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D.H. Lawrence and the Anticipation of the Ecocritical Turn

Dialectical Relations between Humans and Non-Humans in D.H. Lawrence and Thomas Hardy

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Abstract

The aesthetic sensibility to nature displayed in D.H. Lawrence's and Thomas Hardy's works is undeniable and, although the extent to which each writer's imaginative writing *purposefully* engages with concerns of human responsibility towards the nonhuman world is debatable, I would contend that their explorations into the dialectical relationships between human and nonhuman beings may prompt readers of any given time period to give thought to such concerns. Taking account of Sultzbach's caution that the absence of an ecological "solution" (Parham 266) in their works does not lessen the discourse of ethical responsibility they strive to establish, this article will trace the modalities, tensions, aspirations and limitations of Lawrence's and Hardy's green writing, with a focus on the dialectical relationships between human characters and nonhuman beings, which Hardy subtly calls attention to in his novels, and Lawrence dramatizes in his fiction, poems and essays.

Index terms

Keywords: sentimentality, idealisation, responsibility, didactic, sensual, tree



Both writers appeal to the causal responsibility of humans points to their sensitivity to the concept which Gaudin would later call “*écosphie*” (12), with its implication that ecological concerns go hand in hand with social concerns. For Hardy, this means celebrating ancient rural customs and pagan rites, and arguing for social, as much as ecological, conservation. For Lawrence, it means criticising modern, industrialised and capitalistic societies, and calling for a better future. Both writers also take pains to make an urban readership aware of the effects of human actions upon the nonhuman environment, but while Hardy does so covertly, using a type of pastoral which is turned towards the past and depicted in idealised, nostalgic language, Lawrence’s criticism of man’s use of nature is more straightforward. His pastoral mode is at once nostalgic and utopian, and his discourse of ethical responsibility is infused with animism and primitivism, heralding the interdisciplinary quality of ecocriticism by drawing from ethnographic material. In their didactic attempts to urge their contemporaries to reconnect with nature, both Hardy and Lawrence occasionally fall prey to an idealisation of harmonious interrelatedness between humans and non-humans. However, the sentimental relationship with nature to be found in Hardy’s early fiction and Lawrence’s *The White Peacock* matures into a consciousness of nature’s vital power and of man’s responsibility to protect it and thus protect himself.

Lawrence’s and Hardy’s cautionary green writing

2 “Literature can only affect the minds of its readers if it has the ability to orient their thinking not only toward the world in the text but also the world in which the text materially and ideationally exists at the moment of reading,” writes Murphy (4). Calling their readers’ attention to the existence of a nonhuman world within and without the text is an ability which Lawrence’s and Hardy’s stories share, albeit through differing modes of cautionary green writing.

3 By foregrounding the interrelatedness of species and the constant destruction of one species by another, Darwin’s 1859 *Origin of Species* aroused in its readers the consciousness of human beings’ interdependence with the nonhuman world, of the impact of human actions upon nature, and the blindness of humans towards the nonhuman lives surrounding them, as pointed to in the following passage:

we do not see, or we forget, that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings, are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey (Darwin 116).

Thomas Hardy’s vision of the place of humans in nature was deeply affected by Darwin’s work, which prompted him to write in 1910 that

Few people seem to perceive fully as yet that the most far reaching consequence of the establishment of the common origin of all species is ethical: that it logically involved a re-adjustment of altruistic morals by enlarging as a *necessity of rightness* the application of what has been called “The Golden Rule” beyond the area of mankind to that of the whole animal kingdom (*Life of Thomas Hardy* 376).

The White Peacock, in which the consciousness of nonhuman lives and of the treatment of them by humans is key to the maturation of the young protagonists. I would argue, however, that Lawrence's and Hardy's modes of drawing attention to the impact of human agency on the nonhuman environment differ widely, insofar as Lawrence brings the nonhuman world into focus predominantly through the eyes and consciousness of his characters, while openly and vehemently decrying the destruction of nature at the hands of humans by way of an imposing narratorial voice, which may at times fuse with that of a character. Hardy, on the other hand, resorts to seemingly cursory observations of nature, made by an unobtrusive narrator who indulges in microscopic depictions, momentarily taking the focus away from human tragedy to draw attention to the surrounding nonhuman lives, especially the most unremarkable, such as insects.

5 Levine refers to this Hardyan technique as the creation of “understories,” which serve to remind the reader that “life is not all about humans, their needs, and desires” (26). While some critical interpretations point to the symbolism embedded in these sudden shifts of focus from the macroscopic to the microscopic and treat the nonhuman vignettes as objective correlatives subservient to the human story, an ecocritical approach would stress the existence, sufferings and death of small creatures, which are noticed by the narrator but overlooked by the protagonists. For instance, the casual observation that Tess and her friends’ “gauzy skirts had brushed up from the grass innumerable flies and butterflies which, unable to escape, remained caged in the transparent tissue as in an aviary” (*TU* 173) may be taken to imply a comment on Tess's budding romance with Angel Clare and her repressed guilt; on the other hand, it may just as well be an implicit reproof of the girls' disregard for the impending doom that awaits these insects, trapped in her clothing. Hardy's *modus operandi*, then, consists in inducing the reader to appreciate what might be seen, “dramas beyond the human, vital forces, most often unperceived by the protagonists” (Levine 26-27). At times, however, certain characters do scrutinise the nonhuman activities happening at their feet or above their heads, with the effect either of emphasising their tragic loneliness, by means of the disregard shown by the nonhuman world for human tragedies, or on the contrary, of distracting them from their own troubles and attenuating their tragic condition by introducing a feeling of kinship with nonhuman beings. In *The Return of the Native*, Mrs. Yeobright's sorrow is first lessened by her consideration of the tormented trees “under which she sat [which] were singularly battered, rude, and wild, and for a few minutes Mrs. Yeobright dismissed thoughts of her own storm-broken and exhausted state to contemplate theirs” (*RN* 232). Yet shortly after, her tragic condition is all the more keenly felt as the creatures she watches are oblivious to her exhaustion and bring home to her the consciousness that her life is no more significant than theirs: “She remembered that this bustle of ants had been in progress for years at the same spot—doubtless those of the old times were the ancestors of these which walked here now” (*RN* 241).

6 Unlike most of Hardy's characters, those of Lawrence do take notice of their nonhuman environment and detailed descriptions of vegetable or animal peculiarities are produced through internal focalisation. The young protagonists of *The White Peacock* are particularly attentive to their natural surroundings and grow increasingly conscious of suffering, death and the repercussions of human action upon the nonhuman world. Episodes in which an animal is wounded or killed abound, giving Lawrence the opportunity to emphasise Lettie and Cyril's sensitiveness, through the repetition of verbs of perception and an accumulation of minutiae: “Lately, however, she had noticed again the cruel pitiful crying of a hedgehog caught in a gin, and she had noticed the traps for the fierce little murderers, traps walled in with a small fence of fir, and baited with the guts of a killed

room, Mollie venomously decries human insensitivity, Cyril remains calmly compassionate throughout and Lettie, who is emotionally and morally disturbed by the incident, raises ethical questions on human cruelty and responsibility for one's actions:

“Cyril,” said Lettie quietly, “Isn't it cruel?—isn't it awful?”

I had nothing to say.

“Do you mean me?” asked George.

“Not you in particular—everything! If we move the blood rises in our heel-prints.”

He looked at her seriously, with dark eyes.

“I had to drown her out of mercy,” said he, fastening the cord he held to an ash-pole. Then he went to get a spade, and with it, he dug a grave in the old black earth.

“If,” said he, “the poor old cat had made a prettier corpse, you'd have thrown violets on her.” (*WP* 13)

Although Lettie's sudden awareness of the invisible yet immediate consequences of human action is undermined by George's intimation that her horror is tinged with hypocrisy, the theme is picked up again later in the novel, with the added question of the worth of a nonhuman life compared to a human one: “But,” said Lettie—she could not hold herself from asking, “Don't you think it's brutal, now—now that you do think—isn't it degrading and mean to run the poor little things down?” (*WP* 52). The adjective “degrading” indeed introduces the notion of a morally reprehensible ignorance of nonhuman suffering.

7 Lettie's ethical questioning is paralleled in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* by Jude's sympathy for the hungry rooks, his aversion to the pig slaughter, and his and Sue's compassion for a trapped rabbit. Earlier as a child, Jude's sensitiveness to the needs of the rooks leads him to the conclusion that their survival is of equal importance to that of humans: “He sounded the clacker till his arm ached, and at length his heart grew sympathetic with the birds' thwarted desires. [...] ‘Poor little dears!’ said Jude, aloud. ‘You *shall* have some dinner—you shall. There is enough for us all. Farmer Troutham can afford to let you have some” (*JU* 34). This non-anthropocentric notion arises from a growing feeling of kinship with the birds, whose status as outcasts Jude assimilates to his own: “They seemed, like himself, to be living in a world which did not want them. – [...] A magic thread of fellow-feeling united his own life with theirs. Puny and sorry as those lives were, they much resembled his own” (*JU* 34). While this comforting supernatural connection with nonhuman beings remains purely psychological with Hardy's characters, Lawrence describes a painful, unsettling physical kinship between humans and nonhumans. Cyril, struck by the life and consciousness which he detects in the rabbit they are all chasing, struggles with the idea of harming this sentient being:

I could see the palpitation of the heart under the brown fur, and I could see the shining dark eyes looking at me. I felt no pity for it, but still I could not actually hurt it. I beckoned to the father. He ran up, and aimed a blow with the rake. There was a sharp little cry which sent a hot pain through me as if I had been cut. But the rabbit ran out, and instantly I forgot the cry, and gave pursuit, fairly feeling my fingers stiffen to choke it. It was all lame. Leslie was upon it in a moment, and he almost pulled its head off in his excitement to kill it. (*WP* 50)

This intense passage exemplifies what Kelly Sultzbach calls “the problematized ‘Nature’ of modernist works” and the complexity of humans' attitudes towards it, as we see Lawrence “exposing the hinge of our ethical conflicts with prioritizing non-human

8 In *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence again exposes conflicting positions towards the value of nonhuman life, in the scene where two native boys torture a water chick which Kate attempts to save. This episode is very different in its tone and outcome from the one in *The White Peacock*, since the scene is mediated by Kate, whose utter disgust with the cruelty and destructive impulse of the boys ultimately overcomes her pity for the dying chick:

Kate debated whether to rescue the foolish bird again. But what was the good!

This country would have its victim. America would have its victim. As long as time lasts, it will be the continent divided between Victims and Victimisers. What is the good of trying to interfere!

She rose up in detestation of the flabby bird, and of the sulky-faced brat turning his full moon on her in apprehension—
(*PS* 218)

The hopelessness and bitterness which pervade the scene are of course characteristic both of Kate's antipathy for the native population and spirit of place, and of the later phase of Lawrence's literary career. But they also highlight Lawrence's acute consciousness of the wasteful destruction of nature and his struggle with the feeling of his powerlessness to stop it.

9 Hardy's and Lawrence's fiction explore widely the question of humans' use of nature, with Hardy's novels, I would argue, generally celebrating the respectful exploitation of natural resources, whereas Lawrence more often depicts misuse or destruction. This being said, Lawrence also finds occasions to admire humans' skills in employing nature to provide for their needs, as in his account of the grafting technique used by a "god-like" Il Duro, "a creature in intimate communion with the sensible world" (*TI* 177), or his praise of the Italian landscape, which, unlike the violated and disfigured Midlands of *Sons and Lovers* or *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, has been harmoniously transformed by its people: "Here since endless centuries man has tamed the impossible mountain side into terraces, he has quarried the rock, he has fed his sheep among the thin woods, he has cut his boughs and burnt his charcoal, he has been half domesticated even among the wildest fastnesses. This is what is so attractive about the remote places, the Abruzzi, for example" (*SS* 116). Nevertheless, Lawrence more often strikes an admonitory or doleful note, by showcasing the harmful alterations which human activity has inflicted upon the environment. Typically, Lawrence is more outspoken and emphatic in his concern for humans' misuse of nature than Hardy, who favours suggestion and leaves it to the reader to deduce a sense of ethical responsibility. For example, the signalling employed by Wildevve to attract Eustacia's attention is disclosed without the least stylistic effect or narratorial comment, yet the power of what is implicit silently points to the unwitting cruelty of Wildevve's destructive action. The passage begins with "The heath to-night appeared to be totally deserted," which is not the case, as we soon learn, since it is home to a number of nonhuman beings: "retreating into the heath [Wildevve] beat the ferns lightly, whereupon moths flew out alarmed." Following this, Wildevve captures one of them and uses it as a signal: "he returned to the window, and holding the moth to the chink, opened his hand. The moth made towards the candle upon Eustacia's table, hovered round it two or three times, and flew into the flame" (*RN* 225). The finality of the sentence and of the paragraph, after focusing on the moth, reproachfully condemns the wasteful treatment of this nonhuman life. Lawrence, on the other hand, employs dialogue and renders the characters' thoughts to make his readers aware of human

It's only people who ravish things.

"Oh, I don't know—snails and things," he said.

"Even snails only eat them. And bees don't ravish." (*LCL* 93)

Despite his emotional attachment to the wood and his efforts to replant the devastated clearing, Clifford's sense of responsibility towards nature falls short, because of his failure to see it as anything but a poetic construct, which Lawrence mocks through Constance: "Constance sat on the bank and looked at the wretched and trampled bluebells. 'Nothing quite so lovely as an English spring.' 'I can do my share of ruling.' 'What we need to take up now is whips, not swords.' 'The ruling classes!'" (*LCL* 189). The damage which Clifford's motor-chair has caused to the flowers he was praising earlier is ironically intensified when Constance quotes his words in her mind and mocks his vainglorious and potentially destructive aspirations through juxtaposition. Once again, Lawrence reveals here a point of contention about humans' attitude and feeling of responsibility towards nature and despite being critical of Clifford, the novel explores various conceptions of environmental awareness, which we as readers may also be critical of.

Écosophie and pastoral modes

10 Although Kelly Sultzbach cautions ecocritics against the "didactic tendencies to only favor literature which seems to offer a 'solution'" (Parham 266), this part of my analysis will examine attempts by Lawrence and Hardy to imaginatively address the crises caused by industrialisation and urbanisation, and their impact on both human and nonhuman lives.

11 One response to these crises, which each writer explores in his last novel, is the extermination of humans. In *Jude the Obscure*, the issue of overpopulation is tragically portrayed in the sacrificial suicide of Jude's three children. Following a conversation with his surrogate mother during which the eldest comes to the conclusion that "It would be better to be out o' the world than in it, wouldn't it?" (*JO* 352), the suicide note "*Done because we are too menny*" (*JO* 356) is discovered and interpreted thus: "The doctor says there are such boys springing up amongst us—boys of a sort unknown in the last generation—the outcome of new views of life. [...] He says it is the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live" (*JO* 356). This Schopenhauerian vision of the future points to the emerging consciousness of a lack of resources for all, a stance which complements and contradicts Jude's opinion earlier on in the novel that there is enough food for both humans and nonhumans to share. The motivation behind the destruction of humans which Hardy offers here is therefore not to counterbalance the destruction of the nonhuman environment by humans, but to save the human species from extinction, a prospect which Hardy in all likelihood discovered in Darwin's prediction that "Even slow-breeding man has doubled in twenty-five years, and at this rate, in a few thousand years, there would literally not be standing room for his progeny" (117).

12 Lawrence voices the same concern in the poem "Humanity needs pruning," which calls for a selective eradication of humans in order to preserve the human species: "The tree of human existence needs badly pruning/ or the whole tree may fall rotten" (*CP* 678). In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, however, he takes a more radical, post-humanist stance by disclosing the fantasy of a world entirely purged of human destructiveness which would give nature a chance to regenerate: "To contemplate the

selective extermination lies the fear of the extinction of the human species. In fact, since the mid-nineteenth century, care for the nonhuman environment had been motivated by the realisation that humans depend on it for their survival and must therefore preserve its resources to preserve their own species. As Laura Dassow Walls reminds us (Parham 198), George Perkins Marsh was the first, in 1864, to consider “human agency as a *destructive* force on the *global* level” and to alert to “the wholesale destruction of Earth’s support systems” in the future: “The earth is fast becoming an unfit home for its noblest inhabitant, and another era of equal human crime and human improvidence [...] would reduce it to such a condition of impoverished productiveness, of shattered surface, of climactic excess, as to threaten the depravation, barbarism, and perhaps even extinction of the species” (Marsh 43).

- 13 Hardy and Lawrence consequently appeal to human responsibility towards nature by illustrating the interdependence of human and nonhuman lives, as well as the interrelation of environmental and social concerns. Both writers indeed subscribed, in their own ways, to the concept which Guattari called “*écosophie*,” that is, “an ethico-political articulation [...] between the three ecological registers: the environment, social relations and human subjectivity.”¹ The idea Guattari theorised in 1989, that nature and culture should not be treated as separate spheres of existence, but rather, that “the interactions between eco-systems, the *mécanosphère* and the social and individual Universes of reference” should be apprehended “transversally,”² is anticipated in Lawrence’s prophetic inquiry into the connection between social and ecological malaise, and in Hardy’s “recognition that ‘social’ and ‘natural’ are not radically distinct,” to quote Levine (36).

- 14 Thomas Hardy’s fiction is typically situated in a pastoral setting and celebrates pagan rites and ancient rural customs which foreground the enduring rootedness of cultural pursuits in nature, to the extent that Hardy can be said to advocate for interrelated environmental and social conservation. The Preface to *Far from the Madding Crowd* mournfully records the disappearance of rural practices due to urbanisation, rural migration and the spreading cultural influence of towns. Hardy enumerates social changes on a variety of levels and ascribes them to the uprooting of rural populations, whose intimacy with the land is subsequently lost:

The change at the root of this has been the recent supplanting of the class of stationary cottagers, who carried on the local traditions and humours, by a population of more or less migratory labourers, which has led to a break of continuity in local history, more fatal than any other thing to the preservation of legend, folk-lore, close inter-social relations, and eccentric individualities. For these the indispensable conditions of existence are attachment to the soil of one particular spot by generation after generation. (*FMC* 6)

- 15 While Lawrence does not adopt Hardy’s ethnographic style regarding extinct rural practices, he does also record the interrelated transformation of the natural environment, human labour, and human values and consciousness. The opening paragraph of *Sons and Lovers* thus stresses the harmonious, historical cohabitation of agriculture, farming, and small-scale mining since “the time of Charles II,” amidst a “scarcely soiled” landscape, where human labour is compared to animal behaviour (“the few colliers and the donkeys burrowing down like ants into the earth” *SL* 9), only to be immediately contrasted, in the following paragraphs, with the “sudden change” brought about by the expansion of the mining industry “some sixty years ago” and the degraded social conditions it incurred. As a rule, Lawrence grounds his story in the present and alludes to the past

explanations (sometimes even footnotes) distinctly aimed at an urban readership. Such is his instructive description of “a shepherd’s hut—now presenting an outline to which an uninitiated person might have been puzzled to attach either meaning or use” (*FMC* 13), which continues with the exposition of its attributes and seasonal purposes. At other times, an omniscient, pedagogically-minded narrator might interrupt a dialogue to furnish the reader with a lexical clarification pertaining to archaic agrarian terms: “‘No; not large. About a hundred.’ (In speaking of farms the word ‘acres’ is omitted by the natives, by analogy to such old expressions as ‘a stag of ten’)” (*FMC* 19). Moreover, some country traditions like “Maypole-day” are minutely reconstructed to highlight the intimate connection between human social life and nature, around which the former is organised:

The pole lay with one end supported on a trestle, and women were engaged in wreathing it from the top downwards with wild-flowers. The instincts of merry England lingered on here with exceptional vitality, and the symbolic customs which tradition has attached to each season of the year were yet a reality on Egdon. Indeed, the impulses of all such outlandish hamlets are pagan still—in these spots homage to nature, self-adoration, frantic gaieties, fragments of Teutonic rites to divinities whose names are forgotten, seem in some way or other to have survived mediaeval doctrine. (*RN* 318)

Hardy’s account is almost ethnographical, with echoes of Frazer’s study on the custom of the “May-tree,”³ drawing significant attention to both the historical continuity of this tradition (“lingered on / yet / still”) and its geographical exceptionality (“such outlandish hamlets / these spots”), in a plainly laudatory tone (“merry / vitality”). The ritual is again called upon in *Tess*, although the scene of the May-Day dance is more sombrely nostalgic than it was in *The Return of the Native*:

The forests have departed, but some old customs of their shades remain. Many, however, linger only in a metamorphosed or disguised form. The May-Day dance, for instance, was to be discerned on the afternoon under notice, in the guise of the club revel, or “club-walking,” as it was there called. [...] The banded ones were all dressed in white gowns—a gay survival from Old Style days, when cheerfulness and May-time were synonyms—days before the habit of taking long views had reduced emotions to a monotonous average. (*TU* 13)

Hardy here establishes a correlation between the ecological loss, that is deforestation, and, on the one hand, the degeneracy of old spiritual customs into modern monetary or societal pursuits (“club-walking”); and on the other, the loss of rustic innocence and sensibility, which were derived from intimacy with nature, which Hardy symbolises as follows: “every woman and girl carried in her right hand a peeled willow wand, and in her left a bunch of white flowers. The peeling of the former, and the selection of the latter, had been an operation of personal care” (*TU* 13).

¹⁷ Hence, the pastoral mode assumed by Hardy’s novels comments on a depleted present by extolling England’s past; yet it cannot be reduced to the type of escapist pastoral criticised by Roger Sales, as reported by Terry Gifford: “pastoral is essentially escapist in seeking refuge in the country and often also in the past; [...] it is a selective ‘reflection’ on past country life in which old settled values are ‘rescued’ by the text; and [...] all this functions as a simplified ‘reconstruction’ of what is, in fact, a more complex reality” (Gifford 8). Old values and customs are indeed rescued by Hardy, so as to pique the interest of his urban contemporaries for a former rural way of life, which relied on and was organised around nature. This “progressive use of nostalgia,” to borrow Sultzbach’s phrase (Parham 413), purports to reveal to urban readers that the cultural cannot be dissociated from the natural.

alteration of the environment, of human activities and values, and exalt, by contrast, the places and people where interdependent human and nonhuman relations endure. The apocalyptic picture of Northern Italy in the process of industrialisation painted by *Twilight in Italy* points to the joint destruction of the environment, human ties with the environment, social relations and human consciousness:

Down the road of the Ticino valley I felt again my terror of this new world which is coming into being on top of us. One always feels it in a suburb, on the edge of a town, where the land is being broken under the advance of houses. But this is nothing, in England, to the terror one feels on the new Italian roads, where these great blind cubes of dwellings rise stark from the destroyed earth, swarming with a sort of verminous life, really verminous, purely destructive.

It seems to happen when the peasant suddenly leaves his home and becomes a workman. Then an entire change comes over everywhere. Life is now a matter of selling oneself to slave-work, building roads or labouring in quarries or mines or on the railways, purposeless, meaningless, really slave-work, each integer doing his mere labour, and all for no purpose, except to have money, and to get away from the old system. (*TI* 223)

The blindness of the “cubes of dwellings” symbolises human blindness to the natural environment, as a result of the transition from agricultural to industrial labour, which also severs social bonds and isolates “each integer.”

- 19 Guattari’s exhortation to consider environmental and social matters as interconnected spheres of ecology is further explored by Lawrence in a dialogue between Constance and Clifford Chatterley, where each character’s stance is challenged by the other’s, thus offering an exploration of the problematic consideration of man’s responsibility to nature:

“[...] People are killing the very air.”

“Do you think people are doing it?” he asked.

“I do. The steam of so much boredom, and discontent and anger out of all the people, just kills the vitality in the air. I’m sure of it.”

“Perhaps some condition of the atmosphere lowers the vitality of the people?” he said.

“No, it’s man that poisons the universe,” she asserted.

“Fouls his own nest” remarked Clifford. (*LCL* 92)

- 20 Connie’s highly assertive interpretation that the destruction of the environment at the hands of humans is tied to social issues (“so much boredom, and discontent and anger out of all the people”) is questioned by Clifford’s tentative, contrary theory that the responsibility for human ailments lies with a diseased universe. Lawrence has Clifford concede to Connie’s view, but what both standpoints agree on is the interrelatedness of environmental, social and individual crises.

- 21 The dystopian accents one finds in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and *Twilight in Italy* are nonetheless offset by a current of pastoral utopia which Sultzbach ascribes to “the age of rapid industrialization and war [that] tinged some modernist novels with an apocalyptic fear of loss, a sense of desperation to preserve and cherish all that was bright and beautiful about rural England” (Parham 257). A similar “sense of desperation” runs through Hardy’s and Lawrence’s fiction, yet a return to a rural way of life is not what those writers ultimately advocate, conscious as they are of the temporal and cultural divide between the idealised rustic

The looming threat of urban expansion is a reminder that England's future is by no means secure and Forster's agrarian resolution is neither tidy nor pat. Part of Forster's strategy is to show his readers that a traditional pastoral resolution can only exist in the realm of fantasy and could never be realized in current English society without a larger shift in re-defining "progress" and cultural practice, belying the escape of facile nostalgia. (Parham 259)

Hence Lawrence's and Hardy's idealisation of the dialectical relationships between humans and nonhumans is perhaps partly sentimental, partly truly perceptive and partly didactic, as they seek to elicit a sense of collective or individual intimacy with nature.

Reconnecting with nature: idealisation or new awareness?

22 Lawrence's conception of humans' relationship with the natural environment matured from the sentimental bond, portrayed in *The White Peacock* and *Sons and Lovers*, to the consciousness of nature's vital power expressed in *Women in Love*, *Fantasia of the Unconscious* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. To some extent, Lawrence also conveyed a sense of humans' responsibility to respect and protect the nonhuman, so as to protect themselves, in *The Woman Who Rode Away*, *Mornings in Mexico* and other works inspired by Native American cosmology. I do not however think that his imaginative explorations into human and nonhuman dialectical relationships stretched as far as to appeal to the reader's ecological conscience. The aim is rather to establish the necessity for humans of a vital relationship with the nonhuman world.

23 In the early novels, Lawrence's characters often find in nature the comfort and tenderness which their human relationships fail to provide. Mrs Morel thus recovers from scenes of domestic strife by turning to her garden flowers, from which she draws solace: "There she stood, trying to soothe herself with the scent of flowers, and the fading, beautiful evening" (*SL* 14), or strength: "A few whiffs of the raw strong scent of the phlox invigorated her" (*SL* 35). Similarly, the young girl at Annable's funeral uses the scent of flowers to regain peace: "In imagination she pictures the man shut up there in close darkness, while the sunlight flows all outside, and she catches her breath with terror. She must turn and rustle among the leaves of the violets for the flowers she does not see. Then, trembling, she comes to herself, and plucks a few flowers, and breathes them hungrily into her soul, for comfort" (*WP* 157). Other characters such as Miriam and Cyril cherish the touch of leaves and flowers, initially as a substitute for human affection but gradually, as they reach adulthood, as a sensual outlet for their nascent desires:

I turned with swift sudden friendliness to the net of elm-boughs spread over my head, dotted with soft clusters winsomely. I jumped up and pulled the cool soft tufts against my face for company, and as I passed, still I reached upward for the touch of this budded gentleness of the trees. The wood breathed fragrantly, with a subtle sympathy. The firs softened their touch to me, and the larches woke from the barren winter-sleep, and put out velvet fingers to caress me as I passed. (*WP* 152)

24 Thomas Hardy likewise exploits the suggestive possibilities afforded by eco-sensuality, although his characters do not indulge in sentimental relationships with their environment as Lawrence's do. Concern for the respectability of his novels drove Hardy to conceal any trace of sexual impropriety and therefore his descriptions of sensuous contact with plants are a means of tacitly

by of garments might have been heard among them, and Bathsheba appeared in their midst, their soft, feathery arms caressing her up to her shoulders” (*FMC* 142). Eustacia Vye’s passionate and voluptuous nature is rather more explicitly exhibited in her deliberate inclination for human and nonhuman touch: “Her nerves extended into those tresses [...]. If, in passing under one of the Egdon banks, any of its thick skeins were caught, as they sometimes were, by a prickly tuft of the large *Ulex Europaeus*—which will act as a sort of hair-brush—she would go back a few steps, and pass against it a second time.” (*RN* 61)

25 The use of eco-sensuality in Hardy’s fiction thus differs from what we find in Lawrence, who developed the sentimental and budding physical connections with nature of the early novels into the very explicit and elaborate craving for bodily connection disclosed by Birkin:

[...] to sting one’s thigh against the living dark bristles of the fir-boughs; and then to feel the light whip of the hazel on one’s shoulders, stinging, and then to clasp the silvery birch-trunk against one’s breast, its smoothness, its hardness, its vital knots and ridges—this was good, this was all very good, very satisfying. Nothing else would do, nothing else would satisfy, except this coolness and subtlety of vegetation travelling into one’s blood. How fortunate he was, that there was this lovely, subtle, responsive vegetation, waiting for him, as he waited for it; how fulfilled he was, how happy! (*WL* 107)

What first transpires in this passage is the notion that the nonhuman—trees more especially—is imbued with potent life (“living dark bristles,” “vital knots”) which can be perceived by and even shared with humans through close physical contact, rendered here both by the verbs (“sting,” “feel,” “clasp”) and by the linked human and nonhuman bodies (“one’s thigh against [...] the fir-boughs,” “the hazel on one’s shoulders,” “the silvery birch-trunk against one’s breast”). Lawrence imagines the possibility of a transfer of vital power through touch between Birkin and the tree, the “coolness and subtlety of vegetation travelling into [his] blood.” This was subsequently developed in *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, where the speaker is sitting with his back against a tree and senses the power in its sap, “his great blood-jet surging” (*FU* 44). Unlike in *Women in Love* however, the stress is not so much on physical contact as on spiritual connectedness and the transmission of life power seems to be performed beyond touch, through consciousness. Moreover, this transmission is really an exchange, the speaker receiving power from the trees: “They feed my soul” (*FU* 44), and being used in return: “They have taken some of my soul” (*FU* 46).

26 The connection between a human and a nonhuman entity in these two books thus implies a stimulus and a renewal, since the speaker of *Fantasia* is inspired to write his analysis on the unconscious and Birkin to overcome the shock of his conflict with Hermione, by rejecting human connections in favour of a relationship with the nonhuman: “But he was weary of the old ethic, of the human being, and of humanity. He loved now the soft, delicate vegetation, that was so cool and perfect” (*WL* 108). While this recalls Mrs Morel seeking refuge in her garden flowers from the failure of her marriage, it also anticipates Constance Chatterley’s connection with the wood, which will enable her reconnection with other humans. Once more, part of Guattari’s concept is prefigured by Lawrence in his belief that strained social relations may be relieved by cultivating a relationship with the nonhuman environment. Lawrence and Hardy also anticipate Hwa Yol Jung’s diagnosis in 1989 that “The ecological crisis as we know it today points to the loss of man’s sense of touch or intimacy (*Stimmung*) with nature or earth” (Murphy 69), inasmuch as both writers draw attention to “the need to reinstate a tactile relationship and perception of the natural world” (Murphy 71).

rural surroundings and are shown to possess an extensive knowledge of the nonhuman world which stems from the close physical relationship they enjoy with nature. Such is the knowledge displayed by Giles and Marty in *The Woodlanders*, who, as the title of the novel suggests, derive their livelihoods from the wood: “From the light lashing of the twigs upon their faces when brushing through them in the dark, either could pronounce upon the species of the tree whence they stretched; from the quality of the wind’s murmur through a bough, either could in like manner name its sort afar off” (*WL* 416). It may seem improbable and even extravagant to those of Hardy’s readers who are unaccustomed to a sylvan mode of life, that such discriminations could be made, but as Levine points out, Hardy’s intent is to surprise his largely urban readership into discovering “in the fineness of distinctions made, a way of seeing and hearing that belongs to another sensibility, another culture” (Levine 111). The opening of *Under the Greenwood Tree* underlines how common these distinctions are to rural inhabitants, for whom the wood is not an indiscriminate, unidentified unit of landscape but a community of individual, recognisable trees: “To dwellers in the wood almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. At the passing of the breeze the fir-trees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; the holly whistles as it battles with itself; the ash hisses amid its quivering; the beech rustles while its lace boughs rise and fall” (*UGT* 1). By focusing on these details at the very start of his story, Hardy is making a statement on the significance of the diversity of nonhuman life and prompting the reader to make sense of the unknown—but not unknowable—nonhuman world. In fact, these powers of perception are not the prerogative of pastoral natives but are accessible to anyone willing to acknowledge the varieties of nonhuman life: “The instinctive act of humankind was to stand and listen, and learn how the trees on the right and the trees on the left wailed or chaunted to each other in the regular antiphonies of a cathedral choir” (*FMC* 12). The choice of the verb “learn” signals the opportunity of developing intimacy with nature, while the metaphor of “a cathedral choir” acts as a cultural key to understand natural sounds, blurring the distinction between human and nonhuman song.

Conclusion

- 28 Both Hardy and Lawrence thus invite their readers to rethink the nonhuman as a plurality of conscious entities living alongside humans, whose lives are no less important than humans, whether they be woefully unnoticed or mistreated, as in Hardy’s novels, or the focus of a candid reflection on the human kinship or cruelty towards them, carried out by Lawrence’s characters. Anticipating Guattari’s concept of *écosophie*, Lawrence and Hardy emphasise how social and environmental concerns may be interrelated: Hardy, by setting his narratives in an agricultural past and calling attention to rural customs and values originating from a close intimacy with nature, Lawrence, by exploring the seemingly connected degradation of social conditions, human consciousness and the environment, in an industrialised present. However critical we may be of the temptation of pastoral retreat which underlies some of their novels, and of the propensity to idealise dialectical relationships between humans and nonhumans, both Lawrence and Hardy powerfully appeal to their readers to reconnect physically and spiritually with the nonhuman world around them and thus to take responsibility for human and nonhuman coexistence. To argue that they actually intended to advocate human responsibility towards the nonhuman world to preserve a shared

(2000) seek likewise to awaken a sense of ethical responsibility towards the environment in 21st century viewers and readers, by depicting societies in which human-like beings sustain respectful, affectionate relations with other living organisms. These works of “eco-speculative fiction,” to borrow Tom Sykes’s phrase (Parham 219), perpetuate themes and devices already present in Lawrence’s and Hardy’s writing, such as physical and spiritual connection with trees, which bear precious natural resources and must be preserved from waste and destruction. Pullman’s books propose to rethink organic matter and explore interrelatedness between the human and the nonhuman through the concept of “Dust,” a partly-invisible, conscious matter which animates and connects all beings in and in-between parallel worlds. Pullman, like Hardy and Lawrence, draws on ethnographic material to foreground such interconnectedness and adapts it to his fictional purpose: hence, the practice of trepanation in pre-modern cultures is said to enable the individual to connect with the cosmos, thanks to Dust being allowed to enter the brain through the hole in their skull. Overall, the dystopian atmosphere of the trilogy stresses past human carelessness and calls for responsibility towards safeguarding the vital power that is Dust, not unlike Lawrence’s and Hardy’s appeals to safeguard vital connections with the natural environment.

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Notes

1 “une articulation éthico-politique – que je nomme *écosophie* – entre les trois registres écologiques, celui de l’environnement, celui des rapports sociaux et celui de la subjectivité humaine.” Guattari 12.

2 “Moins que jamais la nature ne peut être séparée de la culture et il nous faut apprendre à penser ‘transversalement’ les interactions entre écosystèmes, mécanosphère et Univers de référence sociaux et individuels.” Guattari 34.

3 “The intention of these customs is to bring home to the village, and to each house, the blessings which the tree-spirit has in its power to bestow. Hence the custom in some places of planting a May-tree before every house, or of carrying the village May-tree from door to door, that every household may receive its share of the blessing.” Frazer 146.

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