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# Études Lawrenciennes

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

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## Energy F/flows through the Environment in *The White Peacock*

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### Résumé

This paper argues the case for a new reading of D.H. Lawrence's *The White Peacock* (1911) against the popular interest in the New Physics theories developed at the turn of the twentieth century. Such a reading focuses on energy as an elemental cosmogenic force in the environment and illustrates a new understanding of material relationships. These relationships speak of Lawrence's affinity with modernist and post-humanist concerns, mainly in terms of the permeability and indeterminacy of states. Using his first novel as a case study, this paper exposes the various sources and forms of energy that are inscribed in the narrative, and which literally energise the relationship between the organic and nonorganic. This post-humanist perspective illuminates Lawrence's ability to layer meaning and to transgress the cause and effect narrative of conventional evolution to one of eternal becomings of the post-humanist world. Instead of merely focusing on the elegiac idealisation of landscape, Lawrence unveils the turbulence of life at molecular and microbial level. This microscopic perspective decentres the human as the sole harbinger of meaning.

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### Entrées d'index

**Keywords:** materiality, intensity, physics, electricity, kinetic energy, vitality

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### Texte intégral



- 1 Writing on the cusp of an energy revolution, D.H. Lawrence bridges the gap between modernity and modernism. Whilst the material conditions of modernist texts are steeped in vortical energy flows of literary production,<sup>1</sup> this exemplifies but one aspect of the wider modernist mania with nervous energy, electrical charge and telecommunication that finds its ultimate playground in the chronic metropolis. In contrast, the Victorian age of invention, transport and finance was literally energised by notions of the “vital spark,” which described a moral narrative of energy as work and waste.<sup>2</sup> Degeneration and exhaustion had become root metaphors of energy death in an entropic disordered universe. The intellectual conversion of nineteenth-century exhaustible mechanistic energy into twentieth-century continual radiant energy<sup>3</sup> gave rise to a dynamic cosmos in which an energised modernity now feeds on the unpredictable and destabilising movements of atomic particles and associates it with the peculiar “modern” sensitivity of restlessness and agitation. Energy thus seems to be the essence of modernity itself. It demarcates modern existence as one of energy production and consumption.
- 2 The debt modernist writers pay to this energy revolution is a creative one. Morrison, for example, explores the resemblances between the newly conceptualised quantum world and the modernist fictional world, as both converge on the fizzing interactions between unstable entities. Characters leap in and out of existence in the same way particles do.<sup>4</sup> The constant vibrations of subatomic particles erase the boundaries of material form and process. This is attractive to writers like Lawrence, who concern themselves with the modernist “crisis of representation.”<sup>5</sup> Radiant energy supplies the idea of endless transformations of diffracting energy waves, vibrations and rhythms – what Bergson refers to as “uninterrupted continuity.”<sup>6</sup> Energy and literature combine thus in an “energised modernism” in which the harnessing of the electron connect with human mental and spiritual energies in cycles of transformation and acceleration. The shared understandings of scientific advances and artistic creativity commute the unfamiliar nanoworld of particle physics into the familiar world of social attraction and repulsion.<sup>7</sup>
- 3 However, not just urban and globalised modernity captivates energetic modernists, but also the cycles and rhythms of the natural world. *The White Peacock* (1911), originally intended to be called “Nethermere,” has frequently been examined as a post-pastoral, but not enough attention has been given to the landscape of Nethermere as a conduit of energy flows. Through writing the valley of Nethermere, Lawrence’s powerful visualisations of the natural world is at times lyrical, at times elegiac. But Instead of merely focusing on the elegiac idealisation of landscape and the people working in relation to it, Lawrence unveils the turbulence of life at molecular and microbial level. This posthumanist perspective illuminates Lawrence’s ability to layer meaning and to transgress the story of expulsion from a perceived pre-industrial paradise and allows for a reading in which the human tragedy of expulsion is mitigated by the eternal becomings of the nonhuman world. Perceived through new understandings of spacetime that infiltrate the fabric of the narrative and unpick solid matter, the novel furthermore reveals the insubstantial and permeable materiality that underpins life.
- 4 The classical vitalist idea that all organic matter is energised by a dynamic force that is qualitatively different from “mere” physical or chemical forces, coupled to an evolutionary teleological idea underpinned by Bergsonian *élan vital*, *i.e.* the idea that living things become progressively more animated, is replaced by the vitality of non-teleological communications across the non-human world. These undulating feedback loops of organic and inorganic systems communicate through intensities.<sup>8</sup> Intensity flows, or electric charge, thus underpin the connection between modernist and post-humanist investigations of narratives and illustrate a sensitivity to the environment as alive with continual energy exchanges. Matter is now no longer a stable surface but an entangled constant motion, and the entanglement is instantaneous and everlasting.



- 5 The critical reflection of reconceptualising energy as one of intensity flows responds to Lawrence's critique of humanity's seeking of control over the environment (and failing). His fraught relationship with post-pastoral anxieties that are visible also in other modernist writings, *e.g.*, in constructions of countryside as *Waste Land*,<sup>9</sup> disrupts nature writing. His writing may, therefore, be considered a response to Friedman's demand for more consideration of "the planet" in the "planetary perspective" of modernism,<sup>10</sup> in which the nonhuman, rather than the human, perspective on local ecologies is foregrounded as witness to the perceived traumatic changes traditionally extolled by modernists, thereby decentering these traditional viewpoints.

## The New Physics of D.H. Lawrence

- 6 In 1906, just after Einstein formulated his theory of special relativity, Lawrence worked as a student teacher at University College Nottingham, where he also began work on a piece that would become *The White Peacock* (1911). Rachel Crossland outlines how Lawrence had a thorough grounding and pervasive interest in new scientific theories, which he followed in publications such as *The Teacher*.<sup>11</sup> The topical importance of a post-Newtonian universe for Lawrence, in which interactive molecular movement did away with unrefined causality, is noted widely. Commentators acknowledge Lawrence's enthusiasm for the New Physics, but they also identify this relationship as ambivalent.<sup>12</sup> Lawrence's actual understanding of the New Physics can only be extrapolated,<sup>13</sup> and some commentators, under the routine ascription of Lawrencian worship of the primitive and intuitive, highlight Lawrence's violent "antiscientific animus."<sup>14</sup> Yet neither party overlooks Lawrence's interest in the vitality of quivering connections between the self and its non-organic surroundings illustrated by quantum physics.<sup>15</sup> Lawrence's writing, therefore, inscribes environmental agency that is not metaphysical, but chemico-physical.
- 7 Lawrence's engagement with the New Physics can serve, therefore, as a case study for what Whitworth presents as a popular appeal of scientific discovery during modernism's ascendancy. The popular interest in multiple and simultaneous interactions and the unstable self takes the New Physics beyond the moralising Victorian usage of evolution or dissipation.<sup>16</sup> Lawrence's polarities, however, "locked together in tense dynamic interplay,"<sup>17</sup> speak to a movement away from binary towards allotropic states. Seen through an allotropic lens, existence dissolves from sequential material states into the fluidity of energy states that have a rhythmic, oscillating rather than linear quality. The allotrope allows Lawrence to think of the dynamic instability of simultaneous states, not merely about self and other, even though, as Gibbons notes, this thinking is admittedly less clearly developed before 1911.<sup>18</sup> Whilst most of Lawrence's direct engagement with scientific ideas stem from the late 1910s and early 1920s, the seeds were sown in the threshold between the old and the new century that also saw popular and modernist engagements with these theories.
- 8 Lawrence is also admired by posthumanists as someone who could tie his writings to becomings, the continually unfolding process of existence.<sup>19</sup> *The White Peacock* (1911), Lawrence's first novel, can therefore serve as a pre-cursor to investigations of matter and energy that later inform, *e.g.*, the intensities of radiation permeating *The Rainbow* (1915). As matter is multiplied by the speed of light squared, it discloses the hidden stores of energy that connect the living and the non-living material of the cosmos. Energy as a cosmological constant provides the weave and weft of the existential fabric called life. Virginia Crosswhite Hyde claims that Lawrence's work could, therefore, be considered foundational to the discipline of ecocriticism, in which life expands from purely humanist concerns to the relationships of human and non-human existence.<sup>20</sup>



9 Perhaps the most lucid investigation into Lawrence's posthuman affinities to date is Jeff Wallace's *D.H. Lawrence, Science and the Posthuman*, who dedicates some space to Lawrence and *The White Peacock* under the heading of "Animals."<sup>21</sup> Wallace's focus on animality, however, largely ignores those energetic relationships in *The White Peacock* that exist beyond fauna. The novel's engagement with, what Lawrence later called in *Terra Incognita* the "rich world of contact,"<sup>22</sup> a living, dynamic relationship with something beyond the human, is, however, more than simply ecological, but a grappling with flows and intensities that link up the concerns of energetic modernism and posthumanism.

10 Energy flows in *The White Peacock* interest Lawrence beyond a simple duality of the primitive vs the civilised, or the blood-conscious vs the mind-conscious, which is often proffered as recuperation of the one against the other.<sup>23</sup> Flows help him think about the world as existing in simultaneous energy states. This investigation proposes that it is this de-centred perspective on energy flows that not only illustrate modernism's affiliation with quantum worlds, as shown specifically in Lawrence's writing of the valley of Nethermere, but Nethermere also becomes a contact zone in which Lawrence is able to examine the intersections of "human modernities with the earth's non-human species, diversities, and cosmic rhythms"<sup>24</sup> demanded by a planetary modernism.

## Vitality, not vitalism

11 As noted, the key development in thinking about energy in modernist terms is no longer merely one of waste and dissipation, but also one of radiance. The vitality of radiant energy presents a contrast to the more conservative conception of human consciousness as the highest symbol of organic vitalism. The idea of radiant energy, however, must be taken further than the nervous energy that infuses much of modernist depictions of social relationships. Vitality, therefore, relates to radiance of non-human and non-organic matter through the underlying physics of vibration. In what follows, therefore, this paper not only re-revisions modernist thinking on energy, but also heeds Fiona Becket's dictum that the "greening of modernism [...] needs Lawrence."<sup>25</sup>

12 Lawrence's powers as a writer of landscape is not undisputed. Mason (1977), for example, is highly critical of the, as he considers them, purple and lush passages in *The White Peacock*. He scolds Lawrence's tendency to lists animals, trees, flowers and birds.<sup>26</sup> Other critics suggest, however, that Lawrence's ability to present nature in minute and botanically correct detail both at the symbolic and realistic level allows his readers to experience rather than read about the landscapes.<sup>27</sup> The valley of Nethermere is depicted by Lawrence in a concrete metaphorical language, fulsome of alliteration, consonance, onomatopoeia, as well as rhythmic repetitions of gerunds and adjectives. These manipulations of prose rhythms and sound patterns and textures evoke an impression of the flux and change on a material level that connects Lawrence to the modernists' tradition. Lawrence's style reflects the idea of trespass, seen not just as a political transgression, but as a subversive action of energy flows and vibrations in a quantum world. I propose, therefore, a reading of the environment as oscillating at molecular level. As Lawrence notes later, in such discussions it is prudent to "Start with the Sun."<sup>28</sup>

## Sun

13  The sun represents the most direct idea of vibrating energy-matter. In thermodynamic thought, the network of flows between the personal and the solar construct an energetic assemblage of photon and neuron. The Sun's photonic bombardment of the young Earth, more importantly, resulted in the transformation of its primitive anoxygenic atmosphere

to one with molecular oxygen – and thus life.<sup>29</sup> This oxygenic photosynthesis is the precursor to what Marder has termed the actual energy of plants photosynthesizing.<sup>30</sup> Photosynthesis is an entanglement of photon exchange with oxygen, as light mingles with metabolic life in electrochemical gradients. The penetration of matter by photon is a trespass that overturns the Victorian energetic polarities of potency and falling-off by emphasising the circularity of energy-matter. Lawrence attempts to subvert any cause-and-effect thinking through the photo-voltaic quality of his narrative language. Its key quality is that of incandescence. In a key chapter in *The White Peacock*, the sun is at first absent, unable to light the candle-like flowers of the horse-chestnut tree (*WP* 220), yet later on it catches “in the up-licking scarlet sorrel flames (*WP* 224). Cyril observes how “[a] rosy campion flower caught the sun and shone out” (*WP* 214). The reactive, heliotropic quality of flowers is intensified, as they are made to spark, glitter and catch sunlight like fire. Radiant energy crackles with electric intensity, as well as exothermic combustion. It illuminates the moment in which photon and chlorophyll co-mingle, thus going beyond linear transformations of energy as envisaged by the Laws of Thermodynamics. Light dissolves the outlines of stable forms, and conversely forms the chromatic display of the pink orchids that “stood palely” and “yearned darkly for the sun” (*WP* 22). The electromagnetic radiation of the sun diffracts across the chromatic range of flowers throughout the novel, revealing sunlight as an energy oscillation that plays on a range of different frequencies.

14 In *The White Peacock*, the sun is, however, more often than not, setting: “The gold turns to red, the red darkens, like fire burning low” (*WP* 59). This crepuscular atmosphere has aided interpretations of the novel as belonging to an outcrop of fin-de-siècle writing. Throughout the narrative Cyril experiences “black and substantial” shadows (*WP* 136), the gloom of trees folding over everything, as well as the “chill shade” of clouds (*WP* 204) on an otherwise sunny day. In the poignant final chapter, Cyril goes down the path ‘un-sunned’. Yet trees also provide “a grateful shade” (*WP* 6), a “green shade” (*WP* 231) that nevertheless contains the intensity of the sun. At night, and in shadow, solar radiation no longer reaches the environment, but energy persists in the grey body radiation of the environment that is chiefly in the infra-red zone of the solar spectrum. The solar irradiation that has been absorbed by the vegetation is now emitted as heat. An anthropocentric reading of shadows solely as ominous symbols of fin-de-siècle degeneration omits such a nuanced presentation, and weakens our understanding of Lawrence’s idea of a multiple connections with the cosmos. The perceived deadly force of disintegration presaged by decadent movements is, in fact a dynamic interaction at the threshold that speaks to modernism’s interactions with decadent tropes.<sup>31</sup> The modernist dilemma of formal narrative uncertainty is resolved through a trespass of permeated matter that presents now as simultaneous heat and light vibrations.

15 The vibrations are perhaps most effectively inscribed in ultraviolet light, which only bees and other insects can perceive. Swarms of bees have become central to an understanding of Lawrence’s New Physics, as well as being a reminder of Eddington’s flies illustrating the insubstantiality of matter.<sup>32</sup> The insect-flower-sun assemblage in *The White Peacock* illustrates symbiotic existence in the web of life. Bees appear as a clambering unrest, intoxicated by the flowers, clinging madly and excitedly to extract the nectar and distribute pollen. They are also entangled with the sun. At the beginning of the novel, the newly-hatched bees are dependent on the sun to dry their wings (*WP* 2), and bees are mentioned anytime “hot sunshine stood as in a bowl” (*WP* 6). At Annable’s funeral “the hot sun pushed his way, new little suns dawned and blazed with real light” while the trees are “voiced with a hum of bees” (*WP* 155). The acoustic energy of bees buzzing thickens the atmosphere already viscous with the vibrations of thermal energy. At the scene of Annable’s fatal accident, the sunshine on the quarry appears “to thicken and



sweeten”, and the catkins are “murmuring with bees” (*WP* 153), serving to heighten the sense of life oscillating beneath the anthropocentric concerns of the human tragedy.

- 16 Photons are emitted when electrons are vibrated and travel as waves across space-time. Water particles also vibrate, and their captive energies create similar wave forms.

## Water

- 17 William James wrote in 1910 that the ripple of the brook symbolises descending cosmic energy.<sup>33</sup> Lawrence depicts the mill-brook in Nethermere in a scientific (rather than figurative) way to signal modernist interest in water as oceanic altered state of consciousness beyond the human.<sup>34</sup> The rhythms of the ripples and waves, the physical oddity of water, its polar molecule – all this means that energy flows even in the deceptive stillness of the millpond. It is, in Lawrence’s oxymoronic words, “intensely still” (*WP* 1), thereby hinting at the reduction of kinetic energy of water molecules that occurs when water is a liquid but is as yet not frozen into the absolute stillness of rigid crystals. As water reacts to electric charge, the chorus of clumps of H<sub>2</sub>O denotes the “tumult of life,” the potential energy of the outwardly motionless atmosphere. The seemingly nostalgic tone of “once quickened” hints also at the enduring state of energy, as the excited chemical compounds of water molecules perform an ageless, constant dance of attraction and repulsion beyond the ken of the observer. The tumult of the water becomes increasingly explicit. At first, water slides “sleepily among” stones (*WP* 6), but soon enough we can discern the “foamy race” (*WP* 11), as the mill brook was “swirling along, hurrying, talking to itself, in absorbed intent tones” (*WP* 87). The brook “fell over little cascades in its haste” (*WP* 128), and evermore “hurried along singing” (*WP* 204). The “foamy race” of a downward current conforms more happily to our ideas of kinetic energy. There is, however, a further cascade that exists at molecular level, a natural proton gradient, a “trembling instability of the balance”<sup>35</sup> that precipitated the tumult of life nearly four billion years ago.

## Air

- 18 The water also rides the air-waves and invariably drenches the atmosphere with air heavy with moisture. Often paired with unforgiving wet, the moving air leaves vegetation drenched, limp, withered and ragged. This kinetic energy of water is replicated in the turbulence of air particles which, separated by vast distances, move about with incredible velocities at molecular level. Driven by changing temperatures and pressures, its destructive forces constantly push unseen against the material world. In friction with the environment turns air into waves of vibrating particles, producing sound that “rumbled and roared hoarsely overhead” (*WP* 87). In *The White Peacock* the “booming” quality of moving air whips up the water and swishes the branches of trees (*WP* 11). Intensities are central to Lawrence’s language. The air blows fierce and heavy, as it “blanched the sycamores, and pushed the sullen pines rudely” (*WP* 220).
- 19 These elemental assemblages continue via another wave of energy, that of scent. The “sharp-scented mint” exemplifies the ripples of dynamic motion that attack in puffs of air pressure, as people move through the landscape and “checks the breath” (*WP* 11). The intensity of the brief terror of suffocation combines with the heat of the sun: “the honeysuckle had to ceased to breathe, and all the other scents were moving in the air” (*WP* 224). At the same time vegetation is felled in trembling and quivering waves, sending out chemical distress calls that we perceive as smells. The resonance of the particular frequency of cut grass vibrates in revelation of the chemical bonds that are leapfrogged by



the electrons. Hence the air above the meadow being scythed is filled with the intensities of death messages. Vegetation interacts with elemental forces, destructive and resistant at the same time, forever triumphant in its energetic vitality.

20 The weathering evident in *The White Peacock* is a symbol of elemental trespass. It is more than merely meteorological, but an entangling of air, water and material bodies and a leakage between living and non-living matter. Nethermere is a borderland of constantly shifting energy states though physical, chemical and biological weathering, in which matter is broken down in contact with the earth's atmosphere. The rotten trees and sodden vegetation foreshadow energy transformations that are more closely associated with the earth's soil.

## Soil

21 Soil develops through complex chemical and biological processes, one of which is degradation of organic matter. Cyril, for example, returns to Nethermere at the end of the novel to a sodden vegetation and the smell of cold rotting leaves, a habitual symbol of the iterative cycles of growth and decay. This type of process is another type of respiration (other than photosynthesis), namely the cellular respiration of microbial breakdown of organic matter. The earthy and the ethereal coexist in these changes in energy that infuse the land and make it fertile. Every time the flowers are becoming "brown balls of rottenness" (*WP* 32), they are teeming, at the same time, with the microbial life that sustains the environment. Lawrence wrote in 1909 how the wastefulness of life is "on the whole, beautiful,"<sup>36</sup> and the valley of Nethermere invites constant becomings, because intensities and energy states are constantly shifting. This "dance of death" (*WP* 81) is further evoked through aerial contagion of particles of moisture, scent and light. This kind of trespass is often narrowly considered representative of degenerating human relationships.<sup>37</sup> *The White Peacock* could thus be considered anti-modernist in its energetic depiction of soil ecology,<sup>38</sup> but it is also an indication of a modernist appetite for defamiliarization.

22 It hints at vegetational subversive power of infecting the political structure. Agrarian capitalism in *The White Peacock* is depicted in a state of disorder and neglect. Instead of separation, uniformity and repetition of productive farm land we encounter coagulation. A sense of paralysis is conveyed, for example when Strelley Farm garden is described as "not very productive, save of weeds, and perhaps, tremendous lank artichokes or swollen marrows" (*WP* 52). The derelict farm, similarly, is "a forest of the tallest nettles [...] choked with a growth of abnormal weeds" (*WP* 60). The repetition of "weeds" and the paralytic quality of its stranglehold on produce seemingly devalues the landscape and divides the natural world into profitable and non-profitable assets.

23 A common reading of *The White Peacock* is as a post-pastoral, in which the implied "blood-intimacy"<sup>39</sup> of the agricultural community comes into conflict with modern rational life. Described as a doomed Arcadia,<sup>40</sup> or, in Lawrence's own words, a "decorated idyll running to seed in realism,"<sup>41</sup> the pastoral pitches an idyllic rural economy against the harsh, desolate life of urban capitalist environments. Human consolation, as Bate notes, is afforded through the beauty and peacefulness of the landscape and its timeless rituals.<sup>42</sup> Wallace consequently claims Lawrence's "romantic, pantheistic sense of undistinguishable oneness with nature" makes the "restorative potential of natural beauty" desirable.<sup>43</sup> These readings, however, neglect the energetic aspect of soil ecology, in which the microbiome, and not the human agent, rules.

24 Profitable agriculture was made possible through the management of the nitrogen cycle, a microbial symbiosis in which nitrogen acts as a catalyst for biological processes and as a building block of organic life. Evidence of nitrification via man-made industrial processes

is often used to date the Anthropocene.<sup>44</sup> The metabolic rift of soil chemistry, however, makes this process difficult in wet soils. Hence the frequent references to a sodden landscape in *The White Peacock* speak to the bacteria that free nitrogen gas rather than the fertilisers that fix nitrogen for agricultural production.

## Seed

- 25 This energetic aspect of soil ecology is more than just a political statement about the decline of an 'old' agricultural world. Nethermere vibrates with the pulsating energy of a star, and the valley is racked with a vitality that thrives on sexual energies (WP 28) contained within the lamina of the bulb. Orchids are, for example, "stunted with harsh upbringing," yet they remain "magnificent in their powerful colouring, crushing the pallid lady smocks, washed-out wild gillivers" (WP 220). The energy extolled on their growth is extended manifold in their sexual exuberance, which seems at first to indicate nature off balance. It riffs on the Victorian notion of "waste" and recalibrates it into the vitality of e.g., the bulb, storage of recreational powers, erupting into a conflagration of vitality (WP 53).<sup>45</sup>
- 26 Everywhere we are reminded of the heavy growth that "chained" the environment into perceived paralysis (WP 206). Strelley Mill garden, for example, produces a final yield of "heavy out-reaching boughs of red and gold" cherries, and immense vegetables that lay prostrate, heavy crop of oats, with heads of grain "weighted with drops of gold" (WP 250). Lawrence evokes the sexual excess of vegetal life in threatening terms, by means of abnormal, swollen, tremendous, splendid and immense fruit. The espalier tree in Strelley Mill garden, for example, yields a treasure of plums, "great mist-bloomed, crimson treasures, splendid globes" that "fell heavily, thudding down among the immense rhubarb leaves below" (WP 53). The perceived lack of "productiveness" is, therefore, belied by the inhuman but superb proportions of the produce.
- 27 Sexual energy, bringing forth life in the guise of fruit and seed, is coupled with the energetic conflagration of decomposition. The elm tree is choked by ivy, the wood-pigeon has tumbled dead from a branch, and the saxifrage is silently devoured by snails. The footsteps of human visitors crush the vegetation. They do not notice the life at microscopic level, where "the little grey lichens held up ruby balls to us unnoticed" (WP 210). Lawrence seemingly evokes the melancholic idea of the pointlessness of existence: "What did it matter, when all the great red apples were being shaken from the tree to be left to rot" (WP 210). This seeming indifference, Bate notes, results in a demoralising bleakness of existence.<sup>46</sup> But it is only the human perspective that speaks of spoil, rot and degradation. Viewed from a posthumanist perspective, nature throbs with energy, as chemical reactions dissolve the fruit for energy and growth, the elm sends forth its multitudinous seed and the woodpigeon quickly becomes nurturing organic matter.
- 28 Lawrence's environment is thus transformed beyond the picturesque or poetic into a vital playground of microbial life. It is not a childlike vision of mystical *super*-naturalness and strangeness, but instead a constant becoming that destabilises humanity's lordship. It is a modernist celebration of radiant energy in the form of resonance. The shifting forms of energy – kinetic, mechanical, potential – that ultimately defaults on modern consumerist and capitalist conceptions of energy as resource, is joined by the electro-chemical processes that have been found to generate electric fields in organisms.<sup>47</sup> The excitability of receptors in biological cells expresses itself as a vibration that communicates across the electric layer penetrating the earth's crust. The whole planetary surface acts as an electro-chemical power plant, as electric charges diffract in waves across the molecular interface of the bio- and the lithosphere. Hence even the lithosphere is irrefutably alive in various energy states.



# Stone

- 29 The earth's crust, a thin layer of rock, topped with an even thinner layer of soil, interacts most widely with human activity in the form of agriculture, and also through a "culture of extractivism."<sup>48</sup> This is considered a continuation of the so-called "Great Acceleration" facilitated by the exploitation of energy resources referencing the Anthropocene, or, as Jason Moore termed it, the "Capitalocene."<sup>49</sup> Energy matter, if perceived a cultural commodity, is simply dead stuff to be consumed. This is most directly exemplified by coal mining, with its double bind of class and empire. In terms of its geology, Nottinghamshire is most celebrated, of course, for its extensive carboniferous deposits of coal. It is a highly active and energy-rich environment, in which earth-movements "elevated the strata and at the same time buckled them up into a series of ridges [...] and intervening depressions."<sup>50</sup> Its geology tells the story of the upheavals of distant ages, in which vegetation has turned to coal through enormous pressures. The coal measures have in turn been buried in hundreds of feet of alluvium, the sandy deposits that speak of distant floods, and the Permian sandstone in turn carved by the passage of rivers that have deposited earth, sand and gravel that is quarried in the Nottingham region. Lawrence thus responds in a nuanced way to this rivering of time, in which landscape's political function has a deeper significance than the overt economic affordances of a new rural order. This extended political function is encased in an awareness of the interconnectedness of energy flows driven by the vast sway of the earth's centre.
- 30 The vitality that interests Lawrence so profoundly is, therefore, not the restless energy of modern life, which finds its common ontological expression in coal-fuelled, electrified urban environments, but an inherent actual energy that connects the organic and the nonorganic. His references to the pit and the glare of the iron works on the margins of Nethermere are nods to energy as a resource to be extracted and exploited. What follows, logically, is the idea of depletion and degradation – all noted pastoral tropes in alliance with the encroaching symbols of the industrial age. But energy is not only simply something that is harvested, consumed and exhausted, but an actual spontaneous vitality inherent in the nonorganic universe. An emphasis on the materiality of place, scoping the topographic and geographic realities of the changing landscape, brings us to an understanding of how energy flows exist in the world as matter. The spirit of place, which Lawrence later tellingly evokes as a "vibration",<sup>51</sup> references the kinetic energy waves inherent in the earth.
- 31 Sandstone and coal stand at the threshold of organic and nonorganic demarcations. The "vibrations" Lawrence describes are literal, as coal deposits shift, a geomorphic movement that intensifies with the constant mining that is ongoing in the Anthropocene. The landscape of Nottinghamshire is thus gradually being "undermined" and riven with energy oscillations that penetrate perceptibly from deep earth to the surface rock. The environment vibrates with the energy transfers of human and nonhuman, organic and nonorganic work. The vibrations of crystalline structures straining to resume their interrupted shape account for the imperceptible movements of rocks and metals, in which energy builds up only to be released in the catastrophic avalanche of rocks that bury Annable, who has rushed towards becoming-imperceptible.
- 32 Deleuze and Guattari write that the imperceptible is the immanent end of becoming, its "cosmic formula."<sup>52</sup> The idea is that, ultimately, we slip between our material being into an undefinable particle existence, a haecceity, in which thresholds are crossed. When Cyril happens upon Annable buried under stones, he only perceives "a pile of stones and earth and crushed vegetation" (*WP* 153). Hence Annable has become crushed lithology, a becoming-imperceptible through movement. The Einsteinian revolution has dissociated solidity from absolute form, hence, as Rodowick (1997) notes, "a stone is not a solid object, but a mass that vibrates."<sup>53</sup>



33 Matter, often perceived to be inert, waiting for “formation” via the imposition of energy, is opposed to the symbioses of organisms and the electro-chemical processes that bind them. Tim Ingold (2013) argues against this form-receiving ideology and for a morphogenic notion of form-taking.<sup>54</sup> Matter is merely a stoppage in the inherent flow that creates a particular shape, hence Annable has stopped the flow of the rock, and in the process shaped his own body into the matter. Matter is thus actively involved in flow and becoming, and this form-generating growth is linked to organic growth. It questions notions of the solid physical obduracy of matter and introduces ideas of “haecceities as unformed particles, a swarm.”<sup>55</sup> This quantum leap at a moment of crisis and transition strikes at the core of modernism’s ontological problem.<sup>56</sup> The stones dislodged, the body displaced, both merge in processes that have also formed the precarious Permian sandstone in deep time. Annable’s imperceptibility underneath the pile of stones is aggregated with the high-intensity energy that fills the atmosphere with sounds, sparks and glows and heavy scents (*WP* 153).

## Trespass and Renewal

34 Both light, air and water, photon and polar molecule, as well as the microbiome of the soil and the lithography of the landscape, refer to a world without clearly defined boundaries. Boundary making is a result of the Anthropocene, as the material landscape is acquired, separated, enclosed and surveilled. This back history of forced expulsions and dispossessions in the countryside brought about the cherished “wildernesses” of Romantic imagination. Nottinghamshire is famed for its forests and established ducal seats, with parks and woodlands that are, in fact, the socio-historical result of closed off real-estate. The tension between land ownership and land usage reverberates in *The White Peacock*, and the idea of “trespass” features prominently. Annable, the gamekeeper, is introduced to Nethermere to persecutes trespassers, but this moral obligation only applies to human transgressors. In many instances, trespass is enacted by non-human life, and simultaneously prevents human access. The “great lilac-bush that had once guarded the porch now almost blocked the doorway” (*WP* 2). In the controversial chapter “Shadows in Spring.” Cyril goes to meet Annable at the abandoned church, where grass “overgrew the threshold” (*WP* 147), and a staircase “was filled with ivy and rambling roses – impassable” (*WP* 148). This vibrational communication of the substrate illustrates the agency of non-human matter.

35 Energy flows, in which the incessant movements of electrons and protons in quantum waves through permeable membranes sidestep a totalising ownership of the material environment, allow for a more dynamic understanding of trespass. One energy that is resisted in the novel is, therefore, that of a centrifugal movement towards separation, represented by the transformation of natural boundaries into frontiers. The whole valley of Nethermere is, in fact, encircled by a “dishevelled border-land” (*WP* 46), which depicts not just a territorial fusion that fertilises new understandings about the “other” through physical encounters, but a frontier land that can shock into renewal. The idea of “trespassing” is, therefore, performed as a subversive practice, which re-wilds the farmed environment after the dispersal of the tenant-farmers. Here, work is done continuously in overcoming energy barriers. It emerges as an in-betweenness of the boundary-states of allowed/forbidden significant of a posthuman deterritorialised sensibility.

36 In *The White Peacock*, renewal comes about through permeation. The term “becoming” signals the shifting and fluid flows of intensities,<sup>57</sup> oscillating back and forth between contact points. Deleuze and Guattari write in *A Thousand Plateaus*: “A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation.”<sup>58</sup> It is a coexistence, a symbiosis – a hybridity that neither extinguishes nor creates something else



or new, but already holds the multiplicitous possibilities of becoming-other within. It is a becoming on the molecular plane, a shifting of energies across porous matter. The allotropic states of water molecules, for example, become more energetic in gaseous form. Hence, although water vapour, *e.g.* in the form of mist, is often perceived to be still and diaphanous, it enacts a violent dynamic quality that outshines its solid state. Hence, in *The White Peacock*, mist “licked and wreathed up the shores” (WP 193) and swathed the hedges. This watery threshold, as Michelucci terms it,<sup>59</sup> is not simply a reminder of the existence of an “other,” but a place of becoming-other. The environment at and around Nethermere is, therefore, not merely an allegory for human vanity and/or happiness, but a consciousness that exists in an allotropic state of becoming.

- 37 In Nethermere, light, water, air, earth and stone are “cosmogonic” elements separated at a threshold of the finite and the infinite.<sup>60</sup> Light is particle and wave, oscillating in the borderland of the shadows and penetrating the green chlorophyll, itself a pigment borderland of animal and vegetal life. Water, a “non-place,” is in its pure state hostile to life, but at the same time it is the cradle of life. It infiltrates Nethermere as marsh and swamp, and the air as mist. It is the ultimate energy store of proton-rich and proton-poor molecules, triggering the proton waterfall of potential energy. The air in Nethermere is full of scents and contagions that are carried on the turbulences and penetrate all corners. The earth is rich with microbial activity, in which life thrives and communicates in electro-chemical waves across the earth’s crust. These vibrations speak to the form-giving nature of energetic matter, rather than to a morphogenetic passivity. In terms of temporal rather than spatial boundaries, *The White Peacock* refers more heavily to autumn and spring than to other seasons, as this is the time when the equinox refutes any ascendancy of day over night – or vice versa. These circannual oscillations of seasonality delineate a sensitivity to photoperiodic changes, as the light-energy levels are depicted as a flat iteration of liminal seasons.

## Inscribing the landscape

- 38 As mentioned, modernist energy lives not just in content, but also in form of literary production and provides us with new understandings of time and space. Lawrence’s rhythmic repetitions that foreground a movement back and forth through recessive planes, cosmic periods of peri- and aphelion, natural diurnal and seasonal rhythms, are translated into trancelike, incantatory micro-rhythms of, *e.g.*, the blood pumping through the body. Lawrence inscribes the environment by employing what may be termed an energetic “green language,” an eclectic of narrative power that goes beyond the consensus of metaphor. It is not a derivative language that reduces the landscape to a set of dichotomies but a Derridean “double gesture [...] to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment.”<sup>61</sup> It uses constant shifts between micro-and macro-perspectives to decentre the human point of view. More than that, however, it vibrates as a free energy that regulates mental energy in the form of sensation.
- 39 Lawrence’s use of “green” language is, therefore, not just about compensatory and restorative qualities of nature, but about erasing the demarcation between the human and the natural in the larger cycles of change often referred to as “deep time.”<sup>62</sup> His is a modernist, animistic language that undoes the human as the main signifier.<sup>63</sup> Hence, Lawrence’s geological language mimics the subtle movements of the earth as well as the quick movements of the organic rhythms. In epiphanic moments and shifts in perspectives that veer between the panoramic and the microscopic, “deep time” becomes traceable, although such shifts in narrative points of view caused critics to comment Lawrence’s supposed “bungling” of the *White Peacock*.<sup>64</sup>



40 *The White Peacock* is a novel about shivers of energy that cross between organic and nonorganic, human and nonhuman. Lawrence's language deterritorialises energy currents that leak everywhere in the narrative. For example, the energy of organic decay, illustrated in George Saxton's demise, speaks to the contagion immanent in the cosmos. The adjectival onslaught of "soft," "pale," "rotten" and "clammy" (WP 324) exploits the interplay between the material and social. Paired with "a flow of thick, sweet sunshine" that "drifts" on a "dim afternoon" past George "not touching him" however, the scene signals shifts between solid and liquid that flouts all rules or materiality. It replays the scene of Annable's death, when sunshine also appears "to thicken and sweeten" (WP 153).

41 This viscosity of the atmosphere causes alarm and triggers a revulsion of touch visible in Cyril's haptic gaze. The air seems to touch us back in a mental image of corruption, illustrated by the dimness of the light affecting our vision, but also by the sweetness attacking our olfactory receptors. Such language amply illustrates why Lawrence is considered an "ultimate pre-postmodernist" by Sandra Gilbert,<sup>65</sup> who enacts the complex relationships between the characters in the story without foregrounding them as the important reference points from which the narrative must be understood. Overt references in *The White Peacock* to the "holy communion of pure wild things" (WP 129) must not be reduced to an anthropocentric yearning for religious communion, but as a factual statement that communion is, and will always be, there – in the Energy F/flows that envelop the cosmos and all matter within.

## Notes

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4 Mark Morrisson, "Why Modernist Studies and Science Studies Need Each Other," in *Modernism/modernity* 9.4 (2002): 675- 682. See also Serpil Oppermann, "Quantum Physics and Literature: How they meet the Universe Halfway," in *Anglia* 133.1, 2015, 87-104 (91).

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6 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (1896). (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911), 276.

7 Michael Whitworth, *Einstein's Wake: Relativity, Metaphor and Modernist Literature*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16.

8 Sam Halliday, "Electricity and Homosexuality: from 19<sup>th</sup>-century American Sexual Health Literature to D.H. Lawrence," in *Centaurus* 57, 2015, 212-228 (224).

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14 Cf. Charles Glicksberg, "D.H. Lawrence and Science," in *The Scientific Monthly* 73.2 (1951), 99-104 (104).

15 W.M. Verhoeven, "D.H. Lawrence's Duality Concept in *The White Peacock*," in *Neophilologus* 69 (1985), 294-317.



16 Whitworth, 59.

17 Hayes, 90.

18 Thomas Gibbons, "Allotropic States' and 'Fiddle-Bow': D.H. Lawrence's Occult Sources," in *Notes & Queries* 35.3 (1988), 338-341 (339).

19 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 244.

20 Virginia Crosswhite Hyde, "Terra Incognita': D.H. Lawrence at the Frontiers," in "Terra Incognita": *D.H. Lawrence at the Frontiers*. Eds Virginia Crosswhite Hyde and Earl G. Ingersoll (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), 13-25 (20).

21 Jeff Wallace, *D.H. Lawrence, Science and the Posthuman* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

22 *The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1994), 557.

23 Cf. Carrie Rohman, *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 101.

24 Friedman, 493.

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27 E.g. Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, *The Green Cabinet: Theocritus and the European Pastoral Lyric*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). Gavriel Ben-Ephraim describes Lawrence's nature descriptions as "superlative." "The Pastoral Fallacy: Tale and Teller in D.H. Lawrence's, *The White Peacock*," in *The Literary Review* 19.4. (1976), 406-31 (431).

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31 Cf. Kate Hext and Alex Murray, eds. *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019).

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33 Letter to Henry Adams, 26 June 1910. *The Letters of William James: Two Volumes Combined* (New York: Cosimo, 2008), 347.

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- 44 Cf. Jayant M. Modak, "Haber Process for Ammonia Synthesis," in *Resonance* 16.12.2011, 1159-1167.
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- 58 *Thousand Plateaus*, 323.
- 59 Stefania Michelucci, *Space and Place in the Works of D.H. Lawrence* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2002), 12.
- 60 Michelucci, 28-9.
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- 64 See e.g. Robert Scholes, *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 279.
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## ***Pour citer cet article***

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