Nietzsche contra Lawrence:  
How to be True to the Earth

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What can a man do with his life but live it? And what does life consist in, save a vivid relatedness between the man and the living universe that surrounds him?  
D.H. Lawrence, Pan in America

Both Nietzsche and Lawrence have been identified as important forerunners and progenitors in the development of an ecocentric, “post-humanist” worldview. Nietzsche suggested, and Lawrence developed, the notion of an anti-mechanistic “gay science”. Both writers rejected the Christian denigration of nature, the Romantic notion of a “return to nature” and the instrumentalisation of nature by industrial rationality in favour of a conception of the good life founded in the body and an almost utopian “ascent to nature”. However, since the ascent to nature required an overcoming of existing humanity, both Nietzsche and Lawrence faced the task of articulating a conception of the Over-man – or post-human, as contemporary theory would put it – that is not merely a figure of authoritarian brutality. Deep ecologist Del Ivan Janik has claimed that Lawrence “saw man as part of an organic universe, living best by acknowledging its wonder and rejecting the temptation to force his will upon it. In this sense he stands at the beginning of the modern posthumanist tradition and of the literature of environmental
consciousness."¹ Accurate as this assessment is, however, the struggle with questions of power, gender, sexuality and religion that early posthumanism involved has tended to be airbrushed out of the dark green reading of Lawrence. And Lawrence's personal spiritual and intellectual struggle was also a creative conflict with Nietzsche.

A useful point of departure is Anna Bramwell's comment in *Ecology in the Twentieth Century* on the somewhat surprising ubiquity of Nietzsche in ecophilosophical works, as it might be applied with equal force to Lawrence:

Nietzsche ... is frequently described as an important figure. Why should this be? In reality, he does not conform at all to the model ecologist ... Yet Nietzsche still hovers, worrying but relevant.²

I will get on to the worries in due course; for the moment, a few words on the relevance of Nietzsche might be in order.

For one thing, Nietzsche was not much interested in nature *per se*; unlike Lawrence, he never concerned himself with either natural beauty or the threat posed to it by late 19th century industrialisation. This may be due in part to his actual environment, which was largely congenial, as Robert Solomon reminds us:

From snatches of prose, one might well conclude that Nietzsche wants nothing more fervently than the life of Conan the Barbarian, a role for which he, in particular, was notoriously ill-suited. "Live dangerously" he tells us, from the posher resorts in Southern Europe.³

It seems reasonable to suggest that if Nietzsche was more fascinated by the Provencal art of the troubadours than by the resistable rise of the capitalist machine economy, his convalescent exile by the Med, away from the industrial heartlands of Northern Europe, may be partly responsible. His chief concern is the overcoming of the Christian and moral misreading of nature – especially human nature – and the corresponding articulation of what HM Robinson calls a "somatic conception of the good life" to replace it. However, Nietzsche only calls for such a conception, rather than fully elaborating it – let alone living it – so he has "little to say about how human intelligence could be so immanent in our physical being as to make our articulation of our physical will to power something expressive of a properly human nature and not of brute strength."⁴ In short, the problem is how to distinguish the ideal, noble Overman from the mere thug. We should not expect to find the close and often reverent attention to the non-human world as such that is an attractive and central feature of Lawrence's writing; Nietzsche's interest is lively but essentially abstract.
Nietzsche’s sustained assault on Christianity coincides in some respects with one of the earliest contributions to ecophilosophical theory, Lynn White's famous essay on “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis”, in which he claims that Christianity was a crucial shaping factor in the development of exploitative Western practices of science and technology:

Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.  

I will come back to Zoroastrianism later. Here we should note that both White and Nietzsche arrive at the notion that Christianity has engendered in Europe and the neo-Europe a dangerous and destructive contempt for nature. For Nietzsche, the great crime of the 'religion of the weak' is that it has mendaciously substituted another “higher” world for the one in which we have our present being. This "moral-optical illusion" of dualism has brought about a degeneration in the West that is now made all the more deadly by the death of the God that guaranteed it; Occidental Christianity begot a science which eventually – in Darwin in particular – became its own nemesis. For Nietzsche, as for Lawrence, the death of God has as its consequences both the threat of nihilistic decline and the possibility of new life, the advent of the Overman.

One of the most hopeful and cogent of Nietzsche's works is The Gay Science (Die Frohliche Wissenschaft), subtitled "la gaya scienza", in which a madman proclaims the death of God to the bemused sceptics in the market square, the prophet Zarathustra is introduced, and, according to Laurence Lampert “the new politics of earthly affirmation is tied to a reformed and joyous science.” Opposed to the deadly bad conscience of the morality of mores and the self-importance of the tragic hero, is the wise laughter of the “gay scientist” who affirms the eternal return of all beings as they are.

Nietzsche proposes a programme of de-deification of nature, together with a naturalization of humanity "in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature." He asks:

...how could we reproach or praise the universe? Let us beware of attributing to it heartlessness and unreason or their opposites: it is neither perfect nor beautiful, nor noble, nor does it wish to become any of these things; it does not by any means strive to imitate man. None of our aesthetic and moral judgements apply to it. Nor does it have any instinct for self-preservation or any other instinct; and it does not obey any laws either. Let us beware of saying there are
laws in nature. There are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses. Once you know that there are no purposes, you also know that there is no accident; for it is only beside a world of purposes that the word "accident" has meaning. Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type.  

Nietzsche’s radical anti-anthropomorphism might seem to rule out nearly any statement about nature therefore as an anthropomorphism – including, by the way, the one just cited – although clearly only specific types of assertion are the true targets here. Religious or superstitious claims are first in the firing line, but contemporary science as a form of mechanistic piety is also implicated. Lynn White’s essay called for a Franciscan revival in order that Christianity might make up for centuries of ecologically destructive, anti-natural teaching, but if Nietzsche is right, such a substitution of responsible stewardship for the human dominion apparently mandated in the Bible would leave a mouldering divine corpse propped up in His Heaven, powerless to prevent further degeneration into nihilism. Zarathustra advises otherwise:

Remain faithful to the earth, my brothers, with the power of your virtue. Let your gift-giving love and your knowledge serve the meaning of the earth. Thus I beg and beseech you. Do not let them fly away from earthly things and beat with their wings against eternal walls. Alas, there has always been so much virtue that has flown away. Lead back to the earth the virtue that flew away, as I do – back to the body, back to life, that it may give the earth a meaning, a human meaning.

Such virtue has little in common with environmental ethics, despite the efforts of some to seize on Nietzsche as a progenitor – Nietzsche despised the doctrine of equality as applied to humans and would have retched at the thought of extending its ideology of resentment to the whole natural world. Instead he proposes a “going up” (Hinaufkommen) to nature that would also involve overcoming humanity. For this hard task, demanding virtue without ethics and reverence without wings, Nietzsche thinks a new man (sic) is required who surpasses the man of the present: the free spirit, der Ubermensch, the Overman. DH Lawrence is moved by this project and, as we shall see, appropriates it in his own particular idiom.

Darwin and biological materialism affected both Nietzsche and Lawrence profoundly; they experienced its insights as “true but deadly”, threatening the old structures of belief but failing to provide adequate replace-
ment. Unlike Nietzsche, Lawrence had an extraordinary instinctive intimacy with his natural surroundings, as friends and lovers invariably testified. His appealing combination of childlike wonder and taxonomic fervour had been enhanced by botanical study at University College Nottingham, and by his readings of Ernst Haeckel\textsuperscript{12} and Nietzsche. Bramwell comments that:

\begin{quote}
\ldots Haeckel, in his republican atheism and his nature-worship directly influenced Lawrence. Through Lawrence, Haeckel's ideas influenced several early founders of the Soil Association as well as other vitalist nature-lovers in Britain.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Indeed, Lawrence shuttled throughout his life between passionate attentiveness to birds, beasts and flowers, and nihilistic – often apocalyptic – despair at the thought that the profound significance he found in nature might be merely anthropomorphic projection.

The positive potential of a "going up" or ascent to nature is presented most powerfully in \textit{The Rainbow}, in the "widening circles" that make up the structure of the novel itself. The opening pages of the novel present to us the Brangwen men caught in a timeless state of "blood-intimacy" with nature. These passages are written in a vatic mode potent, rhythmic and beautiful enough to seem to imitate the very forces of germination, growth and death that they set out to describe:

\begin{quote}
[The men] knew the intercourse between heaven and earth, sunshine drawn into the breast and the bowels, the rain sucked up in the daytime, nakedness that comes under the wind in autumn, showing the birds' nests no longer worth hiding. Their life and interrelations were such; feeling the pulse and body of the soil, that opened to their furrow for the grain, and became smooth and supple after their ploughing, and clung to their feet with a weight that pulled like desire, lying hard and unresponsive when the crops were to be shorn away. The young corn waved and was silken, and the lustre slid along the limbs of the men who saw it. They took the udder of the cows, the cows yielded milk and pulse against the hands of the men, the pulse of the blood of the teats of the cows beat into the pulse of the hands of the men.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

Lawrence's prose is not only trying to be true to the earth, it is clearly eroticising the relationship of men and land. But where are the wives while this adultery betwixt man and nature is going on? For Lawrence, they too feel the pulse, but also look outwards to the world of men, "the spoken world beyond." In \textit{"The Rainbow"}, it is often the women who seek escape and transcendence, in defiance of the traditional association of woman and na-
ture beloved of some ecofeminists. The men remain “staring into the sun, dazed with looking towards the source of generation, unable to turn around.”¹⁵ The intergenerational movement of the novel is a widening gyre shaped by the gravitational pull of immanence in contest with the centripetal force of civilisation, history and scepticism.

Lawrence dramatises the death of God and the emergence of a kind of neopaganism in the middle relationship of Will and Anna Brangwen. Her corrosive scepticism is levelled at his Christian belief, which she characterises as absurd, life-denying and misogynistic. Yet Lawrence suggests that it is itself a kind of piety: “She, almost against herself, clung to the worship of the human knowledge. ... She believed in the omnipotence of the human mind.”¹⁶ Her attacks on Will are portrayed as sterile, uncreative criticism. Ultimately only the conception of a child can put creative flesh on her naturalism:

The child in her shone till she herself was a beam of sunshine; and how lovely was the sunshine that loitered and wandered out of doors, where the catkins on the big hazel bushes at the end of the garden hung in their shaken, golden aureole, where little fumes like fire burst out from the black yew-trees as a bird settled clinging to the branches. One day bluebells were along the hedge-bottoms, then cowslips twinkled like manna, golden and evanescent on the meadows. She was full of a rich drowsiness and loneliness.¹⁷

As Tony Pinkney has pointed out, “The Rainbow’s is a “prose of the womb”, matrifocal and generational in narrative structure and preoccupied with circularity, accretion and reproduction.”¹⁸ Anna’s pregnant untouchability and autonomy maddens Will, creating between them a terrible distance. Their reconciliation – through Will’s acceptance of her single being, her “otherness” – inspires in him an apocalyptic vision of future primitivism:

Sweep away the whole monstrous superstructure of the world of today, cities and industries and civilisation, leaving only the bare earth with plants growing and waters running, and he would not mind, so long as he were whole, had Anna and the child and the new, strange certainty in his soul. Then, if he were naked, he would find clothing somewhere, he would make a shelter and bring food to his wife.¹⁹

This disavowal of “the whole of man’s world”, which would find close kin at the survivalist end of deep ecology, is nonetheless seen as nihilistic in terms of the novel’s ultimate “socially-constructive” vision. Once Anna has destroyed his faith, Will discovers the happiness of a nature redeemed from
moralisation:

He listened to the thrushes in the gardens and heard a note which the cathedrals did not include: something free and careless and joyous. He crossed a field that was all yellow and dandelions ... and the bath of yellow glowing was something at once so sumptuous and so fresh, that he was glad he was away from his shadowy cathedral.  

This is the beginning of a new vision of a step beyond the Scylla and Charybdis of Christian and materialist nihilism. It is for their daughter Ursula, moving further on in the widening circle away from the immanence of the Farm, to work out this vision to its completion.

Ursula is resistant both to the sordid democratic spirituality of evangelism and the reductive scepticism of her mother, who “would have nothing extra-human.” By contrast, “Ursula was all for the ultimate.” Yet her faith is one that longs to rejoice in the flesh, rather than remaining obsessed with the obscenity of God on the Cross; that may touch the risen flesh of Christ rather than beholding only a dead body resurrected and bound for heaven. Lawrence, supposedly explaining Ursula's belief, cannot refrain from lapsing into first-person peroration on the Resurrection of the Flesh:

Is heaven impatient for me, and bitter against this earth, that I should hurry off, or that I should linger pale and untouched? Is the flesh which was crucified become as poison to the crowds in the street, or is it as a strong gladness and hope to them, as the first flower blossoming out of the earth's humus?

As so often in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, Lawrence appropriates the language of Christianity only to critique its transcendental ambitions. What he comes to characterise as an affirmative “gay science” already begins to resemble what contemporary critics call an “ecocentric spirituality”.

First of all, however, Ursula must undergo the test of materialist disillusionment that Lawrence himself suffered in the aftermath of his encounter with Darwinism. Significantly, it is her lesbian teacher Winifred Inger – a “gay scientist” in our modern usage – who teaches Ursula the materialist world view: “Winifred had had a scientific education. She had known many clever people. She wanted to bring Ursula to her own position of thought.” The older woman helps Ursula to dissect religion, representing it as merely a “particular clothing to a human aspiration.” In its place, Inger tries to put social aspirations, such as the Women's Movement, but these, with the help of authorial comment in free indirect speech, come to seem
yet further elaborations of disintegrative nihilism. Inger’s friends are all “educated, unsatisfied people, who still moved within the smug provincial society as if they were nearly as tame as their outward behaviour showed, but who were inwardly raging and mad.” The descent into “chaos” cannot last: “The fine, unquenchable flame of the younger girl would consent no more to mingle with the perverted life of the elder woman.” It is worth remembering this rejection, not just of a particular lover but of a much larger, though still specific complex: nihilistically cynical; homosexual; “educated” in a pejorative sense; politically radical; apparently pacifistic but deeply aggressive; and philosophically materialist. This complex of very various noetic and psychological features has a vital and particular biographical relation with Lawrence’s anguished articulation of the “gay science” that will be brought out later. For now it is worth pointing out that Nietzsche, like Lawrence, was almost as concerned about the nihilism of post-Christian materialism as he was about the nihilism of Christianity itself. This dilemma – to be solved at last only by the overcoming of man as such – leads to the “terrifying Either / Or: ‘Either abolish your reverences or – yourselves!’” In Will we can see the nihilism of Christian self-abolition, but in Inger and Anna lies the opposite danger of uncreative scepticism, of nihilistic disenchantment.

The way through at this stage depends upon both the integration of the intellect and the sensual self, and the assimilation and surpassing of scientific knowledge. Ursula, going as Lawrence did to University College Nottingham, finds it staffed not by the expected “priests of knowledge” but by tired-out jobsworths incapable of feeling – or at any rate communicating – any sense of wonder or magnificence. Significantly, the only subject that survives the touch of their dead hands is botany; only in the laboratory is she happy “for there the mystery still glimmered.” Peering into her microscope, Ursula experiences a curious dissonance.

She looked ... at the unicellular shadow that lay within the field of light, ... It was alive. She saw it move – she saw the bright mist of its ciliary activity, she saw the gleam of its nucleus, as it slid across the plane of light. What then was its will? If it was a conjunction of forces, physical and chemical, what held these forces unified, and for what purpose were they unified?

Unable to accept that the creature is merely “mechanical”, she has a kind of scientific epiphany:

Suddenly in her mind the world gleamed strangely, with an intense light, like the nucleus of the creature under the microscope. Suddenly she had passed away into an intensely-gleaming light of
knowledge. She could not understand what it all was. She only knew that it was not limited mechanical energy, nor mere purpose of self-preservation, and self-assertion. It was a consummation, a being infinite. Self was a oneness with the infinite.

It would be possible to trace this insight to Bergson’s “elan vital” and its associated tradition of vitalism, but equally useful to revert to Nietzsche, in whose “gay science”, according to Laurence Lampert, “philology supplants physics because the mechanistic worldview inadequately accounts for the richness of the phenomena.”\textsuperscript{30} A merely responsive or reactive model of life seems insufficient, both in explanatory and ethical terms; as Nietzsche memorably put it in \textit{The Gay Science}:  

Above all, one should not wish to divest existence of its "rich ambiguity": that is a dictate of good taste, gentlemen, the taste of reverence for everything that lies beyond your horizon. ... A "scientific" interpretation of the world, as you understand it, might ... still be one of the "most stupid" of all possible interpretations of the world, meaning that it would be one of the poorest in meaning. ... an essentially mechanical world would be an essentially "meaningless" world.\textsuperscript{31}

The crisis for Nietzsche and Lawrence is essentially a crisis of values rather than the global environment, and they use a different language to modern critics, but such “reverence” and humility seems to chime with Val Plumwood’s call for a “materialist spirituality”: one that would reject the duality of matter and spirit whilst recognizing (as Ursula did) that “materiality is already full of form, spirit, story, agency, and glory”.\textsuperscript{32} Or as Patrick Curry puts it, “We shall never be able to understand and appreciate nature until we re-learn to see it as both ‘spiritual’ subject and ‘natural’ object.”\textsuperscript{33}

So in place of the alleged reductivism – even nihilism – of Darwinism and other materialisms, both Lawrence and Nietzsche propose reverent observation of what Dylan Thomas called “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower”. Attacking Darwin’s mistaking of Malthus for nature, Nietzsche remarks:

The whole of English Darwinism breathes something like the musty air of English overpopulation, like the smell of the distress and overcrowding of small people. But a natural scientist should come out of his human nook; and in nature it is not conditions of distress that are "dominant" but overflow and squandering, even to absurdity. The struggle for existence is only an "exception", a temporary restriction of the will to life.\textsuperscript{34}

The “will to life”, to self-overcoming, is close kin to – if not homologous with
– Lawrence’s favoured formulation of “singling out”, according to which Darwinian “self-preservation” is but one modulation of life – the contractive “systole” – as opposed to the expansive Selbstauflhebung of the “diastolic” movement. The dull but worthy self-containment of the cabbage – which is not allowed to flower – is contrasted with the explosive excess of the poppy’s brief red bloom.

Lawrence’s sense that all things human and inhuman seek self-fulfilment beyond mere survival is articulated in the Study of Thomas Hardy, which he wrote after completing The Rainbow in 1915:

There is always excess, a brimming-over. At spring-time a bird brims over with blue and yellow, a glow-worm brims over with a drop of green moonshine, a lark flies up like heady wine, with song, an errand-boy whistles down the road, and scents brim over the measure of the flower. Then we say, It is spring.35

Lawrence and Nietzsche’s resistance to “merely” scientific explanations is shared by, among others, the contemporary British nature writer Richard Mabey. Whilst drawing on scientific insights where from time to time, Mabey prefers at times to indulge in speculations from which “mechanistic” (or merely cautious?) scientists might refrain. For example, awed by the spectacle of vast flocks of pink-feet geese, Mabey asks:

What do these vespers rituals mean? Conventional theories explain communal roosting very plausibly in terms of “safety in numbers” and the sharing of information about food sources. But as so often in nature, what happens is too extravagant, too excessive, to be so simply utilitarian. The huge assemblies, the prolonged and festive flight displays, the mixing of species, all suggest something else is going on. Is it too anthropomorphic to imagine that … birds like to see in the night in company, to put on a show for mutual reassurance against the dark?36

At the same time, Mabey’s use of a concluding rhetorical question suggests a certain lack of confidence in his suggestion.

One crucial difference between Lawrence and contemporary “gay scientists” is that he felt impelled to imagine the implications of his ideas in social and political terms. In the final pages of The Rainbow Ursula’s overcoming of nihilism is developed into a more general utopian vision, which is figured in the organic terms used previously to describe the Brangwen’s immanence in nature and Will’s religious transport:

As she sat at her window, she saw the people go by in the street below, colliers, women, children, walking each in the husk of an old
fruition, but visible through the husk, the swelling and the heaving contour of the new germination.37

The promise of the rainbow at the end is not now a covenant with a transcendent God, but a sign of “the earth’s new architecture”:

And the rainbow stood upon the earth. She knew that the sordid people who crept hard-scaled and separate on the face of the world’s corruption were living still, that the rainbow was arched in their blood and would quiver to life in their spirit, that they would cast off their horny covering of disintegration, that new, clean, naked bodies would issue to a new germination, to a new growth, rising to the light and the wind and the clean rain of heaven.38

This, I want to suggest, is the outline of Lawrence’s brief vision of a socially-realised gay science, or as Dolores LaChapelle puts it, “the truth that he was working toward – not one system, the totally material earth and the other system, the totally spiritual heaven – but both earth and heaven, integral parts of one unified whole system.”39 It is a vision or a revelation of holistic “truth” whose destruction or diversion is itself a story of critical importance.

The transformation in Lawrence’s thought, which I will of necessity have to schematize and falsify here somewhat, can be described as a shift between two “Nietzsches”. The Nietzsche of the “glad dawn” of the gay science, who extols the path beyond a deified and a mechanised nature, is supplanted – although not in the least consistently – by the Nietzsche who contradicts himself flagrantly, claiming that a particular social order – specifically a “natural” (though not racial) “aristocracy” – is more “natural” than our present system. In other words, the free self-overcoming of life in humans and non-humans is pushed aside in this Nietzsche by an increasing emphasis on the question of power and leadership, and eventually to a proto-fascistic Fuhrerprinzip allegedly underwritten by the order of nature itself.

What then is the nature of the transformation in Lawrence’s Nietzscheanism in the crucial period in 1915? What did the “gay science” mean to him? At first it seemed, as in The Rainbow, either to have some intrinsic potential for general social renovation or to require such change as a necessary precondition. Thus we encounter in Lawrence’s letters in early 1915 a bent towards communism; writing to Lady Ottoline Morrell in February Lawrence was envisaging a new community, Rananim, to be founded upon principles of “truth to the earth”:

It is a communism based, not on poverty, but on riches, not on hu-
mility, but on pride, not on sacrifice but upon complete fulfilment in
the flesh of all strong desire, not on forfeiture but upon inheritance,
ot on heaven but on earth. \(^{40}\)

In the same letter he sees Nietzsche as an adversary, characteristically
misinterpreting his notion of Will to Power in terms that suggest it would
pose a threat to his project:

We must go very, very carefully at first. The great serpent to destroy,
is the Will to Power: the desire for one man to have some dominion
over his fellow man. \(^{41}\)

Soon afterwards, Lawrence wrote to his new and temporary friend Bertrand
Russell of his idea of a “revolution in the state” involving a basic minimum
wage and general nationalisation, remarking perceptively enough that “it is
no use saying a man’s soul should be free, if his boots hurt him so much he
can’t walk.” \(^{42}\) The connection with the concluding vision of The Rainbow is
highlighted by the reference to the present state of mankind “fast within the
hard, unliving, impervious shell.” \(^{43}\) A later letter to Russell shows both that
Lawrence had been working on a philosophical book, based around a study
of Thomas Hardy’s novels but departing into more general questions, and
that this book was linked in his mind with Nietzsche’s The Gay Science: “I
wrote a book about these things – I used to call it ”Le Gai Savaire”. “ \(^{44}\) In
March 1915, immediately upon finishing The Rainbow and shortly before
his first trip to Cambridge, he wrote to Russell again:

Also I feel very profound about my book “The Signal” – “Le Gai
Saver” – or whatever it is – which I am re-beginning. It is my revolu-
tionary utterance. I take on a very important attitude of profundity to
it, and so feel happy. \(^{45}\)

The revolutionary optimism was short-lived. The war dragged on in in-
creasingly bloody fashion, Lawrence was in very poor health and under
great strain thanks to his controversial marriage to the German divorcee
Frieda von Richthofen. Moreover, his stay at Cambridge had left him seeth-
ing with rage. There he had met a group of intellectuals against whom he
reacted in a specific and vitally important fashion; all were “educated unsat-
sified” types, like Winifred Inger. Also like Inger, they were generally in-
clined towards cynicism, socialism and materialism, and several, such as
John Maynard Keynes, Francis Birrell and Duncan Grant, were homosexu-
als. In a letter to Lady Morrell, he associated them with the industrial nihil-
ism of The Rainbow, as “they are cased each in a hard little shell”, and they
make him dream of beetles. Again, in a letter to David Garnett, Lawrence
attacked the homosexual “set” which he saw as corrupted by a “sort of
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sewer”; meeting them was, he says, “one of the crises in my life. It sent me mad with misery and hostility and rage.” Thus Lawrence’s rejection of the progressive, matrifocal “gay science” of The Rainbow, and the swerve towards greater mysticism and obsession with the phallus and the Fuhrer-prinzip, may be seen in part as a reaction against a particular sexual orientation and class as well as their views. By July, he was writing to Russell in increasingly hostile terms, telling him:

You must drop all your democracy. You must not believe in “the people”. ... There must be an aristocracy of people who have wisdom, and there must be a Ruler: a Kaiser: no Presidents and democracies.

This is not, let it be noted, a wholly new idea to Lawrence, nor can it be presented as a rejection of the idea of a “gay science” as such; it is, rather, a crucial new inflection of that idea which was to take Lawrence off on a new and rather unpleasant trajectory.

In the novels written after The Rainbow, Lawrence presents us with a series of male protagonists who are meant to represent embodied intelligence as well an integrated sexuality attuned to the “dark gods” he came to feel he served. And yet despite their frequent protestations against the limitations of verbal consciousness, readers are apt to find them wearily verbose and hectoring. But the crucial point is that he was trying to work out what falling under the spell of the sensuous might mean in political terms. Deep ecological critics such as Janik and LaChapelle are right to see him as a progenitor of future primitivism, or non-regressive, non-Romantic neo-animism, but wrong simply to ignore Lawrence’s serious, persistent and deeply problematic attempts to extrapolate his ideas from intimate to social relations.

One of Lawrence’s most striking, absurd and tiresome attempts is his “Australian” novel Kangaroo. The casual racial stereotyping in the novel I will not attempt to defend – suffice to say the only things I can concur with on very limited experience is the Australian intolerance of assumed superiority and your preference for bungalows. His legendary sensitivity to the sense of place and his extreme biophilia I will leave to you to judge. Here the thinly disguised Lawrence-figure Richard Somers senses the “roused spirit of the bush”:

... the vast, uninhabited land frightened him. It seemed so hoary and lost, so unapproachable. The sky was pure, crystal pure and blue, of a lovely pale blue colour: the air was wonderful, new and un-breathed: and there were great distances. But the bush, the grey, charred bush. It scared him. As a poet, he felt himself entitled to all
kinds of emotions and sensations which an ordinary man would have repudiated. Therefore he let himself feel all sorts of things about the bush. It was so phantom-like, so ghostly, with its tall, pale trees and many dead trees, like corpses, partly charred by bush fires: and then the foliage so dark, like grey-green iron. And then it was so deathly still. Even the few birds seemed to be swamped in silence. Waiting, waiting – the bush seemed to be hoarily waiting. And he could not penetrate into its secret. He couldn't get at it. Nobody could get at it. What was it waiting for?  

What it might be waiting for, it seems, is the spilt blood of the forces of Labour, organised by Willie Struthers, ranged against a national federation of fascists made up of diggers returned from the War and led by Ben "Kangaroo" Cooley. Both fictional leaders spend most of the book trying to co-opt the visionary Somers into their cause.

All this would be of merely literary historical interest had Lawrence not so overtly linked his proto-ecological ideas to the larger political arguments about labour, nation and race. Somers wants men “once more to refer the sensual passion of love sacredly to the great dark God, the ithyphallic, of the first dark religions”, and he finds himself able “to understand most sensitively the dark flicker of animal life about him, even in a bat, even in the writhing of a maggot in a dead rabbit.” But Lawrence's wartime nightmare leads him to conclude that “No man who has really consciously lived through this can believe again absolutely in democracy.” Somers is deeply drawn to Kangaroo's promise of a Nationalist revolution and benevolent dictatorship, believing that it holds out the promise of “a new life-form”. As it turns out, Kangaroo's movement is based too much on male comradeship – matey-ness of a dreadful Colonial kind – and not enough on the deeper wellsprings of life, the dark gods Somers endlessly goes on about, and he withdraws with characteristic English reserve at the critical moment. Its brutally authoritarian character gives him not a moment's pause.

Lawrence thought Kangaroo his most important book. It is not his worst novel – The Plumed Serpent is even more vicious and racist, and far more misogynistic – but it does represent a sincere attempt to imagine what overcoming humanity, being true to the earth and being re-embodied might mean for a whole society. His next successful novel, Lady Chatterly's Lover, is marvellous precisely because it narrows down the scope of the sensual to the sexual realm where it works so much more obviously. An integrated sensibility, a physical, non-alienated intelligence, or a Nietzschean “gay science” is not hard to represent in a sexual relationship; the question that Lawrence thereby abandoned was whether it might work in any other
context.  

My point is not simply that a disillusioned environmentalist might become a fascist. Lawrence's trajectory was nothing if not idiosyncratic, and both his and his contemporaries' understanding of nature was extremely crude and typically hierarchical compared to ours today. Rather, Lawrence's passionate and persistent recuperation of the sensual and his savage indignation at the ways we are dehumanised by the denial of the animal in us ought to prompt us to ask how we might make the link he failed to make – from a somatic conception of the good life to an ecological politics. And what sort of politics? If we believe in the crisis rhetoric of environmentalism, the scale and imminence of the threats we pose to the earth we live in, can we really believe in democracy any more than Richard Lovat Somers? His misanthropic rage and vituperation cannot be altogether alien to us.

So Nietzsche and Lawrence's “gay science” may mean several things, of varying political and ecological valencies: joyous affirmation of earthly existence, our own nature and that around us (what David Abram calls the “spell of the sensuous”); or a reformed, post-mechanistic ecological science under humanistic supervision, rejecting both religious superstition and reductive mechanistic materialism; or a society run by a “natural” aristocracy, with “physicians” such as Nietzsche describes weeding out the weak. At a crucial point in his career, Lawrence seems to have largely turned away from the first and second senses, to an increasing emphasis on the third. In this he exemplifies all too well Jonathan Bate's argument that “The dilemma of Green reading is that it must, yet it cannot, separate ecopoetics from ecopolitics.”

For Raymond Williams, an ecocritic before the term was coined, Lawrence is a key figure – a writer to be admired while remaining irredeemably problematic. He regards the posing of ecopoetics “against”, ultimately, the social preconditions for survival as a betrayal, and his account in *The Country and the City* is moving in its blend of sympathy for the man and condemnation of Leavisites who have failed to address his political aberrations whilst paying homage to his conservative pastoral:

... it is characteristic and significant that he ... aligned the ideas of human independence and renewal – the ideas of nature itself – with an opposition to democracy, to education, to the labour movement: a restless, often contradictory opposition: at its sourest between the war years and the middle twenties; re-thought and in some ways amended, with more real sense of connection, in the reflective essays of his last years. His is a knot too tight to untie now: the knot of a life under overwhelming contradictions and pressures. But as I
have watched it settle into what is now a convention – in literary education especially – I have felt it as an outrage, in a continuing crisis and on a persistent border. The song of the land, the song of rural labour, the song of delight in the many forms of life with which we share our physical world, is too important and too moving to be tamely given up, in an embittered betrayal, to the confident enemies of all significant and actual independence and renewal.56

I have tried to continue the task of disrupting the Leavisite convention – now perpetuated in deep green readings – that celebrates uncritically Lawrence’s song of the earth, while trying to pick at the historical strands that coincide in his difficult and worked-at life, but the knot is indeed too tight.

The song of joyful wisdom is not yet finished, and Nietzsche and Lawrence have the distinction of having given to it some lastingly beautiful melodies as well as some counterpoints of threat and danger. Through them we must ask whether like departures must entail like destinations. Therefore this tribute to our exemplars in ambivalence concludes by recalling that the same Zarathustra who sings in praise of cruelty also offers us this exquisite dream of a world offered to the humans made worthy of it by love and wisdom:

How surely my dream looked upon this finite world, not inquisitively, not acquisitively, not afraid, not begging, as if a full apple offered itself to my hand, a ripe golden apple with cool, soft, velvet skin, thus the world offered itself to me; ... as if delicate hands carried a shrine toward me, a shrine open for the delight of bashful, adoring eyes, thus the world offered itself to me today; not riddle enough to frighten away human love, not solution enough to put to sleep human wisdom: a humanly good thing the world was to me today, though one speaks so much evil of it.57

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NOTES


10 Nietzsche, “Thus Spake Zarathustra” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 188.


12 Haeckel translated Darwin into German, coined the term “ecology” and founded the Monist League to promote ecological, anti-Christian ideas.


15 Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, p. 42.


17 Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, p. 221.


22 Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, p. 320.


31 Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, p. 335.
33 Patrick Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, p. 103.
36 Richard Mabey, *Nature Cure* (London: Chatto and Windus 2005), p.218-9. Note on one hand the dismissive implication of “conventional theories” and “simply utilitarian”, the implied superiority of intuition (“as so often in nature” as though biologists never leave laboratories), the faint praise of “very plausibly”, and on the other hand the caution of Mabey’s questioning approach. In fact his “imaginative” reading of the flocking behaviour seems indistinguishable from the “utilitarian” readings he questions. Elsewhere Mabey takes on “Darwinist” notions of competitive fitness among fen plants, making the daft and unsubstantiated claim they might actually be friendly and “sociable” rather than competitive, and that perhaps meadowsweet benefits the other species around with root secretions (pp. 184-5). Of course nature writers are responsible only to literary editors while scientists face peer review...
37 Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, p. 547.
50 Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, p. 223.
51 Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, p. 263.
52 Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, p. 240.
53 For this observation, I am indebted to H.M. Robinson, “Nietzsche, Lawrence and the Somatic Conception of the Good Life”

