

D. H. LAWRENCE'S IMPOTENCE AND FRIEDA LAWRENCE'S AFFAIR WITH ANGELO RAVAGLI: FACT AND TRADITION

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D. H. Lawrence's experience with impotence and Frieda Lawrence's affair with Angelo Ravagli were reported as cause and effect when they first came to light as issues in Lawrence biography some thirty-five years after the events.

Richard Aldington gave a first hint when he wrote in 1941 that he travelled to Ile de Port-Cros, France to meet the Lawrences whose visit was delayed when Frieda prolonged her trip to Florence to close the Villa Mirenda. Frieda left Lawrence in Le Lavendou, near Toulon, France and travelled to Florence on 2 October 1928 to remove their personal effects and conclude their tenancy of the Villa Mirenda where they had lived since spring 1926. She did not return until 12 October, and Aldington explained that "closing their establishment at Scandicci [was] a complicated process, since it involved a journey to Trieste."¹⁰⁴ Aldington implies that Frieda's story about visiting Trieste as necessary to completing her business at the Mirenda tested one's will to believe it, but he did not give her away, and when he wrote again in 1950, he refused to open the subject of Frieda's affair

¹⁰⁴ Richard Aldington, *Life for Life's Sake: A Book of Reminiscences* (New York: The Viking Press, 1941; rptd. London: Cassell, 1968), p. 320.

with Angelo Ravagli. He did not mention Trieste, but marked the spot: she was "engaged in dismantling the Villa Mirenda and in other engagements."¹⁰⁵ Like a vexed host, Aldington complained that his guests were late: "as Frieda's dismantling of the villa took a very long time, the Lawrences did not reach Port-Cros until about two weeks after the original rendez-vous."¹⁰⁶

Aldington's remarks express an inclination to write the truth about Frieda's activities, but his restraint acknowledges the demands of friendship or propriety: in 1950, after living with him for the twenty years since Lawrence died, Frieda finally married Angelo Ravagli. Richard Aldington's work betrays his sense that Frieda's behaviour was ill disguised and exhibited poor taste, but he settled for the subtlety that raises rather than answers the question.

Harry T. Moore followed Aldington in 1954 when he stressed in *The Intelligent Heart* that Frieda was detained in Italy, but he did not explain why and he did not mention Trieste: "Lawrence did not arrive at Port-Cros till the middle of October. He spent the intervening time on the French coast waiting for Frieda, who brought a cold from Florence which he immediately caught."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Richard Aldington, *D.H. Lawrence: Portrait of a Genius But...* (London: Heinemann; New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1950), p. 394

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 394

¹⁰⁷ Harry T. Moore, *The Intelligent Heart: The Story of D.H. Lawrence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1954), p. 390

Between 1941 and 1962 all mention of Frieda's excursion to Trieste disappeared from biographical accounts of the period between early and mid-October 1928. In 1934, when Frieda published *Not I But The Wind*, she did not mention that she arrived in France later than expected, and in 1957, one year after Frieda's death, in a memoir solicited by Edward Nehls for his *Composite Biography*, Angelo Ravagli flatly denied any knowledge of the Lawrences between 1926 or 1927 when he paid his last, unexpected visit to the Villa Mirenda, and 1930 when he read of Lawrence's death in a newspaper.¹⁰⁸

Aldington was gentleman and friend enough to wait until Frieda died to tell Harry Moore that in 1928, Frieda's visit to Trieste was a tryst, and that in "the last five years of Lawrence's life (1925-1930), Frieda used to go about complaining that he had become impotent."¹⁰⁹ Aldington gave Moore permission to use the information in his 1962 revision of *The Intelligent Heart*:

Lawrence did not arrive at Port-Cros till the middle of October. He spent the intervening time on the French coast waiting for Frieda, who brought a cold from Italy which he immediately caught. She had delayed to engage in a love affair; as she used to tell her intimates, 'Lawrence has been impotent since 1926 !'¹¹⁰

Moore's is the first account to mention that Frieda was having an affair and that Lawrence suffered with impotence. He gives Frieda's affair as generic, does not mention her visit to Trieste, the fact that links her with Ravagli who had been stationed near by since 1926, and he excuses her infidelity on grounds that Lawrence was impotent. Frieda had been dead for six years and Angelo Ravagli was 71 years old and living in Italy when Moore published his revised biography.

Ten years later, Robert Lucas, Frieda's biographer, clarified the facts of her vague love affair and supported Aldington and Moore by citing Barbara Weekley, Frieda's younger daughter by her first husband, Ernest Weekley:

Frieda journeyed alone to wind up the tenancy of the Villa Mirenda. Lawrence went straight to Le Lavendou... She came later than expected. Not only had she been visiting Barbara, who was in Alassio, but she had also had to go to Trieste, as she said to settle some matters relating to the move.

Understandably, she concealed the true reason. She had been with Angelo Ravagli, the Bersaglieri captain. She had made this part of the journey for the express purpose of meeting him, and she put up at the hotel near where Angelo

¹⁰⁸ Edward Nehls, ed., *D.H. Lawrence: A Composite Biography, Volume Three, 1925-1930* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1959), p. 449.

¹⁰⁹ Alister Kershaw and Frederic-Jacques Temple, eds., *Richard Aldington: An Intimate Portrait* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 85.

¹¹⁰ Moore, *Intelligent Heart*, revised 1962, p. 477.

was stationed. If he had not previously been her lover, it was here that she became so.¹¹¹

Lucas forgives Frieda her little deception, and explains that she took a lover to hedge the emotional strain of Lawrence's illness. Her excursion was a "momentary relaxation with the primitive and uncomplicated Ravagli, and relief from abstinence forced upon her by Lawrence's impotence."¹¹² Barbara Weekley reported her mother's words, "'I can't stand it any longer!'"¹¹³

The politics of revelation run an interesting course. In 1974, when Moore issued an expanded and revised edition of his biography under the title, *The Priest of Love*, he cast some doubt on the story of Frieda's visit to Trieste, and reviewed the scholarship. He softened his support for the explanation of Frieda's mysterious absence: "She had *possibly* stopped for a love affair"¹¹⁴ (my italics), and he complicated his own position by adding sexual innuendo to the significance of the cold Frieda brought from Italy: "Richard Aldington in his last years used to give wry imitations of Lawrence's emphasis on Frieda's '*Italian cold*'."¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Robert Lucas, *Frieda Lawrence: The Story of Frieda von Richthofen and D.H. Lawrence*, translated from German by Geoffrey Skelton (New York: Viking, 1973), p. 242.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 243.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 243.

¹¹⁴ Harry T. Moore, *The Priest of Love: A Life of D.H. Lawrence* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), p. 572.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 572.

Aldington, of course, insinuated that Lawrence was not deceived by Frieda's story, and Moore closed his discussion of the matter by quoting Robert Lucas' explicit account of Frieda's visit to Ravagli in Trieste,¹¹⁶ but he did not commit himself to either reports of Lawrence's impotence or Frieda's association with Ravagli in 1928. Although Moore may have been privately convinced, he retained his scholarly doubt and as late as 1979 cautioned Mark Spilka that talk about Lawrence's impotence and Frieda's affair with Ravagli was simply talk: "All we have to go on here are the secondhand reports of unnamed friends."¹¹⁷

In 1973 Stephen Spender published excerpts from the memoir Barbara Weekley wrote for Edward Nehls in 1954. She does not mention that Frieda visited with her in Alassio in the autumn of 1928, but says that after her visit to the Lawrences at the Villa Mirenda in spring 1928, Frieda returned with her to Alassio, and "then went off alone... at this time she wanted to holiday by herself."¹¹⁸ Barbara Weekley implies that her mother had taken a lover, and suggests that Lawrence was not deceived. Maria Huxley, wife of Aldous Huxley, close friends of the Lawrences from 1926, confided to Barbara that Lawrence said, "'Frieda has changed since she went away with Barby,'"¹¹⁹ and

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 572.

¹¹⁷ Harry T. Moore, Letter "To Mark Spilka," 6 January 1979, quoted in Mark Spilka, "Lawrence versus Peeperkorn on Abdication; or 'What Happens to a Pagan Vitalist When the Juice Runs Out?'" in Eds. Robert B. Partlow, Jr. and Harry T. Moore, *D.H. Lawrence: The Man Who Lived* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), p. 110.

¹¹⁸ Barbara Weekley Barr, "Memoir of D.H. Lawrence," in Ed., Stephen Spender, *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist, Poet, Prophet* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 30.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 30.

Barbara wrote that Lawrence "did not reproach my mother. One evening at the Mirenda he said to her, 'Every heart has a right to its own secrets'," ¹²⁰ a double-edged remark that cut two ways, though Barbara could not have known at that time that Lawrence had secrets of his own.

When Barbara Weekley visited the Lawrences at the Mirenda in spring 1928, she arrived on 16 March, and Frieda did not travel with her when she returned to Alassio on 28 March. Frieda visited Barbara in Alassio on 11 April and returned to the Mirenda on 16 April. A week or so later, when Lawrence wrote to Martin Secker, his London publisher whose wife's family, the Capelleros, were natives of Spotorno, Italy, he mentioned Frieda's trip: "Frieda was away a week with Barby in Alassio - went to Spotorno, saw the tenente [Ravagli] and the Capelleros and all." ¹²¹ If, as Barbara suggests, Frieda travelled to Alassio in April 1928 to meet Ravagli under cover of a visit to her, Barbara's report dates Frieda's first encounter with Ravagli some six months earlier than Lucas suggests.

In 1975 Emile Delavenay speculated that Frieda was sexually involved with Angelo Ravagli as early as the autumn of 1925, before Lawrence's sister, Ada Clarke, visited the Villa Bernarda early in 1926, and before Lawrence travelled alone to

visit the Brewsters and Dorothy Brett in Capri, a date nearly two years earlier than Lucas'. ¹²² In the same year, Emily Hahn followed Delavenay when she suggested that during the six week period between Lawrence's departure from Spotorno for Capri and his return on Easter Sunday 1926, Frieda stayed at the Villa Bernarda with her daughters and "probably was seeing Ravagli." ¹²³

In 1980 Keith Sagar wrote that in spring 1928, "Frieda went back with Barbara to Alassio and then, alone to see Angelo Ravagli in Spotorno," ¹²⁴ that Frieda's "relationship with Angelo Ravagli in Lawrence's last years was more or less open," ¹²⁵ and that Lawrence "turned a blind eye." ¹²⁶ In 1998, David Ellis claimed the conservative position that Frieda began her affair with Angelo Ravagli in "March or April 1926." ¹²⁷

After Spilka's "belated speculation on Lawrence's impotence" ¹²⁸ appeared in 1979, it was accepted as fact that Lawrence was impotent for the last five or six years of his life, and in 1980, L.D. Clark summarized: "According to Frieda, Lawrence

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 30.

¹²¹ "To Martin Secker," 24 April 1928, *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, Volume VI March 1927-November 1928, ed., James T. Boulton and Margaret H. Boulton with Gerald M. Lacy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 377 (Hereafter in text as VI, 377). This important letter was not published until 1991.

¹²² Emile Delavenay, "Making Another Lawrence": Frieda and the Lawrence Legend," *DHLR*, 8 (Spring 1975), p. 80.

¹²³ Emily Hahn, Lorenzo: *D.H. Lawrence and the Women Who Loved Him* (Philadelphia and New York: Lippincott, 1975), p. 309.

¹²⁴ Keith Sagar, *The Life of D.H. Lawrence* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 225.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 225.

¹²⁷ David Ellis, *D.H. Lawrence: Dying Game 1922-1930*. (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 290.

¹²⁸ Spilka, p. 105.

became impotent some time in the mid-twenties. She herself was probably already having an affair with Angelo Ravagli."¹²⁹

Spilka acknowledged that some scholars "have long known or suspected that Lawrence was impotent over the last five years of his life,"¹³⁰ and he shared Moore's private view that Lawrence's impotence was related to and dated from "that terrible illness in Mexico in 1925, from which Lawrence never recovered."¹³¹ He concludes that Lawrence experienced impotence,

induced... by the inroads of tuberculosis on his body, and not by any psychic wound like the Oedipus Complex nor any inherent sexual deficiency, as his many adverse critics assume. There seems to me no question that Lawrence did experience genuine sexual fulfilment in his previous relations with Frieda.¹³²

Spilka argues that after Lawrence neared death in Oaxaca and learned from a doctor in Mexico City that he had progressed to a late phase of terminal tuberculosis, his sexual encounters with Frieda were "of necessity infrequent, and by the end of 1926, as Frieda later told her friends, they ceased altogether."¹³³

¹²⁹ L. D. Clark, *The Minoan Distance: The Symbolism of Travel in D.H. Lawrence* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1980), p. 352.

¹³⁰ Spilka, p. 105.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Even persuasive argument is a delicate thing. Harry Moore's *caveat* continues to haunt discussions of Lawrence's impotence and Frieda's affair with Ravagli: no concrete evidence of either has surfaced - a difficult fact to ignore.

Aldington did not confirm the report that Lawrence was impotent, though he instigated and supported the claim that Frieda engaged in a thinly disguised affair with Angelo Ravagli while Lawrence was still alive. The Honorable Dorothy Brett fuelled discussions of Lawrence's impotence with an addendum to her 1933 account of her relationship with the Lawrences that includes a report of two failed sexual encounters with Lawrence in Ravello in 1926.¹³⁴

In 1990, Jeffrey Meyers suggested that those encounters never took place. He argued first, that Lawrence was "not at all attracted to Brett,"¹³⁵ and he was never promiscuous or unfaithful to Frieda after their marriage,¹³⁶ a long-standing tradition that Brenda Maddox dispelled in 1994 when she revealed that in 1920, while Frieda visited Germany alone, Lawrence had a brief affair with Rosalind Thornycroft in Fiesole.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Derek Britton, *Lady Chatterley: The Making of the Novel* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p. 277; see Sean Hignett, Brett: *From Bloomsbury to New Mexico: A Biography* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1983), p. 190-2.

¹³⁵ Jeffrey Meyers, *D.H. Lawrence: A Biography* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1990), p. 315.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

¹³⁷ Brenda Maddox, *D.H. Lawrence: The Story of a Marriage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 271-6; See also Mark Kinkead-Weekes, *D. H. Lawrence: Triumph to Exile 1912-1922* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 601-606.

Meyers adds that Lady Juliette Huxley, Julian Morrell Vinogradoff and Harwood Brewster, "three of Brett's close friends... have confirmed in recent interviews that Brett's late story was certainly a fantasy."¹³⁸

Reports of Dorothy Brett's friends who do not believe her story are inconclusive at best, and Ellis argues that the weight of evidence suggests "some such misfortune"¹³⁹ occurred, and he concludes,

The events in Ravello... have frequently been taken as conclusive proof of Lawrence's physical impotence. Given his state of health, that interpretation may well be accurate, but it is impossible to be certain.¹⁴⁰

Brett's description of her encounters with Lawrence in Ravello suggests that the influences attendant upon that event were too complex to prove that Lawrence was impotent or Brett frigid.¹⁴¹

Persuasive argument and tradition grow in the spaces between documented facts. Arguments for Lawrence's impotence and Frieda's affair with Ravagli, which is a slightly different and perhaps unrelated matter, answer some of the many questions about Lawrence's behaviour, the tone of his voice in some of his letters, the politics of his relationship with Frieda,

Ravagli's disappearance from the Lawrence circle after he had been a regular visitor in Spotorno, the intensely angry feelings Ada Clarke expressed when she visited the Lawrences at the Villa Bernarda, and Lawrence's shifting relationship with Dorothy Brett, Mabel Dodge Luhan and others, but there is no evidence beyond the circumstantial to prove Lawrence was impotent or Frieda was intimate with Ravagli.

Lawrence's convincing portrayal of the impotent Sir Clifford Chatterley suggests that he knew something of the condition, but art, especially art of the highest order like *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, is an unreliable source of biographical fact. Perhaps the most troublesome question is Frieda's use of Lawrence's impotence as an excuse for her affair with Ravagli. She had her lovers in the past and nobody blinked an eye.

When Frieda eloped with Lawrence in 1912, she took a German lover while she debated with herself whether to stay with him or return to England, her three children and her husband, Ernest Weekley.¹⁴² Within the first four months of her marriage to Lawrence, Frieda took three lovers, Udo von Henning, an anonymous woodcutter and Harold Hobson;¹⁴³ while the Lawrences lived in Cornwall in 1917, Frieda apparently had an affair with Cecil Grey.¹⁴⁴ Brenda Maddox learned that Frieda had an affair with a mule driver, Pepino D'Allura, in Taormina in the

¹³⁸ Meyers, p. 315.

¹³⁹ Ellis, p. 294.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 294.

¹⁴¹ Hignet, p. 190-2.

¹⁴² Meyers, p. 88.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 91, and see note 25, p. 401.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 341; see also Kinkead-Weekes, p. 405: "though actual evidence there is none."

early 1920s.¹⁴⁵ Moore reports that Frieda had an affair with John Middleton Murry in 1923,¹⁴⁶ and Aldous Huxley, a generous and reliable witness, adds a few "Italian peasants to Frieda's list of lovers."¹⁴⁷ Why did she need an excuse for an affair with Angelo Ravagli ? It is curious, too, that she would not reveal that Lawrence was dying of tuberculosis; yet she let slip that he was impotent.

By 1982 Leo Hamalian wrote that Lawrence was impotent and Frieda was involved in an affair with Angelo Ravagli as a matter of generally accepted biographical fact,¹⁴⁸ and Jeffrey Meyers, in *D. H. Lawrence and the Experience of Italy*, wrote:

After Lawrence's death Frieda, who never valued fidelity, revealed that Lawrence had become sexually impotent toward the end of 1926 and that she had slept with Lieutenant Angelo Ravagli, who had been their landlord in Spotorno, while Lawrence was in France in October 1928.¹⁴⁹

In his 1990 biography of Lawrence, Meyers recognized, as a matter of course, that Lawrence's impotence and Frieda's affair were distinct items, though they had been related in their revelation as cause and effect. He discussed Lawrence's

¹⁴⁵ Maddox, p. 276.

¹⁴⁶ Moore, *Priest*, p. 97.

¹⁴⁷ Meyers, p. 92.

¹⁴⁸ Leo Hamalian, *D.H. Lawrence In Italy* (New York: Taplinger, 1982), p. 139.

¹⁴⁹ Jeffrey Meyers, *D.H. Lawrence and the Experience of Italy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), p. 157.

impotence as a manifestation of his tubercular syndrome and later addressed Frieda's affair with Ravagli. Meyers suggested that Frieda began her affair in 1926 after Lawrence left the Villa Bernarda with his sister Ada and her friend, and he proposed that Frieda initiated the affair out of anger with Lawrence and Ada as a matter of revenge, a repetition of her affair with John Middleton Murry in 1923 when Lawrence refused to leave America to accompany Frieda who insisted upon a visit to London.¹⁵⁰

Derek Britton also separated the issues in his 1988 discussion of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: he first noticed that while the Lawrences lived at the Villa Bernarda, Angelo Ravagli became a "regular Sunday visitor... and at some time, probably during the Lawrences' stay in Spotorno, Frieda took him as her lover,"¹⁵¹ and later he introduced the issue of Lawrence's impotence on evidence of his sexual failure with Dorothy Brett in Ravello in 1926,¹⁵² Frieda's claim that Lawrence was impotent by 1926, and Cecil Gray's disclosure that while he was Frieda's lover in 1917-1918 she insinuated that Lawrence was "'not far removed' from impotence"¹⁵³ at that time.

Britton acknowledges that the advance of tuberculosis... contributed significantly to the development of Lawrence's potency disorder,¹⁵⁴ but he also proposes that Lawrence's

¹⁵⁰ Meyers, *Biography*, p. 324-333, 341.

¹⁵¹ Britton, p. 15.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

impotence derived from psychosexual influences. He conjures biographical facts from Lawrence's art with his own *caveat*.

Identifying possible psychogenic causes is a more speculative matter. In the sentiments, behaviour and histories of the gamekeepers in the three versions of *Lady Chatterley* there are suggestions of a number of psychological factors which might potentially have contributed to the development of sexual problems. Lawrence identified closely with the keepers and invested them, especially those of the second and third versions, with a great deal of his own thought and experience. Could the sexual psychology of the keepers be identical with that of their creator? Plainly this is not a question that can be answered with any certainty. But it seems reasonable to suspect autobiographical sources where correspondences can be adduced either with opinions expressed elsewhere by Lawrence or with what is known of Lawrence's personal life.¹⁵⁵

Anxiety, Britton suggests, is the source of sexual impotence and the gamekeepers in all three drafts of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* fear both rejection and success. Shame associated with effeminacy creates a sense of inferiority in the gamekeepers of the first and second drafts, and in all three gamekeepers, fear of the

controlling woman dominates their initial rejection of sexual involvement with Constance Chatterley:

Fear, mistrust and even hatred of women, wilful women most especially, are features of the gamekeeper's character in each version of the novel ... Mellors ... dreads the controlling influence of an active partner striving for clitoral orgasm after the man is spent: then the vagina becomes an instrument of a man's humiliation and torture, a fearsome tearing 'beak.'¹⁵⁶

Britton cites Compton Mackenzie's suggestion that in his relationship with Frieda, Lawrence rarely succeeded in producing simultaneous orgasm as the source for the gamekeeper's disgust with Bertha Coutts' sexual habits and for the novel's bias that proposes simultaneous orgasm and female passivity as ideal in sexual intercourse.¹⁵⁷

Britton's argument relies upon an interpretation of the last sexual encounter in the cottage in both the second and final drafts of the novel, which include anal intercourse, as an expression of latent homosexual desire, fear of the female genitals, or contempt for the female that places her in an humiliating posture and treats her as sex object - all of which betray fear of the female that the argument transfers from the gamekeeper, Parkin/Mellors, to Lawrence to establish a psychogenic character for his sexual

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 47.

incapacity - an interesting argument, but one that wants corroborative evidence.

Britton also speculates about Lawrence's motivation for writing *Lady Chatterley's Lover*:

At a subconscious level the writing of *Lady Chatterley* might be explained within the framework of the psychoanalytical tradition as an act of displacement, a demonstration to the world through his writing of a vigorous sensuality to which he could no longer give bodily expression.¹⁵⁸

Lady Chatterley's Lover, Britton suggests, was an exercise in "self-therapy"¹⁵⁹ that served three purposes: first, Lawrence wrote to come to terms with his impotence, "and accept without self-sympathy the fact that his loss of potency might be permanent;" his second aim "may have been to help... keep alive, as Parkin did, 'the burning flicker of hope for a return of desire,'" and finally, Lawrence wrote "to effect a cure of his potency disorder by setting down on paper, principally in relation to the gamekeepers, the fears and fetishes which could have been the psychogenic causes of his ailments."¹⁶⁰ Britton's argument begins with the assumptions that Lawrence was impotent and that

his supposed condition was psychogenic in origin, and he analyzes Lawrence's work to support his assumptions.

Scholarly writing that explores questions of Lawrence's impotence and Frieda's affair with Angelo Ravagli runs a course of elaboration curious as the politics of revelation. Lawrence died early in 1930 and Frieda lived for the next twenty-six years with Angelo Ravagli at the Lawrence ranch near Taos, New Mexico. For the first twenty years, she remained Frieda Lawrence, celebrated wife of the celebrated author, and she controlled, to the extent that she could, information about her life with Lawrence to which scholars were privy. Her denial of her affair with Ravagli and Ravagli's denial of any knowledge of the Lawrences until after Lawrence's death suggest that Frieda insisted upon a respectable appearance for her relationship with Ravagli that her behaviour while Lawrence was alive did not deserve, at least in her estimation.

In 1925 Frieda and Lawrence alone knew the prognosis for his illness, and Frieda's relationship with Angelo Ravagli, which probably began before Ada Clarke's visit to the Villa Bernarda in Spotorno early in 1926, created an emotional and physical harbour for her to weather Lawrence's impending death. In spring 1928, when the lease on the Mirenda expired, Lawrence was packing to leave when Frieda returned from her visit to Ravagli and persuaded him to extend the lease on the Mirenda for six months because she did not want to leave Italy and Ravagli,

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 53.

and when six months passed, in autumn 1928, Frieda visited Ravagli in Trieste to assure herself, before she and Lawrence left Italy for France, that Ravagli would expect her when Lawrence died: he had already lived one and one-half years beyond the Mexico City doctor's most optimistic prediction of two. Since Hans Carossa, who examined Lawrence in Bavaria in 1927, confided only in Franz Schoenberner, neither Frieda nor Lawrence knew that he accurately predicted Lawrence could live no more than two or three years. Frieda's well-guarded affair was not casual - it represented her persistent effort to secure a mate to stave off the trials of widowhood which began for her at age fifty. Her relationship with Angelo Ravagli, which lasted from 1925 or 1926 until her death in 1956, was the longest of her life, and she lived with him as the widowed Frieda Lawrence longer than she had lived with Lawrence.

The question of Frieda's affair with Angelo Ravagli, in comparison with the question of Lawrence's impotence, is a relatively simple matter. Whether Lawrence was impotent by 1926 or not remains a matter of speculation, and elaborate discussions of the causes of his alleged impotence are built upon the sands of *if* and run the same risks as the tradition that Lawrence was never unfaithful to Frieda after they married. Dorothy Brett's report of two failed sexual encounters in Ravello in 1926 provides evidence of sexual difficulties, but those difficulties do not necessarily prove Lawrence was impotent: the encounters Brett describes have too much willed sexual performance, too much *motivation*,

and too little spontaneity to succeed in either the emotional or physical aspects of sexual experience.

Studies that analyze Lawrence's biography and writing identify influences and conditions typical in cases of sexual dysfunction and provide insight into his psychology, but they do not prove impotence. Lawrence dealt with psychosexual theory throughout his career. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* places particular emphasis on the contrast between sexual potency and impotence in both men and women, and Lawrence's polarized contrasts create vibrant tensions that link the potent with the impotent: the story deals with impotence and regression to the same extent that it addresses sexual recovery in an effort to discover the sources of energy common to both potency and impotence and to identify conditions and psychological influences that produce one sort of behaviour as opposed to another.

Arguments for the psychogenic basis of Lawrence's impotence that analyze the psychosexual theory he develops through three drafts of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* must be inconclusive because, in each of his main characters, Lawrence creates a sense of the unconscious that is mercurial and amorphous enough to defy the strictly rational apprehension necessary to distinguish between the unconscious created as a feature of the character's psychology and the unconscious of the creative author. The conversion of Lawrence's psychosexual theory from artistry to biography offers insight into the complex

gaps between the documented facts of Lawrence's life and his art, and raises the interesting question of the psychogenic component in cases of sexual dysfunction, both male and female, caused by debilitating physical illness.

The most persuasive argument for Lawrence's impotence associates it with medical discussions of advanced tuberculosis which include sexual impotence as but one in the long list of physical and emotional trials that accompany the terminal phase of the disease: Lawrence endured

(at various times) all the symptoms of consumption... he suffered from irregular appetite, loss of weight, emaciation, facial pallor, flushed cheeks, unstable pulse rates, fever, night sweats, shortness of breath, wheezing, chest pains, frequent colds, severe coughing, spitting of blood, extreme irritability and sexual impotence.¹⁶¹

Moore was probably right to say that whatever sexual integrity Lawrence had been able to maintain was broken by his illness in Oaxaca, and whatever question either Lawrence or Frieda feared to ask about his condition was answered when they reached Mexico City and learned not only that he suffered with tuberculosis, but that it had advanced to the terminal phase.

¹⁶¹ Meyers, Biography, p. 325.

The Lawrences were a private couple who kept their sexual life to themselves. The testy side of their relationship now and again spilled over into their social life, but what observers, like Dorothy Brett or Mabel Luhan for instance, saw was not always what it seemed and did not necessarily give accurate insight into the Lawrences or their marriage. If Frieda actually announced to unnamed friends that Lawrence had been impotent since 1926, she was probably defending herself against the disapproval of those who felt she behaved badly by taking a lover while Lawrence was so obviously ill. Had she not spoken up about Lawrence's impotence, critical argument would propose it to explain Sir Clifford Chatterley and in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* Lawrence used elements of Frieda's affair with Ravagli as well as elements of his own love affair with Frieda and, as Britton suspects and Brenda Maddox confirms, Rosalyn Thornycroft, among others to shape the relationship between Constance and Mellors, and he used his own experience of impotence to create the characters of Clifford, whose incapacity is both physical and spiritual, and the gamekeeper whose self-imposed want of desire began to have the same effects as Clifford's impotence in his dealings with others.

Lawrence was seriously ill and groped for sources of energy to sustain himself from 1925 through the end of his life, and sexual dysfunction was but one symptom of his condition. He was probably more troubled by his failed appetite, his inability to breathe comfortably, to walk or climb the hills at the Villa Mirenda,

to travel even short distances without anxiety, by his susceptibility to respiratory infection that often required him to spend days in bed wondering if the stress of his cough would produce his last bronchial hemorrhage.

Lawrence was probably impotent, but there is no direct evidence of the fact. Frieda probably began her affair with Angelo Ravagli shortly after she met him in 1925, but there is no direct evidence of the fact. Persuasive argument subtly transforms itself into tradition, and even long-standing tradition is a fragile thing. Discussions of Lawrence's impotence and Frieda's infidelities reinforce the insight that Lawrence used his experience in his writing and, in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, as in most of his great work, life experience is but one raw material that he fashioned into art - it is not an overriding determinant. Studies of Lawrence's life shed light on his work, but his work is not a reliable source of biographical fact.

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