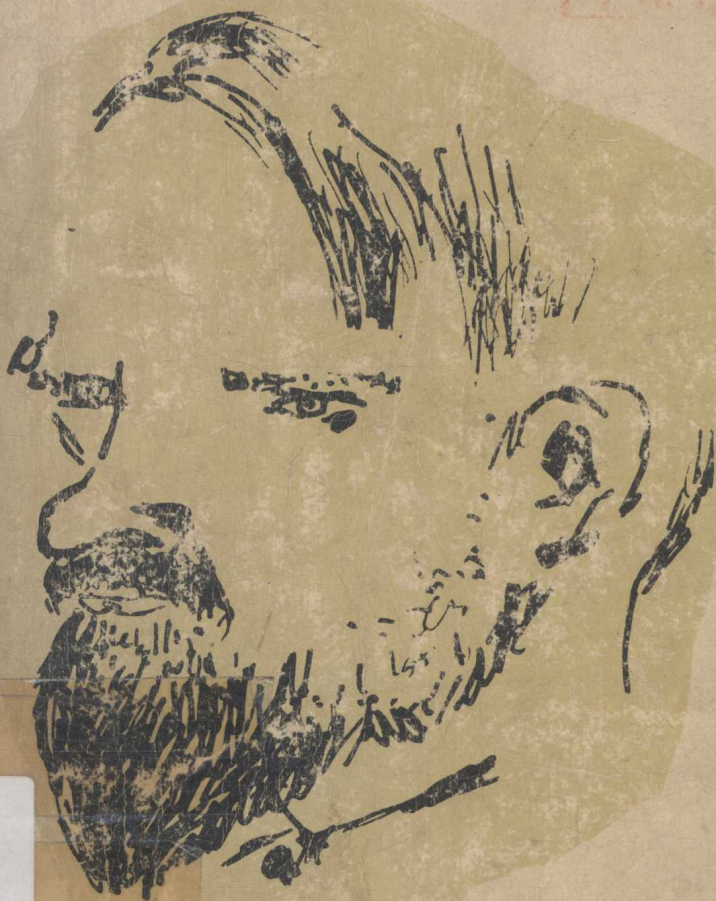


THE PLUMED SERPENT

by D. H. Lawrence

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The Plumed Serpent

D. H. Lawrence

INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM YORK TINDALL

Introduction

This glowing landscape, where flat figures move in ritual patterns, is one of the great creations of our time. Places, people, and actions come from Mexico and New Mexico but, whatever the vividness and actuality of these elements, the whole is far from photographic. Comparable in splendor to "Kubla Khan" or *Salammbô*, or, better perhaps, to the paintings of Gauguin, *The Plumed Serpent* is at once design and vision. In the design Lawrence found expression for his feelings and desires. By the design he creates for us not only a vision of reality but a sense of its wonder. "Strangeness added to beauty," Pater's apprehension of romantic art and its value, describes this wonderful book.

Lawrence's years in New Mexico and Mexico were on the whole his happiest and his most productive. *The Plumed Serpent*, written during this period after many preliminary sketches and studies, is his complete expression. Lawrence had spent his life in quest of a place that should be at once a home and his symbol of unity. Italy had always seemed good; but for a while in the 1920's Spanish and Indian America seemed better. He knew of course that place alone could not give him what he wanted. He knew that Mexico, however enchanting it might be, could provide no more than excitement and the materials for something he must make. That place, with its sterility and color, its horror and loveliness, its immediate sense of life and death, approximated his needs. Not Mexico, however, but his book became the adequate symbol, and like many writers before him Lawrence found in art the peace that life denied.

His quest for a suitable place provides the theme for *St. Mawr*, one of the earliest and most elaborate studies for *The Plumed Serpent*. The seeker, a girl named Lou, is married to an ineffectual baron. In her stable, however,

St. Mawr, a stallion, emanates a dark fire that awes her a little. This beast is the first noble, dangerous thing she has known; and the black-bearded Welsh groom who goes with him is not unattractive. But Phoenix, the redskinned groom, seems even more possible. "Flooded with ancient understanding," she feels that her husband is unreal. Therefore with horse, grooms, and her groom-loving mother she leaves England in search of another place—which she finds in the mountains near Taos, New Mexico. Somewhat surprisingly neglecting her willing and able groom, she establishes herself in Lawrence's ranch and finds her center there.

Although this story is not without narrative interest, the significant progress is from symbol to symbol. In the first half the horse and his grooms stand out against a background of meaningless society, with its tea and mental loves. The ranch is the dominant symbol of the second half. That the story falls into two parts might seem no more than fitting for a journey from a bad place to a good one. But Lawrence does nothing to connect his symbols. Horse and ranch may signify more or less the same thing, or parallel things, but think what we may, a ranch cannot take the place of a horse. As our feelings decline this substitution, the structure collapses.

To Lou, who has forgotten the horse entirely, the ranch is a substitute for man, whether groom or husband. Full of "meaning and mystery," like any symbol, her chosen landscape is not only bigger than man but bigger than spirit. As soon as she sets eye upon it she cries, as Lawrence, advancing in his flivver, must have done before her: "*This is the place.*" The moving and beautiful description that occupies the last quarter of the book elaborates their symbol. Something concrete, it immediately presents what Lou and Lawrence have been tediously talking about. Their symbolic place, like the disappearing horse, is both devilish and benign. A sordid place of pack-rats and sick goats, it is filled nevertheless with an awful holiness. The lovely flowers are fierce. Nothing so blameless as Wordsworth's more than simple primrose could embody Lawrence's vision of life and the passing tranquillity he found in the balance between attraction and repulsion.

It is not surprising that the character who undertakes:

Lawrence's quest should be a woman; for the seeker in the later novels at least is commonly a woman. Not only Ursula of *Women in Love* but Lady Chatterley herself follows this pattern. A reasonable explanation, but not the only one perhaps, is that Lawrence, like Jung or indeed like Joyce, thought the creative principle feminine. If that is so, his questing girl becomes the artist's deepest self in search of a subject and a place.

Having preceded Lou to that New Mexican ranch, Lawrence made further studies for the great book that the place demanded. Most of these preliminaries took the form of reflections or traveler's sketches. Essays in *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine*, a little known but fascinating volume, draw philosophical conclusions from life at Taos among the animals and the pine trees. In harmony with their potencies, both attractive and dangerous, he felt that one could be almost happy there.

Mornings in Mexico exploits again what he called "the spirit of place." These essays, written during his last days in Taos and his first in Mexico, compose one of the most brilliant and sensitive books of travel in the language, rivaled most nearly perhaps by his earlier essays on Italy. Whether he describes his parrot and his Indian servant, a Sunday picnic in Mexico or the snake-dancers of Arizona, the colors are clear and the movement vital. Having passed through his temperament, colors already bright become brighter and assume a mysterious significance. Seeming to reproduce reality, Lawrence creates it.

Anthropologists admire his dancing Indians. This is not unnatural since it was partly by their aid that he interpreted what he saw. He is more than authentic and orthodox however. His bird-treading dancers, like other animists, may try to placate or conquer the potencies of the living universe. Their pious concentration over drums and their ejaculations may call sun, rain, wind, and earth into the service of the sprouting corn. But these more or less familiar ideas and this popular spectacle, so often described, draw their strange power from what they meant to Lawrence. In these barbaric exercises he found an image for what he had been trying to state. No longer a cultural curiosity, the dances became in his hands a form for presenting feelings and ideas. What Lawrence says

of his dancers is true of his essays on them: "They are not representing something. . . . It is a soft, subtle *being* something."

Even the interpretations that interrupt the dance fail to distract us from it. What might have been tiresome is intense. Even his remarks about vitality are vital; for Lawrence had found ways to transform prose from a means of discourse to a means of immediate presentation. Heavy, repetitious, and hypnotic, his words dance the dance they are interpreting. By a kind of ritual of rhythm, sound, and tone he presents while explaining the ritual movements of the dancers. As his Indians win from the reluctant powers their "unspeakable renewal," his words convey what cannot be spoken. And as he goes monotonously on, "the mind bows down before the creative mystery," acknowledging the wonder.

At first glance the later narratives seem little more than rearrangements of materials from these sketches. In "The Woman Who Rode Away" matters of New Mexico combine with those of Mexico to produce an original landscape. Ritual prose, which Lawrence perfected in the essays, reappears in *The Plumed Serpent*, together with dreams of drum, dance, snake, and eagle, and theories of uniting opposites. Many or maybe most of its parts come from the sketches and studies, but Lawrence's great novel, like any aesthetic organization, is more than the sum of its parts. New relationships among them compose a form expressing all he thought and felt. His quest for a symbol to unify himself and to communicate with others might have rested here.

The Plumed Serpent differs from novels in which character is central—from most of them in fact. When we think of a novel we think of characters—Elizabeth Bennett, Mr. Pickwick, or Mrs. Bloom—but in Lawrence's novel, characters are less important than pattern. If we compare Kate, Lawrence's heroine, with heroines of other novels, she is not there at all. She is complex enough in origin, to be sure, part of her projected from Lawrence's idea of Lawrence and part from his idea of Mrs. Lawrence, but she has not emerged far enough from her origins to have independence. Don Ramón, for all his exercises and theories, is more the allegorical image of a

savior than a character. And as for Don Cipriano, the assistant savior, although we are told he is both goatish and cocky, he is no more substantial than something out of melodrama. "The things he said were hardly interesting at all," says Lawrence, "Only what he *was*." A character does not necessarily come to life, however, when the author says he does. Yet, in spite of such cavils, it is plain that Lawrence composed an uncommonly good novel. More like a tapestry or a painted window than like the novels we are used to, it triumphs by arrangements of shape and color. Not people but functions, the characters exist like figures in the carpet only by relationship with other parts of the great design.

Lady Chatterley and her famous lover, even more functional than these figures, are less memorable than their relations with one another. Their profound inhumanity might argue the inhumanity of their creator or at least his indifference to mankind. Certainly Kate, who seems most nearly to share Lawrence's attitudes, regards ordinary people with disgust. Nothing approaching charity or compassion is apparent in the great design. Indeed, Don Ramón particularly condemns them. "You must hate people and humanity," he observes, and in order to escape horror of mankind, you must go beyond it to the "greater life." Lawrence's saviors are opposite to Jesus, and Lawrence himself seems to have regarded human beings with dislike, impatience, or missionary zeal. "The individual hardly counted," says Kate, thinking of the mystery of sex, "a mystery greater than the individual." It seems to her that the highest thing is "some powerful relationship of man to man." She speaks for Lawrence. Forces, ideas, and relationships, supplanting people, make and resolve the tensions of his novel as of a play by Shaw. But symbols and plot give body, mystery, and movement to these abstractions.

The narrative line is another quest. Seeking reality, Kate finds or almost finds it in Sayula, at the lake, through the advice and example of Don Ramón and Don Cipriano, especially the latter. The obstacle to her salvation is that personal independence which she seems to lack. Like other emancipated intellectuals and middle-aged widows of means, she prides herself on herself. But before she can

be saved, they tell her, she must abandon herself to the "gentle reciprocal giving" of unintimate intimacy. That is not easy—as Lawrence's other novels prove; and the present story faithfully follows the ups and downs of a difficult conversion. Fascinated and repelled by Cipriano, her "demon lover," and somewhat confused, she reluctantly bids common intimacy good-by. But impersonal balance is easily disturbed. Sometimes she calls his ritual childish and his theology "high-flown bunk." Sometimes she feels for his hand—and "All was so dark. But oh, so deep, so deep and beyond her, the vast, soft, living heat! So beyond her!" At such times she allows herself to follow the masters and even to occupy a chair in their pantheon. Even after her marriage to Cipriano, troubles recur; and although officially transfigured, she remains a little doubtful.

As Kate is reborn, so is Mexico. Under the direction of the saviors, rebirth occurs simultaneously on several levels: sexual, religious, and political. When the rains come to end the drought, it is impossible to tell whether these waters promise sexual, religious, or political regeneration, or all three at once, along with vegetable awakening. The language is consistently ambiguous. When Don Ramón says "I am not with you till my serpent has coiled his circle of rest in your belly," he confuses the sexual with the religious; but when, welcoming the downpour, he delivers a sermon on "the milk of the maize bud among its hair," there is greater confusion.

Lawrence devotes the opening chapters to a description of the wasteland, waiting for rain. The bullfight, with its martyred male or female horses, shows how far citified Mexicans have degenerated under the influence of democracy, machines, and "the insidious modern disease of tolerance." While saving the stomach, Mexican socialism has ignored the genitals and the soul. To Kate, the cruel, jeering, down-dragging Indians in the country, unawakened by their alien religion and politics, represent indifference if not death. Doña Carlota, Don Ramón's malevolent Catholic wife, establishes marital incapacity. Kate herself is only half alive as she pauses between husbands.

Ramón and Cipriano awaken the sleepers, the jeerers, and the dead ones, or liquidate them when they fail to hear. Dictators now as well as saviors, they secure politi-

cal rebirth by revolution. Cipriano's storm troopers, occupying the strong points and the churches, easily defeat mobs led by fanatical Roman priests, reluctant to be saved. Meanwhile religious rebirth, which cannot be separated from political, is accomplished by sermon, dance, and song. Sexual rebirth, which cannot be separated from religious, is managed not only by advice but by ritual. Sex, politics, and religion, gaining strength through joy, become a singular thing.

The theme of rebirth is supported by symbols so central and impressive that it would be more accurate to say that theme and narrative serve them. Of these symbols Quetzalcoatl, who gives his name to the book, is the most apparent. Bird and snake together, this Aztec god expresses not only a Freudian vision but that connection of earth and sky, matter and spirit, above and below which thrice-great Hermes commended. Convinced that he is Quetzalcoatl, with the serpent of middle-earth in his loins and the bird of the outer air on his brow, Don Ramón says: "I am lord of two ways. I am master of up and down." Lawrence makes his feathered snake not only a sign of unity but of those dying and reviving gods he learned about from Frazer. Like Attis, Osiris, and Adonis, Quetzalcoatl has died in order to live. His return from the waters of resurrection coincides with the departure of Jesus, who, exiled by Don Ramón, goes back for a long immersion and ultimate renewal. But Quetzalcoatl, unlike Jesus, is "only the symbol of the best a man may be." Identifying this symbol with another, Don Ramón exclaims: "The universe is a nest of dragons, with a perfectly unfathomable mystery at the centre of it. If I call the mystery the Morning Star, surely it doesn't matter!"

That star, the "ultimate clue," hovers like a bird-snake in tranquil suspense between the energies of the cosmos, between day and night, earth and sky, reconciling these opposites. That star of twilight suggests marriage and peace. Rising between heart and loins, it is womanhood for woman and manhood for man. ("My manhood," says Don Ramón, "is like a demon howling inside me.") It becomes plain that star and feathered serpent have many meanings, only some of which can be reduced to propositions. This pleases Kate, who, "weary to death of definite

meanings, and a God of one fixed purport," loves to lose herself in a mystery.

More mysterious than star or god, the lake, which contains them both, is the central and most potent symbol of the book. A "pool of peace," it is the place where gods sink for renewal and the place whence they emerge. But it is not only for convenience that Don Ramón establishes his center there. Rather it is for the nameless things the lake evokes with its spermy waters. Full of stars, flowers, and gods, these pale filmy waters, uniting all incompatibles, are indefinitely suggestive. At one time they seem "like some frail milk of thunder," and at another like clotted electricity, thick as "fish-milk." Pale and unreal, the lake extends into nowhere. Kate is profoundly moved; and as Lawrence improves reality, the reader shares her experience and something of her knowledge. It was the possibility of such improvements and such expansions of awareness that drew Lawrence to Mexico and kept him balanced between thunder above and volcanic potency below in the significant landscape.

The rituals of Don Ramón that occupy a large part of the book may seem monotonous and overlong. But ritual, like landscape, is a symbolic form for knowledge. By rhythmic incantation, as Lawrence presents the throbbing of the imported drum and the pressures of the imported dance, he extends our insight. But his ceremonies differ in some particulars from those he found expressive in New Mexico. Consisting partly of sermons and hymns, which, however incantatory, are conceptual, Don Ramón's religion unites the European and the Asiatic with the Indian. The manager of the local hotel, exposed by Kate as a cynic, finds a hint of national socialism in the ceremonies of his neighbor. Kate herself irreverently detects an element of the revival meeting, of the Salvation Army too; and if she had known about it, she could have detected yoga in those postures by which Don Ramón restores his soul and inducts Don Cipriano.

Incidental symbols of birds, beasts, and flowers, together with suns behind suns, the womb-like patio, and the primary colors, maintain the flickering interplay of meanings. The catalogue of Aztec gods invokes the magic of sound. Descriptions, never literal, cannot be received in

the common light of day. When the hard green fruits of the mango, "curiously heavy with life," become the organs of some animal, Lawrence is illustrating the poetic analogies from which he constructs his vision.

Analogy is the important literary method of our time. Before science had established the world of fact, analogy had been the way of knowing reality. Dante's four-leveled allegory and Donne's conceits, which compare the physical with the metaphysical, are examples of this metaphorical way to value and meaning. Preserved through the enlightenment only by the occultists, analogy emerged again during the romantic revival. The occult studies of Blake, Rimbaud, and Yeats made correspondence, as Baudelaire called it, the central preoccupation of the symbolist movement. Conrad, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf are among the novelists who followed poets away from the external, the literal, and the discursive into imagistic and rhythmic suggestion. Lawrence is one of this great company.

The symbol, says Lawrence in one of his essays, is "a complex of emotional experience. And the power of the symbol is to arouse the deep emotional self . . . beyond comprehension." Myth, which is composed of symbols, narrates "a whole human experience, of which the purpose is too deep, going too deep in the blood and soul, for mental explanation or description." Whether we agree with him that myth is non-discursive presentation, with the anthropologists that it is cultural sanction, or with the psychoanalysts that it is Oedipal dream, *The Plumed Serpent* is plainly mythical. It owes this character not to the employment of Aztec myths or patterns from Frazer or hints of Joachim and Salomé, but to a recovery of the way of knowing that produced the myths.

Like ritual or music, myth is a significant form through which we may conceive reality. The elements of the form that Lawrence composed are not only his figures and narrative, and his symbols of god, star, or lake but his structure and his style. Expanding and contracting in scenes of alternate intensity and depression, of movement and rumination, the emotional rhythm accompanies the thematic. The didactic elements that in some of Lawrence's earlier novels almost overwhelm the symbolic narrative they were designed to support are sufficiently incantatory to be non-

discursive in effect. The stiff, awkward, and even ungrammatical prose of the opening chapter, whether intentional or not, is a happy device for expressing discouragement. The gradual transfiguration of style from chapter to chapter conveys the growth of hope, and, at its poetic climax, the very sensation of life. Structure, style, and incidental symbols compose an elaborate symbol or the work of art itself. Although it contains political and religious elements, its total significance is neither political nor religious. Although it contains nonsense and cruelty, the value is neither rational nor moral but what arises from a relationship of part to part in which the inhuman and awkward elements dissonantly combine with the imaginative and the human. *The Plumed Serpent* is a great metaphor for a feeling about reality. Conditioned by place and contemporary politics (of which on one level the book is a nightmare vision), that feeling is the wonder of all things—even of such politics. Kate is always calling for the return of magic and wonder. Her story brings them back.

But neither she nor Lawrence was satisfied for long. Although providing temporary peace, the metaphor became inadequate and the quest went on. Lawrence was not fooled by his mummery, nor was he altogether an enthusiast. The ending of *The Plumed Serpent* is as inconclusive as the ending of *St. Mawr* is ironic. Kate is aware of death as a figure in her design, but the questing lady of "The Woman Who Rode Away" finds only death in the ambiguous landscape. Even the sun, which her sacrifice promises to revive, shines on the altar through a screen of ice. It was time for Lawrence to go away and find another place and another symbol.

Returning for renewal to the Mediterranean, he exchanged Quetzalcoatl for Jesus and the synthetic rituals of Don Ramón for the less extravagant ceremony of Isis. But the pattern remained almost the same. Maybe the ritual of *The Man Who Died* is more Egyptian than Indian, but the dancing Indians of *Mornings in Mexico* had reminded Lawrence of Egyptians. The disappearing horse of *St. Mawr* reappears as the escaped but forgotten cock. Isis, the divinity adored by the lonesome priestess and identified with her, although searching for dismembered Osiris, is only the last of many questing girls. It is not

always easy to tell Lawrence's Jesus apart from the living Quetzalcoatl except that Jesus, as the reassembled Osiris, is disenchanted. It is sometimes hard to tell him from Kate. The difference between *The Plumed Serpent* and *The Man Who Died* is that the latter is shorter, more public, and less magical. Lawrence's Mexican dream, alone of the later novels, takes its place beside *Sons and Lovers*, the great work of his youth.

WILLIAM YORK TINDALL

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