

Lawrence and the Strength of Love:

A Voegelinian Reading

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D. H. Lawrence was a powerful, enigmatic, talented writer, one of the major figures in 20th century English literature, a visionary man, and a critic of the decadence of Western culture in his time. In this paper I want to explore what some of his major novels can tell us about the implications of Lawrence's religious and moral views for public life and history. I will review the central characteristics of Lawrence's major novels, The Rainbow, Women in Love, and Lady Chatterley's Lover before turning to look at The Plumed Serpent, a novel dealing with the initiation of an Indian community into a primitive religious consciousness. This discussion will establish that, while social and political contexts are almost always operative in Lawrence's novels, his focus on individual fulfillment through numinous experience gives him a limited basis for the elaboration of a vision of transformed social and political life. Thus, while he has much to say about the cultural and political deficiencies of England and the modern world generally, he can develop no positive image of the future, no vision of the way out of the historical dead end against which he fulminates.

I want to begin by looking at some brief comments Voegelin himself made about Lawrence in a 1961 letter to his friend, Robert Heilman, which provide a sense of Voegelin's very cautious perspective on Lawrence as an artist. Indeed, insofar as I can discover, these private remarks are the sum total of what he had to say on the subject of D. H. Lawrence.

Voegelin begins by saying that he has been reading Lady Chatterley's Lover as a kind of social duty which would allow him to talk about a book that everyone is discussing. He

mentions that he has previously read Sons and Lovers through and that all the other novels Lawrence wrote have been so boring that he could not finish them. In particular he refers to The Plumed Serpent as distinctly memorable for its capacity to bore. He objects to Lawrence's tedious, repetitive use of adjectives and nouns. After commenting on the implausibility of some of the conversational language in an early section of Lady Chatterley's Lover, Voegelin writes, "You see, I am still not quite convinced of L's stature either as an artist or as a diagnostician of the times."¹ [1] He objects to the view he has heard expressed ". . . that Lawrence was one of the first to have sensed the destructive character of mechanization on human and social life,"² [2] and he points to Holderlin's Odes as a profound early romantic expression of that experience. Further, Voegelin does not care for Lawrence's eroticism: "Nor does his erotology and sacramentalization of sex seem to be very profound"³ [3] Much of the excitement was due, Voegelin holds, because British culture was still Victorian in Lawrence's time. And finally, following up on a point made by Heilman in an essay, Voegelin writes that he agrees that there is a lack of love in Lawrence's fiction: "There is a deep-rooted impotence in his work that lets the description of reality disliked degenerate into caricature and cliché⁴ and the opposed, preferred reality into romantic nonsense. There is lacking the strength of love that would unite the dilemmatic extremes into a convincing creation."⁴ [4]

1 [1] To Robert Heilman, January 14, 1961 in The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 30, Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984, ed. Thomas Hollweck (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 430.

2 [2] Ibid.

3 [3] Ibid., 431.

4 [4] Ibid., 432.

We can take it from these passing yet significant remarks that Voegelin did not see much of interest in Lawrence, whose writings betray a lack of love for all aspects of reality, a lack that prevents him from joining the ranks of the great artists. But while Voegelin insists that Lawrence is not the first to note it he tacitly agrees that the issue of mechanization and its impact on human consciousness is of great import. He does not outright dismiss the question of Lawrence's stature, leaving that undecided. Apparently boredom finally and understandably got the better of him, for there is no sign that he carried on any further discussion of the world of Lawrence. That is a misfortune for us, for that discussion certainly would have contributed profoundly to our understanding of one of the major writers of the 20th century. My impression is that in the Lawrence matter, Voegelin may have been repulsed a little too quickly by texts whose style and intent did not draw him in, but that he would have remained strongly critical of Lawrence's efforts to create adequate symbols of reality.

To understand Lawrence it is fundamental to recognize that he consistently defined himself as a religious writer, indeed as a prophetic figure leading those who hear his voice from death to life. In his early twenties he abandoned the Christian and the Congregational Church in which he had been raised, but he took away a great familiarity with the Bible and later continued to use its metaphors and symbols in his writing. But having become agnostic he discovered a new religion, which he described in a famous letter written in January, 1913. This is the religion he continued to preach, with adjustments, for the rest of his life. Note the basic point that from the start he defines it exactly as religion.

My great religion is a belief in the blood, the flesh, as being wiser than the intellect. We can go wrong in our minds. But what our blood feels and believes and says, is always true. The intellect is only a bit and a bridle. What do I care about knowledge. All I want is to answer to my blood, direct, without fribbling intervention of mind, or

moral, or what not. I conceive a man's body as a kind of flame, like a candle flame forever upright and yet flowing: and the intellect is just the light that is shed onto the things around. And I am not so much concerned with the things around;--which really is mind:--but with the mystery of the flame forever flowing, coming God knows how from out of practically nowhere, and being *itself*, whatever there is around it, that it lights up. We have got so ridiculously mindful, that we never know that we ourselves are anything . . . 5 [5]

And in a letter written six weeks later to the same friend, he writes: "I always feel as if I stood for the fire of Almighty God to go through me---and it is a rather awful feeling. One has to be so terribly religious to be an artist. ♦ 6 [6]

Lawrence was an advocate and apologist for his religion of the blood and his novels were his efforts to present the complex experiences out of which a new openness emerges. He sought to evoke in his readers a change in consciousness which would lead to a new, spontaneous participation in life, ultimately including a transformative encounter with the sacred, pulsating heart of the living and mysterious cosmos. He came to believe that the novel was the perfect artistic medium, more effective than any ♦ 'mindful' philosophical discourse, for describing and then evoking in the reader a response to complex personal relationships and their dynamism which lead to wonder, mystery, awe, terror and give one an awakened, vivid sense of a cosmos that is live. Here is one recent writer's apt summary of this religious quality of Lawrence 's fiction:

5 [5] To Ernest Collings, 17 January 1913 in The Selected Letters of D. H. Lawrence, ed. John T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 53.

6 [6] To Ernest Collings, 24 February 1913 in The Letters of D. H. Lawrence, vol. 1, ed. James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 519.

Lawrence 's visionary ambitions, fed by abiding pantheistic and animistic intuitions, impelled him to try to awaken in his readers a deeply felt experience of the life energy animating the universe. For him, the felt recognition of the aliveness of the cosmos and of one's fundamental connection to it constitutes the essence of sacred experience.⁷ [7]

Lawrence not only believed that the novel was the perfect medium for conveying his religious vision, but he was confident that he, as the discoverer of this possibility, was a writer superior to all philosophers and to all modern novelists. The novel engages mind and body, addresses intellect and feeling, and can present the deep complexities of relationships in an affectively (bodily) and reflectively (mentally) intimate and compelling manner. To describe these experiences of deathly life or of revitalized life Lawrence drew heavily on the beliefs and language of Kabbalah, theosophy and yoga, especially Tantric yoga, all of which emphasized the body as the deepest source of knowledge and which taught ways to enliven consciousness through awakening the body, touching and manipulating the body in its powerful, sensitive chakras.

It is from this view of the revelatory power of the body understood as the source of consciousness that Lawrence focused to a remarkable degree on what Voegelin called his 'erotology,' his focus on sex. Sex per se remains important but ambiguous in Lawrence 's novels. While it is always significant, it may communicate radically different experiences of the other and of life itself. There is willful, domineering, controlling, pornographic, self-centered, sex-in-the-head sex which is a sign of illness, perhaps even a sign of a sickness unto death. Healthy sexual life, however, is the antithesis of the above, and it is characterized by mutual

⁷ [7] Charles Michael Burack, D. H. Lawrence's Language of Sacred Experience: The Transfiguration of the Reader (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2

acceptance, dynamic balance, spontaneity, and freedom from the affectively deadening conventions of the modern mechanical spirit and all that attends it: rigidity, conventionalism, calculation, analysis, greed, and so on. Sexual experience for Lawrence was a religious marker, a sign of one's vitality and openness to numinous experience, a sign of one's consciousness.

In The Rainbow, Women in Love, and Lady Chatterley's Lover, Lawrence teaches the difference between sterility and life through the stories of individuals whose characters are drawn in great detail and whose felt truth in relationships and in self-perception leads to dissolution or to profound numinous experiences. Those experiences of the sacred are described as moments when time is stopped, when one feels in the deepest level of his being in contact with eternity and a reality far beyond the quotidian world. The sacred experience of the individual is but part of the larger dynamic force of the cosmos as a whole. Terms which appear in Lawrence's efforts to capture it are rebirth, strange, mystic, dark, deep, sacred, peaceful, luminous, golden, mystery, eternal.

Thus in Women in Love there is a description of Birkin after he has been opened to transcendent experience through his relationship with Ursula:

He sat still like an Egyptian Pharaoh, driving the car. He felt as if he were seated in immemorial potency, like the great carven statues of real Egypt, as real and as fulfilled with subtle strength, as these are, with a vague, inscrutable smile on the lips. He knew what it was to have the strange and magical current of force in his back and loins, and down his legs, force so perfect that it stayed him immobile, and left his face subtly, mindlessly smiling. He knew what it was to be awake and potent in that other basic mind, the deepest physical mind. And from his source he had a pure and magic control,

magical, mystical, a force in darkness, like electricityA lambent intelligence played secondarily above his pure Egyptian concentration in darkness.⁸ [8]

The further significance of such numinous experience is apparently confined to the personal world of those who have connected with the unfathomable fountain of life. Women in Love ends with Rupert Birkin, modeled on Lawrence himself, meditating on the deep, inhuman, mysterious source of all life. Birkin is comforted with the thought that if the human species ends up in a complete dead end, the eternal source of life can create a new, finer being, so that life moves on, pursuing its mysterious purposes (478-479). There is no significant community life in Women in Love, no optimism about renewing the public life. The discovery of spontaneity, vitality, and connection with the vibrant cosmos is entirely a function of personal relationships. The absence of community life silently expresses deep doubt about its possibilities.

At the end of Lady Chatterley's Lover Lawrence confines the discussion of the future to the concerns of Connie and Mellors around their personal hope that they eventually will be able to marry and raise a child together (295-302) . The Rainbow is an account of several generations of the history of the Brangwen family, focused on the decline in the quality of the intimate relationships that develop between the couples along with the weakening of communal bonds. Generation by generation those relationships become increasingly less spontaneous, more mindful, less centered in the body, more modern and less powerful.

⁸ [8] Women in Love, ed. David Farmer et al. [The Cambridge Edition of the Works of D. H. Lawrence] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 310.

Throughout his adult life Lawrence was very aware of the political, social, and cultural events of his time, often objecting to the decay of the modern West and linking that corruption to the corrosive effects of industrialization, mechanization, capitalism, greed, a stupid aristocracy, self-satisfied politicians, feminism, democracy and much else. Example number one must be his intense opposition to World War I, in which he refused to participate. Lawrence's recent biographer, John Worthen, points out that prior to the war Lawrence shows signs of a general optimism about the possibilities of reform, a belief in the oneness of humanity, and hence a confidence about the path into the future.⁹ [9] After the war that positive outlook was turned dark. He continued to condemn that which he found crass and offensive on an ad hoc basis, but he held to no comprehensive scheme for the reform of public life.

In 1914 and 1915 Lawrence was working on a small book on Thomas Hardy, a work that was not published in his life time. As he admitted, the book turned out to be less about Hardy and much more about his own philosophy. In his considered view a novel explores "the two principles of Love and the Law in a state of conflict and yet reconciled." (90) This would seem to suggest that the relationship of love and the law, that is, the public ordering of communal life, are at the heart of the novelist's concern. But he goes on to reject explicitly the idea that artistic work can be carried over into political reform: "I only ask that the law shall leave me alone as much as possible . . . What does the law matter? What does money, power, or public approval matter? All that matters is that each human being shall *be* in his own fulness." (14, 16)

⁹ [9] John Worthen, D. H. Lawrence: The Life of an Outsider (New York : Counterpoint, 2005), 150-151.

During the war Lawrence may have given up on belief in a united humanity and the promise of the future, but he did have in mind one solution to the problem of community, although it was a very personal proposal. In early 1915 he wrote to a friend about his interest in setting up a quasi-communist society, withdrawn from the world, to be called Rananim.

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 the necessities of life go, and some real decency. It is to be . . . a community which is established upon the assumption of goodness in the members.¹⁰ [10]

This society was to be a perfect blend of individualism and communal identity, run by a chosen spiritual aristocracy, one for men and one for women, which would choose a male Dictator to manage the business side of life and a female Dictator who would manage the domestic side. He invited Bertrand Russell and other possible candidates to join this new world, but he was regularly turned down. Still, he held seriously to this idea for years, until at last in 1926 he acknowledged "That Rananim of ours has sunk out of sight."¹¹ [11] The only pragmatic vision for a communal alternative to the destructive, alienating modern world that Lawrence could come up with turned out to be a utopia in the true sense of the word, i.e., no place.

In 1923 and 1924 Lawrence spent much of his time in Mexico and New Mexico , writing and rewriting his novel, The Plumed Serpent. Unlike the other novels which focus on the transformative experiences of private individuals in their personal, spontaneous relationships,

10 [10] January 18, 1915 to William Hopkins, Letters, ii, 259.

11 [11] January 4, 1926 to S. S. Kotliansky, Letters, v, 367.

this novel offers the tale of the religious initiation and transformation of an entire people through the inspired leadership of a remarkable public leader, part prophet, part authoritarian ruler. This leader, Don Ramon, has watched revolutionary violence nearly destroy the Indian people and he has come to the conclusion that the only way to save humanity is to restore its primitive religious consciousness. He has thus prepared the songs, dances, music, and doctrines which lead to the collective initiation of the people into the patriarchal, occasionally violent religion of Quetzalcoatl. In this initiation there is no room for spontaneity, no room for individuality, and ultimately no room for mystery. Ramon has created the liturgy and spelled out the cosmological beliefs to which the newly converted are expected to assent. The end is known by Ramon, the path to that end is found in the ceremonies and instructions provided for the people. Any spontaneous deviation or expression by the people would undermine the programmed process organized by the authoritarian leader. What he offers his community is not experience of sacred mystery but dogma and doctrine in which some echo of past religious experience is captured and contained, written and preached, recalled and tamed.

An English woman, Kate, observes the preparation for this new religious community, and at first maintains a critical, skeptical attitude. Ramon's colleague, General Cipriano, deified by Ramon in a private ceremony, sees Kate as his future wife, although she resists that too. Cipriano is a violent man, and Lawrence offers this violence as an integral part of primitive religious consciousness. As Kate reflects on that violence, exhibited primarily in carrying out executions, she begins to grasp that the most dynamic feature of God is his pure will which in relation to the men who served him requires them also to be mighty in will and hence in violence.

The Will of God! She began to understand that once fearsome phrase. At the center 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)

Whereas in previous discussions of the sacred mystery Lawrence had rejected the view that divine will was a central characteristic because will is associated with the mechanical principle and domination, he now deifies will and uses it to justify vengeance, malice, planned violence and ruthless bloodshed. As Kate articulates it later, what is demanded by will is good because it is the instrument of the wish of the sacred. (391) When Kate admits that she feels a sense of horror toward him, Cipriano tells her to get used to it since it is good to have a bit of fear and a bit of horror in life, giving life an edge. (235-236) The use of horror and violence is justified because those who carry out such deeds are serving the will of the sacred, mysterious at the heart of the cosmos.

Those who can judge this are the deified leaders who have an elevated religious consciousness and who live to serve the great mysterious source of all being.

While there are didactic and propagandistic elements in all of Lawrence's novels, in The Plumed Serpent the didactic tone is pervasive. Ceremonies and rituals are described in great detail by the omniscient author, as if creating an historical record, but the felt experience of the participants remains obscured and insufficiently developed to evoke an emotional response. Clearly the focus of Lawrence's interest in The Plumed Serpent is in the role of religious leadership in revitalizing a decaying community. Always suspicious of democracy, he believed that renewal had to come from some part of a religious aristocracy which would not fear the sacred need for violence and male domination. Throughout the story he shows little interest in

the lived experience of the masses. The way to transformative, numinous experience, explored in the novels we have previously discussed, is abandoned when it comes to the people as a whole. For them there is dogma, doctrine, ritual, obedience provided by an authoritarian, violent, male leadership.

After finishing The Plumed Serpent (1923-1925) Lawrence wrote he thought that it was "my chief novel so far. ♦12 [12] As the novel was about to appear he wrote to his publisher, Martin Secker: "Tell the man, very nice man, in your office, I *do* mean what Ramon means---for all of us. ♦13 [13] In 1928 he wrote in response to criticism from a socialist acquaintance on the excessive role of the hero in The Plumed Serpent, generally agreeing that the day of the hero is gone: "On the whole, I think you are right. The hero is obsolete, and the leader of men is a back number. After all, at the back of the hero is the militant ideal: and the militant ideal, or the ideal militant, seems to me also a cold egg. ♦14 [14] But that was not the end of his changing opinion.

Lawrence had been discussing the possibility of a German translation of The Plumed Serpent with his sister-in-law, Else Jaffe, and she had labeled his work ♦satanical.' Lawrence responded:

You say *satanisch*. Perhaps you are right; Lucifer is brighter now than tarnished Michael or shabby Gabriel. All things fall into their turn, now Michael goes down, and

12 [12] To Edward McDonald, June 29, 1925 Selected Letters ♦ 298.

13 [13] October 16, 1925

14 [14] To Witter Bynner, March 13, 1928.

whispering Gabriel, and the Son of the Morning will laugh at them all. Yes, I am for Lucifer, who is really the Morning Star.¹⁵ [15]

So we are left with three statements in which Lawrence tells us where he stands in relation to his work, two of them affirming his endorsement of the views and character of his authoritarian leader and the masses, one of them somewhat ambiguously noting that the hero is increasingly obsolete in contemporary culture. On balance he identified with the didactic message of The Plumed Serpent.

Regardless of his later opinions, the critical question we are left with is: why was the author of several novels which focused on individual, private achievement of numinous experience, unable to make the insights of that religious path relevant to the alienating, decaying, social and political world he so passionately condemned? In The Plumed Serpent he squarely faces a scene of social and political collapse which, he maintains, can only be redeemed by a religious awakening of the people, a restoration of their sense of the aliveness of the cosmos and of their connection to it. But the method for achieving this end is a radical departure from spontaneous, unplanned experience which ultimately leads to epiphany. Apparently the personal and private path may be open to a few European individuals with sensitive souls, but for the masses what is required is a powerful teaching authority, dogmas and doctrines, ceremonies and rituals and music, violence, horror, and finally obedience. Lawrence turns out to be one of those many observers of the culture and politics of the 1920s who believed the spiritual decline of the West could only be cured by an authoritarian patriarchy and a revival of primitive religious

¹⁵ [15] June 12, 1929 , to Else Jaffe

experience, including violence, that leads to a sense of moral and cultural unity under one sacred leader.

While Lawrence 's preference for some kind of cultural elite, an aristocracy of the spirit one might say, must be part of any explanation of his authoritarian politics, that is not a sufficient explanation. To a significant degree Lawrence 's own belief system, his conception of transcendence, his view of human consciousness, his image of the world, and his philosophical anthropology, lead to the tension we have been exploring.

In Voegelin's view, a philosopher or artist truly in touch with reality must imagine ways to symbolize the four components of the primordial community of being: God, man, world, and society.¹⁶ [16] The reality of this community of being, Voegelin writes, is known only from the perspective of participation in it, for it is not approached as an object in nature. Voegelin also insists that philosophical or artistic reflection on the nature of the elements of the primordial community derives from the confusing experience of disorder and the sense of wonder and awe.

Lawrence obviously experienced profound disorder in his society, associated with the tragedy of World War I and with political and cultural turbulence in his own England . While he denounced the war and the decay of English social and cultural life, his personal response was to flee. He hoped for Ranim and then held on to that dream for years. During the war, while setting out his 'philosophy' in a text nominally on Thomas Hardy, Lawrence asserted that the

¹⁶ [16] Eric Voegelin, Israel and Revelation, vol. 1 of Order and History (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 1. See also Charles R. Embry, The Philosopher and the Storyteller (Columbia : University of Missouri Press , 2008), ch. 2 for a helpful overview of Voegelinian implications for literary criticism.

novel has to do with conflict and resolution between love and the law. This dramatic claim about 'what really matters' makes quite explicit his desire to escape quotidian reality. "I only ask that the law shall leave me alone as much as possible . . . What does the law matter? What does money, power, or public approval matter? All that matters is that each human being shall *be* in his own fulness." (14, 16) In other words, so that some of us may *be* in our own fulness, public life be damned. It does not matter.

The Lawrentian religion did not produce a useful meditation on society. For the cultural crisis Lawrence observed there was no public or political remedy, only a private resolution for a few. When Lawrence attempted in The Plumed Serpent to present the religious transformation of an entire people, his intimate tales of personal redemption had nothing to offer. He resorted to an approach which was deeply at odds with his major novels.

I mentioned at the outset the passing comments that Voegelin made in 1961 about the Lawrence novels he was struggling to read. I come back to that now because one of those statements seems remarkably relevant: Voegelin's surprising comment was that Lawrence shows a lack of love. Here is what he wrote: "There is lacking the strength of love that would unite the . . . extremes into a convincing creation."¹⁷ [17] Voegelin would prefer a Lawrence with a less schematic view of reality, which, he held, would make his work stronger. In his treatment of characters there is bias springing from his religious advocacy, and that bias leads to a work that is weaker and less convincing. Likewise there is a partiality in Lawrence's focus on the religious experience of private individuals in intimate settings and in his insistence that nothing

¹⁷ [17] See fn. 4

else matters. He railed against the corruptions of modern society, but for its renewal he had nary a word.

