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"Demonish Maturity": Identity, Consumption, and the Discourse of Species in *The Plumed Serpent*

Carrie Rohman

RECENT STUDIES OF PRIMITIVISM IN THE MODERNIST AESTHETIC have privileged the categories of race and gender in an effort to rearticulate our understanding of imperialist binaries. Such studies show that modernist writers juxtapose Western subjectivity with that of racialized and sexualized "others," who are considered less technologically and ideologically advanced, in an anxious attempt to shore up imperialist identity. The animal "other"—though fundamental to modernist ideologies of difference—is usually omitted from these critical discussions of modernism's implicit "power relations" (166), as Marjorie Perloff has called them. In fact, the human/animal binary recurs frequently in modernist literary conventions and registers anxiety about Western identity in a post-Darwinian age.

Among such conventions, D. H. Lawrence's ongoing interrogation of the boundary between "human" and "animal" is especially compelling. Lawrence repeatedly deploys the discourse of species to explore the contours of the human, with results that can be wildly divergent. At times his exploration of the species problem unsettles conventional definitions of the human, but at other times his work recapitulates the traditional humanist subject position through violence against animals. Lawrence's various literary investigations resonate with the recent theoretical interests of thinkers like Jacques Derrida, who argues that animality figures as humanism's constitutive outside.

Animality operates as humanism's "other" because the autonomy of the human subject is dependent upon the disavowal of the animal. That is, we define our humanness through our difference from animals. But the human and animal cannot be entirely sep-

arated. Indeed the human being is constituted as both a primate body linked to basic physical necessity and a "human" mind capable of abstracting itself from those connections. Derrida points to the asymmetrical valuation of this intersection of carnality and concept when he speaks of the dominant schema of Western subjectivity as "carno-phallogocentrism" (113). Derrida adds the prefix "carno" to indicate his further delineation of the patriarchal subject. Just as that subject is identified with phallic power (phallocentrism) and with the metaphysics of presence (logocentrism), so too it is associated with carnivorous virility. Thus Derrida explains, "The subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh" (114). For this reason, Derrida concludes that in Western cultures the head of state could never be a vegetarian since "the *chef* must be an eater of flesh" (114). This sacrifice of the animal is necessary, in deconstructive terms, to enact the disavowal of the other precisely because that "other" already infects the subject itself.

Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) provides a studied meditation on the discourse of animality and its relationship to consumption. Specifically, this work contains a complex species economy that maintains *and* resists the distinction between human and animal by foregrounding connections between eating and power. Lawrence represents the unspeakable confrontation with animality as Kate's fear of cannibalistic incorporation by the Mexican "other," which is figured as an animal other throughout the novel. By registering this fear of the dissolution of self, Lawrence thematizes the modernist anxiety that Darwin set in motion, that we are, in short, more similar to non-human animals than we are different from them. In fact, the species boundary rivals the racial one in Lawrence's imagination and emerges as one of his fundamental axes of thought.

Recent postcolonial criticism has illuminated the dialectic between Western self and non-Western "other" that served to stabilize European identity in the modernist era. Work by such scholars as Marianna Torgovnick and Anne McClintock identifies Western anxiety about the racialized "savage" and notes the gendering of such identity binaries. Torgovnick, like Edward Said in his work on imperialism, gives primacy to the sexualized and racialized dichotomies that are prominent in modernist uses of the primitive. While the elaboration of discursive relationships be-

tween races and genders is crucial to our understanding of modernism, critical work on species distinctions in primitivism remains incomplete.

The human/animal binary is not only a recurring theme in primitivist literature; in some ways it also underlies racial and sexual distinctions. Since notions of the primitive almost always imply the possibility of evolutionary regression, it is necessary to explore the ways in which modernist authors have figured the animal in relation to the primitive and the civilized. Like modernism, its theoretical progenitor, primitivism often engages conflicting oppositions. In *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives*, Torgovnick begins her discussion by noting the modernist predilection for imagining primitives within a "cherished series of dichotomies" (3). As objects of study and comparison for Western subjectivity, primitive peoples are defined alternately as "gentle, in tune with nature, paradisal, ideal—or violent, in need of control" (3). The "primitive," then, has been marshaled by modernist writers to represent both the excessively desirable and the excessively feared, the sublime and the abject. As Torgovnick explains, this is a self-serving paradigm: "the primitive can be—has been, will be (?)—whatever Euro-Americans want it to be. It tells us what we want it to tell us" (9).

This self-reflexivity is grounded in the Western conviction and fear that humans are all fundamentally primitives, an anxiety that has obsessed modern culture since the popularization of Darwin's work. On some level, then, the question of the primitive is always a question of the civilized. According to Torgovnick, this "conceived link between us and them often depends on evolutionist premises" (8). She quotes Freud's claim in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) that the primitive is "a necessary stage of development through which every race has passed" (8). While this quotation implies some historical connection between past and present, it also insists that the primitive is extinct since it merely represents a stage passed through by civilized cultures. More to the point is Freud's argument that there exists "a collective mind, in which mental processes occur just as they do in the mind of an individual" (*Totem* 195). Within this supra-historical mind, an original, presumably singular sensibility can have "persisted for many thousands of years and has remained operative in generations which can have had no knowledge of that [sensibility]" (195). This is certainly the more frightening prospect for modernity,

that some savage vestige is operative in the very minds of the civilized. Thus, the unavoidable implication surfaces: the civilized could actually be savage.

Most threatening about the modern evolutionary view of the primitive is not simply that the civilized might be intimately connected to the primitive, but that the civilized are organically linked to the animal. This more profound by-product of the evolutionary reasoning linked to primitivism—one which Torgovnick fails to address—is itself registered in the human/animal binary, which is often integral to primitivist ideology and metaphor. And while this dichotomy sometimes overlaps with other primitivist distinctions, it requires focused consideration for our further comprehension of the modernist relationship to otherness.

Modernist ideology about the relationship between human and animal has partial roots in the philosophical and social scientific discourses of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The works of Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, are filled with implications about species boundaries. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), his earliest book, Nietzsche outlines the polar, aesthetic categories "Apollonian" and "Dionysian," which frame his analysis. In many ways, the *Ur*-binary of primitivism is already operational here since Apollo and Dionysus represent the reason/instinct dichotomy which saturates modernist literature. On one side of the divide, the Apollonian position is characterized by symbolism and reason or "philosophical calmness" (25). On the other side, the Dionysian partakes of "self-forgetfulness" as man is reunited with nature (26). Nietzsche's description of a Dionysian revelry is telling:

> In song and dance man exhibits himself as a member of a higher community: he has forgotten how to walk and speak, and is on the point of taking a dancing flight into the air. His gestures bespeak enchantment. Even as the animals now talk, and as the earth yields milk and honey, so also something supernatural sounds forth from him. (27)

Ironically, Nietzsche figures this return to the animal as something beyond nature (supernatural). Dionysian reunification with nature seems to set men apart from and above the Apollonian thinkers who "do not divine what a cadaverous-looking and ghastly aspect" they present (26). The value judgment implicit in Nietzsche's dichotomy favors the Dionysian, for Apollo breeds a deterioration that Nietzsche will name later.

The sickness that haunts *The Birth of Tragedy* is exorcised in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality* (1887). At the outset of his second essay, "Guilt, Bad Conscience and Related Matters," he delineates the required developmental steps that humans must have taken in order to become conscionable: "That is precisely what constitutes the long history of the origins of *responsibility*. That particular task of breeding an animal which has the right to make a promise includes . . . first *making* a man to a certain degree undeviating [*notwendig*], uniform, a peer amongst peers, orderly and consequently predictable" (39). Most important here is what brings humanity to its orderly state, the process of "sickly mollycoddling and sermonizing, by means of which the animal 'man' is finally taught to be ashamed of all his instincts" (47). At this point, Nietzsche has no qualms about claiming humanity as primarily animal. His placing of the word "man" in quotation marks is particularly radical, for it indicates a linguistic and cultural constructedness that separates humans from other living creatures.

Nietzsche later argues that responsibility was ushered in after a fundamental shift in human history which resulted in man's "forcible breach with his animal past" (62). Consequently, the responsible person is the person estranged from his "real and irredeemable animal instincts," which have become suppressed (68). Ultimately, then, Nietzsche opposes the civilized to a naturalized humanity that supposedly came before it. Accordingly, what modern people have embraced are "all those other-worldly aspirations, alien to the senses, the instincts, to nature, to animals" (70).

Lawrence explores the potential rekindling of "real animal instincts" throughout his oeuvre, but especially in *The Plumed Serpent*. The novel's opening chapter introduces animality as a compelling trope as the Irish protagonist, Kate, dares to experience the last bull-fight of the season in Mexico City. She considers her own dread of the event to be justified when the bloody spectacle registers as a "half-hearted ceremonial rape" (Clark 52). To Kate's chagrin, a bull continually pushes "his sharp, flourishing horns in the horse's belly, working them up and down inside there with a sort of vague satisfaction" (16). In Kate's estimation, this display reveals more about humans than animals: she is shocked by "[h]uman cowardice and *beastliness*, a smell of blood, a nauseous whiff of bursten bowels!" (16; my emphasis). For

Kate, the Mexicans' abuse of animals reveals a lack of humanity which is metaphorized through abject corporeality, in blood and excrement. She is overcome by the animal nature of human "civilization."

By contrast, her American friend Owen delights in the scene. He insists that viewing the bullfight is viewing "Life" (26). Owen figures as the voyeuristic European primitivist who, according to Torgovnick, takes pleasure in observing the primitive with "a scientific eye" (4). Owen is guilty of exoticism, because he seeks to be enticed by otherness. Lawrence's anti-American sentiment surfaces here as Owen is representatively "cold and abstract" (12). He is like the mechanical gadgets that American capitalism produces. But Lawrence also repeatedly figures Owen as "primitive" and "bird-like" (12), and thus the American appears to embody both the civilized *and* the ancient, the mechanistic and the natural.

While Kate is contrasted to bird-like Owen, her own desire to become a bull just "for five minutes" (26) to seek revenge against sadistic bullfighters signals another dissolution of species boundaries. Her cross-species identification subtly but clearly registers a desire to "become-animal" in Deleuze and Guattari's sense (238). Becoming-animal, according to Deleuze and Guattari, involves a de-individuation or loss of selfhood that surfaces as Kate's primary internal conflict in the novel. Anxieties about incorporation begin to emerge alongside questions of species as this scene progresses. Kate appears to recognize the violence inherent in Derrida's carnophallogocentric schema as she staunchly disapproves of her friends' enjoyment and decides that the two Americans are veritable vultures, "picking over the garbage of sensations, and gobbling it up like carrion birds. At the moment, both Owen and Villiers seemed to her like carrion birds, repulsive" (27–28).

In the novel's opening chapters, then, Kate's relationship to Mexico and Mexicans remains primarily abstracted. The bullfight causes her to perceive an uncivilized, abject Mexican affinity with death and decay. While this spectacular physicality is beastly to her, American voyeurism also has cannibalistic implications. Thus, both the European and its other seem equally primitive at the outset of *The Plumed Serpent* because they participate, to varying degrees, in unclean forms of consumption.

Not surprisingly eating is a prevalent metaphor in Lawrence's

species rubric. In "Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine" (1925), Lawrence outlines a hierarchy of power based on species lines. He insists that "the life-species is the highest which can devour, or destroy, or subjugate every other life-species against which it is pitted" (*RDP* 358). Lawrence places European men at the top of this gastro-political hierarchy, descends through various races, and ends by classifying non-human animals. Such systems, which were used to justify Social Darwinism in the late-nineteenth century, stratify a certain slippage between non-whites and non-human animals.

The discourses of race and species are sometimes mutually deployed, therefore, in Lawrence's work. In *The Plumed Serpent*, non-Europeans are often animalized, or represented as closer in evolutionary terms to non-human animals, further down on the evolutionary chain than Westerners. For instance, when Cipriano, the Indian general who becomes Kate's husband late in the novel, joins a tea party after the bullfight, the two peruse a collection of "Aztec things, obsidian knives, grimacing, squatting idols in black lava" (39). These pieces disturb Kate, who admits that the centerless nature of Mexico oppresses her. Having said so, she looks into Cipriano's "black, slanting, watchful, calculating eyes" and sees something childish but "at the same time something obstinate and mature, a demonish maturity, opposing her in an animal way" (40). Here Kate's imagination conflates the primitive, the Mexican, and the animal.

As the novel unfolds, the dark other is more clearly represented as the animal force in Lawrence's world. For Kate, Mexico itself is the dark antithesis of Western culture. When she looks out across the Valley of Mexico, her impressions are unsettling:

> Superficially Mexico might be all right. . . . Until you were alone with it. And then the undertone was like the low angry, snarling purring of some jaguar spotted with night. . . . And on the bright sunshine was a dark stream of an angry, impotent blood, and the flowers seemed to have their roots in spilt blood. The spirit of place was cruel, down-dragging, destructive. (49, 50)

Mexico is metaphorized as a bloodthirsty, threatening jaguar waiting to pounce upon Kate and presumably to consume her. Even a nearby church, the symbolic seat of charity and welcome, appears with "its barrel roof humping up like some crouching an-

imal" (50). The fear of being devoured is apparently all too familiar for Kate, who, as she confronts these frightening impressions, remembers why she had come to this "high plateau of death" in the first place (50). Ironically, she was propelled by another kind of death: "Over in England, in Ireland, in Europe, she had heard the *consummatum est* of her own spirit" (50). In Mexico, however, death and consumption are material, rather than spiritual, concerns.

Kate experiences Mexicans as nothing more than creatures. Many "eat food so hot with chile it burns holes in their insides. . . . They live in houses that a dog would be ashamed of" (65). "Insignificant looking" Mexican men harbor a "cold, mud-like antagonism as they stepped cattishly past" and are poisonous "like scorpions" (76). The drunks of Mexico City register even further down on Kate's chain of being with their "faces of pure brutish evil, cold and insect-like" (76).

Mexican women fare just as poorly in Kate's assessment. They present "images of wild submissiveness, the primitive womanliness of the world," and they are also "somewhat reptilian" with the "dark eyes of half-created women" (77). It is clearly the undifferentiated identity or self in these women that repels Kate, for she repeatedly notes their "queer void insolence! Something lurking, where the womanly centre should have been: lurking snake-like" (77). Ironically, Kate is frightened by the kind of consciousness she seeks in Mexico. She has fled Europe and its individuated humanism, but she cannot yet accept the "void" that she considers her primitive, animal alternative.

Kate's growing intimacy with Cipriano, her future husband, allows her to study him with a certain intensity, and she spies this same racialized animality in him:

> [T]he movement of his hand was so odd, quick, light, as he ate, so easily a movement of shooting, or of flashing a knife into the body of some adversary, and his dark-coloured lips were so helplessly savage . . . that her heart stood still. There was something undeveloped and intense in him, the intensity and the crudity of the semi-savage. She could well understand the potency of the snake upon the Aztec and Maya imagination. Something smooth, undeveloped, yet vital in this man suggested the heavy-ebbing blood of powerful reptiles, the dragon of Mexico. (67)

Once again, an emphasis on incorporation emerges. Kate watches Cipriano eat, focusing first on his hand, which exhibits an instinc-

tual tendency to kill, and then on his mouth and "savage" lips. In keeping with the conflation of the primitive and the animal, Kate compares Cipriano to a snake that is ready to strike. His glittering eyes threaten her just as the crouching Mexico has, and she feels "as the bird feels when the snake is watching it" (67). Rather than figuring as a rapacious predator, the bird becomes quarry in Kate's imagination as she finishes her dinner.

Lawrence's animalizing characterizations seem at first to rehearse a familiar theme: humans have a developed sense of self that other animals lack, or Europeans have a more demarcated identity which elevates them above non-whites. But Lawrence is ambivalent about his caricatures. For instance, this seeming regression to animality in Cipriano is both threatening and precocious; his animal way is characterized as a "demonish maturity" (40). On some level, then, Cipriano is more civilized than Kate; he sees through the ruse of Western individuality and spies some primal multiplicity or intersubjectivity that Kate cannot perceive.

Indeed, Lawrence's novel, like his earlier works of long fiction, troubles Western notions of individuality. As Jürgen Habermas explains, the philosophical discourse of modernity "turns centrally on the critique of subjectivistic rationalism" (McCarthy viii). That is, absolute self-consciousness, inherent in the "atomistic and autonomous, disengaged and disembodied" subject, is under attack in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (ix). Lawrence is clearly skeptical of this Western legacy of a reason-centered identity. When juxtaposed to Kate, in fact, a character like Cipriano seems to figure outside the economy of Western individuality.

His literary resistance to a rigid notion of self allows Dolores La Chapelle to entitle her book on Lawrence *Future Primitive*. According to La Chapelle, Lawrence longs for a time beyond industrialized modernity that will once more recognize humanity's connection to nature and disallow rationalistic notions of self. In Thomas Lyon's introduction to *Future Primitive*, he notes that La Chapelle and Lawrence both long for a less fragmented subjectivity:

> [They grieve] over the loss of place brought about by the economics of the industrial growth society. The world in which a mountain stood wild and had its full being, was trembling with sacred potential: a human being could realize that mountain, could transcend the lim-

> ited sense of self through whose perceptual filters the mountain had seemed likewise separate and alone. (xvi)

For La Chapelle, Lawrence desires this intersubjective connectedness to the natural world since he himself was able to feel the "old ways" of animistic culture in which all natural entities contained a spiritual charge (32). In the passage at hand, for instance, a mountain is not utterly other than a human being; they share some basic ontology. In Cipriano, then, this intersubjective awareness is animal-like and yet sophisticated. Unlike Kate, he is able to see beyond the subjectivistic rationalism that Horkheimer and Adorno call "a new kind of barbarism" (xi). We will see, however, that Lawrence's allegiance to individuality is not so easily relinquished as La Chapelle would have it.

The problem of the self becomes exponentially exacerbated for Kate as the novel continues, and her dilemma points out the connection between individuation and incorporation. Thinking about her fear of the "centreless" Mexicans, Kate undergoes an epiphany about human subjectivity. She recognizes her illusion about the "I": "She had thought that each individual had a complete self, a complete soul, an accomplished I. And now she realised as plainly as if she had turned into a new being, that this was not so. Men and women had incomplete selves, made up of bits assembled together loosely and somewhat haphazard" (105). Kate recognizes individuality as a kind of fiction and believes the self to be multiple and fragmentary. In recognizing this multiplicity, Kate relinquishes a founding Western premise, but in doing so, she is immediately plagued by fears of incorporation:

> In the great seething light of the lake, with the terrible blue-ribbed mountains of Mexico beyond, she seemed *swallowed* by some grisly skeleton, in the cage of his death-anatomy. She was afraid, mystically, of the man crouching there in the bows with his smooth thighs and supple loins like a snake, and his black eyes watching. (106; my emphasis)

The loss of autonomous selfhood renders Kate susceptible to a kind of identity imperialism. If her own borders of self are not distinct and encompassing, she feels absorbed by others against her will. This absorption is almost always figured in terms of animal predation. Thus Lawrence implies that the crossing of ego

boundaries is instinctual but dangerous. Indeed such crossings are particularly dangerous for Westerners who cling to Cartesian notions of identity which privilege a transparent and absolute self-consciousness.

On the other hand, Lawrence questions the possibility of intersubjectivity, of overcoming the boundaries of identity. He is particularly skeptical when the problem of selfhood is scrutinized through the lens of sexuality, one of Lawrence's recurring considerations. Kate has noticed that Ramón and Cipriano share a kind of passion that includes "the recognition of each other's eternal and abiding loneliness" (252), and she begins to consider the passion between men and women. Then, rather than envisioning her own engulfment by another, she theorizes unbreachable selves:

> Men and women should know that they cannot, absolutely, meet on earth. In the closest kiss, the dearest touch, there is the small gulf which is none the less complete. . . . They must bow and submit in reverence, to the gulf. Even though I eat the body and drink the blood of Christ, Christ is Christ and I am I, and the gulf is impassable. (252)

Here Lawrence seems to posit an essential, individual identity. Even eating the "flesh of my flesh," as evidenced by the reference to consuming the body of Christ, cannot bridge the impassable gap between two persons. Only one process can bridge the gulf between selves, but in explaining this phenomenon, Lawrence waxes ambiguous. To "meet in the quick," he explains, "we must give up the assembled self, the daily I, and . . . meet unconscious in the Morning Star. . . . But without transfiguration we shall never get there" (253). Such passages make Lawrence's ambiguity more evident. He both confirms and resists the sovereign individual; he believes and disbelieves in the melding of identities. Thus, Don Ramón's pronouncement on the indecipherability of sexual relationships reflects this paradox. He tells Kate, "in these matters, one never knows what is half way, nor where it is. A woman who just wants to be taken, and then to cling on, is a parasite. And a man who wants just to take, without giving, is a creature of prey" (271).

Lawrence follows this theory to the letter, and his conclusions have long since commanded the outrage of feminist critics. As it turns out, the parasitic engulfment of men occurs primarily at the moment of female orgasm, when "the great cat, with its

spasms of voluptuousness and its lifelong lustful enjoyment of its own isolated, isolated individuality," takes without giving (438). Kate knows "many women" who "played with love and intimacy as a cat with a mouse. In the end, they quickly ate up the love-mouse, then trotted off with a full belly and a voluptuous sense of power" (438). Here the anxiety about selfhood translates into castration anxiety. The discourses of gender and species are mutually deployed as feminine sexuality is animalized and the woman is tritely figured as the *vagina dentata*.

When confronted with the possibility of becoming a goddess in the new Aztec pantheon orchestrated by Cipriano and Ramón, Kate unfailingly returns to the dilemma of self and other, of distinction and incorporation. Cipriano begins to call her by the Aztec goddess's name, "Malintzi." Since naming is always central to identity, Kate revolts against this perceived usurpation. Resisting Cipriano's proposal to become his bride, Kate insists, "You treat me as if I had no life of my own. . . . But I have" (370). When she is unable to fully answer Cipriano's query about who gave her this life, she simply retorts, "I don't know. But I have got it. And I must live it. I can't be just swallowed up" (370).

For Ramón and Cipriano, the plumed serpent, Quetzalcoatl, appears to resolve the tension that Kate cannot put to rest. Quetzalcoatl is the god of both ways: mind and body, self and loss of self, earth and sky. This god makes manifest the overlap of species, both bird and snake, and Lawrence's characters, who "become" Aztec gods in the novel, also become non-human animals.

In many ways, Quetzalcoatl embodies the binaries or paradoxes that primitivism itself rehearses. John Humma has noted that the eagle and snake serve "one [as] our higher, the other our lower consciousness" (201). What is perhaps most profound for this analysis is the way in which a bizarrely cross-bred animal being is elevated to a spiritual level. Most animal manifestations in the novel remain only on the physical level. But the great bird-snake is the chief of gods, and such transgressing deification implies a fundamental tainting of Western abstraction. In other words, the spiritual is never purely spirit; it is always connected to the snake, to the grounded materiality of the body. One is reminded here of Lawrence's poem "Snake," in which a serpent drinking at the narrator's water-trough is experienced as both god-like and repugnant, as an inspiration and a horror.

Despite its frequently posited status as Lawrence's most ambi-

tious failure, then, *The Plumed Serpent* is an unusual and complex text for the consideration of species ideology in the modernist imagination. While Lawrence appears to rely upon an outmoded, imperialistic equation of racial and animal otherness in the novel, his European and Mexican characters are depicted in a complicated ideological framework that troubles the distinction between human and animal consciousness. Moreover, Lawrence's somewhat fantastic use of the Quetzalcoatl myth places his characters in a liminal reality beyond Western individualism where animality becomes the privileged mode of being. As a result, the interrogation of rationalist humanism in *The Plumed Serpent* can be read as a post-humanist critique deployed through the discourse of species. Though this critique is ambivalent at times, Lawrence's use of the animal as a symbol of salvation from Western culture is exceptional because it destabilizes the West's traditional hierarchizing of human over animal as a matter of course. Thus, as the novel ends with Kate's unresolved dilemma between remaining in the consciously mythologized world of Quetzalcoatl and returning to the individuated life of the West, it seems clear that Lawrence's contradictions bespeak a refusal to choose between the spirit and body, the rational and instinctual, the human and animal.

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