To George Hyde

John Worthen

The following is an open letter submitted in response to the article by George Hyde entitled 'Suave Loins, Venison Pasties and Other Tasty Nonsense: The Unacceptable Face of Lawrence', published in *The Journal of the D.H. Lawrence Society* 2002–2003.

Dear George,

Before I get into the greasy (not to say gamey) world of the venison pasty about which you write with such relish, it would perhaps be helpful to clarify what you mean by the word 'authorized', as applied to an edition. You use the word twice in your article; once in its first paragraph (107), and once in endnote 4, where you proudly proclaim that you are quoting 'from what I call the "authorized" text of *Women in Love*, in the Penguin Popular Classic edition of 1996' (121). Your implication is quite clear; this new edition of *The First 'Women in Love'* is *not* authorized. Unlike *your* edition, it comes with no stamp of authority. It is unreliable, lesser, unauthorial. The fact that Lawrence sent it to be published, and would have rejoiced if it had been, in no way authorizes it.

Did you know, George, that you have in your hands an 'authorized' text which departs from what its author wrote on more than 1500 occasions? The Penguin Popular Classic Edition uses not only a text full of things Lawrence never wrote, but reprints a text which he was forced (by Secker) to change, because Secker was frightened of a libel action from Philip Heseltine. Lawrence hated making the changes, and despised Secker for giving in to the threat. The text is one of

the worst ever printed of the novel. But – for you – it is the text you prefer: it is 'authorized'. It is the text you grew up with (107): it has a paternal feel to it, an authentic, manly feel. It is – to you – the Authorized Version (or Venison).

I can't help feeling, however, that life would have been easier for you if you *had* sought out a text closer to what Lawrence wrote. You speculate a good deal about the chapter title 'Excurse', and if you had looked at the explanatory note on the title in the Cambridge edition of the novel (or the text of that edition which Penguin reprinted), you would have found yourself helped.[1] There is, indeed, a verb 'to excurse' which Lawrence used in chapter V of *Kangaroo*, and it might have been worth considering that; there is also an obsolete but fascinating noun, last used 1587, meaning 'an ambush, a raid, a mad sally'.[2] But in your hands, the title 'Excurse' means – as Humpty-Dumpty puts it – 'just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.'[3] You like 'Excurse' to mean, for example, 'excuse' and you enjoy its meaning that. It is also 'surely truncated from the word "excursion"'; it also means 'Exodus' (109).

But your text is, in every sense, unreliable; you cannot rely on it (any more than you could trust yourself to the support of a venison pasty). You quote this from the chapter 'Excurse': 'source of the deepest life-force at the back and base of the loins' (107). What Lawrence actually wrote was: 'Source of the deepest life-force, the darkest, deepest, strangest life-force of the human body, at the back and base of the loins'.[4] What a convenient text you have, to cut such a sentence down and make it manageable for you! You quote Will saying, about his daughters and religion, that 'I don't want to see them go away from *that*': you would have done better to quote what Lawrence wrote ('I don't want to see them going away from that'[5]) and to have ignored your 'authorized' version. You go on to say that Birkin is 'crushed' by Will's argument, as is revealed by his remark 'Ursula does

exactly as she pleases': and I really don't know what text you are reading at that point, because Birkin is not the least bit crushed.

But you – and your text – are setting up an opposition between the hairy man (Will is obviously hairy, in your terms: and it is true that he has a moustache, even if a cropped one[6]) and the smooth man, Jacob – that is, Birkin. You need to have Birkin/Jacob crushed. And so he is. End of argument.

The reason why Jacob comes into the argument at all, however, is a pretty reason: it is because of the famous venison pasty which confronts Birkin and Ursula at the Saracen's Head. This venison pasty, of all things, reminds you of Jacob's deceitful gift of venison to his blind father Isaac at Genesis xxvii.19 (even though the venison the Biblical Isaac eats is actually goat, not venison). The venison pasty in the Saracen's Head does not seem deceitful, to me: but then I don't have your experience with venison. No matter, you see a link between Birkin and Jacob: subtle invaders both.

This takes us to the heart of your accusation; there is a 'dark, patriarchal symbolism of procreation and generation' (117) in the novel which both I and Middleton Murry are too squeamish to confront. So Murry rubbishes the novel in a review; and you think I prefer *The First 'Women in Love'* because it contains no reference to this dark, patriarchal symbolism, for which we can use the convenient symbolism of the venison pasty. No such pasty appeared in this unmanly, pale, even cowardly fiction of the novel's first version (the only meat to appear is, appropriately, chicken: and cold chicken at that[7]. I find loins of darkness 'obscure', which proves I am squeamish. You relish the dark, the gamey, the patriarchal. You think the novel does, too. It's the unacceptable face of Lawrence. (I'm still not quite sure whether you think Birkin is impressive and gamey, or unimpressive and smooth.)

But I do wonder, George, whether you are not bringing more weight to bear on this venison pasty that it can quite

take? You say that I am wrong to object to what is obscure in the novel on the grounds (1) that others have previously objected to it (though I would have thought that might have strengthened my argument, not have weakened it) and (2) that the novel is engaged in 'rich Biblical allusions which turn essentially upon metaphoric transpositions of the narrative of the deliverance of the chosen people' (113), so that what seems obscure is really only allusive; and (3) that although the writing derived from Pryce and Blavatsky *is* obscure, it is significantly obscure, and I am wrong to object to what is dark, because much of the Bible is dark, and Eastern ways of thinking are dark, and these dark hairy Esaus should take precedence and can gird their dark loins like real heroes, and have phalluses which rise to the occasion: and that proves that I am wrong. (I really think I summarise your argument precisely.)

It sounds prissy, when confronted by such playground taunting – 'Come out from behind that alternative text! Show that you're a man, and that you prefer *Women in Love*! Bet you can't get your unauthorized text up!' – to say that I find your allusiveness, George, as obscure as what I was objecting to in the first place. I don't think you advance an argument I can deal with. But then perhaps you didn't intend to. So I am sure you will go on reading your favourite bits of *Women in Love* while eating a good, over-ripe venison pasty, or enjoying a medlar's decomposition, and thinking dark thoughts, as dark and gamey and patriarchal as you choose to be, while the rest of us discuss what Lawrence actually wrote ... and among the things we might discuss would be the merits of his novel *The First 'Women in Love'*.

In unchanged friendship
John

Endnotes

1. *Women in Love*, ed. David Farmer, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen (Cambridge, 1987), explanatory note on 302:2. Future references to this text as *WL*.
2. *OED2*.
3. Alice asks, sensibly, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things' – but Humpty-Dumpty remains confident that '*I* can manage the whole lot of them!' (Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass And What Alice Found There* [first published 1871], Macmillan, 1908, p. 125).
4. *WL* 314:16–18.
5. *WL* 257:27–8.
6. *WL* 255:20.
7. *The First 'Women in Love', ed. John Worthen and Lindeth Vasey (Cambridge, 2002), 288:19.*