

CHAPTER FIVE

The Implosion of the Transformative Pattern in The Plumed Serpent

I. Initiation and Rananim

In *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence deals more explicitly and insistently with the theme of initiation than in any of his other novels, and it is obvious that the reader is now in the position of a potential initiate. It is not simply ironic that this novel should prove to be one of his most debated works in terms of its power to touch, persuade or transform the reader.¹ While Lawrence eventually himself came to see the novel's "leader-cum-follower" theme as a "bore," and to realize he was "sort of sick of all forms of militarism and militantism," we will see that the novel also fails for reasons beyond its militant, authoritarian, and racist strains.² Despite Lawrence's enthusiasm about the novel as he was writing it, my analysis shows that the novel's technical problems reveal his frequent attempts to impose a didactic vision on the narrative.³ We have seen this conflict between Lawrence's pedantic and vivifying impulses in his earlier novels, but in this work the ideological imperative too often drives and distorts narrative development. In trying too overtly to control the representation of his religious ideology and its effects on the characters and the reader, Lawrence makes significant literary errors of commission and omission: he manufactures implausible and distorted characters and situations, and refrains from presenting perspectival details that would make these implausibilities and distortions more evident to the reader.⁴ These latter techniques reveal a desire, conscious or unconscious, to cover up the untenable and unpersuasive features of the novel. The novel's technical problems not only disclose the difficulties that were

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always inherent in Lawrence's initiatory aims, but they also significantly undermine any authorial attempt to transform the reader. I focus on the weaknesses in the novel's sacralization phase since the passages dealing with the portrayal of the Quetzalcoatl rituals—meditations, dances, ceremonies, hymns—are the most innovative, flawed, and disturbing in the book.

Though this chapter will focus on artistic, characterological, and political problems in the revitalization phase, I want to emphasize that the novel still possesses—for me and for other readers—a rare power, fascination, and beauty. This is due in part to the sheer audacity and originality of Lawrence's intent, scope, and design and to his masterful depiction of some aspects of Kate's life and of Mexican society and landscape. Lawrence's attempt to imagine and portray an entire religious movement is impressive. And though he often distorts Mexico and Mexicans, the total effect of the novel is to create a respect, even an admiration, for the mystery and magic of the land and many of its peoples. Moreover, Lawrence is a notable pioneer in suggesting that a creative fusion of races, cultures, and religions may hold real promise for the revitalization and evolution of humanity. Finally, there can be no doubt that many scenes not directly related to the Quetzalcoatl movement—like the bullfight in Chapter I and the loading of the bull onto the boat in Chapter XXVII—are masterfully portrayed.

We have seen that in *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* the principal sacred initiation is a private, sexual one; and it is the relationship itself that serves as the initiator for the participants. In theory, at least, the relationship is not predetermined but discovered; it unfolds as the participants act and react spontaneously to each other, allowing their passions to be their guides. There is no external authority that the couple must conform to; rather, sacred desire and transcendent peace are the sole authorities. In *The Plumed Serpent*, however, initiation takes on a different character: that of a collective initiation rite in which the steps are prescribed and the goal foreknown. The participants pass through a sequence of ready-made, well-defined rites that culminate not only in sacred experiences of a certain character but also in a particular set of beliefs, cosmological and metaphysical. The initiator is a single person—Don Ramon—and the means of initiation are songs, dances, and ceremonies that he has devised.⁵ Most of these rites are public; a few are semiprivate; and all have predefined forms with virtually no room for individual variation and spontaneous innovation. In fact, conformity rather than spontaneity—as well as the submergence of the individual in the collective—is required for such rites to work. These rites may have been partially spontaneous creations of Ramon—though many seem

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labored and overly learned—but they are certainly not the spontaneous inventions of the people. Indeed, the people must conform, not create; they must follow Ramon's rhythms, not their own.⁶ This authoritarianism is latent in Lawrence's idea of natural aristocracy, which posits that some individuals have deeper or greater souls than others, and that the lesser should freely choose to follow the spiritual wisdom of the greater.⁷ Thus, while Lawrence insists that every individual follow his or her own deepest impulses, he also wants individuals to defer to their superior when there is a conflict of impulses. It is hard to see the difference between this approach and more normative forms of authoritarianism. Don Ramon is supposedly the great man who has already discovered the essential truths; it is merely a matter of disclosing these truths, a few at a time, to the people, Kate and the reader. Even though Lawrence is opposed to the bullying will, he, as author, compels Kate and many of the Mexican people to accept Ramon's ideology. Despite Kate's significant reservations, she implausibly comes to support many of the aims of the Quetzalcoat movement and learns to take orders from Cipriano, surrendering her orgasm and nearly sacrificing her individuality. And despite Ramon's minimal and contrived attempts to "convert" the Indian populations, a large segment implausibly come to participate enthusiastically in the bloody events of the movement. Most readers probably will be unpersuaded by Kate's conversion and by the movement's mass appeal and will likely be repulsed by the quasifascistic propaganda. Notwithstanding recent scholarship that shows that Lawrence is explicitly opposed to Fascism, and that in an early version of the novel Cipriano criticizes Fascism as "a bully movement," most reviewers are still repelled by the power politics of the novel and by the public executions led by Cipriano and sanctioned by Ramon.⁸

Of course, it could be argued that the initiatory structures in *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, and *Lady Chatterley* have a didactic function similar to Don Ramon's rituals. But I have tried to show, especially in the case of the first two novels, that the subtlety, complexity, and self-critique in these novels keeps them from being initiatory in the worst sense: rigidly or narrowly propagandistic.

The acquiescence of the other characters to Don Ramon's scheme probably reflects Lawrence's attempt to create in literature what he failed to create in life: a community of individuals who acknowledged him as their permanent religious leader. Lawrence wrote *The Plumed Serpent* during three visits to Mexico between March 1923 and March 1925. The writing took a great deal out of him, and he must have known that his health would not hold out long enough for him to realize his utopian

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Rananim. Indeed, shortly after completing the novel in February 1925, he collapsed and nearly died.⁹

Lawrence's "quest for Rananim" began during World War I when his disillusionment with Europe impelled him to conceive of a utopia of friends.¹⁰ He seems to have first thought of the idea during a Christmas party in 1914: joining him and Frieda at their Chesham cottage were Katherine Mansfield, John Middleton Murry, Gordon and Beatrice Campbell, Mark Gertler and S. S. Koteliensky. In a January 3, 1915 letter to Koteliensky, which seems to follow up on a conversation that occurred at the party, Lawrence asks, "What about Rananim? Oh, but, we are going. We are going to found an Order of the Knights of Rananim. The motto is 'Fier' ['Proud']—or the Latin equivalent."¹¹ Two weeks later, Lawrence writes to Willie Hopkin that he wants to establish a quasi-communist colony:

I want to gather together about twenty souls and sail away from this world of war and squalor and found a little colony where there shall be no money but a sort of communism as far as necessaries of life go, and some real decency. It is to be . . . a community which is established upon the assumption of goodness in the members.¹²

Over the years, he changed the desired location from a remote island to England to Florida to New Mexico.¹³

In a January 18, 1915 letter to E. M. Forster, Lawrence stresses that he wants a classless community in which members fulfill their desires through their relationships with other members:

In my Island, I wanted people to come without class or money, sacrificing nothing, but each coming with all his desires, yet knowing that his life is but a tiny section of a Whole: so that he shall fulfill his life in relation to the Whole. I wanted a real community, not built out of abstinence or equality, but out of many fulfilled individualities seeking greater fulfilment.¹⁴

While his idea emphasizes both individuality and interdependence, it was clear to many of his friends that he wanted to be the group's spiritual leader, and most concluded that what he really wanted was absolute allegiance. During the time when he was trying to recruit Bertrand Russell to Rananim, he wrote that "I don't believe in democratic control"; rather, "[t]here must be an elected aristocracy" in which the men elect a "Dictator" to "govern the industrial side of life" and the women elect

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a “woman Dictator” to “govern the domestic side.”¹⁵ Though Russell was asked to be Rananim’s president, he surely sensed that Lawrence wanted to be its poet-prophet and probably its philosopher-king. Ultimately, Russell “dismissed Lawrence’s ideas as morbid rubbish.”¹⁶ Koteliansky, a Russian-born translator, was one of Lawrence’s few enduring friends who maintained a lasting interest in Rananim, and Lawrence shared his utopian hopes and frustrations with him until he finally abandoned his dream in 1926. On January 4, 1926, Lawrence wrote Koteliansky that “That Rananim of ours, it has sunk out of sight.”¹⁷

In *The Plumed Serpent*, the idea of sacred knowledge is really more associated with dogma than with mystery. In fact, the fate of the word “dogma” illustrates what seems to have happened to Lawrence’s idea of religious mystery. In the fourth century, “dogma” referred to “the hidden, secret traditions of the Church, which could only be understood mystically and expressed symbolically.”¹⁸ But in the West, the word has “come to mean a body of opinion, categorically and authoritatively stated.”¹⁹ That is, the mystery of numinous experience has become petrified in the legalisms of religious doctrine. The mystic’s individual understanding of divinity is replaced by the theologian’s collective prescriptions and proscriptions. Dogma has in effect become its opposite: kerygma. Similarly, in *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence often converts sacred mystery into religious doctrine. The evocative indirections of authentic sacred art are frequently set aside for the direct assertions of propagandistic prophecy—a prophecy too enamored with violence and vengeance. In our analyses of *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love* and *Lady Chatterley*, we have seen that Lawrence consistently associates a reflexive, insistent consciousness with destructiveness, but in this novel self-conscious willfulness dominates what is now harder to call “the sacralization phase.” Few of Don Ramon’s hymns and ceremonies are spontaneously creative or persuasive. Though some of these religious forms represent impressive creative fusions of Indian and European dispensations, they will probably strike readers as ideologically driven.²⁰

While the earlier novels contain doctrinal and even propagandistic elements, these elements are usually assigned to the dialogue or inner monologues of individual characters, like Birkin, who espouse aspects of Lawrence’s religious philosophy. And though didactic elements can be found in the sex scenes involving Birkin and Ursula, it was clear that the overall structure of *Women in Love* resists reduction to dogmatic formulations. Not so with *The Plumed Serpent*. Lawrence always faced the challenge of finding a way to maintain an attitude of openness and discovery toward themes he had already worked on. It was his ultimate challenge

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to keep his obsessions fresh and ever changing. Yet it seems that the more convinced he became of the validity of spontaneous body-based religious experience, the less innovative he was in representing such experiences. The evocative power of *The Rainbow* is due in part to the fact that Lawrence is still very much in a discovery mode. That novel represents a fine blend of spontaneous writing and crafted rewriting, and maintains a satisfying balance between numinous descriptions and narratorial explanations. Lawrence's belief in the transformative power of his own writing had yet to be weakened by his traumatic experience of the war, and that optimism freed up his positive creative energies.²¹ In contrast, *The Plumed Serpent* emerges as much from Lawrence's frustrated fantasies of power as from fresh feelings and insights. It is, in part, a projection of his thwarted desire to establish Rananim and reveals just how profound and unrelenting was his own desire to assert religious authority.

II. The Breakdown of the Initiatory Pattern

Although the passages depicting the private rituals that Ramon, Cipriano, and Kate perform are meant to revitalize the reader, the avoidance of psychonarration and the overreliance on didacticism and dialogue generally undermine Lawrence's transformative intention. It is especially important for these scenes to be effective because Lawrence has to persuade the reader that in them the Quetzalcoatl leadership is undergoing a believable process of deification. Western readers are not used to thinking of ordinary human beings becoming gods, and so Lawrence must be especially convincing in constructing these scenes.

One scene represents the meditative prayer in which Ramon supposedly makes contact with his divine powers. But the narrator offers only a sparse and external treatment of Ramon's consciousness, and such superficial treatment can be expected to have little or no transformative impact:

He took off his clothes, and in the darkness thrust his clenched fists upwards above his head, in a terrible tension of stretched, upright prayer. In his eyes was only darkness, and slowly the darkness revolved in his brain, too, till he was mindless. Only a powerful will stretched itself and quivered from his spine in an immense tension of prayer. Stretched the invisible bow of the body in the darkness with inhuman tension, erect, till the arrows of the soul, mindless, shot to the mark, and the prayer reached its goal.

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Then suddenly, the clenched and quivering arms dropped, the body relaxed into softness. The man had reached his strength again. He had broken the cords of the world, and was free in the other strength. (169)

The positioning of the body is given as much weight as the experience. The motion of the will is the main internal activity, and the arrow metaphor is striking but not elaborately developed. The tension of the will parallels the tension of the body but reveals little emotional content. The revolving darkness in the brain indicates the whirling energy and consciousness that Lawrence associates with the swirling motion of kundalini energy in the chakras. What is remarkable about the passage is that Ramon's movements mime phallic arousal, tumescence, tension, and ejaculation, suggesting that the prayer is a kind of sexual offering to the deity.

The narration of another prayer is somewhat more effective because the focus is internal and the language more figurative. Three water metaphors—fountain, wave, washing—describe the flooding and purifying impact of the passionate prayer on Ramon's mind and body:

And tense like the gush of a soundless fountain, he thrust up and reached down in the invisible dark, convulsed with passion. Till the black waves began to wash over his consciousness, over his mind, waves of darkness broke over his memory, over his being, like an incoming tide, till at last it was full tide, and he trembled, and fell to rest. Invisible in the darkness, he stood soft and relaxed, staring with wide eyes at the dark, and feeling the dark fecundity of the inner tide washing over his heart, over his belly, his mind dissolved away in the greater, dark mind, which is undisturbed by thoughts.

He covered his face with his hands, and stood still, in pure unconsciousness, neither hearing nor feeling nor knowing, like a dark sea-weed deep in the sea. With no Time and no World, in the deeps that are timeless and worldless. (193)

The image of a tensed body surging upward like a fountain is indeed striking and again suggests the pulsating action of an orgasmic phallus. We also saw the body figured as a fountain in *The Rainbow* (121) and *Women in Love* (314). In the second sentence, the action of the waves is effectively imitated in the oscillation between short and long phrases; this type of phrasal oscillation is one of Lawrence's standard devices for suggesting wavelike movements of passion. The remaining sentences are

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more simply descriptive and explanatory and have less figurative density. A similar set of metaphors is used to describe Connie's oceanic womb in *Lady Chatterley*.

What makes both of these prayer scenes less than fully compelling is the fact that the receiver of Ramon's prayer—the one to whom he is relating—is not palpably present. Ramon's "partner" is the transcendent God, the deity beyond form, beyond the world. This transcendent deity seems more like an absence than a presence and so the scenes have a narcissistic, solipsistic or masturbatory quality. In contrast, in *Women in Love*, Birkin also has a religious experience in solitude, but he achieves this experience through relationship with the God immanent in concrete living beings (plants). Representations of the manifest God are more tangible and vivifying than are representations of the transcendent God.

An excellent opportunity for Lawrence to demonstrate Cipriano's supposedly deified consciousness and to revitalize the reader is during Cipriano's private initiation by Ramon, but the scene is dominated by dialogue, and the account of Cipriano's consciousness is abbreviated. The scene has homoerotic overtones, but both Cipriano's and Ramon's felt experiences of physical intimacy are largely elided. Most of the initiation is an interrogation, with Ramon questioning and Cipriano answering: "Cipriano? . . . 'Yes.' . . . 'Is it dark?' . . . 'It is dark?' . . . 'Who lives?' . . . 'I.' . . . 'Is it dark?' . . . 'No, my Lord.' . . . 'Is it perfect?' . . . 'It is perfect.' . . . 'Who lives?' . . . 'Who—!'" (367–8).²² We have stressed that Lawrence believed that dialogue was useful for clarifying and articulating a deep felt experience, but not for evoking feeling itself. The descriptions of Ramon's actions (his pressing and binding of Cipriano's body) are brief and external, and the psychonarrations of Cipriano are even briefer. It is as if the focus on formal ritual has compelled Lawrence to focus on outer form. The scene may be intriguing to the reader's mind but is not likely to touch his or her heart.

None of the portrayals of Cipriano's consciousness have much figural density; rather, the focus is on a series of circles of sleep or darkness, recalling the rotating darkness of Ramon's brain during his prayer:

And slowly the darkness began to move upon a centre in Cipriano's consciousness, to a centre that plunges into the bottomless depth, like sleep. . . .

In Cipriano, another circle of darkness had started slowly to revolve, from his heart. It swung in widening rounds, like a greater sleep. . . .

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And Cipriano began to feel as if his mind, his head were melting away in the darkness, like a pearl in black wine, the other circle of sleep began to swing, vast. And he was a man without a head, moving like a dark wind over the face of the dark waters. . . .

The last circle was sweeping round, and the breath upon the waters was sinking into the waters. . . . (367–8)

Striking figures—pearl, black wine, dark wind, headless man—only occur in the penultimate section. The fact that dialogue intervenes between these psychonarrations further weakens their accumulative affective impact and potential transformative power. It is noteworthy that when Cipriano's mind is extinguished, his body becomes like the Spirit of God ("dark wind") that hovers over the face of the deep in Genesis; that is, he becomes an incarnation of divinity, a Son of God.

Another passage in which the narrator claims that Cipriano gains godly power involves "the dance of the two warriors," but the focus of the first two paragraphs is on the outer movements of Cipriano's body, not on his inner state: he circles, crouches and leaps "like a panther," and swerves along the ground "as invisible as a lynx" (365). Moreover, though the dance is supposed to be a duel and should therefore offer a sense of profound interchange—of the kind seen in the "Gladiatorial" chapter of *Women in Love*—little attention is given to Cipriano's opponent. Rather, the opponent's presence is only directly mentioned in the clause "the opponent swerved under," and the only other allusion occurs in the brief phrases "clash of shields, parting again"; no other actions are described, and no states of mind are presented (365). The point of view is not expansive; it is self-enclosed. The third paragraph describing the dance does portray Cipriano's inner sense of strength but in two sentences lacking in poetic power. The first, short sentence summarizes what was probably a long sequence of feelings and sensations: "And as the dance went on, Cipriano felt his strength increase and surge inside him" (365). We have seen that summaries of events and emotions are usually not effective revitalization devices. The second sentence merely depicts a static, terminal feeling: "When all his limbs were glistening with sweat, and his spirit was at last satisfied, he was at once tired and surcharged with extraordinary power" (365). Lawrence thus gives more attention to the static than to the dynamic dimension of Cipriano's feelings. We have seen that representations of stasis are generally effective only after extensive treatment of the dynamic phase; in that way, the reader can vicariously experience a sense of rest or release. Moreover, the three clauses making up this sentence have simple predicates that lack vividness.

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Not only does the narrator occlude Cipriano's opponent, he also veils the responses of other soldiers; that is, the narrator offers Cipriano's experience of his power over his men rather than providing their experiences directly. This secondhand portrayal of experience would probably strike many readers as presumptive and unpersuasive:

he felt the black mystery of power go out of him over all his soldiers. And he sat there imperturbable, in silence, holding all those black-eyed men in the splendour of his own, silent self. His own dark consciousness seemed to radiate through their flesh and their bones, they were conscious, not through themselves but through him . . . they got their splendour from his power. (365)

Lawrence's refusal to enter the consciousness of even one soldier adds to the implausibility of the scene and diminishes its transformative potential. Moreover, the two categoricals—"power . . . over *all* his soldiers," "holding *all* those black-eyed men" (emphasis mine)—further intensify the episode's lack of believability.

The private initiation of Kate at the end of Chapter XXIV also lacks plausibility and transformative power. This chapter is short—only eight pages—for good reason: in it Lawrence has to quickly finesse Kate's transition from a lukewarm lover of Cipriano, and a skeptic toward the Quetzalcoatl movement, to an enthusiastic lover and relatively strong supporter of Ramon and Cipriano.²³ Even more improbably, Kate becomes "Malintzi," "the bride of Huitzilopochtli" (392). The chapter tends to rely on strident assertion rather than on dramatic and emotive detail in its strained attempt to convince the reader. It opens with Kate's thought that even though Ramon and Cipriano exhibited "terrible *will*" in their carrying out of the executions, they "no doubt were right for themselves, for their people and country" (387). Kate's disturbingly contrived interior monologue should signal readers that the events to be depicted in the rest of the chapter are likely to be equally unbelievable.²⁴ Kate attempts to justify the men's assertion of will in her reverie about God's Will:

The Will of God! She began to understand that once fearsome phrase. At the centre of all things, a dark, momentous Will sending out its terrific rays and vibrations, like some vast octopus. And at the other end of the vibration, men, created men, erect in the dark potency, answering Will with will, like gods or demons. (387)

Here, sacred experience is figured as the interchange between wills, while in earlier works Lawrence had consistently associated the

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communion of wills with a pseudomysticism masking destructive impulses. In a 1919 essay on Edgar Allan Poe that appears in *The Symbolic Meaning*, Lawrence explicitly repudiates the linkage of God and Will because for him will implies mechanistic fixity and power:

If God is a great will, then the universe is a great machine, for the will is a fixed principle. But God is not a will. God is a mystery, from which creation mysteriously proceeds. So is the self a unit of creative mystery. But the will is the greatest of all control-principles, the greatest machine-principle. (*Studies in Classic American Literature* 231)

We saw a similar linkage of divine Will and the machine principle in *Women in Love* (227–8).

The deification of will in *The Plumed Serpent*, despite the attempt to distinguish between personal and impersonal will, is a significant factor in the novel's attempted justification of calculated violence. It is no longer an issue of having to justify spontaneous interpersonal violence, as it was in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. In *The Plumed Serpent*, premeditated, collective militancy is presented as a divinely sanctioned, defensive response: "Lay forcible hands on nothing, only be ready to resist, if forcible hands should be laid on you. . . . Fight for the vulnerable unfolding of life. But for that, fight never to yield" (361). Cipriano's military exploits often exhibit unrestrained malice and vengeance. Some critics have suggested that Lawrence implicitly condemns Cipriano's militarism, pointing out that the narrator says "there was a sense of violence and crudity in it all, a touch of horror" (420).²⁵ But the novel also attempts to sacralize horror: when Kate admits to Cipriano that she feels "a bit of horror" toward him, he says, "Get used to it that there must be a bit of fear, and a bit of horror in your life. . . . The bit of horror is like the sesame seed in the nougat, it gives the sharp wild flavour. It is good to have it there" (235–6). In an earlier version of the novel, Cipriano pledges himself to the good, but even that pledge did not prevent him from conducting the ruthless public executions.²⁶

At the same time that Lawrence has Kate justify will as a response to the divine, he also has her prettify it when she insists that Cipriano's "Will" is just fine because it is really only the "instrument" and "armour" of his "Wish"—that is, it is a justifiable means for manifesting and protecting his divine desire (391). Before this passage, will had been consistently associated with bullying, fixed ideas and ideals, and Christian love (73–4, 156). But now the reader is asked to believe that Kate's new view of will and of Cipriano is largely engendered by Cipriano's

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“dazzling, childish” eyes and his “strangely young, vulnerable” and “sensitive” appearance as he implores her in Spanish to “Come and put on the green dress. I cannot be the Living Huitzilopochtli, without a bride. I cannot be it, Malintzi!” (391). Kate’s transformed perspective on Cipriano is presented in four short paragraphs that are dramatically unpersuasive: the first describes his eyes, the second presents his request, the third meditates on his boyish vulnerability and fiery wish, and the fourth depicts her sense of being disconcerted by his vulnerability. This new appearance of vulnerability and sensitivity is somehow supposed to explain away his willfulness, violence and vengeance and to make him a worthy partner. Moreover, it is supposed to convince Kate to don the mask of goddess. It is as if Cipriano’s revelation of his own humanity somehow justifies Kate in her pseudo-assumption of divinity.

Kate’s assumption of the role of Malintzi occurs later that night as she sits on the throne next to the Huitzilopochtli’s throne. Again, we get a talky and analytic, rather than a felt, account of her reaction to Cipriano: “Strange how naive he was! He was not like Ramon, rather ponderous and deliberate in his ceremonials. Cipriano, in his own little deeds to-night with her, was naive as a child. . . . Ah, God. . . . There are more ways than one of becoming like a little child” (393). A similar episode occurs in *Lady Chatterley* when Connie uses exclamatory phrases to praise the beauty of Mellors’s body, but that scene has been preceded by numerous concrete and vivid representations of their lovemaking, so the exclamations are more believable. In *Women in Love*, in contrast, we saw that Gerald regresses to a childish state and treats Gudrun as a mother figure. In *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence wants readers to experience Cipriano as refreshingly childlike and not as regressively childish, but the scene does not produce this effect.²⁷ Rather, readers are simply told that Kate herself comes to feel “like a girl in her first adolescence” and to think:

The Living Huitzilopochtli! Ah, easily he was the Living Huitzilopochtli. More than anything. More than Cipriano, more than a male man, he was the living Huitzilopochtli. And she was the goddess bride, Malintzi of the green dress. Ah, yes, it was childish. But it was actually so. (393)

The representation of Kate’s conversion experience is inauthentic. The narrator focuses on the discursive content of her consciousness: we get her thoughts, or at best her verbalized emotions, but not her deep, inarticulate feelings. It is as if Lawrence knew, consciously or unconsciously,

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that if he tried to misrepresent her feelings, the sleight of hand would be even more obvious and annoying to the reader. Kate's transformation seems even more implausible when we consider that her real attraction is to Ramon, with whom she was willing to die: "she didn't mind dying so long as she died with that man [Ramon]" (292). It is striking that immediately after her acknowledgment of the deep bond with Ramon, she agrees to marry Cipriano. It is also revealing that at the beginning of "Marriage by Quetzalcoatl," Kate "let her soul sink again into the lovely elusiveness where everything is possible, even that oneself is elusive among the gods" (325-6). Lawrence has to make Kate feel that everything is possible in order to justify her decision to marry Cipriano. Perhaps her earlier despair has been converted into unrealistic hope. In any case, her thoughts of elusiveness seem created by Lawrence's evasiveness, but readers are likely to remain unpersuaded that Kate's actual thoughts have been truly represented. It is also significant that the marriage ceremony focuses on Ramon's instructions to the bride and groom and that no account is given of either Kate's or Cipriano's feelings during the ceremony—they merely listen to and sometimes repeat Ramon's words. Again, talk rules where impassioned psychonarrative should be; and scripted action replaces spontaneity. Kate's very need to become a goddess does not emerge from her own spontaneous desire but from Ramon's insistence that there be no "womanless gods"; she is pressured into fulfilling his script (234). Even after supposedly experiencing Cipriano as Huitzilopochtli, Kate recognizes that "without Ramon," Cipriano is "just an instrument, and not ultimately interesting to her" (408).

Although Kate's "apotheosis" as Malintzi is unconvincing, Lawrence certainly deserves praise for adding a positive goddess figure to the Indian pantheon.²⁸ It is also commendable that he affirmed the salvific potential of interracial marriage at a time when such an alliance would have been roundly condemned in Europe and America.²⁹

The narrative form that presents the sexual rite in which Kate gives up some of her orgasmic satisfaction also reveals Lawrence fabricating Kate's thoughts and failing to construct a vibrant scene. Instead of getting the psychonarration of a particular erotic encounter, the reader gets Kate's ruminations about her new philosophy of female sexuality, which stresses "*positive passivity*" (421). The passage is set up as a summary of her changing views toward sex, all of which are brought about by an undramatized and improbable submission to Cipriano: she comes to accept Cipriano's opposition to "the curious irritant quality of talk" and realizes that "all her old love had been frictional, charged with the fire of irritation and the spasms of frictional voluptuousness"; and she finally accepts his

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repudiation of her “seething, frictional, ecstatic Aphrodite . . . the seething electric female ecstasy . . . the beak-like friction of Aphrodite of the foam” in favor of “the new, soft, heavy, hot flow, when she was like a fountain gushing noiseless and with urgent softness from the volcanic deeps” (421–2). This latter form of sexual experience is further described as “leaving her soft and powerfully potent, so soft, yet so powerful, like the hot springs of water that gushed up so noiseless, so soft, yet so powerful, with a sort of secret potency” (422). The focus is on comparing and distinguishing these two types of female sexual response, presumably clitoral and vaginal orgasms. Given the radical and offensive call for women to abandon clitoral orgasm, the onus was on Lawrence to demonstrate dramatically why and how a vaginal orgasmic response is indeed superior. Again, he avoids detailing what he cannot persuasively present, probably because at some deep intuitive level he knew he was projecting his wishes rather than realizing his characters.³⁰ Instead, the reader receives a synopsis of the couple’s encounters presented in the conditional tense: Kate’s husband Joachim had given her “orgiastic ‘satisfaction’ ” but “Cipriano would not”; and Kate, “as she lay, would realise the worthlessness of this foam-effervescence, its strange externality to her” (422). The conditional tense adds an element of detachment to what is supposed to be an emotionally persuasive passage. It is also remarkable that clitoral orgasm is criticized as external, since Lawrence had always emphasized that sexual passion is experienced as an inner energy coming from beyond or outside the bounds of ordinary awareness (422). Here he equates the externality of orgasm with the negative externality of convention (talk) rather than with the positive foreignness—the positive outsider status—of passion. Of course, in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Lawrence also criticizes Connie’s “beaklike” clitoral orgasms and also associates her self-conscious sexual activity with irritating, conventional sex-talk.

It is noteworthy that the image of the gushing fountain in Kate’s new vaginal orgasmic response links this scene to the episode describing the gushing forth of Ramon’s fountainlike body during prayer. However, while Ramon’s orgasmlike prayer involves the supposedly sanctified assertion of “a powerful will,” Kate’s vaginal orgasm entails the seemingly sacred surrender of her “seething feminine will” (169, 422).³¹ Lawrence thus portrays the male will as a positive force that contributes to self-transcendence, and the female will as an obstacle that must “subside” and be “swept away” for self-transcendence to occur (422). Given the views that Lawrence presents in his books on psychology, one might have expected him to demonstrate that both men and women need to

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establish a balance of self-assertion and surrender in order to achieve a sacred connection in both prayer and sexual intercourse.

Many of the novel's public rituals are even more problematic than its private ones. The shift in focus from individual to collective initiation creates an identification problem for the reader. In *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, and *Lady Chatterley*, the reader can empathize with individual characters who are interacting with each other and undergoing transformative experiences. The greater the reader's identification with a particular character, the greater the opportunity for vicarious experience and transformation. In *The Plumed Serpent*, the reader is in the position of having to empathize with a character (Kate) who in the crucial transformative scenes is often reacting to groups, not to another individual. Because Kate responds to anonymous collectivities of Indians whose characters and modes of consciousness are occluded, readers will likely find it difficult to appreciate what she is experiencing.

Another general problem related to the question of identification is the mismatch between Ramon's audience and Lawrence's general readership. The rites are designed to awaken the full awareness of the Indians, who supposedly have a more physical form of consciousness than do Europeans. Given Lawrence's own assumptions about cultural and racial differences in consciousness, what would revitalize an Indian cannot be expected to work for a European or American reader. And yet, he seems to assume that all peoples need a body-based rejuvenation since all vital transformation must begin with access to sacred passion. Moreover, Lawrence is claiming that the Indians are suffering from the sustained influence of a European presence, so that what they need is similar to what Europeans need: a throwing off of mentalistic culture.

Still, what the reader seems to confront in these ceremonies is not the mystic "unknown" but the culturally "exotic." Every tourist to a foreign country can experience the exotic, but this is merely the rediscovery of a cultural form that is already known to the indigenous people. It is not truly a discovery: the shock of the exotic is not the shock of the utterly new, the freshly numinous. Nevertheless, it seems to have been Lawrence's presumption that one kind of shock can lead to the other—hence, his use of exotic sacred discourses in the novels we have examined.

One could argue that in all of the novels we have discussed so far, the reader is in a similar place to that of a "tourist": rediscovering sacred moments that Lawrence has already discovered and enshrined in language. And yet the purpose of Lawrence's sacred discourses and literary devices is not simply to recreate numinous experiences but to represent them in ways that evoke new experiences in the reader—affective

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experiences that are related to but not identical repetitions of the characters' experiences.

In the public rituals that Ramon devises, the element of rigid prescription is especially prominent and tends to undermine the attempt at revitalization. Kate herself is aware of this element for she thinks that Ramon is "rather ponderous and deliberate in his ceremonials" (393). Ponderousness and deliberation are qualities that are not conducive to vivifying the Mexican people or the reader. At times Ramon seems to imitate the obsessive-compulsive rituals of orthodox religion. Indeed, given Lawrence's belief in dynamism, spontaneity, and individual choice, it is astonishing that he chose to create rites that are so formalistic and precise, seemingly as deadly and stiff as the conventional religious forms he had always attacked. And yet, it is clear that he had always been fascinated by ritualistic and mythic details. P. T. Whelan's analysis of *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* demonstrates the extraordinary extent to which Lawrence built mythic and legendary resonances into his novels.³² And *Apocalypse* reveals Lawrence's enduring interest in the symbolic significance of the minutiae of myth and ritual. *Fantasia of the Unconscious* also reveals his preoccupation with determining the exact location and operation of sensory-affective functions in the upper/lower, front/back, and left/right regions of the body. But it is one thing for a novel to be filled with mythic and ritualistic resonances, and another for it to be filled with myths and rituals. When ritual and myth are made the centerpiece of a novel, the formalistic elements begin to take over and mute the novel's dynamism. When a mystical novel begins to read as a mystical manual, its revitalizing power is proportionately diminished.

The ceremony for the "Opening of the Church" in Chapter XXI stays too self-consciously focused on formal details for it to have a sacralizing impact. This ceremony is minutely prescribed, choreographed, and carried out; offers the participants little room for spontaneity and dynamic equilibrium; and overwhelms the reader with symbolic minutiae that are not presented in vividly realized contexts. Great emphasis is placed on depicting the positions, movements, and dress of Ramon and Cipriano and their men. Moreover, although forms, colors, and numbers are meant to have symbolic value, they are not represented in vibrantly poetic ways. It is as if Lawrence were so anxious to have the ceremony fastidiously correct in every symbolic detail that he has forgotten his intention of wanting to touch the reader's somatic centers of consciousness. In Western and Eastern meditation practices involving visualization, detailed instructions are sometimes given, but it is understood that the visualization will not have its intended effect until it is practiced many

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times so that the many details can be mastered and internalized. But in a single or even second reading of *The Plumed Serpent*, the reader can hardly be expected to absorb enough of the details of the Quetzalcoatl ceremonies for them to have an evocative effect.

Color is the most pervasive symbolic element in the church opening ceremony. Critics have shown that the colors have alchemical significance, but the very variety of hues and complexity of their deployment is likely to have a more bewildering than vivifying impact.³³ For example, Cipriano is depicted as “a brilliant figure in a sarape whose zig-zag whorls of scarlet, white, and black ran curving, dazzling, to the black shoulders” (336). When four men approach Ramon, their colored belts are described in flat descriptive terms: “one put a blue crown with the bird on his brow, one put a red belt round his breast, and another put a yellow belt round his middle, and the last fastened a white belt round his loins” (341). Also, the portrayal of the colors of the altar fire is dully precise: “a blue flame leaped high into the air, followed by a yellow flame, and then a rose-red smoke” (342).

Some of the descriptions implicitly emphasize the symbolic significance of the precise positioning of the men of Quetzalcoatl and those of Huitzilopochtli. But again these depictions tend to be leaden. Thus, in front of the church there is “a double row of men in the scarlet sarapes of Huitzilopochtli with the black diamonds on the shoulders”; behind Cipriano is “a double row of the guard of Quetzalcoatl, in their blankets with the blue and black borders”; and in the church, “[t]wo files of the white-clad men of Quetzalcoatl stood in a long avenue” (335–8). The overemphasis on movement and placement undermines the passage’s transformative intent. Some of the positioning information refers to the relationship between the sexes: Cipriano orders the men to go to the right and light, to remove their shoes and to stand; the women are to go down the center, cover their faces, and sit (337). The hierarchical relation of the sexes is also stressed during the marriage of Cipriano and Kate: he is to “kiss the brow and the breast of this woman” while she is to “kiss the feet and the heels of this man” (329).

Lawrence had always given special prominence to terms for positioning—above/below, in/out, before/after, in front/behind, center/circumference, between, beyond—but in the church opening ceremony and in the marriage ceremony, the positional terms are too baldly and self-consciously present largely because they refer to actual spatial locations rather than to the spatialization of somatic-affective experience. Thus, readers are less likely to be moved by the description of a group of women sitting in the middle of a group of men than by a description of a character (like

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the newly married Will Brangwen in *The Rainbow*) who feels at the center of a wheellike world. The spatialization of felt experience can be evocative; the localization of persons is usually not; the latter has mainly an intellectual, not an affective, symbolic significance.

This intellectualized process is also seen in Ramon's emphasis on numerology in his instructions to the people. He even resorts to explaining the meaning of the number four. Thus, after he tells the men to offer to the Morning Star the "wine" of their spirit, "blood" of their heart, "oil" of their belly, and "seed" of their "loins," he explains that "Fourfold is man. But the star is one star. And one man is but one star" (341). The detailed didacticism and lack of rhythmic variation in the portrayal of the ceremony contributes to the scene's flatness. What Lawrence has not prepared the reader to understand intuitively, Ramon must present pedantically.³⁴ Both Ramon and Lawrence have ignored Ramon's advice to serve "an inspiration," not "an idea" (73). The reader is all too aware of Lawrence laboring to make a formally correct rite according to his own conception.

Much of the color and numerological symbolism in this novel is explained in Lawrence's *Apocalypse*. In that exegetical work, didacticism is appropriate; in the sacralizing phase of the novel, it is not. Moreover, as we said in our analysis of *Lady Chatterley*, the Book of Revelation has been both praised and criticized for its geometric structure and numerical symbolism, and recent critics have shown that this structure and symbolism contribute to a sense of stasis and timelessness.³⁵ It appears that Lawrence's fascination with the Book of Revelation has worked against his commitment to dynamism. In imitating John's precise preoccupation with position, color, and number, he has introduced too much fixity into his novel. We saw a similar link between numerology and fixity in the structuring of *Lady Chatterley*. Finally, critics have observed that the ceremonial symbolism stresses polarity and balance, while the structure of the community, and the relation to competing groups suggest hierarchy and willful domination.³⁶ More generally, despite Ramon's, the narrator's and Lawrence's wish to bridge Indian physicality and European spirituality, the novel seems to value mindless sensuality more than mind-body balance. We have seen that in Ramon's prayers and in Cipriano's initiation, the extinguishing of mind is central. We will soon see that the Quetzalcoatl dances also have a "mindless" quality. Thus, while the novel's main symbol is the plumed serpent, representing a balance of bird-spirit and serpent-body, and while the Mexican people are often disparaged for being largely serpentlike, the most valorized mode of consciousness in the novel is, nevertheless, mindless sensuality.

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In the most disturbing ceremony in the novel—the execution of the “traitors”—Lawrence uses rhetoric rather than drama to justify the official acts of murder. The ceremony is supposed to be sacralizing in the sense that Lawrence wants the reader to feel that there is something sacred about killing traitors to a noble cause. But the rite is unnecessarily bloodthirsty and insufficiently compassionate; indeed, an arbitrary act of mercy (the drawing of lots to determine who is spared) is no mercy at all. The event has a rigidly didactic and legalistic structure that strains to justify itself: the offenders and their punishments are defined by the authority (Cipriano); the necessity of the punishment is corroborated by a second person (a singer); the charges against the accused are repeated by the authority; two sets of executions, one for the traitors and the other for the cowards, are summarily carried out, with the exception of one pardon; the authority's authority to exact capital punishment is reasserted. Lawrence, the flaunter of law, has embraced the law with a vengeance. The defiant Lawrence had opposed laws that sustained values he detested; the lawful Lawrence is here promulgating laws that express his values. The lawful Lawrence seems prepared to kill all those who stand in the way of his vision—a frightening echo of Robespierre and his Reign of Terror. This misanthropy was evident in *Women in Love* and in the letters he wrote at the time, but in *The Plumed Serpent* Lawrence seems willing to offer mass executions as a general solution against those individuals who oppose or betray his political-religious vision.³⁷

The only justifications for the executions are given in Cipriano's martial poem, in “The Song of the Grey Dog” sung by an unnamed singer, and in Cipriano's poetic pronouncements after the first set of executions and before the second set. In the poem, consisting of “short, martial sentences,” Cipriano defines cowards, liars, traitors, and thieves as “grey dogs” who “devour the dream,” and he proclaims that they deserve to be knifed (376). Definition and proclamation constitute a flimsy justification; there has been no discussion of the appropriateness of the punishments. Immediately after Cipriano delivers his pronouncement, a singer sings “The Song of the Grey Dog” in which the speaker, presumably Huitzilopochtli, tells the story of a person who was attacked by the grey dog and was told by “the Great One” to “Track him down! / Kill him in his unclean house” and to “kill him there with one stroke” for he is “a murderer of dreams” (377). Thus, a second party seems to provide personal evidence of the need to carry out the execution. After the first set of executions, Cipriano asserts, in verse, that “The Lords of Life are the Masters of Death,” and thus self-authorizes his own abusive power (378). This is another perverse use of poetry, and readers will not be persuaded

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by its blatant self-justifying intention. We also note that the initial capitals are restored to the appellations “Lord” and “Master” to help justify the two capital punishments; earlier, Ramon had said “We will be masters among men, and lords among men” (178). Before the second set of executions, Cipriano conducts a kind of colloquy with his guard in which he asserts that “men that are less than men must be put away, lest they multiply too much. Men that are more than men have the judgment of men that are less than men.—Shall they die?” (379). The guards reply in mindless unison that “They shall surely die, my Lord” (379). The ritualized approval of Cipriano’s self-authorized act of execution is deeply disturbing. The repetition of “men” is in line with the novel’s obsession with defining appropriate gender roles.³⁸

It should be emphasized that the novel does possess passages that portray religious rites in a genuinely vivid manner. In the scenes depicting the ceremonial dances, the writing achieves a lyrically persuasive note not found in the ceremonial passages where discursive instructions and explanations proliferate, and where brutal pronouncements and rationalizations abound. It is ironic that these passages are so effective, given the fact that dance constitutes the one rite least shaped by Ramon: supposedly, he has made only modest modifications to the people’s traditional dance forms. In fact, Lawrence adapted the dance forms of the American Indians he observed in New Mexico and represented in *Mornings in Mexico*.³⁹ It is also revealing that the less Ramon invents, the more effective the ritual form seems. Both Ramon and Lawrence suffer from too much self-conscious creation.

The portrayals of the dances in Chapter VII, “The Plaza,” build, and then taper off, in vivifying power. Instead of reaching a dramatic crescendo, they peak in abstract, philosophical language. All the dances are presented from Kate’s perspective, which eventually shifts from that of observer to participant. Her perspective is given because by this point in the narrative she has become the novel’s transformational focus. In the first dance, there is initially one dancer; the description is detailed, concrete, and vivid, and its rhythmic language is intended to have a mildly hypnotic effect on the reader:

One of the seated men . . . began softly to dance the dance step. Mindless, dancing heavily and with a curious bird-like sensitiveness of the feet, he began to tread the earth with his bare soles, as if treading himself deep into the earth. Alone, with curious pendulum rhythm, leaning a little forward from a powerful backbone, he trod to the drumbeat, his white knees lifting and lifting alternately against the dark fringe of his blanket, with a queer dark splash. (128)

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Lawrence's typical technique of word repetition (dance, tread, lift) governed by a few controlling figures (bird, pendulum) is operating here. Moreover, the phrases in the last sentence mime the dancer's motion: the successive phrases elongate as the dancer moves forward with one foot, shorten as the foot hits the ground, lengthen as the second foot begins its forward movement, and shorten again as it touches the earth. But the external perspective acts to limit the affective impact.

When other men join the dancer, a circle dance commences, and Kate's perspective reveals a blend of dancing, singing, and drumming. The harmonious interchange of music and dance is emphasized through the focus on rhythmic sound and bodily motion. Some of the rhythmic and figurative language of the earlier passage is repeated and intensified:

The song seemed to take new wild flights, after it had sunk and rustled to a last ebb. It was like waves that rise out of the invisible, and rear up into foam and a flying, disappearing whiteness and a rustle of extinction. And the dancers, after dancing in a circle in a slow, deep absorption, each man changeless in his own place, treading the same dust with the soft churning of bare feet, slowly, slowly began to revolve, till the circle was slowly revolving round the fire, with always the same soft, down-sinking, churning tread. And the drum kept the changeless living beat, like a heart, and the song rose and soared and fell, ebbed and ebbed to a sort of extinction, then heaved up again. (128-9)

The pendulum rhythm of the dancer in the earlier passage now gives way to the wavelike rhythm of the song and the heartlike beat of the drum. And the birdlike sensitiveness of the dancer's feet exfoliates into the birdlike flights of song. The sense of the wave taking flight is nicely conveyed in the phrase "and rear up into foam and a flying disappearing whiteness": the first half of the phrase establishes the verticality of the wave, and the second half adds a sense of increased and unexpected motion through the use of the two present participles. In the third sentence, Lawrence weaves together the individual and collective movements of the dancers, shifting from the collective circling to the individual treading and then back to the collective; dancer and dance seem almost indistinguishable. Other dualities are also bridged: individuals move and yet appear to stand still, and while remaining singular, they seem to merge into one another ("each man changeless in his own place, treading the same dust"). What creates communion is not only the common tread but also the common earth (dust): the dancers are

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simultaneously in harmony with each other and with their natural surrounding, which molds and is molded by their footsteps. Kate thus experiences a rhythmic pattern of collective male energy.

But when Kate shifts from observer to participant, the psychonarration emphasizes her thoughts more than her feelings—just the opposite of what would be expected and called for to vivify the reader. The language becomes less rhythmic and more philosophically abstract as her thoughts are filled with generalizations about those with whom she is dancing:

The outer wheel was all men. She seemed to feel the strange dark glow of them upon her back. Men, dark, collective men, non-individual. And herself woman, wheeling upon the great wheel of womanhood.

Men and women alike danced with faces lowered and expressionless, abstract, gone in the deep absorption of men into the greater manhood, women in the greater womanhood. It was sex, but the greater, not the lesser sex. The waters over the earth wheeling upon the waters under the earth, like an eagle silently wheeling above its own shadow.

She felt her sex and her womanhood caught up and identified in the slowly revolving ocean of nascent life, the dark sky of the men lowering and wheeling above. (131)

Despite the narratorial insistence that Kate's feelings are being reported ("She seemed to feel"; "She felt"), the passage is largely abstract, and these abstractions have not been sufficiently earned: they do not follow, or are not woven into, a detailed and concrete description of Kate's experience; rather they replace that description. The portrayal of her response does not have many sensory and emotive details. The only concrete details refer to her perception of the "lowered and expressionless" faces and the circular motion of the men and women. The motion is only slightly concretized through its embodiment in a series of figures: the Biblical metaphor of the upper waters wheeling above the lower waters, and the simile of the eagle wheeling above its shadow. In *The Rainbow* and *Lady Chatterley*, philosophical abstractions are most effective in the sacralizing episodes when they supplement more concrete portrayals.

The problem stems in part from the fact that Kate is reacting to the group and not to an individual. In a novel about the establishment of a religious movement, Lawrence thought it essential to convey the nature of collective transformative experiences. By focusing on Kate's experience of collective rituals, he was trying to portray her experience "beyond

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the individualism of the body" (131). But in attempting to represent Kate's response to a collective activity, he resorted to endowing her with very abstract responses. This problem of abstractness was always inherent in Lawrence's emphasis on the sacredness of the impersonal and the non-human (the animal) in human relationships. But while it is difficult to convey a sense of how these qualities—impersonality and animality—operate in a single body, it is even harder to suggest how they operate in a group of bodies or in a single body responding to a group of bodies. In effect, the group adds a secondary level of abstractness and obscurity, and this complication attenuates opportunities for engaging the reader's empathic identification.

The tendency to reduce the Mexican people to abstractions is strong and quick in Kate and contributes to the novel's failure to be powerfully transformative where Lawrence would have it be. Instead of responding vicariously to Kate's experiences of the Mexicans, readers are more likely to detach from her because of her propensity to construct derogatory stereotypes. Kate regularly sees the masses as lacking individuated personalities and mental-spiritual development, but she has only minimal commerce and communication with individuals. Most of her portrayals of Mexican Indians are collective portraits with an external focus: usually, she observes a group of Indians dancing or singing or marching or standing around, and the reader is given access to her perceptions, thoughts or feelings about the Indians' actions, talk, or appearance. Her perspective is almost always tendentiously reductive. In many ways, what Kate says of Diego Rivera's frescoes could be said of her perceptions of the Indians: "These flat Indians were symbols in the great script of socialism. . . . That was all they were used for: symbols in the weary script of socialism and anarchy" (52). In Kate's mind, the Indians also seem flat: they appear to be symbols in Lawrence's "syncretic theocracy."⁴⁰

Kate equates Mexico with the Indians, and her experience of them is generic.⁴¹ Already in Chapter I, Kate is characterizing the crowd at the bullfight as "the mob" and denouncing their "mob authority" (11). To her, men "prowled" back and forth "like lost mongrels" (12). In Chapter IV, she offers a summary of her impressions, which have a largely external focus:

Mexico meant the dark-faced men in cotton clothes and big hats: the peasants, peons, pelados, Indians, call them what you will. The mere natives. . . . Mexico still meant the mass of silent peons, to her. And she thought of them again, these silent, stiff-backed men, driving their strings of asses. . . . There is some Indian quality which

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pervades the whole. . . . The erect, prancing walk. . . . The jaunty balancing of the huge hats. The thrown-back shoulders. . . . Their big, bright black eyes. (75–6)

Kate describes the men's clothes as well as the postures and movements of their bodies; she has obviously had few if any deep encounters with the Indians, and yet her portrayal implicitly attributes certain psychological qualities: indeed, "stiff-backed," "erect, prancing," "jaunty balancing," and "thrown-back" all imply a kind of cocky assertiveness or resistance. She is also quick to reduce the women to "images of wild submissiveness" just from having observed them in a church: seeing them praying, she infers that they "swayed with devotion of fear and ecstasy" and "crouched like people not quite created" (77). These are the inferences of a tourist hasty to categorize and emblemize her superficial impressions. The reader cannot discover if these people have individualized selves because no narratorial attention is given to their inner lives.

In Chapter VII, Kate sees the plaza as "belong[ing] to the peons," and her account of the plaza is for the most part collective and summarizing, like that of a travelogue with personal commentary:

They sat thick on the benches, or slowly strolled round in their sandals and blankets. . . . At the booths which sold tequila, men, women, and boys sat on the benches. . . . Usually there would be a couple of smallish young men with guitars. . . . The young peons in their little white blouses. . . . The Indians on the seats, they too watched the dancers for a while. Then they turned against them the heavy negation of indifference, like a stone on the spirit. . . . The curious, radical opposition of the Indians to the thing we call the Spirit. (113–6)

The judgment of the Indians' inner state is based almost entirely on outward gestures, and strikes the reader as more Kate's projection than a psychological actuality. In Chapter IX, Kate blithely generalizes about the sexual relations between Indian women and men: "The women seemed, on the whole, softly callous and determined to go their own way: to change men if they wished. And the men seemed not to care very profoundly. But it was the women who wanted the men" (151). At least in this description, the verb "seemed" softens the oversimplification.

When Kate's perspective on individual Indians is offered, the focus is almost always external, and when an inner account is given, it is usually Kate's intuitive guess—or projection. In either case, her perceptions do

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not emerge from deep or prolonged contact, and the psychonarrations are not likely to be profoundly transformative. For example, on her boat trip to Sayula, Kate has a kind of "communion" with one of the native boatmen (107). Although the scene has a certain genuine tenderness, we only get her guess as to the man's state of mind; and this verbalized perspective sounds more like her projection (or Lawrence's fabrication) than the man's actual point of view: "And the man . . . said to her with his eyes: *We are living! I know your sex, and you know mine. The mystery we are glad not to meddle with. You leave me my natural honour, and I thank you for the grace*" (107).

The only exceptions to the rule of Kate having brief, and often superficial, contacts with Indians are her relationships with Juana's family and with Cipriano. Juana is based on Lawrence's *criada* ("maid-of-all-work") in Chapala, Isabel de Medina.⁴² Significantly, the narrator reveals that Kate's "servants were the clue to all the native life, for her" (151). This is indeed a very small sample for making judgments about an entire people! In Chapter IX, we see clearly how quickly and easily Kate jumps from simple observations of Juana's family to gross generalizations about the Indian populace. When Kate observes Ezequiel, Juana's son, eating "with a certain blind, rapid indifference," she swiftly concludes that "that also seems to be Mexican. They seem to *eat* even with a certain hostile reluctance, and have a strange indifference to what or when they eat" (141). After observing how Juana's daughters throw stones at each other with "savage ferocity," and how boys at the beach make similar "savage attacks," Kate generalizes that "Always the same thing among the young: a ceaseless, endless taunting and tormenting. The same as among the Red Indians" (146-7). Moreover, readers will probably be unconvinced by Kate's complaint that "I don't want to exploit them [her servants]. . . . I never insult them. I am so careful not to hurt them. And then they *deliberately* make these centipede attacks on me, and are pleased when I am hurt" (149). Kate's repeated generalizations are insulting, and such insults reveal her exploitative relation to Juana's family. Kate even thinks that "While the white man keeps the impetus of his own proud, onward march, the dark races will yield and serve, perforce" (148). In relation to her servants, Kate seems to be trying to maintain her white leadership position. She even thinks that "let the white man once have a misgiving about his own leadership, and the dark races will at once attack him, to pull him down into the old gulfs" (148).

Kate does have an involved relationship with Cipriano, but his character seems more European than Indian, despite the claim, by either Kate or the narrator (it is hard to say which) that his British "education lay like

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a film of white oil on the black lake of his barbarian consciousness" (82). Cipriano has been exposed to European ideas from an early age by his godfather, a bishop, and it is probably because he is so European that Lawrence dares to narrate his consciousness. But Lawrence also needs Cipriano to be a typical Indian in order to make his rigid symbology work out. And yet, Mrs. Norris, an archaeologist, seems to speak for others—including many readers—when she says that Cipriano (like Ramon) is "*entirely* the exception" among Mexicans (30). Still, Kate persists in seeing Cipriano as an emblematic Indian, as if taking the cue from Lawrence. In Chapter XVII, she refers to him "slip[ping] back into the inevitable Mexican General, fascinated by the opportunity for furthering his own personal ambition and imposing his own personal will" (253). In Chapter XX, three quarters of the way into the novel, she still experiences him as she has experienced other Mexican men and the Mexican landscape itself: he has "a sort of glaze of the ordinary world on top, and underneath a black volcano with hell knows what depths of lava" (309).⁴³ Cipriano also seems to her to have "that secret *hauteur* and aloofness of the savage" (312). And even in the novel's penultimate chapter, Kate persists in reducing Cipriano to a type: "He was first and foremost a soldier" (419).

An important component of the novel's vitalization phase is Ramon's hymns. These hymns are supposed to represent the fruit of Ramon's combined intellectual and intuitive efforts, but the didacticism of many of the hymns indicates that a creative fusion has not been fully achieved. The didacticism also prevents the hymns from having a deeply vivifying effect. The narrative line of the hymns emphasizes the reign, rejection, and return of Quetzalcoatl, and his replacement of Jesus and Mary. The thematic dimension enumerates the religious and moral obligations of Quetzalcoatl's would-be followers and interlaces these prescriptions and proscriptions with symbols that are meant to touch the deep somatic-affective centers of the people. But often the symbols are not subtly introduced and integrated, and are not deployed in the context of intoxicating rhythms and sound play. In short, many hymns are belabored poems that cannot be expected to persuade the Mexican people or the reader.⁴⁴ And yet Lawrence thought it necessary to include the hymns because the singing of songs and the reciting of myths are essential elements of most religious communities: at their best, these activities bind the people together by vividly representing their shared beliefs about origins, values, and practices and by offering opportunities for powerful, shared emotional experiences.⁴⁵ It should be said that some of these hymns cleverly echo the themes, symbols, images, and rhythms

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of English translations of Aztec and Navajo hymns that Lawrence read, but the cleverness of his re-creations does not ensure their evocative power for the reader.⁴⁶

One might expect the first hymn, presented in Chapter VII, to be particularly evocative since it inaugurates Ramon's attempt to inspire the involvement of the Mexican people as well as Lawrence's attempt to rouse the reader. What we find instead is a simple first-person narrative. The speaker is Quetzalcoatl, and he tells of his sleep in a cave "behind the sun," his hearing Jesus sing that he is coming home, his helping Jesus return, and his journey to Mexico. The opening stanzas show the hymn's peculiarly stiff form and didactic content:

In the place of the west
 In peace, beyond the lashing of the sun's bright tail,
 In the stillness where waters are born
 Slept I, Quetzalcoatl.
 In the cave which is called Dark Eye,
 Behind the sun, looking through him as a window
 Is the place. There the waters rise,
 There the winds are born. (119)

The poem schematizes Ramon's plan to replace Jesus with Quetzalcoatl. It is as if Ramon knew he was going to overwhelm the people—and Lawrence knew he was going to shock the reader—with the details of this newly manufactured religion, and so decided to give a preview of the supposedly spontaneous unfolding of this religious movement. Being a summary, the hymn is not very lyrical; it introduces key symbols and figures but does not imbed them in a strongly rhythmic form. The main images and metaphors are the eye, womb, star, and bird, all of which we have seen in other novels.

The hymn is followed a few pages later by a third-person, sermonlike narrative that acts as a kind of flashback that gives Quetzalcoatl's background. This quasi-mythic narrative runs over three pages and recounts Quetzalcoatl's experience in Mexico: his teaching the people to sow maize and beans and build boats; his giving life and power to the people and warning that they must heed the power of their bodies; the people's eventual forgetting of his message, which results in their weakening and his growing old; and his need for departure, which coincides with the arrival of Jesus and Mary, who are understood as sources of comfort not power. It also details the wearying out and return of Son and Mother to God the Father. This narrative is both an expanded version of the first

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hymn as well as a prelude to it; it also offers an explanation, justification, and script of the events to come.⁴⁷ The most significant part of the sermonlike narrative shifts to first person, and Quetzalcoatl is allowed to tell of his experiences at some length. The first person narration is figuratively rich, but still didactic:

The man on the hill said: I am Quetzalcoatl, who breathed moisture on your dry mouths. I filled your breast with breath from beyond the sun. I am the wind that whirls from the heart of the earth, the little winds that whirl like snakes round your feet and your legs and thighs, lifting up the head of the snake of your body, in whom is your power. When the snake of your body lifts its head, beware! It is I, Quetzalcoatl, rearing up in you, rearing up and reaching beyond the bright day, to the sun of darkness beyond, where is your home at last. (123)

Like a mini-sermon, the speech tells the reader what to value: spontaneous bodily energy. And because the narrative explains its own imagery—the snake is explicitly associated with bodily power, the dark sun, and upward movement—it artificially limits its own symbolic resonances. A self-conscious, first-person narrator cannot have the vivifying effect that Lawrence intends.⁴⁸ The vivifying passages in the other novels we have discussed are almost always rendered in the third person. In *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence was faced with the problem of presenting first-person myths to English and American readers who are not accustomed to reading long accounts of godly humans. Such narratives are common in Native American myths, but they are likely to strike many Western readers as more amusing or exotic than inspiring. Moreover, Native Americans are used to understanding the “I” in a myth or story as the collective or impersonal “I,” whereas modern Western readers generally understand only the personal, self-referential meanings of “I.”

In Chapter XI, a hymn focuses self-consciously and almost obsessively on directional positioning. It is an excessively elaborate meditation on betweenness. We saw this overt preoccupation with positioning in our analysis of the Quetzalcoatl rituals. The hymn shifts from third to first person and envisions Quetzalcoatl as a bird:

The Lord of the Morning Star
 Stood between the day and the night:
 As a bird that lifts its wings, and stands
 With the bright wing on the right

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And the wing of the dark on the left,
The Dawn Star stood into sight.

Lo! I am always here!
Far in the hollow of space

.....
But I, I am always in place.

Yes, I am always here. I am Lord

.....
But ye that perceive me between
The tremors of night and the day

.....
Between the wings of the endless flight (177–8)

Again, the first person presentation offers a level of self-consciousness that interferes with Lawrence's vivifying intentions. This hymn also has a certain vagueness and juvenile silliness (the talking bird analyzes his station) that cannot be expected to be revitalizing.

Chapter XV presents "The Written Hymns of Quetzalcoatl." One of the three hymns expands on the events outlined in the first hymn. The dialogues between Quetzalcoatl and Jesus are now spelled out, and we even get Jesus's hokey, folky self-introduction: "My name is Jesus, and they called me Christ. Men crucified me on a Cross till I died. But I rose up out of the place where they put me, and I went up to heaven to my Father. Now my Father has told me to come to Mexico" (222). When Quetzalcoatl asks, "You alone?" Jesus replies, "My mother is here. She shed many tears for me, seeing me crucify[*sic*]. So she will hold the Sons of Mexico on her lap" (222). The dialogue almost reads as if it were from a children's history book. *Movements in European History* (1921) was written for secondary school students; this hymn seems to have been written for readers still in primary school! Indeed Lawrence seems to have thought of many Mexicans as little more than children. And in this novel, he sometimes treats the reader as a child to be instructed by one preachy lesson after another. We have seen that the novel's consistent resort to religious rhetoric and to external descriptions of ritual cannot make up for the lack of concrete, vivid representations of authentic sacred exchanges.

It seems clear, then, that when Lawrence composed *The Plumed Serpent*, he was all too self-conscious and insistent about his role as religious initiator. Instead of creating vivifying scenes portraying the evocative flux and reflux of a protagonist's sacred interchange with

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another individual, he devised episodes in which the protagonist responds to groups of anonymous Indians in the context of didactic and compulsively detailed ceremonies that promote a militant, authoritarian religion. Moreover, to make his initiation rite work out according to plan, Lawrence had to contrive many of Kate's responses, often substituting fake thoughts for authentic feelings, and to occlude the reactions of the Indians with whom she interacted. Perhaps, Lawrence's fairly brief stays in Mexico prevented him from developing a more authentic and compelling portrait of Mexico and its peoples. Nevertheless, I believe that his literary genius enabled him to create enough masterful scenes to produce a dazzling, disturbing masterpiece of world literature. When he finally turned to composing *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, he returned to writing about what he knew best: the dynamic relations among English men and women living in their homeland. In that novel Lawrence is no longer trying to portray individuals as permanently identified with the gods; rather, he returns to showing that divine energies manifest within and between individuals when they relate to one another in deep, mutual, and authentic ways. In those moments of numinous connection, individuals may experience themselves as gods or as godly or as simply at one with the Source.