Kate Millett who has been something of a wrecking-ball in Lawrence's reputation and is surprising critical company for David to be keeping. Most Laurentians will know that the book has a description of buggery which could have earned both offenders up to life imprisonment at the time of the book's Trial in 1960. David is not quite correct in saying that it was not discussed at the Trial. The leading counsel for the Prosecution read to the court seven of the eight paragraphs describing it but neither he (an Old Etonian) nor anybody in his team, apparently, had the literary sophistication to be sure, beyond a reasonable doubt, what Connie and Mellors were doing. John Sparrow did not 'mischievously', as David claims, point out that it was indeed 'penetratio per anum' (he was a barrister as well as an academic) and that, had the Court known this, the Defence would probably, and certainly should, have failed. So earnest was this All Souls' fellow in his submission that Osbert Lancaster wrote in the next 'Encounter' the following verse for him, and for many another, to commit to memory:

From figures on a Grecian urn
The cognoscenti can discern

Precise organic situations
And hence improper sex relations,
But can a soul-sick Sparrow tell
The orifice that leads to Hell.

'That Connie hates it but really likes it' says David, 'is an all too familiar formulation that Millet was one of the first to identify and stigmatize'. The text does not say that Connie hated it but really liked it. It reads: 'And how, in fear, she hated it! But how she had really wanted it!' This is not quite the conceit of male egotism that David is so ready to concur with Millett in reprehending. The crass interpretations of Lawrence by Millet have become one of the perversions of his history but there is not only ignorance here; there is a suppressed inconsistency in believing that so great an artist, writing out of his moral sense 'for the race, as it were', could be so irresponsible as to continue validating a form of heterosexual love-making unless he knew that a reciprocal gratification can be relished by the woman. It is worth remembering that, for a time until recently, both parties to buggery were guilty in the eyes of the law and, even for the fair sex, the end-pleasure could be on pain of a long stretch inside. It is hardly normative to deny the indelicate truth

There can be no objection in principle to ascribing homosexuality to Lawrence, although we can wonder whether it would make one bit of difference to appreciating his work. We should, however, be prepared to ask what such an ascription means and whether there is any sound evidence for it. Most of what David can argue on the subject is taken from Lawrence's writings and, on any measure applied to these, the preponderance, the very great preponderance, is heterosexually directed. Quantitatively the homosexuality in Lawrence's writing is very much less than we come across in life. Were it not for Freudianized notions of latency and repression feeding into its historical criminalisations and taboos, David would have no grounds for equivocating his way to his misleading 'conclusion' that Lawrence was bisexual from the evidence of his writing. If you are bisexual, you can comfortably engage in intimacies with both sexes. This is something that only Lawrence could confirm in his own case. There is no evidence that he ever had sexual relations with someone of his own sex. He might well have done so; it would be unusual if he went through childhood, boyhood and youth without doing so, if only once, but there is no evidence for it. There are no grounds for calling him bisexual.

Before turning to Lawrence's literary treatment of this subject, it is worth pointing out that the idea that one can be homosexual without knowing is an unverifiable postulation (or, in our culture, imputation) and that puberty, if not indeed childhood, has an undeniable way of insisting on our sexual proclivities; any repression is usually external. The fact that in his twenty-ninth year

Lawrence couldn't reconcile himself to the homosexuality in the academic coterie among whom he found himself a guest in Cambridge suggests that any proclivities of his own of that nature were not pressing for an opportunity or even for a congenial occasion. This puts into perspective, among other 'evidence', the towelling scene between two men, and its aftermath, in 'The White Peacock', a description that is obviously 'literary': 'and the sweetness of the touch of our naked bodies one against the other was superb'. Superb? Lawrence would have read Tennyson and others. He was playing with a romantic genre for the impressions and velleities of youth: 'Our love was perfect for a moment, more perfect than any love I have known since, either for man or woman'. This was written before the author was introduced to the sexual realities he found with Frieda.

After some four years of these with that incomparable woman and two years after his revulsion at the homosexuals in Cambridge, he wrote the so-called 'Prologue' to 'Women in Love' in which he says of Birkin: '... yet it was for men he felt the hot, flushing, aroused attraction that a man is supposed to feel for the other sex ... men whom he apprehended intoxicatingly in his blood,' etc. The passage goes on and on until it becomes tedious. David thinks that the 'Prologue' is 'an astonishing document' and that it seems 'very likely' that the experiences attributed to Birkin 'were Lawrence's own'. The first thing to observe here is that it is fiction and that at least one aim of fiction is to be convincing to the point of being believable. Is David's barely qualified credulity here a tribute to Lawrence's imaginative writing? For when did these well 'remembered' transports in Lawrence's fancy take place? Presumably after his visit to Cambridge and while he was with Frieda.

We can speculate that one of the reasons for dropping the 'Prologue', apart from considerations of censorship fresh in his mind, was that it was too overt and he wanted to develop Birkin's character along more subtle lines. The question is whether, in Birkin's desire for a mutually pledged friendship with Gerald to balance his love-relationship with Ursula, Lawrence is exploring a universal or personal theme. Most of us are lucky enough to have one or two lifelong friends of our own sex and over time the commitment has become tacit. In the novel the author is in charge of what happens and Birkin's yearning for *Bruderschaft* with Gerald is thwarted by the latter's non-committal responses and by the fatal circumstances that ensue partly because of his character. What is undeniable is that at no time in the novel does Birkin feel 'the hot, flushing, aroused attraction' for Gerald, not even in the naked wrestling, described in what is obviously a piece of imaginative writing. To all intents and purposes, the love Birkin wants with Gerald could have been Platonic.

This theme of male bonding is worried at a little in 'Aaron's Rod' and explicitly rejected in 'Kangaroo'. Its connection with 'hot, flushing, aroused

attraction', still less with anal intercourse, is not discussed by this boldest of authors. It all takes place in the pages of novels and how it can be reliably translated into biography remains unexplained. For all I know, Lawrence was ready to drop his trousers with anyone desirable who was willing to do the same but where is the contemporaneous, flagrant detail? It is possible that in those days, unlike ours, no one, apart from the watchful authorities who would have seized on it in Lawrence's case, thought it was worth a mention. Is that likely? We know more about Lawrence's life than about almost any other person's in history. The nature of his feelings for Alan Chambers or Hocking or the young collier only he knew but it would be lacking in all proportion to suggest that his anguished, young manhood's search, taking him, as he said, from 'woman to woman', was motivated by a need to mask or escape his homosexuality. His over-desperate behaviour from 'the heyday in the blood' is not wildly outside any young man's, even one with a Freudianized, loving mother, until his quest for fulfilment was eventually steadied by finding Frieda. This taught him a lesson about the distorting pressures of life in society that he never forgot and continued to elaborate for the rest of his life.

David asserts that Lawrence found men's bodies attractive. So does at least half of the human race. It is better than finding them repulsive and it must be an advantage to a writer, as well as a value added to experience. Men's bodies are certainly not presented as unattractive in the tradition and discipline of great painters. Rather than being equivocal about the fact or pointing it in the direction of psychoanalysis, is it not preferable to attribute it to what Leavis (in 'Thought, Words and Creativity' P18-19) calls 'self-gathered, delicately intent and unanalysably intuitive wholeness'? Before leaving what David calls Queer Theory in respect of Lawrence, I should just mention that on P78-9 he records some of Lawrence's unabashed physical and psychological analysis of homosexuality from his critique on Whitman and then some 80 pages later he is still speculating on 'repressed' homosexuality in connection with 'Lady Chatterley's Lover', as I illustrated earlier. That is how durably inexact the concept of 'repression' can be and how insidious to clear thinking, like much of the Freudian project.

Some might be surprised that, in examining love and sex in Lawrence according to Wittgenstein's precept of putting 'into order what we already know', David does not regard the Feminism of Kate Millett as falling outside such a circumscribed undertaking. No matter how its inclusion might be justified, he believes that 'Millett has many true things to say about Lawrence'. He could have been more forthcoming about what he thinks the 'many' might be. He spends some four pages exposing her limitations as a literary critic of some Laurentian stories associated with the Americas. Although he asserts that there is 'certainly a strong, misogynist thread running through much of

what Lawrence wrote in Mexico and America', he paradoxically shows that 'characterising it is a far more complicated business than Millett imagined' without proving this Laurentian misogyny himself. It is a charge brought by some Feminists against Lawrence and it would have been interesting and important to see David's grounds for supporting it critically in any of Lawrence's writings. In the decades that I have been reading them, I have never had so much as a suspicion of it.

When she refused to be inducted into the Prosecution for the famous Trial, Helen Gardiner protested that Lawrence had 'complete integrity'. I do not know where narcissism comes in the hierarchy of psychological disorders but Kate Millett diagnoses the author's 'male narcissism' in the fictional scene in which, when Mellors grabs his shirt off the floor to hide his erection, Connie says: 'No. Let me see you!' Realizing that there is no logic in being bashful about his arousal with his mistress, he reveals himself. What follows is a moment when a man's nakedness is validated through a woman's eyes. She had already appreciated his bare back from neck to buttocks: 'But you are beautiful!', her word 'but' expressing her joy and catching at the naked man's implicit susceptibility. Then she appreciates him from the front and the artist paints the picture with a few strokes of his ungainsayable skill. The lovers are becoming more confident in their nakedness together and the mirror is held up to Nature in more ways than one. David does not distance himself from Millett's charge of authorial narcissism in this scene and, although it leads to intercourse, he cannot countenance it as foreplay in which he finds the novel lacking. Many readers, on the other hand, can recognise the excitement of each encounter while love is 'young' and dramatic; perhaps that suffices. On the first occasion, Mellors runs his hand from Connie's shoulder down the curve of her back to her crouching loins. 'And there his hand softly, softly stroked the curve of her flank, in the blind, instinctive caress.' I do not know whether something 'instinctive' counts as foreplay in sex-manuals but it certainly does the trick. (Just in case David is implying that Lawrence himself doubted the efficacy of foreplay, I can offer that he indicates somewhere: the longer the build up, the better the result, or that is his general meaning. Though I cannot remember where he says it, I know I would not have made it up. The principle is standard enough.) I doubt if David can be reconciled to an admiration for Lawrence's last novel.

This brings me to the subject of impotence. 'The terrible thing about Lady C.,' Frieda said in her early seventies and David quotes, 'is that L. identified himself with both Clifford and Mellors; that took courage, that made me shiver, when I read it as he wrote it.' David comments: 'The implicit claim here is that in the last years of her marriage to Lawrence sexual relations between them had ceased and he was impotent.' David may infer this if he wishes but the inference is not logically compelled by her words. It seems

that, among all the imaginative identification that she saw Lawrence projecting into his characterisation of both Clifford and Mellors, all Frieda (over seventy!) could have in her mind was the impotence. Though not logically necessary, it cannot be ruled out, but her admiration for Lawrence as an artist was not usually so limited. She said: 'They never called Lawrence a professional writer (by which she meant artist) but always a genius. That made him angry. "That's my label — genius — and with that I am dismissed."' After his death she commented on the allegation that he was impotent. 'The old lie!' she called it and gave an unforgettable description of him as a lover. I have studied tuberculosis a little, though not specifically in relation to impotence, but it does seem obvious that, as the disease progressed and Lawrence became more and more emaciated and enfeebled, his libido would be lessened and sexual intercourse would become a physical impossibility. When this stage was reached in him no one knows but he apparently wrote a little verse of resignation about it and David quotes it (P149). David, however, wants us to entertain the hypothesis that Lawrence's impotence was not 'entirely a matter of failing health'. What could possibly indicate this? Bertha Coutts is the indicatress, holding back and writhing herself to orgasm on Mellors's discharged erection. Mellors did not like it and what man does? It can even be said, I imagine, to be against nature because once the seed is sown the purpose of the act is completed. According to David, following Middleton Murry, Bertha Coutts is Frieda because Lawrence must have experienced it with her (and her alone) in order to put into the mouth of Mellors such 'a reserve of sexual distaste' about it. I do not see how this can seriously be reasoned. Mellors and Bertha are characters in a novel that has a complexity of purposes. Since Bertha's incorrigible continuation 'against nature' did not make Mellors impotent (It would certainly be an extreme and heroic and unlikely way of becoming so.) the claim that Lawrence's impotence was not 'entirely a matter of failing health' would have to be made by some other argument, if it can be made at all.

David eventually weaves his way to calling Lawrence 'an impotent cuckold'. If we detect anything gratuitous here, it may be because the word 'cuckold' has more sting when the husband is not impotent and because Lawrence could have called himself one before becoming impotent. It is to be recorded in the interests of balance that David sees no implications in the ease (and sophistry) with which Lawrence talked himself into Rosalind Baynes's bed.

Of what relevance now is Lawrence's impotence, whatever its genesis? Does its tragic irony diminish his art in any way? David may talk (three times, I counted) of 'fantasy of compensation' but, unless it produces some glaring unrealities in the art, it is not critically relevant. Of course there will always be a link between a writer's art and his life but with greatness the link will be of a

complexity beyond simplistic analysis. Who tries to determine the connection between Shakespeare's life and his 'Macbeth' or, more teasingly, 'The Winter's Tale'? David believes that Lawrence's life and art, in respect of love and sex, are flawed and, in spite of all the complexities, moves backwards and forwards between biography and art to reach his conclusions. We have to call them his conclusions, no matter how tentatively he chooses to express them or how circuitously he reaches them. There is a conclusion about which he is not tentative. It is that 'at the end of his life and career he is just as confused and contradictory as ever he wason how love and sex can be related'. Does David think that this relation needs explaining rather than discovering? Was not this precisely the discovery that Lawrence made when he met Frieda? Then he knew how love and sex can be related, as a fact of experience. There are many kinds of love and many kinds of sex and sometimes the twain shall meet. The dualism between love and sex that David posits in his title and about which he offers no really helpful distinction could have been avoided if he had called his book 'Sexual Love in D.H.Lawrence'. This lack of distinction in his terms enables him to say: 'But that Lawrence's experiences of sex after his meeting with Frieda could ever be called representative seems improbable'. It will be noted that here David divorces sex from its partner in the dualism but Lawrence loved Frieda and she him and their sexual love was integrated into his creativity. Whether the extensive and varied art he produced after meeting her is representative of the experience of men and women is not to be decided by terms like 'probable' or 'improbable' but by readers' judgements; it is difficult to see how their favourable judgements would not vindicate him against David's misgivings and there is indeed a widely attested rapport and corroboration in readers the world over.

No fair-minded reader of Frieda's 'Not I but the Wind' and of her little stories, so artlessly autobiographical, and especially of her 'Forward' to 'The First Lady Chatterley' would regard David's aspersions on her as anything but unwarranted and certainly unjustified by any evidence he gives in this book. When he thought he was dying in Mexico, Lawrence told Frieda: 'But if I die, nothing has mattered but you, nothing at all'. Does David think that this is Frieda's fabrication? He claims that she provided Lawrence with 'qualifications' for making sexuality his 'main concern'. Quite how she could do that is not clarified. If, to quote her, 'you bore a hole into the wholesomeness' of his consummate sexuality, you impugn the integrity right at the heart of his creativity. Can David accept that this is the consequence of his adverse findings from 'following the evidence'? Lawrence's life and character, no matter how pertinacious the observer or speculator, cannot vitiate his art which remains categorically immune from the diversions of substituting real people for fictional figures or from the facile attributions of authorial disorders. It can be assessed only by someone capable of being inward with it as art, a capacity

that Kate Millett, for example, never had. David is a distinguished biographer of Lawrence and I have been recommending his 'Death and the Author' to every Laurentian I meet. I recommend the present book as well for the challenge of its comprehensive treatment of its subject. The excessive equivocation of its approach, however, is not just a matter of scruple but a signal that David is pressing for a verdict on Lawrence that the 'evidence' does not entail. This is not what Lawrence believed an author wanted after death, namely, 'deep, true justice'.

Love and sex in D.H.Lawrence, by David Ellis.
Clemson University Press, 2015