

## **Messiah and Apostle? Messianic Consciousness as Response to World War, in Lawrence, and Leavis**

*With supplementary comment on after-war Messianism in other major figures*

‘Zwei Jahrtausende beinahe und nicht ein einziger neuer Gott!’

‘Nearly 2000 years and not a solitary new god.’

Thus Nietzsche in *The AntiChrist*, §19, duly blaming Christianity in the process - ‘this pitiful god of Christian monotonous-theism!’. In *The Will to Power*, in his invocation of nihilism, he hints that it is to do with the rise of science: ‘Since Copernicus man has been rolling from the center toward X.’ In the more complex analysis in *The Genealogy of Morality* he argues that science indeed arose from the truth-seeking drive of Christianity. Complex - as usual with Nietzsche.

### **The Post-Copernican Dimension**

This, post-Copernican vision of a world succumbed to science, is the background to the post-*Sons and Lovers* works of Lawrence, particularly the post-war novels, *Aaron's Rod*, *Kangaroo*, *The Plumed Serpent*, and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. And it takes the form, gradually, of reclaiming the Old Gods, most centrally in *The Plumed Serpent*, in Messianic or Shamanic mode. What he does in *The Plumed Serpent* is almost unique, except, perhaps, in Science Fiction, which has less inhibitions than classically trained novelists do, yet without the primal creativity of the classically trained novelist. Tentative and delicate in *Quetzalcoatl*, almost arrogant in *The Plumed Serpent*, not even *Joseph and his Brethren*, amazing historical Re-Creation as it is, has the God-Creating impetus of *The Plumed Serpent*. The versions of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (together with *A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover*) are just as Messianic in a very different way. The Messianic had come to stay, right up to the work on which he was working at the end, *Apocalypse*.

### **Historicity**

Later on I shall suggest that the source of the Messianic impulse in these works of Lawrence lies in *historicity*, in living, not antiquarian, history, that Leavis, despite his Apostolic stance in relation to Lawrence, also possesses, in his profound grasp of historicity, a version of the Messianic insight. Historicity might be, over-simplifyingly, defined as: that in a moment of history which defines its irreversible uniqueness, inherently in communicative relation to past and future. But this Leavis could never quite lay hold of, because of his ambivalence about creative novelty, (however massively he celebrates it theoretically), as opposed to his preoccupation with creating a canon of achieved works. It is apparently a paradox that the supreme exponent of the canonical achieved work, Leavis, should have so celebrated - yet in this very way distorted! - the supreme master of the improvisatory novel, and short rhapsodic novel, Lawrence.

But once one realises the links between historicity and the Messianic impulse, one is then entirely free to recognise the wider Messianic impulse in most of the works of Modernism and Post-Modernism - think of, for instance: *The Wasteland*, *The Rainbow*, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, *Being and Time*, *Interpretation of Dreams*, *Process and Reality*, *Philosophical*

*Investigations, Of Grammatology, The Wheel of Fire, Ulysses, Nostramo, The Magic Mountain, The Glass Bead Game, The Golden Bough, The Goddess of Complete Being (Ted Hughes), Commentary on Romans (Barth), History of the Synoptic Tradition (Bultmann).*

### **The Account of the War in *Kangaroo***

Most of these are written either after War or under the lurking shadow of inevitable War to Come. That is almost what defines them as modern works, or as the precursors, such as Nietzsche. And the link is made in an absolutely paradigmatic way in *Kangaroo*, in the chapters, *The Nightmare*, and the following chapter, *Revenge Timotheus Cries*, which prepare the way for *The Plumed Serpent*. In *The Nightmare* chapter, Lawrence relates, with meticulous fidelity, his experience of the transition from the gentlemanly world of the Asquith Premiership up till 1916, and then the Lloyd George and Horatio Bottomley years and the death of the gentlemanly pre-war world in favour of a kind of, as he evokes, indirect mob rule and mentality, and his and Frieda's and their friends' increasing humiliation and loss of privacy and autonomy at its hands, which had come near the point of destroying them, when the war ended. In *Revenge Timotheus Cries* he recognises both 1. the profound collective impulse of revenge, to be enacted on the grand scale in WW2:

‘One thing he realized, however: that if the fire had suddenly erupted in his own belly, it would erupt one day in the bellies of all men. Because there it had accumulated, like a great horrible lava pool, deep in the unconscious bowels of all men. All who were not dead. And even the dead were many of them raging in the invisible, with gnashing of teeth. But the living dead, these he could not reckon with: they with poisonous teeth like hyaenas.’

and, 2. the desire, Messianic or Shamanic, to delve into the realms older and deeper *beneath* modern consciousness and its wounds and need to retaliate:

‘Humanity could do as it liked: he did not care. So long as he could get his own soul clear. For he believed in the inward soul, in the profound unconscious of man. Not an ideal God. The ideal God is a proposition of the mental consciousness, all-too-limitedly human. "No," he said to himself. "There IS God. But forever dark, forever unrealisable: forever and forever. The unutterable name, because it can never have a name. The great living darkness which we represent by the glyph, God."

There is this ever-present, living darkness inexhaustible and unknowable. It IS. And it is all the God and the gods.

And every LIVING human soul is a well-head to this darkness of the living unutterable. Into every living soul wells up the darkness, the unutterable. And then there is travail of the visible with the invisible. Man is in travail with his own soul, while ever his soul lives. Into his unconscious surges a new flood of the God-darkness, the living unutterable. And this unutterable is like a germ, a foetus with which he must travail, bringing it at last into utterance, into action, into BEING.’

And this is then realised, primarily, in *The Plumed Serpent*. This vision comes to fruition in *The Plumed Serpent*.

## Leavis's recoil?

Leavis recoils from the actuality of *The Plumed Serpent* with, it seems to me, something near to contempt. Leavis's final words on it in *Thought Words and Creativity* are:

'But Mexico was not isolated or insulated; Ramon couldn't realistically count on its remaining for long immune from outside interference.

I will say no more on this head; I will merely add to my adverse criticism this general observation: 'important', used by Lawrence in the way in the way he uses it in his evaluative placing of *The Plumed Serpent*, is a betraying word. It means that even Lawrence can be in a sense a victim of the absence of any sharp boundary between his discursive thought and his fully creative art.'

Leavis dismisses such a passage as the following:

'Only from the flowers there is commingling. And the flowers of every race are the natural aristocrats of that race. And the spirit of the world can fly from flower to flower, like a humming-bird, and slowly fertilize the great trees in their blossoms. Only the Natural Aristocrats can rise above their nation; and even then they do not rise beyond their race. Only the Natural Aristocrats of the World can be international, or cosmopolitan, or cosmic. It has always been so. The peoples are no more capable of it than the leaves of the mango-tree are capable of attaching themselves to the pine.--So if I want Mexicans to learn the name of Quetzalcoatl, it is because I want them to speak with the tongues of their own blood. I wish the Teutonic world would once more think in terms of Thor and Wotan, and the tree Igdrasil. And I wish the Druidic world would see, honestly, that in the mistletoe is their mystery, and that they themselves are the Tuatha De Danaan, alive, but submerged. And a new Hermes should come back to the Mediterranean, and a new Ashtaroth to Tunis; and Mithras again to Persia, and Brahma unbroken to India, and the oldest of dragons to China. Then I, Cipriano, I, First Man of Quetzalcoatl, with you, First Man of Huitzilopochtli, and perhaps your wife, First Woman of Itzpapalotl, could we not meet, with sure souls, the other great aristocrats of the world, the First Man of Wotan and the First Woman of Freya, First Lord of Hermes, and the Lady of Astarte, the Best-Born of Brahma, and the Son of the Greatest Dragon? I tell you, Cipriano, then the earth might rejoice, when the First Lords of the West met the First Lords of South and East, in the Valley of the Soul. Ah, the earth has Valleys of the Soul, that are not cities of commerce and industry. And the mystery is one mystery, but men must see it differently.'

This, of course, is none other than the doctrine Lawrence articulates in his magnificent review of Dostoievski's parable, Ivan Karamazov's parable, of *The Grand Inquisitor*, in which he defends the Inquisitor's position, of affirming, (against what he sees as the too humanly demanding doctrine of freedom of the Gospel Christ), Miracle, Mystery, and Authority. Leavis never deals with this, and he also only occasionally refers to Dostoievski's admirer, and paralleler, Nietzsche. Did he find this all too outlandish in a rather basic sense? In certain ways, despite himself, he remains within the ambit of the Whig Interpretation of History.

## What is the recoil about?

So, does he, then, also recoil from the very possibility Lawrence is exploring? Does his viscerally Enlightenment mind actually recoil from the *essence itself* of what Lawrence is trying to do, the summoning up of the old Gods of Mexico - or of anywhere, back behind Christianity? Countering Leavis, in this context, one is tempted to apply Dr Johnson's dictum about women preaching to what Lawrence is doing in *The Plumed Serpent*: "Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all." Who else even came anywhere near this possibility? For instance, Nietzsche's prophetic utterance in the face of the Copernican dilemma is an utterance which is undoubtedly in the full lineage of Messianic or Shamanic evocation: for instance, in the articulation of the Eternal Return in the section entitled *The Vision and the Riddle*.

## Past Based Knowledge, Apprehension of the Future: Illustrations of the Messianic

If, in a very brief shorthand, - but following the Birkin of *Women in Love*, responding to the fictional Sir Joshua Matheson, the Bertrand Russell figure, - I were to argue that scientific knowledge *essentially* deals with the past, in patterned and law-governed repetition of principles based on past data (a concept confirmed by Hume's puzzles about causality and related matters, the black hole of empiricism), then, unless we radically review our conception of science, a direction in which Quantum Physics may be pushing us, to be sure, science contrasts with historicity, in that historicity deals in the unique and indeterminate in situations, which gives them *their historicity*, and which is connected with the reality that, for us, the future remains open, not totally, but still always in intrinsically unforeseeable ways, and that this is, as Lawrence always emphasises, at the core of our sense of life.

In the light of this, what happens in *The Vision and the Riddle* is revealing indeed. Nietzsche assumes as premise - as the dwarf with whom Zarathustra is contesting takes for granted! - that the cycle of existence is totally determinate, totally constrained by what has already happened, as deterministic as Spinoza. And then he precedes to attribute it to himself, as a volitional decision:

'Must not whatever CAN run its course of all things, have already run along that lane? Must not whatever CAN happen of all things have already happened, resulted, and gone by?

And if everything have already existed, what thinkest thou, dwarf, of This Moment? Must not this gateway also—have already existed?

*And are not all things closely bound together in such wise that This Moment draweth all coming things after it? CONSEQUENTLY—itself also? [my italic]*'

'With one mighty bound he was free', as an episode of Flash Gordon, doomed in some ghastly situation in the previous episode, once began! In effect, Nietzsche is saying that, by an act of will, we actually *turn the past into the future*. And, of course, into our own unique subjectivity in the process. It is the possession of a future which is the criterion.

Similarly, in *The Future of Hegel*, Catherine Malabou argues that, far from embodying the fixed finality of knowledge of which Heidegger accuses him, at the heart of Hegel is a *plasticity* which enables him to be open to a future - and philosophically therefore to *have* a future! - which is

both, in a sense, absolute, yet indeterminate. And that this is what gives him his Messianic fascination for those who, in every epoch since he wrote, have found him hugely compelling and all-influential. And in *Spectres of Marx* Derrida extracts from the political defeat of Marxism a Messianic promise, since now our relation with Marx has become open once more, and therefore full of seeds for the future. In the masterly *The Goddess of Complete Being*, Ted Hughes even finds in Shakespeare himself a creative and self-transforming, a *plastic*, open-ended patterning of transformations, which is Messianic, and directed at the profoundest and most paradigmatic faultlines of the epoch to which Shakespeare is writing in relation.

In them all, it is the reclaiming of a future which is, fatefully, at stake.

### **Leavis's Canon as also historicity: Apostle into Messiah**

But I end with the surprising, or, in light of historicity, not so surprising, recognition that, in this sense, Leavis himself becomes more than Apostolic in relation to Lawrence; he becomes, in his own right, Messianic. No one has a stronger sense of historicity than Leavis. His reshaping of the canon, in the footsteps of TS Eliot's *dissociation of sensibility*, as such is dominated by historicity, and it is his legacy. It is not, in Nietzsche's terms, an antiquarian legacy of historicity; it is a monumental one, in Nietzsche's jargon; it is directed towards constituting an assured reservoir *out of which the future may be forged*. Whatever disagreements we may have with Leavis, this concept is of massive importance; that the concept of the possibility of a canon be taken forward to the future. Without a canon, there is no foundation of historical awareness and reflexivity from which even the dark Gods may emerge.

It is not an either/or. The canon is the opening from which a future may emerge, and, whilst Leavis and Lawrence, - or any of us, - may have different emphases regarding the nature of a canon, the minimum condition of a Leavisite dialogue with Lawrence is that we continue to claim the existence of a canon. The canon is foundational, in a Kantian transcendental sense. With the conception of a canon, we gather to ourselves once more a living conception of historicity as our creative source. This is the recognition implicit in Leavis's work, especially his later work; even though, once the conception of historicity has dawned upon us, it opens up to Nietzschean or Hegelian or Lawrentian magnitudes, it is the Leavisian concept which remains ever potent, the more creatively its plasticity and historicity is released into life and force.

In *The Plumed Serpent* Lawrence uniquely dared to imagine a dialogue with historicity and primal history. Without this element in his creative imagination, he is domesticated, even neutered, and, whatever Leavis was, leaping towards life out of historicity, he too was neither domesticated nor neutered.

<http://hewardwilkinson.co.uk/>