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Chapter 7

Eco-consciousness and Ecopoetics in D. H. Lawrence's *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* and *Apocalypse*

Fiona Becket

It has been asserted that the other-than-human subject emerges in the field of modernism, with significant implications for how the human is read. Bonnie Kime Scott, in a thought-piece called "Green," posits that an understanding of modernism's engagement with the nonhuman helps us to plan for "a culture that invests itself in nature."¹ Kime Scott outlines the usefulness of criticism that destabilizes the mode of "modernist techne" exemplified by Ezra Pound, T. E. Hulme, and Wyndham Lewis in their theorizations of modernist practice, and makes a case for criticism that pays serious attention to the function of nonhuman nature in modernist texts, with respect to subjectivity, gender, and consciousness.

Interventions in the debate include Kime Scott's monograph on Virginia Woolf, which invokes aspects of ecofeminist thought to illuminate Woolf's practice.² Elsewhere, Alison Lacivita has combined ecocriticism and genetic criticism to present *Finnegans Wake* as an exemplary work of "ecological modernism" in which "Joyce's idea of a 'universal history' is inextricably bound to the environment." Elizabeth Black also included Edith Sitwell and Charlotte Mew in her study *The Nature of Modernism*, assessing them as critically underrated despite their work demonstrating an "environmental consciousness" that stimulates a timely reappraisal of individuals in relation to place.³ Carrie Rohman further

¹ Bonnie Kime Scott, "Green," in *Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate*, ed. Stephen Ross (London: Routledge, 2009), 223.

² Bonnie Kime Scott, *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2012).

³ Alison Lacivita, *The Ecology of Finnegans Wake* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2015), 229; Elizabeth Black, *The Nature of Modernism: Ecocritical Approaches to the Poetry of Edward Thomas, T. S. Eliot,*

contextualizes the question by showing how modernism is ideally placed to capitalize on the insights, post-Darwin, pertaining to human animality, and to contest the power of the unitary, totalizing structures of Freudian psychoanalysis, with profound implications for the decentered human subject.⁴ In this chapter I shall place some emphasis on the ways in which Lawrence theorizes the animal, the vegetal, “Nature,” and consciousness in his discursive writing, which on occasions unexpectedly and deliberately brings *oikos* and *demos* into close alignment, and not always happily. Much of my attention will be directed at the poems in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923) and the philosophy of Lawrence’s final book *Apocalypse*, posthumously published in 1931. I also focus on aspects of his two highly idiosyncratic books on the unconscious, as well as some of his later discursive writing, invoked here to understand better the distinctions in Lawrence between creatureliness and beastliness, ethical engagement and alienation. Eco-consciousness in Lawrence describes his philosophy of the interconnectedness of human and more-than-human being, but it does not, as we shall see, reconcile the contradictions and counter-positions that characterize his writing on species and the decentered human subject, or world building.

For Rohman, in the context of British modernism, D. H. Lawrence is the writer who is most committed to putting the animal at the heart of his critique of Western humanism: “His work understands animality as spontaneity, the unknowable, the bodily, and the pure. Essentially, the animal possesses the kind of *being* that Lawrence wants to recuperate in humans, a being that rejects mechanistic forms of self-consciousness and embraces radical mystery.”⁵ Coming after close readings of Lawrence’s “Snake” and “Fish” and, in a later study, “Tortoise Shout,” it is a meaningful claim, although we can return to *Birds, Beasts and*

Edith Sitwell and Charlotte Mew (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁴ Carrie Rohman, *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

⁵ Rohman, *Stalking the Subject*, pp. [AQ OK]

Flowers, where these poems are collected, in its entirety to see if more is at stake than ontological recuperation.⁶ With respect to modernist practice more broadly, Rohman has also progressed the concept of bioaesthetics as dependent upon the non-separability of the ontological and the aesthetic.⁷ Her argument prioritizes species inclusivity as the proper counterweight to human exceptionalism. In this instance the matter goes significantly beyond questions of representation: “The aesthetic capacity *is* animal; it doesn’t just approach animals or hold them in its purview.”⁸

Diverging from Rohman’s perspective, Andrew Kalaidjian examines the contrast with the “pastoral turn” of the Georgian poetry championed by Harold Munro and Edward Marsh and “a new, peculiarly modernist environmental aesthetics” evident in the inversions of the pastoral that he finds in Djuna Barnes’s novel *Nightwood* (1936).⁹ Kalaidjian casts the “dark pastoral” as the antithesis of freedom in nature in a study influenced by Jakob von Uexküll’s biosemiotic development of *Umwelt*. Although writing from different standpoints, Kalaidjian and Rohman (who has also written on *Nightwood*)¹⁰ are representative of critics who perceive in modernist writing the creative expression of interrelated modes of animal and human meaning-making. Kalaidjian concludes that Barnes’s novel “ends with a ‘letting be’ of animal and human, a dark pastoral *dénouement* that does not find safety in nature, but rather

⁶ NOTE MISSING [AQ]

⁷ Carrie Rohman, *Choreographies of the Living: Bioaesthetics in Literature, Art, and Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁸ Rohman, *Choreographies*, 147.

⁹ Andrew Kalaidjian, “The Black Sheep: Djuna Barnes’s Dark Pastoral,” in *Creatural Fictions: Human-Animal Relationships in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature*, ed. David Herman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 80.

¹⁰ Rohman, *Stalking*, 133–58.

affirms the interdependence of all life that persists despite—or rather because of—the manifold modes of existence in the world”.¹¹ This coherent shift from the Georgian poets in 1911–12 toward a modernist aesthetic that engages with the nonhuman can be developed with reference to other movements, such as Imagism.¹²

A revised understanding of the place of other-than-human nature in an analysis of modernist literature and aesthetics is one point of entry into the field. Modernism’s shaping of animality especially, and ecological consciousness more broadly, is gaining particular traction. My approach engenders a fresh consideration of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* which, as a whole, constitutes one of the most consistent attempts within modernism to consider questions that were beginning to be examined in the context of the humanities, the social sciences, and zoological sciences only much later in the twentieth century.¹³ It is likely that the significance of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, taken in its entirety, has been largely overlooked in ecocritical studies because Lawrence is not routinely associated with complex worlding.¹⁴ *Ecopoiesis* is a relatively recent word, created by biophysicist and geneticist Robert Haynes.¹⁵ Comprised of *oikos* and *poiesis* it originally referred to terraforming—

¹¹ Kalaidjian, “The Black Sheep: Djuna Barnes’s Dark Pastoral,” 84.

¹² A useful synopsis of this direction is provided in chapter 1 of Kime Scott’s *In the Hollow of the Wave*, “Towards a Greening of Modernism.”

¹³ Reference will be to *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* in *The Poems: D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Christopher Pollnitz, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Hereafter cited as *P* in parentheses in the text. References to *The Poems*, vol. 2, “Notes and Apparatus” are hereafter cited as *P2*.

¹⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert offers this interesting perspective: “Rather than being a metaphysical Linnaeus [...] Lawrence is here a Satanic Darwin, journeying in thought to the black center of the earth to trace an evolutionary history we citizens of the ‘pussyfoot west’ (CP, 280) have forgotten”; Sandra M. Gilbert, *Acts of Attention: The Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, 2nd ed. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 330.

¹⁵ Robert H. Haynes, “Ecce Ecopoiesis: Playing God on Mars,” in *Moral Expertise: Studies in Practical and*

world building, with sustainability as a primary goal. It is a response to the fragility of planetary life and the actual challenges of literal “worlding.” In this context, *ecopoiesis* becomes an anthropocentric conceit. Transferred to the anthropocentric activity of writing poetry, via its derivative “ecopoetics,” it helps to get a purchase on the impossibility, as Timothy Morton argues, of speaking the ecological subject.¹⁶ If *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* is an effective example of textual and literary *ecopoiesis*, terraforming, it is not only because its preoccupation is with (and not with) the nonhuman, but also because the poet enjoys the creative opportunity of *not* speaking the ecological subject. In “Peace,” the poem does not speak lava; in “The Ass,” “He-Goat,” and “She-Goat,” for instance, it does not speak ass, he-goat, and she-goat, but the poems get closer to not-speaking them than the poems of any other modernist poet drawn to the complex otherness of the nonhuman. The poems that constitute the volume as “art-speech” (unlike examples from much of the polemical writing) collectively examine the grounds for, and sometimes against, collaborative, cooperative cohabitation.¹⁷

Thus far, this chapter has tried to avoid the binary opposition of animal and human that cultural posthumanism challenges. Yet, as Bonnie Kime Scott reminds us, Donna Haraway has commented on the persistence of this binary even in the work of Gilles Deleuze

Professional Ethics, ed. Don MacNiven (London: Routledge, 1990), 161–63.

¹⁶ Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017), Kindle, location 119: “I cannot speak the ecological subject, but this is exactly what I’m required to do. I can’t speak it because language, and in particular grammar, is fossilized human thoughts: thoughts, for example, about humans and nonhumans.”

¹⁷ “Art-speech,” wrote Lawrence, “is the only truth. An artist is usually a damned liar, but his art, if it be art, will tell you the truth of his day”; D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, ed. Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey, and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 14.

and Félix Guattari, in formulations of “becoming-animal” which are increasingly influential in current theorizations of animality in modernism.¹⁸ In his essay “Animal Body, Inhuman Face” Alphonso Lingis, contemplating “the question of the animal,” argues that the animal has a face which is as overlooked in modern thought as the animality of humans. Lingis emphasizes the formation of animal ethics by a concentration on multiplicities (as theorized in Deleuze and Guattari’s influential text *A Thousand Plateaus*) and the principle of the radical interdependency of multiple species: “anaerobic bacteria [...] Macrophages in our bloodstream [...] They, and not some Aristotelian form, are true agencies of our individuation as organisms.”¹⁹ Focussing on the infinitesimally and imperceptively small, and reminding us of the necessary porosity of human and animal bodies, Lingis usefully pans outward to declare “We also live in symbiosis with rice, wheat, and corn fields [...] move and feel in symbiosis with other mammals, birds, reptiles, and fish.”²⁰

Lawrence’s unwavering skepticism with respect to the unitary psychoanalytic subject (the “old stable ego”)²¹ is praised by Deleuze and Guattari, who perceive in Lawrence’s essays and books on the unconscious and society a challenge to the “law of the great Phallus.” They alight on the language of “flows-schizzes” in Lawrence’s writing about recurrent themes: consciousness, sexuality, men, women, family, mothering, education, the requirement that we acknowledge a fluid relationality between all the elements of the cosmos.

¹⁸ Kime Scott, *In the Hollow of the Wave*, Kindle, location 238.

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1992).

²⁰ Lingis Alphonso, “Animal Body, Inhuman Face,” in *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 166.

²¹ *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, vol. II, ed. George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 183.

In *Anti-Oedipus* they warn against dismissing the “pantheism of flows” that characterizes Lawrence’s discursive writing, asserting that “it is not easy to de-oedipalize even nature, even landscapes, to the extent that Lawrence could.”²² The censorship of his work—including his paintings—offered Lawrence the clearest proof, if any were needed, that the social construction of sexuality as perverted and degraded was of a piece with “Freudianism” and the oedipal formations from which capitalism and colonialism proceeded, and fascism.

“What does it matter / What we call human...”

In his final discursive book, *Apocalypse*, Lawrence gives expression to a cultural condition which, in our moment, we might be tempted to call ecological estrangement. “We have lost the cosmos,” he exclaims, “by coming out of responsive connection with it, and this is our chief tragedy. What is our petty little love of nature—Nature!!—compared to the ancient magnificent living with the cosmos, and being honoured by the cosmos!”²³ It is a lament that requires careful scrutiny both in the context of the language and thought of *Apocalypse* regarding the power of the “living relation” in Lawrence’s lexicon, and with respect to a broader awareness in Lawrence’s writing about “Nature” as a closed and monolithic, humanist category set apart from “Man,” and a domain that is subject to diverse forms of mastery. In particular, “responsive connection” as something lost is significant. As we have seen, critics have begun to formulate the ways in which Lawrence’s work challenges received notions of human exceptionality, heightening the sense of an amplification of the relationality

²² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Athlone Press, 1984), 351.

²³ D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation*, ed. Mara Kalnins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 76. Hereafter cited as *A* in parentheses in the text.

of all forms, living and non-living (for in what sense is the non-sentient sun alive?) in his work.

Certainly, the most powerful and enduringly positive imagery to characterize *Apocalypse* is derived, via Lawrence's critique of diverse myth systems, from a holism that resonates throughout his writing. Here it does so with respect to the interconnectedness of the human animal and all the elements of the "cosmos" (a notion that Lawrence borrows from his reading of pre-Socratic philosophy): "I am part of the sun as my eye is part of me. That I am part of the earth my feet know perfectly, and my blood is part of the sea" (A 149). This declaration reappraises the materiality of the sun, earth, and blood as actualities and as unitary symbols. It suggests the interrelationality of elements and ideas that we encounter consistently throughout Lawrence's work. Once light has entered the eye, or once the downward pressure of a step meets the upward pressure of the earth, or the course of the blood is perceived, who can say with conviction where Nature "ends" and where Man "begins"? In *Apocalypse*, then, the dominant belief is in an impersonal ontological mode defined by a radical interdependency, in ways that cast doubt on the grip of transcendental subjectivity and move closer to the construction of—or expression of—ecological subjectivity.

Apocalypse concludes with a statement of connectivity and kinship:

So that my individualism is really an illusion. I am a part of the great whole, and I can never escape. But I *can* deny my connections, break them, and become a fragment.

Then I am wretched.

What we want is to destroy our false, inorganic connections, especially those related to money, and re-establish the living organic connections, with the cosmos, the sun and earth, with mankind and nation and family. (A 149)

The distinction between “inorganic” and “organic” connections inflects much of the writing in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* and is radically inclusive: the alienating power of capital is an underlying preoccupation of the collection, although, as we shall see, Lawrence cannot be held up as a champion of egalitarian ideals. In the context of his oeuvre this perspective from *Apocalypse* fittingly seems to have the last word, significantly detached from the personal philosophy of individual selfhood that dominates the most effective of Lawrence’s fictional works. Poems in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* consistently address the “inorganic connections” forged by industrial capitalism—“The American Eagle,” “The Revolutionary,” and “The Evening Land” position industrial democratic America, its institutions and values, in a state of tension between the “nascent demon people” and the “Two spectres” of idealism and mechanized modernity. This is the force of the speculation in “The American Eagle” as to whether, having been hatched by the “dove of Liberty,” the eagle is reducible to “a sort of prosperity-gander / Fathering endless ten-dollar golden eggs” (P 365).

Environmental consciousness in Lawrence is different from a consciousness of environment. At the level of language, and in the context of a highly personal mode of creativity with metaphor, the suffix “consciousness” is common in Lawrence’s discursive writing and, on occasion, finds its way into his fiction and poetry. The most commonly recognized and acknowledged formulation is “blood-consciousness,” in which, as has been observed before, the first term “blood” attracts more critical notice than the term “consciousness” to which it is attached by a hyphen.²⁴ This act of misplaced attention is an effect of reading that Lawrence brings on himself, so associated is the formulation with the grievous, overly conscious, apparently regenerative “column of blood” primitivism of *The*

²⁴ Fiona Becket, *D. H. Lawrence: The Thinker as Poet* (Basingstoke/New York: Macmillan/St. Martin’s Press, 1997), chs. 4 and 5.

Plumed Serpent (1926), for example, which is closely related to the apotheosis of masculinity in Lawrence's writing.²⁵ As a principal term in Lawrence's lexicon, "blood-consciousness" goes through a series of modulations. The irritating whine of the mosquito in the poet's ear in "Mosquito" "shakes my *sudden* blood to hatred of you" (*P* 288, emphasis added): this non-cerebral response is, in context, profoundly human as distinct from instinctively nonhuman. It can be argued that "blood-consciousness" is less a feature of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* than might be expected, in part because what are being staged and restaged are highly *self-conscious* encounters with the creaturely. Where "blood-consciousness" is highlighted in this collection, it is in the insistent atavism of Lawrence's encounters with the immigrant poor or groups of indigenous people in the course of his nomadic journeying across continents. In "Elephant," "The hot dark blood of itself a-laughing, wet, half-devilish, / men all motion" (*P* 341) distances the dancers at the Perahera festival in Kandy from the "pale and dejected fragment" (*P* 340) of the visiting Prince of Wales, but associates them with "the dark mountain of blood" (*P* 341); in "Cypresses," the trees embody a "Dusky, slim *marrow-thought* of slender, flickering men of Etruria" (*P* 250, emphasis added).

The early champions of Lawrence's "vision" tended to see in "blood-consciousness" an expression of the positive efficacy of "life-blood" in a mode of vitalism. However, the dynamic operations of the metaphor reside in the often overlooked second term, "consciousness." This hyphenated construction shows Lawrence developing an anti-Cartesian language to counter the predominance of "Freudianism" in the mapping of the instincts and the location of the instinctual life "in the head" (another distinctly Lawrentian formulation to describe a mode of overbearing modern self-consciousness).²⁶ In his two short books on the

²⁵ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), ch. 8.

²⁶ D. H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious and Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (Harmondsworth:

unconscious, *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921) and *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922), Lawrence attempts to provide a mapping of the body that accommodates a non-cerebral basis of feeling. Hence, the lifeblood, for Lawrence, must be acknowledged as primary in a materialist genealogy of feeling: “blood-consciousness”, asserts Lawrence in *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*, “is the very source and origin of us” (*FUPU* 183). The idea that opposes this concept in Lawrence’s writing is “mental-consciousness” (sometimes equated with “ideal consciousness”), which is indicative of the “ego-bound” social or “ideal” self and is subject to an infinity of contingencies. “Mental consciousness,” with or without the hyphen, is also frequently gendered to heighten the misogyny with which Lawrence has become associated (the poems “Ego-bound,” “Jealousy,” and “Ego-bound Women,” not in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, comprise a malicious trinity in this regard [*P* 411–12]). The question of agency in Lawrence’s writing is directly related to the power of these opposed concepts of consciousness in the formulation of his thought. To this taxonomy of idiosyncratic metaphors, Lawrence adds a third, less-used formulation, the botanical sounding “sap-consciousness,” of particular interest to those in the field of critical plant studies.²⁷ In *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* he opposes “ideal consciousness” in humans, an other-than-human mode of consciousness: “We are forced to attribute to a starfish, or to a nettle, its own peculiar and integral consciousness. This throws us at once out of the ideal castle of the brain [the well-defended, non-traversable walls of the social and psychological self] into the flux of sap-consciousness” (*FUPU* 217). “Flux” signifies an organic flow implicated in affective experience, nonverbal, and bears no relation (other than at the level of metaphor) to the modernist “*stream of consciousness*” about which Lawrence

Penguin, 1986), 125. Hereafter cited as *FUPU* in parentheses in the text.

²⁷ See, for instance, Michael Marder, *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

was scathing (and which he recasts in “St John” [P 283]). The idea of a genus-specific mode of consciousness (nettle, starfish) is reprised in some of the poems in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, which also extensively practices an iconoclastic mode of re-creating at a level of metaphor that reaches out to the multiple, polymorphous ecological subject: the “pensive slim-muzzled greyhound buds” of cyclamens (P 265); the “anaconda head” of the she-goat (P 338); the poetic association of a mosquito and a heron in flight (P 287).

Broadly speaking, for Lawrence, in modern human subjects, “our petty little love of nature—Nature!!” is derived from an overdeveloped “mental consciousness” which is in turn derived from, and nourishes, a belief in human species-superiority. In his essay “...Love Was Once a Little Boy,” Lawrence asserts that there is no egoism in Nature to counter or confound the predations of Man and to “beware of [...] people who love Nature, or flowers, or dogs” because nothing that is nonhuman can overthrow the tyranny of the ego (RDP 336). When Lawrence, in common with later environmental philosophers, capitalizes Nature, he does so to indicate its constructedness as a unitary concept that produces a state of alienation, which destroys natural diversity and transforms the earth into an object subordinate to the ego. The line in Lawrence’s poem “Men in New Mexico”—“White men make gold-mines and the mountains unmake them / In their sleep” (P 359)—carries a productive ambiguity about who or what is unmade; who or what sleeps. The white men are “mad with somnambulism” (P 360). There is “A black membrane over the face” of the indigenous men, and the mountains are “under the blanket” (P 360). The old planetary body is paralyzed as if in sleep, “Though the mind is awake” (P 360). The metaphor of parasomnia is critical with respect to the inequalities and injustices of modern America.

In “The Evening Land”—deliberately and mischievously placed in the “Fruits” section of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*—Lawrence anticipates his time to come in the United States with ambivalence. At stake, as always, is whether the projected encounter will be

symbiotic or parasitic—whether the poet’s soul will be enlarged or shrivel. He fears in modern, inorganic, capitalist, democratic America the displacement even of an emaciated idealism by the rise of an automaton selfhood, the negation implicit in “the iron click of your human contact” (P 242),

Your more-than-European idealism,
 Like a be-aureoled bleached skeleton hovering
 Its cage-ribs in the social heaven, beneficent.

And then your rapid resurrection
 Into machine-uprisen perfect man. (P 242)

The poem enacts the tension felt by the poet between the attraction of America’s “demonish, New World / nature” (P 243) and recoil from its inhuman modern will: “The winding-sheet of your self-less ideal love” (P 242) spoken in the language of Lawrence’s critique of Whitman. With the tension unresolved, the poem asks the question that resonates through the body of poems: “What does it matter / What we call human, and what we don’t call human?” (P 243). It is a question and a poem that preceded the formation of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, but one that was relocated to it and that informs the exploration of poetic, political, religious, ethical, and natural matter in that volume. Specifically, it challenges what goes under the sign of the human and has wider ramifications for how the ecological subject unfolds into the open ground of poetry.

Creatureliness

There remains a strong sense of the futility of trying to reconcile the many contradictions that characterize Lawrence’s constantly shifting position on the nonhuman. This is not to denigrate an artist who was consistently capable of radical reappraisals of humanity, and who

was interested in the creative potential of the limits of human understanding about nonhuman life. It is, instead, to acknowledge the complexity of his analysis of universal coexistence, how kinship is perceived, and his enjoyment in extending the apparent limits of language. The prefaces ahead of each section of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (which were not included in the first editions) are influenced by Lawrence's reading of John Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy*.²⁸ Pre-Socratic ideas helped to shape and give expression to the interconnected "cosmos" that underpins *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. One of the ways in which the volume disrupts access to the vegetal and animal other is in the nearness of and, therefore, the distance between the section prefaces and the poems with which they are associated in the text. The prefaces are written mainly in a mode of portentous faux-mythic pronouncements, with highly codified connections to the section poems serving to undermine the concept of taxonomy. All the poems in the volume deviate radically from being unequivocally "natural" histories. The "stories" of nature being told here follow the logic of the "stemless flower-mesh" (P 251) as opposed to rigid, hierarchical—arboreal—systems of classification. While there is no doubt that *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* has a much-discussed mythopoeic dynamism and a fascination with archetypes and, in its formation, made pronounced swerves into a tedious rhetoric of restorative manliness—Lawrence's "Overweening men, full of screams of life, commanding a wide / field of vision" (P2 1073) was revised, in "The American Eagle" to "Overweening bird, full of screams of life, commanding a lucrative / obedience"—it is the concentration on the multiplicity of nonhuman life, its connections, ecologies, and voice, which extend modernism's environments.

"Snake" first came to general attention when it was published in the fifth and last anthology of *Georgian Poetry 1920–22*, in the company of pastoral revivals and poetry that

²⁸ John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (1892) (London: A. & C. Black, 1908).

gazed upon, and walked with, animals and birds and strode or wandered through beloved landscapes. They included Martin Armstrong's "The Buzzards," William H. Davies's "The Captive Lion," "The Moth" by Walter de la Mare, and Vita Sackville-West, who "with the kestrels shared the cleanly day."²⁹ "Snake," in keeping with many of the poems in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, as is very well known, stages an encounter between "anthropos" and an other-than-human being which stimulates questions about supremacy and conflict—without turning the snake into a mere cipher or motif. As is also well known, Jacques Derrida introduced this poem in a seminar on sovereignty, hospitality, and ethics in response to Lévinas's uncertainty as to whether the animal has a face, and whether it can, therefore, be included in the "space of the ethical that Lévinas analyses and proposes."³⁰ In "Snake," having failed to override his conditioning and therefore having tried to kill the creature, the poet is aroused to a feeling of remorse and believes that he now has "something to expiate: / A pettiness" (*P* 305). While this suggests that the creature requires recognition in some way, the expiation is deferred, postponed implicitly to the moment of the next creaturely encounter, and not enacted. Not all the poems in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* chart the dilemmas exposed in "Snake"; that much is obvious. In the botanical sections the nonhuman is *renatured* for us in language that implicates myth, politics, and kinship (abstracted) in unexpected, and at times controversial, configurations. "The Evangelistic Beasts" section brings an apocalyptic scale to its reformation of the symbols of the evangelists, grafting together pre-Christian iconography, theology, and the specific animal ontologies in each case. That section is a point where the categories pivot toward the animal and, ultimately, to the radical inclusion of the "Ghosts" section as not separable from Lawrence's ecologizing

²⁹ Edward Marsh, ed., *Georgian Poetry 1920–22* (London: The Poetry Bookshop, 1922).

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign*, vol. I, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 237.

impulse.

It is in these ways that *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* represents a radical mode of rewriting contemporary nature poetry, especially that with which Lawrence had been associated. The Georgian Poetry anthologies were, crucially, produced to revive poetry and make it modern—“new”—in contrast to the verse of the preceding generation, and an aspect of this modernity was the consideration given to humankind’s co-dwellers on the earth. Partly it is an effect of overdone, mannered language and partly of the persistent human scale, but Harold Monro’s poem “Goldfish,” for instance, keeps the fish (plural) at a distance:

They are the angels of that watery world,
 With so much knowledge that they just aspire
 To move themselves on golden fins,
 Or fill their paradise with fire
 By darting suddenly from end to end.³¹

Armstrong’s “The Buzzard” offers descriptions of the buzzard and his mate in flight, with the human onlookers “tranced”; Robert Graves’s “The Voice of Beauty Drowned” uses birdsong to highlight the challenges of poetic creativity. The newness of Lawrence’s exploration of the limits of his knowledge of the nonhuman other took the poems of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* to a different level. What is also evident is not only Lawrence’s inclusion of poems that offer barely codified commentaries on his dislike of instrumentalist and dehumanizing capitalism and other forms of hierarchical social control, including “bolshevism” (unless of the “salvia-savage” kind [P 269]), but also the volume’s uncompromising multispecies formation. The encounters with creatures and plants can be positively heuristic and stimulate ethical enquiry.

³¹ Edward Marsh, ed., *Georgian Poetry 1918–1919* (London: The Poetry Bookshop, 1919), 100.

Many of the poems—"The Red Wolf" is one example—rely on a response to cultures, landscapes, and beings defined by Lawrence's persistent recourse to atavism. The creatural suggests an alternative to this and can be read in "Humming-Bird," the creature "storied" as primordial and monstrous in a ludic adaptation of evolutionary logic: "Probably he was big / As mosses, and little lizards, they say, were once big" (P 324). There are other suggestions, too, of the evolutionary connections between birds and dinosaurs in the "Birds" section.³²

Lawrence does not explicitly propose a different future relation between humans and nonhumans. He does not, therefore, directly address questions of animal or environmental ethics. Of all the poems in the collection, only one, "Mountain Lion," unequivocally expresses a sense of loss at the willful destruction of an animal killed by trappers. In "the open" (P 352), her significance is reduced to a pelt with a market value and, potentially, to meat. As the poem makes patent, she has a face: "And stripes on the brilliant frost of her face, sharp, fine dark rays, / Dark, keen, fine rays in the brilliant frost of her face" (P 351). It is not the intention here to suggest anachronistically, or in an *aspecies* manner, that in this detail Lawrence appears to preempt later discussions about the face (*visage*, which speaks and signifies the presence of the human and which, as we have seen, provokes ethical consideration). In "Fish," the creatures have "no lips; / No tender muzzles" (P 290); the "Almost fish-voice" (P 290) operates by negation "To speak endless inaudible wavelets into the wave" (P 291). The poem tracks the dialectical opposition between the inseparability of the fish from its element and its discrete distinction from the wash of the waters: "Things of one element. / Aqueous, / Each by itself" (P 294, emphasis added). The poet acknowledges that "fishes" define the parameters of his knowledge, certainly, but crucially comes the

³² The significance of Archaeopteryx, a fossil with bird-like characteristics in which traits of ancestral reptiles could be observed, was uncovered and developed in the second half of the nineteenth century.

revelation that the fish he catches to eat, even in its dying seconds, decenters him: “And my heart accused itself / Thinking: *I am not the measure of creation*” (P 293).

Well-established prejudices persist in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. The mountain lion is a high-order mammal and one whose physical beauty after death warrants a paean of praise. It contrasts keenly with “Mosquito” in the “Creatures” section, in which the poet asks, “Am I not mosquito enough to out-mosquito you?” (P 289). In the context of this passing shamanistic identification, the encounter becomes gladiatorial in its exploration of their creaturely differences: “Queer, how you stalk and prowl the air / In circles and evasions, enveloping me” (P 287). This blood-sucking creature (she must be female despite the epithet “Monsieur”) is described as “A nothingness,” with an “evil little aura”; invisible, with an “anaesthetic power,” “enspasmmed in oblivion,” and “Obscenely ecstasied” when blood “gorging” (P 288). There is nothing in the poem to suggest disease or perspective (not seriously infected, the “host,” being a large mammal, can bear the blood loss). At the mosquito’s demise there is a triumphalist tone of a kind absent from “Mountain Lion”: “Queer, what a big stain my sucked blood makes / Beside the infinitesimal faint smear of you!” (P 289). The blood takes on an abject form in this repellent creature, and has resonance elsewhere: the gothic mosquito, through which others’ blood flows, becomes elementally antithetical, “a dull clot of air” (P 287). Similarly, in “Man and Bat,” the trapped *pipistrello* is repeatedly described as a “clot,” signifying something repulsive and unclean, something psychologically disturbing. Yet the measure of the human in both poems resides in “wide-eyed responsibility / In life” (P 300).

Mosquito and bat are creatures of the air, aerialists. In a passage from *Apocalypse* quoted earlier, the knowledge Lawrence’s feet have of being part of the earth, dynamically of it, recalls the description in “Kangaroo” of the mother with her roo: “And all her weight, all her blood, dripping sack-wise down / towards the earth’s centre” (P 345). Here the chthonic

connection that is amplified in her hopping motion magnifies her center of gravity. In common with a very *few* creatures of the *northern* hemisphere, she is “belly-plumbed to the earth’s mid-navel,” only, in her case, with more intensity:

But the yellow antipodal Kangaroo, when she sits up,
Who can unseat her, like a liquid drop that is heavy, and just touches earth. (P 344)

The implication is that, like all her species, she is magnetized dynamically toward the planet’s core, constituted by the forces that animate her: the injunction to the kangaroo is “Leap then, and come down on *the line that draws to the earth’s deep, / heavy centre*” (P 345, emphasis added). This kinship with earthly forces is represented implicitly as a property of the ecological subject, as it cannot be, again implicitly, for automata. In “Fish,” the multiplicity “swarm in companies” and “drive in shoals,” “Many suspended together, forever apart” (P 291), with, crucially, “A *magnetism* in the water between them only” (P 292, emphasis added). This kinetic swarm is also suggested in “Bat” in “A circle swoop, and a quick parabola under the bridge arches” (P 294), and there are many other examples, including the fragile stems of the almond trees in Sicily, their “Grey, lavender, sensitive steel, curving thinly and brittly up in a / parabola” (P 253). The impersonal language recalls Lawrence’s description in 1914 of the “*inhuman*” element to characterization which he developed in the Brangwen novels and expressed in terms of the solid-state allotropes of carbon: “my theme is carbon.”³³ In *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, these examples demonstrate the degree to which “carbon” remains for Lawrence an effective eco-poetic metaphor: the individual creature or species is not converted by an allotropic poetics into something elsewhere, but reappraised in planetary and bodily contexts that recall the molecular,

³³ Letter to Edward Garnett, 5 June 1914, in *Letters*, vol. II, 183.

interdependent ecologies described by Alphonso Lingis, as signaled earlier. This introduces a third term: “inhuman.” Lawrence’s 1914 theory of subjectivity, selfhood, and being was not a statement of ecological subjectivity so much as of inhuman impersonality which required a new language. For this reason, the animality of human subjects in the Brangwen novels is not the same as the ecological interconnectedness of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, with its implicit interrogation of modes of coexistence alongside its alignment of unexpected, often oxymoronic, associations.

Beastliness

Rosi Braidotti describes the oedipal relationship with nonhuman animals, such as domestic pets, that humans construct as familial: “As a mode of relation, it is [...] neurotic in that it is saturated with projections, taboos and fantasies. It is also a token of the human subject’s sense of supreme ontological entitlement.”³⁴ In the absence of personhood, these animals lack any control over their bodies: they are sterilized, culled, relocated, genetically modified, and commodified. In the final section of this chapter I shall illustrate how encounters with animals whose subjugation is highly visible—first, animals constructed as pests; then, domestic and semi-domestic dogs—return us to the ways in which Lawrence reconciles himself to speciesism based on this sense of ontological entitlement. It is notable in Lawrence how the dogmatism of the discursive writing attempts to disturb the “art-speech” of the poetry or, more positively, how the “art-speech” of the poetry subtly dismantles the dogma.

“Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine” (1925) is part autobiography and part polemical essay. It opens with accounts of encounters with creatures, wild and domesticated, on Kiowa Ranch, Taos County, New Mexico, where for two years the Lawrences lived. The veracity of these encounters is in some details questionable: they, too, are “storied.” A chance

³⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 68.

meeting with a porcupine, an indigenous species at home in wooded areas of North America, casts the creature as vermin, destroying pine trees—“Everyone says, porcupines should be killed; the Indians, Mexicans, Americans all say the same.”³⁵ This is not a “Snake” encounter with “one of the lords / Of life” (*P* 305), raising questions of hospitality and accommodation. The porcupine poses no threat to life but is conveniently re-created as repugnant, “a great tick,” its back “a round bear-like mound,” its movement “a lumbering, beetle’s, squalid motion, unpleasant” (*RDP* 349). At this time the resistance to killing is stronger than the narrator’s feelings of repulsion, a repulsion that is unexpectedly based on its creatureliness. So, it is this creatureliness that potentially exempts it from preservation—if it is vermin it could, should, be killed. In an encounter with a different porcupine Lawrence takes up a gun and shoots the animal twice, inexpertly, and finally clubs it to death with a cedar pole, an act that is made easier because it is dark, and he cannot see her face. The essay develops as a polemic advocating discrimination between species, races, and types based on *existential* inequality, to justify the mastery, the subjugation, of the “lower” order of life by the “higher”: the emphasis is on cycles of subjugation that define existence. “Being,” Lawrence asserts, is the property not of species (which can and should eradicate each other) but of individuals; only the individual can be “vividly alive” (*RDP* 357), whether a dandelion or a mountain lion.

Prior to this assertion of a rationale for nurturing a philosophy of existential inequality (a philosophy in which Lawrence underplays collectivities such as those that cause pandemics), Lawrence describes an encounter with a trespasser, possibly a sheepdog, which has strayed, injured, onto the ranch distressed by a swollen muzzle which is stuck painfully with a great number of porcupine quills. The description of Lawrence’s attempt to extract the

³⁵ D. H. Lawrence, *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays*, ed. Michael Herbert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 349. Hereafter cited as *RDP* in parentheses in the text.

quills, which, left alone, will likely kill the dog, highlights the power of empathy to inaugurate an unforeseen episode of cross-species relationality. With the passing of time, and finding the dog's only partial cooperation tiresome, and with the onerous task of quill extraction not completed, the nerve-worn writer-rancher picks up first a stone and then "a good stick" (*RDP* 352) and hits the dog in order to rid himself of its maddening presence. In doing so he strikes it on its punctured, spongy snout, extracting a yelp of pain before the dog takes off. In a variation on the theme of "Snake," the narrator stands back feeling "pangs of regret, at having hit him, unintentionally, on his sore nose" (*RDP* 352). The violence meted out to the dog in this example is in inverse proportion to the empathy shown it—minor irritation developed into a vicious impulse, with nothing, it seems, to provide the rationale for an "expiation" of the kind promised at the closing of "Snake." This is in part because the dog has exhibited tendencies that Lawrence has elsewhere described as contemptible qualities in humans, predominantly through its display of dejection and its self-effacing wretchedness. At the point at which the narrator prepares to strike the dog, the environment acquires an animal-like actuality: "Already in the heat was that sting-like biting of electricity, the thunder gathering in the sheer sunshine [...] and making one's whole body feel dislocated" (*RDP* 352). Dislocated, dispersed, perhaps atomized, and more a part of the biting electricity than apart from it.

In *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* a different dog, a familiar, "Bibbles," is the eponymous subject of a poem which, while it appears to exemplify the poet's desire for mastery developed with reference to what is evidently a highly conditional attachment to a pet—the Lawrences' "black little bitch" (*P* 346)—is also of a piece with Lawrence's critique in *Studies in Classic American Literature* of Whitman's egotistical idealism, the "One Identity" not separable from America's "catastrophe" of "exaggerate love" described in "The Evening Land" (*P* 242). Hence, of Bibbles:

Don't you love everybody!!!

Just everybody.

You love 'em all.

Believe in the One Identity, don't you,

You little Walt-Whitmanesque bitch? (P 346)

Bibbles, inscribed in this way, is negatively humanized to embody a discredited love-ideal that Lawrence associates with modern America (in which Whitman, whose influence is evident in Lawrence, is implicated). Consequently, Bibbles is expected to carry a great deal of freight, being subject to moralizing judgments disproportionate to her familial function. In the moment, she is judged to be unworthy because she appears insensitive to the difference between the proprietorial hand that feeds her and the kindness of strangers. The poem builds its theme by deploying speciesism, racism, and sexism: she is denigrated as black, impure, a bitch, capricious. Her “nemesis” is welcomed using a barely disguised rape narrative. Bibbles, “miserable little bitch of love-tricks,” is accused of approaching people indiscriminately for love—“Me or the Mexican who comes to chop wood” (P 349), but:

Now you've come sex-alive, and the great ranch-dogs are all after you.

They're after what they can get, and don't you turn tail! (P 350)

As the poem's final lines confirm, the subject animal must substitute for “exaggerate love” personal loyalty, a quality most prized in friends and, in Lawrence's case, “Madame.”³⁶ It is a matter of record that, on finding Bibbles fugitive in the company of his neighbors, the artists Knud Merrild and Kai Gótzsche, Lawrence brutally pursued and kicked her in what reads

³⁶ In “Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine,” the soubriquet for Frieda Lawrence.

then, and today, as an episode of animal cruelty, far in excess of the “skelp” she gets in the poem “with a juniper twig” (P 349).³⁷ Whether or not, or to what extent, Lawrence abused his dog is not, though, the point here. The poem’s nasty master/slave address to Bibbles is closely aligned to the essay in “Reflections” in which species egalitarianism and, in current terms, cooperation is regarded as, at the very least, troubling: existence depends on the subjugation of lower orders (species, races) by higher orders (species, races). It is a hierarchy based on the throw of those ontological dice and is a theme Lawrence continues to develop in “Aristocracy.”³⁸

When creation fails, argues Lawrence, the result, as for the ichthyosaurus, is extinction (*RDP* 360). He does not speculate whether the ichthyosaurus counted, whether it had significance, whether it cooperated with fellow species, in short, whether it had meaning ecologically. Extinction, he warns, might yet be humankind’s bad destiny, not as a result of poor custodianship of the Earth, but of the Self’s inability to connect with the universe (the preserve of the “*natural aristocracy*” like Caesar, Galileo, and Shelley) (*RDP* 368–70). In his time, Lawrence asserts, “To men, the sun is becoming stale, and the earth sterile. But the sun itself will never become stale, nor the earth barren. It is only that the *clue* is missing inside men” (*RDP* 360). Clueless man can achieve a vital relationality “only with his own cheap little species” (*RDP* 371), and in “Aristocracy” the political accents of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* and the encounters in “Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine” align: “The democratic mass, capitalist and proletariat alike, are a vast, sluggish, ghastlily, greedy porcupine, lumbering with inertia” (*RDP* 376). The radical connectivity of *Apocalypse* is a

³⁷ See David Ellis, *D. H. Lawrence: Dying Game 1922–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 92–98.

³⁸ See “Aristocracy,” in *RDP*, 367–76.

step away from the hierarchical program of “Reflections” and its culling of porcupines, as is the creation of the ecological subject in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* for whom Lawrence, of course, knows he cannot speak.

Oikos, in Lawrence’s writing, is called upon to accommodate a response to nature that produced sacred trees, Orphic farewells, and Mithraic bulls (whose blood flows atavistically in Lawrence’s veins when he unexpectedly encounters Susan, his ranch cow). It is called upon to accommodate the less symbolic, highly connective, “stemless flower-mesh” of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* which implicates the bare fig trees with the “sweet-myriad-limbed octopus” and the “sweet-fleshed sea-anemone” (P 251), as well as with Demos (P 252). Such highly self-conscious signifying networks, which can align and oppose the organic and the inorganic, make it possible not only to propose the development of an eco-consciousness as a significant aspect of Lawrence’s poetics, but also to proceed with caution in the face of ecocritical appropriations of Lawrence, particularly as representative of a tendency within British modernism. By the same token, a version of eco-modernism that fails to take account of the intricate worlding, the terraforming, of Lawrence’s poetry risks pushing to the margins an act of significant cultural investment in ecological subjectivity.