

## CONTRADICTIONS OF THE PURE RELATIONSHIP

---

Especially in so far as they are primarily or partly located in the unconscious, the psychological traits discussed in the previous chapter set up fundamental tensions within the emergent world of pure relationships. To trace these out, I shall concentrate upon aspects of the pure relationship in same-sex encounters – specifically, those of lesbian women. The strategy might seem an odd one, following on from an interpretation of the psychic characteristics of male and female sexuality. But to see how far the psychological divisions which tend to separate men and women might prove destructive of the pure relationship, it is worth considering its intrinsic dynamics – and in some ways these are most easily studied when the heterosexual element is taken out.

Without worrying too much about how representative the material is, I shall draw heavily upon certain sections of those marvellously reflexive documents, the Hite reports. The Hite surveys set out to ‘chart an ideological revolution in progress’, but they also convey the awareness that the documents analysed contribute directly to that process. Hite’s first long ‘essay questionnaire’ was distributed in 1972–6, and her subsequent first volume based upon responses from 3,500 women in the US. A notable feature of that study and the succeeding volumes was their emphasis

that sexuality should be not only studied through the musings of 'experts' – Kinsey, Masters and Johnson and the rest – but approached through the accounts given by ordinary people. The purpose of the project, in Hite's words, was 'to let *women* define their own sexuality', to allow them 'to speak out about how they feel about sex, how they define their own sexuality, and what sexuality means to them'.

Hite found that 11 per cent of the women in her study (volume 3) had sexual relationships only with other women; a further 7 per cent did so on occasion. No particular statistical significance can be attached to these figures, but it is worth noting that a substantial proportion of her respondents who were above the age of forty were involved in sexual relationships with women for the first time in their lives. Virtually all of these had previously been in heterosexual marriages. Over 80 per cent of the lesbian women, at the time of the study, were in relationships of some duration.

Most lesbian women may be in long-term relationships, but they have difficulty in gaining a sense of security in them. One woman comments:

A non-conventional relationship, with no rules, is difficult. In a marriage, in the traditional sense, if just by chance the roles that people are taught happen to fit two individuals, then that's a pretty good arrangement . . . But for most of us in gay relationships . . . there aren't any rules, really, so you're kind of making up your own as you go along. It's this constant thing of trying to figure out how it works.

Yet since marriage 'in the traditional sense' is disappearing, it is the gays who are the pioneers in this respect – the prime everyday experimenters. They have for some while experienced what is becoming more and more commonplace for heterosexual couples.

## The pure relationship: breaking and making

In heterosexual marriage in earlier periods past sexual encounters were normally 'written out' by both partners as of little significance for the future. Women usually came to marriage with their 'virtue' intact, while the philandering of men was consigned to the category of an acceptable episodic sexuality. A relationship today, however, has to be set apart both from what went before and also from the other involvements, sexual or otherwise, which the individuals might have. A person with whom a partner was in a previous relationship might live on in the minds of one or both; even if prior emotional ties have become quite thoroughly broken, a current relationship is likely to be permeated by their residues. If it be recognised that all adult personal attachments recall aspects of infantile experience, so also do experiences of loss; and in the domain of pure relationships individuals must often now cope with multiple passages of this sort.

Breaking up is an ordeal for gay women because of the negotiated status of their relationships and the particularly 'open' character of homosexual self-identity. 'When we broke up I was really confused. I wondered if I was really a lesbian or if she was the only woman I could love.' This is a woman describing the dissolution of her first sexual relationship with another woman. She adds, 'for many of my lesbian friends, it was the same, the first breakup was devastating because it opened up everything for questioning again'. She has also suffered at the termination of other relationships that had lasted several years or more. One person speaks for most when she says:

Sometimes I get tired of going through life negotiating relationships and working it out. Like, will I ever arrive at some kind of plateau where I finally get the results of my

labours? Once you've run the last mile, they may still leave you for a younger, or more intelligent, or older, or whatever woman – or a man!

There is a structural contradiction in the pure relationship, centring upon commitment, which many of Hite's respondents acknowledge. To generate commitment and develop a shared history, an individual must give of herself to the other. That is, she must provide, in word and deed, some kind of guarantees to the other that the relationship can be sustained for an indefinite period. Yet a present-day relationship is not, as marriage once was, a 'natural condition' whose durability can be taken for granted short of certain extreme circumstances. It is a feature of the pure relationship that it can be terminated, more or less at will, by either partner at any particular point. For a relationship to stand a chance of lasting, commitment is necessary; yet anyone who commits herself without reservations risks great hurt in the future, should the relationship become dissolved.

Some three-quarters of Hite's sample dwell upon their insecurities in respect of love. 'I am always questioning whether she really loves me, or if I love her more'; 'Sometimes I feel love, other times ignored. Am I satisfied? No'; 'I feel more needy than I think she does. I feel loved, but I am somewhat insecure. I want her to want me more. Yet, I would dislike it greatly if she depended too much on me or drained me.' However, most find sexual relationships with other women more intimate and equal than those with men. A general awareness that new models of love should be developed, and that gay relationships provide a context in which this can be achieved, is apparent. '*In love*', as one woman puts it, 'is explosive, obsessive, irrational, wonderful, heady, dreamy. *Loving* is long work, trust, communication, commitment, pain, pleasure.'

The conflict between sexual excitement, which is often

short-lived, and more durable forms of caring for the other emerges strongly. Yet many also observe that the intensity of their sexual responsiveness and satisfaction depends upon the degree of closeness they feel to the other. Over 80 per cent say they are able to talk easily and intimately with their partners. 'She is respectfully attentive, she pays attention to me when I need it, and I do to her. I'm more likely to state my desires, but I encourage her to do what she wants and say whatever she feels.'<sup>1</sup> Economic inequalities are less marked than in most heterosexual relationships; and sharing domestic tasks, even if this frequently produces clashes, seems to be more or less universal.

In the pure relationship, trust has no external supports, and has to be developed on the basis of intimacy. Trust is a vesting of confidence in the other and also in the capability of the mutual bond to withstand future traumas. This is more than a matter of good faith only, problematic as that may be in itself. To trust the other is also to gamble upon the capability of the individual actually to be able to act with integrity. The tendency of sexual relationships to be dyadic (not to be confused with monogamous) is probably to some degree a result of the unconscious desire to recapitulate that feeling of exclusivity which the infant enjoys with its mother. The 'specialness' which one finds in another is, as Freud says, a 'refinding' in this sense. Yet the dyadic character of sexual relationships also tends to be enforced by the nature of the trust presumed. For trust, when we speak of trust in persons, is not a quality capable of indefinite expansion.

The shared history which two individuals develop together at some points inevitably closes off others, who become part of the generalised 'outside'. Exclusiveness is not a guarantee of trust, but it is nevertheless an important stimulus to it. Intimacy means the disclosure of emotions and actions which the individual is unlikely to hold up to a wider public gaze. Indeed, the disclosure of what is kept

from other people is one of the main psychological markers likely to call forth trust from the other and to be sought after in return. It is easy to see how the self-disclosure which intimacy presumes can produce codependence if it does not go along with the preservation of autonomy. If the psychological 'giving' to the other is not mutual, and reasonably well balanced, one individual is likely to define her or his needs without regard to the other, expecting her or him to go along with them.

Of course, a partner in a relationship might make sure that she or he has a circle of friends, as well as others who can be relied upon in times of difficulty. Yet since trust cannot be expanded indefinitely, there are priorities in such decisions. Just like lovers, friends normally require markers of intimacy, information that is special to them alone. Someone who confides more about her feelings and experiences to a friend than to her lover is likely to have reservations about her relationship with that lover. For many heterosexual couples this problem is in a certain sense 'solved' by the very fact that women so often find their male partners difficult to 'talk to'. They are able to put up markers of intimacy with their women friends which a husband or male lover may repudiate.

Giving certain conditions, the pure relationship can provide a facilitating social environment for the reflexive project of self. Boundaries, personal space and the rest, as the therapeutic manuals say, are needed for individuals to flourish in a relationship rather than slide into codependence. Yet it is plain that there are also large areas of possible tension and conflict here. The shared history that a relationship develops can serve to screen off troubles in the outside world; one or both individuals may become dependent, not so much upon the other, but upon the relationship and its routines in a fixated way, as a means of insulating themselves from a full engagement with other social tasks or

obligations. Achieving a balance between autonomy and dependence is problematic.

The mobile nature of self-identity does not necessarily sit easily with the demands of pure relationships. Trust must somehow accommodate itself to the different trajectories of development that partners might follow. There always has to be a certain licence in trust. To trust someone means forgoing opportunities to keep tabs on them or force their activities within some particular mould. Yet the autonomy that is granted to the other will not necessarily be used in such a way as to fulfil the needs that the partner has in the relationship. People 'grow apart' – this is a common enough observation. Yet more subtle influences can be involved. A shift in the narrative of self, for instance, however it might be brought about, typically affects the distribution of power in a relationship, and can nudge it in the direction of codependence.

### **Lesbianism and male sexuality**

Each sex is a dark continent to the other, and the discussion offered in the previous chapter indicates readily enough why this tends to be so. A clear sense of relief at escaping from the sexual attentions of men pervades the attitudes of many of Hite's respondents, even among those who continue to engage in heterosexual encounters. Hite's findings echo those of Charlotte Wolff and others, that bisexual women usually have much stronger attachments to other women than they do to men, even when they are in heterosexual marriages.<sup>2</sup>

Plastic sexuality, if fully developed, would imply a neutral attitude towards the penis. Few women in Hite's study, or that of Wolff, are able or inclined to move freely between women and men, however much they mix up their sexual

experiences. Yet lesbian women do break the stereotype that women are naturally monogamous. Most of Hite's respondents regard monogamy as a desirable ideal, if they are in a reasonably long-term relationship. But this has more to do with a recognition of the centrality of trust than with an aversion to sexual experimentation as such. Many women speak of the difficulties either they or their partners have with remaining monogamous, at least after an initial period of intense physical attraction to the partner has faded.

The episodic sexuality of men seems clearly related to an unconscious endeavour to reclaim and subdue the all-powerful mother. That kind of extreme sexual adventurism seems largely absent among women. Yet we know that the desire to subdue is not limited to male psychology, and it is not surprising to find that some women use promiscuity as a means of tempering the commitment which a primary relationship presupposes. 'She's a horrible philanderer', one woman remarks of her lover

and always has been. I put up with it for three years. We lived together two years. I finally . . . moved out. I still see her and sleep with her, but I sleep with other women too. After all that time of watching her go out with others, I decided to try it too - now I like it and I'm not sure I'm basically monogamous any more either.

A smaller proportion of lesbian than heterosexual married women have had, or are having, affairs outside their primary relationships, but the numbers are still substantial (about a third among Hite's respondents). 'I have had sex outside of my relationships, every one'; 'I love women. I love to flirt. I love the seduction'; 'I was not in love; I was in lust' - wouldn't one think this was heterosexual men, rather than lesbian women, speaking?

However, there are differences. Most heterosexual



women keep their affairs hidden from their partners, but among homosexuals non-monogamous sex is typically either carried on with the knowledge and acquiescence of the partner or very quickly comes to the other's awareness. The reason seems to be the higher level of communication found in woman-to-woman as opposed to heterosexual relationships. Departures from monogamy are more often openly discussed and monogamy is less of a residue of traditional norms of marriage than a standard established in a consensual way. Where other liaisons are not brought out into the open from the beginning, they tend to come to light at some point or another.

A few women seem to miss the episodic sex that encounters with men make possible, but which is rarer in sexual involvements with other women. One continues to have sex with men specifically for that purpose. Another says, 'I find it almost impossible to have the kind of "fun" in essentially impersonal sexual encounters with women that I used to have with men. There is no way that you don't get to know the other women in the process – there is a lot more talking, more affection – you become friends, at the very least.' According to Hite's figures, over 60 per cent of lesbian women remain close and long-term friends with their ex-lovers after the breakup of a relationship.<sup>3</sup>

A prominent feature of the reportage of the lesbian women concerns the intense and sought-after nature of sexual pleasure. Women want sex? Certainly these women do, and are active in the pursuit of sexual satisfaction, both inside and outside relationships. If sexual pleasure be measured by orgasmic response – a dubious index, as many have said, but surely not devoid of value when placed against the sexual deprivations suffered by women in the past – lesbian sex appears more successful than heterosexual activity. Moreover, there is greater equality in the giving and taking of sexual experience: 'There's a bond between us that my experience with men could never compare to'; 'I like

women's ways, bodies, passions, gentleness/power'; 'I have never felt pressured to have sex by a woman. I was *always* pressured by men.' For the most part these emphases seem compatible with, and actively serve to produce, sexual responsiveness. These women give the lie to the idea that the eroticising of the female body is achieved at the expense of genital sensation. The two in fact go together, something that is entirely compatible with the influence of plastic sexuality.

In gay relationships, male as well as female, sexuality can be witnessed in its complete separation from reproduction. The sexuality of gay women is organised of necessity almost wholly with regard to the perceived implications of the pure relationship. That is to say, the plasticity of sexual response is channelled above all by a recognition of the tastes of the partners and their view about what is or is not enjoyable and tolerable. Differential power may be reimported through a proclivity, for example, for sado-masochistic sex. One woman says:

I like rough, passionate sex because it goes beyond the barriers of 'niceness' that so many women build around themselves. There's no feeling of holding back, as there so often is with politically correct gentle sex – 'S and L', as one of my friends has dubbed it (sweetness and light that is). My current lover and I have experimented some with S/M and bondage and found it very exciting and sexy. Everything we've done has been totally consensual and the 'bottom' (who it is varies) always has control, along with the illusion of being out of control. We've included things like spanking, whipping, hair pulling, and biting, never to the point of injury or even marking. What makes it so good is the feeling of completely letting go.<sup>4</sup>

One might see here the return of the phallus and in a somewhat obnoxious form. To some extent this may be

correct, but a different interpretation could also be proposed. In lesbian relationships (as among male gays also), attitudes and traits, 'prohibited' in the pure relationship can potentially be acted upon, including instrumental control and the exercise of formal power. Confined within the sphere of sexuality and turned into fantasy – rather than, as has always been usual, determined from the outside – dominance perhaps helps to neutralise aggression which would otherwise make itself felt elsewhere.

As in other respects, what might appear to be a retrograde characteristic of woman-to-woman sexual relationships could actually provide a model for ethically defensible heterosexual activity. Consensual sado-masochism need not be offered as a recipe for rewarding sexual experience, but the principle it expresses is capable of generalisation. Plastic sexuality might become a sphere which no longer contains the detritus of external compulsions, but instead takes its place as one among other forms of self-exploration and moral construction. Perhaps here one could read a quite different meaning into the writings of de Sade from those ordinarily suggested. In de Sade, power, pain and death come to invest themselves wholly in sex, and are played out through perversion. The phallus rules everything and sexuality is drained of any vestiges of tenderness – or so it seems. Yet de Sade separates female sexuality wholly from reproduction and celebrates its chronic escape from subordination to phallic concerns. His representation of sex, which concentrates everything else within it, could be seen as an ironic metaphorical device, indicating the innocence of sexuality itself.

### **Homosexuality and the episodic encounter**

Episodic sexuality is most developed among women in the culture of some types of lesbian clubs and bars. Bar life is

ometimes concentrated upon cruising, the search for transient sexual partners. A newcomer to the bar culture comments that, for a long while, 'I just couldn't understand why I kept lucking out in the bars.' Her education and background, she continues, didn't seem to impress anyone. When it dawned on her that the main things that counted in forming liaisons were looks and 'on the spot attractiveness'. It was that simple . . . No one in the bar was interested in meeting someone she could take home to meet Mother.<sup>5</sup>

Short-term, depersonalised liaisons: these are by no means absent from lesbian relationships. Given that many gay men establish long-term sexual ties with one another, one should not exaggerate the contrasts between female and male homosexuality. Yet episodic sexuality among some gay men is intensified well beyond anything found in lesbian communities. When the bath-houses existed, for example, many men who attended sought out multiple sexual experiences each evening; most would be disappointed if they only had one sexual encounter during the course of several hours. In his study of the bath-house culture in the 1960s, for example, Martin Hoffman interviewed one young man who, as the passive receptor, often had some fifty sexual contacts in the course of an evening.<sup>6</sup>

Bath-house sex, as is true of various other contexts of male gay sexual activity, was generally anonymous. The men who went there usually had no social contact with each other save for the most casual of conversations. They had no knowledge of the nature of each other's lives in the outside world and addressed one another only by first names. A new meaning here is given to transience; compared with such encounters, the anonymous heterosexual episode portrayed in *Last Tango in Paris* seems like a deep and enduring involvement.

The man referred to by Hoffman had been married and was the father of two children. Male bisexuality is so characteristic of the sexual behaviour of men today that it is

as 'orthodox' a form of sexual orientation as heterosexuality. The proportion of 'heterosexual' men who engage regularly in episodic homosexual activity has increased markedly over the recent period – in spite of the impact of AIDS. Researchers have estimated that, in the US, 40 per cent of married men at some point during their married lives engage in regular sex with other men; others have claimed the proportion to be even higher.<sup>7</sup>

The defensive aspects of episodic sexuality in this guise seem clear enough. It can be seen as a wholesale male flight from the connections which link sexuality, self-identity and intimacy. Where women are no longer complicit, episodic homosexuality is a collusive effort of men to resist the implications of gender equality. Commitment to the rights of the other in the marital relationship is kept at bay emotionally through the distancing effect of episodic encounters.

Can the same be said of men who are more explicitly gay and repudiate all sexual contacts with women? Given that resentment towards women is part of male psychology on a very general level, gay men in some sense cope with ambivalence by detaching themselves from it altogether. Yet it would be wrong to see an orientation towards episodic sexuality only in negative terms. Like lesbians, male gays place in question the traditional heterosexual integration of marriage and monogamy. As understood in institutionalised marriage, monogamy was always tied to the double standard and therefore to patriarchy. It was a normative demand upon men, but for many honoured only in the breach. In a world of plastic sexuality and pure relationships, however, monogamy has to be 'reworked' in the context of commitment and trust. Monogamy refers, not to the relationship itself, but to sexual exclusiveness as a criterion of trust; 'fidelity' has no meaning except as an aspect of that integrity which trust in the other presumes.

Where episodic encounters do not form a control device

— or an addiction, as surely is the case in the instance described by Hoffman — they are in effect explorations of the possibilities offered by plastic sexuality. From this perspective, even in the shape of impersonal, fleeting contacts, episodic sexuality may be a positive form of everyday experiment. It reveals plastic sexuality for what it (implicitly) is: sex detached from its age-old subservience to differential power. Episodic gay sexuality of the bath-house culture type thus expresses an equality which is absent from most heterosexual involvements, including transient ones. By its very nature, it permits power only in the form of sexual practice itself: sexual taste is the sole determinant. This is surely part of the pleasure and fulfilment that episodic sexuality can provide, when shorn of its compulsive characteristics.

The macho gay, the leather queen, the denim groupie — these are more than just ironic rejoinders to heterosexual masculinity. They are a visible deconstruction of maleness, and at the same time they affirm what taken for granted phallic power denies: that, in modern social life, self-identity, including sexual identity, is a reflexive achievement. In a parallel way, impersonal episodic sex is a critical commentary upon the subversion of sexual pleasure by its involvement with 'extrinsic' domination. It is likely to be defensive and compulsive to the degree to which it is driven by influences outside itself. Its intrinsic equality can only be fully redeemed if nourished through equalising influences in other milieux of social life. Episodic sexuality may usually be a way of avoiding intimacy, but it also offers a means of furthering or elaborating upon it. For sexual exclusiveness is only one way in which commitment to another is protected and integrity achieved. Central though it is to the rule of the phallus, it is not at all clear that episodic sexuality is inherently incompatible with emergent norms of the pure relationship.

### Men and women: together or apart?

'I've been gay for thirty years. I've had long relationships, so have my friends, but almost nobody stays together "for life". We used to worry about this – we thought heterosexuals seemed to stay together far more than gay couples did.' The woman making this observation in Hite's study goes on to add: things have changed now. And so they have. The gay relationships described in Hite's investigations are frequently difficult, beset with problems and short-lived. In comparison with them, however, heterosexual relationships quite often seem like a battleground, where aggression and open fighting intermingle with a profound disaffection between the sexes. Hite found that almost her entire sample of heterosexual women respondents said that they want 'more verbal closeness' with their husbands; most report meeting resistance, or emotional disengagement, when they try to initiate closer communication. Women feel desperate about the continued infidelities of their partners, although a comparable proportion of them also engage in extramarital liaisons. They find emotional aridity in situations in which they expected continuing love. Hite puts things in the following way:

Many women know they are not getting equal emotional support, esteem or respect in their relationships. And yet it can be difficult to describe definitively to a man just how he is projecting diminishing attitudes. Some of the ways this happens are so subtle in their expression that, while a woman may wind up feeling frustrated and on the defensive, she can find it almost impossible to say just why: pointing to the subtle thing said or done would look petty, like overreacting. But taken all together, it is no surprise when even one of these incidents can set off a major fight – or, more typically, another round of alienation which never gets resolved. These little incidents cut away at the relationship, making women

angry and finally causing love to dwindle down to a mere modest toleration.<sup>8</sup>

Equalisation is an intrinsic element in the transformation of intimacy, as is the possibility of communication. Men's anger against women today in some substantial part is a reaction against women's self-assertion, in the home, the workplace and elsewhere. Women are angry at men in turn because of the subtle and not so subtle ways in which men deny them material privileges claimed for themselves. Economic poverty for women, emotional poverty for men: is this the state of play in the relation between the sexes? The self-appointed advocates of men and women on both sides would say so, although each is likely to accuse the other of not fully acknowledging the sufferings of the other sex.

Picking up on the theme of masculinity as psychic damage, Herb Goldberg describes the 'hazards of being male' and speaks of masculine privilege as a myth.<sup>9</sup> Goldberg is a sensitive observer of the changes that have affected gender and sexuality, and sympathetic to the aims of the women's movement. In his writings, however, the complaints of women about men made in Hite's studies and echoed in myriad therapeutic manuals – that men are emotionally stunted, out of touch with their feelings and so forth – are seen as unhappy burdens men have to shoulder.

Here addiction once more appears in a central role. Many men, Goldberg says, have become 'zombies', driven by motives they barely understand. Modern culture is saturated by 'businessmen zombies, golf zombies, sports car zombies, playboy zombies': all are 'playing by the rules of the male game plan' and as a consequence 'have lost touch with, or are running away from, their feelings and awareness of themselves as people'. Women have protested against, and broken free from, their confinement to a domestic milieu and the limitations of self-development that went with it. Men are still imprisoned in the role of bread-



winner, even though the economic benefits men provide for women are now resented rather than appreciated. The need to 'act like a man' is strongly imprinted – and for the most part such demeanour is expected by women also – but the pressures it produces are intense. The idea that males are privileged, Goldberg say, flies in the face of all the statistics of personal damage: in respect of longevity, proneness to disease, suicide, crime, accidents, alcoholism and drug addiction, women are on average more favoured than men.

The man who in moments of honest reflection asks himself, 'What is in all of this for me? What am I getting, and what can I expect in the future?' may find himself at a considerable loss to answer positively or optimistically. Her changes in combination with his own rigidity have put him up against the wall. If he persists in his old ways, he stands accused of chauvinism and sexism. If he stretches himself to take on new responsibilities without making equal demands and throwing off parts of his traditional harness, he will only find himself overloaded and strained to the breaking-point. If he lets go of the traditional masculine style completely, he may find to his terror that he is becoming invisible, unsexy and unworthy in the eyes of most women and even most other men, who turn away from a man who is without a job, status and power.<sup>10</sup>

In contemporary relationships, according to Goldberg, men frequently find themselves in a no-win situation. Women will say 'you are afraid of closeness and emotional warmth', which is often true; but they have in fact actively sought out men they could look up to, self-contained, controlled and dedicated to the world of work. Women become angered by the very characteristics which attracted them in the first place, for they have come to devalue the forms of care which men have been most able to provide.<sup>11</sup>

The feminist riposte sees all this in quite a different way. According to Barbara Ehrenreich, men began a rebellion

against their pre-existing gender roles some while before women.<sup>12</sup> Up to some thirty or forty years ago it was generally expected that a man would get married and support a wife; anyone who did not do so was regarded as in some way suspect. At a certain point, however, men became wary of being drawn into marriage and meeting its economic demands. They retained an orientation towards economic success, but no longer necessarily believed that they should work on behalf of others. To stay free, a man should stay single; he could enjoy the fruits of his work without the social requirement of a wife or established home. In Ehrenreich's view, beatniks and hippies, who appeared to place in question the life of the hard-working, conventional male, further reinforced the changes already under way, for they scorned marriage, home and domestic responsibility.

Medicine and psychology, Ehrenreich says, unwittingly contributed to the male rebellion; they showed how men were disproportionately affected by the stresses and strains of modern life. In the nineteenth century, men's life expectancy was higher than that of women; as heart disease, cancer and other illnesses replaced the previous major afflictions, like tuberculosis or pneumonia, and as death in childbirth became uncommon, women started on average to outlive men. Men have become the weaker sex and in some medical circles at least this fact was explained in terms of their need to work harder than women. Coronary heart disease, in particular, concentrated more among men than women, came to be regarded as an expression of the stresses men face. Goldberg's arguments are here turned on their head: 'the long-term effect of the coronary scare was to undermine women's claims to a share of the husband's wage and, beyond that, to indict the breadwinning role as a "lethal trap" for men.'<sup>13</sup>

What is the outcome? Goldberg's position, in Ehrenreich's view, allows men to try for a double gain. They can shed the breadwinner role without relinquishing their superior

economic advantages as compared with women. The 'mask of masculinity' can be removed and at the same time the male can avoid any long-term domestic engagement, concentrating instead upon his own pleasures. A social climate has been created which endorses 'irresponsibility, self-indulgence and an isolationist detachment from the claims of others'.<sup>14</sup> Men have won their freedom while women still await theirs. The economic independence obtained by men has not become available to women, who have had to take over the responsibilities which men have shed. Women, particularly those heading single-parent families, make up a high proportion of the poor. Men have reneged on the pact that in an earlier era was the basis of the family wage.

### The separation of the sexes

Given the discrepancy of their analyses, it is not surprising that the practical remedies each author offers are different. Ehrenreich's programme is primarily economic in character. Women should have a sufficient minimum income to provide for a family wage without the necessary assistance of men, which means, among other things, equality of opportunity in the labour market. Provision for child care, vocational training and government support for women without paid employment are also needed. Ehrenreich contemplates the possibility that this might mean that women tend progressively to give up on men; men will move transiently through the lives of women, who will remain the real bedrock of the family. A reconciliation between the sexes is possible, based upon 'some renewal of loyalty and trust between adult men and women', but it is far from guaranteed.<sup>15</sup>

Goldberg's recommendations are almost all about self-identity. Men are enjoined to redefine masculinity so as to

overcome those influences that have separated them from their 'inner experience'. They must avoid the labels that have served to sustain a slavish adherence to the performance principle – the worry of being thought a coward, weak, a failure, immature, impotent or a misogynist. They should cultivate close friendships with other men in order to provide the same sort of support which women are able to offer to one another. It is important for every man to break with the idea that women with whom he becomes involved should be passive and adoring; rather, he should expect to develop relationships with women who are autonomous individuals. Men need to develop their 'feminine side' and 'reclaim emotions, dependency needs, passivity, fluidity, playfulness, sensuality, vulnerability and resistance to always assuming responsibility'.<sup>16</sup> Do not seek so fervently to change the world, Goldberg advises men: change yourself first.

There is little doubt that new emotional antagonisms are opening up between the sexes. The sources of both male and female rage bite even more deeply than either of the foregoing accounts suggests. The phallus is only the penis: what a numbing and disconcerting discovery this is for both sexes! The claims to power of maleness depend upon a dangling piece of flesh that has now lost its distinctive connection to reproduction. This is a new castration indeed; women can now see men, at least on a cognitive level, as just as much a functionless appendage as the male sexual organ itself.

For the male, as indicated earlier, sustaining basic trust is from infancy bound up with mastery and control, including self-control, these originating in a repressed emotional dependence upon women. The need to neutralise such repressed desires, or to destroy the object of them, jostles with the requirement for love. In these circumstances, men are likely to drift away from women in large numbers and to regard commitment as equivalent to entrapment, while

levels of male violence against women may very well climb beyond those currently observed.

Ambivalent dependence, however, is not confined to the male sex. Shame-fuelled rage is characteristic of female psychosexual development also. The transmuting of the phallus into the penis has troubling implications for women, because its role as a signifier of autonomy is important to their own sense of self-integrity. Female admiration of men presumes that the male is able to escape the dominance of the mother; women's complicity derives from that specific 'badness' which can be tamed by love. Many women are likely to long precisely for the kind of man who won't commit; indeed, an aversion to commitment, for reasons already explained, often maximises both his attractiveness and the challenge he offers.

All these things have a profound impact upon heterosexual ties. Heterosexual marriage superficially appears to retain its central position in the social order, making the prior discussion of lesbian relationships at best rather marginal. In reality, it has been largely undermined by the rise of the pure relationship and plastic sexuality. If orthodox marriage is not yet widely seen as just one life-style among others, as in fact it has become, this is partly the result of institutional lag and partly the result of the complicated mixture of attraction and repulsion which the psychic development of each sex creates with regard to the other. The more the pure relationship becomes the prototypical form of personal life, the more this paradoxical set of attitudes comes plainly into view. It produces various forms of dependence, and codependence, but it also has the schismatic consequences noted above.

Some marriages may still be contracted, or sustained, mainly for the sake of producing, or bringing up, children. Yet the presence of children – in 'first families' or in stepfamilies – serves as often to introduce strains in a relationship as to shore it up. Most heterosexual marriages

(and many homosexual liaisons) which do not approximate to the pure relationship are likely to devolve in two directions if they do not lapse into codependence. One is a version of companionate marriage. The level of sexual involvement of the spouses with each other is low, but some degree of equality and mutual sympathy is built into the relationship. This is marriage of a late modern type, organised in terms of a model of friendship. The other form is where marriage is used as a home base by both partners, who have only a slight emotional investment in one another. This differs from the old 'standard type' of heterosexual marriage, in which the male used marriage as a place from which to operate, while the wife organised the means for his settled existence. Here both partners treat the marriage as a relatively secure environment from which they issue out to face the wider world.<sup>17</sup>

Yet each of these types is also likely to veer towards the pure relationship, within the life-experience of the individual and in society at large. Whether or not the sexes will grow together or apart will depend upon how far pure relationships can be contracted and carried on in a durable way. The perspectives represented by Goldberg and Ehrenreich each have their shortcomings. Ehrenreich brings together a diversity of sources in her interpretation of the increasing irresponsibility of men. The *Playboy* philosophy is discussed in the same breath as beatnik bohemia, cardiology, Maslow's psychology of human potential and attempts to found men's movements along the lines that Goldberg advocates. All move in the direction of 'mounting perfidy' as men consolidate their freedom at the expense of women. But matters are surely more complex than her account suggests. Currents of narcissism characterise some of the trends described, but so too do attempts to develop views of masculinity which run counter to male dominance. As formulated by Goldberg and others, for instance, male liberationism acknowledges the equality of women and men

and argues that the ties between masculinity and economic instrumentality should be dissolved. What Ehrenreich describes as a 'flight from commitment' on the part of men actually coincides with the very beginning of 'commitment' in its current sense, a shift in sexual relations towards the emergence of the pure relationship. And this is a phenomenon with mixed consequences for men, not just for women – especially if men's covert emotional dependence upon women be recognised.

Goldberg, on the other hand, underestimates the strength of the economic and social constraints which keep women from achieving parity in the private or public domains – something connected above all with the fact that women remain the main parenting agents and domestic caretakers. Patriarchy remains entrenched throughout the social and economic order. He also underplays the force of the psychic resistances which affect the behaviour of men and women, as well as the contradictory character of psychosexual formations. 'Why can't a good man be sexy; why can't a sexy man be good?' – this is a plea from the heart, not just a quixotic feminine refusal to accept the full implications of gender equality. It has a very real counterpart in men's proclivity for episodic sexuality, for reasons discussed earlier.

No one knows how far the advent of the pure relationship will prove more explosive than integrating in its consequences. The transformation of intimacy, together with plastic sexuality, provides for conditions which could bring about a reconciliation of the sexes. More is involved, however, than greater economic equality and psychic restructuring, extremely difficult to achieve though these may be. I shall try to show why in the concluding chapters.

## NOTES

- 1 All quotations in the preceding paragraphs are from Shere Hite: *Women and Love*, London: Viking, 1988.
- 2 Charlotte Wolff: *Bisexuality*, London: Quartet, 1979.
- 3 Hite in *Women and Love* actually discusses this phenomenon twice in her book, on p. 610 and p. 641, apparently without noticing the repetition. The figures given for women who remain close friends with their ex-lovers are slightly different in the two places, 64 per cent on one page and 62 per cent on the other.
- 4 Hite: *Women and Love*.
- 5 Sydney Abbott and Barbara Love: *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, New York: Stein, 1977, p. 74.
- 6 Martin Hoffman: *The Gay World*, New York: Basic, 1968, pp. 49-50.
- 7 Heather Formani: *Men. The Darker Continent*, London: Mandarin, 1991, pp. 23-30.
- 8 Hite: *Women and Love*, p. 73.
- 9 Herb Goldberg: *The Hazards of Being Male*, New York: Signet, 1976; *The New Male*, New York: Signet, 1979; and other works by the same author.
- 10 Goldberg: *The Hazards of Being Male*, p. 3.
- 11 Goldberg: *The New Male*, p. 163.
- 12 Barbara Ehrenreich: *The Hearts of Men*, London: Pluto, 1983.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- 16 Goldberg: *The New Male*, p. 254.
- 17 For a somewhat different typology, see Hite: *Women and Love*, pp. 521-3.