

Going with the Flow: The Allotropic Mechanics of Love as War in *Women in Love*

In *Women in Love*, D.H. Lawrence demonstrates how sexual mechanics dictates cultural interaction. Lawrence's novel corresponds to a binary metaphysics of solids and fluids, the polarization of which acts as a balance between love and war. In Lawrence's novel, Birkin theorizes that Western civilization is destroying itself by insisting upon the solid, "fixed" concepts of its culture, including ideals of love and marriage, which result from the individual's desire for possession of objects of desire. Solids become symbols for the *idée fixe*, the obsession for fetishes fueling an economy of war. On the other hand, fluid objects symbolize organic flow, life and its continuation. Just as *The Rainbow* was Lawrence's pre-war symbol for hope for Modernist mankind, Birkin's river of dissolution in *Women in Love* is a symbol that demonstrates Lawrence's pessimism in face of the Great War of the sexes that ultimately destroys Birkin's hope for a new kind of love, a "star" equilibrium. Lawrence's metaphysics ultimately ends in despair, since Gerald's death and Gudrun's degeneration into a sensationalist world view indicates a general systemic degeneration and spin of culture into the chaos of Loerke's Modernist *Dis Irae*. However, this disintegration of hope for perfect equilibrium gives way to the cycle of forces between physics and psyche, war and sex, which implode at the level of time's passage, where the science of becoming dead levels the playing field of players, where order emerges out of Modernism's disorders. Unlike Thomas Mann's Hans Castorp, Gerald becomes a permanent fixture on his own Magic Mountain in the Tyrol, an emblem of the destructive reduction caused by culture's fixed ideologies, where sex and war occupy contrary, yet not contradictory, roles for local and global transformation of epistemologies.

In Lawrence's novel, love is a battlefield where Western civilization is spinning towards oblivion. Two sets of relationships symbolize opposite principles of the metaphysics of solids and fluids. As George Ford reveals in *Double Measure*,

Lawrence's reference to such a mechanics is applicable to both the *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, the first evolving "both destruction through the flood but also salvation and restoration through God's covenant" and the second the *Dis Irae* in which the world meets its doom, in Lawrence's own words, " 'the deluge of iron rain [which] will destroy the world here, utterly: [in which] no Ararat will rise above the subsiding iron waters'" (163). This iron rain is the age of Modernism, Gerald's tyrannical control of his workers through machine domination, a domination made possible by another machine, the Great War. Production is what keeps the machine of war running, and vice versa. According to Ford, *Women in Love* contained " 'the results in one's soul of the [great] war...purely destructive, not like *The Rainbow*, destructive-consummating" (163). This destructive principle is illustrated by symbols of fluidity as man's ability to "go with the flow" of life even in all the weirdnesses of modernity, to adapt and change with life's ever-changing patterns.

As Lawrence reveals in *The Crown*, the ideal of love is mere sentimentality, as he demonstrates in the character of Ursula, when she insists on Birkin declaring her love, when Birkin knows that it is merely a control mechanism based upon notions of civility/chivalry, more customary and childish than "honest maturity," as Lawrence terms it (60). According to Lawrence, "...no matter *what* happens to us, now, we sentimentalise it and use it as a means of sensational reduction," where "even the great war does not alter our civilization one iota, in its total nature" because "the form...remains intact" and "only inside the complete envelope we writhe with sensational experiences of death, hurt, horror, reduction" (*The Crown* 61). Evaluation of the whole system of economics of love is dependent upon current perspectives of its movement, and as he demonstrates with *Women in Love*, with its metaphysical composition, whether the person be in a state of movement toward the "flux of life" or the "flux of death," both streams of which fuse "into the third reality, of real creation" (Lawrence *The Crown*, 61).

Gerald is the emblem of the final state of the old, stable, self-conscious ego of physical mendacity that is frozen in time and space. Gerald and Gudrun represent the mechanically fixed idea in economy and sex, where “love” is really a materialistic fetishism for possession and domination of the Other. Conversely, Birkin and Ursula represent the principle of fluid organic life and regeneration that rejects the simple reductionism of sexual materialism, each person floating free of social and cultural expectations and fixations in order to discover spiritual love. Both couples search for ideal loves, but the materialism of Gerald and Gudrun results in both physical and psychic degeneration and death. Characters like the Pussum, Hermione, and Loerke act as catalysts for the war of love between these couples. Lawrence’s argument is extremely ambiguous at points, since the notion of mechanization as artificial and opposed to the organic is contradicted by the idea that culture evolves according to its own “natural” movements, including the movement into degeneration. These ideals are fixed so as to prevent the degeneration that follows overindulgence of the senses.

The chapter of “Fetish” is preceded by “In the Train” and “Creme de Menthe,” the chapters in the novel where Birkin and Gerald take their first trip to London together. “In the Train” establishes Birkin’s general views on London’s degeneration due to human self-delusions of grandeur: “our one idea is to lie to ourselves. We have an ideal of a perfect world, clean, straight and sufficient. So we cover the earth with foulness; life is a blotch of labour, like insects scurrying in filth, so that your collier can have a pianoforte in his parlour...” (56). Gerald argues with Birkin that people must have material things, and this statement is Lawrence’s first direct connection between Gerald and things of a materialistic nature. Gerald is unable to answer Birkin’s next question, which is, what is one to do once one is satisfied with materiality; however, once Birkin sees that Gerald’s intention is to extend his ego in power over Others simply for the sake of possession, Birkin is able to identify Gerald as his own opposite. Only then does Birkin suggest love as the “be-all and the end-all of life” (58), to which Gerald retorts that for him it had not

been so-- “so far” (58). Indeed, as the ending of the novel demonstrates, Gerald’s life does end for Gudrun, but only because he is unable to possess her, as he did the Pussum, the model he was keeping in comfort. Gudrun is his equal in materiality, and in the fetishisms of art, his superior. Gerald and Gudrun are both identified as encrusted materialist objects in their own right, materialized in their fixed ideas of bourgeois work, “love,” and art as separate from the influence of life-energies. , This metaphysics of mechanical living is linked with thermodynamic tropes, explaining why and how Gerald and Gudrun become fixated commodities within their own bourgeois economics.

As Lawrence reveals in “In the Train,” Gerald identifies the current condition of London as an inability to “centre” life because it is “artificially held *together* by the social mechanism” of society, the global effect of which is its “mechanical” bourgeois economy (59). Birkin’s further identification of a perfect union with a woman is itself such a construction, at its superficial levels, as Birkin himself realizes; but he knows that an “ultimate marriage” of two independent souls may be the only thing in life that leads to a spiritual consummation. Birkin’s subsequent attraction to Gerald is “cooled” by Birkin’s realization that Gerald does not take him seriously, making him “go hard and cold,” as eventually, “Gerald fell away, became as nothing to him” (60). The emotional “warmth” between the men is cooled by Gerald’s own inability to transcend beyond the mechanical world of his collier life and its implications, as well as Gerald’s own inability to let go of the fetish of material things, which we find in “Creme de Menthe” when he meets the Pussum and Halliday, and in “Fetish” when he goes with the Pussum to rendezvous at Halliday’s apartment. As Colin Clarke notes, Birkin subsequently later explains the nature of the River of Dissolution that engulfs man’s body and consciousness with Gerald and Gudrun as *Fleurs du Mal*. This philosophy derives from Charles Baudelaire’s 1857 book of poetry “The Flowers of Evil,” which describes why people of the latter nineteenth-century were experiencing this *fin de siècle* angst: “Infatuation, sadism, lust, avarice,/ Possess our souls and drain the body’s force...It’s

BOREDOM.” (1-2, 37). Baudelaire’s prophesy of the effects of boredom are like Flaubert’s exposition of boredom in *Madame Bovary*: new experiences have not quenched man’s thirst for discovery, but have led, rather, to an unhealthy idea that if mankind is not constantly progressing, moving forward, through new and better experiences, that somehow mankind is not doing its duties toward society and self (Smith 110). In fact, as both Baudelaire and Flaubert reveal, quite the opposite is true, for experience (of Baudelaire’s man and Flaubert’s Emma Bovary) has led instead to the dissolution of innocence and a false sense of cultural stagnation and “icy” apathy, that “boredom” and the idea that the devil finds use for idle hands. However, the metaphor of fluidity is demonstrated best by showing how the extremes of frigidity of the physical self-esteem are opposed to the depths of human passion, both caused by the meltdown of the inorganic “mechanical” man, Gerald, by the Magna Mater as fatal woman fetish of Birkin’s fear.

Examples of flow as associated with creative movement or its lack abound in this novel. Woman, as emblem, becomes the element in which man is melted or frozen, the material fetish in which man can drown, freeze, or burn. In “Creme de Menthe,” the Pussum is introduced as Halliday’s erst-while lover, with whom Gerald takes a sudden interest. Lawrence’s shifty autobiographical reference in the Pussum is to the Puma, the mistress of Philip Heseltine, the Expressionist Bohemians of Lawrence’s real acquaintance. The Pussum is the emblem of utter materiality, only going with Gerald in order to “capture” Halliday in marriage, the ultimate fetishism. Her unhappiness as an object of materiality is reflected in her “inchoate” eyes that are “black, unhappy pools” of misery that reflect an “unfathomable hell of knowledge” (66). The Pussum is described as being Lotus-like, “in dreadful flowing nakedness (71), who “seemed to become soft, subtly to infuse herself into [Gerald’s] bones, as if she were passing into him in a black, electric flow” (74). Most importantly, the Pussum is not afraid of blood, which she demonstrates on a hapless friend of Halliday’s who challenges her in her claim about

blood. Halliday is sickened by this useless gesture of power, but the Pussum warns that Halliday is going to “cat” (throw up) (72). The Pussum emblemizes the flow of the Magna Mater, the Magna Dolorosa, the “electricity” that is ultimately empty at bottom, revealed in the Pussum’s “inchoate” eyes.

Such women terrify and disgust Birkin, and sees these extremes in the women he courts, the Great Mother figures emblemized in Hermoine, whose fetishization and statue-like grip “claims back the man she had borne in suffering” (209), like the Commander’s grip on Don Juan in *Don Giovanni*. Indeed, the very name of Hermione recalls Shakespeare’s Hermione, whose transformation into a statue is recalled in Lawrence’s own characterization in this novel. Hermione’s attempt to kill Birkin with the Lapis Lazuli is her “deathly” claim, an idealism that Ursula utterly rejects in “Excuse.” He thinks of Ursula in the same and inverse terms as Hermione, different, yet the same melting of individual primacy.

The “electricity” of the Pussum is connected to the same metaphysics that Birkin muses over in “Man to Man”: “the process of singling into individuality resulted into the great polarisation of sex” in which “there is only the pure duality of polarisation, each one free from any contamination of the other,” where “the individual is primal, sex is subordinate, but perfectly polarised” and “each admits the different nature of the other” (210). Gerald, like Birkin, cannot accept the Pussum’s black electric flow anymore than he can accept Birkin’s bodilessness. Lawrence explains these “polarizations” in *The Crown* as part of “real death,” where “the actual physical fact of death is part of the life stream....when the flux of light and dark has flowed sufficiently apart for the conjunction [life]...to disappear,” and “our blossoming is transcendence beyond death and life” (56). Lawrence identifies the “black flow” of the Pussum as one extreme of this flow, with its African/southern fetishized death of heat disintegration that is identified with the naked human body, “this withered, null walls of the womb” (*The Crown* 57) of the Magna Mater that Birkin detests so much.

The other extreme of this polarized ideology is represented by the figure of Gerald. Lawrence's fixed idea is symbolized by the mechanization of mankind, and metaphysically linked to the symbol of ice and snow, which Birkin notes is the "vast abstraction of ice and snow" and its "ice-destructive knowledge, snow-abstract annihilation" (266), an abstraction that Gudrun as *the woman* "blasts" and "chars" Gerald as his perfect polar opposite in sensuality, who is in turn "pressed" by Gerald "like a frost, deadening her" (464, 466). His motion, according to Loerke, is total enjoyment in the mechanism of the body (448). Prior to their breakup, Gudrun believes he would marry her and through sheer force of will, make "order of out of confusion" and thereby "bring to pass an inevitable conclusion" of all of modernity's problems;" yet while Gudrun dreams of Gerald as a kind of "superhuman instrument," she also knew in her heart that "the whole coinage of valuation [in social England] was spurious" and that the "undeniable reality" is "the hard irony of hopes and ideas" (441). According to Birkin, this mind culture is of the "white races" of the Arctic North, the processes of which attempt to freeze cultural movements to limited ideas, and it is this mechanization of culture and its ideology that Gerald cannot overcome and let go, making Gerald into a "one of those strange white wonderful demons from the north, fulfilled in the destructive frost mystery," "fated to pass away in this knowledge...death by perfect cold" (266-67), abstract in his motions as a geometrical equation (440). Opposed to this end, this "omen of the universal dissolution" (267) is the position of the Magna Mater, the purely destructive woman of sensuality as portrayed in the characters of Gudrun and the Pussum.

In diametrical opposition to this principle is what Birkin refers to as the "long African process" of degeneration, the idea of decay in absolute knowledge of the senses and the sensational, represented by the desires of the Pussum and Gudrun. Despite Birkin's desire for a "star equilibrium," the perfection of two perfectly balanced pure beings "each constituting the freedom of the other, balancing each other like two poles of

one force” (208), he is forced to admit that while he detests his own possession at the hands of woman, the brokenness of sex is a necessary evil, a mingling of love that “was become madly abhorrent to him” (209). In *The Crown*, Lawrence assumes that “when a man seeks a woman in love..., he seeks a union, ...a consummation of himself with that which is not himself, light with dark, dark with light,” and that the mere mingling of bodies in sex is only another type of ultimate reduction of the flesh, a clashing of egos rather than of a balance of souls (58), where “the man seeks his own sensational reduction, but he disintegrates the woman even more, in the name of love...what horrors men perpetrate [in the name of love], and are applauded!” (59). Gerald’s reduction is of the “fine” variety, where he experiences his own reduction subtly, while Loerke’s reduction is of the “coarse” variety, “a sort of activity of coarse hate” that reduces not only himself but everybody around him (*The Crown* 59). The “coldness” of Gerald’s character is metaphysical as well as physical, a physics about physics that identifies coldness in particular as part of physical rather than spiritual “mechanics.” Both Gudrun and Gerald identify with this coldness of fetishistic desire for fleshy sensuality: Gerald pursues the Pussum only to conquer her, much in the same way he conquers his workers, his “strange machines, heavy oiled,” whose “voluptuousness was like that of machinery, cold and iron,” “half-automatised” in brain and heart, “sickeningly mindless” to Gudrun who nonetheless feels a “thick, hot attraction” for the colliers (118-19). Gudrun’s metamorphosis as a “new Daphne,” who is “turning not into a tree but a machine,” foreshadows her subsequent transformation into the cold, fatal woman of Lawrence’s nightmares, an emblem of the modern woman, not in love, but in sensual desire and the fatality of superficial surface transformation only. Lawrence specifies his own metaphysics of cold and heat in his *Letters*, which Eugene Goodheart specifies as a distinctly Nietzschean metaphysics as described in *The Will to Power* as “the misunderstanding of passion and reason [read *morality*], as if the latter existed as an entity by itself, and not rather as a state of the relations between different passions and

desires; as if every passion did not contain itself its own quantum of reason” (qtd. in Goodheart, 19). Furthermore, Goodheart also identifies Lawrence’s metaphysics as influenced by F. Marinetti’s Futurist manifesto, when Lawrence wrote that he was more interested in the physical than that which was psychical because “that which is physic—non-human, in humanity, is more interesting to me than the old fashioned element—which causes one to conceive a character in a certain moral scheme and make him consistent” (qtd. in Goodheart 21). Lawrence identifies his “modern” woman as an inhuman thing, a fetish, “inhumanly, physiologically, materially” because “you mustn’t look in my novel for the old stable ego of the character;” accordingly, there is another *ego*, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable, and passes through...allotropic states which it needs a deeper sense than any we’ve been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same single radically unchanged element. (Like as diamond and coal are the same pure single element of carbon. The ordinary novel would trace the history of the diamond [the ideal]—but I say, “Diamond, what! This is carbon.” And my diamond might be coal or soot, and my theme is carbon.). (*Letters* 197-98)

Lawrence’s metaphysics is thermodynamic as well as dynamic, a justifiable heuristic for the novel itself. According to Charles Ross, Lawrence rewrote scene after scene in *Women in Love* in order to accentuate Gerald’s “ice-destructive” consciousness as a “nonhuman aspect of the ‘terrible, static ice-built mountain-top’ of the will, reductive to phenomena, symbolic of “the resonance of this vocabulary for conveying the sterile abuse of the will...characteristic of modern society” (110). Garrett Stewart also identifies this allotropic metaphor as referent to both rhetoric and theme of the novel, a kind of chemical “elemental diction” suggestive of dynamic motion, especially when he suggests death as a metaphor of motion: “even of the relationship between tropes and allotropes derivative from the Greek root “ ‘turning,’ whether ‘aside’ or ‘into,’ which indeed the process tropes and allotropes can be seen to result from: figurative diversion and transformation, metaphoric revision in the one and radical metamorphosis in the

other” (Stewart 172). Flowing water stays fluid, while the extreme states of temperature create opposite effects. This dynamic is at work on the narrative and metanarrative levels of Lawrence’s work, manifestly superimposed in a topology of symbols, particularly the effects of fluid dynamics as his characters approach and surpass various psychological states. As Stewart suggests, “the scientific model also works for dubieties of syntax, where two seemingly different parsings of a grammatical arrangement can be resolved as allotropes of a twofold unity hitherto unobserved” (173). The metanarrative level of this parsing of figures occurs as Lawrence literally figures the unstable nature of language as the basis for its subsequent transformations, just as his characters transform from one state of being to another, for better or worse. As Stewart notes, “frequently set in motion by the presence of an unstable syntactic bond, a paratactic loosening of structure for instance, words are alchemized into their own ambiguous allotropes, phrases and clauses into their grammatical alter-egos” (173), where Lawrence constructs the topography of his novel as an interplay between the living being and the nonbeing of the word. As George Ford notes, Lawrence’s incorporation of the juxtaposition between cold and heat may derive from Robert Browning’s monologue in “Love Among the Ruins”, as mentioned by Birkin on the way to London in “In the Train.” Ford notes that “this brief dialogue condenses into a few lines the main themes of the whole novel;” ironically, its repetitive verse: juxtapositioning “smiles” with “miles and miles” is the same type of redundancy consistent with the mnemonic oscillation which Katherine Hayles and Stewart point out in the novel. The redundancy in the repetitions of ideologies and practices in life lulls the modern age into a sleep of uneasy dreaming from which man seldom awakes, in life or in literature.

For Lawrence, this was his “fantasia of the unconscious,” which manifests itself through physical states of being, which is why the chapter “Fetish” is so important for establishing his narrative economy of symbols for this novel. As Michael Wutz observes, “allotropic states of characters” are maintained in the novel in the chemistry between the

sexes, “the originary source, the supply of energy or fuel that regulates and manages human conduct,” all producing “the conversions of carbon that—as irreducible ground of energy—remains constant and interminable in its quantity, yet is infinitely protean in its effects” (92-93). Katherine Hayles confirms what I perceive as an “oscillating” motion caused by the frictional chemistry between Lawrence’s characters: “it is a to-and-fro in which the oscillations back and forth become increasingly violent, eventually leading to the permanent fragmentation of a bifurcated psyche” (101), demonstrating motion physics in this novel as a topographical metaphysics in which author and characters participate. The language of the novel itself becomes an intentional “frictional to-and-fro,” not a science or even what one could say about science and reality, but literary play, not about reality or “what we can say about reality, but about what we cannot say about it...the reality that lies beyond words” (Hayles 97). As Hayles notes, “the emergence of this kind of motion illuminates why Lawrence should insist, in the essays [*Fantasia of the Unconscious* and *The Crown*] that the opposing body centers are united into a mystical whole by an interconnecting field” that ultimately attempts to avoid the “aimless oscillation that eventually leads to dissolution of the psyche and death” (101). Gerald’s linear motion “is merely the extreme continuation of this destructive oscillation,” resulting “when one of the poles of a natural polarity is so far gone that it is altogether suppressed” (Hayles 101).

Like the Pussum, Gudrun is identified with and connects to this “flow” of dissolution, especially in “Sketch-book” when she draws the water-plants, the “dark, lurid colours” of which attract Gudrun, and the “turgid fleshy structure” of which seems to her “a sensuous vision” because “she *knew* how they rose out of the mud” with its “festering chill” (123); it is also the reason why she eventually moves away from Gerald toward Loerke, which kills Gerald’s own sense of material necessity of possession. Indeed, as Hayles goes on to demonstrate, Gerald is “Snowed Up” in the Tyrol, boxed into the material housing of the body that is merely haunted by a ghost, a figure that is associated

with Gerald on more than one occasion in the novel, particularly when he comes upon Gudrun and Loerke drinking bilberry schnapps, the elixir of clarity of sight. When Loerke exclaims “*Maria!* You come like a ghost,” and the narrator confirms that “his presence was unnatural and ghostly to them” (497), the point is indeed to let the audience *see*, literally and figuratively, what Gerald has become: a divided energy that must disperse, soul from body. The dark flow of the solar plexus, that final seat of hidden energy, becomes frozen in Birkin, as well, when he witnesses the dead form of Gerald’s body, “his brain was beginning to freeze, his blood was turning to ice-water...a heavy, bruising cold pressing on his arms from outside, and a heavier cold congealing within him, in his heart and in his bowels” (504). It is appropriate, then, that Gerald becomes a permanent fixture of the Tyrol in the frozen valley where he simply lapses into the unconsciousness that characterizes his blatant bourgeois tendency toward fetishization, “this secret, silent worship of the null envelope that preserves us intact for our gratification with the flux of corruption” (*The Crown* 57), which explains why Gerald sought to “possess” Gudrun as he did the Pussum, who likewise only wanted to possess Gerald in much the same way. Gerald’s method is to divide and conquer his women, which the Pussum is ill-equipped to fight, but which Gudrun recognizes and rejects immediately. In the Tyrol, Gerald falls back into the emptiness of his own river of dissolution, the emptiness of his own heart and mind, and Birkin cannot save him from himself. Gudrun’s lack of feeling upon Gerald’s death indicates her own emptiness, as she falls into Loerke’s river of dissolution as she indulges her artistic sensibilities, rejecting the normality of a conventional material life at home with Gerald for the cold fixedness of artistic fetishism.

Warmth is associated with light and life, while coldness is associated with death and darkness, but extremes of those two thermodynamic states both ironically produce the same results: disintegration. As Lawrence was attempting to demonstrate, the states of being are also part of states of constant becoming: one is either peaking in their heat

or has already peaked; either way, all beings are spinning down to the final heat death, where all is carbon, human dust mingling with coal dust. Since Lawrence grew up in a colliery town, it is hardly any surprise that he should seize upon such an image, for it was as much a part of his life as his career was, despite his attempts to escape it. As he demonstrates, the ego never was stable in any real individual, so why should it be in fictional characters? To stabilize a character's ego as consisting of absolute characteristics is to render it flat and caricatured, merely symbolic with no human characteristics. Real people are never that consistent, because their states of being are constantly changing, chaotic but also self-organizing, just as Capra explains the thermodynamics of fluids and solids: "viscosity" and "friction" depends upon the tendency of the individual's physical and spiritual makeup. The closer to heat death people approach in this river of dissolution, the more fixed they become, until like Gerald, they become a symbol of fixed ideologies that reflect rather than refract one set of reasoning, bereft of the warmth of human passion but beautiful in their conceptions. In *Women in Love*, Lawrence criticizes these very ideologies as responsible for World War I, but he seemed to realize that these ideologies were so fixed that the spin toward heat death would continue for the Modernist age. For Lawrence, "to be man was as nothing compared to the possibilities of the creative mystery," that is, "to have one's pulse beating direct from the mystery, this was perfection, unutterable satisfaction" (505), a consummation for which one may devoutly hope. Ultimately, this metaphysics is a hopeful one, for Lawrence's characters may suffer their own meltdowns, but his hope for a conversion of energies for the future lies in the message of the text itself. Lawrence is both hopeful and dubious that dissolution and death is the answer to all problems, showing that the Law of Conservation of energy is the world's saving grace.

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