Modernist Ecology:
Literary Modernism and the Reimagination of Nature

by

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You say nature is always nature, the sky is always the sky. But sit still and consider for one moment what sort of nature it was the Romans saw on the face of the earth, and what sort of heavens the medievals knew above them, and your sky will begin to crack like glass.

- D. H. Lawrence, from “Review of A Second Contemporary Verse Anthology”
Abstract

Countering the trend in contemporary ecocriticism to advance realism as an environmentally responsible mode of representation, this essay argues that the anti-realist aesthetics of literary modernism were implicitly “ecological.” In order to make this argument I distinguish between contemporary and modernist ecological culture (both of which I differentiate in turn from ecological science); while the former is concerned primarily with the practical reform characteristic of what we now call “environmentalism,” the latter demanded an all-encompassing reimagination of the relationship between humanity and nature. “Modernist ecology,” as I call it, attempted to envision this change, which would be ontological or metaphysical rather than simply social, through thematically and formally experimental works of art. Its radical vision, suggestive in some ways of today’s “deep” ecology, repudiated modern accounts of nature as a congeries of inert objects to be manipulated by a sovereign subject, and instead foregrounded the chiasmic intertexture of the subject/object relationship. In aesthetic modernism we encounter not “objective” nature, but “nature-being” – a blank substratum beneath the solid contours of what philosopher Kate Soper calls “lay nature” – the revelation of which shatters historical constructions of nature and alone allows for radical alternatives. This essay looks specifically at modernist ecology as it appears in the works of W. B. Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, and Samuel Beckett, detailing their attempts to envision revolutionary new ecologies, but also their struggles with the limited capacity of esoteric modernist art to effect significant ecological change on a collective level.
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Introduction:

Is There a “Modernist” Ecology?

I would like to be able to feel again, to be able to cry again before nature as I once did, to kneel and give thanks. I let it go, however, and torture myself as little as possible about it. But it must, it absolutely must return, or take on new forms.

- Wassily Kandinsky (from a letter to Gabrielle Münter)

Kandinsky’s mournful, yet hopeful letter was composed in 1907, the same year he completed one of his last major figurative paintings, “Riding Couple,” which depicts aristocratic lovers who have retreated to the peace of the woodlands; four years later he would complete “Picture with a Circle,” the first truly abstract painting (at least according to Kandinsky himself). In abstraction Kandinsky found a distinctly modernist resolution to his own sense of alienation from nature and the complacent naturalism he associated with the industrial, bourgeois, materialist aspects of modernity and the sense of loss and fragmentation he believed were symptomatic of their effect on the human spirit. His paradoxical resolution to this condition works through negation: because nature can no longer be worshipped in innocence and simplicity in a modern era that has seen it so

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1 Quoted in Gerald Izenberg’s Modernism and Masculinity: Mann, Wedekind, Kandinsky through World War I (2000) (pg. 186).
2 For a detailed discussion of Kandinsky’s regard for nature and resistance to modernization see Izenberg’s “Wassily Kandinsky and the Origins of Abstraction” in the same study (161-219).
Pervasively reified into raw material, its fallen “objective” image must be dissolved in order to allow for the rediscovery of its spiritual essence. Thus Kandinsky’s formal abstraction strives to overcome nature’s modern incarnation through an art which, in an unconventional push for more profound realism, itself comes to resemble the unconditioned, unformed matrix that, for many modernists, lies beneath these reifications; in order to preserve nature’s essence, he must depart entirely from its familiar, common sense appearance, a perplexing dynamic Theodor Adorno describes in his discussion of “Natural Beauty” in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970).³

It is not important to fully understand Kandinsky’s strange logic or to think through his shifting personae and affiliations to grasp the problem I want to highlight here; it is enough to reflect on the difficulty of discussing such an artist, who was clearly deeply invested in nature and in some sense its preservation, in terms of ecology, the environment, or, to name the critical idiom I will respond to throughout this study, ecocriticism. How can we possibly talk about “ecology,” for instance, in the works of a man who not only fiercely repudiated naturalism, but associated its mode of representation with an assault on nature that is not quite a matter of “environmental” destruction as we would conceive of it today, but destruction in the abstract – metaphysical destruction preceding and enabling literal destruction? And what violence

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³ Adorno writes: “Art imitates neither nature nor individual natural beauty. What it does is imitate natural beauty as such” (107). In other words art, or at least Adorno’s valorized modernist art, does not seek to emulate nature in superficial appearance; instead it departs from appearance in order to capture nature’s unconditioned, unformed beauty. Art is in this sense both an ally and an usurper of natural beauty for Adorno.
would we have to do to the meaning of the term “ecology” to pursue such a discussion? Likewise, is Kandinsky even concerned with what we call “the environment” at all? Or is the modernist paradox he channels in his letter and its paradoxical resolution simply too far removed from practical environmental concerns to demand this kind of inquiry in the first place?

This study will not attempt to resolve these questions with specific reference to Kandinsky, who appears here only as a pretext to raise them; my focus is British and Irish literary modernism – and especially the works of W. B. Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, and Samuel Beckett – rather than modernism in the visual arts, though the same constellation of questions invoked by this painter will recur with every literary modernist I discuss. As far as literary studies is concerned, there seems to be at least an implicit answer to the last question: ecocriticism has mostly ignored modernism as a movement. Of course there is some exceptional ecocriticism on select modernist figures – Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens – but in large part when modernism is discussed it is discussed without sufficient attempt to discover what is uniquely modernist about its “ecology,” an oversight that risks occluding any insights into our own contemporaneity we might glean from the relatively esoteric reimagination of nature and human subjectivity that I will identify as a distinctively modernist mode of ecological critique. Perhaps this is because, in spite of its breadth (or perhaps because of it), ecocriticism has traditionally been more interested in modernity – the entirety of the supposedly “anthropocentric” Western tradition – than with the aesthetic modernism of
the late-nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century, the cultural production of a comparatively brief historical moment. Part of the aim of this study is to develop an ecocritical framework that might make sense of the dynamics of this post-romantic, pre-environmentalist moment and to position it in relation to contemporary concerns without losing sight of the conceptual horizon demarcated by its proper historical context.

However, as its title should suggest, this study considers the modernist moment on its own terms while also employing an ecocritical tool – the equivocal term “ecology” itself – in order to newly elucidate a past object of investigation. “Ecology,” as I will describe in more detail further on, is useful precisely because it is so loose: it allows me to bring together a diverse range of aesthetic, philosophical, spiritual, social, and political discourses from the modernist period that concern “nature,” while suggestively drawing attention to cultural modernism’s distance from other discourses associated with the term, most importantly those of ecological science and liberal environmentalism. Likewise, “modernist ecology” (which combines two loose terms) allows me to discuss a diverse range of ideas under the same banner, ideas that are unified only to the extent that they emerge from the same cultural movement and respond to a similar set of “ecological” problems. From the contemporary point of view that conflates “ecology” and “environmentalism,” the term “modernist ecology,” which I intend to be provocative, should suggest a dubious marriage of irreconcilable ideas. Today most people think of ecological crisis in terms of practical political and personal reform: today’s environmentalist (polls suggest that more than three quarters of people living in OECD
countries self-identify as such)\(^4\) knows that ours is an age demanding new governmental policies, new international accords, new “green” technologies, new personal practices and consumer demands, and many other reforms designed to make liberal capitalism more “sustainable.” Far from arguing that modernism is “environmentalist” in this anachronistic (and by some accounts vacant) sense, this project aims, through rigorous readings of primary texts, to illustrate how modernist authors identified an ecological crisis of their own on an entirely different register than the one informing the ubiquitous liberal environmentalist. As I will develop in detail below, many modernists emphasized ontology over politics and all-encompassing revolution over practical reform in their attempts to counter a perceived crisis, incompatible as these points of emphasis may seem at first glance. It would certainly be possible to describe these tendencies in modernism without employing the term “ecology” at all, but I find the discord between contemporary and modernist narratives of crisis to be especially fruitful for advancing our understanding of modernist culture, and, by extension, the contemporary moment.

This study could also wash its hands of “ecocriticism” altogether and proceed under the aegis of modernist studies alone. Because I endeavor to describe a tendency of modernist culture rather than to advance a proscriptive environmental politics, many critics would undoubtedly not recognize the relevance of this study to the larger project

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\(^4\) This trend is discussed in Dara O’Rourke’s policy paper “Opportunities and Obstacles for Corporate Social Responsibility Reporting in Developing Countries” (2004), prepared for the Corporate Social Responsibility Practice, Washington D.C. The OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) includes Group of Eight nations America, The United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, France, Italy, and Japan, in addition to other (mostly European) world powers.
of ecocriticism. However, this attitude presupposes a uniform outlook and firm set of principles that ecocriticism simply does not have as yet, and in my opinion should actively avoid in the name of investigative openness. Answers to the question “What is ecocriticism?” are necessarily various; I see no reason not to include this study in an evolving body of contemporary scholarship that is partly conditioned in all its permutations by a pressing need to rethink nature. Such scholarship needs to be aware of past endeavours to do just that in order to move forward most effectively. As such, while this is first and foremost a study in cultural modernism, it aims to enrich and extend ecocritical discourse as well.

**Imagining Nature in the Modernist Period: Ecological Science and Ecological Culture**

The term *oecologie* was coined in 1866 by German biologist Ernst Haeckel, who drew from a preexisting phrase used by Swedish botanist, zoologist, and physician Carl von Linné (also known as Linnaeus) to describe natural systems in his 1749 essay “The Oeconomy of Nature,” one of the pioneering documents of ecological science. The root of both *oecology* and *oeconomy* is the Greek *oikos*, which signifies home or dwelling-place; for Haeckel, *oecology* would be a science of interrelatedness, based on the paradigm shifting principle that “the living organisms of the earth constitute a single economic unit resembling a household or family dwelling intimately together, in conflict as well as mutual aid” (Worster 192). Although the scientific community was slow to
embrace Haeckel’s term, and even slower to embrace the worldview that informed it, the
new science of ecology continued to make strides leading into the early-twentieth
century, a period that saw major landmarks in the field and its surrounding culture:
seminal studies in plant ecology such as Eugenius Warming’s The Ecology of Plants
(1895), Frederic Clements and Roscoe Pound’s The Phytogeography of Nebraska (1897),
and Clements’s Plant Physiology and Ecology (1907); the formation of the British
Ecological Society (1913) and the American Ecological Society (1915); the inaugural
issue of the journal Ecology (1920); and advances in animal ecology that extended and
consolidated the field, such as Charles Elton’s Animal Ecology (1927), to name only a
select few publications and events. However, modern ecology, or “new ecology” as it
was once called, was established most definitively through Oxford botanist A. G.
Tansley’s work in the 1930s, a period during which he coined and tirelessly championed
the term “ecosystem,” a term designed to rid ecology of any lingering anthropomorphic
discourses such as those describing a mutually dependent, interspecies “community”
(Worster 301) – in effect, to move away from Haeckel’s vision of nature as a shared
dwelling place (and the moral implications of this vision) and towards a picture of nature
as a self-regulating mathematical system, an outlook and methodology known as
“bioeconomics.”

As Donald Worster points out throughout his classic history of ecology Nature’s
Economy (1977), ecology has always been a unique and problematic term because of its
association with both hard science and what Worster refers to as an “Arcadian”
worldview. The central irony of the development of modern ecology is that the bioeconomic model, which deals with ecosystems strictly in terms of the exchange of energy, rose to prominence through the nineteen-forties and fifties, and thus corresponded roughly with the popular recognition of a burgeoning “Age of Ecology” bestowed with a value-rich new science heralding the necessity of environmental stewardship. As Worster points out, little connection actually existed between the Arcadian or ecological ideologies marking the nascent new era and the hard science of studies in bioeconomics such as Raymond Lindeman’s seminal 1942 essay “The Trophic-Dynamic Aspect of Ecology” (306). In fact, the public was (and still is) largely ignorant of developments in ecological science; in popular parlance “ecology” continued to signify, first and foremost, a circumspect new mentality towards nature, such as the one captured in Aldo Leopold’s conservationist classic A Sand County Almanac (1949). It is undoubtedly for this reason that the definitive advent of the environmental movement is typically associated with another book written for a non-specialized audience, Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring (1962), which, though rigorously informed by scientific data, arguably succeeded because of its calculated appeals to the public’s emotions and sense of moral responsibility. After all, the new ecology simply described the economy of nature; Carson’s gift was her ability to mobilize these facts to promote a new commitment to the environment, a commitment that depended on an axiological
argument supporting nature’s inherent value with no necessary ties to the new science (which served as a diagnostic tool more so than a standalone message).\(^5\)

One of the reasons Worster’s study continues to be read today is that it grasps and clearly elucidates the disconnect inherent to ecological discourse between scientific fact and moral, philosophical, political, or spiritual outlook, and it is this disconnect that makes it possible to speak of modernism as an ecological discourse in its own right: while the modernist authors I deal with in this study would be uniformly against the reductions of bioeconomics, they can and should be positioned in relation to an emergent ecological culture. Decades before panic over global warming and acid rain, this culture responded to disasters and crises of a different but related character. Firstly, the upheaval of modernization was for many modernists inseparable from what Alfred North Whitehead identified in *Science and the Modern World* (1925) as the hegemony of an abstract, mechanistic materialism which allowed for technological innovations but reduced nature to a “senseless, valueless, purposeless” set of objects (58-59), a trauma that threatened and thus intensified minority accounts of nature as a domain of value, mystery, and even “magic” that could potentially heal, instruct, or redeem a modern world gone awry. Secondly, more tangible traumas such as the Great War – a mass confrontation with the potential of modern technology to literally and figuratively disfigure humanity and nature – and the radical extension of this threat with the advent of

\(^5\) Carson also argued that human life, not only the inherent value of the ecosystem, was at risk due to pesticide use.
atomic weaponry in the late-modernist period (which, as Heidegger infamously proclaimed, also saw human bodies reduced to industrial waste material in the Holocaust [cited in Lacoue-Labarth, 34]) led to widespread questioning of modernization’s material progress and myriad diagnoses of an insidious spiritual illness in the industrialized West. These traumas provoked a sense of horror at the reduction of humanity and nature alike to manipulable raw material, and confirmed suspicions that there was a profound and unsettling link between the reductive world picture described by Whitehead and the literal destruction of human and non-human life that was felt on an unprecedented scale in the first half of the twentieth century.

Throughout the modernist period these crises were responded to with (and in the case of the Holocaust partly conditioned by) an accelerating concern for individual and collective health. Emergent movements as various as communalism, vegetarianism, scouting, nudism, yoga, the Irish revival, German völkisch nationalism, aesthetic primitivism, and various new or imported mystical practices all reflected a pervasive desire in the West to “get ‘back-to-nature’” (Griffin 144) that was paralleled in more philosophically reflexive modernist discourses such as vitalism and phenomenology. As Roger Griffin describes, in its most radical formulations this desire was expressed in revolutionary calls to inaugurate an alternate modernity (9) through a collective departure into the radically new that could be imagined in terms of a new conception of nature or “being,” a new “man,” and ultimately a new era free from mechanistic materialism, the blight of industrial technology, and other “ecological” calamities. However, despite its
similarities to the ecological culture of the late-twentieth and early-twenty first century, the culture of modernism rarely referenced ecological science in its search for new ways of dwelling on the earth. Whether one speaks of aesthetic modernisms such as Kandinsky’s abstraction, Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, and Lawrence’s *The Plumed Serpent* or political modernisms of an ominous character such as German National Socialism, the ecological culture of modernism was about new attitudes, outlooks, and individual or collective projects devoid of significant ties to ecological science.6 One might even say that this lack of regard for hard science facilitated modernism’s aesthetic and political radicalism, for better or for worse, by freeing ecological thought from scientific discoveries that are not necessarily instructive or relevant when it comes to forming a new individual or collective ethos.7 Thus, as a prelude to our so-called “Age of Ecology,” modernism is marked by striking ideological

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6 Nazi ideology did appropriate scientific discourse (or rather pseudo-scientific discourse, primarily derived from misinterpretations of evolutionary biology) in such a way that it was subordinated to a greater “spiritual” mission of redemption. I use Nazi ideology as an example here because it bears some similarity to aesthetic modernist ecological thought (or rather is an example of its politicization). Insofar as the Nazi regime, a political modernism, was also the first state to “reconcile a broad ecological plan with ... concern for real political intervention” (Ferry 92) by many accounts, no discussion of modernist ecological culture can ignore its potential expression as fascism, of which Nazism is the best example. I address these associations in a chapter on D. H. Lawrence, elucidating the links between aesthetic and political modernism and evaluating the validity of claims that modernist ecological culture, when expressed politically, was essentially fascist.

7 As Worster concludes, despite what ecological science might reveal about ecosystems at a given time and within a given paradigm, ecology as a form of cultural discourse is largely detached from scientific ecology (316-338), especially considering that “the facts” of scientific ecology themselves are always coloured by ideology (xi). The fact that nature is an interrelated system, for example, does not automatically communicate any kind of moral message, nor does it confirm that there is innate value in nature. Though ecological culture may draw from the scientific fact in making persuasive arguments of a moral, axiological, and political character, I maintain that these arguments are, like all cultural discourses, inevitably ideological, even in their most pragmatic forms.
similarities and even more striking differences; it is in understanding both that we can productively supplement and contextualize today’s ecological discourse.

**Aesthetic Modernism as Ecological Critique**

It is surprising that the larger project of aesthetic modernism has been largely ignored by ecocritics, considering that the modernist period is identified in one of the most celebrated attempts at periodizing twentieth century culture – Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism* (1991) – as a cultural situation for which “nature” or “being” still lingers in a subversive, subterranean capacity and can thus be invoked in opposition to “progress” or even actively transformed (ix); in effect as a period with more investment in “nature” than our own, albeit of another character. The canonical portrayal of the “great modernists” as seers or prophets of a newly secular society also seems to fit perfectly with narratives of ecological renewal, especially given the tendency of figures like Yeats, Pound, H.D., Woolf, Lawrence, and even Beckett to seize upon versions of this subversive residue in their aesthetic experiments in order to challenge what Jean-Luc Marion describes (in relation to Husserl’s phenomenology) as the “unquestioned paradigm of objectness” (32). This is the modernist movement I will discuss: an interrelated set of aesthetic practices oriented toward ontological change that were made possible by the ideological structure of the modernist period, which, I would suggest, begins in the late-nineteenth century and survives into the late-modernism of the fifties and beyond (and perhaps even into the present in some form). I read this “modernist
ecology” as a non-genre specific commitment to experiments in ontology that are both thematically and formally innovative, though my analysis tends towards the thematic. I do not intend to discuss modernist ecology as if it were a consolidated school incorporating every author who could otherwise be drawn into a discussion of cultural modernism, but I do maintain the validity of treating modernism as a relatively coherent programme of aesthetic experimentation. The cultural status ascribed to the ecological current in modernism, often by its own architects, was visionary: these works concern “the imagination of the world” (187) in Yeats’s words, and, as Jameson suggests, aspire to free themselves from the simultaneously enabling and limiting domain of the aesthetic and to transform the world of actuality, including, as I will argue, nature and humanity alike (Singular Modernity 136). Modernist ecology is thus not amenable to a purely formalist reading; while it develops new literary forms in order to reimagine the relationship between humanity and nature, its ultimate aim is not merely to “make it new” in poetry, prose, or drama, but to actualize ecological change, whatever that might entail. How and why this lofty utopian aspiration so often led to a sense of futility or embitterment among individual modernists is also central to understanding and evaluating the legacy of ecological modernism.

It is also surprising that modernist studies has not paid more attention to the ecological bent of modernism considering the initiative of Douglas Mao’s otherwise influential study Solid Objects (1998) to challenge accounts of “masculinist” modernism’s anxious fortification of the self against “the morass of the external” (10)
and to lay bare the “foundationally ecological” line of thinking that underlies the work of many major modernists (for Mao, Woolf, Lewis, Pound, and Stevens in particular). Mao argues that literary modernists almost universally diagnosed modernity “as an affair of consciousness gone awry, a phenomenon of subjectivity grown rapacious and fantastically powerful either with the help of or under the sway of science and expansionist capitalism” (8) and that in many cases modernist works show “how the abstract ‘domination’ of objects can converge with the actual domination of humans and the actual destruction of the object world” (89). Although Mao’s book is rich with compelling suggestions about how modernism might be read in terms of ecology – and the suggestion that modernist ecology implies a fundamental connection between abstract domination and more tangible environmental degradation is central to my own reading – these remain only suggestions, as Mao’s insights are never positioned in relation to ecocritical discourse (understandably so since the discourse was still underdeveloped and in large part effectively anti-modernist at the time of Solid Objects’s publication). This makes Mao’s study a point of departure for ecological readings of modernism, which can now make use of more than a decade’s worth of further scholarship in ecocriticism and environmental ethics, discourses that are becoming increasingly theoretically nuanced thanks to the recent explosion of interest in these fields among literary scholars.
Still, there is, as I mentioned, a preexisting current of thought linking particular modernist authors to ecology that dates back to the early-1990s, though it is too various and marginal to be considered an established critical tradition. The logic supporting the exciting possibility of a theoretically rich union of modernist studies and ecocriticism was articulated as far back as 1998, the same year *Solid Objects* was published, in an essay by Carol Cantrell that appeared in the pages of ISLE (*Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*). Cantrell’s essay was groundbreaking insofar as it linked the modernist aesthetic project as a whole to an ontologically inflected species of ecological critique:

Implicit in the modernist aesthetic project is a critique of the Western understanding of reason, particularly as it is based on the separation of perceiving mind from the perceived world. Much of the infamous difficulty of modern art is inherent in its attempt to explore alternative conceptions of perception. Elements of the experience of the world which our culture conventionally treats as background – issues of perspective, framing, and medium, for example – become for modernists the foreground and even the subject of their work ... Key elements of modernism – the attack on dualistic thinking, the foregrounding of backgrounds, the exploration of the relation of

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language to alterity, and the self-referential nature of symbol making – are vital areas of inquiry for those of us who are interested in the relationship between literature and environment (34).

Moving beyond single-author readings despite her focus on Virginia Woolf’s novels, Cantrell’s initiative was to posit a foundational connection between modernism and ecological thought. As she suggests in her essay, many of the relatively abstract concerns that might make aesthetic modernism seem distant from the earthy domain of ecological thought can actually enable it to think ecologically with unusual depth that may be valuable to rediscover today.

As Mao and Cantrell’s relatively loose uses of the term suggest, if some modernist works can justifiably be described as “ecological” it is because the word ecology, with its root association with home or dwelling-place, does not only name the ecosystems that are disclosed by ecological science, it also names the way we comport ourselves towards a natural world that is itself a reflection of our comportment towards it – as Robert Pogue Harrison puts it using Heideggerian language, it names our very “manner of being in the world” (199). Or to paraphrase Cheryll Glotfelty’s less gnomic formulation, it names a general concern with relationships between the human and the non-human and the worlds these relationships posit (xx). It is also the dimension of our understanding and experience of nature that philosopher Kate Soper allocates to “metaphysical” rather than commonsense or realist nature, what we might think of as the ideological aspect of nature that is implicated in human history and subject to change.
rather than as an unhistorical objectivity we can arguably never access. Herbert Marcuse usefully terms this protean relationship the “reality principle,” by which he means both the synchronic manifestation of one particular “nature” and the diachronic evolution of our understanding of human subjectivity and the object world, categories that are, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty illustrates in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), illusory to the extent that they are always chiasmically intertwined. The reality principle is an illuminating notion because it makes clear that when we talk about nature we are always talking about a certain construction of nature, and that when we talk about reimagining nature, as Marcuse so frequently does, we are always talking just as much about changing ourselves, however that might be accomplished and whatever it might entail. For the modernists I discuss in this study, the impetus to change seems to develop out of an intimation that the unnamable blur of subject and object – something which replaces “objective” nature but can hardly be considered a victim to be safeguarded in any conventional sense – somehow mutely suffers degradations that are direct consequences of pernicious modern ideologies.

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9 For a detailed discussion of the reality principle see *Eros and Civilization* (11-20). Marcuse suggests that the reality principle serves to establish a more secure and manipulable world in the interest of survival, but can do so in excess, and at the expense of fantasy, pleasure, and creativity, in situations of “surplus repression,” repression that exceeds the minimum ego and object formation necessary for survival.

10 See chapter four, “The Intertwining–The Chiasm” (130-155). Merleau-Ponty writes: “What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them – but something to which we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look, things we could not dream of seeing ‘all naked’ because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh” (131).
Modernism and “Metaphysical” Nature: Two Tendencies of Modernist Ecology

Soper’s terminology also provides a useful schema for understanding the “nature” of the modernist works I have in mind, and helps illuminate its questionable compatibility with the nature of today’s mainstream environmentalism and realist ecocriticism. Soper terms the nature contemporary environmentalism strives to protect “lay nature” – the nature of endangered species, deforestation, and pollution; “the nature of immediate experience ... [that] we have destroyed and polluted and are asked to conserve and protect” (155) – and distinguishes it from “realist nature,” “the structures, processes and causal powers that are constantly operative within the physical world, that provide the objects of study of the natural sciences” (155-156), including ecological science. Realist nature, despite its importance for calculating and managing ecological problems, is said to be “value neutral” and not to inspire human concern because it is an invisible set of laws and principles that can be abstracted from any specific bioregion or any natural process. Realist nature cannot be protected because, as a set of laws rather than a concrete embodiment of these laws, it cannot be violated or destroyed. Soper introduces a third concept, “metaphysical nature,” which describes humanity’s relationship with the non-human, and thus formulations of ontology in general (155). Metaphysical nature describes the constructions of subjectivity and objectivity that are the domain of Marcuse’s reality principle; they are distinct from realist nature (though realist nature
implies one such construction) and might actually refuse, for instance, the existential validity of the scientific method or the common sense logic of lay nature.  

According to Soper, any concept of nature, whether it originates in recondite philosophy or environmental activism, must draw on more than one of these “natures,” and usually from all three. For example, mainstream liberal environmentalism strives to protect lay nature and must do so through scientific methods supplied by realist accounts of nature, but it also implicitly suggests a metaphysics: a condition of separation in which humanity, distinct from nature, works to manage the natural world’s resources in the interest of its own self-preservation and quality of life. Ecocriticism generally contests this “resourcist” managerial model, but it is far too various a movement to attach it to a single competing outlook. It is enough to consider that academic ecocriticism usually aspires to the status of activism, and is therefore typically concerned with understanding realist nature and safeguarding lay nature, a project proper to an era defined in part by its environmental crisis. Many literary and philosophical modernist works, however, are concerned primarily with metaphysical nature and carry out their critique on this register. Although this seems to align modernism with deep ecology, a form of environmentalism that focuses on ontology – and to a certain extent it does, an association I will discuss further on – even these more philosophical environmentalisms are ultimately much more concerned with the lay nature that Yeats, for example, largely treated as figurative for

11 The reader should note that Soper’s term “realism” can be misleading for the purposes of my discussion since her “lay nature” is actually closer to the ideology of what I will go on refer to as “realist ecocriticism.”
what he saw as a more essential metaphysical transformation. This study will explore the
dynamics of metaphysical or, interchangeably for my purposes, ontological ecology in
the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century – what I term modernist ecology – and
will attempt to explore its strengths and weaknesses, to situate it in relation to less
abstract forms of ecological critique, and to reconsider its contemporary relevance.

Many modernist works focus primarily on metaphysical nature because they are
ultimately concerned with the relationship between the human subject and its world, and
because they tend to look past lay nature in an effort to glimpse, to use Lily Briscoe’s
phrase from Woolf’s To the Lighthouse, “the thing itself before it has been made into
anything” (209). The first of these related characterizations may seem counter-intuitive
considering the popular caricature of modernism as a subjectivist “inward turn,” an
ultimately solipsistic engagement with interiority rather than the world. I have to follow
Jameson in his assertion that this is a superficial reading that does not do justice to the
extent to which the supposed inward turn was often one and same with a desire to
radically transform subjectivity. For Jameson, what might look like an insular retreat to
interiority evokes “a momentum that cannot find resolution within the self, but that must
be completed by a … transmutation of the world of actuality itself” (136). Ultimately the
object of reform is the greater social world, and giving this reading of modernism an
ecological inflection, I would further suggest that humanity’s relationship to nature is
challenged, with particular emphasis on the hegemony of monadic individualism, rigid
subject/object metaphysics, and technological instrumentalism that for many modernists
represents a kind of miasma proper to industrialized society. Modernist ecology thus imagines alternatives to the prevailing understanding (through the twentieth century and today) of the human being as a detached, sovereign subject who manipulates and uses a congeries of inert raw material. Lawrence’s fictional work serves as a good example of this tendency; novels like *Women in Love* (1920) and *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) offer sustained imaginative meditations on alternatives to the modern subject, who inhabits a dying world not simply because of uncontrolled industrialism, for example, but because of the metaphysical deadening of humanity and nature that Lawrence thought of as more essential than the literal environmental destruction that he believed to follow inevitably in its wake.

The other related tendency of modernist ecology, what I will later refer to in relation to “nature-being,” is usefully understood in terms of what Sanford Schwartz calls the “matrix of modernism,” a model appearing isomorphically throughout modern philosophy that focuses on the distinction between surface and depth, or construct and matrix (4). This model posits a world of convention subtended with an originary ground – a Heideggerian “groundless ground” rather than a stable foundation – that is concealed from ordinary perception in order to allow us to negotiate our world instrumentally and to see to our practical needs. Nietzsche, Bradley, Bergson, Whitehead, and Heidegger, for example, articulate versions of this matrix, and in each case the matrix or substratum comes to represent an alternative to the confines of the reality principle because it offers something behind instrumental materialism that can be seized upon and reimagined – a
“deeper nature,” as it were, that is historical and subject to change precisely because it never fully disappears behind the object world’s shifting historical manifestations. For Bergson and Heidegger, this deeper nature is full of promise; it is something we must attune ourselves to in order to allow the world to reveal itself more authentically. Both philosophers suggest that habit, everyday language, and scientific prejudice reify a banal, prison-like reality, and both cast the artist as the privileged seer who can help rediscover the originary source of these reifications; both suggest as well that this rediscovery will in turn herald the “saving power” that might redeem the titanic factory that is the modern world.  

T. E. Hulme used this model to theorize literary modernism in his essay “Bergson’s Philosophy of Art” (1911), in which he affords the modern aesthete, who is felicitously removed from the world of convention, a central place in revitalizing an instrumental language that is always becoming stale (200). Although Hulme, whose allegiances and aesthetics vacillated wildly, would later join Wyndham Lewis’s contrarian endeavor to defend the hard, common sense reality he denigrates in this early essay, the perspective he outlines resonates with a formal and thematic maxim of modernism: reality has been deadened by convention, yet there is a more authentic reality to be uncovered. Even if, as Nietzsche insisted, this more authentic reality is a “chaos of sensations” devoid of meaning or value in itself (550), it may be meaningful insofar as it

12 Heidegger was fond of quoting the opening lines of Hölderlin’s “Patmos” (1803), “Near is/And difficult to grasp, the God./But where danger threatens/That which saves from it also grows” (1-3, 231).
frees humanity from its own stifling constructs and allows for renewed creation. Given Soper’s claim that lay nature, a domain of “directly tangible forms,” is the object of concern for contemporary environmentalists – “the nature we feel for: the nature we love and revere, by which we are inspired, and with which we commune” (180) – it is readily apparent why modernist aesthetics can clash with ecocriticism, which, as I will discuss further on, tends towards realism in some of its most influential formulations. For the early Hulme and many other modern artists and thinkers, the nature of directly tangible forms is suspicious, if not pernicious, while Soper’s “communion” is reserved primarily for a substratum beneath the object world that seems to put individual entities under erasure and thus might confirm suspicions that modernism is at bottom an esoteric discourse with little potential to affect “the real world.” Such suspicions are understandable: while it is relatively easy to imagine what “saving” the polar bear or the rainforest might entail, even if it would be difficult to carry out in practice, it is hard to imagine what saving the modernist matrix, the chaos of sensations, or “being” might entail. Indeed, the whole notion can seem absurd if it is not properly contextualized.

The first aspect of modernist ecology – its tendency to treat ecological problems as ontological problems – is closely aligned with the anti-enlightenment current in

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13 Nietzsche posits a realm of conceptual abstraction making up the stuff of everyday experience and scientific knowledge – a reality that is “arranged, simplified, schematized, interpreted through and through” (*The Will to Power* 263-264) – subtended by a chaos of sensations, a “sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back” (550) with no coherent purpose or stable form. Philosophy can access the chaos of sensations through the work of negation (“philosophizing with a hammer”) and, encountering this groundless ground, work to create new abstractions, new forms, and thus new realities.
nineteenth and twentieth century thought that Peter Murphy and David Rogers term “romantic modernism” (xi). The hallmarks of romantic modernism in its twentieth century incarnations are evident in late-modernist philosophical works such as Horkheimer and Adorno’s *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1955), and Heidegger’s work in general, especially his post-*Being and Time* writings, such as the influential essay “The Question Concerning Technology” (1949).

Although Frankfurt School cultural critics Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse are associated with the left and Heidegger with the right, the similarities between their critiques of enlightenment and modernity are arguably more significant than their differences: both accuse enlightenment legacies such as instrumental reason, humanism, and Cartesian metaphysics of allowing for the disenchantment and rapacious exploitation of nature, and both refuse the possibility of radical change without a concomitant metaphysical revolution that would fundamentally transform humanity’s relationship with the non-human and teach people to “let things be”\(^*\) (which would also necessarily lead to a fundamental transformation of human beings’ treatment of other human beings).

To use Heidegger’s useful distinction, both see relevant change, what deep ecologists call “deep” or “fundamental” change, taking place ontologically rather than ontically, or on the level of ideological constructs that are deeper than or prior to practice. The ontic/ontological distinction running through Heidegger’s work maintains that “Being” is

\(^{14}\) Heidegger’s term *Gelassenheit* roughly translates into “letting things be,” or eschewing an instrumentalist attitude towards language and things. This concept is outlined in *Conversation on a Country Path About Thinking* (1966, written in the mid-forties), in which human thought is called upon to make an epochal “transition from willing into releasement” (61).
an expansive category, a “groundless ground,” similar in some respects to a primordial, all-encompassing nature, whereas “beings” are individual entities: things, plants, animals, and human bodies. For Heidegger, disciplines which claim objectivity are always suspect because they access these ontic entities without engagement with the historically mediated ontology that makes such an encounter possible; thus to think ecologically is, in part, to pursue a deep critique of such objectivism.15 Romantic modernism’s insistence on deep ecological critique is evident, for example, in Heidegger’s late declaration that the “devastation of the earth can easily go hand in hand with a guaranteed supreme living standard for man” (What is Called Thinking? 30), which implies the possibility of a future where practical problems facing humankind – scarcity and lack of housing, to which we might add conspicuous environmental degradation – are seemingly resolved, while the “devastation of the earth,” which is here portrayed as a metaphysical problem, continues unabated. It is also evident in Marcuse’s utopian insistence in Eros and Civilization that the reconciliation of subject and object by way of aesthetic experience is ultimately more important than pragmatic but unreflective action, regardless of its intentions or efficacy.

15 Heidegger introduces this distinction and relates it more specifically to the critique of science in the introduction to Being and Time: “The question of Being aims therefore at ascertaining the a priori conditions not only for the possibility of the sciences which examine entities as entities of such and such a type, and, in so doing, already operate with an understanding of Being, but also for the possibility of those ontologies themselves which are prior to the ontical sciences and which provide their foundations” (31). As this quotation suggests, Heidegger’s ontic entities are roughly analogous to the stuff of Soper’s lay nature, while the ontological is roughly analogous to her metaphysical nature.
Modernism as “Deeper Ecology”

As I have suggested, the privilege afforded matters of ontology in modernist ecology connects it with deep ecology, a movement Katz, Light, and Rothenberg characterize as fundamentally ontological (xiv) in their compelling introduction to Beneath the Surface (2000). While deep ecology is practical in the sense that it addresses the destructive consequences wrought on the natural world by the marriage of modern industrial technology, corporate greed, conspicuous consumption, and “overpopulation,” and urges people to take action to safeguard their environment, philosophers of deep ecology, following the movement’s originator Arne Naess, insist that political action is meaningless without an accompanying change in outlook. We do not only need to act differently when it comes to nature, we need to see nature in a different light as well; we need to reform, for example, our rigid and ecologically problematic notion of subjectivity, which necessarily implies that we need to reform our notion of objectivity as well. For Naess, as for interpreters such as Warwick Fox, Bill Devall, and Georges Sessions, this entails the dissolution of conventional boundaries between self and other,

16 Like ecocriticism, deep ecology is by no means a monologic discourse, and in fact aspires to syncretize numerous radical perspectives; it is also imperfectly divisible, at least according to Katz, Light, and Rothenberg, into complementary and intermingling political/activist and philosophical/theoretical dimensions (x). However, in spite of the variety of deep ecological perspectives, the philosophical, or as Naess would say “ecosophical,” dimension of radical ecology, which is here conceived according to its own logic as a whole or gestalt, remains resolutely committed to anti-humanist, “non-anthropocent” ontology (Zimmerman 62). However, this is not a secondary commitment: in fact, as Katz, Light, and Rothenberg put it, the reverse is true: “The ethics and politics of deep ecology – those ideas most clearly expressed in its platform – are secondary; they are derived from the basic ontological commitments of the deep ecological worldview” (xiv).
and the realization of the “ecological self” – a broadened consciousness which incorporates flora and fauna into the gestalt of selfhood, which is not to be confused with “the narrow ego” (“Self-Realization” 13-15). It is the naïve language of some of the early calls for “trans-personal” or “non-anthropocentric” self-realization among deep ecologists that accounts in part for the movement’s reputation as an unsophisticated “tree-hugger’s” postmodernism. John Seed’s ebullient essay “Anthropocentrism” (1983) in particular is justly infamous among critics of deep ecology (though it is cited everywhere in New Age literature): “What a relief then! The thousands of years of separation are over and we begin to recall our true nature. That is, the change is a spiritual one, thinking like a mountain” (243). If deep ecology’s ontological approach is “deep” the implication is that liberal approaches to environmental sustainability are “shallow”; that is to say they are unwilling to commit to the fundamental ontological, ethical, and axiological reimagination of “self” required to address the planetary environmental crisis, or the radical measures a genuinely new outlook might demand. While deep ecology’s perilous similarity to popular New Age thought has provoked the ire of “shallow” liberal environmentalists and left-ecocritics alike, its central point – that from an environmentalist perspective it is hard to imagine significant reform taking place in a

17 See also Naess’s essay “Metaphysics of a Treeline” (1987) in The Collected Works of Arne Naess for an example of this line of argument. The essay makes use of type-characters with divergent perspectives to dramatize the extent to which environmentalism is a matter of consciousness, of how the self and by extension the natural world are understood to be rather than how environmental issues are managed by government agencies (2825-2829).
18 This dichotomy was first introduced in Naess’s “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary” (1973).
society that values nature only to the extent that it can be exploited – remains as compelling as it is problematic, and might equally be attributed to modernist ecology.

Modernist ecology is closest to deep ecology where it insists on intervening in the history of abstractions as a means of indirectly addressing concrete realities and their effect on the natural world; in other words, where, like deep ecology, it shifts the focus away from individual sites within nature and towards the overarching historical construction of nature that makes its abuse possible in the first place (Szerszynski 118). But modernist ecology is “deeper” than deep ecology in the sense that it does not advance a substantialist account of nature at all; that is to say it does not attempt to offer an account of nature as a given, as a thing or congeries of things we can be faithful to or unfaithful to, or as a thing with tangible properties that can either be illuminated or concealed by ideology. For example, the chiasmic intertexture of the subject/object relationship, which for deep ecology is a real property of nature that has been concealed by Western metaphysics, is for modernist ecology simply another, more rich, more laudable way of relating to nature with no transcendental truth claim. While this “deeper ecology” may seem deeply problematic insofar as it eliminates the very “object” – external nature – that is supposed to be of concern for deep ecologists and scientific ecologists alike, Timothy Morton compellingly argues in his landmark study *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) that “essentialist” accounts of nature as “an abstract principle that transcends the material realm and even the realm of representation” (16) are more pertinent to progressive ecological discourse precisely because they are felicitously anti-
essentialist in another manner of speaking (since essentialist nature has no properties at all!). Most importantly for Morton, essentialist accounts of nature are less inclined to appeal to nature as a domain of extra-cultural truth, a discursive strategy he sees as a failure of the ecological imagination that is not only misguided, but can have pernicious political consequences, for example when it serves to naturalize racist rhetoric or predatory *laissez-faire* economics. Similarly, for ecological modernists there is something *blank* rather than substantial about metaphysical nature, and it is this very blankness or negativity that allows for new configurations of the ecological self. On the other hand, modernism’s nature is extremely slippery because of this same lack of tangible substance, and can therefore still be appropriated by ideologies *of all kinds*, including the fascist ideologies that emerged in the twentieth century and appealed to many ecologically minded modernists.

Lastly, modernist ecology is deeper than deep ecology because it affords even more importance to metaphysical or ontological change, sometimes to the extent that it appears to eschew practical political involvement altogether. At its most quietistic, it can seem to leave common sense nature behind entirely in its pursuit of a formless abstraction or unknowable thing-in-itself. While this is a problem this study will address – particularly through a sustained examination of the tension between aesthetic autonomy and avant-garde resolution that is internal to modernism – modernist ecology’s fraught relationship with politics is closely tied to its felicitous resistance to divisive “simulacra,” to use Alain Badiou’s term, such as race, nationhood, and native soil, which were
employed to disastrous ends when they were incorporated (incoherently I will argue) into ideologies of ecological renewal in the twentieth century. This resistance to simulacra, though controversial by today’s standards, makes modernist ecology a remarkably “cosmopolitan” or “universal” discourse that, unlike deep ecology, dispenses entirely with the discourses of place and particularity that are now typically associated with ecological thought.

From Nature to “Nature-Being”

The second aspect of modernist ecology – its tendency to conflate nature and “Being,” and its corresponding lack of concern with the traditional distinction between “first” and “second” nature, natural and built environments, natural entities and manmade objects – is more suggestive of contemporary attempts to do away with the concept of nature altogether. In The End of Nature (1985) Bill McKibben proclaimed this distinction dead in the literal sense, since no “wilderness” or “untouched nature” can be said to exist in a world with global climate change, acid rain, and orbiting satellites (45). More recently, the influence of theorists such as Bruno Latour, Félix Guattari, Donna Haraway, and Giorgio Agamben has led to a movement to do away with what Latour calls the “the

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19 For Badiou, a simulacrum is any concept communicating “closed particularity” (Ethics 74) and thus working to limit revolutionary possibilities to a single group or territory. I discuss Badiou’s controversial term in detail in Chapter Two of this essay.

20 Marx, following Cicero’s On the Nature of Gods, distinguished between “first nature” – nature that is unaltered by humanity – and “second nature” – the environments that are constructed through human labour.

21 See, for example, We Have Never Been Modern (1993), The Three Ecologies (1989), Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (1991), and The Open (2004)
great divide,” the tendency in Western thought since the Enlightenment to manufacture a distinction between Nature and Culture and to proceed as if this distinction were inalienably viable. Latour suggests instead that we replace the Nature/Culture distinction with a discourse of “nature-culture” capable of recognizing the extent to which nature is always permeated with culture and vice versa – that nature-culture hybrids proliferate everywhere, or rather that there are no hybrids, since there is no real intermingling of distinct domains in the first place (7). For ecocritics influenced by the movement away from “nature,” it is problematic and ultimately incoherent to celebrate only “natural” environments, since there is no adequate means to distinguish between natural and human constructions in a world so thoroughly worked over by humanity (even in the mid-nineteenth century Marx was able to confidently diagnose the end of first nature).22 Likewise, ecocritics committed to environmental justice have drawn on this critique of traditional concepts of “nature” to focus on the ecology of manufactured environments, such as inner city neighborhoods, while ignoring supposedly backwards “first wave” preoccupations with nature writing and the fate of the non-human envisioned as a monolithic victimized Other.

Modernist ecology anticipates this willingness to forget about the traditional nature writer’s unspoiled wilderness, but it also exhibits a residual essentialism of a respectively. And certainly one could read the deconstruction of the Nature/Culture binary as characteristic of postmodern theory in general.

22 In The German Ideology (1846) Marx asserted that “the nature that preceded human history … no longer exists” except perhaps in the most remote areas (175).
unique character that would undoubtedly raise the suspicions of the theorists mentioned above. Jean Paul-Sartre’s *Nausea* (1938) serves as a useful example (though it is otherwise not a paradigmatic text of modernist ecology). The novel concerns the encounter between its protagonist, Roquentin, and *de trop* (brute being), and his struggle to accept its groundlessness. One of Roquentin’s most frightening encounters is provoked by a tree, but “vast, vague Nature” (225) makes its presence felt anywhere – in a city café for example. Nevertheless, Roquentin associates its incursion into his quotidian reality primarily with natural imagery, specifically with images of vegetation, and paranoically envisions plant life consuming the city of Paris entirely (221-222). In *Nausea, de trop* is not simply common sense nature: it appears anywhere, through a tree or through a coffee cup, or rather through the suspension of their solid contours. However, *de trop* is not simply *not* common sense nature either: ontic nature is in fact something like the privileged locus of the revelation of this alternate experience of being in Sartre’s novel, as Roquentin’s apocalyptic fantasies make clear.

On the ontic register this text dissolves strict distinctions between the stuff of nature and the products of human culture and thus rejects untenable conceptions of nature as untouched wilderness, but on the ontological register it conceptualizes nature as something of a universal, as the (almost) invisible yet omnipresent matrix named in Schwartz’s surface and depth model of modernist thought. I call the amorphous nature that appears on this ontological register “nature-being” after Latour’s nature-culture. It anticipates Latour’s hybrid – since it disrupts traditional boundaries between natural and
built environments, organic things and manmade objects, and nature and culture – but it dissolves these distinctions in order to arrive at a transcendental substratum, whereas Latour advances nature-culture as a way of getting beyond such transcendental thinking entirely (thinking which is identifiable with Morton’s “essentialism”). Indeed, Latour would probably still be inclined to position nature-being on the “Nature” side of the great divide. After all, while nature-being is not an untouched place at a remove from civilization, one can still think of it as something of an untouched “non-place” at a remove from the modern reality principle. Likewise, although it offers nothing of the reactionary security of blood and soil, nature-being is still an originary ground of sorts in spite of its cosmopolitanism and radical blankness; this is why the imagination of nature in literary modernism must be distinguished from postmodern accounts that seek to avoid models of depth and their attendant potential for essentialism, regardless of whether this essentialism is seen in a positive or negative light. On the other hand, nature-being is very different from the external, substantialist nature at a remove from “culture” or “society” that Latour’s concept of an erroneous great divide is partly intended to critique; while nature-being is metaphysical in character and perhaps suspiciously “untouched” or

It is important to keep in mind that nature-being can be described as “transcendent” because it underlies all particulars, not because it transcends the material realm entirely (just as it can be described as “essentialist” despite having only negative properties). Max Weber’s account of modernity’s disruption of the “unity of the primitive image of the world, in which everything was concrete magic” and its inauguration of a schism between “rational cognition and mastery over nature” and “‘mystic’ experiences [that] remain the only possible ‘beyond’” applies well enough to the appearance of nature-being in a “world robbed of gods” (282) yet reeling against the former; however, it should again be emphasized that the “beyond” described by Weber is located within a world of groundless facticity that cannot itself be transcended. For Ludwig Wittgenstein, this issueless “limited whole” displaces theistic questions about meaning and purpose with “mystical” wonder at what is (88-89).
“unspoiled” (in the abstract), its capacity to be worked upon and reimagined is more characteristic of a cultural project than an outlying “wilderness” that is forever separate from and recalcitrant toward human endeavours. Speaking generally, one might say that modernist ecology and postmodern theories that deconstruct substantialist nature do not view nature in exactly the same way, but they do not view nature in radically different ways either, especially when, for example, they are both positioned relative to realist nature writing.

**Towards a Modernist Ecocriticism**

Literary modernism’s more general anti-referential aesthetic is of course related to its greater interest in nature-being than lay and realist nature, though it must be kept in mind that modernist experimentation was typically understood by its own producers not in terms of flight from reality but in terms of “higher mimesis,” an attempt to overcome the pitfalls of convention and to develop new artistic forms that might rediscover the world at its most raw, immediate, and unconditioned. However, ecocriticism, at least the version promoted by some of its most prominent scholars – most notably Lawrence Buell – tends towards an environmental realism that is difficult to reconcile with this spirit of rediscovery through aesthetic transmutation, which, according to the paradox of modernist ecology captured in Kandinsky’s letter, sees nature “return” through the assumption of “new forms.” The realist trend in ecocriticism defines itself in opposition to what Buell refers to as the “textual excesses” of poststructuralist theory – a vestige of
ecocriticism’s embattled entry into the academy during the deconstructionist nineties – but it might equally define itself against literary modernism, as it is not easily reconcilable with a movement commonly defined in opposition to realism. In fact, realist ecocriticism versus poststructuralist theory debates are directly analogous to the modernism versus realism debates of the mid-twentieth century, which found definitive expression in Lukács’s dismissal of Adorno’s defense of aesthetic modernism, and his insistence that it represents a harmful obfuscation of the totality of social relations. Like Lukács, many ecocritics would simply dismiss the “obfuscations” of anti-referential literature, and modify their cannons accordingly, while my own position is more akin to Adorno’s insistence that modernism’s “negativity” – the extent to which it resists reification, cancels a historical reality principle, and stimulates the imagination of alternate social and natural worlds – represents a valuable ecological critique of modernity in its own right.

In The Environmental Imagination (1995), Buell suggests that ecocriticism might “succinctly be defined as the study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (430). On the surface this is not a contentious definition, but as Dana Phillips points out, Buell’s emphasis on “commitment” allows him to broadly dismiss the “abstractions” of contemporary theory, which in effect amount to currents in contemporary thought he finds uncongenial to his

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24 A disagreement that is documented in Aesthetics and Politics: Debates Between Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno (1980).
insistence that criticism return to the referential aspects of literature and reunite text and world (584). What is latent in Buell’s definition is explicit in Jay Parini’s earlier and more aggressive remark that ecocriticism “marks a return to activism and social responsibility” signaled by its revitalizing “dismissal of theory’s more solipsistic tendencies” and its “re-engagement with realism, with the actual universe of rocks, trees and rivers that lie behind the wilderness of signs” (cited in Phillips, 576). Buell reaffirms a more carefully qualified version of this stance in his more recent work *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, but the results are equally problematic and Phillips’s critique still applies. Buell suggests that, while literary language cannot simply duplicate the natural world, “it can be bent toward or away from [extratextual landscapes] [And we] can see this in such basic aesthetic decisions as whether or not to foreground local toponymy, vernacularization, and indigenous names for uniquely native species” (33). Much can be said about the vague notion that a text can be “bent toward” the environment, but it is enough to point out that Buell valorizes only those texts that he considers to be more “faithful” to the environment, meaning they ultimately refer back to a realist picture instead of empty ideology; a text to be celebrated is one that shows us what is really growing in a woodland (identified botanically no doubt), what blights are really affecting a bioregion, or what is really contributing to the environmentality of a city neighborhood. One way of situating Buell’s critical position in relation to modernist ecology is to recognize that he accepts the critique of traditional, common sense nature as it pertains to rigidly enforcing a division between natural and human environments, but
that he is not interested in engaging in a modernist critique of the common sense ontology that informs constructions of the urban and natural alike (and understandably so considering his primary commitment to practical environmentalist politics).

Certainly works that advance a workable picture of the environment are of value today and deserve the attention they receive from ecocritics, but Buell’s commitment to praxis leads him to dismiss or ignore works that engage with ecological questions in novel ways, yet are outside the purview of his brand of criticism. He does offer perceptive readings of select modernist works, including Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and Faulkner’s “The Bear,” but he affirms only those novels and poems he can reconcile with what is arguably an essentially anti-modernist critical paradigm originally formulated to discuss non-fictional nature writing; as Phillips caustically puts it, Buell advocates the study of literature that may well be stylistically innovative, yet still allows critics to “play peek-a-boo with a world [they] know is there all along” (592). Phillips further demonstrates the problem of such neo-naturalism in his caricature of Buell’s ecocritic: an ancillary figure who is “reduced to an umpire's role, squinting to see if a given description of a painted trillium or [even] a live oak tree is itself well-painted and lively” (586). If Glenn Love’s much more extreme insistence that the ecocritic defer to science and write in scientific language is also taken into consideration, this umpire is really only able to celebrate the efforts of those in other fields who are better positioned to engage directly in the production of ecological knowledge, while condemning much of experimental art (584). Still, Buell’s groundbreaking work should not be dismissed: he
has progressively corrected the tendency of earlier ecocriticism (including his own work) to focus exclusively on natural environments, and he was among the first to apply ecocriticism to non-fictional prose. Nonetheless, his work gives a good sense of the limitations of ecocriticism that aspires to reconnect with “real,” as opposed to merely “ideological” nature, an unfashionable and in my opinion unnecessary aspiration that has contributed to the marginalization of ecocriticism in the past. It seems to me that literature is uniquely capable of progressively transforming rather than transcending “ideology,” which in the context of this discussion seems to be none other than the historical construction of nature – arguably the only “nature” we can speak of coherently. Buell is right to look to literature to change our perspective of nature and environment, but I maintain that literature need not be referential or realistic to do so – and indeed the pairing of modernist aesthetics and ecocriticism would make little sense were this not the case.

An anti-realist ecocriticism with an historical understanding of nature is required to appreciate the ecology of works like Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and Beckett’s *Molloy*, which on the surface might seem to have little to do with nature. Jonathan Bate prefers to call this kind of criticism *ecopoetics* in order to distinguish it from branches of ecocriticism that are concerned with *ecopolitics* (75). Bate insists that ecopoetics is always implicated in politics, but also insists on a provisional bracketing that will allow literary ecology to be explored without too hastily transforming any given manifestation of it into a coherent political stance – without celebrating modernists as early
environmental crusaders for example, or following Luc Ferry, broadly and peremptorily vilifying “posthuman” experimentation as an inroad to “Nazi Ecology” (91). Bate’s suggestion is to practice ecocriticism with a sense of both the distinction and the relationship between aesthetics and politics (and by extension ontology and politics), which, as political philosopher Stephen White describes, is sometimes predictable but never perfectly linear.\(^{25}\)

This perspective would suggest that we need not look to ecocriticism to celebrate “the pragmatically green” in literature, but rather that ecocriticism should consider how literature can destabilize traditional constructions of humanity and nature and thus might lead (or have already led to) ecologically significant changes in the outlook of its readers. This “weak” version of ecocriticism, to borrow a term from Gianni Vattimo, is useful for reading modernist ecology because it shares its preoccupations – transforming the subject, reimagining dwelling, questioning historical constructions of nature – and asks us to consider the extent to which literary experiments can change individuals and collectivities without blindly exaggerating the influence of literature or assuming a politically didactic position in advance of the inquiry. As White puts it, a “weak” investment in ontological critique necessarily involves “a tentative, experimental aspect” (10) that might frustrate proponents of more politically motivated forms of cultural criticism, yet does not preclude the possibility of a progressive role for such critique. This

ecocriticism also asks us to consider the extent to which modernist literary experiments prefigure environmental concerns without making anachronistic demands of the texts in question: surely the solution to our environmental crisis is not, beknownst only to Beckett critics, buried in the pages of a Beckett novel, but this does not mean there is nothing these pages can teach us today. Likewise, it reminds us that while many modernists may have attempted to reimagine nature this does not make them early “environmentalists,” nor do we need this concept in order to see what is ecological in their aesthetic experiments. Although I draw specifically on Bate and White’s work to make my point here, what I am suggesting is that an ecocriticism sensitive to larger debates surrounding the relationship between aesthetics, ontology, and social change is more promising for theorizing the strengths and weaknesses of modernist ecology as I understand it than other ecocritical approaches, particularly first wave activist ecocriticisms that position themselves against “the abstractions of theory,” and to a lesser extent second wave ecocriticisms that foreground issues of environmental justice but leave behind the “undoubtedly marginal” vagaries of the modernist ontological approach to ecology (which Greg Garrard classifies as “Heideggerian Ecophilosophy” [8]) as they endeavor to chart “the future of environmental criticism” using a pre-established critical language.26

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26 While ecocriticism has struggled for academic legitimacy since its inception, making it over entirely into a relatively familiar discourse of social justice with added awareness of “environmentality” might risk being too acceptable, and more importantly too unchallenging, to critics in other fields, even as it works to create what is arguably a more politically relevant field of study. By bringing together ecocriticism and modernist studies, I aim instead to develop an ecologically sensitive critical approach that remains true to aesthetic modernism’s anti-humanist agenda.
Literary modernism can and should be read ecologically, but the difficulties of doing so make it clear why modernism in general does not really have a high profile as yet in ecocriticism. Some dominant methodological tendencies in ecocriticism are frustrated by antithetical tendencies in modernist ideology and aesthetics, and must be discarded, modified, or carefully historicized when applied to works of cultural modernism. An ecocriticism suitable to modernist ecology has to work through the contradictions of the period and approach texts with an eye to experimental ecologies rather than pragmatic green philosophy. It must follow Bate in celebrating the imagination of new ecologies while remaining aware of the connections and disconnections uniting and dividing ontology and politics. It need not celebrate anything else about individual works of modernism or the modernist period; instead it should aim to go against the grain of revisionist scholarship and present modernist ecology in its genuine historicity before speculating about its status today. And if it is celebratory, it must allow for experiments in modernist ecology to be cautiously affirmed given the dynamics of their own era and only then remapped to suit our own.

Despite the value of environmental justice approaches to ecocriticism, which I do not question (even insofar as they might be applied to modernism) I believe that my approach can provide insights of a different character into important aspects of the history of ecological thought in the early-twentieth century, while also charting new connections between ecological thought and political modernisms, especially fascism (whose ideology, I would argue, is impossible to fully understand from a justice-based approach alone).
Notes on Author Selection and Breakdown of Individual Chapters

I will explore modernist ecology through Yeats, Lawrence, and Beckett because these three modernist figures offer a balance between the expected and the unexpected, the readily apparent and the obscure. Clearly Yeats writes about nature, but it is by no means obvious that his aestheticized Celticism engages in anything recognizable as a coherent ecological critique; Lawrence was appropriated as a saint of sixties counterculture, but the relationship of his ecological critique to some of the more fearsome aspects of cultural modernism needs to be foregrounded if his ecology is to be understood on its own terms; finally, Beckett’s popular characterization as a purveyor of bleak nihilism masks the ecological bent of his experiments in negativity, and makes him seem the least suitable artist in this grouping when he is arguably the most consistently and self-reflexively ecological thinker out of the three.

Alongside Yeats, Lawrence, and Beckett there are, of course, many notable omissions: obviously a discussion of every major modernist is not feasible, and there are numerous absent authors who would have been suitable additions to this study. There are also some seemingly obvious choices that are almost too perfect: Hemingway’s “Big Two Hearted River” from *In Our Time* (1925) for example – with its literal desire to get back to nature in order to convalesce from the wounds inflicted by the violence of modernization – is assimilable to a common sense view of ecology and a realist world picture, something all but impossible with seemingly less apposite works such as
Beckett’s perplexing novel *Watt* (1953). Others are an imperfect fit: while William Carlos Williams, for instance, is consistently concerned with the fate of nature in the twentieth century, his borderline positivism and valorization of the local and particular seem to exclude him from my discussion, as it runs contrary to the idea of metaphysical nature.\(^27\)

It is also worth mentioning that the most glaring omission here is undoubtedly the work of Virginia Woolf, whose novels, as several critics have already pointed out, work to establish an aestheticized ecofeminism that I would read as a variant of the broader ideology I have associated with modernist ecology.\(^28\) My omission of Woolf is attributable first and foremost to time constraints, and secondly to the context of this relative wealth of preexisting ecocritical scholarship on Woolf, something that, as I indicated above, is rather unusual for a modernist writer. Although I could not discuss Woolf at length in this essay, I hope to reconsider my critical framework in relation to Woolf’s novels and non-fiction in a future article or amendment. Of particular interest is Woolf’s adaptation of the non-substantialist ontology characteristic of modernist ecology.

\(^27\) For more on William’s positivism see Mao’s *Solid Objects* (231-255).

to a feminist critique of fascism, a position that would respond particularly well to my discussion of the meeting of fascist and ecological themes in Lawrence’s novels.

Although each chapter outlined below focuses on one or several modernists who fit my critical framework exceptionally well – with their own particular variations and departures of course – I have organized my chapters around major themes that are also present in the work of modernist authors to whom I could not give close attention in this study, such as Woolf, Pound, Stevens, H. D., and many more.

Chapter One: “W. B. Yeats and (the impossibility of) Ecological Politics”

This chapter starts by discussing Yeats’s attempt to mobilize Celticism in order to promote a new vision of humanity and nature in his early revivalist work. He defines this early vision in opposition to instrumental materialism, which for Yeats was a damnably “English” metaphysics whose hegemony in Ireland was a colonial legacy to be rejected. Despite the anti-colonial resonance of his reading of “English” materialism, I complicate readings of Yeats as an Irish nationalist by emphasizing the “cosmopolitan” ecology of his modernist critique. My discussion is framed throughout by Bate’s assertion of the non-identity of politics and ecopoetics; Yeats negotiated the divide between politics and ecopoetics in different ways during different stages of his career, but for the most part vigorously maintained the necessity of the distinction in order to avoid the appropriation of his ecological vision. His later aristocratic assertions of the autonomy of art, which I read through ecopoetics, are enabling but also starkly limiting in the final analysis, and
offer insight into the effectuality of modernist ecology as a project of societal and
civilizational reform.

Chapter Two: “Posthumanism and Fascist Ecology in the Novels of D. H. Lawrence”

This chapter begins by discussing Lawrence’s *Women in Love* (1920) as an ecological
critique, then traces his increasing interest in authoritarian political expressions of
modernist ecology through the so-called “leadership novels,” especially *Kangaroo* (1923)
and *The Plumed Serpent* (1926). My discussion of Lawrence focuses most directly on the
relationship between modernist ecological critique and the politics of fascism, especially
Nazism, and draws on recent developments in the study of this relationship, most
importantly Roger Griffin’s *Modernism and Fascism* (2007). Griffin’s loose distinction
between what he terms “programmatic” and “epiphanic” modernisms frames this chapter;
while the latter remains bound by the limitations of the aesthetic and accepts change of
“spiritual kind with no revolutionary, epoch-making designs on ‘creating a new world’”
(63) the latter “expresses itself as a mission to change society, to inaugurate a new epoch
... and projects the transformation of social realities and political systems” (62). Though
Lawrence was for a period clearly attracted to programmatic modernism of an
authoritarian character – what I term “fascist ecology” – I argue that he ultimately
retreated from programmatic conceptions of modernist ecology in his last major novel,
*Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), because of the contradictions and impasses his always
equivocal investment in fascist ecology provoked. In order to navigate Lawrence’s work,
I look to the writings of Alain Badiou and Luc Ferry to help theorize the relationship between modernist ecology and fascist ecology, which, though easily conflated for reasons I will make clear, are ultimately not compatible in spite of the former’s aforementioned propensity to be appropriated and warped by reactionary political discourses.

Chapter Three: “Samuel Beckett and the Ecology of Negation”

This chapter turns to Beckett’s late-modernism of the nineteen-fifties – specifically his so-called *Trilogy* comprised of *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951), and *The Unamable* (1953), as well as the early novel *Watt* (composed during the 1930s and published in 1953) – and locates an anti-realist, anti-authoritarian version of modernist ecology in these works. I suggest that Beckett’s resistance to realism can be interpreted through his contemporary Marcuse, whose work suggests that the modern reality principle can be challenged through attention to a non-instrumental “aesthetic dimension” that has no respect for its reifications. This discussion serves as a suitable coda to my essay because Beckett’s *Trilogy* is something of an allegory for modernist ecology: it deconstructs the subject/object binary, looks to what his character Moran calls “the spray of phenomena” (111) rather than to realist or lay nature, and suggests that reconciliation with the non-human is dependent on establishing a modernist language and non-dualistic ontology. Yet the darkness and gloom of Beckett’s work also complicates my theoretical framework and poses new questions about the nature of modernism, questions I attempt to answer by way of dialogue with Morton’s critique of ecocriticism in *Ecology Without Nature*. Lastly,
while Beckett’s anti-authoritarian tendencies clearly speak to his position as a late-modernist writing with acute awareness of the potentially disastrous consequences of political modernism, a common way of contextualizing his work, I also suggest reading his valorization of weakness, ignorance, and failure as a sign of his parallel awareness of the stark limitations of modernist ecological critique in the ecopoetic or “epiphanic” mode, an awareness, I argue, that is something of a strength in its own right.
Works Cited


Chapter One:

W. B. Yeats and the (impossibility of) Ecological Politics

When W. B. Yeats’s interest in nature is taken seriously – when it is not, for example, mistakenly identified as incompatible with his early yearning for spiritual transcendence or his late desire to escape into a world of artifice – it becomes possible to trace many of his seemingly inconsistent personae back to this investment in nature, and to understand the impossible predicaments it tends to generate. Yeats seems like a fit subject for the essential discourses in ecocriticism as they are sketched out by Greg Garrard in his handbook to the critical idiom, and certainly many articles and books have touched on Yeats’s relationship to the natural world from a variety of perspectives and have drawn divergent conclusions about what kind of nature, if any, was important for Yeats and why. If there is an incipient “ecocritic’s Yeats” prepared to gain currency it is because many of his works are pastorals that seem to reinscribe locality and “place” over the universalized “space” of modernity, while others point to the “pollutions” of industrial capitalism and mechanical philosophy and descry forgetfulness of primordial nature,

29 See Garrard’s Ecocriticism (2004). This critical companion distinguishes between a number of essential ecocritical discourses (among which are the discourses of “apocalypse,” “pollution,” “pastoral,” and “dwelling” I reference here).
even as they predict the coming of a new age. However, while Yeats’s works are clearly ecologically sensitive to some degree, the criticism of the last ten years suggests that his failures as a critic of modernization are simply too glaring to call for a revisionist celebration under the banner of ecocriticism: his pastoralism obscures social injustices and remains largely ignorant of the actual living conditions of the Irish peasantry; his reinscription of place and particularity is reactionary, even dangerously proximate to the blood and soil ideologies of fascism; his apocalyptic concern with spiritual pollution is ultimately a mystification detached from, and even hostile to, the practical concerns of his modernizing Ireland. These now familiar critical readings of Yeats’s life and work are still revealing, yet demand re-examination if his manner of thinking ecologically is to be fully understood, especially since his apparent political failures are often a consequence, though perhaps not a necessary consequence, of his modernist attempt to foreground the capacity of nature-being – and the art that rediscovers and heralds it – to effect a species of revolutionary change with genealogical ties to today’s radical ecology.

Yeats’s transformation of the English pastoral into a folk-influenced “Celtic” pastoral, for example, is deeply problematic from the standpoint of social and political realism,30 but the same tendency towards metaphysical abstraction that separates the

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30 Many critics have told a version of the same basic narrative about Yeats: he first made use of the peasant class in creating a mythic version of agrarian life that was intended to have instructional value for a largely urban audience, then scorned the “real” peasantry when, as Seamus Deane suggests, this class and its values could not be assimilated to the fictional Ireland he had created and its pro-ascendancy, even fascist agenda (Deane 38). Despite the problematic nature of his treatment of the peasant class, Deborah Fleming, for one, argues that “If [Yeats]
Celtic pastoral from the actual lives of the peasantry allows Yeats to issue a profound challenge to hegemonic modern institutions – especially philosophical positivism, instrumental materialism, rationalism, and economic liberalism – which for Yeats are ecologically calamitous and damnably “English” inasmuch as he viewed British colonial rule as “the engine by which modernity had reached Ireland” (Moses 565). Indeed, it is this very tendency towards metaphysical abstraction that allows Yeats to open up a para-political space that offers a position from which to critique these institutions without simply reproducing their terms, a space that is at first associated with the buried but preserved wellspring of Celticism, then with cosmopolitan occultism, and finally with Yeats’s own modernist assertion of the autonomy of art and the ambiguous standing of this doctrine with regard to effective action in the public sphere.

Jonathan Bate’s name for the para-political space Yeats negotiates throughout his career is “ecopoetics.” To reiterate the terms of my introduction, ecopoetics are ecological in the sense that they “work upon consciousness” (Bate 23), articulate the relationship between internal and external worlds (251), and generally reimagine “what it might be like to live differently on the earth” (251). Bate’s conception of ecopoetics is useful when considering Yeats’s work since his commitment to ecological change is resolutely metaphysical, and can easily be misperceived as empty mysticism or an aestheticized the peasants’ experience, [he] did so in order to revolutionalize all of Irish society with timeless traditions and so radically alter that society at a period of momentous change” (43). In Haunted English: The Celtic Fringe, the British Empire, and De-Anglicization (2006) Laura O’Connor discusses this problem on the level of language, detailing Yeats’s struggle to overcome the reigning “English symbolic order” (xii).
attempt to escape nature altogether by critics who, from this perspective, themselves reify the philosophical institutions of “English” modernity, and thus preemptively deny the efficacy of ecopoetics as a catalyst for ecological change. For Bate, environmental politics are forced to participate in exoteric public discussions of the natural world and are therefore compelled to accept such reifications in order to garner mainstream support and to project a sense of temperance and legitimacy; conversely, the provisional autonomy of ecopoetics allows for esoteric ontological experiments that affect the public sphere in indirect and often unpredictable ways (23). The autonomy of ecopoetics is provisional because, while it must remain distinct from politics to effectively imagine ecological possibilities that exceed their imaginative potential, it can never be fully separated from politics (for reasons that require no explanation here) and is thus perpetually drawn into a public sphere whose pragmatic terms and practical limitations it rejects in favour of the ideal of revolutionary metaphysical change.

Yeats’s well known lyric poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (1892), for example, envisions a literal return to nature in the form of a simpler, more rustic life removed from the “the pavements grey” (39, 11), but more importantly seeks to imagine a way of being characterized by a closer, more receptive relationship to nature. While Innisfree is of course a real geographical location, in the poem the peaceful ambience of the island

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32 For a detailed critical analysis of this compromise see “The Environmentalists’ Dilemma” in Neil Evernden’s classic work of ecocriticism The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment (1985). For an extended alarmist condemnation of “romantic,” “anti-Enlightenment,” “Nazi” ecology see Luc Ferry’s The New Ecological Order (1992), which I discuss in the next chapter.
comes to represent an entire mode of existence that is unrealized in the present and therefore confined to fantasy. The poem encourages the reader to answer to the yearning of “the deep heart’s core” (39, 12) and to imaginatively depart from the drab, alienating lifeworld of the modern city – which is here figurative of detachment from nature more generally – and to pursue the ideal captured in the image of the idyllic island. While the poem is not political in any direct sense, what seems like a purely escapist condemnation of modernity is closely aligned with Yeats’s ecological project to realize a “Celtic” form of modernity, a project with anti-colonial and nationalist reverberations. By calculatingly presenting its vision as an ontological one “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” asserts its relative independence from politics, but this very gesture gives the poem a peculiar form of political resonance that could not be secured otherwise. While similarly straightforward ecopoetic readings fit much of Yeats’s earlier work, his more mature work complicates matters, posing difficult questions about the viability of the esoteric kind of metaphysically inflected ecological change incanted in this earlier poem.

Although Bate associates ecopoetics primarily with romanticism, I have suggested that it also shares a special kinship – arguably even more of a kinship – with modernist aesthetics: both blur the boundary between politics and ontology while also demarcating it, both demand autonomy from politics but are inevitably drawn into politics, and both marry virility in the imaginative realm with relative impotence in the public sphere (to invoke the masculinist language of Yeats’s own work). And even among the modernists Yeats stands out as a figure uniquely obsessed with exploring the potential of ecopoetic
experimentation and the indirect, perplexing, and for Yeats ultimately frustrating relationship between art (with its need for autonomy and inevitable frustration with autonomy) and actual political reform. This chapter examines Yeats’s poetry, prose, and drama, charting his negotiation of ecopoetics through the three phases of his career sketched above and his various ways of conceptualizing and realizing its potential for different kinds of reform. The advantage of this approach is that it allows for an understanding of Yeats’s ecology that does not simply equate it with his politics and “expose” it as the mystified expression of a set of purely reactionary political convictions, while also foregrounding the extent to which his often questionable politics are undeniably (if not linearly) an outgrowth of his ecology. This chapter argues that Yeats’s ecological convictions remained strong throughout his career despite its significant vicissitudes – including his seeming abandonment of his early ecological vision and retreat into a sometimes magnanimous, sometimes embittered cult of heroic artistry and tragic failure that seems far removed from the pastoralism of the early works – and that his complex predicament, its expression wavering between romantic hope and defeatist exasperation, is paradigmatic of the predicament of the ecological modernist.
Politics, Poetics, and the Celtic Pastoral

Wherever men have tried to imagine a perfect life, they have imagined a place where men plough and sow and reap, not a place where there are great wheels turning and great chimneys vomiting smoke

- Speech in New York (1903)\

Surely if one goes far enough into the woods, one will find there all that one is seeking?

- “The Celtic Element in Literature” (1897)

The artists and ethnographers of the Celtic revival, as Deborah Fleming argues, were pastoralists who attempted to create a national identity for modern Ireland by fictionalizing its “premodern” folk culture and (rapidly changing) agrarian landscape. The revivalists, along with many of their contemporaries in politics, appealed to a renewed version of a longstanding pastoral ideal that maintained considerable influence in Irish public life, an ideal Maurice Goldring names “Green Ireland” (Fleming 46). The first epigraph to this section makes clear that Yeats was willing to appeal to this agrarian ideal without his characteristic equivocation and subtlety, and it would not be inaccurate to suggest that it informs most of his work to some degree. However, his own pastoralism is generally much more complex and much less politically transparent than the reactionary fantasies of revivalists like Standish O’Grady. Its “Celtic” interpretation of

\[33\] Quoted in Fleming (pg. 113).
the pastoral, one might say, is more evocative of the symbolist woods of the second epigraph than of the agrarian idyll of the first, though certainly there is a close connection between the two. Yeats’s purpose in recovering folktales and mythologies was not straightforwardly to valorize peasant life and to offer its charming proximity to nature as an alternative to life in modern cities with their “great chimneys vomiting smoke,” but to resist the “English” metaphysics which, for Yeats, prepared the way for the smoke of industry by creating spiritually damaging reifications capable of eclipsing the originary power of “Celtic” nature. For Yeats aesthetic realism is closely associated with these English metaphysics, and as such he refuses to reproduce their terms on the level of representation – by offering, for example, a realistic depiction of the plight of the peasantry and its culture. The political failures of Yeats’s aesthetic are, as I have already suggested, in this sense inexorably linked to its attempt to issue an ecological critique with strengths and weaknesses that are consequences of its resistance to conventional modes of representation and, relatedly, conventional modes of political discourse.

The stakes of Yeats’s appropriation of Celticism to advance an ontological rather than a social vision for Ireland are clear in his early essay “The Celtic Element in Literature” (1897), which both challenges and reaffirms the Celtic stereotypes that had been previously reinforced by non-Irish writers in Ernest Renan’s *The Poetry of the Celtic Races* (1859) and Matthew Arnold’s *The Study of Celtic Literature* (1867). Despite subtle differences in their portrayals, Renan and Arnold both understand the Celts to be a race of poetic dreamers, close to nature and in revolt against “the despotism of fact”
(Arnold, quoted in Yeats 173); yet while they are said to possess a genius for imagination and passion, the Celts correspondingly lack the Anglo-Saxon empirical sense and aptitude for governance. This racist framework, as Gregory Castle puts it, consigns “the Celtic people to a realm of magic naturalism that is at the farthest remove from cultural and political power” (49) and justifies English rule over this beautiful but anarchic people. Arnold’s affectionate, paternalistic account of the Celt suggests that the Celtic imagination is a perfect *supplement* to an England that is fortuitously dominated by materialism and politics, but is perhaps in need of greater sensitivity and artistic appreciation. In other words, Celtic “natural magic” (Yeats, “Celtic Element” 176) is valuable as long it offers up its dreams without compromising English political power or the instrumentalist orientation that undergirds it, something that is basically foreclosed as a possibility in advance by the terms of Arnold’s discussion.

Yeats accepts Renan and Arnold’s terms for the most part – he also casts the English as practical and materialistic and the Celts as imaginative and idealistic – but he sees Celtic natural magic as superior to materialism, and is not inclined to accept an ancillary role for the Celtic imagination under otherwise hegemonic English institutions. In 1897 Yeats believed that the Celtic revival genuinely had the potential to contest the ascendancy of positivism and instrumental materialism and to usher in a new era: it was a “fountain of legends,” “a new intoxication for the imagination of the world” (“Celtic Element” 187). “The Celtic Element in Literature” argues that the Celtic sensibility is not a racial trait but a spiritual outlook and corresponding orientation towards the natural
world. Yeats claims that Arnold’s essentialism prevented him from seeing that “‘natural magic’ is but the ancient religion of the world, the ancient worship of Nature and that troubled ecstasy before her, that certainty of all beautiful places being haunted, which is brought into men’s minds” (176). If for Arnold natural magic was the relatively useless yet beautiful product of a doomed, feminized race – a pleasant but more or less unnecessary complement to industrialized England’s more masculine kind of production – for the early Yeats it signifies an antithetical mode of existence with the potential to explode the English institutions with which it must inevitably clash. Although according to Yeats’s disenchantment narrative English modernity suppressed the originary power of “natural magic” in favour of a cold system of “weight and measure” (178) that enabled it to achieve dominance over humanity and nature, the ancient tradition is dormant rather than dead and will be reawakened in the twentieth century. In “The Autumn of the Body” (1898) Yeats imagined this reawakening as the disintegration of the historical construction of the physical and objective, an “exfoliation of the concrete” (Gorski 24) that would prepare the way for a new understanding of nature-being yet would also represent a return to ancient wisdom.

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34 As I will explain further on, Yeats’s folk and occult language is something of a “Magic” analogue for the philosophical language I outlined in the introduction to this paper; he often uses transcendental language to discuss concepts which might appear in the writings of Bergson or Bradley in a materialist mould (“nature-being,” as I have defined it, is one such concept). My sense of Yeats as an artist concerned with “metaphysical” nature and opposed to English “materialism” should not be taken to suggest that he locates nature in a world beyond the physical, even if Yeats’s language and symbolism would sometimes suggest the opposite. To use Marjorie Howe’s concept, I understand Yeats’s folk and occult language to be a “technology”
Yeats’s aspiration for change is not conventionally political, but it is nationalist and anticolonial in the abstract; the “filthy modern tide” of Bacon, Locke, and Newton is seen to dominate Ireland in a kind of metaphysical colonialism that compliments English economic exploitation and military coercion. However, in spite of the familial relationship between these faces of English domination, the metaphysical stands out as the most significant for the early Yeats, inasmuch as he sees the Celtic apprehension of reality as the only viable avenue for Irish emancipation – an independent Ireland cast in a materialistic mould would still be a colonized Ireland in the most important respects. This stance invites comparison to contemporary deep ecology, which insists that ecological change requires a kind of “collective subjective” change and therefore cannot be realized by policy making alone. Yeats’s stance is more extreme in that he insists that ecological change, here conflated with decolonization, cannot come about as a result of policy making at all, nor can it arise out of radical emancipatory politics that are not authentically Celtic. The metaphysical is privileged, for example, in “The Two Trees,” a poem that contrasts a subjective, enchanted way of seeing with the ultimately dissatisfying rational intellect – “the bitter glass” (49, 40) – and the world of “barrenness” (49, 29) it inevitably engenders. The alternative to the bitter glass is the visionary “dreaming wisdom” (23) offered to Fergus in “King Fergus and the Druid” which seems to exceed the political in revolutionary potential even as it appears, as Fergus learns,

(84) that allows him to create an esoteric discourse and to organize its terms more so than a belief structure.

35 I borrow this phrase from his late poem “The Statues” (1938).
insubstantial or unreal by comparison. Thus, given his valuation of the importance of “spirit” over the solidified abstractions of matter, when Yeats associated himself with the revolutionaries in “To Ireland in the Coming Times” he was not merely casting himself in the secondary role of poet laureate of the nationalist movement, but was casting himself in the indispensable role of the Celtic bard, the cultural alchemist who could – by way of a process that defies any clear distinction between the literal and the figurative – transform modern Ireland back into “A Druid land” (32). In “The Song of the Happy Shepherd” the speaker suggests that while in the modern world “The woods of Arcady are dead,/And over is their antique joy” (7, 1-2), it is imperative to resist the cold “optic glass” (8, 29-30) and to realize that in “dreaming” lies the germ of destiny (8, 56). Poetic “words” (8, 43) are necessary to reimagine a golden age that now can be reclaimed only through visionary art and its effect on consciousness.

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36 Yeats’s language can also be confusing where the concept of “abstraction” is concerned. His Celtic pastoral is more abstract than naturalism since it abstracts from habits of thought that reify nature into a congeries of external objects. However, for Yeats (as for Heidegger and Adorno) the Enlightenment is the prime purveyor of “abstraction” since it hypostasizes its own intellectual products and comes to identify them with nature itself, which is in actuality both more concrete (more irreducibly or “horrifically” present) and more abstract (more resistant to reification, more formless) than Victorian science, for example, would indicate. Yeats’s contempt for abstraction was not limited to its consequences for nature; he disliked the democratic abstractions of the French revolution – “equality” for example – for their failure to acknowledge the superior imaginative capabilities possessed by figures like artist-bards. This is an example of Yeats’s valuation of ontological change interfacing with his elitist politics, a dynamic I will discuss further on.

37 In “Ireland and the Arts” (1901), Yeats conflates Celticism and the artistic temperament: “The arts have failed; fewer people are interested in them every generation. The mere business of living, of making money, of amusing oneself, occupies people more and more, and makes them less and less capable of the difficult art of appreciation ... We who care deeply about the arts find ourselves the priesthood of an almost forgotten faith, and we must, I think, if we would win the people again, take upon ourselves the method and the fervour of the priesthood” (203).
Yeats’s early work endeavours to offer such dreaming wisdom. It draws heavily on Irish folklore to invoke a world that is romantic and pastoral but not devoid of a fearsome element that differentiates its aesthetic from Wordsworthian love of nature or the English Arcadian pastoral. In Yeats’s early poetry the estranging aspect of Celtic mythology is its power – it is synonymous with its radical departure from the dull familiarity of disenchanted Newtonian nature. What is feral and strange in a figure like King Goll, for example, who rejects mundane political power in favour of pre-civilized life in the wilderness, is also what makes him a commanding signifier of alternate possibilities. Even the Sidhe, who threaten humans with dissolution and death, promise rebirth inasmuch as they offer deliverance from the quotidian and flight into the numinous, wild, and uncharted. Poems such as “Who goes with Fergus?,” “Fergus and the Druid,” “The Stolen Child,” “The Hosting of the Sidhe,” “The Madness of King Goll,” and “The Song of Wandering Aengus” are fables of liberation, yet the fearsome, mysterious, or elusive nature they depict is also a source of torment. This nature’s absence of positive qualities makes it a deconstructive power more so than a totality of natural objects and creatures. In “Fergus and the Druid,” as William Gorksi suggests, this deconstructive power “transforms Fergus's consciousness ... so that he perceives that Being is not possession of the self but pervades all time and space” (49), but this knowledge does not correspond to any clear course of action in the world and thus renders him “passive” (50). It also isolates him, since the knowledge he gleans from the Druid’s bag of dreams is hermetic in nature and can scarcely be communicated at all,
much less communicated to all. The poem can thus be taken to affirm Celtic nature’s capacity to deconstruct English metaphysics and alter consciousness, but also to register doubts about the effect of consciousness on the world that “the declamatory stance of [Yeats’s] essays disallowed” (70).

Yeats’s interest in Faeryland, as Castle argues, was not just an “enabling metaphor” but actually corresponded to real (or potentially real) “states of consciousness” (58), even if he harboured doubts as to their transformative potential given that they were easily overlooked. In the early play The Land of Heart’s Desire (1894), for example, Yeats’s protagonist Maurteen Bruin yearns to be free of her banal domestic life and looks to the woods for salvation, which comes in the form of a Sidhe child who takes her away to Faeryland, leaving her physical body behind (43). Maurteen’s rebirth requires the negation of the quotidian world and, through the optics of her family and priest, appears as death. Yet for the pagan traditions Yeats’s draws upon, death is not a terminus but a transformation of form; the death of Maurteen’s body marks the death of her ego and her passage into a form of consciousness that is not accessible within her family’s (and the audience’s) historically conditioned conceptual horizon. The motif of transformation is central to the play: the emergence of the Sidhe child from the woods is evocative of Yeats’s later approving citation of Mallarmé’s anti-realist aesthetic, for which it is

38 This motif also appears in “The Heart of the Spring” in The Secret Rose. In this story a wise man prepares to go away with the Sidhe after a life of meditation. While in one sense he simply dies – his apprentice finds his body after certain ritual preparations have been made – a joyously singing bird outside the hermitage signals his transformation into a non-human form (39-40).
imperative to evoke “the horror of the forest or the silent thunder in the leaves, not the intense dense wood of the trees” (“Autumn” 193), in other words, to resist reification in order to revitalize perception. Like many of Yeats’s early poems, *The Land of Heart’s Desire* uses folklore to explore the “maddening” possibility of an intertwined metamorphosis of humanity and nature while registering the reservations and cultural resistances that haunt this desire. Yeats’s preference for Celtic paganism over Christianity as a symbolic system was partly rooted in his conviction that monotheism was inherently ecologically destructive; 39 Ireland, however, had a unique opportunity to shed Christian influence, since “the old religion which made of the coming and going of the greenness of the woods and of the fruitfulness of the fields a part of its worship, lives side by side with the new religion which would trample nature as a serpent under its feet” (quoted in Mattar 70). The fact that the peasantry and middle-class alike clung to Catholicism and remained recalcitrant to Yeats’s fantasy of Celtic Ireland became a major hurdle and ultimately a source of embitterment.

Yeats’s preoccupation with phantasms on the fringes of perception – the incorporeal Sidhe or King Goll’s fluttering beech leaves – and his emphasis on their capacity to change the perceiving subject is ecological in the romantic modernist sense, and can be contrasted with, for example, the concrete primitivism of J. M. Synge’s *The Riders to the Sea* (1904), which locates ecological virtue in the reduced and difficult way

39 Lynn White Jr. famously made the same assertion years later in his influential paper “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” (1967).
of life of the Aran peasantry rather than in a figurative wilderness.\textsuperscript{40} Correspondingly, Yeats’s primitivism tends to emphasize the superior capacity of premodern people to connect with the “oceanic,” the world as it appears in light of “the dissolution of the boundaries between subject and object, between all conceived and conceivable polarities” (Torgovnick 18), to a much greater degree than Synge’s. His romantic modernism is also antithetical to eighteenth and nineteenth century “picturesque” accounts of nature that assume the perceiver’s distance from his objects of perception, and thus a fundamental distinction between nature and consciousness rather than a chiasmic intertexture of inside and outside. As Bate argues in \textit{The Song of the Earth} (2000), by separating subject and object, the naturalist aesthetics of “picturesque” art deny subjectivity’s role in the creation of nature and thus its capacity to effect metaphysical change; however enchanted or sublime a given natural landscape may be for the picturesque tourist, its total externalization represses the extent to which its historical incarnation is partly a human projection and the consequences that follow from any given projection a human responsibility (155). In “The Autumn of the Body” Yeats calls for a struggle “against that picturesque and declamatory way of writing, against that ‘externality’ which a time of scientific and political thought has brought into literature” (189) and associates it with the failure of science to grasp the essence of nature (193); in “The Symbolism of Poetry”

\textsuperscript{40} The more mimetic \textit{Riders to the Sea} is included in a survey of “modern eco-drama” compiled by Lawrence Buell in \textit{The Future of Environmental Criticism} (48) while, unsurprisingly, no play by Yeats is included. Synge’s account of the difficult lives of the Aran Islanders is no less “modernist,” but belongs to and critiques a discourse of anthropological primitivism which is ultimately secondary to Yeats’s ecology (Fleming 139). For comprehensive accounts of both men’s engagement with anthropology and primitivism see Mattar’s \textit{Primitivism, Science and the Irish Revival} and Fleming’s “\textit{A Man Who Does Not Exist}.”
(1900) he identifies England as a place “where journalists are more powerful and ideas less plentiful than elsewhere” (154) and approvingly quotes Arthur Symon’s contemptuous account of writers who try “to build brick and mortar inside the covers of a book” (155). While his nineteenth century naturalist predecessors were also preoccupied with nature, for Yeats their failure to understand the importance of art in creating the kind of consciousness that can perceive “the horror of the forest” made their art oppressive and stifling, inimical to metaphysical change.42

Ecopoetics Nationalized: The Trouble with *Cathleen ni Houlihan*

The language of Yeats’s Celtic pastoral consistently opposes (English) materialism/politics to (Celtic) nature/spiritual metamorphosis. This deliberately cultivated distinction, however, is experimentally dissolved in Yeats’s most overtly nationalist work *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), in which, collaborating with Lady Gregory, he attempted to unify his vision of metaphysical change with mainstream political nationalism.

In terms supplied by Yeats’s later prophetic work *A Vision* (1925), the play concerns a young man, Michael Gillane, and his metamorphosis from primary to

41 Yeats’s use of the word “essence” recalls Morton’s distinction between substantialist accounts of nature, those which suggest that nature is an external thing or set of things, and essentialist accounts, those which suggests that nature is an “abstract principle that transcends the material realm and even the realm of representation” rather than something “palpable and there” (16).

42 The 1910 poem “The Realists” directly satirizes the conservatism of realism, suggesting that it remains bound to the *status quo* and incapable of awakening the imagination to new possibilities.
antithetical consciousness after hearing the call of a poor old woman who is later revealed to be Cathleen ni Houlihan, the mythic personification of Mother Ireland. Cathleen’s call makes Michael’s material negotiation of his upcoming marriage appear irrelevant to him and gives him “the look of a man that has got the touch” (27). As Yeats explains in his note to “The Hosting of the Sidhe” (1899), “the touch” refers to the “magical sleep” (213) brought on by the call of the Sidhe; however, here supernatural enchantment is identified with the nationalist call for violent collective action in the name of Irish sovereignty. Michael’s family tries to stop him from joining the French supported Irish uprising, but, as his father realizes, he is lost to another world and will not return (27). Michael is different than Maurteen despite his departure from quotidian affairs: rather than quietly disappearing into the Celtic twilight, he transforms into a violent, sacrificial Irish hero, one capable of hearing Cathleen’s call and unselfishly offering his blood for her regeneration (28). His is a more directly politicized dissolution of the boundaries of subjectivity: instead of merging with deterritorialized Celtic nature, Michael merges with the material body of Ireland and her four “beautiful green fields” (23) (which correspond to Ireland’s traditional regions). His “mother” Cathleen is nature-being nationalized – she effaces the distinction between Celtic nature and the Irish nation, demanding more than Celtic consciousness alone.

_Cathleen ni Houlihan_ is significant because it gives the Celtic pastoral a clear political agenda and mobilizes ecopoetics – which for Bate must remain felicitously distinct from politics – for the most violent nationalist purposes. While the anticolonial
vision of Yeats’s early work operates on the level of perception (or imagination),
*Cathleen* lends his bardic voice to the promotion of violent action in the “mundane” world.⁴³ There is an inconsistency here that Yeats would ascertain shortly after the play’s production: by appealing to violent action rather than the creative imagination to enact radical change, he admitted the equal or superior capacity of politics to effect the kind of metaphysical change he had previously opposed to the political altogether. Nonetheless, the play is revolutionary in that it disavows constitutional politics; in Ferrall’s terms, it makes an “avant-garde” attempt to “reintegrate art into the praxis of life” (4) and seems to realize art’s capacity to effect political change by altering consciousness. Yet, for Yeats, the consequence of entering into the political arena was that the aspect of change he valued most was reduced to a means to an end for nationalists who accepted his play as a useful dramatization of the ideology motivating their actions (Cullingford 52). Yeats’s intent with *Cathleen* was to unify his esoteric vision with exoteric political action. However, exoteric political action was supposed to be a *tool* for realizing his esoteric vision; the problem with the play was that its reception as a work of immense political utility inverted the intended equation – the esoteric vision was used as a tool to promote political action, and, for Yeats, its ecological dimension was lost in the process.

⁴³ Compare the nationalism of *Cathleen*, for example, with the poem “Into the Twilight” (published in 1899), which is nationalist inasmuch as it celebrates the imaginary “mystical brotherhood/Of sun and moon and hollow wood/And river stream” (10-11, 59) that animates “mother Eire” (5, 59) but otherwise contains no direct imperative to action. The call in this poem is to a kind of meditation rather than violent self-assertion.

⁴⁴ My discussion reflects my acceptance of Ferrall’s contention that the avant-garde impulse was already harboured in the doctrine of aesthetic autonomy and therefore cannot be neatly distinguished from modernism (Ferrall 5).
Shortly after the play’s first staging Yeats reacted to its public reception, insisting that patriotism was a natural, uncalculated by-product of all visionary Irish art while deploiring the kind of propagandistic appropriation of Irish creativity which “sought in the artist only a public relations officer” (55). For the rest of his career Yeats would be acutely aware of the uses to which his mythologies could be put, and would be critical of the appropriation of his works by “philistine” nationalists with little understanding of their greater meaning for Ireland and civilization at large; the idea that he now had to protect his work from the public as much as he had to reach them with its message would change his conception of the ecological artist’s role significantly.

Another problem with Cathleen was that, while it failed to communicate the imperative of metaphysical change, it succeeded in helping to create what was for Yeats a politics of pseudo-revolutionary violence which, ironically, only furthered the eclipse of Celtic nature. The play’s rejection of the domestic concord of the day to day affairs of the home in favour of martyrdom is, as Moses points out, also a rejection of modern bourgeois comedy in favour of the intoxicated zeal of ancient Dionysian tragedy (562). But here Dionysian ecstasy – which is usually equated with the breakdown of all ontic distinctions and social mores in the face of an overpowering, oceanic nature – is harnessed to political ends, whereas in previous works, even more ostensibly nationalist

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45 “Pseudo” according to Yeats’s valuation of metaphysical change, that is.
46 Nietzsche’s treatise on Attic tragedy The Birth of Tragedy (1872), a major influence on modernist aesthetics and on Yeats in particular, advances this view of nature. For Nietzsche, as for Schopenhauer, Dionysian ecstasy collapses the principium individuationis – the principle that distinguishes discrete forms and allows for perception of causality – and reveals beneath it a “mysterious primordial unity” (37).
works, it was opposed to them. For the ancient Greeks (or at least for their modern interpreters) the tragic wisdom of the Dionysian wilderness and the demands of the polis were irreconcilable, and the attempt to impose the logic of one domain on the other could only result in disaster. Unlike King Goll, who accepts his exile from the responsibility of rule as the cost of his entry into the world of dreams, Cathleen is an embodiment of the reconciliation and seamless fusion of the two domains. Ferrall suggests that this play represents an early attempt on Yeats’s part to dissolve the antinomies characteristic of his early work by aestheticizing politics, an experiment he would not repeat until his brief flirtation with fascism in the thirties (23). To translate Walter Benjamin’s phrase into its ecocritical analogue, the play too hastily collapsed the gulf between ecopoetics and programmatic politics, compromising the fragile autonomy of the former. The result was that “authentic” Celticism was subordinated to politics and an “inauthentic” version of Celticism was enabled as a promoter of violence – violence which, for Yeats, was potentially senseless inasmuch as it could likely never realize relevant reform yet helped foment “a kind of life denying hatred” (27) masked as heroic sacrifice. Howes has also shown how Yeats’s anxiety over Cathleen was linked to his reinterpretation of her hypnotic allure; initially a figure representing a lauded form of sacrificial collectivity, Yeats came to see her as a figure of the dangerous and misdirected fanaticism of the mob.

47 In Euripides’s Bacchae King Pentheus’s attempt to impose the logic of the polis on the Dionysian maenads results in his dismemberment, registering the incompatibility of quotidian life with the dissolution of the boundaries of form.
48 In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) Benjamin famously defined fascism as “the introduction of aesthetics into political life” (243).
49 In “The Circus Animal’s Desertion” (1939) Yeats looks back on Cathleen’s enslavement to “fanaticism and hate” (22, 347) with regret.
Thus, ironically, the introduction of ecological ideals like the dissolution of the ego and transformation of consciousness into political discourse ultimately fed a form of Irish nationalism that introduced a threatening – and potentially anti-Celtic – version of collective enchantment at odds with Yeats’s ecological project.

“Cosmopolitan” Ontology and the Language of Occultism

It is very near us that country is, it is on every side; it may be on the bare hill behind it is, or it may be in the heart of the wood

   - Red Hanrahan, in “The Twisting of the Rope” (100)

The poet and “hedge schoolmaster” (83) Red Hanrahan from Yeats’s “The Stories of Red Hanrahan” 50 speaks the above lines in response to the jibes of a group of young men who are jealous over his influence over Oona, a beautiful young peasant woman. The men, echoing Yeats’s poem “The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland,” warn that Hanrahan’s captivating pastoral songs about the Country of the Young are meretricious: if she follows Hanrahan, Oona will never find the land of which he speaks and, in trying to do

50 The stories in this volume were written in 1903-1905, then compiled in a revised version of The Secret Rose (1913). Earlier versions of some of the stories appeared under different titles in the first edition of The Secret Rose (1897). These stories are all collected in finalized versions in Mythologies (1932). I quote the 1913 versions unless otherwise indicated. These stories are particularly interesting because they were conceived relatively early and revised assiduously over many years, indicating that Yeats realized the continued relevance of their content but also saw fit to subtly alter it to reflect his changing attitudes. It is for this reason that I use these texts to discuss his post-Cathleen preoccupations when they could be taken to predate the play (though certainly Yeats’s career does not divide neatly into “before” and “after” Cathleen phases – it is no surprise that germs of Yeats’s later thought and even sustained deliberations on some of its excruciating impasses appear in his early work).
so, will only end up destitute in the Mayo bogs (99). Their playful digs at Hanrahan aim to undercut his utopianism by exposing the mundane reality of nature and the urgency of economic over spiritual life. But Hanrahan undercuts their mockery in turn: the “country” is not a distant ideal, but a circumambient presence – it is everywhere and nowhere. If Yeats’s Celtic nature is at times strongly associated with one particular locale, Ireland, Hanrahan’s response invokes its more “cosmopolitan” dimension. This cosmopolitan aspect of Celtic nature preoccupied Yeats increasingly as he became more and more disillusioned with the direction of Irish nationalism and the imaginative potential of Irish politics.

Yeats’s increased attention to the cosmopolitanism of nature-being after *Cathleen* did not come about as a result of a full-scale reinterpretation of Celtic nature, but more of a subtle shift in emphasis from one potentiality of his early thought to another. The tendency towards deterritorialization was already evident in many texts that preceded or were roughly contemporaneous with *Cathleen* and it would be plausible enough for Yeats to retrospectively claim in 1937’s “A General Introduction for my Work” that he had been “no Nationalist, except in Ireland for passing reasons” (526). In “The Celtic Element in Literature” Yeats already portrays natural magic as something of a global religion, even if he tends to emphasize the unique propensity of the Celts to experience ecstasy before its beauty. In the poetry collection *The Rose* (1893) he reflects on the occult symbol of the multifoliate Rose and associates it with the perfect unity of the One and the many, of Being and beings. In “The Rose Upon the Rood of Time” the Rose is
capable of dissolving the subject and allowing for transcendence of all particulars (8-12, 31). In “The Secret Rose” from *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) the dawn of the Rose, the realization of its promise of Unity of Being, is associated with the wisdom of Celtic legend and corresponds to “the annihilation of the quotidian world” (Howes 73). In “To Ireland in the Coming Times” the struggle for Irish independence is portrayed as parallel to the revivalist project of searching after the “red-rose-bordered-hem” (30, 50) invoked by the old legends. This poem in particular is interesting because it suggests that one of the reasons Ireland has the right to autonomy from England is its service of the Rose; however, for all its affinities with Ireland, the Rose is an ideal without borders that is at the same time wholly separate from Irish political affairs (it is global/Celtic rather than local/Irish). It thus foregrounds the affinities between mystical service of the Rose and political service of Ireland at the same time that it emphasizes the inalienable distinction between these kinds of service, and the preeminence of what is essentially a cosmopolitan doctrine, a kind of spiritual or ecological instead of Trotskyist International.

The occult language developed in the Rose poems provided Yeats with a means of conceptualizing nature-being and differentiating it from nature as it appeared through the optics of English materialism. Theosophy and alchemy both proved attractive in particular because of their coupling of cosmopolitanism and anti-materialism. Ken Monteith argues that Yeats’s interest in spiritualism grew organically out of his early pastoralism because the pastoral and the occult generally share the assumption that the contemporary world is corrupt and hides truths about an unchanging nature that can only
be rediscovered at a distance from modern society (23). However, the occult places its emphasis not on idylls, imagined communities, and “primitive” ways of life, but on the subjective experience of mystical adepts who are solely capable of accessing a hidden world through rituals and quasi-divine symbols (such as the Rose). In this sense the occult is about individuals more so than the pastoral, and this became attractive to Yeats as Ireland entered into what he perceived to be a climate of growing hostility towards the arts, a perception I will discuss in detail below. Alchemy in particular was of great interest to Yeats in his middle period because it maintains that “objective” nature is a construct of the intellect and seeks, through the experiments of adepts, to locate the *prima materia*, the undifferentiated, originary substance underlying all phenomena (Gorski 183).

William Gorski usefully differentiates between “spiritual” and “material” alchemy, the former of which Yeats embraced: material alchemy seeks to literally transform the world of objects, as for example the infamous fallacy that base metals can be transmuted into gold, while spiritual alchemy seeks to transform the object world by way of creative processes that bridge the gap between matter and spirit (or matter and consciousness) (4). Yeats saw artistic creation as a form of alchemy since it was capable of transforming the world of objects in a more subtle and plausible way than material alchemy at the same time that it transformed the practicing alchemist/artist (17). Gorski suggests that Yeats’s spiritual alchemy ultimately seeks to locate a “material absolute”
(439) that is often masked by the transcendentalist language he uses to invoke it.\footnote{Gorski describes the origin mythos of alchemy in terms that modernist philosophy in spite of their occult character: “In this hermetic model, human ontology originates as pure consciousness in a timeless, spaceless dimension, and from this primordial precinct the personal subject individuates, cuts himself off from the whole, and falls into matter, thereby narrowing the field of his vision” (35); it is then up to the adept to reject the limitations of matter and to regain access to the “limitless origin of being” (35).} The implication, as I have already suggested, is that Yeats’s ontology is ultimately “materialist,” though it was staunchly opposed to “English” materialism, which denies the capacity of spirit to influence the object world. Thus, when Yeats celebrates “Irish” idealism in his late essay “Bishop Berkeley” (1931) he is not suggesting that the mind simply creates the world \textit{ex nihilo}, but that the Irish tradition, unlike the English, understands the doctrine of the \textit{prima materia} and felicitously allows for the interplay between matter and spirit (hence his assertion that Berkeley was an idealist and a realist alike) (405). However, while Yeats preferred the abstractions of the Irish folk and philosophical traditions over the abstractions of English positivism, geography and national borders held little significance for the occult since the \textit{prima materia} is accessible everywhere (or everywhere and nowhere). It is worth noting here how Yeats’s occult amalgamation of materialism and idealism allows for matter to be reimagined in ways that Christianity does not. Miracles aside, monotheism’s transcendental axis allows for the possibility of the profane world by consigning matter and spirit to different realms, and in doing so effectively creates the independent material world of enlightenment science (Szerszynski 8). The material absolute, both matter and spirit, does

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51 Gorski describes the origin mythos of alchemy in terms that modernist philosophy in spite of their occult character: “In this hermetic model, human ontology originates as pure consciousness in a timeless, spaceless dimension, and from this primordial precinct the personal subject individuates, cuts himself off from the whole, and falls into matter, thereby narrowing the field of his vision” (35); it is then up to the adept to reject the limitations of matter and to regain access to the “limitless origin of being” (35).
not demand these sharply demarcated realms, and allows for a more malleable, less substantialist concept of matter.

Yeats’s essay “Magic” (1901), written a year before Cathleen, connects cosmopolitan nature-being with an occult theory of collectivity similar to Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious and anticipates Yeats’s search for an alternative to mainstream Irish nationalism, which imagined the boundaries of change in nationalist/political rather than cosmopolitan/occult terms. The essay suggests that there is a Great Mind, a shared “memory of Nature that reveals events and symbols of distant centuries” (46) and connects all of humanity with the perennial knowledge of the “mystics” (46) – something of an occult elaboration on the notion of natural magic as it appeared in “The Celtic Element in Literature.” It also relates a familiar declensionist narrative, attributing the pervasive “evil” and “ugliness” of the modern world to its forgetfulness of certain intuitive realities that are elaborated in global occult traditions (28) and its insistence on an instrumental attitude that is anathema to “the passive meditative life” (41):

I often think I would put this belief in magic from me if I could, for I have come to see or to imagine, in men and women, in houses, in handicrafts, in nearly all sights and sounds, a certain evil, a certain ugliness, that comes from the slow perishing through the centuries of a quality of mind that made this belief and its evidences common over the world (28).
Despite Yeats’s despair over this situation – a consequence of the ascendancy of an expansionist, colonial modernity – he outlines three core metaphysical beliefs that implicitly suggest the possibility of active intervention. These beliefs are as follows:

1. That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
2. That the borders of our memories are shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
3. That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.

In this and other prose works Yeats produced during his period of enthusiasm for Symbolism (Symon’s symbolism in particular) “symbols” stand for the correspondence between visionary art and the Great Mind. Because of their mysterious capacity to connect with the Great Mind, symbols are a powerful means of fighting “ugliness” and rediscovering beauty. They are also a powerful means of working upon consciousness, since according to this theory all individuals share suppressed memories of the Great Mind and can therefore be jarred into recollection by the artist/enchanter.

The relationship between the Great Mind, Nature, and symbols is thus complexly tautological. The Great Mind is a deep reservoir of collective memories of Nature that
must itself be remembered. It allows for the recollection of Nature, yet it is almost identical to Nature since in the modern world it is among the sole surviving remainders of Nature and the habits of thought that allow people to access it. Symbols (or art) allow the artist to rediscover the Great Mind and to unveil it to the people, and this is possible only because symbols are the Great Mind, or more accurately because they are fragments of it. Yet the Great mind also reveals symbols as much as it is revealed by symbols (46). This has implications for the role of art in effecting change: forging the collective consciousness required to effect change is only a possibility because in a sense it already exists, because people are inalienably connected to the Great Mind. While this might be taken to mean that radical diversion from the forgetful and destructive programme of (“bad”) modernity is not only possible but likely given the presupposition of an inalienable collectivity linked to Nature, it equally begs the question as to how the forces disseminating “ugliness” ascended to such dominance in the first place. Worse still, as is evident in Yeats’s description of the loss of magical traditions, it suggests a staggering will to ignore the Great Mind on the part of moderns (as opposed to “barbaric people”) that is potentially more powerful than its intimate connection with all of humanity (41). I will return to the paradoxical position of art as the architect of what this essay suggests is an already existing collectivity, but for now it suffices to reiterate that the occult language of “Magic” connects cosmopolitan nature-being with a complementary theory of the collective mind with enabling but also ambivalent implications for metaphysical change.
Readings of Yeats as a nationalist and even as a postcolonial artist sometimes fail to register the cosmopolitan dimension of his thought iterated in these poems, prose narratives, and essays. This tendency is evident, for example, in Rached Khalifa’s “W. B. Yeats: Theorizing the Irish Nation” (2001), which reads Yeats’s career in terms of a gradual movement away from “pastoral universalism” and towards “immediate localism” (277). Khalifa’s argument is that Yeats’s work after *The Wanderings of Oisin* sought to reject vague pastoralism and to create a “cartographic” (278) poetry “oriented towards rediscovering and revalorizing Irish culture and landscape” (278) (read: *actual* landscape), but also, problematically, towards a nationalist “politics of boundary closure” (286) implicated in isolationism, xenophobia, and rightist forms of statecraft. For Khalifa, Yeats’s attempt to rediscover the politics of the local through cartographic poetry should be cautiously valorized as a postcolonial project, but ultimately loses out in his *oeuvre* to an aestheticized organic nationalism that is marked by “hate” (284), “corrosive to the Other,” and “potentially dangerous” (295). Khalifa reads “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” for example, as a cartographic poem announcing a return to the specificity of place over against the ideological abstractions of the revival:

Though the poem reiterates the same poetics of exaltation of pastoral unity [as his early pastoral poetry], the same Thoreauistic overvaluation of nature, this time this unity is defined differently at the level of

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52 Many ecocritics would also be inclined to applaud the move towards the local, but it is important to recognize that in Yeats’s romantic modernist framework the geographically local is a means to a cosmopolitan end.
geography, aesthetics, and politics. This time it is reterritorialized in Irish landscape. It is appropriated, nationalized. It is revalorized as a pure national experience, an experience that is lived concretely - not virtually - in the heart of Irish space (293).

However, he also suggests that the poem is marred by its tendency to “boundary closure” (286) and “uterine fantasy” (293). The problem with subordinating what Khalifa calls the “personal” (the subjective) to a cartographical nationalist project is that the symbolist core of the poem – which insists that the Isle of Innisfree is less a location than a collectively shared ontological “dimension” without borders – is dispelled, cast as “uterine fantasy,” when for Yeats the local and concrete, as opposed to the “bad” abstractions of English modernity, are more a means of accessing an ontological universal through local ambience than an objective space with inherent value as such. It is because of the cosmopolitanism evident in the poem that Andrew John Miller has recently insisted that Yeats’s Ireland is precisely “virtual” rather than concrete, even when his rhetoric about the local would seem to suggest the opposite, and that his concept of the nation is actually “curiously non-spatial,” as if the nation were a revelation made possible by a “sacramental ritual rather than a geographical relationship” (66). Khalifa, by contrast, sees Yeats as an internationalist only inasmuch as he belongs to a long list of pernicious antimodern figures who felt malaise over progress and who turned to

53 Yeats writes: “to this universalism, this seeing of unity everywhere, you can only attain through what is near you, your nation, or, if you be no traveller, your village and the cobwebs on your walls” (quoted in Miller 66).
obscurantist, reactionary politics for an antidote (296); his reading can only make sense of the cosmopolitan occult as a political perversion, whereas Miller’s reading allows us to appreciate the consistency with which “Postnational deterritorialization and otherworldly mysticism are, for Yeats, manifestations of the same anti-mimetic impulse that informs his sense of poetic representation” (74). Following Miller, I contend that Yeats’s ecology is, at least in its occult manifestation, less about countering universalizing modernity with a reinscription of place and particularity than about countering it with an equally abstract, universalizing system.

**The Exiled Bard and the Greasy Till**

Hanrahan is a suitable mouthpiece for the shift to cosmopolitanism since he possesses bardic wisdom and is touched by the Sidhe, yet is distrusted, feared, and often spurned by the Irish people. This depiction of the bard departs from Yeats’s early ideal of a powerful, unifying, and hybrid bardic authority; now the cosmopolitan bard is, like the modern artist, marginalized and relatively powerless, albeit in possession of no less potential for power. Formerly working for the people, he now works to explode their false consciousness.

The idea of the exiled bard developed out of Yeats’s perception that mainstream nationalism was contaminated with middle-class materialism and moralism. In “Poetry and Tradition” (1907) Yeats dismisses these values, reprimanding the Irish public for
their materialism and their failure to take art seriously, and records being surprised at
the reaction against his modernist attacks on verse that “owe[s] its position to its moral or
political worth” (256) rather than its beauty or evocative power. Yeats’s shifting
perception of the position of art as a catalyst for relevant change is especially evident in
the collections Responsibilities (1914) and The Wild Swans at Coole (1919). In
“September 1913” Yeats registered his growing dislike of the Catholic middle-class and
the “greasy till” (108, 2) that had replaced “Romantic Ireland,” which he now realized
was likely destined to remain an “imaginary Ireland” (“Poetry and Tradition” 246). The
germ of this poem was the Hugh Lane affair of 1913, which saw the Irish public refuse to
delegate funding to a gallery that would house Lane’s collection of “foreign” modern art,
and the gallery relocated to London instead. In “On Those That Hated ‘The Playboy of
the Western World,’ 1907” Yeats further castigated philistine moralists who had rioted at
Synge’s play (many of whom were prominent nationalists, including then Sinn Féin

54 Describing the typical middle class citizen, Yeats writes, “They prefer the stalk to the
flower, and believe that painting and poetry exist that there may be instruction, and love that there
may be children, and theatres that busy men may rest, and holidays that busy men may go on
being busy” (251).

55 Miller’s reading of the first epigraph to this collection – “in dreams begin responsibility” –
is very insightful. The epigraph “sets dreams against the multifarious forces that, in Yeats’s view,
would subordinate poetry to prose, symbolism to naturalism, and, above all, art to politics” (72),
and suggests that we adopt an attitude of responsibility to dreams, “the generative power of the
imagination,” rather than to “drab reality” (75). The question remains: how can we remain
responsible to dreams in the waking world, which is presumably antithetical to them? To be truly
responsible to dreams would be to realize The Land of Heart’s Desire on earth (75), yet realizing
a collective “dream” is fraught with difficulties (I will discuss these difficulties at length below).
This dreams/reality divide, a divide that is somehow also intimate and potentially reversible,
parallels the ecopoetics/politics divide that structures this chapter.
leader Arthur Griffith) for their impotent hostility towards what he saw as a landmark work of Irish genius.\textsuperscript{56}

The materialism and morally censorious nature of the Irish people and the Catholic middle-class in particular made it difficult to imagine “great art” – which after all was being persecuted not \textit{in spite of} but \textit{because of} its greatness in Yeats’s view – as something that would realize meaningful ecological collectivity in Ireland, much less change the direction of Western civilization. This stance was complicated by the Easter Rising, which temporarily renewed Yeats’s interest in nationalism, but the ambivalent, equivocal tone of the later “Easter 1916” (published in \textit{Michael Robartes and the Dancer} in 1921) communicates doubts about the direction of even a genuinely “heroic” nationalism and treats the rebels who took the Dublin General Post Office as singular exceptions to the mediocrity and cowardice in Ireland. Elizabeth Cullingford goes so far as to suggest that Yeats was moved by the Easter Rising because it could be read as an unsuccessful “poet’s rebellion” (7) in keeping with his tendency to exalt “the rebels, the poets, and the failures at the expense of the prosaic constitutional politicians” (6). Like the artist-bard figure, the rebels fought on behalf of the people under the aegis of a vision of Ireland that the Irish people, with their comparatively “base” interests, could never live up to.

\textsuperscript{56} The crowd was incensed primarily by the appearance of a female actress wearing an undergarment.
In “The Fisherman” Yeats explicitly rejects any remaining anthropological interest in the peasantry and acknowledges his passion not for a primitive way of life, a past time, or for the Irish people as they are, but for “A man who does not exist,/A man who is but a dream” (149, 35-36). The poem most definitely marks Yeats’s realization that the primitive peasant – here a stand-in for all his primitivist motifs – is not a historical being who once existed or who continues to exist somewhere in Ireland (or in India for that matter), but is instead symbolic of an indwelling future that can be abstracted entirely from the system of signs he uses to evoke it. “The Fisherman” washes its hands of the Catholic peasantry and the jeering crowds alike, and instead celebrates an as-yet unrealized humanity in harmony with nature and in possession of an aristocratic grace. While many critics have, like Khalifa, detected “a politics of hate” in this kind of contemptuous stance, for historians of modernism such as Fredric Jameson and Alain Badiou the “cold/And passionate” (“The Fisherman” 39-40) posthumanism of such cosmopolitan modernist texts is precisely what marks them with the kind of uncompromising utopianism that insists on a future that would not be recognizable through the fractured optics of the present (and is no longer credited under contemporary liberal capitalism, either because it is dismissed as an empty fantasy, or, when it is taken seriously, charged with a vague “totalitarianism”). The poem gives off new resonances in today’s intellectual climate, where, on the margins, whether by deep ecologists or

academic “posthumanists,” a full-scale reimagination of humanity is being identified as a way to effect the radical changes required for planetary survival, though certainly unqualified rejection of the present in favour of a more ecological future is already the poem’s defiant announcement in the context of 1919. It is no coincidence that it is in “Ego Dominus Tuus,” also collected in The Wild Swans at Coole, that Yeats first sketches out his Nietzschean doctrine of the mask, which holds that the imaginative function of poetry is not to represent and know the self or its world but to stimulate painful yearning for the “anti-self,” the unfathomable potentiality of individual and collective being just beyond the vanishing point of the conceptual horizon. 58

For Castle “The Fisherman” definitively marks Yeats’s movement away from the peasantry as a relatively “external” source of poetic truth and towards the artist/bard as an autonomous figure uniquely capable of imagining new communities and modes of being but relatively powerless to express these visions to a shallow and materialistic people (83). The anxious mood of The Secret Rose stories predicts this shift. In “The Crucifixion of the Outcast” a bardic figure is crucified for singing of “the false gods of the old days” (11) after the monks beat him for “waking forgotten longings in their hearts” (14). In “Out of the Rose” a knight of the Rose fights valiantly against a band of thieves on behalf of a group of peasants and, in a magnanimous reversal, promises to pay them for each bandit he kills on their behalf; the knight is mortally wounded and the thankless peasants

58 The doctrine of the mask formalizes the motif of transmutation through death that first appeared in The Land of Heart’s Desire; however, here it is severed from folk mythologies and delegated to the intrepid artist alone.
send an “idiot” to collect their money, someone hyperbolically incapable of understanding the knight’s service to the Rose and his duty to merge with the divine substance faced with creeping “corruption” in the world (23). In “The Wisdom of the King” a young Celtic prince is touched by the Sidhe as an infant and consequently grows crow feathers in his hair as an adolescent. His retainers disguise his lineage and pass a law requiring all citizens to weave feathers into their hair, and he rules over his kingdom in ignorance of the truth. However, his is the wisdom of a bard rather than a king – Yeats’s figure of mundane political power – and his council mires his people in equivocation and impracticable fantasies:

While [his people] listened to him his words seemed to make all darkness light and filled their hearts like music; but when they returned to their own lands his words seemed far off, and what they could remember too strange and subtle to help them in their lives. A number indeed did live differently afterwards, but their new life was less excellent than the old: some among them had long served a good cause, but when they heard him praise it, they returned to their own lands to find what they had loved less lovable, for he had taught them how little divided false and true; others, again, who had served no cause, but had sought in peace the welfare of their own households, found their bones softer and less ready for toil, for he had shown them greater purposes; and numbers of the young, when they had heard him upon all these
things, remembered certain strange words that made ordinary joys
nothing, and sought impossible joys and grew unhappy (29).

Even installed in a position of political power, this bardic figure is incapable of
communicating his message because it is antithetical to the quotidian affairs of his
people. The king eventually discovers the truth – that he is not human and has been
occupying a human station – and flees the court to join the Sidhe in the darkness of the
woods. “The Wisdom of the King” is one of many Yeatsian parables about the
incommensurability of poetics and politics that suggestively ends with the flight of the
artist figure into either solitude or an esoteric community.

_On Baile’s Strand_ (1904), most notably, explores the stifling effect of political
responsibility on the virile creativity Yeats located outside of quotidian affairs. The play
dramatizes events that culminate in Cuchulain – Yeats’s perennial representative of
heroic artistry – swearing allegiance to King Conchubar – his representative of
constitutional political authority – and falling into raving madness as a direct
consequence of his mistaken concession to politics (70-72). For Moses, Cuchulain’s
“singular attachment to the ‘non-political’ activities of love, music, song, and dance, and,
above all, his cosmopolitan, as opposed to an exclusionary and xenophobic, conception
of patriotism and nationhood, all denote him as the Irish hero par excellence” (570). Yet
the oath he is compelled to swear in the name of the kingdom’s security also demands
that he subordinate his heroic, “non-political” energy to the will of the king, who can _use_
this energy as a tool but cannot understand the lawless creative spirit that is its source.
The oath Cuchulain is compelled to swear to Conchubar is in effect the inverse of the alchemist’s oath, which demands that the adept develop the spiritual awareness and self-knowledge required to engender a transformation of humanity – a “New Birth” (Waite, quoted in Gorski 25) – and to unveil the divine prima materia. Since the alchemist/artist is attuned to cosmopolitan nature and works progressively to revolutionize selfhood, it is fitting that his primary antagonists are Conchubar, a wielder of political and social power, and the Blind Man, a petty, sadistic, self-interested materialist devoid of spiritual vision and possessed of an inexplicable malice directed at the hero Cuchulain. It is these two figures together who bring about Cuchulain’s madness, and the play ends with Conchubar tactically diverting the hero’s raging energy into the relentless waves. *On Baile’s Strand* is a register of societal forces subordinating ecopoetics to politics and conspiring against the artist’s sovereignty, yet the play reveals the central irony of Yeats’s cosmopolitan occultism: for all its emphasis on boundless collectivity linked to an impersonal, originary nature, it ultimately led him to champion the individual as the ultimate good.

**Heroic Individuality and the Defence of Ecopoetics (the ecological modernist as moderate?)**

The maddening consequence of Yeats’s linked appeals to cosmopolitan hermetic doctrines and autonomous individualism (so far as it protected the autonomy of art) was that the artist/adept, with only his or her heroic individuality as a resource, was left to
fight the “filthy modern tide” in almost total obscurity from the political mainstream. This isolated figure was now the only one capable of understanding the stakes of metaphysical change and the collective consciousness required to realize it. Thus an attempt had to be made to protect the visionary power of Celtic art while also identifying false or dangerous forms of change and collectivity, such as those espoused by violent nationalists and moralist mobs.

The prose narrative “Rosa Alchemica”59 deals with the themes set out in The Secret Rose and On Baile’s Strand, but rather than reflecting on the artist’s predicament faced with the incommensurability of ecopoetics and politics, it deals with collectivity, and in particular the threat of undesirable forms of collectivity. The protagonist of the story is an isolated scholar with an “historical” (127) interest in religious and magical traditions who has recently published “a little work on the Alchemists” (126), which was upbraided for its “timidity” by “believers in the arcane sciences” (126). His scholarly book’s thesis is proximate to Yeats’s own ideas: he argues for a spiritual understanding of alchemy, that “they [the alchemists] sought to fashion gold out of common metals merely as part of a universal transmutation of all things into some divine and imperishable substance” and that this mirrors the “transmutation of life into art” (126). Despite his

59 Like The Secret Rose this text was published in 1897 and revised many times (in 1908, 1913, 1914, 1925, and 1932). I quote from the 1932 version, as the late revisions (1925 and 1932) do not alter the style or content substantially, unlike the early revisions which give us the 1932 text minus a few very minor changes.
detached air, the scholar reveals that he has laboured in earnest to effect this transmutation, with only disappointment and isolation as his reward:

I understood the alchemical doctrine, that all beings, divided from the great deep where spirits wander, one and yet a multitude, are weary; and sympathized, in the pride of my connoisseurship, with the consuming thirst for destruction which made the alchemist veil under his symbols of lions and dragons, of eagles and ravens, of dew and of nitre, a search for an essence which would dissolve all mortal things. I repeated to myself the ninth key of Basilius Valentius, in which he compares the fire of the last day to the fire of the alchemist, and the world to the alchemist’s furnace, and would have us know that all must be dissolved before the divine substance, material gold or immaterial ecstasy, awake. I had dissolved indeed the mortal world and lived amid immortal essences, but had obtained no miraculous ecstasy (129).

Like Fergus, the scholar grasps the truth of the doctrine of the prima materia and the Great Mind but, detached from any meaningful collectivity, is left with only “the bitter dream of a limitless energy” (128). The transmutation of mortal things into an imperishable substance, life into art, is unrealizable in his condition.

However, when the scholar is interrupted by Michael Robartes, an old acquaintance and member of The Order of the Alchemical Rose, he is confronted with
the possibility of a kind of collectivity that might make the promise of metaphysical transmutation a reality. Initially resistant to Robartes’s invitation to join the Order – he dismisses his “ideas and phantasies” as “the illusions that creep like maggots into civilizations when they begin to decay” (134) – the scholar accepts after inexplicably falling into a trance and communing with “eternal things” (136). Together they travel to the Order’s temple, which is built “between the pure multitude of the waves and the impure multitude of men” (136), a space both human/finite and natural/infinite. The temple is ornate, adorned with an immense mosaic of a Rose (145), and the other initiates and the whole scene take on the air of a “mask,” Yeats’s sign for artifice as a catalyst for the imagination of antithetical possibilities. As part of his initiation the scholar is compelled to perform a Dionysian “magical dance” (144) with a woman who he realizes is “less than human” (147) and loses himself in another profound trance during the ceremony; he later awakens beside the other initiates in a rather bare building, with only a rough painting of a Rose on the ceiling, and flees the temple in terror. This story is interesting because it is ambivalent regarding the power of the Order to transform the mortal world: the self-abnegating mystical dance graces the temple with a Byzantine beauty, but everything returns to the shabbiness of daily life afterwards. It also registers fears about “the unimaginable fanaticisms” (138) made possible by the Order’s irrational collectivity regardless of its other potential.

Miller has shown how the story introduces another manifestation of irrational collectivity in its concluding sequence, in which a mob of outraged, moralistic fishermen
chase the scholar away and prepare to attack the heretic temple with stones (Miller 68-69). The story seems to pose a troubling question: is the self-abnegating collectivity of the visionary order ultimately no different in its irrationalism from the idiot violence of the fishermen? The scholar seems to answer in the affirmative, fleeing from the Order and the fishermen alike. But if both forms of collectivity are reprehensible, the scholar cannot in turn be credited as the kind of heroic individual Yeats began to celebrate in his middle period given that he seeks solace in Christianity (the maligned religion of the Catholic middle-class) after the stresses of the incident and clearly lacks Cuchulain’s intrepid creative spirit. Howes’s answer is that there are indeed two collectivities, that Yeats came to distinguish between “mob” and “nation,” the former being associated with violent nationalism and jeering protests, the latter with an as-yet unrealized mystical union of minds capable of galvanizing a “mere aggregate of autonomous individuals brought together by chance” (Howes 87) to work towards collective metaphysical change. I would add that there are two parallel types of individualism for Yeats: one such as the scholar’s, which fears self-abnegation and clings to the safe confines of the ego to the extent that collective vision becomes impossible, and one such as the idealized

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60 The poem “The Scholars” from the *Wild Swans at Coole* notably satirizes the gap between scholars and the sometimes violent intensity of their objects of study.

61 Note that for Howes a “nation” is not subject to national borders or “nationalism” as such – The Order of the Golden Dawn, for example, was a “nation” in her sense of the world. Howes discussion is specific to theatre but might apply to any of Yeats’s artistic mediums: “Yeats found the dissolution of the individual subject … deeply threatening, all the more so because it was potentially seductive, and he worked to define the Irish nation as a collectivity that nurtured rather than suppressed the individual will. Thus Yeats began his theatre project wanting mass mobilization into one kind of collectivity, a nation, and fearing mass mobilization into another kind of collectivity, a crowd or mob. The problem was that they looked unnervingly alike” (78).
artist’s, which does not fear self-abnegation, but retains the sovereign ego required to resist the mob and the creativity and courage required to conceive of an enabling “anti-self” for his or her society.

The latter type of individuality is dramatized in the middle-period plays, particularly the Cuchulain plays. In On Baile’s Strand Cuchulain is contrasted with the selfish and sadistic Blind Man, who revels in seeing the great fall out of petty jealousy. The Blind Man from On Baile’s Strand is paralleled by the blind beggar from The Cat and the Moon (1924) who asks the saints to restore only his literal vision, while his companion the lame beggar chooses to be blessed rather than cured – to achieve figurative vision worthy of greatness. In The Green Helmet (1910) Cuchulain willingly offers his life in order to redeem his community from a curse that fuels irrational aggression in others but has no effect on him. In At the Hawk’s Well (1916) his creative virility and fearless courtship of the Hawk Woman, a symbol of antithetical possibilities, is differentiated from the selfish desire of the Old Man to possess wisdom and inspiration he has no claim to. In The Only Jealousy of Emer (1922) Cuchulain is drawn into a trance by his possessive supernatural lover Fand, and is replaced by a daemonic emanation who inverts his heroic values. It is up to Emer this time to act magnanimously – she renounces any claim on Cuchulain in order to free him from the curse and restore his former stature, knowing that he will never know of her gesture and return to his younger mistress Eithne.
Inguba (155). Unlike the scholar, who cannot immerse himself in the unknown out of fear, Cuchulain must be returned to the mortal plane because the supernatural trance threatens to rob the world of his unique form of power. The play seems to suggest that Cuchulain, like the temple of the Rose, operates in a space between the natural and supernatural, political and poetic, and therefore loses his heroic power when he crosses over entirely into one of the domains. As a champion of ecopoetics he can no more abandon the mundane world that is the object of ecological change than he can entirely give this project over to politics. Read in this way, Emer is a complement to On Baile’s Strand, which explores the latter threat to the hero’s autonomy.

A Vision (1925) sought in part to create a system worthy of Cuchulain, one that could balance cosmopolitan occultism and individual freedom. The text attempts to chart a “third way” between liberal democracy and industrialist state socialism. In these “productionist” ideologies Yeats saw two faces of anti-individualism working to push the primary (objectifying) tendency that had taken hold in England to completion through

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62 Moses reads Emer as a rejection of the quest for “an ideal relationship that transcends the confines of the mundane domestic world” (576) in favour of a “‘real life’ mistress, young and attractive, but also vain, ignorant, silly, and possessing an unwarranted faith in her own powers and talents” (575). For Moses the play is thus a register of Yeats’s realization that he must “give [Cuchulain] up to a new generation of suitors - younger, more vibrant, less reflective, more materially interested, less spiritually elevated, better attuned to the realities and demands of (implicitly modern) political existence” (575), namely the architects of the Free State. This reading is plausible, but it undercuts the significance of Emer’s gesture, which is proof that magnanimity is still possible since it is itself heroic and strives to sustain and provide a place for “heroism” (“good” individuality and creative power) in a hostile environment, the goal that animates all the plays I have cited in this section.
their own global projects. The text offers a non-progressive, non-dialectical historicism as an alternative to liberal-democratic and Marxist historicism, both of which Yeats saw as political expressions of the English metaphysics of Bacon, Locke, and Newton (Fleming 127). *A Vision*’s arcane cosmological system, which explains history as the perpetual alternation of polarized antithetical (subjective/“Celtic”) and primary (objective/“English”) gyres, did not court mainstream acceptance, to say the least. This text describes Yeats’s aesthetic in cosmological terms: while the primary gyre solidifies objectifying systems of knowledge and surrenders the imagination to the material world, the antithetical gyre strives to transmute the Mask (the image of desire) into *The Body of Fate* (reality) (74). *A Vision* presents itself as a dispassionate account of hidden historical forces, but this belies Yeats’s clear preference for the limitless creativity of the subjective gyre and his enthusiasm for the Celtic age his system guarantees will come. *A Vision* is

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63 For Heidegger the twentieth century “productionist” ideologies (liberal democracy and communism) were political correlatives of “productionist metaphysics” – the reduction of all things to raw material for use – and were embarking upon a titanic but ultimately nihilistic technological project which necessarily grew out of the productionist world picture. For Heidegger, an ecological “third way,” neither communism nor liberal capitalism, had to be charted to counteract this project. For a comprehensive discussion of Heidegger’s concept of productionist metaphysics and the third way, see Michael Zimmerman’s *Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art* (1990).

In “Between Techne and Technology” (1984), Hubert Dreyfus argues that *Being and Time* is marked by a contradiction between locality and cosmopolitanism: it longs for the rootedness of the “local” as a refuge from the levelling, planetary scope of modern technology, yet, simply by theorizing technology as a planetary project, makes it impossible to think the local as anything other than “a region within the all-encompassing region” (Zimmerman, *Confrontation* 151). The third way really seems to demand a planetary project of its own, not the return to place and particularity Heidegger advocated philosophically and politically. Unlike Heidegger, Yeats realized the necessarily planetary scope of his ecological project, yet found it impossible to pursue politically. Michael Zimmerman has persuasively argued that Heidegger’s “antinaturalistic ontology” was actually deeply incompatible with the simulacra celebrated by the Nazi regime (see for instance, “Martin Heidegger: Antinaturalistic Critic of Technological Modernity” in *Minding Nature*, pg. 71-74)
thus a kind of political manifesto without the politics, a text marked by a multitude of vague, usually questionable political imperatives – as for example its preference for antithetical aristocracy over primary democracy – born out of and secondary to an ontological imperative that cannot be effectively politicized, as Cathleen ni Houlihan had demonstrated. At best the embedded reactionary politics of the text call for an aristocracy of the arts defined precisely by its lack of any worldly political power. I question whether or not the form of collective organization corresponding to Yeats’s ecopoetics was at this stage not rearguard neo-feudalism or fascism, but what he actually realized – the aristocratic salon where “true” creative individuality and collective vision were concentrated (or isolated).

It is possible to see the high modernist salon as the concrete institutional manifestation of ecopoetic experimentation because Yeats arguably externalized his aesthetic vision most successfully (in his middle to late drama) when he operated at the greatest remove from the national theatre, and reinforced the antagonism between modernist aesthetics and nationalist politics most vigorously. At this point the irrelevance of art to political affairs was almost courted: unlike Heidegger’s idealized National Socialism, which in theory sought to politicize ecopoetics through a national movement guided by circumspect attention to the mysterious “message” of Being rather than the Western imperative of planetary domination, Yeats’s version of the ecological “third way” carefully upheld the distinction between ecopoetics and politics. This was accomplished in tandem with the defence of individualism by consigning the third way to
the autonomous domain of art and using politics not to realize the message of art in the world (which risked burying or contaminating the message) but to protect the individuality and freedom that are essential to the vital artistic production that could communicate it. Yeats’s two terms in the Irish Senate were correspondingly characterized by a generally temperate defense of individual rights and freedoms that veered towards the kind of politics that are traditionally labeled liberal (Cullingford 138) instead of working towards the radical world-historical rupture envisioned by texts like “The Fisherman” and A Vision. During his Senatorship Yeats worked against censorship, solidifying liberal values such as personal freedom and freedom of the press, both of which protected the “great Art” that was being “beaten down” (“The Fisherman” 24, 148). Given that liberalism is generally regarded by contemporary radical ecologists as the anti-ecological system, it seems bizarre that Yeats’s investment in modernist ecology led him to adopt a version of liberalism as a practical means of safeguarding its operative domain. This irony is somewhat attenuated by the fact that Yeats’s was a classical rather than economic liberalism and he remained vehemently opposed to “English” laissez-faire liberalism. Still, humanist discourses of sovereign individualism are also castigated by ecocritics and philosophers of environmental ethics; one could argue that Yeats sought to protect what I have characterized as the posthumanism of his work at the expense of contradicting its message. In any case, as Yeats’s artistic production, especially his plays,

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64 Yeats was elected in 1922 and again in 1925. He retired in 1928 due to ill health.
became increasingly experimental, his contributions to public political discourse became more and more moderate.

**The Crucified Aristocrat and the Mob (the ecological modernist as fascist?)**

If there were exceptions to Yeats’s moderation, they were usually voiced in response to the unstable plight of the Anglo-Irish, whom Yeats had come to see as a besieged cultural aristocracy in sole possession of the sensibility that could recognize great art and the social conditions required for it to flourish. For Yeats ascendency culture created heroic individuals: the Anglo-Irish hero was willing to sacrifice himself or herself for Ireland, but, like Parnell, could expect only scorn from Catholic Ireland in exchange. As such the Anglo-Irish came to represent the ideal union of individuality and service to an as yet unrealized and increasingly unrealizable vision of collective life, mirroring the plight of the Irish modernist as Yeats envisioned it. The celebration of the relative failure of this class to reach the recalcitrant Catholic middle-class marks a final attenuation of Yeats’s expectations for ecopoetics: in later works its cause is limited to survival, to having an operative domain at all, regardless of whom its cultural products reach.

The unpublished play *Calvary* (conceived in 1918 and worked on through the 1920s) and Yeats’s last finished play *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939) both focus on the death of spiritually elevated individuals at the hands of more materially interested and less reflective beings. *Calvary* contrasts the magnanimity and spiritual purpose of Christ with a group of Roman soldiers who, oblivious to his suffering and his message, murder
him perfunctorily as part of their day’s work. The soldiers’ senseless, sensual dance
around the cross (163) marks them as representatives of the violence gripping Ireland,
which Yeats associated with British colonial violence in “Nineteen Hundred and
Nineteen” and with Irish sectarian violence in “Meditations in a Time of Civil War” (both
of which are collected in 1928’s The Tower). Likewise, in The Death of Cuchulain the
great hero, anticipating Christ, is murdered by The Blind Man for “twelve pennies” (270)
yet maintains his grace and dignity faced with what is, outwardly, a wretched fate. This
final play reflects upon the apparent discrepancy between this Cuchulain, slain by a
degraded image of his own people, and the Cuchulain of Oliver Sheppard’s 1911 statute,
which was moved to the Dublin Post Office to memorialize the Easter Rising. While in
its new location the statue fittingly references the “terrible beauty” of the events of 1916
and their worthiness of Cuchulain, it also represents the appropriation of these events by
the Irish State, which Yeats saw as the cosmopolitan artist-hero’s antithesis, and thus
makes “an old man looking back on life/[Imagine] it in scorn” (272). The play
acknowledges that the Cuchulain of collective cultural memory is slippery and evolving,
but it also seems to suggest that, as Yeats predicted in On Baile’s Strand, the hero’s most
valuable message is lost when his image is used by a state that otherwise proves itself
hostile to what Yeats took this message to be (namely, the imperative of metaphysical
change and the fearless pursuit of the anti-self). On the other hand, it suggests that even if
Cuchulain survives primarily in a degraded form to be consumed by “the mob,” his
deeper message survives in some ciphered form as well.
In a sense it was Yeats’s dramatically reduced expectations for the Anglo-Irish cultural hero that led him to engage with the fascist Blueshirts for a brief time during the thirties. Fascism offered to nationalize ecopoetics – the very thing Yeats had calculatingly avoided during his time in the Senate – but to do so under the guidance of a cultural elite operating above and for the betterment of the unreflective mob. Or at least that was how Yeats imagined it until he met General O’Duffy, an “uneducated lunatic” (Cullingford 205) by his account. While fascism initially appeared to be an aristocratic, antithetical system of governance capable of realizing the vision of modernist ecology (the kind of mythic system invoked in A Vision) Yeats quickly realized that in practice it was the exact opposite; it was the ultimate manifestation of the principle tendency he had identified in capitalism and communism: it was an industrialist, imperialist monstrosity in romantic clothing (Cullingford 218). In Modernist Writing and Reactionary Politics (2001) Ferrall has shown how Yeats’s (almost entirely imaginative) involvement with fascism birthed a final, explicitly “anti-fascist” period late in his life, which was characterized by ever more vociferous assertions of aesthetic autonomy (36), though Yeats never actually compromised his “Anglo-Irish”/modernist commitment to aesthetic autonomy in the preceding period even if he contemplated doing so as a way to escape the troubling situation of the uprooted modernist (37).

Ferrall’s study makes it clear why it is possible for Cullingford, for example, to represent Yeats as a staunch liberal while so many other critics, most famously his contemporary George Orwell, have labelled him a fascist:
Yeats is anti-fascist to the extent that he … remains committed to “modernist” aesthetic autonomy and yet fascist to the extent to which he desires an avant-garde resolution of the opposition between aesthetics and politics … (37)

Ideologically speaking, Yeats can be plausibly identified as a liberal or a fascist, but pragmatically speaking he was essentially a liberal. Aesthetically, his work is radically experimental, yet his liberal politics served to block its avant-garde impulse (to block its expression as politics!) and to channel it exclusively into indirect work upon consciousness. Thus the “apolitical” doctrine of aesthetic autonomy prevented Yeats from following through with a fascist/avant-garde attempt to nationalize ecopoetics, a possibility implied even in his most quietistic work. It is in this sense that ecopoetics must be “modernist” in order to function alongside politics; if ecopoetics ceases to be modernist, if it is too directly political, it steps out of its para-political domain and ceases

65 See the introduction to Modernist Writing and Reactionary Politics for a discussion of the relationship between fascism and the avant-garde. For Ferrall, fascism “parodies” the avant-garde inasmuch as its form of “activism” achieves the ends of the avant-garde, albeit in a grotesque form: “Fascism can be described as a parody of the avant-garde because whereas [fascism] ... reintegrates art into a ‘new life praxis’ rather than the current ‘means-ends rationality of the bourgeois everyday’, it achieves its effects as Benjamin points out ‘without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate’” (7). The avant-garde endeavors to unify art and politics under the sign of a new world order, but this is realized on a grand scale only in the fascist project to “[reconstitute] the political arena as an aesthetic spectacle at war with the progressive and enlightened aspects of modernity” (8). I will develop my discussion of fascism and the avant-garde with reference to D. H. Lawrence in the next chapter, turning to Roger Griffin’s groundbreaking study Modernism and Fascism (2007) to productively complicate Benjamin’s theory of the aestheticization of politics (which informs Ferrall’s reading of fascism as a cynical manipulation of the masses). While I take issue with some aspects of Ferrall’s reading, his sense of both the avant-garde and fascism as potential expressions of cultural modernism informs my discussion here.
to exist as such (in this sense it is truly a para-site, its “autonomy” more of a parasitism). In the following chapter I will discuss whether or not it must always step out as a species of fascism – whether or not there is a revolutionary rather than reactionary “rough beast,” if this is even a meaningful distinction in the first place – but for now it is sufficient to conclude that for Yeats the entry of ecopoetics into the public sphere was equivalent to its subordination to anti-ecological ideologies and systems of governance. It seems that the relative absence of mainstream ecological politics in Yeats’s time encouraged the creation of a (potentially false) double bind: either ecology survives as autonomous ecopoetics, confined to art and capable of only frustratingly indirect action, or it is politicized as either anti- or pseudo-ecological nationalism, the most extreme expression of which is fascism.

**Assured Uncertainty: Suspended Contraries in *The Herne’s Egg***

Yeats’s late play *The Herne’s Egg* (1938) is something of a retrospective reflection on the numerous tensions that animate his life’s work – tensions between politics and ecopoetics, English and Celtic, matter and spirit, self and anti-self, mob and nation, fascism and modernism. Cullingford has observed how Yeats’s attention to both sides of these fragile binaries marks him as a poet rather than a politician, one who has “the luxury of seeing both sides of the question” and does not have to make politically expedient choices (viii). Both Cullingford and Moses read Yeats as a dialectical thinker because of his dynamic treatment of such oppositions (Cullingford viii; Moses 567) but
Yeats’s “dialectics,” as I have shown throughout this chapter, either allow no possibility for sublation (as in *A Vision*), or actively work to avoid it (as in *The Herne’s Egg*). It is more accurate to read Yeats’s work in terms of his idol Blake’s suspended contraries, oppositions that may at times blur but remain largely static; and, in turn, to read these suspended contraries as evidence of Yeats’s need to preserve rather than to overcome the tensions in his work.

*The Herne’s Egg* opens with King Congal and his enemy King Aedh directing their respective armies in an evenly matched military struggle. The stage directions demand that their battle be performed “rhymically as if in a dance” (229), calling to mind the dance of the Roman soldiers in *Calvary*, whose sensuality and dynamism communicates not so much intensity as cheerful thoughtlessness indicative of spiritual poverty. The dance of these Kings symbolizes politics locked in a series of unending exchanges with nothing profound or important at stake. Glenn Willmott observes how, given that “the warriors are ... seen to be parasites upon the life of war, forgetful of any reason for fighting other than routine” (64-65), the play registers Yeats’s “pessimistic view, by the 1930s, of Irish political struggles as petty and schismatic” (64). The foil to these Kings (Congal in particular since he is the play’s protagonist) is Attracta, a priestess of the Great Herne, a fearsome pagan god. Attracta is a member of a mystic sisterhood (a “nation” in Howe’s sense of the word) dedicated to safeguarding the Herne’s eggs, the germs, perhaps, of some as-yet unfathomable mode of existence. The main action of the play concerns Congal’s theft of the Herne’s eggs, Attracta’s subsequent repossession of
the eggs in a trance, and the soldiers’ rape of Attracta as a punishment (it is later revealed that only Congal actually raped the priestess, while the other men simulated the act out of fear). After the rape, Attracta curses the soldiers, condemning them to reincarnation as animals, and reserves a crueller fate for Congal, who is to be killed by a fool. The fool does not succeed in killing Congal, but in a final assertion of his will, the King throws himself on the fool’s spit and dies wondering whether or not he was himself the portended fool. Despite Attracta’s last-minute effort to lessen his punishment by procreating with Corney (the play’s less sinister version of the Blind Man) and allowing him to return as a human-being, it is revealed in the play’s final line that Congal will be reincarnated as a lowly donkey.

The conflict between Congal and Attracta is instigated by the king’s lack of respect for the sacred Herne’s eggs and the priestesses’ mystical sisterhood. Like Euripides’s Pentheus, Congal tries to extend the protocols of worldly authority beyond their scope and is destroyed as a result. For Congal, the eggs are something to be harvested and consumed rather than worshipped; his only imperative is to use, an attitude he extends not only to material objects but also to Attracta’s body. For theorists of ethics since Kant, purely self-interested use of another person has been identified as the antithesis of ethical life, and theorists of environmental ethics have since extended the proscription against this kind of rapacious use to the natural world. From this ethical perspective, Congal can be seen as an exploiter of others and of material things, at least at the beginning of the play; in his perceptive commentary, Richard Allen Cave points out
how Congal, an Irish hero from the sagas, appears here in a fallen form as a degraded old campaigner, thieving, drinking, and raping his way across the countryside with callous self-interest (369). Congal’s blindness is also evident in his attitude towards the Herne: he dismisses the god as a creation of the sublimated sexuality of Attracta and other virgin women, and suggests that coupling with all seven soldiers is needed to “melt down the snow/That’s fallen among these wintry rocks” (233). He is not initially capable of acknowledging the Herne’s influence, which he ridicules with impunity early in the play (during the time that it remains hidden).

As the play progresses, however, the repressed Herne returns as a powerful and destructive force demanding recognition. The Herne’s vengeful appearance recalls Yeats’s earlier story “The Curse of the Fires and of the Shadows” from *The Secret Rose*, in which a Sidhe leads a crew of murderous puritans representing Christian hostility towards Celtic paganism over a cliff to their deaths. But in *The Herne’s Egg* the revenge of the antithetical is much more sinister and much more ambivalent; by the end of the play we almost come to admire Congal’s courageous negotiation of his horrible fate, and the once passive Herne becomes horrific as its excessive retribution is exacted without mercy. This ambivalence is a result of the play’s refusal to offer a stable frame of reference to ground its action. While the earlier story is unambiguously a celebration of Celticism, the late play depicts two frames of reference locked in suspension; the tension between Attracta’s and Congal’s ways of seeing produces absurd impasses and deadlocked ironies instead of synthetic resolutions. As Cave suggests, it becomes
increasingly difficult to make judgments about the play’s message as the plot unfolds, and we find ourselves wondering what, if anything, is being celebrated (369).

In this play, unlike the Cuchulain plays, it is near impossible to tell what is genuinely heroic and what is cowardly, a register of Yeats’s own reservations concerning his value as an ecological modernist operating against the political mainstream in relative isolation. The dark tone of the play and its pervasive irony reflect a condition in which every potential stance is revealed to be deeply flawed, whether one closes one’s eyes to ecopoetics and advances “callously” in a world tainted by its contempt for Celtic nature, or orients oneself towards a spectre that resembles apolitical escape unless it is mobilized for real, nightmarish violence. These potential stances can be identified with Congal, Attracta before her rape, and the Herne respectively: Congal, as I have discussed, is a figure of mundane political power locked in an irrelevant material struggle, whose ignorance of Celtic nature facilitates his instrumentalist attitude; before her rape, Attracta possesses sacred wisdom that challenges Congal’s attitude, but is forced to endure his displays of power without an effective avenue to challenge them; after her rape, Attracta summons the Herne, who, while not explicitly a figure of nationalized ecopoetics, represents the kind of irrational, monstrously effective violence Yeats feared his work could generate. Yeats’s imperfect position as an ecological modernist is most similar to Attracta’s: his defence of autonomous ecopoetics challenges the reality principle of modern Irish politics (but goes largely unheard) at the same time that it attempts to
contain the radical, but potentially misdirected violence ecopoetics can engender when collapsed into politics.

_The Herne’s Egg_ is not just another celebration or defence of ecopoetics, but an acknowledgement on Yeats’s part that his service of autonomous ecopoetics is tied to a complex ideological bind and results in ambivalence. His preferred position is portrayed as necessarily haunted by limitations, stalked by the paths it rejects; but so too is the dominant order he sought throughout his career to undermine. Rather than attempting to open the flood gates of repressed Celticism in order to spontaneously reform society – the comparatively naïve aspiration of Yeats’s early work – _The Herne’s Egg_ preserves Yeats’s ecological critique while insisting on an uncertain, even grotesque suspension that questions the metaphysics of mainstream Irish politics and the esoteric discourse of autonomous ecopoetics alike.

**Waiting on An Acre of Grass**

What portion in the world can the artist have
Who has awakened from the common dream
But dissipation and despair?

- from “Ego Dominus Tuus” (49-51, 161)

Perhaps the only clear message communicated in _The Herne’s Egg_ is that the antithetical, like the Herne’s revenge, will inevitably ascend to restructure civilization, for better or worse, according to the movement of the gyres. Indeed, a deeply problematic consolation
of the non-voluntarist cosmology of *A Vision* is that Yeats’s form of passive engagement through art is, given the text’s peculiar logic, not even strictly necessary to effect the changes he envisions therein. His later writing, correspondingly, takes on a fatalistic tone and an extended timeline – the changes to come are no longer the imminent generational project of the early essays. The concluding passage of “A General Introduction for my Work” reflects this shift towards a kind of impassioned quietism:

> When I stand upon O’Connell Bridge in the half-light and notice that discordant architecture, all those electric signs, where modern heterogeneity has taken physical form, a vague hatred comes up out of my own dark and I am certain that wherever in Europe there are minds strong enough to lead others the same vague hatred arises; in four or five generations or in less generations this hatred will have issued in violence and imposed some kind of rule of kindred. I cannot know the nature of that rule, for its opposite fills the light; all I can do to bring it nearer is to intensify my hatred. I am no Nationalist, except in Ireland for passing reasons; State and Nation are the work of intellect, and when you consider what comes before and what comes after them they are … not worth the blade of grass God gives for the rest of the linnet (526).

While an as-yet unrealized “rule of kindred” – the anti-self of the political and cultural order that “fills the light” – will replace the ugliness of modernity’s hegemonic
“heterogeneity” in “four or five generations or in less generations,” it will likely come about as a result of the “violence” Yeats could advocate conceptually but not politically. With this extended timeline, the dilemma of modernist ecology is postponed more than it is resolved. This is unsurprising considering its architecture: if the state of profound uncertainty shadowed by violence evident in The Herne’s Egg is accepted as the romantic modernist’s (imagination of the) zeitgeist, postponement – of warlike action, of commitment beyond the precincts of autonomous art – is understandable, even if it can be taken to confirm some of the most damning suspicions about modernism. Yeats’s delegation of transcendent power to nature in this passage even approaches the passive “humanity is a virus,” “nature will have her revenge” mentality of some of the most facile, misanthropic environmentalist thought. It is certainly possible to read such postponement as failure of commitment dressed up as heroism, the tears of the beautiful soul who “washes his or her hands of the corrupt world, refusing to admit how in this very abstemiousness and distaste he or she participates in the creation of that world” (Morton 13).

On the other hand, there is something genuinely ecologically minded about the long view that strives to preserve the germ of “authentic” change for a future generation better equipped to realize it, even if this timeline tends to falsely diminish the import of
contemporary events. Indeed, there is something monstrously ecological – monstrous, that is, in its passivity – about Yeats’s last collected poem “Politics” (from 1938’s *Last Poems*), which stands as a disavowal of the import of the events leading up to World War Two, ostensibly one of the century’s definitive traumas. The poem shows Yeats’s shocking will to look past politics – in this case to a young girl representing both the potentially liberatory aesthetic dimension and the youthful virility that uncovers it – and towards a history that is not defined only by conflicts between states, but by recognition or suppression of beauty, which for Yeats is always linked to the recognition and suppression of nature-being. Yeats’s broken-down “old man” persona, who finds himself lying in “the foul rag and bone shop of the heart” (“The Circus Animal’s Desertion” 40, 348), is as much an embittered reaction to the pervasive belief that metaphysics are dead and “the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms” (348) (the epigraph to “Politics,” a quote from Thomas Mann) as it is to the inevitable decay of the body and creative spirit in old age and the resulting sense that all personal creation has been for nought.

Although “The Circus Animal’s Desertion,” with its Congal-like denial of art’s capacity to alter a material world that is now seen as nothing more than a degraded

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66 The attempt to locate “authentic” ecology is still relevant today: contemporary environmentalism is faced with the difficult task, for example, of challenging profit oriented liberal “resourcism” with anti-capitalist, “ecocentric” models of environmental stewardship.  
67 Marcuse’s work, which I discuss further on in a chapter on Beckett, is devoted to drawing this connection. *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978) associate ecologically destructive substantialist orientations towards nature with the failure to perceive natural beauty.
“mound of refuse” (347, 35), has generally been accepted as the definitive statement of Yeats’s later career, he offers what I think is a more perceptive, less cynical assessment of the dynamics of his late situation in “An Acre of Grass” (from 1938’s New Poems). This lesser known poem is worth quoting in its entirety:

    Picture and book remain,
    An acre of green grass
    For air and exercise,
    Now strength of body goes;
    Midnight, an old house
    Where nothing stirs but a mouse

    My temptation is quiet.
    Here at life’s end
    Neither loose imagination,
    Nor the mill of the mind,
    Consuming its rag and bone,
    Can make the truth known.

    Grant me an old man’s frenzy.
    Myself must I remake
    Till I am Timon and Lear
    Or that William Blake
    Who beat upon the wall
    Till truth obeyed his call;

    A mind Michael Angelo knew
    That can pierce the clouds
    Or inspired by frenzy
    Shake the dead in their shrouds;
    Forgotten else by mankind
    An old man’s eagle mind (301-302).
This poem finds the speaker alone in a quiet house with quieted temptations, in possession of knowledge but isolated from society. While externally the scene is domestic, limited to an acre of grass “for air and exercise,” internally the “old man’s eagle mind” continues to yearn for the anti-self. This project, because internal and detached from meaningful collectivity, is forgotten “by mankind,” yet its fearsome energy lies dormant, prepared to “pierce the clouds.” The old man’s labour to transform “rag and bone” into the anti-self is never-ending, futile save that it keeps the germ of metaphysical change alive. His autonomy – equally a result of exile and conscious choice – is starkly limiting, yet it also provides a protected domain in which to cultivate the seeds of genuine change. “An Acre of Grass” reflects how autonomous ecopoetics does not simply fail, as “The Circus Animal’s Desertion” can be taken to suggest, but finds its project deferred, whether temporarily or unendingly – stalemated by its own mode of engagement.

**Conclusion: The Impossibility of Ecological Politics**

Over the course of his career-spanning experiment with modernist ecology Yeats’s found that genuine ecological politics were impossible. While his ecological language proved capable of promoting zeal for Irish nationalism, he saw its essential message lost in the process. The nationalization of ecopoetics was found undesirable due to its tendency, on one hand, to collapse the ecopoetics/politics distinction only falsely (to subordinate ecopoetics to politics), and, on the other hand, its capacity to collapse the distinction
effectively yet misdirectedly, thereby threatening to create monstrous, uncontrollable, and ultimately valueless forms of collectivity. The cosmopolitan occultism of Yeats’s work and its theory of the Great Mind offered an alternative, indirect way of effecting ecological change through alchemical art, but paradoxically exalted the talented individual as the ultimate good. Similarly, his notion of an as-yet unrealized humanity preserved radical possibilities for change, but drew upon this imagined form of collectivity to harshly dismiss the existing “mob.” Yeats’s recourse to “activism” via art and his liberal defence of its autonomous operative domain protected the project of modernist ecology, but radically divorced it from mainstream political discourse and thus limited its potential for societal and civilizational change. Yeats’s late work registers doubts and reservations about his ecological project, but remains faithful to its ambitions, if only through a problematic logic of passivity and deferral.

I have offered this necessarily simplified narrative about Yeats’s career in an attempt to show how his consistent commitment to ecological change generated impasses that are commonly associated with his own lack of political commitment or with aesthetic modernism’s more general “apolitical” tendencies. While environmentally responsible thought today arguably requires a hitherto unfathomable extension of the political sphere – Latour, for example, has described how non-human entities such as crustaceans, river beds, old growth trees, aerosols, and DNA are finally entering political discourse and
changing forever what we mean by “politics”68 – Yeats’s work speaks to an opposite but potentially complementary requirement of modernist ecology: that the esoteric, para-political modernist language that can offer new ways of interfacing with the non-human be protected from the leveling effect of exoteric, instrumentalist political discussion. Whether we speak of the need to extend or to limit the political sphere, attempts to reduce Yeats’s thought to an implicitly or explicitly expressed political agenda which deny or ignore the unique valence of ecopoetics, and the very viability of this para-political space for thought, will inevitably misrepresent its ecological dimension. Likewise, depictions of Yeats as an apolitical thinker cannot be credited when the relationship between politics and ecopoetics has been properly theorized, especially given that what constitutes politics for Yeats is so vague and equivocal, either one-dimensional (constitutional politics, liberal statecraft, dull policy making) or remarkably expansive (a reality principle to be combated – the politics of resisting “politics”). If many contemporary theorists insist that a new, ecologically aware form of political discourse needs to replace the former, limited view of politics, Yeats’s “apolitical” commitment to metaphysical change insists that an entirely new mode of existence is required to alter modernity’s destructive course. To think Yeats’s complex position we must resort to a paradox that is nicely articulated by Andrew Gibson in another context: “it is the meaning of the future which gives meaning to politics, which is to decree the impossibility of politics, which is not to give up on politics” (194). While the call to extend political consideration to the non-human, we can

68 See for instance We Have Never Been Modern (1-3).
only hope, will eventually inform environmental policies worldwide, Yeats’s modernist vision – viewed in a contemporary light – must be understood as revolutionarily defiant of and supplementary to the project of environmentalist political reform: it is too “deep” for practical politics, yet, in the final analysis, ironically finds itself back in the kind of supplementary position the Yeats of “The Celtic Element in Literature” defined his entire project against.
Works Cited


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Chapter Two:

Posthumanism and Fascist Ecology in the Novels of D. H. Lawrence

Introduction: Modernist Ecology, Fascism, and Lawrence’s “Two Natures”

The essential quality of poetry is that it makes a new effort of attention, and “discovers” a new world within the known world. Man, and the animals, and the flowers, all live within a strange and forever surging chaos. The chaos which we have got used to we call a cosmos. The unspeakable inner chaos of which we are composed we call consciousness, and mind, and even civilization. But it is, ultimately, chaos, lit up by visions, or not lit up by visions. Just as the rainbow may or may not light up the storm ... But man cannot live in chaos ... Man must wrap himself in a vision, make a house of apparent form and stability, fixity. In his terror of chaos he begins by putting up an umbrella between himself and the everlasting whirl. Then he paints the under-side of his umbrella like a firmament. Then he parades around, lives and dies under his umbrella. Bequeathed to his descendents, the umbrella becomes a dome, a vault, and men at last begin to feel that something is wrong. Man fixes some wonderful erection of his own between himself and the wild chaos, and gradually goes bleached and stifled under his parasol. Then comes a poet, enemy of convention, and makes a slit in the umbrella; and lo! the glimpse of chaos is a vision, a window to the sun. But after a while, getting used to the vision, and not liking the genuine draught from chaos, commonplace man daubs a simulacrum of the window that opens onto chaos, and patches the umbrella with the painted patch of the simulacrum. That is, he has got used to the vision; it is part of his house-decoration.

- D. H. Lawrence, from “Preface to Chariot of the Sun” (257)

In his remarkable preface to Harry Crosby’s 1928 collection Chariot of the Sun, Lawrence concisely articulates a version of the theory of poetics and artistic innovation I have identified as central to ecological modernism: faced with an ontology of “form and stability” which is stultifying yet only “apparent,” the artist struggles to rediscover the
“surging chaos” of nature-being – the *prima materia* of both mind and matter – only to recommence a cycle, reminiscent of Yeats’s perpetual exchange of the primary and antithetical gyres, that will see convention and habit recapture merely the *form* of artistic vision and force the production of ever new “windows” opening to the “genuine draught from chaos.” This passage can be read as a retrospective theorization of Lawrence’s own experimental literary project up until 1928, and it is also strikingly prescient in its prediction of “rebel” modernism’s ultimate recuperation by the same bourgeois culture whose values it attempted to shatter, as well as New Criticism’s post-war creation of a purely formal “tradition of the new” (Osbourne 165) disguising modernism’s equivocal but pervasive revolutionary bent. It is interesting that Lawrence, usually condemned for his politics in today’s academia, should be so clear in his warning against the kind of empty formalism that is now condemned alongside him. Certainly Lawrence would have been loath to see the struggle for “vision” reduced to an empty search for new structural permutations, but what exactly makes this search so empty for an artist such as Lawrence, who was troubled by “apolitical” formalism but resistant to liberal conceptions of politics as well?

This question brings us back to the impasse I identified in Yeats’s work: ecological modernism must be “authentic,” must strive to encounter nature-being rather than produce new forms for their own sake, yet to be truly meaningful this authentic encounter must have consequences beyond the subjective experience of the artist, whether these consequences are brought about actively (through problematic concessions
to politics) or relatively passively (though the problematically limited domain of ecopoetics). The question of authenticity is thus inevitably tied to avant-garde attempts to unite politics and art which, as I have suggested, are internal to modernism – from this perspective the avant-garde impulse is “the modernism of modernism” (38), as Andrew Hewitt puts it – and find their own empty formalization in Clement Greenberg’s narrative of the avant-garde as a search for the aesthetically new with no meaningful contact with politics or “the world” whatsoever (Jameson 172). The greater question all this brings up is how exactly to narrate the complex relationship in Lawrence’s work between the ecological theory of poetics quoted above, the possibility of the recuperation of “revolutionary” artistic vision by the status quo, and the extreme leadership politics he appears to advance, at least for a time, as the avant-garde path to the realization of the former and the solution to the latter. In simpler terms, what is the relationship between Lawrence’s seemingly apolitical ecology, with its demand for authentic windows onto nature-being rather than degraded “simulacra,” and his fantasies of a potentially fascist project to purge and rejuvenate all of civilization?

While Lawrence, like Yeats, is understandably often thought of as a reactionary figure, this is usually due to his insistence on the politically troubling notion that nature is under threat due to an “unnatural” state of affairs marked by capitalism, industrialism, and materialism, to which it is possible to add feminism, socialism, and eventually even fascism itself. While it is certainly possible to find organicism in Lawrence’s writing and to link it with the failures of his political imagination, the category of the “natural” or
“organic,” as Anne Fernihough argues, is not reactionary in itself, but rather realizes its reactionary or progressive political potential depending on how it is used in a particular context (20). F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson’s *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Responsibility* (1933), an early forerunner of ecocriticism in the naturalist mould, was one of the first critical texts to emphasize the capacity of literature to foster organic community and environmental awareness, and found its primary inspiration in Lawrence, whom Leavis in particular lionized. While this deeply conservative text has fallen out of favour for good reason, Fernihough’s groundbreaking study *D. H. Lawrence: Aesthetics and Ideology* (1993) was the first to challenge a critical assumption that grew out of the now familiar argument used to dismiss it: that organicism, even esteem for “nature” more generally, is necessarily characterized by an implicit or explicit desire to effect reactionary closure and to return to a lost “natural” state. Since the twentieth century saw this natural state imagined in terms of native soil and bloodlines with catastrophic consequences, this line of argument implies that “nature” may be too dangerous to deal with at all, at least not in political discussion. To counter this limited argument, Fernihough argues for the presence of “progressive” difference, multiplicity, and uprootedness in certain portrayals of nature (17) – and Lawrence’s nature in particular – which can even appear alongside reactionary organicism in the same text. Although Lawrence’s aesthetics are closer to realism or naturalism than those of the other authors in this study, they are nonetheless exemplary of what Jeff Wallace calls “posthuman epistemology” (197), a “higher” realism which, in
line with Fernihough’s theory of defamiliarized nature, consistently undermines discrete organic entities by revealing their greater identity with the flux of nature-being.

For Fernihough, the tendency to complacently dismiss ideologies suspected of organicism is more than a terminological problem: it has made it nearly impossible to effectively explore the complex relationship between ecology and fascism in Lawrence’s work (16). Her conclusion serves as a call for more critical explorations of this link, and allows us to contend with the real difficulty involved in understanding Lawrence’s ecology, which lies not in unmasking his use of reactionary terminology and perhaps artificially separating such reactionary features from his work’s “good intentions,” but in making sense of his work’s vacillation between a (“progressive”) nature that is resistant to form and detached from locality – the “chaos” of nature being invoked in his preface to *Chariot of the Sun* – and a (“reactionary”) nature linked with nationalism and racial memory. However, while Fernihough’s study allows us to discredit dismissals of Lawrence’s work as straightforwardly reactionary, her sense of the former nature as implicitly progressive also masks something essential: the extent to which fascism was no more straightforwardly reactionary than Lawrence’s work, and was itself ideologically invested in *both* natures.

This chapter analyzes the relationship between modernist nature-being and radical politics in Lawrence’s work without attempting to claim nature-being as a progressive concept in the conventional liberal or leftist sense. It also attempts to explain Lawrence’s engagement with authoritarian politics without positing a hard distinction between what
is ecological in Lawrence’s thought and what is potentially fascist. In order to take up such a position it is necessary to complicate the framework I used in the previous chapter to explain Yeats’s vacillation between politics and ecopoetics, particularly where conceptions of politics, artistic autonomy, and fascism are concerned (especially Benjamin’s well known theory of fascism as the aestheticization of politics). Recent studies of fascism such as Roger Griffin’s *Modernism and Fascism* (2007) and Mark Antliff’s *Avant-Garde Fascism* (2007) have demonstrated definitively that it is no longer tenable or even academically responsible to maintain strong distinctions between the “progressive” aspirations of aesthetic modernism and the historical avant-gardes and the “reactionary” ideology of European fascism, nor is it possible, in Benjaminian fashion, to dismiss the fascist “revolutions” as cynical manipulations of the masses devoid of revolutionary conviction at the higher levels of organization. Likewise, because fascism’s internally contradictory investment in nature was futural as much as it was tied to an imagined past – and was positioned against the bourgeois status quo in both iterations – it is no longer possible to portray fascist ecology as a discourse of reactionary closure without careful qualifications that apply equally to Lawrence’s similarly complex investment in nature.69

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69 Although it risks indulging in an overly abstract discussion of concrete historical phenomena, I follow Griffin in using a maximalist definition of fascism informed primarily by homologous features of Italian fascism and German National Socialism, but also by French, Romanian, Spanish, and other variants of fascism. This approach looks first and foremost at the fascist imaginary, but without losing sight of its role in generating political reality. According to Griffin, fascist ideology, a relatively amorphous yet consistent set of ideas, rose to prominence in
In order to make such qualifications I will draw on French philosopher Alain Badiou’s controversial affirmation of the twentieth century’s posthuman projects faced with a humanist restoration in contemporary academia, and will use French political philosopher Luc Ferry as a liberal humanist counterpoint to his thought.  

Though they the first half of the twentieth century and was eventually expressed in social modernist programmes.

In reconstructing the fascist imaginary it may be useful to consider two figures discussed by Griffin: Baron Julius Evola and Adolf Hitler. Evola, an Italian ex-Dadaist, travelled to Germany in 1938 to deliver a private lecture to the inner circle of Himmler’s SS on his popular treatise *Revolt Against the Modern World* (1934). The lecture – delivered in language that combined cosmopolitan occultism and profound racism – reiterated his argument that the modern West had propelled itself towards the brink of dissolution, but reminded the SS leaders that a new age could be inaugurated should they remain true to “the metaphysical dimension of their mission, namely to carry out a total material and *spiritual* revolution” (Griffin 16). While Evola, in spite of this lecture, is remembered as a “reactionary” cultural critic insofar he had no demonstrable direct influence on mainstream Nazi or Italian fascist politics, his contemporary Hitler, who made an almost identical though less esoteric argument using similar language in *Mein Kampf* (1925), is remembered for his central role in advancing catastrophic social processes which, due to their more concrete, “political” character, are more comfortably designated “fascist” (as if there were an ideology on one hand, and a set of events on the other). If these men believed similar things, Griffin asks, and some of them brought their convictions into practice, why are we afraid of recognizing the importance of ideology when it comes to the study of fascism (and apparently only fascism)?

Although I follow Griffin in speaking generally of fascist ideology, my discussion focuses on Nazism as an exemplary form of fascism because Nazism was the variant of fascism which most directly thematized its vision of anthropological/ontological revolution in terms of nature, and is thus the most explicitly “ecological” form of fascism. While Italian fascism, for example, sought to effect the same kind of epochal change, it did not imagine the Italian “new man” as a steward of nature (nonetheless, Italian fascism can still be loosely termed “ecological” in the modernist sense despite its relative lack of investment in organic if not metaphysical nature). I also focus on Nazism because Lawrence, as I will discuss, was influenced by the same complex of German anti-enlightenment thought from which Nazism emerged. Regarding my use of the term “fascist ecology” – which, in short, I understand to be a palingenetic programme marked by a contradictory meeting of the two natures detailed above – I will theorize its ideology in detail throughout this chapter.

Although the terms “posthuman” and “posthumanism” bear varied connotations in postmodern theory, I use these terms to signify cultural modernism’s attempt to imagine a new humanity – which, as I have suggested, necessarily implies imagining a new nature – and thus its affirmation, against classical humanism, of the historical contingency and infinite potential of the human being to create itself (in *The Century*, Badiou calls this infinite being “the immortal”). My
are rival thinkers in French philosophy, Ferry and Badiou have not explicitly debated questions of posthumanism and ecology; while Ferry has defended Enlightenment humanism and liberal environmentalism in his influential essay *The New Ecological Order* (1992), Badiou has had less to say about environmentalism (though he has condemned what he sees as its conservatism). Still, the terms of a debate between liberal environmentalism and modernist ecology are evident in their larger disagreement, and are useful for theorizing the relationship between modernist ecology and fascism since for Ferry ecological movements, and deep ecology in particular, represent first and foremost a dangerous threat to democracy, while for Badiou “danger,” especially the danger of a fascist resolution, is the sign of an authentic political process capable of genuinely altering the status quo, rather than merely attempting to limit its evils. Badiou’s thought is further useful in that, as I will outline in detail below, it offers a coherent means of separating the promising/threatening danger of a revolutionary event – which for Badiou is always universalizing, inclusive, and felicitously transcendent of locality – from the possibility of its transformation into an affirmation of “simulacra” such as nation, race, or native soil (to which we might add Leavis and Thompson’s “organic community” as well as reactionary uses of the categories “organic” or “natural” more generally). As such it helps differentiate between what is universal in Lawrence’s ecology and what settles for mystified nationalism and other phony claimants to the future. Furthermore, it allows us

“posthumanism” is thus that of Yeats and Lawrence, Nietzsche and Marx, but also Hitler and Mussolini.
to better understand why Lawrence’s consistently contradictory ways of formulating his own revolutionary/fascist fantasies ultimately led him to reject them.

This chapter begins with an analysis of the ecological crisis diagnosed by Lawrence in *Women in Love* (1920), and moves on to demonstrate how and why he advanced authoritarian politics as the means to enact his regenerative vision with increasing forcefulness, primarily through the so-called “leadership novels,” especially *Kangaroo* (1923) and *The Plumed Serpent* (1926). Drawing on Griffin’s theory of semi-distinct “programmatic” and “epiphanic” impulses in modernism – the former of which “expresses itself as a mission to change society, to inaugurate a new epoch ... and projects the transformation of social realities and political systems” (62), while the latter accepts change of “a purely inner, spiritual kind with no revolutionary, epoch-making designs on ‘creating a new world’” (63) – it then traces Lawrence’s retreat from programmatic conceptions of modernist ecology in his last major novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928). While Lawrence’s critics have tended to celebrate his more epiphanic works and condemn his leadership novels, I suggest that these encounters with the programmatic mode help delimit a threshold between imaginative vision and revolutionary action that modernist ecology, in the final analysis, was more concerned with maintaining than aggressively crossing. Finally, I argue that Lawrence is an indispensible figure in the study of modernism, fascism, and ecocriticism precisely because of the proximity of his thought to fascist ecology, and because of his ability to sometimes self-consciously,
sometimes unwittingly expose the workings of fascist ideology and the conditions that give rise to it.

**Ecocide and Palingenesis in Women in Love**

The neologism “ecocide,” in currency since the nineteen-seventies, names the belated condition in which the global network of modern industrial technology, liberal capitalism, and conspicuous consumption (primarily in privileged nations) has developed to such an extent that the wholesale destruction of planetary ecosystems becomes a very real possibility. The realization that Western society is “ecocidal” emerged through the sixties and seventies, entering the popular imagination through iconic post-World War Two, “postmodern” images – the rubble of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Cold War nuclear arms testing, the defoliated jungles of Vietnam, the fragile planet glimpsed from space, the ominous “silent spring” sketched by Rachel Carson, news portraiture of the latest extinct animal – yet Lawrence envisioned the possibility of ecocide in more esoteric, metaphysical terms long before such images confirmed its certainty exoterically. Although it develops themes that are evident in *The Rainbow* (1915) and other earlier works, *Women in Love* (1920), written in part during the catastrophe of the First World War, marks Lawrence’s first truly desperate confrontation with the linkage of nihilism and technological power he identified not only as the war’s engine, but as the engine of modernization itself. Lawrence’s account of the ecocidal course of modernity is metaphysical in the sense that it focuses less on the tangible environmental degradation
wrought by industrial technology (degradation “out there” so to speak) than on features of the modern imagination which sanction such degradation in advance, for example the tendency to understand nature and humanity alike as infinitely exploitable inert mechanisms. This insistence on the metaphysical or ontological as a mode of ecological critique links Lawrence’s thought to deep ecology, as Paul Delany has observed, and allows us to read his work as an early exploration of the relationship between “deep” ecological thought and larger political projects.

The title of Paul Nash’s suggestively titled war painting “We are Making a New World” (1918), which depicts the sun rising on a stretch of No Man’s Land mangled by artillery bombardment, could not be more appropriate to the striking union of bitterness, irony, and frustrated hope that is Lawrence’s novel; like Nash’s painting, Women in Love diagnoses the catastrophe of modernity at the same time that it registers cultural modernism’s desire to purge in order to one day regenerate, a desire which, viewed through the optics of the 1920s, was only realized in cruelly ironic “real-world” forms such as the war’s indiscriminate destruction not only of organic life, but also of whole structures of human experience. Both Nash and Lawrence suggest that their contemporaries are successfully creating a new world, but that it is the wrong one—a posthumanism of nihilistic technological cataclysm. Thus, as an experiment in modernist

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ecology, *Women in Love* does not so much condemn the early-twentieth century’s climate of destruction – which after all destroys what is old and outworn alongside what is vital – as it considers what might need to be eliminated or transformed in order to create conditions that would foster the creation of a healthy posthuman state, and how this might be effected. The question posed by Lawrence’s ecology is thus not the contemporary environmentalist’s “conservative” question – “How do we limit or arrest what is destructive and preserve what remains?” – but the modernist’s paradoxically framed futural question – “How do we negate what is destructive and create something that is actually new?”

*Women in Love* explores both kinds of destruction through the two couples whose frustrated attempts to find new ways of living form the substance of the narrative. Though both couples are comprised of full characters who display a wide range of motivations, the destruction wrought by the marriage of nihilism and modern technology (and its counterpart in a certain kind of modern art) is associated primarily with Gerald Critch and Gudrun Brangwen, whereas the creative destruction which attempts to counteract it is associated primarily with Rupert Birkin and Ursula Brangwen, though it should be emphasized that it is through Gerald and Birkin’s homoerotic exploration of *Blutbrüderschaft* (“blood-brotherhood”) that these posthumanisms confront one and other most directly in the text. *Women in Love* begins with a conversation between Gudrun and Ursula that immediately establishes the novel’s restless mood faced with a climate in which, as Gudrun puts it, “Nothing materializes” (6) despite the evident sterility of the
still lingering mores of the Victorian generation – which for Lawrence confirmed its ideological bankruptcy by marching enthusiastically to war – and the need for new, regenerative ways of living. Although Gudrun’s somewhat flippant conclusion that it is necessary to simply “[jump] over the edge” (8) regardless of where one might land foreshadows the novel’s violent conclusion, her attitude captures the modernist moment proper to Lawrence’s postwar work, for which the possibility of an alternative, any alternative, to the prevailing order legitimates the most extreme risks. The fact that this discourse of extremes is invoked by a conversation about marriage of all things indicates the wider resonance of the novel’s central relationships and their often radical, if indirect engagement with pressing societal issues. Soon after their conversation about marriage, the Brangwens encounter Birkin and Gerald as they pass by Diana Critch’s wedding ceremony, and both men come to represent different attractive alternatives to the status quo. Gudrun is attracted to Gerald’s physical prowess and social status, but more mysteriously to his “northern” features, which, in their “sinister stillness,” suggest “lurking danger” (13); Ursula, on the other hand, is attracted to Rupert’s active intellect and stimulating eccentricity, another signifier of new possibilities.

If Gerald can be read as a posthuman figure, it is strictly in the more negative sense of technological mastery unchecked by the Victorian humanism espoused by his father, who (in bad faith it is suggested) attempted to be simultaneously an exploitative capitalist and selfless benefactor of the working class (222). Like Shaw’s Andrew Undershaft in Major Barbara (1905), Gerald rejects sham charity and humanitarianism
and instead embraces the capacity of industrial technology’s unprecedented productive energy to alter society, but unlike Undershaft he does so with only a guiding vision of industry’s perfection, not society’s. Gudrun recognizes this lack at the heart of Gerald’s personality early in the novel when the sisters witness his violent, willful swimming; “Certainly, he’s got go,” Gudrun reflects, “The unfortunate thing is, where does his go go to, what becomes of it?” (47). Gerald’s project aims to sweep away his father’s failed union of humanitarianism and capitalism, but envisions in its stead only the struggle of the industrialist “God of the machine” (230) to “subjugate Matter to his own ends” (231) – to reduce all of humanity and nature to Heidegger’s Bestand (“standing reserve”).73 This project requires no external sanction: “The subjugation itself was the point, the fight was the be-all, the fruits of victory were mere results” (231). The only possible victory is “the pure fulfillment of [the industrialist’s] will in the struggle with the natural conditions” (231); Gerald is not motivated by the increased profits he nonetheless secures from the mining operation, but by the “inhuman principle” (235) of mechanization. His denial of free coal to widows of dead miners, for example, does not stem from concern with profitability as much as from contempt for “these stock figures of sentimental humanitarianism” whose “almost repulsive” (238) suffering demands concessions from a

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73 See “The Question Concerning Technology” (pg. 17).
machine designed only to manipulate human beings unsentimentally, just as the contested coal is extracted from mines.  

Gerald pushes the logic of Taylorized industrial production beyond its limits, and in doing so reveals what is for Lawrence its perverse, nihilistic core. Lawrence’s ecological sensibility is evident in his election to respond to the war with a novel which

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74 In *Women in Love* Gerald’s project is framed in terms of something like an early, racist version of Adorno and Horkheimer’s dialectic of enlightenment. Birkin theorizes that West African civilization “died, mystically” thousands of years ago when it lost its “desire for creation and happiness” (262) “leaving the single impulse for knowledge of one sort, mindless, progressive knowledge through the senses” (262-263) and a darker “mystic knowledge in disintegration and corruption” (263). Although Birkin’s terms are often ambiguous to the point of contradiction, it is clear that he sees West African mysticism as a radicalization of sensual experience so extreme that it conquers the imagination’s ability to interface creatively with nature, which is here reduced only to painful or pleasurable stimulus (or a meeting of the two). He sees the “mysticism” of “the white races” (263), in turn, as fundamentally different, yet headed towards the same endpoint of dissolution. The white races, having taken mind/matter abstraction to extremes, will “fulfil a mystery of ice-destructive knowledge, snow-abstract annihilation” (263). I suggest that this is similar in some ways to the argument of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* since, considering Gerald’s role as the ultimate pursuer of “ice-destructive knowledge,” the novel tells a comparable story about Europe reifying its own abstractions in order to create a totalizing “objective” system that becomes as oppressive and hostile to imagination as the terminal thoughtlessness Birkin projects onto West Africa.

75 Taylorism was not a political ideology but an industrial system pioneered by Frederick Taylor in the late-nineteenth century, and otherwise known as “scientific management.” Taylorism maximized industrial efficiency by taking the division of labour to extremes; under Taylorism, workers were asked to master much more limited skill sets that involved performing highly specified, repetitive tasks. Commentators on the left and right were both horrified by the dehumanizing nature of this means of production, but its hugely increased output ensured its widespread adoption by manufacturing plants. Lukáč’s Marxist theory of reification (first outlined in 1923’s landmark *History and Class Consciousness*) identified a growing trend under industrial capitalism to treat human relations as if they were manipulable things, and still stands among the most notable condemnations of scientific management. On the right, Heidegger’s celebration of handicraft and small scale agriculture in *Being and Time* (1927) positioned itself against the levelling effect of streamlined “American” industrialism. Across the Atlantic, The American Arts and Crafts Movement represented a much less politically radical challenge to Taylorism. Sigfried Giedion’s classic *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948) remains an informative and authoritative history of Taylorism, and is actually even more interesting considering its early date of publication.
deals (directly) only with this ecocidal “fight with Matter” (235), thereby suggesting that its irrational rationality lies at the heart of not only the catastrophe of World War One, but also the colonial and counter-revolutionary violence Gerald is reported to have fantasized about during his youth (66). The end result of Gerald’s project is a condition in which the hypocrisies of the old order have been excised only in order to distil and radicalize its life-denying tendencies. Instead of a positive, idealistic vision of the modernist “new man” – a posthuman übermensch whose break with past modes of perception, morality, and collective action would inaugurate a more promising “new world” – Gerald locates “the most wonderful and superhuman” (239) in “the pure instrumentality of mankind” (230), a vision which, by reducing humanity to matter, not only intensifies the worst tendencies to reification evident in Victorian science, but suppresses the capacity and freedom of human consciousness to experience matter in any other way (hence Gerald’s satisfaction with the miners’ dogged acceptance of his new order). Gerald’s industrial program rests on a paradox: he successfully remakes humanity and nature on both the ontic and ontological registers, and in this sense confirms modernist ecology’s conception of a reimaginable nature or reality principle, yet, ultimately hostile to consciousness and celebratory only of the blind, impersonal will of technology, it then aims to eliminate this possibility altogether. While modernist ecology, as I have suggested, emphasizes the chiasmic interaction of consciousness and matter in order to allow for the possibility of ontological change, Gerald’s vision of humanity and
matter as raw materials reified by an impersonal will to power aims for a condition of closure in which ecological change would become impossible.

Birkin attempts, desperately, and not always coherently, to find alternatives to the condition of closure represented by Gerald’s perfect mechanical system without reverting back to the humanism it rejects. Although Birkin’s thought is experimental and never arrives at a defined programme of action, it consistently refuses to view “humanity” and “nature” as fixed categories, which is essential for modernist ecology’s competing notion of posthumanism as life-enhancing metaphysical change. It is thus in Birkin’s thought that we recognize Fernihough’s “progressive” element in the organic, an element that is suppressed by Gerald’s “substitution of the mechanical principle for the organic” alongside more static notions of “organic purpose” and “organic unity” (239) which compete with the logic of total mechanization. Although Birkin rejects popular “newspaper cant” about “the new man,” his agitated conversation relentlessly announces the need to “bust [this life] completely” (53) by dissolving modern self-consciousness and willfulness and accessing instead the “dark involuntary being” (42) which alone seems to offer promise of the reintegration into “the circumambient universe” envisioned by Lawrence in his essay “Morality and the Novel” and posited as the ultimate purpose of art (527). Critics interested in Lawrence’s posthumanism, such as Jeff Wallace, often

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76 Lawrence writes: “The business of art is to reveal the relation between man and his circumambient universe, at the living moment. As mankind is always struggling in the toils of old relationships, art is always ahead of the ‘times,’ which themselves are always far in the rear of the living moment ... If we think about it, we find that our life consists in this achieving of a pure relationship between ourselves and the living universe about us. This is how I ‘save my soul,’ by
focus on Birkin’s recurrent fantasy of a world devoid of human beings – “a world empty of people, just uninterrupted grass, a hare sitting up” (131) – but it is important to note that it is precisely in this frustrated, bitter fantasy that his posthuman imagination fails, at least from the perspective of modernist ecology, since its conjuring-away of human subjectivity simply avoids thinking metaphysical change at all. In fact, these dead-end fantasies actually mirror Gerald’s pursuit of a condition of closure in which ecology is no longer possible, and should therefore be contrasted with Birkin’s more properly ecological thought rather than conflated with it.77 Likewise, Ursula recognizes that there “is complete ignominy in an unreplenished, mechanized life” (199), yet is drawn to fantasies of death as much as rejuvenation:

What a gladness to think that whatever humanity did, it could not seize hold of the kingdom of death, to nullify that. The sea they turned into a

accomplishing a pure relationship between me and another person, me and a race of men, me and the animals, me and the trees and flowers, me and the earth, me and the skies and sun and stars, me and the moon ... This, if we knew it, is our life and our eternity: the subtle, perfected relation between me and my whole universe” (527-528).

77 I discuss human death as a figure of the end of ecology in greater detail in the next chapter in relation to Beckett’s Malone Dies and The Unnamable. Still, it bears pointing out here how my theory of ecological modernism differs from Douglas Mao’s. For Mao, modernism was unique in that it sought to appreciate the object’s fascinating and total independence from humanity (10-11); the object world was for the modernists “a realm beyond the reach of ideology but not secure against the material consequences of ideological conflicts” (9). While I accept this reading and also perceive this desire in many modernist texts, I argue that modernist ecology is not fathomable without interaction between subject and object, or more to the point, relational shifts within a hybridized subject/object. From my perspective, the thing-in-itself is of no interest to modernist ecology in the final analysis, though fantasies of death as a means of accessing or protecting the non-human sometime appear in the same texts that undertake the laborious task of attempting to think ecologically, including Women in Love and Beckett’s novels (and of course Mao’s book is not about modernist ecology in my sense of the term, so there can actually be little conflict between our respective theories about modernism and the world of things).
murderous alley and a soiled road of commerce, disputed like the dirty land of a city every inch of it. The air they claimed too, shared it up, parcelled it out to certain owners, they trespassed in the air to fight for it. Everything was gone, walled in, with spikes on top of the walls ...

But the great, dark, illimitable kingdom of death, there humanity was put to scorn (199).

The desperation of Ursula’s prescient account of the combined effect of capitalism and technology on the environment is evident in its identification of death, non-being, as the only realm of being not drawn into the “spiked walls” of enfrraming; like Birkin’s fantasy, it despairs of ecological change and should not be read as ecological thought in the modernist sense without qualification.

One of the most notable instances of Birkin’s real ecological thought occurs after Hermione strikes him in the head with a paper weight during an intellectual argument and his state of shock and disorientation leads him to actively seek integration with “the circumambient universe” rather than merely to theorize it in conversation. Wandering into a nearby stretch of woods, Birkin takes off his clothes and luxuriates erotically in nature, exalting in “the coolness and subtlety of vegetation travelling into [his] blood” (110). He experiences the vegetation as “lovely, subtle, responsive ... added on to him” (111) a source of “immeasurable” enrichment (110) beyond possibility in intellectual
discussion, even sexual relationships (110). This state of ecstatic dissolution, in which boundaries between external nature and human consciousness seem to collapse, is for Birkin the seed of a posthuman ethic:

As for the certain grief he felt at the same time, in his soul, that was only the remains of an old ethic, that bade a human being adhere to humanity. 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. He would overlook the old grief, he would put away the old ethic, he would be free in his new state (111).

His experience is an elegy for the old subjectivity and the birth of a new posthuman state. Birkin calls the woods “his marriage place,” the recipient of his spiritual “seed,” and is concerned with protecting his vision from the “horror” of “other people” – still, he recognizes that it will be necessary “to go back into the world” (111). At this point his vision lacks a programme of action beyond its call to a meditative form of consciousness akin to Heidegger’s Gelassenheit (“letting things be”), which counters enframing on the subjective level but lacks its technological counterpart’s power to externalize itself

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78 Lawrence’s essay “Pan in America” opposes the kind of ecstatic, unproductive experience of nature Birkin describes to the manipulation of nature as raw material: “Is this any less true than when a lumberman glances at a pine tree, sees if it will cut good lumber, dabs a mark or a number upon it, and goes his way absolutely without further thought or feeling? Is he truer to life? Is it truer to insulate oneself entirely from the influence of the tree's life, and to walk about in an inanimate forest of standing lumber, marketable in St. Louis, Mo.? Is it truer to life to know, with a pantheistic sensuality, that the tree has its own life, its own assertive existence, its own living relatedness to me: that my life is added to, or militated against by the tree’s life?” (26).
through the might of industry, and, as I discussed with regard to Yeats’s poetics, does not lend itself particularly well to exoteric discussion or formulation within the ken of liberal politics. Ursula has a parallel experience when her intellectual campaign against arrogant “anthropomorphism” (274) finds its weird object of sympathy in the “magic peace” (254) of the forest at night, and Birkin and Ursula bring these visions into their coupling, which consistently eroticizes the interplay between individual being (the self) and impersonal fields of energy (the cosmos or circumambient universe).

The pairing of Gerald/Gudrun and Birkin/Ursula, as Fernihough suggests, invokes the Kultur/Zivilization division which was important to late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century German intellectuals anxious to define their own relationship to industrialization (27). According to this sociological theory, modern civilization is split between “outer” and “inner” expressions; while Zivilization (civilization) secures “the tangible amenities of earthly existence” (27) and marks its progress through externalizing forces such as industrial production, economic development, and the invention of ever more sophisticated technology, Kultur (culture) pursues more spiritual concerns and marks its progress through enlightenment (Bildung, or “cultivation”). Implicit in this

79 The fact that the problems of modernist of ecology are to a large extent still the problems of contemporary ecological critique is confirmed by Laurence Coupe’s inclusion of Lawrence’s essay “Remembering Pan” in The Green Studies Reader (2000), a collection of ecocriticism and its early sources of inspiration. Eco critics of all affiliations continue to locate some “new environmental ethic” in the works of authors from a variety of time periods and aesthetic movements, yet the problem of how to programmatically apply such ethics (which are metaphysical as much as they are “ethical”) beyond the realm of mere subjective experience remains as unresolved for the latest brand of poststructuralism as it was for Lawrence, for whom this was a major source of distress.
formulation, which was after all created by an intellectual class who felt threatened by the seemingly independent momentum of modernization, was the implication that culture needed to supplement or guide civilization, which was itself devoid of a higher purpose. Callous “externalism” was to be reimagined by a cultural elite with the appropriate spiritual sensitivity to balance the extraction of material necessities and manufacture of goods with respect for the beauty and mystery of creation, a fantasy of reconciliation registered in English modernism by E. M. Forster’s *Howard’s End* (1910). Modris Eksteins suggests that the German exaltation of *Kultur* anticipated modernism in its progressive attack on modern institutions but encouraged a potentially dangerous tendency “to look for answers to man’s social problems not in the external world but in his soul” (79). Lawrence’s frequent travels to Germany and attention to German philosophical thought make it unlikely that he was not familiar with this terminology (Smith 9), which is actually referenced quite directly when Hermione is described as a *Kulturträger* (bearer of culture), a term which could also be applied to Birkin, Ursula, and Gudrun (educators and an artist respectively).

Lawrence clearly imagines Gerald as a figure of *Zivilization* gone awry and Birkin as a figure of *Kultur* struggling to find external expression, but he offers no simple path to their reconciliation. Both men sense that they might be enriched by the other in some way, but Birkin’s reconciliatory attempts to guide Gerald’s energy towards a life-enhancing goal are ultimately seen to be incapable of redeeming his project, which ultimately holds the notion of higher spiritual purpose in contempt and resolves itself,
like the war, in irrational destruction. The failure of Gerald and Birkin’s Blutbrüderschaft is finally underscored by the perverse consummation of Gerald and Gudrun’s relationship in violence and death in the frozen Alps. Gudrun is complicit in Gerald’s project to the extent that she recognizes the lack at the core of his personality, but, far from being repelled, is perversely attracted by hints that his is ultimately a nihilistic, self-destructive path. In one of the novel’s most recognizable passages, Gudrun is attracted to Gerald’s skilful mastery of an Arab mare while Ursula is appalled by his excessive, seemingly avoidable brutality (114-115). Yet Gudrun’s attraction to Gerald’s form of degraded posthumanism is evident before she even encounters him; walking through the “defaced countryside” with Ursula she takes pleasure in its ugliness and in modern industry’s “torture” of the “meaningless people” (9) who are caught within its mechanisms:

‘It is like a country in an underworld,’ said Gudrun. ‘The colliers bring it above-ground with them, shovel it up. Ursula, it’s marvellous – it’s really wonderful, another world. The people are all ghouls, and everything is ghostly. Everything is a ghoulish replica of the real world, a replica, a ghoul, all soiled, everything sordid. It’s like being mad, Ursula’ (9).

Gudrun’s aestheticization of the ugly scene before her acts as a cultural counterpart to Gerald’s form of industry, and is later associated, primarily through Loerke’s theory that “art should interpret industry” (440) rather than critique it, with a certain kind of empty modern art which merely apes industrial aesthetics without being able to imagine an
ecological posthumanism of its own. It also represents a version of Birkin’s Dionysian experience in the woods which discovers the “mad” thrill of consenting to the degradation of nature and humanity; later, Gudrun experiences a version of Birkin’s mystic communion with nature, but “like a new Daphne” turns “not into a tree but a machine” (113). Even Gudrun’s dance before Gerald’s cattle, which in its allusion to Dalcroze suggests the search for alternative health in the twentieth century, morphs into a frenzied dance of destruction, and is later revealed to have been empty when Gudrun plans to go to Dresden with Loerke to witness the merely “amusing” (482) eurhythmics first hand. Matei Calinescu suggests that such aestheticization detached from any critical programme of change constitutes “kitsch,” “the element of evil in the value system of art” (259). While I would not use the theological term “evil” in relation to Gudrun, Lawrence does make clear that her aestheticism is a marker of a perverse new iteration of Kultur which does not seek to critique or guide Zivilization at all – not because of frustration faced with its own impotence so much as dark, blissful complicity.

When Gudrun pairs up with Loerke she finds another bearer of nihilistic ecocidal culture. Just as she was attracted to Gerald’s violence and lack, she is attracted to Loerke’s wholesale rejection of meaning and purpose in life or art: “In the last issue he cared about nothing, was troubled about nothing, he made not the slightest attempt to be at one with anything” (443). Although his life’s ambition is to serve art, Loerke’s theory

80 Celia McLean aptly points out that Loerke “sees art not as having a value of truth in itself, but as being merely an instrument subordinated to industry” (278), and, along with Anne Ehlert
of art as “interpretation” does not allow for culture to intervene in any way in worldly affairs and therefore renders it completely self-referential and “purposeless”; while modernist ecopoetics seek *provisional* autonomy from politics – a gesture evident in Birkin’s temporary retreat from humanity and discovery of a new ethic – Loerke’s is a theory of *total* autonomy, as he condescendingly describes to Ursula:

> It is a work of art, it is a picture of nothing, of absolutely nothing. It has nothing to do with anything but itself, it has no relation with the everyday world of this and other, there is no connection between them, absolutely none, they are two different and distinct planes of existence, and to translate one into the other is worse than foolish (447).

Loerke’s totally autonomous art duplicates the logic of Gerald’s industry inasmuch as it is produced for the sake of its own production and accepts no external sanction or higher ideal of societal transformation. His autonomous art and Gerald’s autonomous technology both attempt to suppress the transformative impulse of ecopoetics, but they cannot be assigned to the “rival” category of the political since they both claim autonomy from politics as well. Here we recognize the Heideggerian narrative according to which *techne* begins to express itself without limitation by politics or even human agency in the

relates this stance to futurism. While Loerke’s theory is suggestive of futurism to some extent, it celebrates art’s autonomy in such a way that is not at all suggestive of the movement’s aggressive avant-gardism. Likewise, Gudrun and Loerke’s increasing irony, hedonism, and insincerity – as for example in Gudrun’s laughing dismissal of the utopianism of “Rupert’s Blessed Isles” (456) – is at odds with the stoic embrace of violent transformative action characteristic of futurism. It is therefore more likely that Loerke represents what for Lawrence is a nihilistic principle in modern art, rather than a specific movement within modernism and the avant-garde.
modern era, a narrative which is rounded out by Loerke’s conception of a parallel modern art which begins to expresses itself only by revelling in the aesthetic “byproducts” of technology’s autonomous will, rather than by searching for a new relationship to nature-being. By portraying both Gerald and Loerke as life-denying characters, Women in Love prepares the way for Lawrence’s later position: that it is only through a productive encounter between ecopoetics and politics that these “bad” autonomies can be combated – an encounter that is explored more fully in the leadership novels.

The fact that for Lawrence technology evidently possesses some measure of autonomy from politics complicates the framework I previously used to describe Yeats’s distinction between ecopoetics and politics, since Yeats imagines technology to be one element in an interrelated complex of modern institutions which includes the anti-ecological “English” conception of politics as liberal democracy coupled with the effective organization of material resources. In A Singular Modernity (2002), Fredric Jameson suggests that notions of autonomous art and autonomous technology emerged out of a later critical failure to understand the relationship between modernist art to politics on one hand, and modern technology to politics on the other.\(^8\) Instead of predictably pointing out that, in actual fact, “everything is political through and through,” Jameson asserts that both modern art and modern technology occupied a position more appropriately designated “semi-autonomy” (160). So far as art is concerned, Jameson

\(^8\) Jameson discusses this failure, and its ideological underpinnings, in Part One of the subsection “Modernism as Ideology” (141-160).
prefers the category of the semi-autonomous inasmuch as “the purely aesthetic is ... indissolubly linked to the requirement that it be ultimately impure” (160); in its most powerful modernist formulations semi-autonomous art distances itself from politics in such a way that, precisely though this “apolitical” withdrawal, it presents a challenge to the status quo that could not otherwise be issued – in this sense it is “politically” radical. For Jameson, truly autonomous art could actually express itself only through total nonsense (160) and is the retrospective ideological creation of a New Critical literary establishment which endeavoured to stabilize the threats of social transformation created by social modernisms such as Marxism and fascism and semi-autonomous aesthetic modernism itself (166). Although Jameson focuses on the revisionist nature of the category, my own discussion of Yeats would suggest that total autonomy was grasped as a possibility internal to modernist aesthetics by some modernists, even if it was, in the end, rarely practiced. Loerke’s characterization indicates that, for Lawrence, total autonomy was commensurate with failure to pursue ecological change and was thus identifiable as the most despicable, untimely failure of modern art. Crucially, Jameson proposes that semi-autonomy concerns “the ontological” whereas autonomy concerns the “structural and descriptive” (163) or, in Loerke’s language, the “interpretative.” Thus we can differentiate two problematic autonomies: a retrospective critical category that postulates a purely formal modernism sealed off from politics and technology, and a philosophy of the dynamics of art and praxis internal to modernism that effects the same ontological closure I discussed in relation to Gerald and Loerke’s parallel projects and
worldviews. Both suggest that reading art as totally autonomous suppresses its capacity to inaugurate ecological change since such a reading insists that art’s ecopoetic or para-political engagement with ontology is completely sealed off from the world.

By identifying modern technology as semi-autonomous alongside modernist art, Jameson also offers a means of understanding its unique relationship to ecology. Because, as Heidegger insists, modern technology is first and foremost a frame for conceptualizing nature-being, it should come as no surprise that the semi-autonomy characteristic of ecopoetics is mirrored in the semi-autonomy of technology, which also interacts with the political in indirect and unpredictable ways. Far from the “enemy” of ecology, modern technology is a direct physical consequence of the pernicious form of ecology Heidegger called “productionism” and thus attests to ecology’s capacity to fundamentally alter the world of actuality in a perverse form. The problem for Lawrence and Heidegger alike is that in the modern era technology increasingly attests to the power of ecology only in the negative, as ecocidal destruction, and, as it were, works only in one direction – that is, technology affects ecology, but ecology, figured as a collective project, can no longer control the progression of technology. This is because Gerald’s radicalized technological project (which for Lawrence speaks to the destiny of modern industry) strives for total autonomy even from the collective imagination that gives rise to it, thereby denying its own porous, semi-autonomous interaction with the status quo and the collective projects that might alter it; thus autonomous technology changes the world of actuality by radicalizing its worst qualities while denying its own capacity to be
changed by anything that lies outside its posthuman logic of closure. It is in their acceptance of the worst qualities of autonomy – its complicity with ecocide and its denial of ecological change – that Gerald’s industry and Loerke’s art meet. However, it seems that for Lawrence life-giving ecology is still possible because life-giving art, the other semi-autonomous ecological agent, is still potentially capable of guiding technology where politics has failed to do so. The best solution is evidently for a new form of politics influenced by ecopoetics to confront and reckon with technology, another theme of the leadership novels explored in an embryonic form in Women in Love. Lawrence’s confrontation with this narrative about “bad” autonomous technology and art offers clues as to why he was less suspicious of politics than Yeats and much more willing to imagine situations in which a “good” posthuman ecology would emerge from art’s semi-autonomous sphere to find adequate political expression and ultimately control the tendency to mechanism externalized in ecocidal modern technology.

Roger Griffin’s account of cultural modernism’s two distinguishable but intertwined “epiphanic” and “programmatic” modes offers a useful way of theorizing the transition from art’s semi-autonomous ecopoetics to the kind of political expression Lawrence imagines in his later novels. Rather than enforcing hard distinctions between social modernisms such as Marxism and fascism, philosophical modernisms such as Bergson’s vitalism and Heidegger’s analytic of Dasein, and aesthetic modernisms such as Symbolism and Vorticism, Griffin understands all these modernisms in terms of their particular negotiation of semi-autonomy. Using a “maximalist” definition of modernism
meant to give concise expression to a complex of ideas common to a multiplicity of modernisms, Griffin identifies the centrality of modernism’s “palingenetic” impulse, the adventurous pursuit of social and spiritual transformation captured neatly in the German term *Aufbruch*, which connotes “breaking open,” “irruption,” or “departure” into a new “phase or situation” (9):

> Modernism expresses the striving of *Aufbruch*, the drive to break through established normality to find unsuspected patterns of meaning and order within the encroaching chaos, to turn crepuscular twilight into a new dawn, to inaugurate a new beginning beyond the ongoing dissolution, and achieve, if not an alternative modernity, at least a lasting spiritual refuge, or even just a temporary night-shelter, from its devastating effects ... Thus modernism can be seen as an attempted rebellion against Modernity carried out in order to inaugurate a new modernity (53).

Griffin’s suggestion that modernism ranges between energetic pursuits after “a new modernity” and almost defeated attempts to establish a mere “temporary night shelter” further suggests his distinction between the epiphanic and programmatic, both of which can be read as negotiations of semi-autonomy since their visions initially arise from outside the logic of the political status quo and its limitations. To reiterate the terms of this chapter’s introduction, epiphanic modernisms announce new spiritual or ecopoetic visions, but do not attempt to find direct political expressions for their ideas; whether out
of quietism, powerlessness, the desire to protect their own (misrecognized) autonomous sphere, or a sense of their own limits and the dangers of “spiritualized” or aestheticized politics, these modernisms seek only after “the cultivation of special moments in which there is Aufbruch of a purely inner, spiritual kind with no revolutionary, epoch-making designs on ‘creating a new world’” (63). Programmatic modernisms, on the other hand, aggressively attempt to realize their vision in the social world:

[In modernism’s programmatic mode] the rejection of modernity expresses itself as a mission to change society, to inaugurate a new epoch, to start time anew ... [It] lends itself to manifestoes and declarations, and encourages the artist/intellectual to collaborate proactively with collective movements for radical change and projects the transformation of social realities and political systems (62).

Instead of designating a given aesthetic modernism, for example, as either straightforwardly political or apolitical, Griffin reads any given instantiation of modernism in terms of its negotiation of these modes: does it attempt to bring its vision of spiritual renewal into the social world or does it render its ecopoetic vision and wait – if it waits for change at all – for a spontaneous collective transformation? Or, finding its programme perverted by the world, does it sit back frustrated on its “acre of grass”? And most importantly, what ideological work must be performed in order to negotiate between these modes and arrive at, or vacillate between solutions?
In *Women and Love* the possibility of a programmatic solution is implied at the same time that it is deferred. For the most part, the novel imagines epiphanic encounters with a new ecological ethic, such as Birkin’s experience in the woods, and implies their potential to revolutionize society without proposing a means to accomplish this (beyond subjective experience itself) or a sustained consideration of what such a new society might look like. However, it is important to understand that, as Griffin argues, it is precisely through these epiphanic visions that the possibility of programmatic resolution emerges – a crucial point considering that fascism is one possible iteration of programmatic cultural modernism. While “even in the most ‘cutting edge’ publications on the subject, modernism is still constructed as a cultural phenomenon having a natural affinity with (left-wing) socio-political phenomena,” Griffin views cultural modernism “as a palingenetic force that can express itself directly in revolutionary social and political movement, left and *right*” (68). That is to say, the matrix of regenerative social, philosophical, and aesthetic ideas characteristic of cultural modernism can seek collective (as opposed to theoretical) political expression in a multitude of ways, and these expressions tend to blur the very left/right binary Griffin uses to make his point. It is in this vein that Antliff encourages us to think of fascism “not as an isolated political phenomenon or as an aesthetic aberration ... but as a form of cultural politics in dialectic (or dialogic) relation to other anti-Enlightenment movements, both left and right,” a perspective which highlights the extent to which fascism was not so much a “fixed, stable entity” as a “movement full of internal contradictions, with an unstable ‘base’ composed
of individuals and constituencies who endorsed fascism for a variety of reasons” (60). As such, contrary to Benjamin’s well known distinction between a fascist aestheticization of politics and a Marxist politicization of aesthetics (Benjamin 244) – a distinction which understands fascism in terms of cynicism and bad faith while claiming ideological sincerity only for communism – Griffin and Antliff propose that no such antinomies can explain the complex dynamics of cultural modernism’s push for political expression in the twentieth century. This is implied in the notion of palingenesis itself, which does not

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Antliff, for example, contests the capacity of Benjamin’s discussion to draw a firm distinction between the communist and fascist avant-garde. He denies, for instance, that fascist art invariably mobilized its fictions in search of a condition of organic closure intended to overcome “the fragmented and pluralistic flux of contemporary society” (32); in fact, he follows Andrew Hewitt in pointing to Italian fascism’s embrace of futurism, for which the problem of modern civilization was precisely the condition of stasis and closure in which it was mired: “By calling for ‘the ontologization of struggle’ [he uses Hewitt’s term] as both an aesthetic and a political principle, the futurists wished to reinvigorate a culture subsumed in the very organicist metaphors Benjamin would identify with the fascist project” (34). In doing so, Italian fascists appropriated techniques from cubism and surrealism and even celebrated the dynamism of their movement using Eisenstein’s theory of montage (which for Benjamin was an inherently liberatory technique aligned with communism) (2). It is for this reason that Hewitt not only expresses “grave doubts about the liberating value of the mass reproduction and de-aурaticization of art celebrated by Benjamin” (24) – the supposed ‘communist’ alternative to the fascists’ cynical aestheticization of politics – but questions the very distinction between communist and fascist aesthetics upon which his entire argument rests (24).

Griffin further points out that even Nazi aesthetics were much more sympathetic to certain currents of aesthetic modernism than previously thought, and that even those Nazi works that seem straightforwardly identifiable with the “reactionary” nature of anti-avant-garde organicist “kitsch” must be reevaluated in light of their “[inseparability] from the attempted anthropological revolution” (307) which demanded a new humanity and nature even as its visual language manifestly evoked a nostalgic rootedness belonging to a fictive past. He also reminds us that the organicism of officially endorsed Nazi art was produced in the service of a programmatic modernism and is thus comparable to other regime-sanctioned aesthetic modernisms such as Stalinist or Maoist socialist realism if not European and American aesthetic modernism (287). Thought it is at odds with our largely formal conception of modernist aesthetics, Nazi art was thus an example, however grotesque, of an avant-garde synthesis of politics and art; it is understandable as a “parody” of modernism and the avant-garde, as Ferral argues, but only
seek linear social progress but total rupture from the status quo: despite fascism’s other internal contradictions, there is nothing inherently paradoxical about “reactionary modernism,” to use Jeffrey Herf’s term,\textsuperscript{83} since in spite of fascism’s use of images and mythologies drawn from a created past, as a programmatic cultural modernism, fascism, like communism, sought an anthropological revolution (307), a “new man,” and ultimately a new modernity that would not be evaluable within the conceptual horizon of the old, even if this new order inevitably failed to materialize.\textsuperscript{84}

Stephen White’s commentary on the aesthetics of political discourse would suggest that Benjamin’s understanding of fascism is limited because of his overly narrow conception of the aesthetic as “art for art’s sake” aestheticism, which is not attributable to the fascist avant-garde. For White, aestheticization is “inescapable” (23) in political discourse, regardless of Marxist distrust of the aestheticization of politics or liberal anxiety over its compromise of the “rational” public sphere. White sees “the

\textsuperscript{83} See Herf’s Reactionary Modernism (1984). For Herf, reactionary modernism’s marriage of futural utopianism and anti-modern, anti-enlightenment sentiment speaks to a paradox in Rightist social modernism (4-9). This paradox, however, arises only because of expectations that futural-utopian discourse will be “progressive” in a liberal or leftist sense – expectations, Griffin points out, that we cannot apply to social modernism. I argue below that there is a paradox inherent to fascist ecology, but for entirely different reasons.

\textsuperscript{84} It is important to note that acknowledging the similarities between social modernisms should not be confused with the neo-liberal attempt to conflate and banish all competing “ideologies” (which are none other than the variegated remnants of social modernism itself). None of the critics and historians I reference here do so out of a neo-liberal agenda, but instead out of concern for historical accuracy. My point here is simply that the substantial differences between social modernisms are observable only when their expansive common goal, palingenesis, is understood as such, not that there are no such differences in practice (as the term “totalitarian” is usually used to imply).
ontologization of struggle,” to use Hewitt’s term, not as a unique feature of one political ideology, but as a necessary dimension of all political thought that can express itself in emancipatory and reactionary forms alike; thus the aesthetic or ontological dimension of political thought – White, like myself, sees little difference between the terms – allows us to “interrogate more carefully those ‘entities’ presupposed by our typical ways of seeing and doing in the modern world” (4). In fact, it alone enables ecology to enter political discussion, and therefore should not (and cannot) be dispensed with out of anxiety over its possible misuses.

Given the above theory of social modernism as “ontologized” palingenesis, and contrary to what Barbara Mensch argues in D. H. Lawrence and the Authoritarian Personality (1991), it is Birkin rather than Gerald who comes closest to fascist ideology, though Women in Love itself is certainly far from a “fascist” novel. Mensch’s study is limited by its excessive focus on personality and its over-reliance on the largely discredited Cold War/neo-liberal categories “authoritarian” and “totalitarian,” categories she problematically conflates with fascism in many cases. Mensch reads Gerald in terms of Adorno’s “manipulative type” (109), a personality obsessed with order and authority who treats everything and everyone as material to be mustered for his own ends. While this is largely true of Gerald, Mensch overstates his conservatism, fails to recognize the futural thrust of his (ecocidal) posthumanism, and, following Adorno’s problematic
reading, misleadingly suggests that the “manipulative type” is essentially fascist (27). The idea that Gerald predicts the fascist “personality” (a concept I find dubious in its own right) is questionable considering that fascist ideology was, as Griffin argues, palingenetic rather than conservative, oriented towards the kind of ecological renewal Gerald’s project attempts to arrest, and, in its early German manifestations, strongly opposed to the reduction of nature to raw material described by Adorno. Finally, as an agent of autonomous technology, Gerald is defined by his lack of a programme of societal renewal, however aggressive his industrial project. Although Mensch insists that the “authoritarian personality” undergirding fascism exists in all societies, democratic, communist, or fascist, it is more likely that Lawrence saw Gerald’s nihilistic “programme without a programme” as characteristic of Western democracy more so than the dangerous/promising oppositional social modernisms that were beginning to find political expression in his time.

85 I agree that Gerald displays a conservative concern for propriety at certain times, but focusing only on his conservatism ignores the extent to which his project is futural and posthuman, and cannot account for his aggressive pursuit of a new conception of humanity and nature (whatever its features). Mensch cites his fantasy to return to conservatism (83) as an example, but this is reactionary only to the extent that it is an anxious response to the situation he has created: “He knew that all his life he had been wrenching at the frame of life to break it apart. And now, with something of the terror of a destructive child, he saw himself on the point of inheriting his own destruction” (Women in Love 228). To return to the “dullest conservatism,” “the strictest Toryism” (229) would allow him to escape his destructive system through repression and stasis, not through a fascist resolution. It is for this reason that I find Adorno’s conflation of fascism and conservatism under the sign of “authoritarianism” to be more misleading than insightful, and choose to use this term sparingly in my own discussion (and only to designate an interest in strong, centralized leadership, rather than a specific ideology or personality type).
Birkin is actually closer to fascist ideology than Gerald because his rarefied, ecopoetic vision of a posthuman ecological “ethic” is, as Jameson puts it in his discussion of semi-autonomy, “indissolubly linked to the requirement that it become impure,” that it express itself somehow in the social world, even if this proves impossible. Birkin is too distrustful of mass politics (or even other people in general) to develop a coherent collective programme for his vision, but his notion of “natural aristocracy” – a term not used until *The Plumed Serpent* – serves as something of a middle ground between Griffin’s two modernist modes. The idea of a natural aristocracy, an aristocracy of spirit rather than wealth or lineage, is implied in Birkin’s doctrine of spiritual inequality, which counters two notions of equality proposed in the novel: Hermione’s democratic or humanist spiritual equality, which acknowledges imbalances in material wealth but asserts that “in the spirit we are all one” (106), and Gerald’s posthuman “mechanical equality” (234), which reduces all human beings to equally important (or unimportant) cogs in a larger mechanism. For Birkin human beings are equal in basic, essentially unimportant “mathematical” ways, but “mechanical equality” is a perverse reduction limiting individuals’ ability to find expression for their spiritual energy, that which alone creates felicitous *inequality* among human beings. Birkin explains his position to Hermione in the same heated argument that leads up to his experience in the woods:

> It is just the opposite, just the contrary, Hermione. We are all different and unequal in spirit – it is only the *social* differences that are based on accidental material conditions. We are all abstractly or mathematically
equal, if you like. Every man has hunger and thirst, two eyes, one nose and two legs. We’re all the same in point of number. But spiritually, there is pure difference and neither equality nor inequality counts. It is upon these two bits of knowledge that you must found a state. Your democracy is an absolute lie – your brotherhood of man is a pure falsity, if you apply it further than mathematical abstraction ... In the spirit, I am as separate as one star is from another, as different in quality and quantity (107).

While Birkin asserts that “[one] man isn’t any better than another, not because they are equal, but because they are intrinsically other” (106), the possibility of spiritually superior beings is clearly implied here, and develops, through the leadership novels, into a more overt celebration of bearers of Kultur who are uniquely capable of guiding Zivilization towards elevated ends. In the above passage Birkin relates his theory of spiritual inequality to the formation of a new state, but in Women in Love the closest thing to a state is the leaderless community of exiled natural aristocrats comprised of the novels four most important characters, and later reduced to only Birkin and Ursula. The novel presents us not with the formula for an idealized ecological oligarchy, but with a more dystopian version of “Rananim,” Lawrence’s fantasy of a utopian society made up
of exiled natural aristocrats, in which everything does seem to “fail to materialize” in the final analysis.86

While *Women in Love* concludes on this uncertain, somewhat defeated note, the leadership novels that follow endeavour to envision the unformed, non-democratic state Birkin mentions only in passing. Still, as a study of the ideological soil from which fascism emerged rather than a fascist novel, *Women in Love* establishes Lawrence’s sense of the dynamics at work in the modern, industrialized West and the stakes involved in confronting its ecocidal course. Faced with a justifiably dead humanism and the rise of a more virulent posthuman radicalization of its worst tendencies, Lawrence suggests that an alternative, life-giving posthuman politics informed by semi-autonomous ecopoetic vision must emerge to control modern technology, and, much more importantly, to free humanity and nature from the deadening metaphysics that undergird it. *Women in Love* does not offer a programmatic means of effecting this union of ecopoetics and politics; rather, it presents us only with disconnected, individual epiphanies and a doctrine of spiritual inequality which suggests that the bearers of these epiphanic experiences are best suited for ecologically sensitive rule, a prospect that seems impossible to implement by the end of the novel. Overall, this complex of ideas is most attributable to Birkin, whose frustrated ambition to translate epiphanic experience into a life-giving programme is actually much closer to fascist ideology than Gerald’s aggressively nihilistic industrial

86 George Zytaruk has compiled an illuminating record of Lawrence’s correspondences regarding this utopian society with his friend S. S. Koteliansky in *The Quest for Ranim D. H. Lawrence’s Letters to S. S. Koteliansky 1914 -1930* (1979).
project, which is more suggestive of the liberal-capitalist democracies critiqued by Marxism and fascism alike. Michael Charles Burack and James C. Cowan have both discussed how Lawrence’s theory of spiritual inequality, which, as I have argued, emerged in reaction to an essentially ecological problem, implicitly endorses “authoritarian” means of correcting civilization’s course (128; 199). Jad Smith has taken this further, arguing that Lawrence’s engagement with German thought lead him to embrace solutions to the crisis of Kultur and Zivilization – including the notion of natural aristocracy – which were later central and historically specific to the ideology of Nazism (10). My discussion of Women in Love has aimed to establish the terms of Lawrence’s ecological modernism and to propose that it may be related to fascist ideology, at least insofar as it aims to solve a similar set of problems and draws from the same complex of ideas; in what follows I will discuss this relationship in greater detail and consider whether or not Lawrence’s is really a “fascist ecology.”

After Strange Programmes in Kangaroo

If Women in Love invokes a matrix of ecological ideas that became important to fascist ideology, especially in Germany, Kangaroo explores the possibility of fascist resolution directly, emphasizing both the desirability and the difficulty of accepting such a resolution. While Rupert Birkin discovers a new ecological ethic and only imagines a corresponding state, the protagonist and “Lawrence figure” of Kangaroo, Lovat Somers, an author and political essayist, deals directly with two emergent revolutionary
organizations in Australian society, each intent on fomenting its own Aufbruch. As such the novel represents a direct confrontation with modernism’s programmatic mode, and is as much a critical “thought experiment” as a fantasy of power placing the exiled artist at the centre of grassroots radical politics in a foreign nation, a rather implausible plot structure that is repeated in an even more unlikely form in The Plumed Serpent. Though he is an alienated artist figure, Somers yearns to help shape a mass movement with his ideas, to “get men to move with [him] before [he] dies” (77) and finds an opportunity to do so in Australia through the connections he establishes with Benjamin “Kangaroo” Cooley’s “diggers” and Willie Struthers’s socialists. His wife Harriet reminds him that he has always eschewed politics and insisted that “a new religious idea must gradually spring up and ripen before there [can] be any constructive change” (111) but Somers is set upon bringing his ideas into the realm of political power and jump-starting the transition to a new epoch. Dissatisfaction with private epiphanies and the limitations of art is thus the starting point of the novel, as Somers makes perfectly clear to Harriet: “I want to do something with living people, somewhere, somehow, while I live on earth. I write, but I write alone. And I live alone. Without any connexion whatever with the rest of men” (79). Kangaroo’s most fundamental assumption, shared by both the social modernisms it portrays, is that any viable expression of collective opposition to the status quo will be anti-liberal-democratic and anti-capitalist, yet the novel as a whole is less concerned, at least outwardly, with resolving the ecological problems introduced in Women in Love. Nonetheless, Somers’s exploration of and hesitation before both
potential programmes supplies the ideological basis for The Plumed Serpent’s imaginative construction of an idealized ecological state that is ostensibly fascist.

*Kangaroo*’s foreign setting is important to the novel’s exploration of new possibilities for Western civilization. Somers comes to Australia out of disgust with Europe and the war, and is initially both attracted to and disturbed by the country’s “unformed” landscape and people. He is chilled by the “vast, uninhabited land” (18) whose “spirit of place” and “secret” seems an inhuman “presence” (19) watching from the bush and waiting. Yet, despite their unnerving proximity to this primordial presence, the people of Sydney’s suburbs live in bland, comfortable bungalows in the style of England’s middle class, while at the edges of their human settlements this “Englishness all [crumples] out into formlessness and chaos” (33). In Australia, European form, custom, and habit are laid over a fundamentally chaotic, inhuman nature, a dynamic which for Lawrence is true of Europe but more evident in the colonial “new world.”

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87 This also marks a shift from *Women in Love*’s equation of West Africa with mindless sensual experience that is not be emulated to a more positively exoticized, and in some ways admiring account of “primitive” non-white races. In *Kangaroo*’s racist framework, the Australian aborigines are associated with the promising formlessness of nature-being – the medium of creativity, if not creativity itself: “The strange, as it were, *invisible* beauty of Australia, which is undeniably there, but which seems to lurk beyond the range of our white vision. You feel you can’t see - as if you eyes hadn’t the vision in them to correspond with the outside landscape ... in landscape or in nigger, you get a sense of subtle, remote, *formless* beauty more poignant than anything ever experienced before” (87, Lawrence’s italics). For Lawrence the Australian aborigines, like the landscape, are beautiful because they hint at the formless real of nature beneath its outward forms, the recovery of which can alone rescue “the white races” from their destructive system of abstraction. However, this portrayal of the Australian aborigines is also literally dehumanizing: it associates them more with the matter to be transformed than with the transformative mind. Despite his “progressive” view of nature, this passage is exemplary of Lawrence’s capacity to be complicit with the most oppressive and degrading projections of the
Australia is also characterized by political formlessness, which testifies to its potential to create a new “life form” (111) but also by its complacency and failure to submit to the right kind of authority; democratic equality is greatly extended in Australia, but for Somers the country is cursed by its “frivolous” sense of freedom and, like the greater democratic world, remains utterly devoid of purpose and powerless to combat its own evils as a result:

The absence of any inner meaning; and at the same time the great sense of vacant spaces. The sense of irresponsible freedom. The sense of do-as-you-please liberty. And all utterly uninteresting. What is more hopelessly uninteresting than accomplished liberty? Great swarming, teeming Sydney flowing out into these myriad of bungalows, like shallow waters spreading, undyked. And what then? Nothing. No inner life, no high command, no interest in anything, finally (33).

Somers recognizes “human” Australia as a distillation of the logic of liberal democracy’s empty pursuit of negative rather than positive freedom, another “project without a project” which complements the more blatantly insidious industrialism portrayed in *Women in Love*. Australia is thus characterized by its contact with formless, primordial colonial imagination and to understand modernist ecology – like colonialism itself – as a project entrusted to Europe. I discuss the relationship between modernist ecology, fascist ecology, and race in greater detail in the next subsection, suggesting that modernist ecology betrays its cosmopolitanism when it is articulated in terms of race or other divisions of the category of the human, rather than in terms of such categories’ transcendence (though I do not intend to suggest that this levelling of human difference is not problematic in its own right).
nature and its unrealized promise to rework human consciousness, but also by its quiet capitulation to the liberal democratic status-quo and its general lack of political will and spiritual energy.

The diggers and the socialist both recognize Australia’s failure to work towards an ideal that might transcend the logic of liberal democracy and cast the mould of a new society. While it is tempting (and more or less accurate) to straightforwardly equate the diggers with fascism and the Australian socialists with Marxism, Ferrall reminds us that *Kangaroo* does not portray these factions as opposites nor does it attach much importance to the categories “left” and “right,” and in doing so “cannily represents and critiques the political reality of a period in which Mussolini could begin his career as a socialist and the German fascists could name themselves National Socialists” (133). By identifying the diggers and socialists as manifestations of a larger will to *Aufbruch*, Lawrence does not attempt to obscure their differences, but rather represents his contemporary experience of the broader energetic spirit of social modernism with a measure of historical accuracy that is not usually evident in more partisan works, from the left or right. It is also important to keep in mind, in the age of the global free market, that Lawrence’s interest in strong leadership and a centrally planned future was characteristic of early-twentieth century politics across (and beyond) the political spectrum, whether one speaks of fascist corporatism, the Soviet five year plans, Roosevelt’s “New Deal,” or even Keynes’s interventionist economics (Griffin 328).
The charismatic leaders of both movements are drawn to Somers because of a series of articles on democracy he published in an international journal, the content of which is plainly suggestive of Lawrence’s own essay “Democracy.” As Somers explains to William James (“Jaz”), reiterating a viewpoint expressed in *Women in Love* by Rupert Birkin, he views politics in terms of the distribution of material wealth and “democratic” politics, we are left to infer, not as a doctrine of the equality of the soul but as the equitable distribution of wealth (72). In this sense, Somers’s democracy is a form of pragmatic socialism. However, as Lawrence argues in his own essay, this pragmatic socialism would ideally result in a kind of Nietzschean democracy, defined against liberal democracy, in which the instrumentalization of politics would allow the individual to turn his or her attention away from material struggle and towards the spiritual battle against mechanization and empty forms of freedom: “All settlement of the property question must arise spontaneously out of a new impulse in man, to free himself from the extraneous load of possession, and to walk naked and light” (718). This conception of politics is different from socialism in that it aims to limit the effective sphere of politics and instrumental materialism so that the semi-autonomous sphere I have equated with ecopoetics can come to inform humanity’s future to a far greater degree. Somers’s rejection of politics is therefore not apolitical in the conventional sense; rather it is a call for a spiritual or ecopoetic revolution to guide the material socialism of legitimate “democracy,” which could evidently appear in a traditionally socialist form (as the
collectivization of resources characteristic of communism) or in a fascist form (as the top-down management characteristic of “national socialism”). Somers insists:

I really don’t care about politics. Politics is no more than your country’s housekeeping. If I had to swallow my whole life up in housekeeping, I wouldn’t keep house at all; I’d sleep under a hedge. Same with country and politics. I’d rather have no country than be gulped in politics and social stuff … no sort of politics will help the country (72).

Since Struthers aims to collectivize Australia’s wealth and Kangaroo aims to redistribute wealth from the top down – economic plans which for Lawrence, who seems indifferent to how “democracy” is achieved, establish the same necessary point of departure – Somers is left to decide which movement is most capable of moving beyond “democracy and democratic feeling” on the spiritual plain and truly creating “a new life-form.”

Somers is most attracted to Kangaroo’s diggers, who rally around their charismatic leader and swear a lifetime oath to obey his dictates, since Kangaroo and Somers share a conception of natural aristocracy that informs their conception of democracy in turn, a conviction that the “men with soul and with passionate truth in them must control the world’s material riches and supplies” so that “the mass of mankind” can “begin to live again” (112). Lily relates a similar conviction to Aaron at the end of Aaron’s Rod (1922): it is only when power is granted to “heroic” spiritual leaders of “greater soul” that politics transcends its own instrumentality (347) – and the same logic
accounts for the distinction running throughout Kangaroo between politics and “real politics” (which take politics as their starting point as it were). Somers initially believes that Kangaroo is the spiritually elevated “Dictator” (Kangaroo 110) and bearer of real politics he has been imagining. Kangaroo’s plan is to form a constitutional dictatorship headed by a benevolent “tyrant,” “patriarch,” or “pope” “representing as near as possible the wise, subtle spirit of life” (125) and undergirded by a species of secular, vitalist theology which identifies evil as “the great principle which opposes life in its new urges” (126). The purpose of Kangaroo’s movement is to cultivate a new humanity nurtured by love and the will to life rather than by “anti-life” (126), which is figured primarily in terms of possessiveness, greed, and (rather ironically) will-to-power. His followers, the diggers, are mostly veterans of the war at odds with comfortable and complacent life in post-war Australia and in search of strong leadership and a destiny for the nation, or perhaps a violent conflagration for its own sake, as Somers muses (177). The diggers are evocative of Mussolini’s celebration of the hardened “trenchocracy” who were forged in the crucible of industrialized warfare and returned to Italian politics with the soldier’s combative spirit; they are also suggestive of the German Freikorps, veteran soldiers who refused to disband after the treaty of Versailles, many of whom became Nazism’s earliest and most zealous proponents and effectively served as the movement’s first political instruments. Thus Kangaroo’s movement resembles historical fascism not just ideologically, but in that it combines a grandiose spiritual mission that might otherwise
be pursued “in the soul,” to use Ekstein’s phrase, with a militant power base capable of revolutionary action.

Although Somers comes closest to accepting Kangaroo’s programme, Kangaroo is really about his hesitation before the social modernisms depicted by Lawrence and ultimately his decision to reject both of them. Yet it is important to consider that Somers’s rejection of both Struthers and Kangaroo does not speak to his rejection of any particular political ideology, but to his frustrated demand for a form of social modernism that would truly break with the past. In Badiou’s terms, social modernisms seek to break out of “the situation” – the conceptual horizon created by a given state of political, philosophical, and aesthetic affairs beyond which “new [ways] of being and acting” (42) emerge which “meant nothing according to the prevailing language and established knowledge” (43) – while (real) “politics” is the corresponding “movement of thought and action that frees itself from dominant statist subjectivity and that proposes, summons and organises projects that cannot be reflected or represented by those norms under which the State operates” (Metapolitics 85).88 The problem for Somers is that Struthers and Kangaroo both believe they are breaking with the situation when they are actually reproducing it, albeit in an altered form. The sticking point for Somers is how both movements fail to reject liberal humanism’s “dead” ideal of “Love, Self-Sacrifice, and

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88 In effect, Badiou echoes Lawrence in suggesting that only social modernisms can justifiably be understood as “real” politics, since they alone attempt to break free of their situation instead of working to ameliorate its injustices or limit the contradictions of its extant system of thought and action.
Humanity” (292) and therefore present the old humanity, the humanity that should have died in the war, for the new. His argument with Kangaroo’s philosophy of love, the most developed of the two, is also the most telling; in terms suggestive of Lawrence’s *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921) and *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922), Somers accuses Kangaroo’s love of “Working everything from the spirit, from the head” (151) and of neglecting what he later refers to as the “dark God” (224). While the “dark God” is a deliberately indeterminate symbol, Andrew Radford suggests that it stands in part for the intimation of a “deeper reality than that of the plane of most of our conscious living” (52), at once an external “strange [well] of secret life-force” associated with the Australian bush and “the largely unmapped hinterland of the psyche” (55). As such, Somers’s quarrel with Kangaroo seems to revolve around the would-be leader’s failure to embrace a deeper, stranger form of change that would work on the chiasmic intertexture of formless nature and formless human consciousness, the kind of change I have termed “ecological.” By emphasizing love and spirit over the darkness internal and external to humanity, Kangaroo has, for Somers, failed to imagine a posthuman break with the situation.

In one of Kangaroo’s many experimental departures from conventional narrative, the narrator (who may be detailing Somers’ own thought process in free indirect discourse) relates a theory of revolution and leadership which helps explain Somers’s objections to Kangaroo and his fixation on the “dark God.” The narrator suggests that Kangaroo has failed to appreciate the nature of collective psychology and its relation to
natural aristocracy in subtle ways. What he has recognized adequately is the importance of nurturing the will to life, which the narrator characterizes as “a will-to-live in the furthest sense, a will-to-change, a will-to-evolve, a will toward further creation of the self” (325), and the need for sensitive souls to assume leadership roles and to help foster a (“real”) politics of life. However, Kangaroo has attempted to understand the creative urge through an outworn (liberal-democratic-humanist-Christian) conception of love, when it issues instead from “the strange creative urge, the God-whisper” and must be brought to the masses by “some few exquisitely sensitive and fearless souls who struggle with all their might to make that strange translation of the low, dark throbbing into open act or speech” (325). According to this formulation, Kangaroo – who fails to hear this “message” issuing from a dark, unknown wellspring of being “outside our universe” (326), the source of “the great dark God … of the first dark religions” (224) – has misrecognized himself as a natural aristocrat and can only hope to reproduce a reformed image of the present situation, in which people “racket away in their nice, complete, homely universe, running their trains and making the world safe for democracy” (326). It is not a coincidence that Kangaroo accuses Somers of betraying his “human intelligence” (263-264) by dreaming of an inhuman power; in the final analysis, Lawrence suggests, Benjamin Cooley’s nickname is misleading: he is not a posthuman figure, but something akin to Nietzsche’s “last man,” the final defender of the category of the human.

Revolutions, we are told, take place when collective “madness and insanity” sets in because the “throb” of the life urge is being interpreted only in terms of old “codes”
(326) and cannot find expression outside of dull conformity (which inevitably compounds collective pathology) or wanton, aimless destruction of the kind that ultimately erupts in Australia in Kangaroo. Whether they are directed revolutions of the “masses” or aimless outbursts by the “mob” against all leadership (330), “[all] great mass uprisings are really acts of vengeance against the dominant consciousness of the day” (331). What is required is a leader with “deep, throbbing roots down in the dark red soul of the living flesh of humanity” (332) who can interpret the messages issuing from a “deeper reality than that of the plane of most of our conscious living,” to use Radford’s phrase, and communicate this message not through empty political rhetoric – which can only fall within the logic of the situation – but through “vertebral telepathy.” This “telepathy” is a kind of psycho-biological “technology” similar to Yeats’s Great Mind that is said to link all individuals, especially natural aristocrats, to the greater collective consciousness and, when a new message emerges and a new situation is destined, to allow it to be spontaneously (“telepathically”) disseminated, thus fomenting a revolutionary break with the social and metaphysical status quo (329).

This bizarre mixture of mythopoetics and pseudo-science is an attempt to privilege both passive attention to “the universe” and active, revolutionary engagement with the social world. However, the theory of vertebral telepathy’s focus on a strong, sensitive leader and real-world action merely obscures the extent to which, despite its derivation from a programmatic impulse, its terms are still that of spontaneous or epiphanic rather than programmatic change. Since the leader’s role is to “listen” to the
message of being, which is said to emerge spontaneously under the right conditions, and
to communicate it to the masses, he (Lawrence has a patriarch in mind here) is none other
than a version of the artist figure who brings his ecopoetic “new ethic” or “message” into
the political sphere without having to make any concessions in order to do so. The fact
that a mystical technology is required for Lawrence to imagine this possibility speaks
clearly to his inability to accommodate his ecological aesthetics to a historical social
modernism, fascist or communist: his “real politics” are simply ecopoetics bolstered by a
direct link to the hearts and minds of the people (who no longer have to read works of
literature at all!). Kangaroo’s attempt to envision a politics informed by semi-
autonomous ecopoetics devolves into an occult wish fulfillment fantasy that resembles
something like a transcendent distribution deal for Lawrence’s agonistic, obscure
modernist fiction. The novel’s increasing focus on seemingly unrelated discourses of
individuality and posthumanism reflects the narrative’s return to the epiphanic mode: for
all its emphasis on collectivity, the theory of vertebral telepathy suggests that “it is the
individual alone who can save humanity” (332) through ecopoetic visions of “non-human
gods, non-human human being” (375). Somer’s reflection near the end of the novel could
not be more evocative of spontaneous change, and clearly marks a return to his earlier
belief in “spiritual” or “religious” rather than social revolution: “the only thing to look to
is the God who fulfills one from the dark. And the only thing to wait for is for men to
find their aloneness and their God in the darkness. Then one can meet as worshippers, in
a sacred contact with the dark” (361). Thus, for all its emphasis on avant-garde resolution, *Kangaroo* ultimately turns back to semi-autonomy and, as Jeff Wallace puts it, suggests that “the posthuman future does not seem to lie in any political domain” (225) after all.

*Kangaroo*’s experiment ends on an indeterminate note. It rejects Kangaroo’s essentially fascist programme and falls back upon the individual soul, but it does so out of disgust with Kangaroo’s own particular union of spirituality and militant politics, not with the idea of such a union; as Ferrall aptly points out, the novel leaves us wondering whether Lawrence’s thought experiment has led him to begrudgingly accept “the kind of conservatism or liberalism which refuses to distinguish between fascism and communism” or to campaign for “an even purer kind of fascism” (133) that will do justice to the creative urge of the “dark god” and genuinely break with the situation. *The Plumed Serpent*, the next stage in Lawrence’s leadership experiment, would suggest that the latter is the case, as it envisions a form of idealized fascism which would succeed where Kangaroo fails.

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89 Lawrence came to a similar conclusion himself two years earlier in his history textbook *Movements in European History* (1921). After dismissing socialism and fascism alike in rather facile terms as mere “bullying” (313-316) hostile to the individual soul, Lawrence calls upon his readers to recognize that “There is nothing to be done, en masse. But every youth, every girl can make the great historical change inside himself and herself, to care supremely for nothing but the spark of noblesse that is in him and in her, and to follow only the leader who is a star of the new, natural Noblesse” (321). This passage suggests that once a critical mass of internal metamorphoses has pervaded society at the level of the individual, a leader will emerge and “great historical change” will occur spontaneously on the level of the collective. As such this is simply a version of the perennially unsatisfying prospect of spontaneous change with the addition of a leader figure, and more of a return to the base impasse of modernist ecology than an effective union of ecopoetics and politics.
soon the dark forest will rise again

- Don Ramón, from *The Plumed Serpent* (76)

According to the scholarship that informs this chapter, fascism is a potential form of social modernism; it follows, therefore, that fascist ecology – a term I will use to designate fascism’s ideological investment in anthropological/ontological palingenesis coupled with the attempt to realize this aim politically – is not only difficult to distinguish from modernist ecology, but presents itself as a potential programmatic form of its more aesthetic or epiphanic counterpart. *The Plumed Serpent*, I argue, is an attempt to envision modernist ecology in this fascist mode. While it is now well known that Lawrence was vociferous about his condemnation of fascism and communism alike, it is also widely accepted that his understanding of fascism as an essentially conservative display of state power for its own sake rather than a complex “revolutionary” political ideology legitimating use of power – an understandable but ultimately misleading equation of fascism with violence instead of political process which is still common today90 – did not allow him to perceive the considerable similarities between fascist ideology and his own

90 For Badiou the tendency to view Nazism as an issueless outburst of brutality and evil instead of a coherent political process represents a troubling unwillingness to understand not only its genesis, but also the promise/danger characteristic of revolutionary politics in general: “it is impossible to think politics through to the end if we refuse to envisage the possibility of political sequences whose organic categories and subjective prescriptions are criminal” (*Ethics* 65).
thoughts and fantasies. While Fernihough, among others, has argued that Lawrence’s writing on ecological aesthetics – for example the epigraph to this chapter from his review of *Chariot of the Sun* – can be distinguished from and opposed to the leadership politics of novels like *The Plumed Serpent* (185), I find this, too, misleading since it celebrates the “progressiveness” of Lawrence’s more epiphanic writing about nature-being when, considering Lawrence’s oeuvre as a whole, such writing finds expression only in suspended dialectic with its potential programmatic expressions, which Fernihough isolates and rejects. It is only by accepting the “progressive” credentials of fascism, however much violence it does to the common understanding of this term, that we can see *The Plumed Serpent* as a relatively coherent integration of Lawrence’s ecological aesthetics with a social modernist programme, in spite of the deeper incoherencies this integration produces in turn.

Like *Kangaroo*, *The Plumed Serpent* tells the story of an English-born protagonist assuming a position of unlikely influence in a foreign country whose incipient social modernisms are preparing for a break with the past; in this case, a female protagonist, Kate Leslie, finds herself invited to assume an important role in the Quetzalcoatl movement alongside spiritual leader Don Ramón Carrasco and rebel general Don

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Cipriano Viedma, who seek to both restore and modernize Mexico’s pre-Christian religious traditions. Although it is not particularly plausible that Ramón and Cipriano should desire the services of a middle-aged English tourist, the scenario allows Kate’s Western, liberal view of selfhood to be challenged not only by the posthuman values espoused in Ramón’s teachings but also by the troubling violence the movement precipitates. As in *Kangaroo*, Lawrence explains the movement’s leaders’ attraction to Kate in terms of natural aristocracy, which they recognize in the foreigner, though according to the Quetzalcoatl movement’s own nationalist logic, as I will explain below, there is no reason for an Englishwoman to assume any role of importance in Mexican affairs. At the outset of the novel Kate is tired of her travelling companions, who are portrayed as empty modern thrill seekers (2-3), and repulsed by the Mexican people, a “degenerate mob” (5). Mexico is depicted as a threatening, primitive place that is nonetheless productively other to the West, similar to Australia but without the vestigial “Englishness”; as Kate later explains to Ramón, the Mexican people appear to have “no real I,” no fiction of a defined identity or stable center, but rather “a raging black hole, like the middle of a maelstrom” (36). It is only when Kate meets Western educated patricians Ramón and Cipriano, “entirely the exception among Mexicans” (35), that she begins to understand the potential of this human *prima materia* (Cowan 185), the formlessness of which the movement intends to seize upon and transform.

The ultimate goal of the Quetzalcoatl movement is to bring about the kind of ontological/anthropological change that is envisioned in modernist ecology’s ecopoetics
and programmatized in social modernism’s politics. Ramón’s teachings announce the return of the ancient gods – and his own identity with Quetzalcoatl as his mortal messenger – in order to reconnect the Mexican people with the “heart of the cosmos” (193). For Ramón, Christianity and its secular offshoots liberal humanitarianism and reform socialism have represented themselves as the salvation of the people when they are actually “poison in the communion cup” (208), keeping them stuck within the same system and progressively distancing them from their deep roots in “the Tree of Life” which connect them inalienably to “the centre of the earth” (76). He teaches instead that Mexican men “are not yet men,” Mexican women “not yet women” (198); this will occur only when the bonds of Western humanism and materialism are broken and Mexicans turn individually and collectively to the “Quick of all being” (251). These sermons are ecological in the sense that they do not distinguish between internal and external change – the new humanity will find itself only when it realizes that “the earth is alive” and worships the new manifestation of the mythopoetic figure Quetzalcoatl, “the snake of the world” who “keeps the soil sweet” (195). Confronted with the movement’s posthumanism, Kate is torn between her ties to Western individualism and her newfound realization that she is intertwined with the external cosmos, her selfhood and self-will fictions anchoring her to modern humanity’s “automatism” and inability to “let the world live again” (102).

For Ramón it is up to “natural aristocrats,” “the flowers of each race” (246), to meet their fellow men in “the Quick of all being” or “the Morning Star” (251). In The
Plumed Serpent the idea of the great impersonal darkness out of which humanity and nature emerge, “the Quick” (or in my terms nature-being), is the medium for what is theorized as vertebral telepathy in Kangaroo. Since all individuals are consciously or unconsciously linked to this originary “Tree of Life,” the natural aristocrat must learn to communicate with the masses beyond the “merely human, personal plane” (250), the domain of politics and the liberal democratic situation.\textsuperscript{92} As in the paradox of Yeats’s Great Mind, the Quick is both the medium and the message of Ramón’s ecology: since it is within himself and the masses alike, the Quick allows him to reach his followers through a form of spiritual communication which, once achieved, will remake humanity. However, to become what they already are, the masses must undergo “transfiguration” (251); in order to hear the transformative message, they must transform – neither takes precedence over the other:

That which we get from the beyond, we get it alone. The final me I am, comes from the farthest off, from the Morning Star. The rest is assembled. All that of me which is assembled from the mighty cosmos can meet and touch all that is assembled in the beloved. But this is never the quick. Never can be.

\textsuperscript{92} As in Kangaroo, Lawrence projects his aesthetics onto a racial Other and depicts this Other as the object of ecological transformation rather than the transformative agent, but in this case the burden of enacting ecological change rests, at least, with (Western educated) Mexicans rather than with white colonials, which mediates the novel’s racism to some small degree.
If we would meet in the quick, we must give up the assembled self, the daily I, and putting off ourselves one after the other, meet unconscious in the Morning Star. Body, soul, and spirit can be transfigured into the Morning Star. But without transfiguration we shall never get there. We shall gnash at the leash.

Ramón knew what it was to gnash at his leashes. He had gnashed himself almost to pieces, before he had found the way to pass out in himself, in the quick of himself, to the Quick of all being and existence, which he called the Morning Star, since men must give all things names. To pass in the quick of himself, with transfiguration, to the Morning Star, and there, there alone meet his fellow man (251).

While the Quick is nature-being itself, the formless element of mind and matter, it also functions as yet another occult technology which collectivizes epiphany. *The Plumed Serpent* envisions modernist ecology in its most tautological form as nature-being revealing its own message – a mystical exchange which might otherwise have been characterized in terms of the individual’s ponderous anticipation of spontaneous change – but, as in *Kangaroo*, supplements it with a leader figure who must play a crucial role in communicating and interpreting this message. However, unlike Kangaroo, Ramón interprets the message as a call to reject “love” and “charity,” to embrace Somers’s “dark god.” Instead of loving and ministering to humanity as it is, Ramón strives to create a
new humanity by challenging the Christian cultural traditions and Western reifications imposed on Mexico, especially those which foster alienation from nature.

Ramón does not initially view his sermons and mass demonstrations as political, and refuses to attach his movement to any political party, insisting, “I must stand in another world and act in another world” (190). Like Somers, Ramón believes early on that politics alone cannot break with the situation, that he must instead “get inside the egg, right to the middle, to start growing a new bird” (190). Yet Ramón and Cipriano are both attentive to the rise to power of socialist revolutionary leader Montes, and come to view his attempt to save Mexico from capitalist exploitation and material poverty as something of a political counterpart to their own ecological attempt to “save its soul” (189). Although Ramón is respectful of Montes’s way, his initial sense is that “It is not good, trying to mix these two things ... at this stage of affairs” (190) – that collaboration with socialism will bring “the taint of politics” (245) and destroy the integrity of the movement. However, maintaining such autonomy while publicly appealing to the masses proves impracticable. When the movement gains momentum it is officially challenged by Church authorities and the reactionary Knights of Cortez, and Ramón must side with

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93 This discourse of reconnection with nature is couched in mythopoetic language, as for example in Ramón’s most superficially ecological sermon: “At the heart of this earth sleeps a great serpent, in the midst of fire … It is the living fire of the earth, for the earth is alive. The snake of the world is huge, and the rocks are his scales, trees grow between them. I tell you the earth you dig is alive as a snake that sleeps. So vast a serpent you walk on, this lake lies between his folds as a drop of rain in the folds of a sleeping rattlesnake. Yet he none the less lives. The earth is alive … And if he died, we should all perish. Only his living keeps the soil sweet, that grows you maize. From the roots of his scales we dig silver and gold, and the trees have root in him, as the hair of my face has root in my lips” (195).
Montes in order to save it, going against his previous conviction that unless the movement could “stand uncontaminated” it would be better to “abandon everything” (245). As Kate’s hotel manager predicted it would, albeit with the misconception that it was a “try-on of the Bolshevists” (99) in its inception, the Quetzalcoatl movement evolves into a form of socialism with a dark god. By reconciling the material interests of revolutionary socialism (as opposed to “humanitarian” reform socialism) with Ramón’s push for spiritual palingenesis, the revolution realizes Lawrence’s “democracy” in the form of “national socialism” (100). This union with politics precipitates the infamous scenes of ritualistic execution, where the men of Quetzalcoatl, “The Lords of Life,” exercise power in the most shocking way, becoming also “Masters of Death” (379) when Cipriano brutally stabs three enemies of the revolution with Ramón’s blessing.

Considering the trajectory of Kangaroo, one might expect the Quetzalcoatl movement to be revealed, in the end, to be inadequate to the dark god, and for the novel to end as a cautionary tale about the danger of “contaminating” ecopoetics. Instead, Montes’s coup is successful, the “old Church” is made “illegal” in Mexico, and the religion of Quetzalcoatl is made the national religion of the new Mexican republic (420). After the coup the whole country is “thrilling with a new thing, with a release of energy,” though there is a counterbalancing “sense of violence and crudity in it all” (421). Although Kate serves as a trenchant critic of the movement throughout the novel, assuming a “debunking role” characteristic of Lawrence’s female characters, as Robert Burden points out (Burden 238), she is equally an enthusiast of its challenge to Western
values. At the end of the novel she neither accepts nor rejects the movement, but finds herself desiring both modern individualism and submission to an impersonal, collective project (439-445). Countering an earlier tendency to read *The Plumed Serpent* as a relatively uncritical endorsement of fascism, other critics have read the novel’s conclusion as more of a criticism of the Quetzalcoatl movement than a true impasse. For Cowan, Ramón clearly goes back on his stand against politics and trades the difficult path of spiritual renewal for the quick fix of coercive violence, turning his followers into mechanical automatons in their own right and ultimately betraying his vision of regeneration (209). For Mensch, the prevailing suggestion is that the revolution will attract destructive personality types and consequently breed only violence and death in spite of its idealism (251), while for Smith either the socialists, the people, or Cipriano – the loci of real political power in the novel – will betray Ramón’s vision in the end (19). Although these are by no means misreadings since the text certainly implies these possibilities, it does seem that reading the ending against itself by picking one side of the impasse over the other, whether to exonerate Lawrence of charges of fascism or to establish *The Plumed Serpent* as critique of fascism (rather than a critical novel about fascism), can only stem from anxiety over its indeterminate politics. Because I have no investment in condemning *The Plumed Serpent* as “fascist” or in “exonerating” it, I prefer to accept the suspended dialectic with which the novel concludes and view it as

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94 This tendency is observable in Fernihough’s argument, discussed above, which suggests that Lawrence’s laudable aesthetics can be opposed to the politics of novels like *The Plumed Serpent*. 187
characteristic of the interaction between modernist ecology and fascist ecology. The challenge that remains is to understand why it is so characteristic.

The debate between Badiou and Ferry can help theorize the nature of this impasse, and explain why it is likely to recur when modernist ecology seeks programmatic expression. In *The New Ecological Order*, Ferry, assuming a familiar liberal stance, argues against precisely the kind of palingenetic social project that Lawrence imagines in *The Plumed Serpent* since such projects, he maintains, pursue an unrealized “other world” (67) that, in its ideal perfection, sanctions the most violent, antidemocratic methods of realization, yet remains nothing more than an unrealizable utopian mirage. For Ferry, radical ecology, especially deep ecology, is one of the foremost sources of such retrograde political thought in the contemporary world since it appeals especially to those “left stranded by the political void [brought on by the ascendance of liberal capitalism after the Cold War] and the end of utopian visions” (62). For Ferry ecology’s “posthumanism” is very much rooted in social modernist ideology, particularly its fascist iterations, and has disturbing political potential since it contests the West’s legacy of enlightenment humanism at the same time that it announces a civilizational crisis so pervasive and apocalyptic that any means of combating it could foreseeably be justified, including wholesale suspension of human rights, even genocide. Ecology as a social movement, he argues, also compromises the public sphere by flooding it with ideas that are actually religious or aesthetic in nature (134), a characteristic it shares with fascism according to Benjamin’s theory. Ferry concludes that “[as] a political movement,
ecology will not be democratic; as a democratic movement, it must renounce the mirage of grand political visions” (146). In other words, ecology must consent to the liberal democratic situation as it is, and attempt to effect reform within its logic – the only “adult” (138) attitude – or else become the newest voice of tyranny; tellingly, for Ferry this means accepting the capacity of the global market to adapt to increasingly environmentally conscious consumers choosing the “green” option out of their own free will rather than as a result of state coercion (145), something of a liberal version of spontaneous change, envisioning “sustainability” in terms of a slightly modified set of personal practices (which will “just happen”).

In *The Century*, a lecture series about the relationship between posthumanism in aesthetic and social modernism and contemporary politics, Badiou celebrates the now taboo twentieth century project that Ferry rejects: the creation of “a new man” (9). In line with the restless mood of Lawrence’s leadership novels, Badiou condemns the empty “humanitarian compassion” of liberal democratic politics (and its intellectual counterpart, the new cultural studies academia, heir to the intellectual posthumanism of the nineteen-sixties), which, with its reformist imperative to alleviate suffering and injustice rather than to break entirely with the situation, represents for Badiou “nothing less than the forsaking of any novelty that could be ascribed to man” (32). The extremity of Badiou’s stance is evident in his remark that in today’s “supermarket” of images of the suffering Other “it is never really a question of man except in the form of the tortured, the massacred, the famished, the genocided” (175), and in his rejection of human rights as
“the rights of the natural living being, of finitude, of resignation to what there is” (169).

This seemingly monstrous position is possible to maintain because Badiou calls for a return to cultural modernism’s conceptualization of humanity not in the form of a fragile body to be respected or violated but as “the immortal” – the figure of man “as absent to himself, torn away from what he is” and capable of infinite “adventurous greatness” (92) which might defy the logic of the status quo we are now, under the humanist restoration and neo-liberal “end of ideology,” constantly being solicited to accept as a lesser evil (as for example in Ferry’s work). Indeed, for Badiou the monstrous or dangerous aspects of the twentieth century’s cultural modernism only speak to the sincerity and frightening conviction of its variously envisioned palingenetic project. He articulates the century’s logic in a striking polemic:

If you think the world can and must change absolutely; that there is neither a nature of things to be respected nor pre-formed subjects to be maintained, you thereby admit that the individual may be sacrificable. Meaning that the individual is not independently endowed with any intrinsic nature that would deserve our striving to perpetuate it (99).

Reinterpreting the liberal tendency to view “ideology” as inherently dangerous, Badiou sees the climate of danger attendant to social modernism as the sign of its genuine engagement with revolutionary politics, which for Badiou seek to inaugurate an “event,” “a new way of being and acting” that was previously “excluded by all the regular laws of the situation” (Ethics 40-41) (and here, it bears mentioning, Badiou echoes Lawrence in
posing a distinction between politics, with can only act within the logic of the situation, and “real” politics, which create an entirely new logic).

Crucially, while Ferry maintains that ecological thought is problematic because it “does not exclude” (93) evils such as Nazism, Badiou maintains that genuine events can be distinguished, above all, by two linked characteristics: their universal appeal, and their very capacity to betray this appeal and create radical “Evil.” For Badiou, “it is absolutely essential that Evil be a possible dimension of truths” (Ethics 60) since a position such as Ferry’s, which attempts to protect the status quo against disruptions which might lead to tyranny, is in the end “beneath Good and beneath Evil” (60), incapable of any break with the situation whatsoever. It is for this reason that Badiou, like Lawrence, considers liberal democracy’s “ethics” as spurious, as “nihilist” (35), and supplies his own criteria for what constitutes real “democracy.” If for Lawrence real democracy secures material necessities for all so that spiritual transformation can bring about a new form of humanity, for Badiou democratic political processes, which arise outside the scope of constitutional politics, create “a space of emancipation subtracted from the consensual figure of the state” (Metapolitics 90). This space is emancipatory because it is universal, because it designates the infinite “void” (Ethics 74) beyond the situation, and therefore never rests upon empty simulacra supplied by arbitrary boundaries and archaic or fictive traditions – for example “German,” “Aryan,” or “French” – which instead designate only
“closed particularity” (74). Although every “invocation of blood and soil, of race, of custom, of community, works directly against truths” (76), it is only insofar as they can be represented as truth events that these simulacra are able to seize upon a particular situation, as for example in the interwar Weimar Republic (66). In Nazi Germany, Badiou argues, the closed particularity “Aryan” was supplemented by another fiction, “Jew,” which signified everything which threatened the imaginary contours of the particular, including the universal appeal itself (75), and is thus key for understanding the abject failure of the movement not only morally, but as a push for palingenesis (which in effect would render our moral consideration obsolete if it were achieved). This theory of democracy is useful for understanding the relationship between modernist ecology and

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95 In D. H. Lawrence, Science, and Posthumanism (2005) Jeff Wallace persuasively argues that Lawrence’s posthumanism grew in part out of Darwinian materialism, which destabilized divisions between humanity and nature (6), and is therefore not anti-scientific but exemplary of cultural modernism’s “doubled or distinctly ambivalent stance towards science” (14). However, one feature of Darwinism that Lawrence does not celebrate is its fixation on what philosophers can be variously termed the underlying “will” (Schopenhauer and Nietzsche) or “drive” (Odo Marquard) of organic nature – the biological face of Soper’s “realist” system of inalienable, self-governing drives. In The Dialectic of Romanticism Murphy and Roberts trace the emergence of a traumatic three-way split in post-Darwinian German philosophy between romantic notions of aesthetic-creative nature, enlightenment ideas of nature as an abstract, rational system, and the latter’s disturbing outgrowth: a darker scientific understanding of realist nature as a self-devouring, amoral system that is regulated yet irrational (subject only to cruel, chaotic rules such as “survival of the fittest”) (16). I would suggest that Lawrence’s nature inevitably contains elements from all three, but is primarily aesthetic-creative. This is important considering that Nazi ideologues purportedly set out to counter enlightenment systems of mechanization in the name of (“Aryan”) human freedom and creativity, but also mobilized drive nature – which arguably cannot, and certainly should not be extended to the social world – in order to legitimize unchecked persecution of “the weak” and eventually the Holocaust. The idea of “the fittest” is thus one simulacrum that Lawrence avoids, and actually critiques quite pointedly in his early novel The White Peacock (1911) through the character Annable, who attempts to raise his children according to Darwinian principles and fails miserably (see chapter two of Anne Ehlert’s 2001 dissertation Ecological Vision in the Fiction of D. H. Lawrence for an illuminating discussing of Annable’s experiment).
fascist ecology since it explains how a revolutionary political process such as Nazism can be “formally indistinguishable from an event” (73) which breaks with the situation and designates the void, even as it remains bound to imagined particularities that render it incapable of any “truth” whatsoever, in so far as for Badiou revolutionary truth must be “democratic” to have validity.

Badiou’s abstract theories of democracy and fascism offer another way of understanding the failure of Kangaroo’s revolution: while on one hand it simply reproduces the logic of liberal democracy, on the other it lapses consistently into false particularities – while Kangaroo touts “the human” to Somers’s chagrin, his followers, especially Jack, reveal the movement’s inherent xenophobia, anti-internationalism, and racism, the extent to which it designates not the infinite void, but an idealized white Australia (208). Yet while Somers picks up on the movement’s failure to break entirely with the liberal democratic situation, he participates uncritically in its followers’ panic over the threat of “coloured labour” (101) and theorizes, without his characteristic hesitation, that the correct balance of leadership and liberty sought after by himself and by the diggers can only belong to “white blood” (102). The irony (or “betrayal” to use Badiou’s term) evident in Somers complicity with the digger’s xenophobia and racism is that he reifies false particularities that divide the pre-existing category of the human even as he purportedly seeks to transcend this category altogether through commerce with the posthuman dark god. The dark god, it seems, excludes the worst of humanism and liberal democracy, but does not exclude the worst of nationalism, at least not in Kangaroo. After
the climatic riot in Sydney that concludes the novel, Somers recognizes the ugliness of
the movement and seemingly of nationalism more generally, only to fall back upon a
position suggestive of Ferry’s, for which the dangers of palingenesis – which for Badiou
are the very condition of its possibility – legitimate retreat from revolutionary politics, a
return to Birkin’s comparatively quietistic posthuman ecopoetics.

Somers is also in agreement with Jack that women should be excluded entirely
from “real politics” (106). As Robert Burden points out, Lawrence’s leadership phase
was characterized in part by a (more or less newfound) refusal of “the feminization of
culture” (232) which entailed not just increasing suspicion of “the new woman,” but also
refusal of pacifism in face of perceived civilizational disaster. Indeed, his need to engage
actively with the situation in an active, “masculine” manner no doubt accounts in part for
Lawrence’s search for a programmatic solution to the ecological crisis he perceived in the
modern West. The irony of this masculinist stance, which envisions the modernist seer as
stern, combative figure prepared for literal and figurative violence, is that the ideal male
type it celebrates comes increasingly to resemble the type he is supposed to counter: the
detached, predatory modern subject who sets upon a feminized nature in order to serve
his own interests. If this modern type, like Gerald, transforms nature-being in addition to
exploiting it, there is still less to separate these two figures, since they both rely on
aggression to realize worldly objectives and metaphysical change. Lawrence’s insistence
on masculinist resolution also seems to have created a potentially false dilemma: either
warlike confrontation with modernity or quietism. As he evidently entertained no position
between total war and exasperated retreat at this point in his career, Lawrence seems to have limited his ecological imagination to a masculinist framework that is arguably unsuitable for addressing an ongoing crisis.\(^{96}\)

While this certainly does not indict modernism’s programmatic mode in general, Lawrence’s masculinist understanding of ecological crisis as an urgent, warlike situation ironically limited his ability to envision the new humanity his resolute male characters proclaim and endeavor to actualize. Lawrence’s recourse to stereotypical gender roles in novels purportedly concerned with profound revolutionary rupture is further indicative of his failure to think beyond regressive particulars; in both *Kangaroo* and *The Plumed Serpent* the new humanity’s gender dynamics are suggestive not of the unknown vistas of the future, but of a backwards window onto the nineteenth century. Both Harriet and Kate take on multifaceted, but ultimately subordinate roles beneath male visionaries. Kate’s role in particular is revealing; though she is superficially granted an important position in the society to come, this is contingent upon her “mystical marriage,” which requires her to reject the “willfulness” of the modern woman while effectively allocating worldly power to the virile, violent male principle embodied by Cipriano. Burden points out that on a deeper level “charactological and textual instabilities in Lawrence’s fiction” tend to “undermine the doctrinaire assertions of male leadership” (232); in other words, although both *Kangaroo* and *The Plumed Serpent* misidentify past gender roles with radical

\(^{96}\) In a future chapter or article I intend to discuss how Woolf’s ecofeminism unmasks this false dilemma and identifies fascism’s masculinist agenda as a symptom of the root cause of ecological crisis, rather than a potential resolution.
novelty, female characters such as Harriet and Kate Leslie undermine the apparent message of male superiority through their consistently critical stance towards their male counterparts. While Burden is correct to point this out, “charactological and textual instabilities” (which abound in all fiction) are also the loci of telling ideological impasses, and in Lawrence’s leadership novels they speak consistently to the incoherence that results when ecological change is imagined in terms of simulacra.

In *The Plumed Serpent* the incoherent relationship between the universal and the particular is most complex because the novel attempts to imagine fascist ecology in more detailed terms. While in *Kangaroo* natural aristocrats are evidently white men charged with leading the white race – and Kangaroo, the false natural aristocrat, a Jew[^97] – in *The Plumed Serpent* they are “the flowers of each race” capable of speaking to their people in “the tongues of their own blood” (246). Together they form “a Natural Aristocracy of the World” (246), each rooted in the mythopoetics of their particular native soil and cultural traditions but together united in a larger project to breathe life into a disenchanted world; as Ramón puts it,

[^97]: Lawrence’s treatment of Kangaroo’s Jewishness resonates with Badiou’s reading of the paranoid discourse of “the Jew” in Nazi Germany. Somers voices his preference for “a spurred heel” over “the heel of a Jewish financier” (237), and ultimately associates Kangaroo with a “bad” internationalism combining Judeo-Christian love, humanism, and capitalism. Struthers also blames “Jewish” capital for exploiting local farmers in the most hateful terms (342). It would not be a stretch to read Lawrence’s constant and vaguely anti-Semitic reminders of Kangaroo’s Jewishness as foreshadowing of his eventual exposure as a false prophet. It is worth recalling too that *Women in Love*’s Loerke, another figure of bad internationalism, is discussed by Birkin and Gerald in anti-Semitic terms (444-445).
I wish the Teutonic world would once more think in terms of Thor and Wotan, and the tree Igdrasil. And I wish the Druidic world would see, honestly, that in the mistletoe is their mystery, and that they themselves are the Tuatha De Danaan, alive, but submerged. And a new Hermes should come back to the Mediterranean, and a new Ashtaroh to Tunis; and a Mithras to Persia, and Brahma unbroken to India, and the oldest of dragons to China (247).

Ramón sees local interpretations of a greater natural magic as the only path to an “international, cosmopolitan, or cosmic” sensibility united in “the Quick of all being” that would allow natural aristocrats to “rise above their nation” but never to “rise beyond their race” (246). “National socialism” is the programmatic form assumed by this local/international, racialist/cosmopolitan spiritual movement of regenesis. Undoubtedly Ramón’s list of mythopoetic traditions would constitute an enumeration of simulacra for Badiou, yet the political form of the Quetzalcoatl movement is clearly not virulently racist in the same way that historical national socialism was, and is evidently more concerned with the spiritual liberation of all the world’s peoples (even if this liberation comes through submission to racially appropriate spiritual oligarchs). Still, The Plumed Serpent’s idealized fascist ecology attempts to reconcile mutually exclusive discourses of internationalism and nationalism, mirroring an incoherence at the heart of fascist ideology; while, viewed from the inside, fascism was manifestly concerned with creating “a new type of human being from whom would spring a new morality, a new social
system, and eventually a new international order” (Eksteins 303), its internationalist aspirations, as Eric Carlson points out, were ultimately mired in paradox: were French fascists, for example, expected to embrace occupying Nazi troops in the name of international fascism, or resist in the name of nationalism? (27). Was the “new man” to be the conquering Aryan or French superman or various supermen, each corresponding to its own master race? For Lawrence the latter was the case: the fascist international would birth a new man for each distinct “spirit of place,” to use a term Lawrence employs many times throughout his work. But if the purpose of fascist ecology was, for Lawrence, to programmatize a cosmopolitan ecological vision that could emerge anywhere regardless of regnant ideologies and state forms, why attach it to such particularities at all? The example of Nazism clearly illustrates the failure of programmatic modernism to inaugurate a universal event when it appeals to a mythopoetics of the autochthonous and thereby privileges one race, one homeland at the expense of all others, or at least confuses what Badiou calls the infinite void with a finite spirit of place, which in turn demands efforts of preservation, exclusion, or brutal sanitation that are inconceivable according to democratic logic. 98 In The Plumed Serpent Lawrence attempts to issue an

98 The spirit of place is certainly not necessarily a pernicious concept, and many critics have read Lawrence’s attention to place in positive terms. For instance, Eunyoung Oh looks at the spirit of place from a postcolonial perspective and concludes that though Lawrence’s novels and essays of place participate in many colonialist conventions, they also entirely avoid others, such as the tendency to figure foreign places as vast “landscapes” to explore and dominate; speaking of The Plumed Serpent Oh writes, “Although critics have suspected the motives behind Lawrence’s appropriation of the Quetzalcoatl myth, this Mexican novel shows that the author’s greatest concern is with finding a new mode of life, which transgresses the limits of colonized experiences as well as those of colonialist perspectives” (20). This is true, but in no way does it rule out fascism, which likewise attempts to transgress all limits of experience. Carol Cantrell prefers to
appeal that would satisfy both his own and Badiou’s requirements for democracy, but arrives at a quintessentially fascist paradox which finds its expression in the mystified nationalism of a compromised doctrine of universality.

_The Plumed Serpent_ is so interesting as an experiment in fascist ecology because it suggests that fascist ecology’s definitive tendency is to conceptualize nature-being through the very particularities it is ostensibly intended to dissolve in the name of the new. For Yeats, whose early theory of international Celticism is in many respects similar to Ramón’s theory of natural aristocracy, it became clear that the spiritual truth of modernist ecology was identical only with its cosmopolitanism and was thus to be rigorously disassociated from politics, which in Ireland were inevitably mired in either the “English” situation or in the pseudo-politics and false particularities of Irish nationalism. By reimagining democratic politics in terms of the rupture created by the event, Badiou attempts to politicize what for the later Yeats could only survive in a protected but isolated autonomous sphere. However, _The Plumed Serpent_ does not read “place” as “the union of human making, culture, creativity and the environment” (38) and sees aesthetic modernism’s attention to this kind of place as something that can jar readers out of “the habit of thinking place as ‘landscape,’ ‘out there,’ ‘objective,’ and thus without relation to the self” (37). In Cantrell’s sense, modernist ecology could be thought of as a discourse of “place,” but so too could fascist ecology, which through a “union of human making, culture, creativity, and the environment” engenders simulacra such as racial rootedness and views these sentimentally as integral to the ecological health of the collective self. I do not mean to throw out either of these positive theories of place, but neither is very useful for unpacking and critiquing fascist ideology since neither is written with fascism in mind. I prefer to de-emphasize place, if only as a choice of terminology, since the most important, distinguishing feature of modernist ecology is its cosmopolitanism, not its attention to particulars (Cantrell’s idea of “place” could work fairly well, but would be more useful for my purposes were it provocatively termed “placelessness”).
imagine ecology in terms that satisfy Badiou’s requirements for a genuine event, but rather straddles the universal and the particular, the cosmopolitan and the local. Even though this position is perhaps closer to universality than historical fascism and other fascist ecologies, such as Heidegger’s, for Badiou it would still represent failure to effect palingenesis. But Badiou’s theory of the simulacrum begs important questions: is there a theoretical “pure” form of fascism that does not appeal to false particulars and is thus worthy of being called an event? Is fascism always the event betrayed, or is what is typically meant by “fascism” – the militant defence of particulars – simply one of two possibilities internal to fascist ideology (“the fascism of fascism” as it were)\(^9\). Badiou’s answer is that a theoretical “pure” fascism without simulacra would not be fascism by definition, since fascism is precisely that political programme which formally mirrors but falsifies the event. Furthermore, he insists that even without simulacra, events are betrayed when they are interpreted as a sanction of “total power” (*Ethics* 71) and thereby counteract their own emancipatory potential, a more familiar criteria for rejecting

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\(^9\) Badiou’s theory of fascism is some ways weakened by his election to speak only of Nazism and never of Italian fascism, a weakness I have duplicated here by using Nazism as my primary example of fascism. Italian fascism’s futurist/modernist credentials make it more difficult to explain in terms of simulacra, though I think Badiou’s theory can still explain the failure of this social modernism, which in the end expressed itself more consistently though misogyny, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism than through cultural innovation. Mussolini’s politician granddaughter, Alessandra Mussolini, actually attempted to argue that since what was wrong with Italian fascism was its racism, a new non-racist fascism should be established. She had an ultra-conservative rather than palingenetic movement in mind, but this might still speak to problems that can result from focusing exclusively on simulacra when critiquing fascist ideology. I have focused on this concept not because it is Badiou’s only critique of fascist ideology or because it is the only criticism to make, but rather because it has a great deal of explanatory power when applied to Lawrence’s investment in nature. As such I intend this chapter to offer a comprehensive critique of the novels under discussion, not of fascist ideology.
Lawrence’s experiments in authoritarian politics and his doctrine of natural aristocracy in particular. What I would like to suggest a propos of fascist ecology is that it can in fact never be “pure” since, the likelihood of abuse of “total power” by its interpreters notwithstanding, its ideology is definable precisely in terms of a contradictory embrace of the universal and the particular: this is what must be designated by the term fascist ecology, even though it necessarily contains within itself and attempts to find political expression for the cosmopolitanism of modernist ecology. It is in this sense that Lawrence’s novel, with its concluding impasse, is not stuck between fascist ecology and some other “good” or more morally “correct” position, but is rather exemplary of the ideological contradiction which alone can differentiate fascist ecology from the modernist ecology it subsumes and betrays.  

Despite their larger disagreement, Badiou and Ferry both agree that this contradiction is a problem inherent to fascist ecology and other social modernisms. For Ferry, it speaks to the political incoherence of deep ecology, which he sees as a marriage of the extreme left’s futural thrust and the extreme right’s defence of the particular (xxvii). Despite his use of somewhat misleading terminology, Ferry actually offers a perceptive critique of “right wing” ecological thinking which privileges organic nature as

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100 Although I use the term “contradiction” here, this reading is a bit different from Herf’s theory of reactionary modernism in that it does not see fascism as inherently contradictory on its own terms – after all, the willed fictions of simulacra can still “make it new”– but as compromised from the perspective of universal or “democratic” thought. Despite this subtle difference, Herf’s theory is still very useful for understanding a variety of contradictions evident in Nazi ideology and practice, as for example its embrace of the same industrial technology it originally defined itself against.
the locus of “primordial authenticity” (96), and insists instead that nature is always constructed by the intellect (95). Modernist ecology is not far off from this position, but further insists that Ferry’s constructions of the intellect themselves (namely, those of Cartesian humanism) are simulacra that need to be dissolved in order to break with the situation – that the truth of nature lies with nature-being, the *prima materia* of these constructions, and therefore always points elsewhere, toward its limitless malleability. As such, nature-being is nothing like the simulacra traditionally defended by the right: it reconfigures the “primordial” as that which is strikingly *blank*, a window not onto humanity’s rootedness in a multitude of local soils, landscapes, or folkways, but to its infinitude, its capacity to transcend these particulars and to create entirely new ecologies (a blankness that was grasped by fascism, as I have argued, but only as one side of a contradiction). In this sense nature-being designates Badiou’s void at the same time that it satisfies Ferry’s requirement that the modern (as opposed to the anti-modern or reactionary) celebrate “uprootedness” over mythologies of foundation (xxi). So far I have tried to demonstrate that Lawrence’s greatest influence was always this “progressive” element of nature-being, but also that his work became mired in contradiction when he attempted to imagine its idealized programmatic form in *The Plumed Serpent.*
The Return to Epiphanic Modernism in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*

The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes

- from *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (5)

It seems that Lawrence came to recognize the shortcomings of *The Plumed Serpent*’s fascist ecology; in 1924, during the rush of its composition, Lawrence excitedly referred to the novel as “his most important” (*Letters* 271), yet announced his “boredom” with the theme of leadership and militant revolution shortly after its publication in 1926 (Burack 126). His next and last major novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), deals with leadership and collective action only in the negative: here their absence is a sign of irreversible “cataclysm” rather than a call to action. The novel focuses instead on the possibility of individual epiphany, and forgoes the leadership novels’ elaborate theories of collective consciousness, exploring intersubjectivity on the much smaller scale of an isolated couple, Constance Chatterley and Oliver Mellors. As such, *Chatterley* does not represent a linear intensification of the themes developed in *Kangaroo* and *The Plumed Serpent*, but a marked retreat from their experiments with modernism’s programmatic mode. However, despite the fact that these programmatic experiments culminate in an incoherent fascist ecology, I argue that we cannot simply accept this as a *necessary* retreat, and must instead theorize Lawrence’s failed assault on the boundaries between art and politics, epiphany and programme as something of a necessary and timely exercise.
Chatterley returns to Women in Love’s industrial England and recapitulates many of the earlier novel’s themes in more direct, didactic form: the degradation of the war; the life-denying tendency of modern technology and the nihilistic complicity of modern art; the spiritual poverty of mind/body or humanity/nature dualism and mechanical metaphysics; the distant promise of a new ethic located in the erotic experience of nature; the pressing need for collective ecological change that remains frustratingly unfathomable. Of all Lawrence’s novels, Chatterley is perhaps the most concerned with foregrounding the connection between modern spiritual illness and the degradation of “the environment,” which is portrayed, in a near contemporary way, as the threatened source from which all life and vitality emerges – Sir Clifford’s recently logged “conservation” grounds (43), Mellors’s delicate newborn chick (118), the air Constance realizes is being “killed” (95) by pollution. Autonomous technology and autonomous art, which in Women in Love are embodied by Gerald and Gudrun/Loerke respectively, are in the later novel both associated with Sir Clifford, who is at once an industrial magnate and a producer of modern fiction. Clifford is content with his successful literary career, complete with publication in “the most modern magazines” (17), but is also compelled to pursue “the bitch-goddess of Success” (111) through his mining operation, which, like Gerald, he turns into a Taylorized operation in the service of abstract “Power” (112) as much as profit. For Constance, Sir Clifford’s operation represents a “strange denial of the common pulse of humanity” (15); it reduces workers to “objects rather than men” (16), mars the countryside, and for all its material production does not seem to improve
anyone’s overall quality of life. Furthermore, Clifford applies the rational management he brings to industry to everything, including sexuality (46). It is from Clifford’s world, which is hyperbolic of the emptiness of modern life, that Constance attempts to escape.

At first Constance finds solace in the woodlands around Wragby Estate, “her one refuge, her sanctuary” (21), but her inherited disconnection with the “substantial and vital world” (21) makes the forest seem a mere “dream” or yet another “simulacrum of reality” (19). As she spends more time in the forest, however, she begins to puzzle over the strange “silence” of the trees, which in their very “unspeaking reticence” seem to project an obscure message that captures the mood of the novel perfectly:

> From the wood came an ancient melancholy, somehow soothing to her, better than the harsh insentience of the outer world. She liked the inwardness of the remnant of forest, the unspeaking reticence of the old trees. They seemed a very power of silence, and yet a vital presence. They, too, were waiting: obstinately, stoically waiting, and giving off a potency of silence. Perhaps they were only waiting for the end; to be cut down, cleared away, the end of the forest, for them the end of all things. But perhaps their strong and aristocratic silence, the silence of strong trees, meant something else (68).

Although *Chatterley* focuses on the “substantial” world of nature to a greater extent than the other novels I have discussed, the forest is depicted here as an *internal* as much as
external realm. The message Constance attributes to the trees does not issue from an external or material source, but from the radical blankness or “reticence” of nature-being itself, which, grasped as a summons or charge, points to the infinitude of humanity and nature, and only in this sense to the possibility of a better (or even worse) future. The novel thus works on two related but semi-distinct registers that should now be quite familiar: on one hand, there is a pervasive threat to living organisms, landscape, and sensuous, embodied experience; on the other, a failure or malignancy of the human imagination is creating the metaphysics that makes this threat possible. It is important to keep in mind that this dynamic, which runs through all Lawrence’s work, implicitly gives priority to the latter metaphysical problem, since any corrective for the former threats can only appear, according to this logic, as a new ethic, a new metaphysics, regardless of how “substantial” or material such a solution might seem.\(^{101}\) I reiterate this point here because the novel’s near-contemporary concern with “the environment” lends itself rather misleadingly to a realist reading of its prognosis of ecological crisis.

Encountering Mellors is “a visionary experience” (68) for Constance, and the couple’s lovemaking, like Birkin and Ursula’s, is a receptive, sensual experience that resonates with the novel’s ecological themes. Before her experiences with Mellors, Constance seeks ecstatic experience – “the resurrection of the body” (87) – in the forest (88-89) rather than through intersubjective experience; after their meeting, her

\(^{101}\) As Fernihough puts it, the former can only be understood as the “direct physical consequence” (131) of the latter.
relationship with the gamekeeper actualizes her newfound spiritual and bodily awareness at the very smallest scale of collectivity. Although Mellors is a source of vitality for Constance, the feelings of hope she reawakens in the gamekeeper cause him pain and anxiety:

He went down again into the darkness and seclusion of the wood. But he knew that the seclusion of the wood was illusory. The industrial noises broke the solitude, the sharp lights, though unseen, mocked it. A man could no longer be private and withdrawn. The world allows no hermits. And he had taken the woman, and brought on himself a new cycle of pain and doom. For he knew by experience what it meant.

It was not woman’s fault, nor even love’s fault, nor the fault of sex. The fault lay there, out there, in those evil electric lights and diabolical rattlings of engines. There, in the world of the mechanical greedy, greedy mechanism and mechanized greed, sparkling with lights and gushing hot metal and roaring with traffic, there lay the vast evil thing, ready to destroy whatever did not conform. Soon it would destroy the wood, and the bluebells would spring no more (123).

Mellors’s relationship with Constance forces him to confront his own pessimism about modern England and to recognize the failure of his wounded withdrawal from the ecological crisis (and the ultimate impossibility of withdrawal). However, unlike Somers, Mellors does not exactly grasp his dissatisfaction with withdrawal as a call to
programmatic political engagement; instead, the linkage of natural aristocracy and programmatic engagement that informs the leadership novels’ conception of revolution is registered in *Chatterley* only as an absence of worthy fellow travellers:

Oh, if only there were other men to be with, to fight that sparking electric Thing outside there, to preserve the tenderness of life, the tenderness of women, and the natural riches of desire. If only there were men to fight side by side with! But the men were all outside there, glorying in the Thing, triumphing or being trodden down in the rush of mechanized greed or of greedy mechanism (125).

Mellors laments how everywhere there is only philosophical “bolshevism,” the worship of “the mechanical thing” (226), and no spark of vitality to designate the void of the situation. In his darkest mood Mellors declares that soon “the last real man” will be

102 Lawrence’s treatment of “Bolshevism” offers clues as to why ecological modernists tended to be more attracted to fascism than to communism. In *Chatterley* Bolshevism is understood in terms of the principle of the machine (40-41); in other words, it is viewed as identical to same pernicious, “abstract” materialist metaphysics that are effecting the ecological crisis in the democratic, capitalist world – as Tommy Dukes puts it in *Chatterley*, “We’re all of us Bolshevists” (41). This speaks to Lawrence’s greater concern for ecological problems than for social injustice; since for Lawrence technology is troublingly autonomous even from capital, a redistribution of the wealth created by the means of production will not address the ecological crisis, except perhaps by creating the democratic conditions that might allow people to turn away from social injustice. Despite its obvious weaknesses as a critique of communism (a critique echoed by deep ecologists today), Lawrence’s understanding of Bolshevism speaks to the failure of many leftisms to assimilate ecological thought and to offer a comprehensive critique of modernity in the first half of the century. A generation after Lawrence, Adorno and Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse theorized Marxisms which combined historical materialism with modernist-inflected ecological thought, reflecting the New Left’s awareness of the ecological shortcomings of past iterations of Marxist materialism and offering an anti-fascist union of ecopoetics and politics.
killed off and the ecological crisis will be so completely naturalized that its unchecked “algebraic progression” (227) will destroy the human species altogether, an apocalyptic fantasy which, as in Birkin and Ursula’s fantasy scenarios, envisions a future for non-human nature but despairs of posthuman ecology. Although Chatterley no longer envisions a revolutionary programme, the masculinist rhetoric of Kangaroo and The Plumed Serpent is still present as a negation in Mellors’s wounded speech; here the rhetoric of warlike action is crossed-out only to be reconfigured as dissatisfied quietism due to an absence of “real men.” Thus Chatterley does not transcend the dilemma imposed by the potentially false action/quietism binary, as the tone of the epigraph to this section might suggest, rather it arrives, defeated, at the latter pole. Although Chatterley represents a movement away from the gender dynamics of the leadership novels, it seems that the cancelled but preserved “real man,” the virile revolutionary type capable of fighting on behalf of nature, was a simulacrum Lawrence was capable of abandoning due to his own exasperation over its absence, but not of thinking beyond entirely.

The closest thing to a programme Mellors can imagine without the intervention of this revolutionary type is spontaneous collective rejection of industrial civilization; he explains to Constance that “[w]e needn’t rant an’ rave. Bit by bit, let’s drop the whole industrial life an’ go back” (228). However, in the absence of worthy fellows this fantasy is not only naive, it is also knowingly futile on another register. Shortly after this indulgence Mellors frankly acknowledges the impossibility of a collective rejection of the industrial way: “I’d wipe the machines off the face of the earth again, and end the
industrial epoch absolutely, like a black mistake. But since I can’t an’ nobody can, I’d better hold my peace, an’ try an’ live my own life: if I’ve got one to live, which I rather doubt” (230). His appeal to live differently, to “be alive and frisky, and acknowledge the great god Pan” (315), is really addressed and addressable only to Constance and to himself. Thus the novel’s critique of industrialized society resolves itself in something akin to a mere lifestyle choice; outside the couple’s private world the world of men remains unredeemably “apathetic” and “limp” (314) (suggesting Yeats’s masculinist language of virility/impotence) and, importantly, Lawrence no longer envisions an idealized leader or theorizes a direct link between his artist/Pan figure and the collective. In this sense Chatterley returns to the state of disconnection between Zivilization and Kultur diagnosed in Women in Love, but no longer struggles to overcome this disconnection through an idealized meeting of ecopoetics and politics (and, more positively, does not actively invoke simulacra as an alternative to the novel’s restless mood). While Constance’s love and strength of character tempers some of Mellor’s pessimism, he still prophecies “a bad time coming” (315); and with only a near-impossible spontaneous revolution to hope for, the tiny “flame” the couple has “fucked ... into being” (316), so maddeningly far from a programme of action, is all that separates their impossible retreat, in Griffin’s words their “night shelter,” from total resignation to the ecocidal situation. In short, the novel avoids the contradictions of fascist ecology by stepping away from the male revolutionary type, but returns to its dissatisfying point of
departure: a disconnect between new ecologies revealed through epiphany and the regnant political, social, and ideological situation.

This return from *The Plumed Serpent*’s fascist ecology has been celebrated in most Lawrence criticism to date, but is not unproblematic in its own right. For instance, Burack, reflecting a common tendency among Lawrence’s critics, reads *Chatterley* as a rejection of the leadership novels’ flights of authoritarian fantasy and a return to what he sees as a more energetic mode of ecological experimentation that marked Lawrence’s earlier works, such as *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. For Burack, the leadership novels are the weakest of Lawrence’s attempts to create a transformative art, but are redeemed in part by *Chatterley*’s “final rally of resources” (156). Likewise, for Cowan *Chatterley* is more successful than the leadership novels because it accepts, with finality, that ecology is a matter of “inward visionary experience” which can lead in turn “to personal growth and change” (211); in other words because the later novel accepts the limitations of epiphany and its indirect relationship with collective change. Both representative readings see Lawrence’s programmatic experiments as artistically unproductive dead ends and valorize the epiphanic in his work. However, while there is much truth to these types of readings, I would like to join Burden in challenging them; Burden argues instead that it is in the leadership novels that Lawrence is at his most experimental and modernist, that these novels take both the self-reflexive/critical and activist/avant-garde aspirations of literary modernism to their limit (231). Indeed, there is an irony involved in rejecting the leadership novels as it is precisely in these texts that a
truly transgressive, indeed disturbing union of politics and art occurs. Yet, faced with an actual example of politicized art – so nominally valued in contemporary literary studies – Lawrence’s critics (myself included) are tempted to look away, back towards semi-autonomous ecopoetics, to an art that feels suspiciously “apolitical” by comparison, acceptable only insomuch as it remains forever suspended on the threshold of revolutionary action. One begins to wonder whether Lawrence’s first transgression is not fascist ecology, but simply his attempt to create an extreme form of “real” political art, a transgression which for the New Critics was nothing more than an error in taste, a misrecognition of art’s limits. If Griffin and Antliff are correct in announcing the incoherence of Benjamin’s notion of aestheticized politics (which, they argue, serves primarily to distance the fascist avant-garde from the communist avant-garde and to offer an easy way out of this network of problems) perhaps we need to seriously consider the possibility that there are definite limits to our taste for politicized art, yet without submitting to the empty formalism of New Criticism. It is in this sense that my account of modernist ecology must be thought of as critical of, yet consistent with the epiphanic reading of Lawrence’s oeuvre I have detailed here; in the final analysis modernist ecology must be read in terms of the maintenance of the threshold between imagination and collective action more so than a leap into the void, yet this is brought to light most clearly in programmatic works such as Lawrence’s leadership novels, which cannot
preserve the integrity – the universality or infinitude – of their ecopoetic vision when they try to cross over.  

However, even if modernist ecology must in the end accept the logic of ecopoetic epiphany (which creates and maintains this threshold between imagination and collective action) over programmatic resolution (which crosses the threshold) this should not be thought of as a wholesale rejection of the programmatic mode, which alone promises, potentially falsely it must be said, a genuinely revolutionary art. According to Badiou this art would actually be required to submit its poetics absolutely to the directives of the party after the revolutionary event’s inception, since a genuine event would finally unite politics and art (The Century 151) and, to use a combination of Badiou’s terms and my own, abolish semi-autonomous ecopoetics by articulating them politically under the sign of the universal. It is thus possible to think the programmatic mode’s “destination,” the unreachable terminus of its Aufbruch, as a horizon beyond which the conflict or divide between politics and art would no longer exist. And in this sense, like the other conditions of closure I have outlined in this chapter, the ultimate, transcendent goal of the programmatic impulse would, once achieved, actually obviate the whole discourse of modernist ecology; it is for this reason that modernist ecology can only operate on the

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103 Calinescu understands the self-limiting tendency of avant-garde art (or would-be avant-garde art) in terms of forgetfulness: “hypnotized by his enemy – of whom he makes an infinitely cunning and terrifying monster – the avant-gardist often ends up forgetting about the future. The future, he seems to imply, can take care of itself when the demons of the past are exorcised” (96). I prefer to read the self-limiting nature of the avant-garde, at least the avant-garde within modernism, in terms of the maintenance of a threshold between imagination and action, since I view its relatively passive relationship to the future as more of a self-conscious gesture.
threshold of the divide, even if its strange form of activism consists in challenging the very liminal condition with which it is identical. As I have argued, Lawrence discovered the difficulty of willfully crossing the threshold and effecting such closure without compromising his ecopoetic vision in his leadership phase, which stands out as at once his most radical and most flawed. However, the difficulty of willfully crossing over should not be regarded as a testament to the necessity of submitting to the limitations of ecopoetics; while the distinction is subtle, I want to suggest that modernist ecology is only vital when a challenge to these limitations is nonetheless issued – after all, to resign oneself to the inevitability of submission does not have the same power as to fail. In my opinion Lawrence’s writing lost direction by the time of Chatterley because his most thought provoking experiments had already run their course and had arrived at an illuminating disintegration. One might even read the “ruins” the novel invokes in its opening lines not only as the traumatized stuff of the natural world and collective consciousness, but also as the discarded ideological material of a monolithic project which did not exactly fail, yet could not succeed, and in the end returned self-consciously to its point of departure, to be resumed in another form by a future generation.  

In effect Lawrence’s broader investment in dialogue necessitates this impasse. While today democracy is often characterized as that which rejects “totalitarianism” aforethought, Lawrence attempts to bring all possibilities of reform into dialogue in his fiction (even in works where his attraction to a given possibility becomes conspicuous). Lawrence’s thought experiments are thus dangerously democratic to the extent that they incorporate all manner of imagined authoritarian programmes, yet they are also defined from the outset by self-reflexive equivocation that is incompatible with them.

104
Conclusion: Radical Ecology in the Arts and the Limits of Aesthetic Purgation

This [twentieth] century has been the century of a poetics of the wait, a poetics of the threshold. The threshold will not have been crossed, but its maintenance will have constituted the power of the poem

- Alain Badiou, from The Century (22)

One of Badiou’s most striking insights into the linked histories of twentieth century posthuman art and politics is that both are governed by a logic of purgation. In the arts, a pervasive concern with authenticity led to an obsession with exposing phony claimants to the real; since art, language, even private epiphany can only indirectly demonstrate “the rawness of the real” (53) – Lawrence’s “genuine draught from chaos” – through a self-abnegating “system of fictions” (The Century 52), these systems always remain under suspicion and must be continuously purified to avoid misrecognizing the real entirely (53). In politics, the same logic of purgation sought to publicly demonstrate the uncertainties of the real and the fragility of the revolutionary event; under Stalinism, for example, as “a matter of policy” it could never be certain who was true to the revolutionary event, and, finally, no one could be safe from the purges (53); under Nazism, absurd simulacra such as “Aryan blood” dominated revolutionary rhetoric, but were policed with the same tireless paranoia and unlimited, systematic violence. Modernist ecology generally pursued the former, aesthetic form of purgation aggressively, attempting to separate the unedited semblance of nature-being, the most
elemental system of fictions and (for many modernists) the closest to the real, 105 from a variously articulated realist metaphysics which did not just misrecognize “nature” in its own reifications – thereby creating a kind of false ecological consciousness – but pushed civilization towards tangible environmental collapse by externalizing itself in industrial technology unchecked by any life-giving “cultural” ethos. Lawrence’s leadership novels, which attempt to imagine an idealized authoritarian politics informed by semi-autonomous ecopoetics, probably come closer than any other modernist works in English to fully embracing the latter form of political purgation, but Lawrence ultimately ceased to pursue an aggressive social modernist programme for a number of reasons. First of all, his fantasies of enlightened leadership by “natural aristocrats” bolstered by mystical forms of communication with the masses and, in The Plumed Serpent, violent political purgation in the name of nature-being, remained confined to the larger dialogue of his fiction, in part because they were profoundly hostile to any concrete historical expressions of social modernism, whether communist or fascist. Second of all, and to his credit, the self-reflexive/critical dimension of his modernism, which he amplified alongside the activist/avant-garde dimension which receives so much more attention in relation to the leadership novels, counter-balanced his revolutionary enthusiasm enough that even his most extreme political fictions resolved themselves in a series of analogous impasses rather than doctrinaire assertions. Last of all, his inability to imagine a revolutionary event outside the ideological contradictions of fascist ecology seems to

105 I discuss the non-identity between nature-being and the real or “the thing-in-itself” in detail in the next chapter.
have alerted his more developed aesthetic-creative sensibility to the possibility of phony claimants to the real within his own fiction, namely the simulacra observable in both *Kangaroo* and *The Plumed Serpent*, and led to his abandonment of the leadership ideal as an engine for ecological change. In *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* his fiction self-consciously returns to the threshold it previously dreamed of crossing, but ultimately demarcated and maintained. Like Badiou, whose analytic of the universal event can itself be criticized for amounting to a new generation’s deferral to spontaneous change, Lawrence seems to have concluded that the responsibility of aesthetic modernism is not quite to foment a revolution, but to maintain the space of critical semi-autonomy which alone can designate the void and, like Wragby’s “strong and silent” trees, to await the palingenetic event.

In the next chapter I will explore how a laborious form of inaction is positioned as a principal responsibility of ecological modernism in Beckett’s *Trilogy*, which, secure in its identity as a poetics of the threshold rather than the leap, attempts to eschew all simulacra in its treatment of the universal element of nature observable in Lawrence’s aesthetics, and to portray nature-being as precisely that which, in its unbounded blankness and alterity, is most resistant to programmatic resolution, fascist or otherwise.
Works Cited


mutilate, mutilate, mutilate, and perhaps some day, fifteen generations hence, you’ll succeed in
beginning to look like yourself

- from *The Unnamable* (315)

Why did we think the deepest ecological experience would be full of love and light?

- Timothy Morton, from *Ecology Without Nature* (198)

In his struggle to proceed without being too disgusted with his own verbiage, Beckett’s
Malone cannot bring himself to employ the conventions of realism in his descriptions of
the natural world – one might say that he refuses to be a nature writer. A few sentences
after Malone launches into a description of ties between urban and rural economies, he
abruptly concludes, “I can’t do it” (196); likewise, one of his last efforts to describe a
landscape in detail ends with the exasperated excoriation, “To hell with all this fucking
scenery” (278), which is almost a statement of programme for Beckett’s *Trilogy* (1951-
1953) as a whole. As Malone’s ornery attitude illustrates, Beckett’s prose work is at odds
with the kind of ecocriticism most prominently advanced by Lawrence Buell in *Writing
for an Endangered World* and *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, which insists that
environmental realism allows for greater fidelity to ecological issues. In fact, Beckett’s
work presents us with a negative ecology that claims quite the opposite: that it is the
conventions of realism and the common sense view of nature it supports that are implicated in the domination of nature. Beckett’s ecology is negative in Adorno’s sense: it reproduces alienating aspects of modern being-in-the-world in order to gesture toward other unknown but anticipated possibilities; and, even as it solidifies “the scars of history” into artistic form, works to tear down the ideological scaffolding that holds the modern experience of nature together, if only by drawing attention to its status as a historical rather than an existential reality.

The notion that Beckett hyperbolically reconstructs modern being-in-the-world while simultaneously deconstructing it is nothing new in Beckett criticism; however, discussions of this tendency in his work have generally focused on ideas of consciousness and language without foregrounding the ecological ramifications of negativity or relating them to his insufficiently explored interest in the natural world. Likewise, more ecologically oriented explorations of negativity in Beckett’s work have generally failed to register the possibilities that emerge from his treatment of what I have termed nature-being. While Harrison, for example, has read Beckett in terms of ecology by observing how the relentless negativity of *The Trilogy* creates an objective correlative for the literal “wasteland” that has been produced in the twentieth century, his reading still casts the novels as abortive documents of despair, refusing any positive ecological content that might underlie their seemingly grim reductions (150).\footnote{While Harrison’s reading is limited, he is right to point out that Beckett, more so than Joyce (who, along with Woolf and Williams, is championed by Buell) creates an ecological modernism,}

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\footnote{While Harrison’s reading is limited, he is right to point out that Beckett, more so than Joyce (who, along with Woolf and Williams, is championed by Buell) creates an ecological modernism,}
correct this kind of oversight, suggesting that Beckett’s engagement with nature, and his obsession with climate in particular, is characterized by an anti-realist aesthetic designed to “articulate the hell that is caused by abstraction from the biosphere, from the living environment” (72) while also “rupturing the tympanum between inner and outer being – and thereby moving beyond the binary Western model of constructing reality as an inner (subjective) reacting to an outer (objective)” (67). For Davies, stark images of confinement and isolation such as Nell and Nagg’s garbage bins in *Endgame* (1957) or Malone’s skull-like room implicitly demand not only new forms of social organization (an echo of Adorno’s interpretation of Beckett’s work) but a new orientation towards all of non-human nature (an ecological extension of this familiar argument). Davies’s take on the role of climate in Beckett’s work is convincing and his extension of Adorno’s argument is apposite, but short of repeating what is now something of an ecocritical cliché – that the subject object/binary, which some radical ecologists identify as the root of modern ecological calamity, must be dissolved – he does not offer much insight into Beckett’s rather ambivalent and self-reflexive relationship with this idea, nor does he draw attention to how the modernist peculiarities of Beckett’s concept of nature inform his negotiation of it.

as he issues a challenge to discourses of plenitude: “[Joyce’s] luxuriant forest of prose does not grow in the desiccated ground of the modern habitat but rather in some garden of nostalgia. His work thrives on the illusion of plenitude - the plenitude of nature, of the vigorous body, of meaningfulness in every dimension of being. On the other hand Samuel Beckett seems truly to reflect, or preannounce, the changing climate of the times” (150).
Drawing on insights from Herbert Marcuse, a theorist who seems temperamentally at odds with Beckett but who actually shares many of his concerns, and from Timothy Morton’s recent reassessment of ecocriticism in *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), this chapter attempts to provide a more comprehensive account of Beckett’s negative ecology, to position it in relation to the programmatic modernisms discussed in Chapter Two, and to reflect on its strengths as well as Beckett’s own immanent critique of its weaknesses.

**Habit, Ignorance, and the Suffering of Being: “Proust” and Part One of *Molloy***

You would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery

- Molloy, in *Molloy* (13)

In his early essay “Proust” (1930) Beckett suggests that there is a necessary relationship between negativity and a deeper experience of being. Here, in prose he would later

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107 Adorno is certainly the more obvious choice for discussing Beckett and ecology (or modernism for that matter), and much of value has been written concerning Beckett, Adorno, and questions of nature, for example Nigel Mapp’s excellent chapter “No Nature, No Nothing: Adorno, Beckett, Disenchantment” in *Adorno and Literature* (2006). While leftist intellectuals Adorno, Derrida, and more recently Badiou have (perhaps surprisingly) all expressed singular admiration for Beckett’s texts, to my knowledge Marcuse has said nothing at all to say about them. Work by or concerning Adorno, Derrida, or Badiou and Beckett is certainly valuable and informs this chapter, but I find that Marcuse’s thought offers new insights into Beckett’s work, partly because it is so explicitly “ecological.”
disparage for its philosophical pretensions, Beckett proposes a surface and depth ontology comparable to Sanford Schwartz’s “matrix of modernism,” where quotidian reality is produced by limiting what Nietzsche termed “the chaos of sensations” and creating a more useful, more intelligible, and more comfortable, but by no means more “real” world.\textsuperscript{108} His essay is also suggestive of Bergson’s claim in Matter and Memory (1896) that the nervous system’s primary function is not to reveal reality, but to limit it, to “edit” it so to speak, into useful forms that allow for self-preservation and ontological security (43-46).\textsuperscript{109} The objective world we inhabit is thus one of habit, “a compromise effected between the individual and his environment” (Beckett, “Proust” 515) where utility rather than actuality literally determines the nature of things. Habit’s instrumental reifications are operative in biological time as the organism’s drive to self-preservation, and in historical time as Marcuse’s “reality principle” – the historical construction of human subjectivity and external nature.\textsuperscript{110} For Beckett we can overcome habit and return to pure sensation only by cultivating a kind of enabling ignorance, which in the context of his discussion of Proust is associated with the “unedited” upsurge of involuntary memory; similarly, the reality principle (and possibly even the function of the

\textsuperscript{108} See Nietzsche’s The Will to Power (263-264).
\textsuperscript{109} Notably, in Abstraction and Empathy (1907) Wilhelm Worringer explicitly associated realist art with ontological security and modernist art with ontological insecurity, suggesting that the intellectual and material history of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century had culminated in a crisis of representation and a concomitant reevaluation of realist conceptions of nature.
\textsuperscript{110} See the introduction for more on “the reality principle.”
organism\textsuperscript{111} can be changed as a result of this destructive-creative encounter, though perhaps only on the level of subjective experience.

It is not surprising that the positive, even utopian, dimension of Beckett’s work is registered infrequently, at least as far as its popular reception is concerned: ostensibly his writing documents meaningless suffering and marvels at the unfathomable perseverance of human beings (and other creatures) despite “how it is.” Yet suffering, far from indicating straightforward pessimism, is also the very locus of possibility in \textit{Molloy}, and arguably all of Beckett’s work. In “Proust,” Beckett connects emancipation from habit and its hardwired functions with the experience of an ambivalent sort of freedom:

The old ego dies hard. Such as it was, a minister of dullness, it was also an agent of security. When it ceases to perform that second function, when it is opposed by a phenomenon that it cannot reduce to the condition of a comfortable and familiar concept, when, in a word, it betrays its trust as a screen to spare its victim the spectacle of reality, it disappears, and the victim, now an ex-victim, for a moment free, is exposed to that reality (517).

He describes this freedom almost ecstatically, in language that could have been written by Marcuse himself save for its insistence that “the spectacle of reality” – the stuff of

\textsuperscript{111} I discuss this even more extreme possibility below, in subsections on \textit{Malone Dies} and \textit{The Unnamable}. 

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nature as it appears outside of the imperative to use and produce – is identified as the source of a peculiar kind of suffering rather than pleasure:

for a moment, the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being… that is, the free play of every faculty. Because the pernicious devotion of habit paralyses our attention … our current habit of living is … incapable of dealing with the mystery of a strange sky or a strange room, with any circumstance unforeseen in her curriculum … [But when] the atrophied faculties come to the rescue … the maximum value of our being is restored (516).

For Marcuse “the free play of faculties” (*One Dimensional Man* 240) (he uses the same phrase as Beckett) can achieve reconciliation with nature because it is commensurate with the dissolution of the rigid duality dividing dominant, sovereign subject from passive, inert object; for the more gloomy, Schopenhauerian Beckett it allows for renewed access to being in the form of suffering which paradoxically yields to peaceful receptivity after the subject is jarred out of its complacent belief in its own sovereignty and the stability of the reified world it projects. For both writers, despite their different dispositions and vocabularies, the negation of nature as it is represented and experienced in the twentieth century allows for a breath of what Beckett describes as “the only paradise that is not the dream of a madman” (“Proust” 544) – a realm of peace and vague potentiality beyond the veneer of convention. Jonathan Bate’s Heideggerian perspective suggests that it is this “passiveness” (278) before being, this eschewal of instrumental
domination, that signifies progressive ecological consciousness, if not political environmentalism.

Anthony Uhlmann aptly characterizes Beckett’s tendency to negate the stable forms of consensus reality as an attempt to achieve reimmersion in the “univocity of being,” an aspiration he associates with anti-Platonic thought (9), a “subversive” modern tradition incorporating Nietzsche, Bergson, and Spinoza, as well as Schopenhauer, the philosopher with whom Beckett felt the most profound personal affinity. Uhlmann interprets this tradition through the postmodern “Bergsonism” of Gilles Deleuze112 and makes an important observation concerning the difference between modern and postmodern accounts of negativity: for Deleuze, departing from the plane of organization and accessing the plane of consistency (roughly: his terms for the reality principle and the chaos of sensations or “univocity of being” respectively) is an effortless and fluid shift, while for Beckett it requires almost superhuman effort (16), hence the agonizing techniques of exhaustion that seem to differentiate his work from the joyously schizophrenic musings of works such as Deleuze and Guattari’s The Anti-Oedipus (1972) (which nonetheless champions Beckett as a “schizo” artist). Beckett’s association of unreified nature-being with meager but hard-won freedom aligns him with modernist modes of ecological critique that tend to emphasize the extent to which unproductive experience is effectively suppressed in the modern world, a dynamic first explored in

112 I will not discuss Deleuze’s work at length in this chapter. See Uhlmann’s Beckett and Poststructuralism (1999) for a comprehensive reading of Beckett’s work through Deleuze’s philosophy.
Murphy (1938) through the protagonist’s ill-fated refusal to recognize the capitalist mode of production and attempt to, as Lidan Lin puts it, “cultivat[e] an environment in which he can hope to achieve an authentic connection with the Other, a connection that is purged of self-interest” (2). This is also why Beckett’s ecology cannot be separated from his seemingly morbid insistence on miserable struggle that is almost guaranteed to be futile, as I will discuss below: even if negation opens up the possibility of radical change by unmasking the contingency of the reality principle, what is the likelihood that society will change alongside the artist (not to mention the schizophrenic moribund) who experiences its transformation subjectively?

Molloy, a character who is utterly abject yet seems to have privileged access to the chaos of sensations – what Moran later refers to as “the spray of phenomena” (111) – seems, fittingly, to invoke the possibilities inherent in negation while simultaneously invoking its failure to have much of an impact on the society it challenges. Molloy embodies the enabling ignorance Beckett invokes in “Proust”: he is free from habit because he is mostly devoid of assumptions regarding the world around him and cannot internalize social norms.  

This is evident in his encounter with a policeman, who, like Moran, finds himself unable to interpellate Molloy since Molloy is an “individual” so divorced from due procedure that he cannot even recognize his own name. Molloy’s external world is as unstable as his subjectivity: he fails to endow his world with

113 For a comprehensive, illuminating discussion of the role of enabling ignorance in Molloy also see Uhlmann’s Beckett and Poststructuralism (especially chapter 2, “Perception and Apprehension: Bergson, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari and Beckett,” pg. 58-91).
properties that would allow him to travel through it with greater ease and to relate his experiences to others. At times Molloy looks like a grotesque and comically ineffectual deep ecologist, such as when he “forget[s] to be” and fuses seamlessly with the “roots and tame stems” (46) in Lousse’s garden while being kept under her care like a household dog. Reflecting on the lack of stability that surrounds him while gazing through a window at the “shifting boughs” of a tree, Molloy concedes, “It was I who was not natural enough to enter into that order [the order of natural causes] and appreciate its niceties” (44). In this passage Molloy distances himself from nature, but by “nature” he means nature as disclosed by “the ontic sciences” – nature as a system of laws and drives, Soper’s realist nature – and the nature of convention or consensus reality. While Molloy is indeed distant from realist nature and lay nature, he is identifiable with nature-being in his very failure to enter into the “niceties” of these modes of experience and representation. In short, from the perspective of modernist ecology, Molloy is unnatural precisely because he is too much like nature.

Molloy’s ability to respond to the interpellations of interlopers and authority figures, to distinguish forms from the formlessness that underlies them, and to tell a story rooted in a recognizable consensus reality only deteriorates as his narrative unfolds; by the end of his strange report he is near-paralyzed, using his crutch as a hook to drag himself through the murmuring forest, which, unsurprisingly, is not described in a manner that tells us much of anything about the bioregion. In fact, Molloy reports that, for all his association with “the spectacle of reality,” he can only name a single tree, the
irregular larch (which was disparaged by Wordsworth for its lack of “dignity” and “dingy, lifeless hue”). While Descartes insisted at the outset of his Meditations (1641) that the only way to get out of a forest is to proceed in a straight line (Harrison 110), Molloy endeavors to “go in a circle and this way to go in a straight line” (85), a motif that is repeated throughout the Trilogy. His anti-Cartesian mode of navigation emphasizes the pressing need to dissolve the rigid subject/object duality in order to escape the reality principle at the same time that it reveals, through his own moribund condition, how inchoate and impracticable this escape may be, at least from the perspective of the kind of sensible citizen who cannot recognize the validity, not to mention the sanity, of Molloy’s ruptured subjectivity. Furthermore, while it is clear that Molloy has escaped from the world of habit and has accessed the formless “deeper nature” that is inscribed in modernist ideology in multitudinous variations from Nietzsche to Heidegger and Yeats to Beckett himself, it is not obvious that this offers him any solace or changes anything for the better. Likewise, it is unclear how his vision of the world could reach out and reform the world of the anonymous “they” who set out to lynch him in the ontological security of day and retreat indoors to weather the obscurity of night, those individuals who stay far from “the forest” and collectively sustain systems of domination, including the construction of nature as raw material.\(^\text{115}\)

\(^{114}\) See Wordsworth’s account of the larch in A Description of the Scenery of the Lakes In Northern England (1822). When we look to the larch, Wordsworth muses, “we shall look in vain for any of those appearances which are the chief sources of beauty in a natural wood” (89).

\(^{115}\) In Molloy we discern the tyranny of the reality principle. Because of its status as a collective ideological projection, individual attempts to overcome the reality principle are
While Molloy is trapped in a state of suspension – he can escape, yet can never escape – he is closest to freedom when he gazes at his unknown “instrument” (63), an object he cannot discern the utility of nor contain in the hypostatizing words of the “they.” His narrative is characterized by resistance to the demand (which is posited or intuited by Molloy himself) that he reproduce the language and therefore the reality of the “they” in his pages – and by his inability to do so effectively – yet also by the fear that not to do so is ultimately impossible: “You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten” (32). The object, however, allows for one of his most reliable avenues of escape since it cannot be located within what Heidegger calls the “equipmental totality” (*Being and Time* 136) – the structure that allows for the instrumentality of objects to become intelligible – and therefore cannot be assigned a name or function that would identify it as a part of the larger apparatus that oppresses Molloy, namely the reality principle itself. Like the famous sucking stones, the unknown object becomes an object of unproductive enjoyment and thus redefines the function of the senses: doomed to failure, or at least doomed to be relegated the status of subjective epiphenomena. Yet what is required is none other than a “collective subjective change.” The individual’s negation of the reality principle and solitary establishment of a new order or new manner of being-in-the-world is nothing, yet from the perspective of modernist ecology it is essentially no different in its “idealism” than the collective projection that is called “objective” and thought of as an existential reality. The hope that survives in many works of modernism is that there is something “more real” about nature-being – that variously termed ontological substratum that is revealed after the work of negation – and that this can serve as a higher objectivity: that at least untruth can be identified where the construction of nature is concerned, if not truth.
I could never understand what possible purpose it could serve, nor even contrive the faintest hypothesis on the subject. And from time to time I took it from my pocket and gazed upon it, with an astonished and affectionate gaze … But for a certain time I think it inspired me with a kind of veneration, for there was no doubt in my mind that it was not an object of virtu, but that it had a most specific function always to remain hidden from me. I could therefore puzzle over it endlessly without the least risk (64).

The strange part about this passage is that it is not that the object does not have a use or a name (critics have offered various suggestions as to what it might actually be, for instance a knife rest) but that it is not known: it is ignorance that allows for freedom. Yet Molloy’s sense of freedom is without effect on anyone else’s perception of the world (presumably a more respectable citizen could come around and put the object to whatever use it is intended to serve). It seems that for Beckett “letting things be” – eschewing an attitude of instrumental domination and experiencing “the free play of the faculties” – is a sincerely ecological posture that is nonetheless deeply ironic in its juxtaposition of profound revelation with relative ineffectuality.

Another important feature of the instrument is that, in its isolation, it actually transcends its status as a solid object; in Heideggerian terms, the ontic object, detached from any context that would make it recognizable, dissolves and allows for a glimpse of being itself (the ontological); or in the Bergsonian terms favored by Uhlmann, the object
of perception, in its isolation, yields to the apprehension of the univocity of being that
underlies it:

Something is isolated, or rather, something isolates itself. But this
isolation goes further, becomes true isolation, as all possibility of
comprehension is removed. Comprehension here referring to the
process of contextualization, the process of assimilating a thing or
phenomenon to a ready-made worldview, a view we have been trained
to perceive ... (77).

Thus Molloy accesses “the suffering of being” through apprehension, such as when he
simply cannot recognize any distinction between objects of perception, and through this
radicalized perception of individual objects (which ultimately also yields to
apprehension). Elizabeth Barry misses the point entirely when she dismisses the idea that
the unknown object could yield to apprehension insofar as it is man-made rather than
natural (61); enforcement of a strict distinction between first and second nature makes it
impossible to understand the dynamics of modernist ecology as I understand it since it
relegates the experience of nature-being to the wilderness, which is only figurative of an
experience of reality that has no necessary relationship to the lay forest. Indeed, the dense
forest Molloy finds himself lost in is a metaphor for the “spray of phenomena” more so
than a simple congeries of trees; the two should not simply be conflated, even as a
privileged relationship between the forest and apprehension is clearly recognizable
throughout the text (we later find out that there may be no dense forest at all, at least not
“ontically”). Molloy’s figurative forest defies Buell’s insistence that the stuff of nature is somewhere “in” the text and that ecologically sensitive literature should attempt to draw attention to the traces of the real (that is to say, in this context, the habitual). In *Molloy* natural objects (such as trees, a multitude of which make up a forest) are dissolved in order for nature-being (the forest as “spray of phenomena”) to be revealed: whatever this signifies for ecological critique, it is not something Buell’s environmental realism can grasp since the forests he wants to celebrate are of the former sort, while the latter sort suggest the figurative “use” of nature he condemns for its obscurantist tendencies.

**Realism and the Habit of Domination: Part Two of *Molloy***

The idea of man’s autarchy can be only a delusion, a kind of schizoid withdrawal into a make-believe world; in truth, there is no escaping the ecological matrix

- Donald Worster, from *Nature’s Economy* (333)

what I saw was … a crumbling, a frenzied collapsing of all that had always protected me from all I was always condemned to be

- Jacques Moran, in *Molloy* (148)

Molloy’s narrative opens up ecological possibilities but ends up in a ditch; lying in this ditch, which demarcates the border between the forest and an unnamed town, Molloy intuits that some form of help is on the way (91). In order to understand how the ambivalent revelations of Part One of *Molloy* can be read in terms of ecology, and what
exactly “help” might entail, it is necessary to turn to Jacques Moran’s narrative, the record of a character who has almost universally been read as a petty agent of control and domination yet unexpectedly seems to become the savior Molloy anticipates.

Moran is a bourgeois homeowner and self-described “master of himself” who is commissioned by a mysterious linguistic and metaphysical authority, Youdi, to track down Molloy in the unstable “Molloy country” and to write a “report.” His mission is, ostensibly, to contain Molloy, to capture him in the stable forms of the “they,” the consensus reality in which Moran dwells (conceitedly, but, as it turns out, insecurely). Moran has trained his son to spy, monitor, and calculate like his father, and most importantly, to walk like him, “with little rapid steps, his head up, his breathing even and economical, his arms swinging, looking neither to left nor right, apparently oblivious to everything and in reality missing nothing” (128); he authorizes only one pastime, the study of botany, whereas indolence and play are banned despite Moran’s own secret sympathy for gazing at plants in their “innocence and simplicity” (99) – rendering them into his own version of Molloy’s unknown object. Jacques Jr.’s stamp collection, for example, is tolerated as an activity of organization and value-accumulation, a version of his mandatory savings box (131), but his tendency to simply gaze at the useless, aestheticized stamps, a version of his father’s own secret pastime, is condemned and met with punishment. Moran’s tyrannical attitude towards his son is parallel to his tyrannical attitude towards the world he “captures” in his reports: according to Moran, nothing can elude his panoptic observation.
However, Moran’s authority is far more tenuous than he can admit to himself, as his insecure and paranoiac character would suggest. Early in his narrative it is already clear that he is haunted by disturbing phantoms:

I get up, go out, and everything is changed. The blood drains from my head, the noise of things bursting, merging, avoiding one another, assails me on all sides, my eyes search in vain for two things alike, each pinpoint of skin screams a different message, I drown in the spray of phenomena. It is at the mercy of these sensations, which happily I know to be illusory, that I have to live and work. It is thanks to them that I find myself a meaning (111).

Later in his narrative, Moran associates this experience with Molloy (and Molloy’s mother),¹¹⁶ and divulges that he has long apprehended and unsuccessfully stalked an inner and an outer Molloy (115), phantoms representing what Moran must repress in order to maintain his productivity and sense of security, his world of “solid[s] in the midst of other solids” (108). Moran is aware of the existence of what Schwartz describes as a surface and depth ontology, and, like Nietzsche, posits a world of meaning subtended by a chaos of sensations; however, he views the underlying matrix as an illusion, as something unreal that must nonetheless be contained. Like Woolf’s Mr. Ramsay from To

¹¹⁶ Elizabeth Barry’s reading of Molloy’s mother as an origin that can never be located (8) in Beckett and Authority (2006) fits well with Nietzsche’s (and Adorno’s) understanding of negativity as a gesture that can sweep away second nature, but never locate mythic first nature. In The Unnamable the quest for Molloy’s mother is revealed to be a quest to become identical with the mythic thing-in-itself (see below).
*The Lighthouse*. Moran finds meaning preserving the stable reality that is relentlessly threatened by “illusory” phenomena, but, in fighting this battle self-reflexively, has already conceded defeat. The “unreal” specter of these phenomena is the cause of Moran’s paranoia: it forces him to be on guard for nature-being, an enemy that is everywhere and nowhere, while also propelling him towards his inevitable collapse.

Moran associates the ambivalent avenues of revelation and escape I discussed in relation to Part One of *Molloy* with indolence, “the fatal pleasure principle” (99) which taints his treatment of “the Molloy affair” from the outset. He not only considers taking his “autocycle,” an open-air pleasure craft, in search of Molloy, he also uncharacteristically fails to consult maps or the weather forecast (124). Upon entering the Molloy country, which for Molloy was densely forested, Moran finds only meager copses and barren fields (134) but gets lost in an abstract wilderness which threatens to dissolve his world:

Does this mean I shall one day be banished from my house, from my garden, lose my trees, my lawns, my birds … lose and be banished from the absurd comforts of my home where all is snug and neat and all those things are at hand without which I could not bear being a man, where my enemies cannot reach me, which it was my life’s work to build, to adorn, to perfect, to keep? (132)
Moran is initially horrified by the “spray” and realizes that he is in danger of offending Youdi – whom he “should court now more than ever” (132) – but later luxuriates in its gradual destruction of his selfhood and world and the concomitant onset of paralysis in his legs: “Was I secretly glad that this has happened to me…? I surrendered myself to the beauties of the scene, I gazed at the trees, the fields, the sky, the birds” (145). By choosing to masturbate in a forest clearing rather than to doggedly pursue his objective, Moran, in Marcusian terms, rejects the surplus repression demanded by the modern reality principle and accesses the aesthetic dimension – “the innocence and simplicity” of things that must be suppressed in the name of utility and productivity.

However, Beckett’s version of the aesthetic dimension, while an alternative to the modern reality principle Marcuse calls “the performance principle” – the disclosure of nature as a set of objects to be used – is not so replete with promises “of love and light.” If we credit Marcuse’s argument in *Eros and Civilization*, the performance principle’s “aggressive attitude toward the object-world” (103) can be dismantled through attention to the unproductive, aesthetic experience of nature that is relegated to the realm of useless, childish fantasy under industrialized capitalism (and afforded a similar position in more orthodox accounts of Marxist ontology):

[The aesthetic experience of nature] negates that which sustains the performance principle. The opposition between man and nature, subject and object, is overcome. Being is experienced as gratification, which
unites man and nature so that fulfillment of man is at the same time the
fulfillment, without violence, of nature (151).

The dissolution of Moran’s ordered world and of his concomitant ability to negotiate it in
the Seamless yet disconnected style of Stephen White’s “Teflon subject” – an entity who
“generates distance” from external nature in order to master it more effectively (4) –
liberates him from Youdi and allows him to experiment with a new attitude towards his
environment.

In his lecture “Marxism and Feminism” (1974) Marcuse identifies patriarchal
conceptions of masculinity with the modern subject’s domination of nature, and suggests
that qualities that have been gendered “feminine” in the language of patriarchal ideology
such as “receptivity, sensitivity, non-violence, [and] tenderness” need to be valorized, “at
least as a transitory phase in [a] reconstruction of society” (283) that would culminate in
a “feminist” rather than masculinist reality principle.117 Beckett’s fiction can be read as
“feminist” in Marcuse’s sense, since his narratives of indolence, contemplation,
disability, play, and impotence subvert the aggressive, masculine attitude towards nature
described by Marcuse, while also discarding the virile male revolutionary type

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117 This line of argument has been developed in more recent ecofeminist studies theorizing the
environmental crisis in feminist terms, for example Rosemary Radford Ruether’s New Woman,
New Earth (1975), Carolyn Merchant’s The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the
While the ecofeminist position is critical of (at least early) deep ecology’s absence of gender
politics, its attempt to expose the environmental and social consequences of Western
constructions of human subjectivity and the object world can nonetheless be read as a variant of
the “deep” approach advocated by Naess.
encountered in both Yeats and Lawrence’s work. If the modern subject’s domineering attitude towards the object world is uncomfortably mirrored in the modernist seer’s warlike effort to redeem nature, Beckett’s late modernism, reflecting his post-war, post-fascist position, attempts to imagine an entirely different kind of subversive subjectivity. Beckett’s decision to write about male protagonists can itself be read as a commentary on the kind of masculinity encountered in Yeats and Lawrence’s texts, which ultimately reject the programmatic mode, but do not reject the concomitant action/quietism binary which prevents their ecological thought from developing beyond the point of its apparent failure (which, as it were, is Beckett’s point of departure).

Moran’s transformation is suggestive of an emergent “feminist” attitude in the Marcusian sense. When he finally returns to his home after living like an animal for an indeterminate span of time, he elects to give up “being a man,” to live in the garden with the wild birds, and to listen to an alternate voice associated not only with his own inner life, but also with the murmurs and cries he can now hear emitting from all things – a voice issuing from nature-being itself rather than the obscure patriarch Youdi. While Moran’s garden was initially identifiable with Louse’s garden, a place Molloy reported to have vacated because of its keeper’s insistence on order, it is associated in its overgrown state with Marcuse’s “feminine” attitude of meditative receptivity, which eschews any attempt to violently control nature. His thoughts about his bees are synecdochic of his greater transformation:
And I said, with rapture, Here is something I can study all my life, and never understand … for me, sitting near my sun-drenched hives, it would always be a noble thing to contemplate, too noble ever to be sullied by the cogitations of a man like me, exiled in his manhood. And I would never do my bees the wrong I had done my God, to whom I had been taught to ascribe angers, my fears, desires, and even my body (169).

To use an imperfect term supplied by deep ecology, Moran’s experience of nature is no longer anthropocentric: he has given up trying to understand and to dominate, and has instead opted to be receptive to nature-being, to “let things be,” a stance that either corrects the mistakes of history or is “frivolous and meaningless” (169) or is somehow both simultaneously.

Moran’s role in Molloy is reminiscent of the role of the (straw man) realist in treatises of modernist aesthetics from Woolf’s “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown” to Beckett’s own “Proust”: his deceptive overconfidence and sense of security and his corresponding gait and demeanor are parodic of the pretensions of realism, which Beckett explicitly links with habit in his essay. After his paralyzing metamorphosis, however, Moran reports that description is “contrary to his principles” (150) and violently murders an avatar of his earlier self who comes in search of his own elusive Molloy, infuriating Moran with his imperious questions and inadequate descriptions (151). Like Lawrence, Beckett focuses on questions of ontology rather than on conventional plot elements, and
Malone’s narration (which is written in what Molloy calls “the mythological present” – after Moran’s transformation that is) reflects the same tendency, disdaining to relate the “adventures” that befell him and his son on their journey (131) and instead focusing on his inner metamorphosis, which is equally the transformation of his external world. Moran’s insistence that he will no longer attempt to imprison the birds in the language of his past reports, that he will attune himself to their language, and that he will find a new language with which to speak of them, ties this metamorphosis to a renewed understanding of language and representation. Using a mixture of Bergsonian and Foucaultian language, Ulhmann relates Molloy’s obsession with language to the specter of ontological and linguistic tyranny that haunts the novel:

Words are the names of things, and as Bergson has shown, we learn to isolate things, divide them off from the pure, indivisible, extensity which is reality. And this is done … through the proper disciplining, the proper training of our senses. They are trained to perceive: the world we think we describe may merely be that which we have been taught to see, our experience of reality equating to a grading of our comprehension of the lessons we learnt by heart – the process of learning by heart being the figure Bergson uses to describe the training of memory, the trained memory constituting habit (78).

Elizabeth Barry also argues persuasively that Beckett’s resistance to realism is rooted in his belief that, as a mode of representation, it does not consolidate and communicate “the
real,” but obscures it, “fails to communicate how real the world is” (51). At best realism, which is after all idiomatic, reproduces nothing other than conventions, a now familiar critique that is associated with poststructuralism but which found its first expression in modernist aesthetics. Indeed, looking at Molloy as a critique of realism allows us to see that it is something of a belated allegory for modernism itself, an allegory that reproduces the successes and the failures of an entire movement. It is also an allegory of modernist ecology: the novel’s well known final lines – “I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining” (162) – explicitly link two features of modernist ideology, anti-referential aesthetics and the concept of higher realism, with the relinquishment of the metaphysics of domination, suggesting that modernist modes of representation are deeply ecological, that they are thematically and formally ecological.

Moran’s transformation illustrates the logic of modernist ecology and its incompatibility with realist ecocriticism because it is the earlier Moran who describes his region realistically, insists his son practice botany, and prides himself on faithfully capturing his environment in reports – a Moran who shares something with Buell’s ecocritic – who is associated with instrumental domination and monadic detachment from nature. But what are we to think of an ecology of ignorance for which, to modify Beckett’s well known dictum, to think ecologically is to fail?118 What kind of ecology

118 In the published manuscript of “Three Dialogues” (1949) Beckett describes the paintings of his friend Bram Van Velde in a way that is very suggestive of his own artistic practice: “to be an
would celebrate Molloy, who passively communes with nature-being but knows next to nothing about the scientific ecologist’s nature and would not likely care much for the activist’s? The ethos of ignorance Beckett invokes through his hapless character does challenge the “ecocidal” status-quo within its own horizon – by negating the vilified reifications of realist nature – and is aligned with the proto-ecological critiques of modernity Murphy and Roberts identify as romantic modernisms. But perhaps it is Moran rather than “unnatural” Molloy who best embodies the logic of Beckett’s negative ecology. Moran’s modernist project, which departs from renewed ignorance in the spirit of receptive failure, is portrayed as a break from an abstract source of oppression, a break which suggests that new ways of being-in-the-world might be possible, though the novel can only hint at what such a reorientation would entail. For the most part Beckett works within the horizon of the pre- *Silent Spring* nineteen fifties, portraying his nascent ecology as it might appear through the eyes of the twentieth century at large: as abject and ineffectual – as nothing.

Yet the troubling suggestion remains that even Moran’s defiant project is not only largely ineffectual, but ultimately amenable to Youdi’s interests. When Moran is finally confronted by Gaber, his message is not one of wrath; it seems that, in spite of himself, Moran has succeeded in writing his report to Youdi’s satisfaction:

> artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from its desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living” (563).
Is he angry? I said … I’m asking you if he’s angry I cried. Angry, said Gaber, don’t make me laugh, he keeps rubbing his hands from morning to night, I can hear them in the outer room. That means nothing, I said. And chuckling to himself, said Gaber (164).

Youdi’s lack of perturbation suggests that Moran’s efforts of negation have left his order no less intact. Gaber even tells Moran that Youdi himself exclaimed “life is a thing of beauty” (164), a phrase that ironically echoes Moran’s seemingly oppositional fall into unproductive experience. Could it be that exposing the reality principle’s historical, constructed character without consequence solidifies rather than loosens its hold? The lessons of the second half of the twentieth century seem to suggest that capitalism is capable of assimilating even the most trenchant critiques without compromising its inexorable progress (Gaber reports that Youdi’s lack of concern is not a result of a change in his character, but is merely a result of him “getting old … like the world” [164]). As far as the future of the natural environment is concerned, this would suggest the postmodern lesson that the continued devastation of nature is perfectly compatible with the proliferation of environmentalist ideologies of all kinds; the more ideological and less pragmatic these critiques, the easier they are rendered ineffectual, and as I have suggested it would not be wrong to identify modernist ecology as purely ideological given its ontological mode of critique. This would seem to confirm Buell’s Lukácsian

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119 Presuming Youdi is an oppressive figure, he could either be laughing at the ineffectuality of Moran’s protest, or showing how the aesthetic dimension is easily recuperated into clichéd and conventional notions of beauty which themselves partake of the language of habit.
suspicion that literary forms and theories that contest the validity of realism indirectly contribute to the unchecked destruction of real nature.\footnote{Marcuse anticipated this possibly in his chapter “The Conquest of the Unhappy Conscious: Repressive Desublimation” in \textit{One Dimensional Man}, which deals with the potential for aesthetic pleasure to be manipulated in order to falsely reconcile individuals to an establishment that is, at bottom, still fundamentally repressive (57-83). In contrast to the late modernism of \textit{Eros and Civilization}, one might say that this text’s more cautious sense of the liberatory potential of pleasure reflects a more properly “postmodern” outlook.}

The question remains: what is the value of Beckett’s ecology, which appears overly idealistic from a contemporary viewpoint, especially considering that it admits its own failure in advance? And if it does fail, can it nonetheless enrich our understanding of what it means to think ecologically in a way that discourses of common sense and realism cannot? In order to answer this question I will move on to the next two novels in the \textit{Trilogy}, but first I will look back to \textit{Watt} (1953), a novel that explores the limitations of the problematic kind of metaphysical change that might be allowable for Beckett.

\textbf{The Possibility of Change (without Change?) in \textit{Watt}}

So I shall merely state, without enquiring how it came, or how it went, that in my opinion it was not an illusion, as long as it lasted, that presence of what did not exist, that presence without, that presence within, that presence between, though I’ll be buggered if I can understand how it could have been anything else

- Arsene, in \textit{Watt} (45)
The notion of a kind of change that is at once profound and meaningless, revolutionary and without consequence is central to *Watt*, Beckett’s second major novel.\(^{121}\) *Watt* tells the story of its titular character’s servitude/apprenticeship at the mysterious Mr. Knott’s house and the concomitant collapse of his naïve empiricism, which is characterized as a willingness to dwell among “face values” (73) and never to look beyond “the outer meaning” (73) of things. Knott – whose name suggests negativity (“not”) and a perplexing or irresolvable impasse (“knot”)\(^{122}\) – has, like Godot, often been interpreted in terms of an allegory of apophatic religion that identifies him as the unknowable godhead. But one does not have to bring in questions of transcendence in order to understand his central place in the novel (just as in *Waiting for Godot*, the religious allegory may be something of a red herring).

Indeed, there are consistent and strong suggestions that the elusive Knott represents nature-being, which, like the godhead of negative theology, is apprehensible but lacks positive qualities. For instance, Knott climbs the trees on his overgrown grounds like an animal (198) and is compared to a tree himself (57); he emits bizarre sounds without symbolic meaning that sometimes suggest birdsong or the sound of flowing water (147); he favors taking his meals in a form that reduces their discrete

\(^{121}\) *Watt* was written during the thirties and only later published.
\(^{122}\) Correspondingly, Watt’s name suggests his role as a tortured questioner (“What?”) after his empiricism starts to break down. It is interesting to note how a form of repressive ignorance is associated with Watt – his initial willingness to leave common sense unquestioned and find solace in words – which is diametrically opposed to the liberating ignorance I described with reference to *Molloy*. However, Watt is similar to *Molloy* in its association of the “natural order” with the former kind of ignorance and “nature” (nature-being or Mr. Knott that is) with the latter.
components to a homogenous broth (87); he assumes a different aspect every time he appears, yet he can never be seen clearly or described with precision (one of Watt’s endeavors is to see him face to face, though he is frightened of what he might encounter) (146-147); and attempts to understand his motivations are mocked for their “anthropomorphic insolence” (202). The servants in Knott’s house are charged with caring for this weird master. But their duty seems to be nothing more than to bear witness to a mystery that ultimately reveals nothing to them other than nothingness itself – the amorphous epistemological darkness behind outward appearances – and this enlightenment to darkness cannot free them from the reality of the disintegration of their bodies or the almost relentless toil required to sustain them (148). As such Watt reproduces and critiques a central romantic modernist narrative. In his “Letter on Humanism” (1947) Heidegger claimed that humanity or Dasein is privileged over other entities because of its total subordination to the non-human, a paradoxical condition inanimate objects and animals do not share. In this mystical formulation, Dasein is uniquely capable of bearing witness to the presencing of being, but this witnessing serves the needs not of humanity but of being itself, which is said to use Dasein as a conduit to create the historical and linguistic clearings through which it experiences itself; this is what Dasein is “for” and nothing else, and in this sense it is bound to serve not as the master of nature, but as the “shepherd of being” who circumspectly “guard[s]” its truth (“A Letter on ‘Humanism’” 252). Watt invokes this romantic modernist mythos, but its broken-down shepherds undermine the ponderous quality of what might be called the
“abstract pastoral,” and feel mocked in turn by their elusive charge. If for Heidegger “man is used for hearing the message” (“A Dialogue on Language” 40) that might redeem the fallen history of the West, for Beckett the difficulty and dubiety of scrying a positive programme out of a negation is foregrounded, though this negation is still portrayed as the potential locus of an equivocal kind of emancipation. Thus Beckett remains faithful to the project of modernist ecology, but with a corrective measure of incredulity towards its expression in grand narratives of renewal, a stance that reflects his late-modernist position.

One of the novel’s most striking passages is a monologue delivered to Watt by Arsene, another of Knott’s servants and Watt’s predecessor, upon his arrival at the house; here Arsene offers his own enigmatic account of what is to be discovered at Knott’s, foreshadowing the “reversed metamorphoses” (44) that will transform Watt over the course of his stay. Arsene’s speech centers around a seemingly trivial experience he undergoes in one of the rare moments of leisure he can steal at the house, a space that is microcosmic of the outside world in that its inhabitants are compelled to devote the vast majority of their time to labour rather than intellectual or aesthetic contemplation, not to mention enjoyment or play. Arsene bitterly recalls the irony that one is greeted with upon

123 “It is so easy to accept, so easy to refuse, when the call is heard, so easy, so easy. But to us, in our windowlessness, in our bloodheat, in our hush, to us who could not hear the wind, nor see the sun, what call could come, from the kind of weather we liked, but a call so faint as to mock acceptance, mock refusal?” (Watt 152).

124 Beckett’s novels are also notably absent of the Lawrencian leader figure who is capable of interpreting this message and communicating it to the people. One might say that fantasies of leadership and mass action are displaced by a hesitant “Lutheran” dialogue between self and other that cannot arrive at certainty or resolution.
arrives: at the threshold of Knott’s, “where to do nothing exclusively would be an act of
the highest value, and significance,” the servants are assigned “definite tasks of
unquestionable utility” (41). Speaking of Watt as a generic representative of Knott’s
servants, Arsene describes how Watt will nonetheless eventually lose his grip on the
realm of common sense appearances and come to sense himself dissolving into the
surrounding environment in the manner of Molloy:

He feels it. The sensations, the premonitions of harmony are
irrefragable, of imminent harmony, when all outside him will be he, the
flowers that he is among him, the sky the sky that is above him, the
earth trodden the earth treading, and all sound his echo (41).

Yet this ecological revelation will remain confined to rare moments of rhapsody, or at
least will by no means replace the more pragmatic orientation required to get through the
work required for survival, however the struggle for existence is organized socially.125
Nonetheless, Arsene does find enough unproductive moments to eventually achieve the
parodic bodhi126 he ostensibly advances as the ultimate endpoint of engagement with Mr.
Knott – an ambiguous revelation that strikes him as he smokes his pipe against a rock
wall on a warm and bright afternoon, listening to sights and sounds that “demand

125 And in this case the hierarchical arrangement of the house suggests an association between
nature-being and those best positioned to access it – namely, the idle rich – which is interesting
given Beckett’s more common association of nature-being with tramps and abject characters.
126 In Buddhist thought, bodhi refers to “enlightenment” or “awakening.”
nothing, ordain nothing, explain nothing, propound nothing” (39) – and his account does not foreclose the possibility that the seemingly subjective experience of ontological change might indeed be capable of producing actual as opposed to apparent change.

Leaning against the wall, Arsene feels a sudden qualitative change, a change “other than a change of degree” (44), that seems to alter things fundamentally while effecting no change on another register. He remains convinced that the change is not mere subjective fancy:

To conclude from this that the incident was internal would, I think, be rash. For my - how shall I say? - my personal system was so distended at the period of which I speak that the distinction between what was inside it and what was outside it was not at all easy to draw. Everything that happened happened inside it, and at the same time everything that happened happened outside it ... The sun on the wall, since I was looking at the sun on the wall at the time, underwent an instantaneous and I venture to say radical change of appearance. I was the same sun and the same wall, or so little older that the difference may be safely disregarded, but so changed that I felt I had been transported, without my having remarked it, to some quite different yard, and to some quite different season, in an unfamiliar country (44).
This passage’s collapse of subjective and objective transformation makes it emblematic of metaphysical change. While Arsene can clearly detect a shift in his own relationship to the object world, he cannot convince himself that there is any ground to distinguish between altered subjectivity and altered objectivity – indeed the change is thought to have affected not subject or object *per se*, but the “[h]ymeneal” (43) barrier or “tympanum” (to use a term from *The Unnamable*) that artificially separates them. The rupture of the tympanum delivers Arsene over to what he calls “existence off the ladder” (43), a condition where reliable boundaries between self and other cannot be maintained, and a glimpse of what lies behind convention is consequently granted. Here nature-being appears as an amorphous blur of subject and object that evokes Kristeva’s notion of the abject (Morton 60). The connection with Kristeva’s theory of horror is not accidental: in *Watt*, as in *Molloy*, the revelation of nature-being is consistently equated with the mystic idea of “holy terror” or, to use an example produced by the intellectual climate of the nineteen-fifties, the existentialist vision of the “flesh creeping quality of sheer existence” described by Emmanuel Levinas (60). Thus for Arsene the experience is equated with “the forgotten horrors of joy” (*Watt* 43): it allows him to joyfully discover the contingency of habit, which is at the same time a horrific unveiling of nature-being’s refusal of the *principium individuationis* – the abyssal, Dionysian quality of nature which so captivated Nietzsche – and its related capacity to both expand and devour the apprehending subject.127

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127 In the Kantian sense, this is similar to the experience of the sublime, but, as I discuss
Timothy Morton calls the blur of subject and object, inner and outer that Arsene apprehends *ambience*. For Morton, ambience is the goal of much of ecological writing inasmuch as such writing attempts to create an impression of a circumambient world – an environment – that is “material and physical, though somewhat intangible” (33). It is also the goal of much of the twentieth century philosophy I have referenced in this chapter; Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger are all environmental thinkers inasmuch as they are all preoccupied in their own way with our immersion in nature-being, something that is not quite a thing, yet not quite nothing, not quite a tangible thing “over there,” yet not quite a projection of the mind (56). For Morton, while ambience is valuable because it “interferes with attempts to set up a unified, transcendent nature that could become a symptomatic fantasy thing” (77) – in other words because it mediates against problematic substantialist accounts of nature – it fails as a practical way of thinking ecologically because its insistence on abject nature makes it impossible to locate any kind of “object” to safeguard; indeed, and here Morton uses Kristeva’s language, ambience is the very genotext (in my terms, nature-being) from which the phenotext (nature “over there,” nature as object) emerges in the first place.\(^{128}\) While, as Kristeva intimated, the unveiled phenotext has revolutionary potential because it destabilizes the genotext and draws attention to its constructed character, it certainly cannot offer any kind of ethical guidance, something nature is reported to do in much nature writing. Ethical choices are

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\(^{128}\) For more on her terminology, see Kristeva’s “Revolution in Poetic Language” in *The Kristeva Reader*, especially the subheading “Genotext and Phenotext” (120-123).
therefore always left to the human subject in the end, which, like the world of work, continues to hold sway after Marcusian reconciliation seems to have been effected.

So for Morton, while ambience is liberatory, it is also an ideological trap, or at best it is a relatively innocuous epiphenomenon with potentially misleading instructive value. Morton appositely describes its endpoint: “The ultimate fantasy of ambience is that we could actually achieve ecology without a subject. Ecological awareness would just happen to us, as immersively and convincingly as a shower of rain” (183). This critical assessment would seem to foreclose the possibility that ambience is essential for ecology in the final analysis, and to deny the validity of Arsene’s experience of metaphysical change. Going back to an impasse I identified in Molloy, metaphysical change is real in the sense that there is nothing authoritative to check it against (or rather that there is nothing but the authority of habit to check it against), but it appears to be mere fantasy when it is not experienced collectively, something Beckett is reluctant to call for in the first place, partly because of his post-fascist position. Yet Beckett’s work is maniacal in its pursuit of ecology without a subject even as its willingness to recognize the failure of collective metaphysical change and the inevitable return of the subject/object divide

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129 It is important to note, in contrast to what Morton says here a propos of a postmodern context, how exhausting it is for Beckett to arrive at ambience. The fact that, as Morton argues, “ecological” ambience, like many potentially oppositional ideologies, was quickly recuperated and became one of the foremost commodities of consumer capitalism should not discredit the importance of Beckett’s negative ecology in a modernist context. This is exactly what Murphy and Roberts do in The Dialectic of Romanticism when they dismiss the whole of romantic modernism because of its ancestral relationship to postmodern “Californian Ideology” (186) (the various New Age movements that have grown out of romantic modernism’s ontological mode of critique) (see chapter 17, “Utopia in the New World,” pg. 181-192).
might otherwise lead to the very kind of “enlightened Cartesianism” (180) Morton advocates as an alternative to the problematic vagaries of ambience. Nowhere is this tendency to juxtapose the most radically negative experiments in ecology without a subject with the inevitability of the Cartesian picture more evident than in the last two novels of the Trilogy, which explore the most extreme limits of modernist ecology.

Towards the Limit of Negation in Malone Dies

Naturally it would be pointless to set off in search of the nothing. Yet it must be said that this is exactly what poetry exhausts itself doing; this is what renders poetry ... complicit with death ...

[It] is because poetry propagates the idea of an intuition of the nothing in which being would reside when there is not even the site for such intuition – they call it Nature – because everything is consistent. The only thing we can affirm is this: every situation implies the nothing of its all.

But the nothing is neither a place nor a term of the situation

- Alain Badiou, from Being and Event (54)

I shall be natural at last

- Malone, in Malone Dies (179)

Malone’s narrative explores the limits of a path already charted in Watt. If Arsene marvels at the collapse of subject and object and the possibility of metaphysical change, Watt attempts to dwell (or is constrained to dwell) in the abject clearing opened up by Arsene’s ambivalent revelation. Since we have access only to Sam’s narrative voice, we
see Watt in the third person (“objectively” as it were) crashing blindly through Knott’s garden of wild weeds in an utterly moribund state: this is life beyond subject and object from a third person perspective. *Malone Dies* does something equally extreme on the level of narrative: it is a preliminary attempt to create a narrative voice that is itself the terminal abjection assumed by the *characters* Molloy and Watt, a literary project that is not fully realized until *The Unnamable*. As in Part Two of *Molloy*, literary realism and the notion of mimetic language in general are ridiculed in *Watt*, most memorably through deliberately absurd attempts at verisimilitude, such as the interminable series of onomatopoeic signs (“Krick! …. Krack!”) that stands in for a night of singing frogs (137-138) and Arthur’s abortive story, which is reminiscent of Woolf’s account of realism in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” in that it is composed of exhaustive enumerations of banal facts (and only terminates when Arthur opts instead for the superior joys of silence) (169-198). In *Malone Dies*, however, the object is less to satirize realism than to use it disingenuously, without any faith whatsoever in its ability to represent anything beyond its own conventions, and ultimately to allow for nothingness – nature-being’s blankness – to burst in and annihilate the reality principle realism advances as an existential reality.

If the language of habit is indeed stripped away in Part Two of *Molloy* and, correspondingly, a revivified language seems like a possibility, what remains in *Malone*

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130 While Molloy and Moran are indeed narrators and storytellers, Malone’s role as a narrator and creator of fictions is foregrounded to a far greater extent. The hints that he created Molloy and Moran suggest as much, and this metafictional, frame-story motif continues into the next novel.
Dies is not a renewed language capable of singing “the song of the earth” (to use Jonathan Bate’s phrase) but a language that will do so in the negative by acknowledging its own failure. Thus the potential for a renewed modernist language is ironically realized through a language that is even more dead, even more incapable of capturing the real, a tactical reversal of Hulme’s theory of modernist aesthetics. Malone has repudiated “the wild beast of earnestness” (194) that used to possess him and now endeavours to play with convention in a manner that will defeat the game entirely:

I began again. But little by little with a different aim, no longer to succeed, but in order to fail. Nuance. But what I sought, when I struggled out of my hole, aloft through the stirring air towards an inaccessible boon, was the rapture of vertigo, the letting go, the fall, the gulf, the relapse into darkness, to nothingness, to earnestness, to home (195).

Paradoxically, it is this playful and disingenuous use of language that will allow him to rediscover a terminal, deathly earnestness, “to be natural at last.” Malone does not strive, like a nature writer, for mimesis in his representation of nature, yet his style of narration is designed to allow for nature-being to “[burst] and [drown] everything” (190), to cancel the “fictions” of lay nature. Thus his project attempts to avoid the domination inherent in the language of habit by withdrawing trust in its capacity to represent the nothingness of

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131 See the introduction for more on Hulme’s theory.
nature-being, and, in turn, by trusting in nature-being’s capacity to manifest itself after language’s failure. Malone’s ecology is extreme: he will attempt to exist without dominating nature-being at all, and this is ultimately achieved only in death, a flight from the violence of representation more so than a flight from his own misery.

Chris Ackerley draws attention to the pervasive desire to return to the mineral world that appears and reappears in Beckett’s fiction, a fantasy of reconciliation with nature in the form of terminal peace after the erasure of the distinctions wrought by consciousness (83). Marcuse’s discussion of Schopenhauer and the death instinct offers a useful way of historicizing the deathward impulse in Beckett’s work:

[Flights into nothingness and death] aim not only against the reality principle, at non-being, but also beyond the reality principle – at another mode of being. They betoken the historical character of the reality principle, the limits of its validity and necessity (99).

For Marcuse, the most nihilistic works, and especially the most nihilistic works, implicitly communicate an ecological message even as they seem to consent to destruction with indifference. On this view, Malone’s indifferent character Sapo/Macmann, like Watt and most of Beckett’s characters, is an “ecological” creation in the sense that he attunes himself to the nothingness of nature-being and lives as if the subject/object distinction did not hold. In doing so he testifies to the possibility that
human life could somehow be lived without “dominating” the natural world at the same time that he parodies this very idea through the insignificance and insanity of his gesture.

While Ackerley is right to point out that any romantic or ecological reading of Beckett is frustrated by his sense of disgust with biological processes (85), in *Malone Dies* the cycles of biological nature are subsumed into nature-being and thus lose their violent, oppositional character because the natural entities at war with one another, like the subjects that observe their “ravening for earth and light” (275), lose their distinction in Malone’s narrative and appear as a manifestation of the same all-encompassing presence. Macmann’s hedge refuge, for example, is not quite an emblem of nature “pacified” of its violence in Marcuse’s sense, but it is, like the wild garden favored by the schizophrenic asylum inmates, “a paradise for those who like their nature sloven” (278), a place marked by a lack of distinction between what sees and what is seen, what suffers and what inflicts suffering. Just as he cancels the striving of biological nature without redeeming it, Macmann steps back from the struggle for existence and does not assert himself much more than would be expected of a volitionless window onto nature; he is incapable of contributing to the world of work – for example he cannot garden because he cannot discern between weeds and valued plants, whether useful or beautiful (244) – and survives meagerly off of charity and other interventions that are met with total indifference. His withdrawal from the world of work is not a romantic attempt to live only in beauty – like Knott (*Watt* 203) he is not only blind to the utility of nature, but blind to conventional notions of its beauty (*Malone Dies* 206) – but it is evocative of
Marcuse’s notion of the aesthetic dimension, a disinterested, subversive experience of being that is related to the notion of formal beauty but is ultimately not identical with its cultivated distinctions. The suggestion running consistently through the Trilogy is that conventional ideas of beauty, as opposed to the aesthetic dimension, are implicated in the language of habit and are thus equally capable of obscuring the alterity of nature-being. So while Beckett’s vision may be violent and ugly compared to Marcuse’s, it is still preoccupied with reconciliation in its own grim way.

Marcuse’s idea of reconciliation, as Andrew Biro points out, is only intelligible if his distinction between basic and surplus repression is extended to his discussion of alienation and domination. For Marcuse, a certain basic level of repression – the disciplining of the senses required for productive labor – is required for survival and social grouping, if only at the organismic level. The problem is that oppressive social organizations demand an irrational surplus, more discipline and violence than is required to overcome scarcity and open-up the realm of unproductive experience (Eros 32). Likewise, a certain level of basic domination over nature is necessary, or rather a distinction must be made between necessary use or interaction and rapacious surplus domination; and, finally, a corresponding distinction must be maintained between basic

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132 In The Aesthetic Dimension Marcuse argues that art’s function is not so much to embody conventional or even unconventional “beauty,” but to “[subvert] the dominant consciousness, the ordinary experience” in a manner that is “largely autonomous vis à vis the given social relations” (ix). Much of Molloy, Watt, and Malone Dies takes place in this space of ineffectual but unlimited refusal: Beckett’s characters reject productivity in favour of travelling aimlessly, lying supine on the ground, and playing idly with objects and language. In this sense they are governed by a logic of subversive pleasure, if not aesthetic beauty.
alienation – the inevitable (yet permeable and blurred) subject/object distinction – and surplus alienation – the rigid subject/object distinction characteristic of Enlightenment thought since Descartes (Biro 195). According to this framework, the inevitability of basic domination and alienation does not require the subject to draw rigid lines between itself and the object world nor to assume what radical ecology suggests is a corresponding attitude of supremacist mastery over the non-human. An attempt to reform the reality principle is thus not an attempt to overcome repression altogether, but to cancel forms of surplus repression. Reconciliation between subject and object is thus only understandable as an instructive mythos, a reading I will discuss below with reference to The Unnamable. This terminology provides insight into the radical nature of Beckett’s ecology: he does not stop at negating surplus domination but, as if he were taking Marcuse’s thought experiment to an extreme by refusing its core distinction, attempts to negate basic domination as well.

Sapo/Macmann takes the idea of “letting things be” to an extreme; his ignorance and indolence distance him from basic and surplus domination and seem resistant not only to a repressive and specifically modern reality principle, but to any reality principle whatsoever. While for many ecocritics the ability to “read” a landscape is an indispensible part of maintaining an ecologically progressive attitude towards it, it is Sapo’s inability to read landscape that allows him his passive form of communion with nature. Like a naturalist, he takes an interest in the stuff of the natural world and seeks it out, but he is ignorant of the things he encounters:
Sapo loved nature, took an interest in animals and plants and willingly raised his eyes to the sky, day and night. But he did not know how to look at all these things, the looks he rained upon them taught him nothing about them. He confused the birds with one another, and the trees, and could not tell one crop from another crop. He did not associate the crocus with the spring nor the chrysanthemum with Michaelmas. The sun, the moon, the planets and the stars did not fill him with wonder. He was sometimes tempted by the knowledge of these strange things, sometimes beautiful, that he would have about him all his life. But from his ignorance of them he drew a kind of joy … (191).

Again, the subject’s ignorance allows the object world to detach itself from the signs that enframe it according to human needs and associations, and for its nothingness/plenitude to envelop the subject in turn – and this is advanced as an end in itself. Hence Sapo’s self-abnegating pastime: letting the darkness “envelope and pervade him” (203). His later incarnation Macmann takes this even further: he lies on the earth during a rain storm, as if he had no volition or survival instinct, as if there were no distinction between himself and the storm, and as if his suffering itself were not distinct from the circumambient environment – no more of a cause for concern than the raindrops drenching his body – and only arises when “the élan vital or struggle for life [begins] to prod him in the arse again” (243). Malone himself reports a similar experience:

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the noises of the world, so various in themselves and which I used to be so clever at distinguishing from one another, had been dinning at me for so long, always the same old noises, as gradually to have merged into a single noise, so that all I heard was one vast continuous buzzing. The volume of sound perceived remained no doubt the same, I had simply lost the faculty of decomposing it. The noises of nature, of mankind and even my own, were all jumbled together in one and the same unbridled gibberish. Enough. I would willingly attribute part of my shall I say misfortunes to this disordered sense were I not unfortunately rather inclined to look upon it as a blessing (207).

Here the integrity of individual things is breaking down, like it did for Moran, but Malone does not dismiss his experience as an illusion: the illusion is that there are distinctions within nature-being, “the unchanging” which for reasons unknown has sought temporary “relief from its formlessness” (197). To live without basic repression is to live in this unchanging formlessness, an absurd and impossible endeavor.

If Sapo/Macmann lives the kind of extreme ecology Malone strives for on the level of language, his foil is the Lambert family, a group of peasants who are “embedded in life, hoping for nothing more” (199), exposed to “the crass tenacity of life and its diligent pains” (216). The sections dealing with the Lamberts are, fittingly, the most idiomatically realist in the narrative, though far from seamlessly so. This family is one of the subjects of the young Sapo’s anthropological interest in the rural peasantry, and from
a certain perspective they evoke ecological issues of a far more pertinent character than
does Sapo, considering that their lives are deeply rooted in the soil, governed by the cycle
of the seasons, and the success or failure of their crops. At this point in Sapo’s
development Malone even comes close to offering a commentary on the various regional
difficulties that afflict the Lamberts:

The markets. The inadequacy of the exchanges between rural and urban
areas had not escaped the excellent youth. He had mustered, on this
subject, the following considerations, some perhaps close to, others no
doubt far from, the truth.

In his country the problem – no, I can’t do it.

The peasants. His visits to. I can’t (196).

It is as if Malone is aware that the realist mode is most directly capable of engaging with
such issues, yet he is unable to use it out of disgust with its language. Because his
primary endeavor is to cancel domination on the level of language and, by extension, on
the level of ontology, Malone cannot contribute to this kind of discourse without the

133 Moran, after he comes to live as a slovenly conduit of nature-being, also encounters a
shepherd, but, unlike the Lamberts, he is an attractive figure, an idealized “shepherd of being”
who dwells on the earth and endures its hardships without fostering excessive alienation or
domination. This meeting of the literally and figuratively ecological has a jarring effect, and is
one of a few positive visions in the Trilogy. However, the overall tendency of the work is to move
beyond such positive visions in an attempt to isolate the more fertile groundlessness of the
universal. In fact, the shepherd can be read as another, uncharacteristically pleasant interlocutor,
whom Moran must nonetheless pass by to arrive at his non-destination.
nauseous derived from reproducing the “evil” one intends to fight. It is no accident that Mr. Lambert, the figure most associated with lay nature and the narrative’s realist mode, is a butcher and a marital rapist (200) and is grotesquely calculating in his use of an aging donkey for profit (212).\textsuperscript{134}

In a narrative set in the vaguest of environs (a room somewhere, a town, an asylum, some island, etc.), the Lambert family’s dismal rootedness is most suggestive of the discourses of place celebrated in modernist primitivism and contemporary ecocriticism alike, yet their daily affairs are enlightening neither to Sapo nor Malone. Far from the site of a new, pastoral way of life, the “primitive” locus of the Lambert’s farm is yet another solid to be absorbed into the “unconquerable dark” (203) Sapo communes with as his grasp of lay nature deteriorates. At this point it is worthwhile recalling Yeats and Lawrence’s respective negotiations of primitivism and place: for Yeats, the lifeways of the historical Irish peasantry were ultimately abstracted from the “peasant figure” and its surrounding imagery, which continued to stand for an indwelling future with no necessary ties to rural life, distant eras, or even modern Ireland; for Lawrence, for whom nature-being was also cosmopolitan, the distant locales of Australia and Mexico nonetheless seemed, at least before \textit{Lady Chatterley’s Lover}, to enjoy a privileged connection to nature-being (a paradox evident in Don Ramón’s call for “racially appropriate” natural aristocrats in tune with the universal wellspring of being). For

\textsuperscript{134} Although he does the save the ass from the knacker, it would be more than a stretch to read Mr. Lambert as a positive ethical figure on this account.
Beckett there are no such negotiations: not only is the *Trilogy’s* extreme ecology cosmopolitan or universal to the point that all lingering traces of substantialist nature and primitivism are dispelled, it also allows for no privileged position from which to commune with nature-being (just as there is no nature “over there,” there is no place “over there” to come to this realization). Thus *Malone Dies* moves to complete the trajectory away from place and particularity that is observable in Yeats and Lawrence’s work.\(^\text{135}\)

But if the Lambert’s locality is associated with the domination inherent to realism, it should already be obvious that Malone’s narrative mode is particularly cruel in its denial of the integrity of individual entities, revealing a “darker” side of the universal. Malone can be said to solve the problem of domination through a logic of total extermination, a consequence of his extreme attempt to negate both surplus and basic forms of domination. After giving himself the choice of two stewards for Macmann – Moll and Lemuel – Malone chooses the more violent and sadistic and the least socialized.

\(^{135}\) Badiou also sees a movement away from “all descriptive particularity” (29) in Beckett’s *oeuvre*, but reads *The Trilogy* (and other works) in much different terms than I do. For an exceptional study of Badiou’s writing on Beckett, which in my opinion greatly improves upon Badiou’s own, more prescriptive insights, see Andrew Gibson’s *Beckett and Badiou: The Pathos of Intermittency* (2006). For Gibson (though not quite for Badiou) the “intellectual mystery” at the center of the *Trilogy* is that of the rarity of what Badiou calls the event; although Gibson accepts Badiou’s contention that Beckett’s novels are meditations on the possibility of the event, he adds that in Beckett’s world these meditations take place in a world of infinite possibility that nonetheless remains immutable, a world where the thought of the event cannot be easily differentiated from “an ironical or otiose whim” with “derisory status” (38). For Gibson, Beckett’s ironic narrators think the infinite possibility and perplexing rarity of the event without Badiou’s fear of pathos “sapping and imperilling the virile momentum of the forward march” (262). I agree that any attempt to discuss Beckett in terms of change – political or otherwise – must contend with the profound irony and stasis we find in Beckett’s writing.
While Moll offers some promise of rehabilitating Macmann and teaching him a language of eros – some kind of compromise between limiting surplus domination and participating productively in a shared world – Lemuel wields the hatchet that finally frees the asylum inmates from any remaining forces tying them to the (or any) reality principle, a gesture that corresponds with Malone’s own death and the end of the novel (287-288). It is fitting that the rich philanthropist who organizes the outing to the island, the aptly named Lady Pedal, is a tourist interested in the beauty of nature’s forms and their power to heal and rehabilitate the individual, a stance that is repudiated (through her murder) in favor of nature-being’s envelopment of all distinctions. In Malone Dies ecology without a subject is achieved through literal and figurative death. If the possibility of metaphysical change is in question throughout Watt and Molloy, in Malone Dies it culminates in an extreme ecology that, Marcuse’s objection to Schopenhauer notwithstanding, tends to identify nature-being with death rather than the possibility for renewed life, and, in its disturbing acceptance of total annihilation, seems to sever any ties between modernist ecology and the preservation of common sense nature.

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136 Notably, Malone’s description of the island is reminiscent of Arnold Böcklin’s symbolist painting The Isle of the Dead (1880-1886, in various versions), which uses natural imagery in a figurative way. Caspar David Friedrich’s symbolist painting Man and Woman Contemplating the Moon (1824) is said to have inspired Waiting For Godot.
The Unnamable and the Impossibility (and Necessity) of Modernist Ecology

The dream of deep ecology will never be realized on the earth, but our survival as a species may be dependent on our capacity to dream it in the work of our imagination

- Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (38)

The essential is to go on squirming forever at the end of the line

- from *The Unnamable* (338)

*The Unnamable*, the final novel of the *Trilogy*, answers to the various impasses I have identified so far with paradoxes: ontological or metaphysical critique is the deepest and the most useless mode of ecological critique; nature-being is and is not nature, is and is not Other; ecology without a subject is impossible and indispensible; modernist ecology must be practiced because it cannot be practiced. Each of these paradoxes celebrates the modernist project, specifically its experimental attempt to honor the radical alterity of nature-being while harnessing its enabling nothingness to provoke a kind of ontological revolution; however, each paradox also ironically undercuts this aim, and indicates the ultimate failure of ecological modernism. However, if *The Unnamable* contends with the paradoxes of modernist ecology, its ultimate conclusion, as the epigraph to this section suggests, is that one must push doggedly onward, towards a goal that is always being unmasked as impossible – that the truth of modernist ecology lies not in locating something concrete but in its willingness to pursue a horizon that can be encroached upon but never definitively reached. If *The Unnamable* has something of interest to offer

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ecocritics, it is that this esoteric pursuit can serve as a valuable cultural counterpart to the worldly machinations of practical environmentalisms and to the politicized realisms of naturalist and environmental justice ecocriticisms.

_The Unnamable_ completes the project of _Malone Dies_: to create a narrative voice that is itself the abjection of nature-being, to imagine ecology without a subject and to let ambience speak. If Molloy, Moran, Watt, and Macmann _are like_ or come to live _as if they were_ nature-being, _The Unnamable_ _is_ nature-being. However, “he”¹³⁷ should not be confused with the Kantian thing-in-itself, which is inaccessible even to him, even though he identifies with it; as my discussion of Arsene’s monologue implied, this is because nature-being is experienced as an ambient blend of subject and object, or negated subjectivity (and therefore objectivity), while the thing-in-itself is radically unthinkable and unrepresentable: nature unperceived, without even a dissolved or revolutionized subject. While in _Watt_ nature-being may have seemed radically Other, _The Unnamable_’s unusual perspective reveals its relative (and only relative) proximity to the conventional subject. _The Unnamable_’s speculation that he is a “tympanum” which demarcates the borders of subject and object even as it allows these realms to blend into each other suggests as much:

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¹³⁷ Although _The Unnamable_ does refer to himself using the third person singular “he,” I would prefer to use “it.” I refrain from doing so because it causes so much grammatical confusion to do so. Although I can offer little insight into Beckett’s decision to use “he” rather than “it,” the masculine personal pronoun does, fittingly, suggest conscious reconfiguration of the revolutionary masculine type on display in Yeats and Lawrence’s work.
Perhaps that’s what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I’m neither one side nor the other, I’m in the middle, I’m the partition, I’ve two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that’s what I feel, myself vibrating, I’m the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don’t belong to either, it’s not to me they’re talking, it’s not of me they’re talking (383).

The Unnamable cannot be named in a language that insists on a division between subject and object since he exists between them; and later he denies that there are two realms to divide in the first place – “there are not two places, there are not two prisons” (410) – although these realms continue to assert themselves nonetheless, however altered. The stuff of lay nature is entirely absent from this narrative – there is not even “a scrap of nature to talk about” (394) – but it is important to remember that The Unnamable’s movement away from nature is equally a movement towards nature, that is to say towards himself, nature-being, and eventually the unknown thing-in-itself he can never reach.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ The infamous difficulty of this text is due in part to The Unnamable’s misrecognition of himself as the thing-in-itself. His identity as nature-being, the tympanum, and his (mistaken) intuition that he is “Worm” (his name for the thing-in-itself, as I will discuss below) cross over but are not identical. This confusion sheds some light on Watt as well. Mr. Knott, whom I have equated with nature-being, seems also to represent the radical alterity of the thing-in-itself; however, as Arsene’s speech suggests, the endpoint of engagement with Mr. Knott’s Otherness is ambience, not knowledge of the thing-in-itself. For the servants, then, Mr. Knott is experienced as nature-being, and cannot be experienced as anything else, regardless of the fact that he is also
Thus The Unnamable should not be confused with some inner limit of the subject, though this is not totally untrue so long as the subject is recognized as ambience (and therefore neither inside nor outside, as much object as subject), or with the medium of language itself, though this is also not totally untrue so long as, following Heidegger, language is recognized as somehow distinct from the formlessness of nature-being at the same time that it is the only medium through which it can manifest or know itself:

I’m in words, made of words, others’ words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words, the whole world is here with me, I’m in the air, the walls, the walled-in-one, everything yields, opens, ebbs, flows, like flakes, I’m in all these flakes, meeting, mingling, falling asunder, wherever I go I find me, leave me, go towards me, come from me, nothing ever but me, a particle of me, retrieved, lost, gone astray … I am they, all of them, those that merge, those that part, those that never meet, and nothing else, yes, something else, I’m something quite different, a quite different thing, a wordless thing in empty space, a hard shut dry cold black place, where nothing stirs, nothing speaks, and that I listen, and that I seek, like a caged beast born of caged beasts (387).

“elsewhere.” The implication in both texts is that ambience, which is in this context not radically other but a blur of self and other, is the closest we can get to the radical alterity of nature, which is purely theoretical, and irrelevant to human endeavours.
The Unnamable recognizes himself in the language he is forced to use, but this language is also what moulds him into the “monster’s carapace” (325) of solid forms that encases him. His dilemma is that, unlike in *Malone Dies* where Malone finds freedom in death (only to reawaken as The Unnamable), not even the peace of nothingness is possible anymore: he must speak, and thus he must serve as his own oppressor even as, like Malone, he embarks on a liberatory project of “self-realization” through the mutilation of language which, doomed to impossibility from the outset, will attempt to eschew all forms of domination.

The Unnamable’s narrative is full of oppressors and authority figures, all of whom are fictions accounting for his Sisyphean circumstances. The conspirator Basil, for example, tries to force him to adopt a historical existence marked by a series of banal biographical details, the trappings of prose realism Beckett playfully identified as “good housekeeping, living” (563) in “Three Dialogues.” The Unnamable cannot sustain his own self-referential narration, and intermittently narrates as Basil, who later becomes Mahood, a character who comes to stand-in for The Unnamable’s own condition, both victim and oppressor. While this character is figurative for The Unnamable, in order to remain so he must be pushed to the extremes of abjection – such as when he is confined to a jar – in order to avoid any of the biographical trappings Basil/Mahood would assign to him (or he would adopt as a character). Just as we are given the option to see The Unnamable as a kind of grotesquely reduced “character,” we are given the option of
seeing him in typical Cartesian terms, though it is clear that this is also an abhorrent falsification as far as he is concerned:

Ascribe to me a body. Better still, arrogate to me a mind. Speak of a world of my own, sometimes referred to as inner, without choking. Doubt no more. Seek no more … And finally, these and other decisions having been taken, carry on cheerfully as before (390).

We are tempted to accept the impossibility of The Unnamable and to move on, secure in our knowledge that Beckett’s experiment is a failure, but according to The Unnamable something will have “changed nevertheless” (390).

If we credit Morton’s argument in Ecology Without Nature, a sustained ambient narrative is impossible, since the subject and the object inevitably resurface from the unnameable blur. The perpetual cycle of self-abnegation and self-assertion that marks The Unnamable’s narrative (which is equally the appearance and disappearance of things) might suggest as much, even though he dreams of finally grinding this cycle to a halt and escaping into non-existence. However, the fact that ambience, even if it is admitted as an existential reality, is impossible to sustain as a mode of representation (or practical action) does not mean that there is nothing to be gained from attempts to get beyond subject and object, and Morton acknowledges as much. One might say that sustained ambience’s impossibility does not discredit it as an ecological thought experiment any more than the impossibility of a utopian future discredits attempts to
create a better society. If we accept Biro’s reading of Marcuse – that basic alienation ensures the failure of reconciliation only in the most terminal sense – it becomes apparent that the ambient imagination is not so much about collapsing any and all distinctions between subject and object, but about overcoming the surplus alienation that sustains a metaphysics of domination. In this sense, and here I depart from Morton, the fact that ambience cannot in turn be sustained as a reality principle is not particularly important as far as its potential as a mode of ecological critique is concerned. Beckett draws our attention to its failure not in order to discredit it with finality, but to acknowledge the impossibility of dwelling so close to the real. His creations try to live sustained ambience, and this teaches us something of importance even if they fail or are destroyed in the process.

The Unnamable’s project is best understood in these terms. Even as he narrates from the position of ambient nature-being, he has not fully realized the impossible task of conquering basic domination and alienation. This fantasy – and terminal reconciliation is always a fantastic projection – could only be realized if he could become Worm, his last creation, “the anti-Mahood” (346). Worm is the true thing-in-itself; his appearance draws attention to the relative familiarity of nature-being, which is revealed not to be so antithetical to the subject after all (because, unlike Worm, who is radically Other, it is the subject as much as the object). Even describing Worm, or bringing him up at all, humanizes him (360) and thus destroys him. While nature-being is realized through the negation of lay and realist nature, any realization of Worm would mean his cancellation:
even in a blur of ambience, where all boundaries have been exploded and no distinction remain, Worm is elsewhere. Hence, according to my definition of ecology, there can be no ecology where Worm is concerned, because there is no relationship between Worm – who is not even the raw “datum” (Beckett, “Three Dialogues” 555) out of which subjects and objects are extracted – and anything else in the first place. Worm cannot be the subject of metaphysical change: unlike relations between subject and object, he is unchanging (346). Not even a revivified (or mutilated) language can speak of him. Yet the purpose of the Trilogy’s ecology of negation is not only to explode the phenotext, but to find Worm, to speak Worm, and, in The Unnamable, finally to become Worm. The novel’s closing passage is a testimony to the needfulness and impossibility of its aim:

he must be somewhere, he is made of silence, he’s the one to be sought, the one to be, the one to be spoken of, the one to speak, but he can’t speak, then I could stop, I’d be he, I’d be the silence, I’d be back in the silence, we’d be reunited, his story the story to be told, but he has no story, he hasn’t been in story, it’s not certain, he’s in his own story, unimaginable, unspeakable, that doesn’t matter, the attempt must be made (413).

And further down, the final lines of the Trilogy:

perhaps it’s done already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be
the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence
you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on (414).

Thus, for Beckett, modernist ecology reaches its ultimate impasse when its (romantic) will to effect reconciliation is undercut by its self-reflexive (modernist) awareness of the impossibility of this project, yet somehow without losing faith in it. And its perseverance faced with this ultimate impasse is its most vital expression of triumph in failure.

_The Unnamable’s_ self-conscious pursuit of an essentially mythic impossibility suggests a way of redeeming _the idea_ of terminal reconciliation. I have discussed how the revelation of ambient nature-being cannot grant final closure or a stable reality principle, but can expose the fictive nature of surplus repression and validate our pursuit of basic repression – and basic repression only – as a reality principle. Interpreting the ontological argument of radical ecology through Marcuse and Biro, I have also suggested that to dwell in basic, rather than surplus repression would be the closest thing to dwelling in an ecological utopia, and would mean an end to the metaphysical and literal devastation of nature (or at least this is the only way of interpreting the endpoint of ontological ecology in a way that is coherent, albeit utopian). But _The Unnamable_ is not content to be coherent and tries to go even further than ambience, to locate nature in such a way that would eradicate subject and object entirely, rather than collapse and blur their respective domains. His fantasies about becoming identical with Worm, like Lawrence’s fantasies about the wholesale annihilation of humankind, reflect his desire for a literally posthuman state which would make the whole discourse of modernist ecology
meaningless (a discourse that is his own). In his essay *The Open*, Giorgio Agamben reflects on the paradox of this eschaton as it appears in Alexandre Kojève’s lectures on Hegel; the paradox of Hegel’s systemic account of the reconciliation of humanity and nature – “the end of history” – is that humanity as we know it will disappear in the peace of Hegelian reconciliation and thus cannot subjectively experience the utopia it dreams of engendering (Agamben 6). Utopia is thus the conceptual death of humanity. In fact, both “protagonists” of history, subject and object, will disappear. While Beckett is certainly no systemic Hegelian, The Unnameable’s fantasies about Worm suggest the same: if he were Worm, there would be no ecology, no prospect or need for metaphysical change – he would be “the silence.” And, as an ecological project or otherwise, this is literally not fathomable.

However, continually striving for something impossible does provide a kind of insurance that the reality principle will remain open as a problem; as Simon Critchley puts it, “the weak messianic power” (22) of Beckett’s prose ensures that the very “task of thinking” survives, which is nothing if not to “keep open the slightest difference between things as they are and things as they might be” (24). If the movement toward ambience results in some semblance of a coherent ecology, the movement towards Worm resists

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139 Kojève writes: “The disappearance of Man at the end of History is not a cosmic catastrophe: the natural World remains what it has been from all eternity: Man remains alive as animal in harmony with Nature or given Being. What disappears is Man properly so called – that is, Action negating the given, and Error, or, in general, the Subject opposed to the Object” (cited in Agamben, 6). Beckett’s vision is more similar to the one advanced by Bataille, for whom the post-historical utopia could only be conceived of as an indefinite epilogue to history, since it would inevitably bear the scars of subjectivity, the impossible overcoming of which would be the only enduring “human” project (7).
such formulations and ensures that any account of what constitutes basic and surplus repression will be challenged – that the ecological project will never be eclipsed entirely by the language and logic of the situation. Marcuse’s notion of fantasy sheds light on the mythic function of this endeavor: for Marcuse fantasy preserves, against regnant accounts of the real and conceivable, “an ‘impossible’ attitude” (165) that will not accept even the most indispensible forms of alienation and domination. The wisdom of this stance lies in its ability to preserve utopian vision, to make sure reconciliation always lies just over the horizon, and ultimately, as Jameson puts it (speaking of social change), to provoke the mind to “a schematizing activity of the … political imagination which has not yet found its concept” (“Islands” 88). This inbuilt deconstructive impulse, answering to fears about the taboo universal, also ensures that the total annihilation of identity imagined somewhat sinisterly in Malone Dies cannot be arrived at in a terminal sense or misrecognized as a “destination” at all; instead of treating particulars as if they might cease to exist after a final flood of revelatory darkness (one thinks of Morton’s “shower of rain”), The Unnamable perpetually registers their lack of independent external existence, and thus their relative malleability. Thus the utopia modernist ecology insists upon (if only by purging its phony claimants) is not exactly an ecologically-sensitive society, rather it is a kind of ecological being who has evolved the surprisingly ironic form of self-consciousness required create to create one.

Interestingly, deep ecology’s aspirations appear in a new light when they are interpreted in terms of utopian fantasy: the positive ideal of an ontology of self-
realization acts, rather counter-intuitively, as an inbuilt deconstructive impulse, forcing us to question the values that would guide any environmentalist project without reprieve. The real goal for deep ecology is, on this interpretation, to make sure that we are always in the process of crossing the divide between “humanity” and “nature” and thereby revolutionizing our manner of being-in-the-world (and, as a form of ecological critique rather than the universal straw man of such critiques, exposing the danger involved in entrusting the future of the natural world to political agents for whom it can be nothing other than an imperiled resource, even when this appears inevitable). *The Unnamable* suggests that this is equally a goal of modernist ecology, which is in this sense an early and more vital expression of deep ecological thought.

Simultaneously the most extreme and most attenuated expression of modernist ecology, *The Unnamable* preserves the radical utopian spirit of modernism while limiting its potential to manifest itself as a grand programme of renewal that would end alienation once and for all. It represents something of a modernist mythos, but it is an inherently critical one that is corrosive to substantialism, simulacra, and masculinist injunctions. As such it most directly theorizes the modernist ecological project as an instructive mode of “weak” ontological critique rather than a terminal utopian destination. This self-conscious union of radicalism and weakness suggests that modernist ecology is, at its innermost core, incompatible with the fascist politics it was nonetheless tied to in social modernist programmes. Neither is it fully recuperable by today’s mainstream environmentalist discourse, which makes it a valuable corrective to instrumentalist
ecological culture even if its practical application remains necessarily uncertain, if one can speak of “practical” modernist ecology at all. In the work of Yeats and Lawrence the failure of programmatic resolution and the return to ecopoetics was registered to some degree as a perplexing failure; in Beckett’s late-modernist work this failure is the inevitable form and content of ecological art: to think ecologically is to fail. Yet, to quote Worstward Ho (1983), a truly ecological culture must nonetheless drag itself forward in an unending attempt to “fail better” (89).

**Conclusion: The Perils of Being Blind to Mahood**

[The work of art’s] relation to praxis is inexorably indirect, mediated, and frustrating. The more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change

- Marcuse, from *The Aesthetic Dimension* (xiii)

The spell that binds us today consists not least in the fact that it ceaselessly urges people to take action that they believe will break the spell; and that it prevents the reflection on themselves and the circumstances that might really break it

- Adorno, from *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* (114)

When Mahood is confined to a jar and used by an enterprising restaurateur as a piece of raw material to prop up a menu, he is surprised to discern that while the people of the town look at him, no one really seems to *see* him. Reflecting on his own invisibility,
Mahood realizes that, despite the fact that he seems to embody something outside of his society’s purview – something genuinely antithetical – his power to start a revolution or even a minor stir is rather limited:

Though not exactly in order I am tolerated by the police. They know I am speechless and consequently incapable of taking unfair advantage of my situation to stir up the population against its governors, by means of burning oratory during the rush hour or subversive slogans whispered, after nightfall, to belated pedestrians the worse for drink. And since I have lost all my members, with the exception of the onetime virile, they know also that I shall not be guilty of any gestures liable to be construed as inciting to alms … (327).

In Mahood we recognize the plight of the modernist who endeavors to change humanity and nature through artistic vision, and also the at once starkly limited and sublimely limitless domain of ecopoetics, those literary experiments which can push us to experience nature differently, yet cannot directly spell out manifestos or engage in environmental politics.

With a measure of healthy suspicion towards masculine “all or nothing” injunctions, Beckett’s ecopoetics reimagine the reality principle and the agent of ecological change for the post-World War Two climate. The peril of denying the relevance of such ecopoetic experiments is that, leading into the twenty-first century (by which time programmatic modernist politics would be largely contained by hegemonic
liberal capitalism), they preserve both a corrosively critical and a utopian element in ecological thought that is arguably absent from the substantialist discourse of contemporary environmentalism, which from a modernist perspective is, ironically, ecologically unsound. Similarly, the explicit or tacit tendency to advance realism as a more “ethical” or ecological mode of representation, the political and pedagogical practicality of this position notwithstanding, risks stifling the ecological imagination and closing off valuable avenues of critique, as the epigraphs for this section suggest. Surely, as Morton contends, ethical choices concerning the fate of our world are best entrusted to enlightened subjects functioning in a consensus reality (a public sphere) informed by ontological assumptions that might appall some of the more zealous among the ecological modernists, but rapprochement between such ethical or political realism and ecopoetics is still required for a truly vital ecological culture (in the academy or otherwise). As such it is important to recognize that it is the impossible attitude of Beckett’s novels, their failure to be practically ecological and the significant pitfalls of this failure, that, in a final paradox, makes them so surprisingly indispensible as ecological experiments, in their own context and in today’s.
Works Cited


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Epilogue:

The Dismal Road to the Twenty-First Century

[Silence. Estragon looks attentively at the tree.]

What do we do now?

- from *Waiting for Godot* (11)

I have theorized a movement in twentieth century culture, termed “modernist ecology,” which serves as shorthand for the ideological isomorphy that allows Lawrence, Yeats, and Beckett’s otherwise diverse, complex negotiations of key leitmotifs[^140] to be recognized, with due reservation, as a distinct current in the larger stream of twentieth century thought. My goal here has certainly not been to grossly simplify a complex and multifaceted aesthetic movement; rather it has been to identify some tendencies that might anchor future discussions of modernist authors who might not fit so readily into the framework I have worked with here, yet who should be drawn into a still more expansive discussion of the relationship between aesthetic modernism and “nature.” After all, although I have focused on three authors, my stated purpose has been to move beyond much of contemporary ecocriticism by considering modernism as a movement, an

[^140]: More specifically: anti-realist art’s capacity to challenge established ontology; the possibilities and limitations conferred by aesthetic autonomy; the relationship between ecopoetics and politics; the attraction and the perils of programmatic resolution; and the non-identity of modernist nature-being and simulacra of place and particularity.
endeavor that is guaranteed to be as contentious and reductive as it is illuminating and productive. Hopefully future studies in modernist ecology will challenge and thereby enrich the narrative I have constructed in this essay. I hope to do so myself in a future chapter or article devoted to Woolf, which will complete this project in spirit.

My discussion of Yeats, Lawrence, and Beckett has consistently suggested that the ecological culture of aesthetic modernism, equivocal by nature, even at its most monologic, was finally one of inbuilt or immanent critique more so than programmatic resolution. While it engaged with the redemptive narratives that partly defined the philosophical and political climate of the modernist period, modernist ecology ultimately, albeit sometimes with palpable regret, embraced a “weak” version of ecological critique which remains quietly relevant in today’s intellectual milieu, where the question of how, precisely, one is to go about thinking “ecologically” is still very much an open one. This shift towards (or return to) a semi-autonomous/ecopoetic position can be attributed to the primacy of the critical/self-reflexive dimension of modernist ecological thought, which tended to undermine modernism’s own lofty, programmatic aspirations long before the critique of grand narratives came to be associated with a “postmodern” turn in aesthetics and philosophy.

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141 Future studies in modernist ecology might, for instance, theorize its gender dynamics in more detail, critique the notion of universal ecological change (and its potentially problematic subject-position) from a post-colonial perspective, attempt to locate left iterations of modernist ecological thought, and of course extend the discussion beyond British and Irish modernisms produced in the first half of the twentieth century.
Modernist ecology is actually uncomfortably but fruitfully positioned *between* what Morton calls “thinking big,” confronting a titanic, overwhelming crisis, and weak thought, that is to say “thinking small,” thinking against the very grandiose resolutions this crisis seems to sanction. Proximate as it was to fascism, a political process that “thought big” but at the same time did not think at all (one is reminded of the unfathomably futural thousand year Reich which lay in ruins, along with much of Europe and the USSR, only a few years after its inception), modernist ecology was drawn into fascism’s gravitational pull at the same time that its core ideological construct, nature-being, charted lines of escape leading outward into its own recalcitrant, limitless blankness, compelling modernist ecology to arrive back, subtly but thoroughly changed, at its point of departure. While, from Yeats to Beckett, the imperative of ontological/anthropological change remained constant throughout modernist ecological discourse (a big thought if ever there was one!), modernist ecology’s eschewal of fascist resolution reconfigured ecology as a circuitous road to the future, one that promised the melancholy of interminable critique and inevitable failure in place of a messianic new dawn. The ecological utopia to come was reconfigured: instead of a project to be embarked upon tomorrow, it was reimagined as a vital but fragile *thought* to be circumspectly safeguarded along the road to a dismal future that threatened to render it impossible to think the new humanity or nature at all, much less actualize it in history.

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142 See “Thinking Big,” chapter one of 2010’s *The Ecological Thought.*
The works I have discussed suggest that we would do as well to imagine ecology in terms of the visual language of *Waiting for Godot* – a play that dwells with Vladimir and Estragon as they wait by the side of a barren road, watched over by a decrepit tree that might one day bloom again ("it’s not certain") – as we would to contemplate Ernest Callenbach, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Ursula K. LeGuin’s more tangible archaeologies of the future.143 Ecological thought must still travel this dismal road today: we must remain committed to the future in the midst of a cataclysm that has already occurred (as Lawrence aptly put it over eighty years ago); we must attune ourselves to the sadness and idiocy of our world without washing our hands of it (as Yeats came so close to doing at times); we must not lose sight of the lessons of the twentieth century or fall prey to the calculated obliviousness of today’s liberal environmentalist party line; and we must actively intervene in governmental policy even as we insist on a future, perhaps not our own or anyone else’s, perhaps never to come, that will be truly ecological (that unnameable horizon of ecological thought evoked by Beckett). Our world is still marked by what Gibson calls "the pathos of intermittency," a condition which demands that we

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143 I’m thinking of *Ecotopia* (1975), *Pacific Edge* (1988), and *Always Coming Home* (1985) respectively, all utopian novels attempting to imagine an ideal, ecologically-sensitive society in tangible terms. In *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005) Jameson argues that, in the post-communist era, science fiction in particular stimulates the utopian imagination, thus occupying the cultural role that was assumed so vitally by aesthetic modernism through the first half of the twentieth century.
think the seeming impossibility of qualitative change and its infinite possibility together. Yeats, Beckett, and Lawrence are in this sense our contemporaries in crisis.

Of course modernist ecology’s tendency to embrace “weak” ecological critique, whether willingly or with a measure of regret, should not be understood as a weakness. When the programmatic politics of modernism are bracketed or negated, as in Beckett’s *Trilogy*, we discern features of modernist ecology that might still help us think ecologically with greater depth today. My introduction focused on the non-contemporaneity of modernist ecology, so it is fitting here to stress the opposite. In modernist works we find an antidote to the substantialist rhetoric of place and particularity that has, in my opinion and in the opinion of other contemporary critics, limited our ecological imagination. We do not need to fetishize holdouts against global capitalism and against the conceptual death of nature in order to think ecologically; there is no “place” outside the problem, nor was there one fifty, even a hundred years ago (one thinks of the folly of Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, fleeing to his imagined Patusan faced with a troubling new world’s demands for recognition). At best these imagined spaces of hope—which are suspiciously suggestive of modernist primitivism—allow us to think what is really at stake: not the miraculous holdout, but the elusive *New*. As Yeats finally did, we have to move beyond the illusion that ecological utopia belongs to past times or distant places, and to realize that these are always images of an indwelling future. As Lawrence

144 See Gibson’s remarkable conclusion “The Pathos of Intermittency” in *Beckett and Badiou* (254-290).
grasped imperfectly and too late, we need to think deeper and universally, beyond the simulacra of place and particularity. For that matter, we need to think beyond the local voting station, beyond community activism, beyond recycling and other such palliatives, and, in general, beyond utility (beyond “what is to be done?”). It is not enough to think the Other (in ecology there is one and there isn’t one); we need to join the modernists in thinking the New. We also need to join them in self-reflexively recognizing how grandiose, impracticable, and inexpressible the modernist project is, and how distant from realpolitik and the tangible arenas where measurable change occurs. Ultimately we have to act in the quotidian world without forsaking the frustrating pathways of ecological thought; as Françoise Proust puts it, we must “make present life liveable and resist the unliveable life.”¹⁴⁵ Modernist ecology suggests that this is what it might mean to partake in an ecologically-minded culture and to care about the future of our world.

I have suggested throughout this study that modernism bears an ancestral relationship to deep ecology; I have not done so in order to celebrate deep ecology as it exists today, but to suggest that traces of modernist ecology have survived to inform contemporary ecological culture, however marginally. We need to learn to distinguish these traces from their present-day forms. Deep ecology has a bad reputation for a reason: at worst (and not unlike fascism, even if critics of deep ecology often make this connection for the wrong reasons) it incoherently combines substantialist accounts of nature with a more laudable desire to revolutionize the self and to carry the momentum

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in Gibson, pg. 260-261.
created by this change into the world.\textsuperscript{146} What is worth rediscovering today is this universal, metaphysical imperative and the utopian pathways of thought it manages to stimulate at a time when anthropological/ontological palingenesis has, as Jameson so consistently argues in his work, become more difficult to imagine than ever. What is worth scrapping are deep ecology’s other potential faces: substantialism, misanthropy, Malthusianism, and resistance to the necessary equivocations of theory, which are nothing less than the pathways of critical thought. Modernism suggests that we need to think deeper than deep ecology, yet from a modernist perspective there is something suspicious about the near-universal antipathy towards deep ecology in today’s cultural criticism: could this be a reaction to deep ecology’s injunction to think totality \textit{at all} more so than the lack of theoretical complexity with which the injunction is articulated? Could deep ecology be reviled because, in its own way, it tries (and fails) to imagine the New without taking a never-ending detour through the postmodernist’s Other? Is deep ecology too fascist or too democratic, or both?

Contempt towards deep ecology could indeed be synecdochic of a greater resistance to the totalizing scope of the ecological crisis itself. If there is anything

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{146} In \textit{Environmentalism and the Future of Progressive Politics} (1989) Robert C. Paehlke, anticipating a dominant trend in critical studies of deep ecology (especially poststructuralist studies), has correctly identified the anti-universalist simulacra that can appear in theories of deep ecology as troubling evidence for the movement’s potentially “ecofascist” face. I would add that to differentiate this aspect of deep ecology from, for instance, post-colonial celebrations of locality, we need to theorize fascist ecology, as I have done, as a palingenetic programme marked by an incoherent \textit{meeting} of universalism and anti-universalism. This is more true to the (failed) logic of fascist ecology, as I see it, and offers a way of recuperating aspects of deep ecology that we cannot afford to dismiss out of hand today.}

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constructive about deep ecology, perhaps it is that it tries to think the taboo universal and thus retains an aura of uncompromising opposition and danger that prevents its modernist traces from being absorbed completely by New Age kitsch (Eckhart Tolle’s feel-good, Oprah-endorsed mishmashes of Buddhism, Heidegger, and environmentalism come to mind as examples of unthreatening metaphysical ecology). We need an ecology that is deep, posthuman, universal, and even dangerous in Badiou’s sense; however, as modernism teaches us, we do not need masculine “all or nothing” injunctions that sacrifice self-reflexivity to action (critics have been justifiably disturbed, in my opinion, by Earth First!’s battle cry, “No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth”). We cannot, as the Reagan administration so preposterously attempted to do with its “War on Drugs,” treat an ongoing crisis as if it were resolvable with a spirited infantry charge. “Fighting” for the future might be a disaster in its own right, at least insofar as it might come at the cost of thinking for the future, and might tacitly posit an unsuitable type of warlike, masculinist agency. As Lawrence seems to have realized by the time he wrote Lady Chatterley’s Lover, the disaster has already occurred and its effects are our reality; a new regime alone cannot change that. As Heidegger put it in an infamous interview, speaking with an eye to the same monstrous longview I attributed to the later Yeats, it might take hundreds of years for ecological change to occur, however much we like to feel in control right now.147 For all our conviction that this, today, is the ecological age, the seeds of ecological thought – one thinks of Yeats’s Herne’s eggs – might still be the unsprouted

147 I am referring here to his posthumously published interview in Der Spiegel (1966).
anachronisms they were three or four generations ago. Public figures like Al Gore and Tim Flannery are right to urge people to “Act Now!” and to offer practical solutions for sustainable living, but their bestsellers are received as optimistic blueprints for global capitalism’s “green” phase, which is problematic precisely because it is so imminent and thinkable. Its denizens are none other than ourselves, plus solar panels.

As this study has suggested, when the modernist rhetoric of the New encounters its own impracticability or its grotesque, parodic realization yet does not apostatize, the result is profound irony. While environmental activists, deep ecologists, and public intellectuals alike speak to us in tones of deathly earnestness, aesthetic modernism teaches us that ecological thought is implicitly ironic, and this makes it oddly suitable for our time. Between today and the day we can think ecologically, a position from which we will no longer recognize ourselves, we will have to be content writing letters, signing petitions, waving signs, voting “green,” walking out to the compost pile or recycling bin (so trivial to think about in relation to Cathleen ni Houlihan or Kangaroo). But we also have to preserve another element of ecological culture, inscribed so richly in modernist texts, one that arguably has little to do with any of this. We also have step away from action and think ecology. Modernism’s contemporary relevance – which is part of the reason it is seen as unfashionably non-contemporary – consists in the fact that it asks us to think ecology at a time when those of us who demand change are preoccupied with action or the refusal of action. In this sense modernism’s marginality in what is (supposed to be) an increasingly activist literary studies is actually fitting. What modernism offers
us today *is* something of a supplement (a supplement we find elsewhere in less pronounced forms, and maybe everywhere); but without this supplement there is no ecological thought. This is why we need Yeats, Lawrence, and Beckett – not to mention Woolf, Stevens, and H.D. – in an age defined by environmental crisis. Modernist ecology is a discourse about the essential supplement, the unnecessary thing we cannot think the future of our world without. It is not about what to do tomorrow. It is about what we are, and it is about the void: what we are not, yet.


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