

## Going Down

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In “The Dogma of Gender,” Patricia Berry explores the pleasures and restrictions of gender categories, and the comparatively confused “polymorphous” state of the “pre-gender” realm—the eroticism that exists in early childhood before we have learned our gender roles (39). Berry posits that primal sexual feeling comes with an attendant sense of inferiority. Gender is constructed to protect us from this feeling, and the pre-gender realm, from which the feeling arises, is labeled dark, chaotic, and dangerous. And yet, Berry finds that this realm is constantly seeking to “work on” itself, “defining, refining and recombining its pleasures” (51). She concludes that “the polymorphous underrealm has form and *logos* within it”—that it is not dark and chaotic as we fear but in fact has its own structure, and even its own light (50). She suggests that we cannot remain like Pentheus of *The Bacchae*, “superior to it all, looking down”: if we don’t dive deep sometimes, we may end up trapped within the “dogma” she speaks of (51). Indeed, diving deep may create the power to set us free.

The characters of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* know more about the tension between the upper and lower realms of the psyche than most. The novel begins with a marriage that, like thousands of others in 1920s England, has been ravaged by the horrors of World War I. Sir Clifford Chatterley, after six months in the trenches, comes back to England and to his wife Connie “more or less in bits” (1). After two years under a doctor’s care, he returns with Connie to the family seat at Wragby—paralyzed from the waist down, impotent, and confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

Clifford is so devastated by the loss of his manhood that he renounces the corporeal altogether, retreating into a “life of the mind” that, unbeknownst to him, leaves his wife increasingly lonely and restless (35). That is, until she meets Oliver Mellors, the estate’s gamekeeper. Their passionate affair quickly becomes much more than a distraction from the tedium of Connie’s marriage; they engage the primal sexual impulses that Berry speaks of at every

turn, actively working to “burn out” every hint of shame that comes with them (267). Connie’s exploration acquaints her with her more sensual self, but this knowledge, like all deeply important things, comes with a price.

Consider Connie’s greatest sexual revelation: a bittersweet night spent with Mellors just before she leaves on a trip to Venice. Lawrence describes it as a profound learning experience in which all her shame is burned away and she meets her most sensual self. But in order for it to be so, Connie must give herself up entirely to Mellors: “She had to be a passive, consenting thing, like a slave, a physical slave.” Mellors believes wholeheartedly that this is the only way for a man and a woman to truly be together—in the “natural” sense, he calls it (267). Earlier in the novel, he related to Connie the story of how he came to separate from his wife: how she became spiteful and manipulative, refusing when he made advances and pouncing as soon as he backed off; how in their lovemaking, she deliberately held back until he was finished, then “brought herself off”; how he grew so furious at this “low kind of self-will” that he finally left her (217, 218).

Mellors’s theory, in essence, is that the only natural state of a woman in lovemaking (and perhaps, by extension, elsewhere) is to be submissive to the male. The use of the word “natural” is thoughtful and deliberate; it evokes all the vitality, resilience, and righteous heroism with which Lawrence portrays the natural world and its valiant struggle against the creeping terror of industrialization. By the novel’s end, the theory is ostensibly proven correct: Connie is utterly fulfilled in her relationship with Mellors, so much so that she finds the courage to leave the security of her wealth and title at Wragby and create a new life.

What can a modern reader make of this freedom through submission? For that matter, what can a modern *society*, one that considers itself liberated and equal, make of it? Is it one woman’s story? An archetypal truth? Misogynist propaganda masquerading as sensitive romance?

Feminist critic Angela Carter would agree with the third interpretation. In her essay “Lorenzo the Closet-Queen,” she condemns Lawrence with scathing wit, calling him a misogynist, fetishist, and hypocrite who has perpetrated one of the greatest cons of modern fiction: “Lawrence attempts to convince the reader that he, D. H. L., has a hot line to a woman’s heart by the extraordinary sympathy he has for her deepest needs, that is, nice stockings, pretty dresses and submission” (500). She writes here of *Women in Love*, but her criticisms, if we omit the obsession with fashion, apply to his depiction of Connie in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.

Certainly it is an understandable feminist instinct to recoil from many aspects of the text: frequent and often patronizing references to Connie's "queer female mind," or some such variation; Mellors's condemnation of modern woman's attempt to usurp the male; a complete invalidation of lesbian sexuality coupled with disturbingly explicit homophobia; an exaltation of the male as essential arbiter of sexual discovery, not to mention an almost religious reverence for the phallus itself; and, of course, the emphasis on submission. We cannot call Carter's accusations a case of ideological paranoia. The questions are there. But they are more complicated than she acknowledges.

Lawrence begins Connie's sexual journey in her teenage years, narrating what he calls her "aesthetically unconventional upbringing" (2). She and her sister travel all over Europe to learn about art and politics firsthand, argue passionately about philosophy with idealistic young men bearing guitars, and fall in love with whoever generates the most thrilling conversation. Connie feels that a woman's aim in life is to achieve "an absolute, a perfect, a pure and noble freedom," but she considers "the sex thing" a necessary subjection because the men insist upon it "like dogs" and will spoil a relationship if a woman does not yield (3, 4). She quickly learns, however, that she can remain free within the sexual act if she only yields her body and not her "inner, free self" (4). Connie, at the outset, is the quintessential modern woman: engaged entirely in the life of the mind, dwelling wholly in the upper realm Berry speaks of. Her body (and perhaps, by extension, her gender) is merely an obstacle to be overcome.

Because Connie does not yield her innermost self to any sexual partner, Berry might say that in a psychic sense, she remains a virgin. In "Virginites of Image," Berry explains how the life of the mind (in the most basic sense of the phrase) is structured by images. An image is never anything pure or simple; rather, it is "a complexity of relationships, an inherence of tensions, juxtapositions and interconnections" that shapes and governs the psyche from the unconscious depths (94). But an image can nonetheless be "virginal" if it is understood to be immutable and impenetrable—like Connie's unsullied sense of self. A virginal image, according to Berry, has a "fantastic, personal, or simplistic quality of mind" (104). It is incomplete, unable to influence or transform. A non-virginal image, by contrast, "breaks through the surface of what is happening and creates a surprising, difficult, or unaccustomed moment" (100). Only it has the power to break down the virginal image, and the virginal image needs to be broken down.

Connie's intellectual idealism epitomizes the innocence that defines the virgin image. When she deliberately withholds her whole self from her partner, she refuses the transformation that the loss of her psychic virginity might offer.

Even with the man she comes to love, Connie initially resists surrender. In one instance of her lovemaking with Mellors, she is so detached that she feels she is watching herself from above, and disdains the physical act as "a ridiculous performance." As her mind retreats entirely from the "terribly physical intimacy," we find that she is just like Pentheus as Berry describes him: safe in the upper realm with its class structure and modern contempt for sentimentality, entirely superior to the shameful shenanigans going on below (184). But as soon as Mellors finishes, Connie feels that her resistance is driving him away—"he was withdrawing, his spirit was leaving her"—and she weeps in anger at her own inhibitions (185).

Connie clings to him "in terror" when he attempts to get dressed, and he takes her in his arms (186). At this moment her resistance disappears, and she becomes "small" in his arms; and when they make love, Connie takes what is for her the most terrifying risk: "She dared to let go everything, all herself, and be gone in the flood." She lets her *self* go, submits completely, and is "born: a woman" (186, 187). No longer herself a virgin image, she is transformed, released from the dogma of the upper realm, the life of the mind she once revered.

But even in this moment, which Lawrence describes with reverential, almost religious language, we get a sense of the terrifying ordeal that losing oneself can entail. The psychological violence of this process of submission is even more explicit during the night before Connie's trip to Venice. Lawrence writes that Connie is "frightened" and "almost unwilling," that the passion is "sharp and searing as fire," and even describes Mellors as a "reckless devil"; it takes a "real effort" for Connie to become "like a slave" to him (267-68). Berry writes of a similar brutality in her article "Neurosis and the Rape of Demeter/Persephone." Reading the myth of Hades' abduction and rape of Persephone as a metaphor, she argues that one cannot descend to the underworld, the realm of psyche, by oneself—the act necessitates a violation, a kind of psychic break. One must instead be *taken* there. Given that she advocates coming to terms with life in the underworld, we can safely infer that this violation—this rape—is necessary for psychic wholeness.

Lawrence's process of submission operates under the same basic principles: a woman must surrender herself and allow a man to take her to the underworld. And so Mellors does with Connie: he takes her to "the very heart

of the jungle of herself" (268). But does the man also undergo this terrifying journey? And how does the woman endure it? Lawrence is mum on the first question, at least in this novel; but in answer to the second, he endows the man with a responsibility, one that is essential if the woman he abducts is to reach the bottom.

That responsibility is tenderness. When Mellors takes Connie in his arms in that pivotal moment, Lawrence describes repeatedly the tenderness of his touch and his desire. This allows Connie to feel safe as she teeters on the precipice of ultimate vulnerability; indeed, she acknowledges how necessary it is if she is to take the leap: "if he were not tender to her now," she thinks (her last conscious thought before she lets go), "how cruel, for she was all open to him and helpless!" The violence and shock of the journey within must be tempered, or the woman will not trust the man to bear her through; and if she does not trust him utterly, that "inward resistance" will remain (266).

Lawrence suggests that the sexual union of man and woman is the only mode through which we may discover our natural selves; or as Berry might say, dive deep enough to reach the archetypes within us. (Lawrence explicitly states that Connie is "born" as a woman, presumably Lawrence's idea of a natural, archetypal woman, only when she has gone through this transformation [187]). It is a strange paradox, then, that we can only reach the pre-gender realm through a strictly gendered and aggressively heterosexual framework—a framework that, considering the intense prejudices of the time, is certainly dogmatic. It is clear from Mellors's furious rant against lesbians that Lawrence believes homosexual men and women will never know their innermost selves.

But something is missing from this account, something that can be found through a deeper exploration of Lawrence's notions of myth. In his novella *The Man Who Died*, we have a much clearer sense of Lawrence's mythic philosophy of the relationship between man and woman; he appropriates the myths of Christ's resurrection and Isis's search for Osiris to tell another story of fulfillment through (hetero) sexual union. The Jesus of the Gospels rises from the dead long enough to allow his disciples to witness the miracle, long enough to give them the mandate to spread the good news, and then he ascends to heaven. The Jesus of Lawrence's myth, known only in the text as "the man who died," has outlived his mission and become disillusioned; he wanders Lebanon looking for meaning until he comes upon a temple of Isis and a priestess who is also in search of something.

The priestess's worship is centered on the goddess's efforts to resurrect her murdered husband Osiris, whose killer has divided his body into fourteen parts and scattered them across the earth. Isis searches for each part, eventually finding thirteen; the fourteenth, his phallus, is eaten by a fish. Isis fashions Osiris a new phallus out of gold and puts him back together, resurrecting him long enough so that she may conceive a child. Lawrence's priestess, like her goddess, waits for the risen Osiris. She thinks of her innermost self as a lotus: closed to any man who, like a sun, would try to force open her petals. Instead, she waits for a man "re-born," who approaches softly, like a moon (which is like a sun resurrected from death) (189). Only to the moon will the lotus open of its own accord.

The priestess is a psychic virgin before meeting the man who died, like Connie before meeting Mellors. But her image contains a rising moon, which carries the potential for transformation, indeed the *expectancy* of it. The priestess is not trapped in the dogmas of modernity and the life of the mind that, according to Lawrence, initially make Connie blind to her deepest needs. Unlike Connie, the priestess knows what she wants. In that sense, she is closer to the underworld and might have a shorter drop if she leaps off the precipice of her vulnerability.

But no matter how vast her store of divine knowledge, giving herself to a man is still a risky journey. During the first night together in the temple, the man observes the priestess in a ritual of prayer. He realizes that she is afraid of him, of what is about to happen, and is consciously working to banish her fear and make herself "completely penetrable"; the scene reminds us of Connie's thought that submission "cost her an effort" (*The Man* 203, *Lady* 267). He is moved by her courage, and decides that he must not fail her. This in turn reminds us of Mellors's mandate to offer tenderness.

But in *The Man Who Died*, the woman offers tenderness as well. The man is tainted by the scars of his crucifixion and death, and he carries a terrible fear of engaging the body that has caused him so much pain. So the priestess strips him and tenderly anoints his wounds with oil. The act echoes Isis rebuilding Osiris—she heals him, puts him back together, makes him whole. As she does so, the man realizes that what was missing from his teaching was "live love," the love of the flesh. He had instead taught "bodyless" love, the kind of love, perhaps, that Connie felt for the brilliant conversationalists of her youth (205).

When the priestess finishes anointing him, the man feels that he is "something new" (206). As the desire for the priestess grows in him, Lawrence compares him to the sun at dawn, and he finally exclaims in a blaze

of passion, “I am risen!”—the pun surely intended (207). In this moment, we see Lawrence’s image of a man’s journey of self-discovery through sexual union, and it is markedly different from the tortured descent of the woman. The man who died rises like the sun to the realization of his divinity, lost in the ecstasy of his own power (his penis is actually referred to as “his power” [207]), all before the actual sex act even begins. He meets his true self, his archetypal self, when he realizes his dominion over the priestess, who at this moment is kneeling at the statue of Isis, hiding her face. The act itself is communicated in a single sentence.

We can, of course, attribute the man’s rising to transcendence, to the fact that the character in this case is literally divine. But it can also be said that the use of a deity merely makes explicit the implicit phallus worship at play in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Consider the scene in which Connie sings the praises of Mellors’s manhood for the better part of two pages, not to mention her frequent professions of love for it throughout the novel. Lawrence reveres the phallus as a kind of savior, offering liberating and life-giving power for the woman who will submit to it; Connie refers to it as a “bud of life” (227). Here the hidden hierarchy of Lawrence’s philosophy of relationships becomes clear. When a man and a woman come together in lovemaking, paradoxically, a vertical separation occurs: the man rises up, and the woman falls.

The affair between the priestess and the man who died continues for many months. In the spring, the season of renewal, of nature’s triumph, the priestess finds that she is pregnant. The man feels that it is time to move on, but promises to return. The priestess is left strikingly like Connie: alone, but hopeful, transformed by the life inside her. Although neither woman rides off into the sunset in search of her destiny (as the man who died does), both seem to find fulfillment in submitting to their lovers. But what would happen if the men were different?

Another Lawrence novella, *The Fox*, tells the story of a man, Henry, who comes between two women who have been living together, managing a farm, for years. His attempts to seduce one of the women, Nellie, are strangely attractive but ultimately unconvincing—she agrees to marry him in a moment of panic but changes her mind when he leaves town. Henry’s desire to possess Nellie is so strong that he resorts to the murder of her companion. But even when they are finally husband and wife, after all his displays of aggression, manipulation and domination, he is not satisfied. He wants her to yield “even the responsibility for her own soul” so she will no longer be an “independent woman with a man’s responsibility.” But Nellie had already

made a whole life, a life she loved, out of work and responsibility, and she will not give up what has become her reason for being. She is sure that Henry wants to “veil her woman’s spirit . . . to put her independent spirit to sleep . . . to take away her consciousness, and make her just his woman.” And so she strains to “keep awake” while Henry obstinately waits for the sleep of her surrender (178, 179).

What this story tells us is that if you are a man who wants a woman to yield, you cannot skip steps. Henry tries to force Nellie’s submission without earning her trust by treating her with tenderness, and in the process ruins both their lives—not to mention those of the dead woman’s parents, who witnessed their only child’s last agonizing moments. If true submission, the kind of submission that earns you a transformative trip to the underworld, cannot be forced, then one must conclude that it is as much an act of will as resistance.

Furthermore, it is the act of will on which the transformation of *both* parties depend. Mellors says to Connie, “I could never get my pleasure and satisfaction of [a woman] unless she got hers of me at the same time” (222). All she has to do is hold back, which we know from Connie’s first affairs is not difficult, and the whole thing becomes a “ridiculous performance” again, the “cold-hearted fucking” that Mellors left his wife to get away from (*Lady* 184, 222). If it is ultimately the woman’s decision to let go that sets the whole journey in motion, then Lawrence, with his dogma of male dominance and his disdain or pity for all women who are not “natural,” has placed himself in an oddly constrictive position.

Lawrence insists that it takes two to get to the underworld, but Virginia Woolf shows us another way. She does this through Lily Briscoe, a struggling artist who, in the last section of *To the Lighthouse*, sets out to complete the painting she has held in her mind for ten years. She is haunted by an old male acquaintance’s assertions that “women can’t paint, can’t write” (a dogmatic statement, if I’ve ever heard one) and hesitates to make the first irrevocable mark on her canvas, thinking that it poses “innumerable risks,” that painting makes her feel naked, like an “unborn soul, a soul reft of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt” (157, 158, 159). But she jumps off the pinnacle anyway, and begins to paint.

Lily’s courageous beginning reminds us of Connie’s “daring” to let go and of the priestess’s banishing her fear. Soon after that first mark, Lily’s “mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain”; her brush is “dictated to” by some inner

rhythm. To access such inspiration, she must lose “consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance”—everything that connects her with the upper realm, especially the dogma of her gender that keeps her from believing she can (159). This is true submission in the Lawrentian sense, but with a twist: allowing oneself, as Connie did, to “be gone in the flood” (187). For Lily, as for Connie, the risk is great, and it’s a long way down; but her reward is communion with a force of pure and primal creation, an archetypal force that is beyond her name, personality, and appearance—even her gender.

Perhaps Connie and the priestess are not submitting to their men at all. Perhaps they are instead submitting to a force from within, a force much greater than any man, any woman, any gendered being. It is a force that dwells in all of us, in the bedrock of our psyche. It is a force reminding us that we cannot be forever like Pentheus, that we cannot be whole if we remain above it all in the realm of judgment, restrictions, and categories; and Lawrence, a passionate acolyte of this force, ironically restrains and underestimates its power by attempting to place it under such strict conditions: sexual love, two people, a man and a woman, the man on top.

Woolf shows us that we might hear the voice of the underworld calling through any place, any person, any *thing*: some, like Connie, might respond in the arms of a lover; but some, like Lily, might experience it through paintbrushes and pens. If we only crane our ears towards the ground, *we* might hear it calling up from the depths, urging us to leap.

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