

*The Salvator Mundi Touch: Messianic
Typology in D. H. Lawrence's
"Women in Love"*

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JOHN MIDDLETON MURRY'S review of Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1921) epitomizes the extreme bewilderment felt by early readers of the novel. Clearly Murry floundered his way through it and re-emerged unenlightened. He felt himself at sea in "wave after wave of turgid, exasperated writing impelled towards some distant and invisible end." Stripped of their signifying clothes, the characters seemed as "indistinguishable as octopods," their experience generated at levels of total non-differentiation, a "sub-human" emanation out of primeval "slime." Indeed Murry felt that Lawrence's "prophetic" propensities had "murdered" his gift as an artist.¹

Murry obviously grappled in vain to find some hold in the novel, some anchor in plot or motive or development. There seemed to be none, however, no recognizable linear structure, no logico-temporal order, no apparent causality, indeed none of those teleological indicators which charted the course of the usual novel. Cynthia Asquith's comment sums up the general air of mystification: "What is it all about, and why?"²

Today's readers have, of course, come to terms with these difficulties to such an extent that it is precisely the novel's refusal of simple narrative progress, its repudiation of formal plot or design (rather than its content or message) that assures its privileged place as an innovative work. That there is, in fact, no external framework, no centres of reference beyond those of its inner thematic concerns is the present-day critical orthodoxy.³ The question arises, however, as to whether this refusal is as absolute as is generally supposed. Is the novel as devoid of a formal frame-

work as is now taken for granted? May there not be a scheme, a kind of submerged narrative structure which, alien to novelistic convention, remains as opaque to contemporary readers as it certainly was to earlier ones? Was Lawrence (with that sardonic irony which typified his attitude to the production of fiction between 1916-18) employing a veiled or "esoteric" structuring system which he was well aware would go unrecognized but which would further his exclusive concern with projecting the novel? (Such a suggestion is markedly less bizarre in the light of the recent discovery of a calculated correspondence between the progress of the seven love-episodes in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and an arcane initiation typology based on the opening of the "seven seals" in the body.)⁴

We know that Lawrence was immersed in "esoteric" research just before the writing of *Women in Love*, responding to the fashionable works of the day with a characteristic fascination-repulsion ambivalence.⁵ Central to these works is a preoccupation with "messiahs" or "seers" or "prophetae" (the terms are largely interchangeable), charismatic figures possessed of powers of divination and prophecy, whose lives have a prototypical pattern. Their setting-out, their individual crises, their choice of neophytes, their forms of initiation correspond to a definite type. A kind of "messianic typology" emerges. It seems too that in *Women in Love* Lawrence makes use of such a typology as a formal meta-structure, an overall frame which determines the "shape" of Birkin's "career" and the peculiar trajectory of his relations with Ursula. It determines not only the sequence of episodes but their "clustering" around vital events in a typical initiatory progress. But first of all the term "esoteric" itself needs some clarification.

Those "esoteric" writers whom Lawrence most likely read, H. P. Blavatsky, A. P. Sinnett, James M. Pryse among others, employ the term to specify a body of arcana, cryptic "truths" possessed solely by "seers" or "messiahs" (the Buddha, Pythagoras, Plato and Jesus being among the most distinguished in a long line), and communicated in secret to receptive disciples through ritual initiation.⁶ These writers in turn claimed access to such "truths" through secret communications from which the

“profani,” the mass of mankind, either through obtuseness or wilful hostility, were excluded. This note of elitism chimes accurately with the tone of Lawrence’s own “metaphysics” as outlined in *The Crown* and in *Women in Love*,⁷ and in the letters he employs the term “esoteric” to reinforce this elitism. Thus a 1917 letter proclaims the need for “a body of esoteric doctrines” touching “the mystery of the initiation into pure being” and preserved “sacred and clean from the herd.”⁸ “Exoteric” forms, by contrast, constitute a kind of vulgate; atrophied public beliefs and rituals which are now obsolete.

Since they included themselves in the line of succession, these “esoteric” writers show a natural fascination with the “careers” of their prototypes, those earlier “seers” and “prophetae.” In their discussions of the lives of these “seers” it is possible to detect a recurrent pattern, a typical five-stage messianic life-trajectory, the outline of which is as follows.

The prospective messiah first offers snippets of the kerygma, fragments of his evolving “wisdom” (its more superficial moral or ethical aspects, for example). His hearers in turn either ignore or revile him (a situation which mirrored the expectations of Blavatsky, Sinnett and Pryse as they too made their partial disclosures) (*SD*, i, xx-xxi, xxxiv, xxxviii; *EB*, pp. 1-3). The second stage involves a pause, a period of retreat or sequestration while the “seer” deepens his grasp on the “mysteries.” It was frequently marked by trials or spiritual crises, typified by the Buddha’s confrontation with the demon Mara or Jesus’ with Satan in the desert.⁹ The next is the stage of instruction, as the “seer” re-emerges to select an inner circle of neophytes, especially attuned and receptive. To them alone and in secret he imparts the full scope of the doctrines (*SD*, i, xx-xxi; *AU*, pp. 1-6).¹⁰ The fourth stage enacts the climactic ordeals of ritual initiation, the experiential assimilation by the neophyte of the transforming power of the doctrine.¹¹ Apocalyptic typology frequently posits a fifth stage (of which Pryse, for example, makes much), the emergence of the fated antagonist, the “pseudo-seer” or antichrist, demonic shadow of the true messiah, whose destiny it was to deal in illusion, often in perverse “eroticism” and always in final destruction (*AU*, pp. 51, 168).¹²

Before exploring the details, we can outline the general concordance between this messianic typology and the narrative framework of *Women in Love*. The first stage, the partial disclosure of the doctrines to sceptical audiences, coincides with Birkin's offer of snippets of his new "vision" in three separate occasions (in the opening episodes "Shortlands," "Class-Room" and "In the Train"). Typically he encounters incomprehension and ridicule, culminating in his retreat from his home-ground and his undertaking a journey to London (pp. 7-67). The next three episodes ("Crème de Menthe," "Totem" and "Breadalby") mark the phase of withdrawal in which Birkin, rarely foregrounded, appears evanescent and hermit-like. Three times he is discovered, intensifying his grasp of the "mysteries" through the engagement with art, absorbed in the African totem, drawing the Chinese geese, and being mysteriously assaulted by Hermione with a symbolic art object, the beautiful lapis lazuli ball. This phase culminates once again in a train journey away from the home-ground (pp. 68-121).¹³

Three further episodes ("An Island," "Mino" and "Water-Party") explicitly *place* Birkin as Salvator Mundi type, assertive, strident and preachy. With Ursula he enacts the crucial choice of a "neophyte," his predestined woman, imparting the full scope of the doctrines to her, while she as sceptical "clerk" and novelistic tyro, opposes yet absorbs, criticizes yet finally accepts (pp. 137-213). The path is now clear for the initiatory "ordeals" (mainly Ursula's), enacted in three crucial episodes ("Sunday Evening," "Moony" and "Excuse"), representing in turn a descent into Hades, a typical symbolic configuration of the "mysteries," and a final climactic "accession into being." This fourth stage concludes with the terminal journey by sea out of England (pp. 214-435). Birkin's withdrawal from the foreground coincides with the uncanny emergence of Loerke, the fully-fledged "pseudo-seer" of the "last days" of the novel. True to type, he attracts Gudrun as "neophyte," plays a demonic pseudo-initiation game with her, and propounds new doctrines which are replete with inverted echoes of Birkin's (pp. 436-533). At this point a more detailed exposition will, I hope, serve to confirm these correspondences, at the same time underscoring the extent

to which the dynamics of the novel's particular form persistently disrupt and disperse the types.¹⁴

1. *Prospective Messiah*

The theme of the emergent messiah is openly broached for the first time in the novel as Birkin and Gerald ride on the train to London. In a vignette fretted with multiple ironies, Gerald holds out the editorial of his *Daily Telegraph* for Birkin's inspection. It presages the rise of a man with a "new gospel" destined to rescue England from decadence and to precipitate a new epoch (p. 59). Already, however, the novel has intimated that Birkin himself may be the figure who will bring such anticipations to subversive fulfilment. Thus, we see him adopting extreme stances, uttering veiled prophecies, and struggling to bring a fragmented vision into clearer perspective. Three times he makes cryptic pronouncements, and three times is repelled, thus confirming the fate of all would-be messiahs who (as Pryse puts it) are repaid for their pains with "some form of physical or mental martyrdom" (*AU*, p. 81).

On the first and unpropitious occasion of Laura Critch's wedding party at Shortlands, Birkin startles the dissociated old Mrs. Critch by proposing that people, since they lack "essential" existence, should be wiped out *en masse*. Mrs. Critch instantly catches his drift (many of her own secret intimations, we learn later, match those of Birkin's), but subtly diverts his apocalyptic intensity with a domestic monologue of her own (p. 27). Later at the same party, testing a counterpart notion on Gerald, Birkin equates "essential" existence with acting in "singleness" (disclosing a mere fragment of the later fully-evolved "doctrine"). As messianic foil and opponent, Gerald dismisses Birkin's proposal as a blueprint for anarchy, as "pure nonsense" (pp. 35-37).

The more intimate and provocative presence of Hermione ("Class-Room") precipitates the second set of disclosures, which both deepen and personalize the wedding-party communications. Oscillating between messianic diagnosis and prescription, Birkin insists that Hermione repudiate her ego-conceit and live from "another centre," a darker dimension of being. Quite "unable to interpret his phrases" (and with Ursula's support) Hermione

ridicules him, and jeers him "into nothingness." For the first time he behaves like a would-be messiah, striking the true monomaniacal note, and sounding "as if he were addressing a meeting" (pp. 46-49).

The train journey with Gerald to London marks the occasion of the third revelation, the faith-core of the "new gospel," Birkin's belief in "ultimate marriage." Since these kerymatic adumbrations are both obscure and fragmentary, not surprisingly Gerald submits him to the ultimate humiliation, the public fate of prospective messiahs; responding with the scepticism of the "born unbeliever," he refuses to take him "seriously." Birkin is compelled to pursue his meditations in private, giving a more systematic and discursive edge to the "message." Mingling theological speculation with popular Darwinism he contemplates with satisfaction the imminent demise of the present race of humanity to make way for "a new embodiment, in a new way" (pp. 63-65).¹⁵

This retreat from the home-ground (typologically always the place least accommodating to prophets) signals the end of Birkin's "career" as apprentice messiah. After a brief eclipse, he will re-emerge more assertively, with a more rounded grasp of the "doctrine" and a more assured sense of destiny.

2. *Retreat*

At this point messianic typology locates a pause, a period of sequestration and reorientation, typified by the phase of retreat which marked the earlier stages of the careers of the Buddha (lonely meditation), and of Jesus (isolation in the wilderness), and of eastern adepts in general (secret study). It is the period during which the universal forces of darkness and disintegration are confronted and "conquered." Sinnett characterizes it as the prolonged silent "brood(ing)" of the "illuminati" before they re-emerge to "instruct" a small and exclusive circle of neophytes (*EB*, pp. 1-12). The next three episodes exemplify this phase of Birkin's "career" ("Crème de Menthe," "Totem" and "Breadalby") as in the midst of compulsive chatter, he remains noticeably dissociated and silent. Conforming to type these episodes have a common ambience in the pseudo, the deceptive and the false:

the Pompadour cafe is pseudo-artistic, Halliday's flat artificially primitive, and Breadalby house vacuously intellectual. On three central occasions in which Birkin is foregrounded, he is absorbed in the mysterious creation-destruction dialectic as revealed in art objects.

In the Pompadour, Birkin "looked muted, unreal, his presence left out" (p. 68); in Halliday's flat "aloof and white, and somehow evanescent" (p. 86). We glimpse him briefly engaged in contemplating the West Pacific statuette of the woman in labour, *placing* it culturally and ontologically in terms of the evolving "doctrine," sensing it as expressive of a phase of reductive sensation in a way that Gerald (as usual) only half comprehends. Most significantly he intuits that the statuette incorporates only a partial truth ("I know, this isn't everything"), one pole of the creation-destruction dialectic (pp. 87-88). The next occasion will show him contemplating two esoteric symbols in which both poles are perfectly equilibrated.

This involves Birkin's copying of the drawing of the Chinese geese, absorbing more about China (as he informs Hermione) than through "reading all the books." His "secret study" discloses the complete creation-destruction dialectic, articulated through two major symbols, the geese and the lotus flower.¹⁶ Through the power of these symbols to hold the life and death flows in perfect suspension ("fire of the cold-burning mud") Birkin penetrates to those mysterious "centres" of energy from which the Chinese live ("centres" whose renovatory power both he and Ursula discover for themselves in the episode "Excuse"). *Now* their force (their "insidious occult potency") is displayed in the ease with which Birkin finally penetrates Hermione's "defences," activating the latent and "convulsive" death-flow in her (pp. 98-99).

When she subsequently unleashes the "death-flow" on Birkin, hitting him over the head with the lapis lazuli ball, he anticipates her assault, wholly "unsurprised" by its violence. He senses his own complicity, the inevitability of this confrontation with the forces of disintegration and of his own compliance in the role of "victim" and "martyr" ("You were quite right, to biff me . . ."). His impulse to withdraw has its climax in his pantheistic regress to nature, the rejected prophet's retreat to the forest, and his

naked rolling in the flowers and the bushes. Though soothed, Birkin recognizes this retreat as factitious ("It was necessary to go back into the world"), a pseudo and premature attempt to stimulate those "centres" of energy about which the Chinese drawing had taught him so much (the text is especially insistent on this pseudo-stimulation of their central nodes at the loins, the thighs and the belly). Their true renovatory power must await the contact with the woman, Ursula's discovery of these dark "sources" of transformation at the inn of the Saracen's Head. The phase of withdrawal culminates in another train journey, the sick prophet's further retreat from his home-ground (pp. 116-21).

3. *Instruction*

Already in "Breadalby," Birkin has chosen Ursula, sensing her responsiveness, her "dangerous power" (p. 102). Now in three contiguous episodes ("An Island," "Mino" and "Water-Party"), he brings a further typological phase to fulfilment, "instructing" Ursula, revealing to her alone and in secret the full scope of the "doctrine," hitherto adumbrated only in public and only in fragments. This is the obligatory stage of "probation" or "preparatory training" (*AU*, p. 79), the choice of a neophyte and the disclosure of the kerygma as a prelude to the "ordeals" of initiation (*SD*, ii, 215).¹⁷ As "novelistic" tyro, Ursula's responses will modulate from open hostility, the proper "clerkly" scepticism in the face of messianic presumption, to a depth of assimilation which, she feels, eludes her conscious control.

The location of the first revelations is the island to which Birkin takes Ursula in a punt. Esoterically, islands are the traditional *loci classici* of occult communications, those retreats where the prototypical "Sons of God" once imparted their "weird secrets," access to which is now lost to all but a few "privileged men" (*IU*, i, 589-90; *SD*, ii, 220-23). (Birkin himself will be metamorphosed into one of their type in the inn of the Saracen's Head.) The communications themselves are an excursion into Lawrentian eschatology, cosmic in scope, a more theatrical and challenging version of his tentative musings on the train to London (p. 62). The mode of "instruction" is characteristically

messianic, modulating from apocalyptic diagnosis, through universal prescription, on to a final declaration of faith. Thus humanity, he diagnoses, is "dry-rotten" to the core (his sole claim to "rightness" is his awareness of this); humanity must fall from the tree of life and perish *en masse*; his consequent faith is in the "unseen hosts," those cosmic "Sons of God" who will obliterate the present race of mankind to make way for a new generation.¹⁸ Ursula, in turn, is riven by conflicting reactions, a "duality of feeling," loathing "the Salvator Mundi touch" in its rigidity and diffuse generality, yet compelled by his spontaneity, his "desirable life-rapidity" (the novel will enact Birkin's mutation from former to latter, from strident and humourless apocalyptic western-type prophet to smiling, flexible and "cooler" eastern-type sage) (pp. 139-43).¹⁹

Cats as denizens of the extra-human and wholly "other" spaces provide the symbolic context for the next set of revelations, as the Mino and the female stray enact the mysterious dynamics of the projected "star-equilibrium," the non-human "plane" of the new love-relationship. Once again Birkin proceeds by way of diagnosis, prescription and a declaration of faith, the orientation on this occasion being individual rather than cosmic. The transactions of personal and possessive love are now obsolete; there must be a penetration to a transpersonal "plane," the level of the uncharted, the stark and the final; his core-belief is in Ursula herself ("if I *do* believe in you") and in their unique capacity to effect a "break-through." As the most intimate challenge to Ursula's own assumptions about the nature of love, this occasion provokes her bitterest opposition, as she repudiates Birkin's messianic "earnestness" yet responds to his presence (pp. 161-72).

Birkin's third set of communications punctuates the dramatic events of the "Water-Party" episode, hinging like the events themselves on the traumatic irruption of the "death-flow" into the surface and "bright" celebration of life. There are two "secret" discussions, two occasions on which Birkin integrates his previous cosmic and individual prescriptions and gives them a fresh soteriological edge. As a lead-in to the first occasion, he dances the "death-flow" for Ursula, simulating its rhythms in his "obscene" and "slack-wagging" stepdance, immediately in-

sisting that she acknowledge the "spasm of universal dissolution" in herself. Ursula at first exemplifies the human resistance (which Birkin had noted) to acknowledging such concordances between the life and death processes, her initial apprehension being one-sided ("You only want us to know death") (pp. 188-94). After the drowning of Gerald's young sister (the theatrical staging of the "death-process" in public) she attends more sympathetically to Birkin's adumbrations, catching his drift when he insists on being "born again," yet reluctant to yield up "her very identity" (pp. 208-09). Precisely such a "yielding" constitutes the stuff of the initiatory "ordeals" which immediately follow.

4. *Initiation*

Initiation schemata, whether of the Eastern or Western types, have an immense variety of forms. Some like the Mithraic divide into seven stages; others like those Greek initiations described by Olympiodorus and Smyrnaeus have five; but the most common number by far was three.²⁰ Lawrence in the novel adopts the trinitarian paradigm, typical of the Egyptian and Eleusian mysteries. The first step involved the descent of the neophyte into Hades, the entrée through the "gates of death," and the experiential access to the death-throes of the old self (*IU*, ii, 145; *SD*, ii, 462). Its most common metaphorical inscription was that of the journey into the unknown, the declination into darkness. The second frequently hinged on some ritual performance, the symbolic enactment of the cosmic dimensions of the mysteries (in Greece, for example, this often revolved on the neophyte's assimilation of the moon-mysteries, associated with the worship of Diana, the moon-goddess) (*SD*, i, xxxix; *SD*, ii, 462-64). The third stage enacted the triumphant re-ascent into light, the sun-revelation of the third morning (*SD*, ii, 462).²¹ Ursula's "ordeals" of initiation (whose outline we can first of all sketch) involve a complex "novelistic" improvisation on this basic trinitarian pattern.

The process starts with the episode "Sunday Evening," Ursula's essentially solitary "ordeal," her entrée through the "gates of death," her traumatic mutation of identity and her realization of Birkin's prescriptions in "Water-Party." It prepares the way for

the symbolic enactment, the nocturnal moon-stoning ritual of the episode "Moony" and the bodying-forth of the cosmic scope of the "mystery." The climactic third stage is accomplished in "Excuse" with its numinous transfigurations and its ultimate "accession into being."

These three episodes are habitually treated as self-contained units, thematically self-validating and autonomous, without essential interconnections. Viewed as central events in a ritual initiatory drama, however, they appear as a sequence of interlocking scenes in a clear teleological progression. Even the interludes *between* these central episodes have parallel structures. Thus both "Sunday Evening" and "Moony" are each followed by unsuccessful encounters between Birkin and Ursula, after which Birkin engages in discursive meditations about those issues to which the encounters gave rise. And each interlude climaxes in a sexual polarization as Birkin swings sympathetically towards Gerald, and Ursula towards Hermione and Gudrun. A more detailed review will make these patterns more apparent.

Ursula's "ordeal" in "Sunday Evening" is of a radically different order from any which precedes or which follows it. Her sudden access to the "death-flow," the "imminence of death" in herself, propels her on a perilous journey over "the brink." Initially she hangs "about the gates," dreading the abyss, as the authorial voice (in its role of Plutonic guide) provokes and impels her (pp. 214-15). Then enacting the descent into Hades, abruptly "she yielded, she gave way, and all was dark." As "novelistic" neophyte, Ursula savours the "illimitable" perspectives of this new "kingdom of death," that expansive freedom which makes her previous existence seem like an incarceration (pp. 216-17).

Until her final "release" in "Excuse," Ursula's transit through the Hadean regions will be marked by a false luminosity, the residual tracks of her dissociated and "brilliant" old self as it continues to flare up assertively before its ultimate extinction. It has its metaphorical inscription in images of brittleness and light, refractions from jewels, crystals and moonlight, the glitter of the obsolete ego as it traverses the darkness. Thus when Birkin makes his first unsuccessful approach to her, her "whole nature" con-

denses into a "sharp crystal of fine hatred" against him, while he in her projected appraisal of him, becomes a "strange gem-like being whose existence defined her own non-existence" (pp. 221-22).

After this Birkin retires, absorbed in speculation, clarifying the sexual dialectic of the new love-relationship (the novel consistently differentiates between the modes of Birkin's and Ursula's private preoccupations: his are messianic in flavour, discursive and projective; hers are essentially experiential and personal). Repudiating the now-obsolete Platonic hermaphroditic fable (in which he locates the origins of possessive love), he fabricates a new sexual myth, theosophical in its orientation, an evolving configuration in which the man and the woman constellate like stars in a perfectly "polarized sex-circuit" (pp. 223-25).²² As an immediate consequence of his meditations, however, he moves in Gerald's direction in an attempt to establish a *Blutbrüderschaft*, while Ursula moves back to her old friends and her "old ways" (p. 237). After a prolonged separation (Birkin retreats to the south of France), their next coming together in "Moony" will show Ursula telepathetically attuned to his presence, sensing his return by the movement of his shadow by the pond.

The nocturnal moon-stoning ritual marks the second stage in the initiatory progress, the symbolic bodying-forth of the cosmic scope of the "mystery" (Birkin's celebrated invocation, "Cybele — curse her! The accursed *Syria Dea!*", however repudiatory, serves to locate the scene exactly in this context). The text at this point has generated multiple readings, produced by Birkin's enigmatic behaviour: was he attacking the castrating Great Mother aspect of Ursula, or her extreme self-sufficiency, or her hard and recalcitrant ego? Read as an initiation rite, the text foregrounds Birkin's role as "novelistic" and ritual hierophant, enacting an archaic cosmic drama for Ursula's benefit, one which portends the final death-throes of the old self and the violent birth-pangs of the new.

Before Ursula recognizes Birkin, she is possessed by soteriological longings, repudiating her "moon-brilliant hardness," desiring a profounder Plutonic penetration, "another night." Indeed the radiant moon on the black water is a determinate image of

the disk of her luminous ego circumscribed by unfathomable and Hadean darkness; it is in the light of this image that Birkin's triple assault on the moon has its initiatory significance. Thus it theatricalizes the initiatory *method*, the purging of the "old self" through beneficent penetration by, and immersion in, darkness; it dramatizes the meaning of Ursula's continuing "ordeal," her persistent oscillation between light and dark states; and it prefigures the mode of her imminent "release," as the moon's own image mutates from deathly "whiteness" to reformed "ragged rose" (Ursula's own frigid "radiance" will likewise mutate into "fresh, luminous flower"). At the end of the stoning, Ursula feels "spilled out, like water . . .," a trope particularly appropriate to ritual ascesis and emptying (Birkin, by contrast, is merely "satisfied"). Their subsequent love-making enacts this uneasy vacillation between light and dark modes, their dark "gentle communion" disrupted by passionate "destructive fires" which, Birkin feels, should be now superseded.

The sequence of events which leads into "Excuse" has a parallel structure to that which led into "Moony." Once again Birkin engages in discursive meditations, fighting his way out of the twin evolutionary cul-de-sacs of sun and ice destruction into potential ontological plenitude, "the paradisaical entry into pure, single being" (p. 287). It is this anticipation which precipitates his second unsuccessful encounter with Ursula, the "farce" of the marriage proposal, which exacerbates her "bright" opposition. This second interlude climaxes in the extreme polarization of the sexes, in Birkin's "surrogate" conjunction with Gerald in "Gladiatorial" and Ursula's ambivalent contact with Hermione in "Woman to Woman."

Middleton Murry was the first to identify the episode "Excuse" as the "essential crisis" of the novel,²³ and a reading along typological lines confirms his judgement. The episode marks the novelistic enactment of the third initiatory phase, the rebirth out of isolation and darkness into a new day, the radiance of a reconstituted self. The Lawrentian version is highly idiosyncratic (he seems to follow a typology of Yogic initiation based partly on Pryse and partly on Tantric sources) and has proved unusu-

ally resistant to exegesis. Here we can concentrate solely on its salience as a climactic rite of initiation.

It conforms to a typical chronological sequence, starting at dusk as the lovers drive past the Minster cathedral, continuing right through the night, and concluding at "high day." Its modes are consistently "esoteric" and gnostic, the lovers themselves as exclusive celebrants "filled with darkness and secrecy" (p. 361). Certain aspects of the sequence emphasize their mutual participation; others portray Birkin as "hierophant" and Ursula as neophytic "discoverer." Thus both experience the simultaneous birth of a new consciousness (at the same moment the bells of the Minster "like dim, bygone centuries sounding" signal the end of an obsolete epoch) (pp. 350-52); both undergo a radical transmutation of vision, appearing to each other as presences from the "beyond" (pp. 352-53); both achieve the "perfect passing away" and the "intolerable accession into being" (p. 354); and of course both participate in the plutonic sexual conjunction in Sherwood Forest with which the rituals culminate (pp. 360-61). At the same time the hermeneutic suspense of the narrative is concentrated on Ursula's discoveries, her progressive "enlightenment" (intensified by Birkin's own speculation as to whether the climactic moment may be at hand when Ursula may at last "go beyond herself") (p. 343). Thus it is she who locates those mysterious somatic "centres," the "ultra-phallic" source of these radiant transfigurations (the Chinese drawing has taught Birkin about them); through her ritual stroking of his loins, it is she who establishes the "rich new circuit" between them; and it is she who experiences the total reconstitution of selfhood, becoming at last "her complete self" (pp. 353-54). Like a typical hierophant, throughout these discoveries, Birkin remains comparatively passive, watching and approving with a deific detachment. And like typical initiates at the end of the ritual, the lovers impose a ban on disclosure, hiding away "the remembrance and the knowledge" of the night, even from each other (p. 361).

5. *The Pseudo-Seer*

From this point onwards the narrative foregrounding of Birkin and Ursula is at once more casual and more intermittent. Both

are displaced by the new thrust of the action and by the transition to a snow-bound Alpine location which largely excludes them. With the exception of their brief spell aboard ship out of England (pp. 436-38) their time of radical transformation is over. Ursula's earlier resistance is replaced by frank receptivity (she actually propounds Birkin's love-doctrines to Gudrun, much to Gudrun's annoyance) (p. 493), and the refreshed "life-impulse" in Birkin renders the old messianic preachiness obsolete. His role as flexible eastern-type "seer" is in the ascendant, as he appears mostly "smiling," at once more detached and accessible. The foreground is usurped by the death-drama between Gerald and Gudrun, and by the emergence of Loerke, the antagonist who precipitates the final events of the novel.

Sibylline and Joachite apocalypses have, of course, their pseudo-messiahs (or antichrists) who emerge to challenge the true messiah on the eve of the millennium (the type was frequently portrayed as a "black art" initiate, perversely erotic, a creature of "lust and dirt" (mud) and possibly Jewish, much like Loerke).²⁴ Pryse, rewriting the Johannine apocalypse as an esoteric and occult initiation rite, characterizes the "pseudo-seer" as an instigator of degenerate visions and of "phallic sorcery" (*AU*, pp. 51; 168). His path of initiation leads into the "mysteries" of exclusion, of perpetual opposition, and of final disintegration and death. As "novelistic" pseudo-seer, Loerke combines all these attributes, playing an elaborate game of initiation with Gudrun, a parodic replay of the "true" initiation enacted by Birkin and Ursula. Typically, there are three central encounters between them.

At first sight Gudrun is "spell-bound" by Loerke, entranced by his futurist theories of art, compelled by his narrative of sexual obliquities. He actualizes her descent into Hades, her experiential access to "the underworld of life," the "rock bottom" of all existence (pp. 474-80) (Birkin's prophetic antennae instantly register Loerke as "adversary," as dangerously attractive to women and as virtuoso of the ultimate rites of corruption [pp. 480-82]). In their second encounter Loerke discloses the sado-masochistic drive behind his creation of art, while Gudrun, "almost slave-like," responds to his dark implications (pp. 482-88). As the

third encounter is the climactic one there is much preliminary authorial planting of clues through which to gauge its significance. One important effect is to place Loerke and Gudrun as pseudo-initiates.

Thus they elaborate together a "game" of "subtle inter-suggestivity" (quite incomprehensible to the exoteric Gerald) "as if they had some esoteric understanding of life, that they alone were initiated into the fearful central secrets, that the world dared not know" (the "as if" underscores its status as dubious "game," as a purely mimetic performance void of ultimate meaning). In addition Loerke is something of a "phallic sorcerer," an adept in the "black art" of sex, a would-be proficient in "this temple of mysteries" (the body of Gudrun) where Gerald has remained a perpetual "postulant": "But he, Loerke, could he not penetrate into the inner darkness, find the spirit of the woman in its inner recess, and wrestle with it there, the central serpent that is coiled at the core of life?" Not surprisingly Gudrun's choice of Loerke as her "creature" and her future is based on her intuitive anticipation of celebrating "the obscene mystery of ultimate reduction" with him (pp. 504-08).

The encounter itself (pp. 514-17) seals a kind of contract between them and clarifies the basis of their future commitment. It also resonates with subversive echoes of those crucial encounters between Birkin and Ursula. Thus Loerke immediately "personalizes" the relationship, delving into Gudrun's background and love-affairs (Birkin, by contrast, sought to "impersonalize" his). He quickly declares his "faith" in her ("I believe in you"), echoing Birkin's declaration to Ursula (p. 163). He proffers a new "gospel" of love, transcending the now obsolete "*religion d'amour*," a parodic enactment of precisely that level of engagement which Birkin insisted must be outgrown ("it is the *me* that is looking for a mistress, and my *me* is waiting for the *thee* of the mistress . . ."). Finally, as "pseudo-seer" he proposes a new type of union with Gudrun, as with "prophetic eyes" he envisages a concurrence of "your fate and mine" towards a terminal destiny which however he refuses to contemplate. Typically the essence of the relationship is its hypothetical quality, its location in the

realm of the might-be-achieved, its status as pure "game" played into a blurred and indefinite future.

Birkin's final foregrounding, on his return to the Alps, highlights at once his awakened humanity (his distress at Gerald's death) and his more benign and muted messianism. His former relish in apocalyptic destruction has modulated into more compassionate meditations on world evolution. Thus as he stands in the snow at the place where Gerald died, a new sense of cosmic "mystery" breaks in on him. The word itself (noticeably absent from his earlier revelations to Ursula) now connotes that movement of universal creation which is independent of man, and whose "fathomless, infallible, inexhaustible" quality makes messianic compulsion irrelevant. In the more speculative manner of the eastern "sages" (and with theosophical commonplaces as source) Birkin now contemplates a time-scale which is other than man's, the imponderable evolution of "new races and new species . . . new forms of consciousness, new forms of body, new units of being" (p. 538), whose emergence mankind can neither predict nor envisage. Earlier intimations that Birkin himself might be the spearhead of such evolution have now vanished. One single reflection crystallizes Birkin's gradual mutation from hyper-active and dogmatic western-type prophet to more flexible and cosmically-conscious eastern-type "seer": as he undertakes the day's business (of organizing Gerald's affairs) "quietly, without bother," it comes home to him that to "rant, to rave" in the old manner is now obsolete; better to be quietly detached, living "direct from the mystery," and bearing "one's soul in patience and in fulness" (pp. 538-39).

NOTES

- 1 *"The Rainbow" and "Women in Love": A Casebook*, ed. Colin Clarke (London: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 67-72. Murry of course subsequently modified these opinions (see *Casebook*, pp. 77-90).
- 2 Quoted from John Worthen, *D. H. Lawrence and The Idea of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 90.
- 3 Worthen for example puts this view succinctly, "Its very structure is a refusal of simple narrative progression, its clear-cut, often unlinked chapters follow not the sequence of a particular narrative but the progress of particular concerns . . ." (pp. 95-96).

- ⁴ Frank Kermode was among the first to note the connection. "See Spenser and the Allegorists," *Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 28-30. For the more "esoteric" aspects of the correspondence, see my article, "Connie and the Chakras: Yogic Patterns in D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*," *The D. H. Lawrence Review*, 13, No. 1 (Spring 1980), 79-93.
- ⁵ Emile Delavenay, *D. H. Lawrence: The Man and his Work* (London: Heinemann, 1972), pp. 458-62.
- ⁶ The works by these writers are cited parenthetically in my text by volume number (where necessary), and page number(s). The following abbreviated titles have been used: *AU* for James M. Pryse, *The Apocalypse Unsealed* (London: John M. Watkins, 1910); *EB* for A. P. Sinnett, *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883; rev. ed. London: The Theosophical Publishing House Ltd., 1972); *IU* for H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, 2 vols. (1877; 2nd ed. California: The Theosophical Publishing Company, 1910); and *SD* for H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: Volumes i and ii* (1888; rpt. California: The Theosophy Company, 1974).
- ⁷ To take one example: Gudrun contrasts the esoteric Cleopatra, who "harvested the ultimate sensation" with such "exoteric exponents of love" as Mary Stuart and the "great Rachel." *Women in Love* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 505. Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in my text.
- ⁸ *The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Harry T. Moore (1962; rpt. London: Heinemann, 1977), I, 520.
- ⁹ This period of sequestration was especially common among western-type would-be messiahs. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957; 3rd ed. London: Granada Publishing Ltd., Paladin, 1970), p. 45, speaks of the typical medieval prospective messiah, who first retired to the forest "as a hermit" in order to "acquire the spiritual power for his mission."
- ¹⁰ Blavatsky recuperates the gospel story for the esoteric tradition by positing John the Baptist as a mere exoteric teacher who proclaimed the orthodox and public forms of the new doctrine. Then, after the typical "pause" in the desert, Jesus came, chose his "inner circle" of disciples, taught them, and initiated them into the "higher mysteries" (*SD*, ii, 566; *IU*, II, 191-92). The text most frequently brought forward by Blavatsky and others to prove that Jesus himself distinguished between the esoteric and exoteric forms of his teaching is taken from Matthew, Ch. 13, v. 11, 13, "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given . . . Therefore speak I to them in parables; because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand."
- ¹¹ The phases of secret instruction and ritual initiation are exclusive to esoteric interpretations and have no basis in orthodox Christian messianic typology. There the central emphasis is on Jesus' transformation of the Jewish eschatological expectation of a political messiah-king into one whose kingdom was "not of this world." For a concise modern discussion, see Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (1959; 4th imp. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1973), Ch. 5. Sometimes, however, Christian baptism was regarded as a type of initiation-sacrament reminiscent of Greek and Egyptian mystery-religions. See Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of The New Testament* (1952; 4th imp. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1974), I, 140.
- ¹² Of these five stages only two are characteristic of Christian messianic typology: those of "sequestration" and of the emergence of the "false

- prophet" or antichrist type. The latter is a familiar figure in Johannine, Sybilline and Joachite prophecy. See Cohn, pp. 33-36; 77-81; 108-10.
- 13 Lawrence's schematics in the novel involve an endless improvisation on a trinitarian paradigm, typical also of his "metaphysics."
 - 14 An article as determinedly schematic as this one is forced to ignore the play of irony, scepticism, depreciation and even humour which attends Birkin's "career" and his relations with Ursula. The term "novelistic" is used to indicate those moments in the novel where the play *against* the types is particularly marked. Likewise it ignores Gerald's relations with Gudrun. Gerald is essentially an "exoteric" type, mouthpiece of received opinions and attitudes, of public orthodoxies. Even his "initiation" with Gudrun in the episode "Rabbit" (p. 273) occurs in public, in the presence of Winifred.
 - 15 This blending of Darwinism and theosophical speculation (if only to repudiate Darwinian theory) is typical of these "esoteric" writers (*SD*, pp. 186-87; *EB*, pp. 28-34).
 - 16 The lotus is a well-known esoteric symbol, signifying the union of fire/water, spirit/matter, male/female in a higher transcendence (*SD*, i, 379-81). Likewise the esoteric "goose" symbol (in a way particularly appropriate to Birkin's "secret study") represents "Wisdom in darkness beyond the reach of men" (*SD*, i, 77-81).
 - 17 For this period of "preparation and probation" as a prelude to initiation, see Samuel Angus, *The Mystery-Religions and Christianity* (1925; rpt. New York: University Books, 1966), pp. 77-90.
 - 18 Birkin's "unseen hosts" closely resemble the "Dhyan Chohans" of theosophical angelology who are at once "forerunners of the new humanity" and "the perfected efflorescence of former humanity, who... reign... in a divine way over the destinies of our world" (*EB*, pp. 131, 163).
 - 19 Lawrence's story, *The Man Who Died*, enacts a parallel mutation from assertive and missionary type messiah who "tried to lay the compulsion of love on all men" to a more relaxed and accommodating type of oriental initiate.
 - 20 See Angus, Ch. III. On Mithraic ritual initiation, the standard work (available to Lawrence) was Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra* (1903; rpt. New York: Dover, 1956). See especially pp. 152-57.
 - 21 The parallel with the three stages of the Christian redemptive scheme is clear: the "crucifixion" of the "old self," the harrowing of hell, and the resurrection on the third morning. In Pryse's esoteric reading of the Johannine apocalypse there is a similar three-stage scheme: the extreme "loneliness" of the neophyte's descent into Hades; the cosmic allegory of the riding out of the four horsemen; and the climactic revelation of the "seven seals" at the conclusion of the initiatic ordeals (*AU*, 88-135). See also Lawrence's own reading of the Johannine apocalypse in *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation*, ed. Mara Kalnins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 73-107.
 - 22 This notion of the sexual "star-balance" may derive from Edward Carpenter's *Love's Coming-of-Age* (1896; 4th imp. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Ltd., 1903), pp. 103-04, or from Blavatsky (*SD*, ii, 84) where she speaks of a future evolution towards an "equilibrated compound" of male and female, the sexual "balance" in its "final perfection."
 - 23 *Casebook*, p. 70.
 - 24 Cohn, pp. 84-88.