

A Playful Novel of Reprise:

An Ecofeminist Reading of *Kangaroo*

[Draft of an essay published in the *Journal of D.H. Lawrence Studies*, Vol 3 No 2 (2013), pp. 109-119.]

Terry Gifford

“If you call the land a bride, she’s the sort of bride not many of us are willing to tackle.” (K 77)

Despite what Neil Roberts calls “its odd reputation as a blood-dimmed fascist polemic”,¹ *Kangaroo* is a novel with a sense of humour that is also returning to some of the most complex issues in Lawrence’s previous work in the relaxed distancing context of an Australian novel. Such issues include: the means of social change; alternative idealisms; what social role, if any, the concerned individual should have; the practice of “star-polarity”; and the ultimate nature of Lawrence’s individual quest. To regard this as a playful novel of reprise, whether of Lawrence’s break with Bertrand Russell,² or Italian idealist politics,³ or *Women in Love*’s tensions of individuation (man-woman, man-man, social-individual), is to be able to engage fully with its shifting dialogic strategy.⁴ This playfulness underpins what Roberts calls a “narrative of contingency”,⁵ what Michael Bell calls Somers’ “parallel worlds” of social and travel narratives,⁶ or what David Ellis describes as “the illusion that what his protagonists experience is being recorded as it occurs”.⁷ The playful dialogic strategy of the narrative mode enables a reprise of themes to be both distanced by and tested against the new experience of place during the six weeks of the novel’s

composition in the very house that is the centre of the novel itself, “Wyewurk” in Thirroul that in the novel is “Coo-ee” in “Mullumbimby”.

It is perfectly possible to understand that Somers’ second walk into the bush is slightly more positive (“unapproachable”, “mystery”: *K* 177) than his first (“horrid”, “terror”: *K* 14) because Lawrence himself had become more familiar with what was at first so frighteningly alienating, or that Lawrence’s final botanising walk into the bush gets incorporated into the novel’s final chapter because the novel gives the impression of being a “narrative of contingency” as Roberts calls it. On the other hand, Somers’ final visit to the dying Kangaroo is followed by images of real “gentle” kangaroos at the Zoo (“Such a married couple!”) in a mode that is clearly more than one of contingency (*K* 339-40). With their “Australian eyes” they symbolise the continent for Somers, evoking in him not only “a dark, animal tenderness”, but “another sort of consciousness, deeper than human”. A dialogic strategy allows for multiple fictional modes and a variety of “non-fictional” modes to work in relation to the themes in this novel in a more purposefully playful manner than the conventionally understood notion of a “travel narrative” working *against* a “political plot” in *Kangaroo*. More than an almost accidental “resistance to those elements in the novel that do show evidence of forethought and plotting”,⁸ the role of land, in particular, acts as both distancing and testing of notions explicitly debated in the “political plot” so as to render the latter inadequate without a full engagement with the former. That is, relations between human beings (man-woman, man-man, social-individual) require, in Australia especially, to be understood in terms of their relationship with land. Inevitably, this must become a gendered understanding and this essay seeks to explore the dialogue between land, gender and the social issues in *Kangaroo*.⁹

In Annette Kolodny's classic work *The Lay of the Land* she recognises that the metaphor of "the land-as-woman" in American literature, more than simply being a transposition of Old World pastoral discourse into New World writing, was actually an archetype from a "universal grammar" of writing about land.¹⁰ In *Kangaroo* the New World land is a female of a distinctly anti-pastoral cast, as is established while Harriet and Richard Lovatt Somers are settling into their new home. It is the Australian Jack's observation that his countrymen "treat the country more like a woman they pick up on the streets than a bride, to my thinking" (*K* 77). Harriet says that she doubts whether, in that case, she could love an Australian. In reply Jack makes the point which becomes a challenge that Lawrence sets for his narrator to explore in *Kangaroo*: "But it's no good loving Australia if you can't love the Australian" (*K* 78). Perceptions of land and people, Australia and Australians, are inextricable, as Somers emphasises when he offers a construction of Australian land that appears to be without human history and certainly not male in character: "'It always seems to me,' said Somers, 'that somebody will have to water Australia with their blood before it's a real man's country'" (*K* 78). Indeed, he later comes to feel that this struggle with the bush has produced only men who are "hollow stalks": "'They're marvellous and manly and independent and all that, outside. But inside, they *are* not. When they're *quite* alone, they don't exist'" (*K* 131). On the other hand, Somers is also tempted, for a while, to consider that the qualities the land gives the people in Australia might offer an opportunity for a new kind of society:

Yet Australia, the wonderful, lonely Australia, with her seven million people only – it might begin here. And the Australians, so queer, so absent, as it were,

leaving themselves out all the time – they might be capable of a beautiful unselfishness and steadfastness of purpose. (K 93)

In fact, Lawrence begins to use negatively the trope of Jack's "far-offness" by which people are assumed to have developed their characteristic "absence" from the land: "And he seemed to become more Australian and apathetic every week. The great indifference, the darkness of the fern-world, upon his mind" (K 178).

Thus while the "fern-world" of the bush is an ancient pre-human one, it has its effect upon the psyche of those who live in spaces cleared from it, as in Thirroul or, indeed, Sydney. (The tree-fern, that forms a darkening canopy well above head-height, is powerfully suggestive of primeval forest and today abuts the gardens of the western side of Thirroul, as it does the edges of modern Manly.) Lawrence is alert to the subtle influence of the bush on those who seek to develop a society that is distinctively of their land, an Australian form of society that is the subject of the political debate in the novel. That this debate is conducted by males, in the case of the Diggers to the deliberate exclusion of women, and that the land is associated with the female early in the novel, indicates that discourses of land, gender and society are closely intertwined in *Kangaroo*. Indeed, the dialogic play between them creates an exhilarating, if ultimately flawed novel that is unique in Lawrence's *oeuvre* for its tonal shifts between irony and seriousness in dealing with thematic shifts between the pre-cultural presence of land and the intense cultural debates about ideals and social strategies for change; between the male desire for mates and the need for the female; between the undercutting female knowingness and the male drive for idealistic contribution; between finding a social role and being independently alone; and ultimately between where the (upper) democratic impulse leads and where the (lower)

dark gods lead in their parallel vaguenesses of formulation and questing drives. For an example of how Lawrence makes the tonal shifts that are also thematic shifts in the playful dialogics of this novel one might consider the “Kangaroo” chapter. Here one can see how themes are both distanced by, and tested against, the new experience of place.

It is true that this sense of newness produces a narrator who is a “travelling observer”, as Neil Roberts puts it, and that the “most contingent detail is defamiliarised and foregrounded” but “resists, as much as the bush, incorporation into Somers’ ‘world’”.¹¹ However, the function of such detail to distance and test the novel’s themes should not be characterised as “contingent”. An apparent tone of reportage can disguise the function of such detail as more than “thematically significant in themselves” and certainly not necessarily “working *against* other tendencies in the novel” as Roberts suggests.¹² In the “Kangaroo” chapter this material and tone are more artfully used by the novelist than Roberts’ comments might have us believe.¹³ Indeed, in the novel’s second chapter, an apparent “traveller’s observation” significantly indicates the mechanism by which Australians are given their sense of their distinctive place:

This was a Sunday afternoon – but with none of the surfeited dreariness of English Sunday afternoons. It was still a raw loose world. All Sydney would be out by the sea or in the bush, a roving, unbroken world. (*K* 28)

The home of the Somers in Mullumbimby will be significantly affected by being situated between the dual presences of the sea and the bush, with both actually in view at the same time as the bush rises to the “Matlock Tor” above the town. (The Thirroul

Lawrence scholar, Joe Davis, points out that Lawrence chose to largely omit the presence of the collieries, the brick and coke works and the railway depot from the novel.)¹⁴ In the “Kangaroo” chapter the novelist frames the first meeting of Somers and Kangaroo, and its subsequent discussion by Harriet and Jack, by images of the sea. The distanced “travelling observer” reference to the sea at the opening of the chapter belies its role as providing a test for Somers’ reflections at its conclusion. Harriet and Richard hear the sea all the time (as did Lawrence whilst writing the novel), but “In Sydney itself, there is no sea” (*K* 103) we are told as the narrator gets Somers from Mullumbimby to Sydney for his urban meeting with Kangaroo. The associations Somers/rural/sea and Kangaroo/urban/no-sea are subliminally established for the reader. Equally significantly, Harriet is excluded from this meeting.

Kangaroo preaches a philosophy of Love expressed by reference to regeneration in nature: fire, seeds, phoenix, “the creation of song and beauty and lovely gesture” throughout the natural world (*K* 132-3). He even draws upon images of natural flux, ebbs and flows, natural “withering” and “new urges” of life (*K* 113). This might be attractive to Somers since Lawrence puts his own iconic images in the mouth of Kangaroo. But Kangaroo’s insistence on a patriarchal form of new social life (also later attractive to Somers in a different form) indicates that in his abstract notion of Love he does not understand ecology. It is Harriet who, in discussion with Kangaroo, points out that her husband’s discussions with him have taken place with her permission (“I let him do as he likes”). Kangaroo quotes the New Testament: “Wonderful woman! Even the wind bloweth where it listeth”. The tone here is uneasy, bantering, playful indeed, in the sparring manner that Lawrence knows so well. “The wind has permission too,” says Harriet, teaching him the basics of ecology. “Everything goes by permission of something else in this world” (*K* 120).

Against this subversive insight (“She was being her most annoying”) one might test the content of the tonal shifts that follow it in the circular monologue of Somers’ “small voice” at the back of his mind, in the row between Harriet and Richard that ends in laughter, in the heavily ironic letter Harriet writes to Kangaroo (“I shall make myself into a Fire Brigade, because I am sure you will be kindling fires all over everywhere ...” [K 124]), and finally in Somers’ contemplation of the sea back at Mullumbimby that concludes the chapter:

Man is also a fierce and fish-cold devil, in his hour, filled with cold fury of desire to get away from the cloy of human life altogether, not into death, but into that icily self-sufficient vigour of a fish. (K 125)

The tempting escapism of this is the beginning of a retreat into an isolated individualism that leads towards the dark gods of the bush and another kind of temptation that is rather more complex in that it includes and enhances his relationship with Harriet.

In a previous essay on *The Boy in the Bush* Izabel Brandão and I concluded that that novel “points towards the need for some kind of harmonious encounter between human and non-human as necessary for the harmonious relationship between men and women”.¹⁵ In that novel the bush is the major location for such encounters. But the role of the bush in the earlier novel, *Kangaroo*, is a shifting one that is consistent with the novel’s dialogic mode. The shifts in Somers’ sense of the bush from terror to mystery to botanical wonder (described with remarkable “precision and sensitivity” the Cambridge editor points out [K xxxiv]) has already been mentioned, as has its perpetual influence upon Australians in the sense that Somers is aware of it

as he first stands facing the shore outside “Coo-ee” with “the whole of vast Australia lying behind him flat and open to the sky” (*K* 88). Despite Somers’ different experiences of the bush, it never loses its intimidating character. Jaz points out to Somers a common experience for some Australians: “They want to turn bushrangers for six months, and then they get frightened of themselves, and come back and want to be good citizens” (*K* 203). For Somers the “old, saurian torpor” (*K* 178) induced by the bush could result in permanent apathy and indifference, or it could produce “an indifference with a deep flow of loose energy beneath it, ready to break out like a geyser” (*K* 181). The image of the volcano, both physical and social revolutionary, that runs through the novel and gives one chapter its title, is another potential connection between land and people in Australia.

The culture of the Celts that is celebrated in the “Nightmare” chapter and is “present” in Australia in the Cornishman Jaz – William James Trewhella – represents for Somers an ancient pre-Christian connection with the natural world: “They are nearer to the magic of the dark world” (*K* 206). Because Lawrence knows nothing of Aboriginal culture,¹⁶ the bush carries in the novel the potential for such a revolutionary return to the dark gods, always the opposite of Somers’ “own white world, his own machine-consciousness” (*K* 238). The social changes Somers would want are at times expressed in terms surprisingly similar to those of Kangaroo: “Not the tuppenny social world of present mankind: but a genuine world, full of life and eternal creative surprises, including of course destructive surprises: since destruction is part of creation” (*K* 150). But Kangaroo will not embrace destructiveness as a necessary first stage to social revolution, and Somers himself moves away from the social altogether into an increasing tendency to isolate himself in the world of the dark gods associated with the bush and enacted in ancient Cornish culture. Ultimately the

vagueness of Lawrence's notion defeats him in this novel and he, like Somers, has to leave Australia dissatisfied in a manner that can't be satisfactorily attributed to "the inversion of the seasons in his blood" (*K* 260). The novel, for the writer, the narrator and the central character, has, playfully, played itself out when Chapter XV begins: "Chapter follows chapter, and nothing doing" (*K* 284).¹⁷ But in the process of having Somers talk to himself about this final alternative to the Love philosophy of Kangaroo and the socialism of Willie Struthers, Lawrence briefly explores the role of the practice of *Women in Love's* notion of "star-polarity" (*WL* 201) in Somers' conception of commitment to the dark gods.

From the beginning both Harriet and Richard know instinctively that cutting her out of the political debate is unsustainable. Harriet reflects that, "If their marriage was a real thing, then anything very serious was her matter as much as his, surely" (*K* 95). Richard has a dream in which he is horrified at his rejection of a face that is not only both his wife and his mother, but also "his sister and girls he had known when he was younger" (*K* 96). Later in the novel, when Somers is searching for a way to get clear of the competing ideas for saving humanity, he turns to imagining what a life would be under the influence of "the old dark gods". This train of thought leads him to the realisation that the source of this power is "First to the unutterable dark of God [...] Then to that utterable and sometimes very loud dark of that woman Harriet":

I must admit that only the dark God in her fighting with my white idealism has got me so clear: and that only the dark God in her answering the dark God in me has got my soul heavy and fecund with a new sort of infant. (*K* 266-7)

Later still, in the dialogic mode of this novel, Somers renounces this kind of discourse and “his frantic struggles”: “He was a preacher and a blatherer, and he hated himself for it” (K 272). Nevertheless, the kind of individualistic aloneness that the escapist Somers desires after his disengagement with politics is challenged and qualified by the role of Harriet in his life, as is registered in the satirical dialogue Somers imagines with a woman: “‘My dear young lady, let me entreat you, be alone, only be alone.’ ‘Oh, Mr Somers, I should love to, if you’d hold my hand’” (K 282). The dynamic, unstable, yet sustaining relationship between woman and land and man is shown in this novel to be inescapable, yet Somers wants, at the end, to escape these commitments.

While writing this novel Lawrence himself was on his way, in an easterly direction, towards an engagement with native Americans and their dark gods that would feature more fully in *The Plumed Serpent* and later essays and stories. In a sense, Lawrence admits the intrinsic paradox of that quest in Jaz’s playful taunt in response to another last turn in Somers’ position in relation to Australia, had he stayed: “‘I’d want to go back in the bush near one of the little townships. It’s like wanting a woman, Jaz. I want it.’” How Lawrence must have laughed a carnivalesque laughter, in the days before it was Bakhtinian to do so, when he playfully wrote Jaz’s insight into Somers:

“You won’t give in to the women, and Australia is like a woman to you.” [...]

“Why Mr Somers!” laughed Jaz; “seems to me you just go round the world looking for things you’re not going to give in to.” (K 348)

¹ Roberts, Neil, *D. H. Lawrence, Travel and Cultural Difference* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 61. A current example of the novel's 'odd reputation' from the English ecocritic Greg Garrard, published in an Australian journal, dismisses the novel as an 'absurd and tiresome attempt' at 'casual racial stereotyping' and 'extreme biophilia'. Garrard not only misses the humour and tonal shifts in the novel, but crucially misses the role of the land and sea in critiquing the larger political arguments (Greg Garrard, 'Nietzsche *contra* Lawrence: How to be True to the Earth', *Colloquy*, No 12, November 2006, 21). Keith Sagar has pointed out to me that racial stereotyping is precisely the point for Lawrence who believed that people developed to fit the conditions of their land (per. com.), as did Ruskin in observing that cultures can be differentiated by their environmental conditions (Terry Gifford, 'Conclusion' in Michael Wheeler (ed.) *Ruskin and Environment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 191).

² Keith Sagar, *The Art of D. H. Lawrence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 132.

³ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴ Neil Roberts convincingly establishes the dialogic nature of this novel (Roberts 15). There is much that could be said about Marxist dialectics and Bakhtinian dialogics in relation to *Kangaroo*. In rejecting the dialectical notion of thesis met by counter-thesis as the mode of the novel, I prefer the more improvisational, playful, reflexive Bakhtinian notion that "every utterance is the product of the interaction between speakers and the product of a broader context of the whole complex social situation in which the utterance emerges" (Patrick Murphy, *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 10). For the distinction between dialectics and dialogics see *Ibid.*, 167-175.

⁵ Roberts 60-73.

⁶ Michael Bell, *D. H. Lawrence: Language and Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 159-60.

⁷ David Ellis, *D. H. Lawrence: Dying Game: 1922-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 42.

⁸ Roberts 64.

⁹ For an example of the tendency to discuss the political paradoxes of the novel, however astutely, without reference to the presence of land or gender, see Philip Skelton, "A Slobbery Affair" and "Stinking Mongrelism": Individualism, Postmodernity and D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo*, *English Studies*, 84:6, 2003, 545-557.

¹⁰ Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 150.

¹¹ Roberts 64.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Since we are dealing with what Lawrence himself called "art-speech" it is reasonable to suppose an artfulness in the appearance of a "narrative of contingency" here. In her book on Lawrence, Izabel Brandão puts it thus: "A poet can only reveal to us a portion of reality, i.e., *his/her* own reality. It doesn't matter whether on the surface it seems to be the opposite of what reality truly is. (This is what might be called the writer's *poetic* reality.)" (Izabel Brandão, *A Imaginação do Feminino Segundo D. H. Lawrence* (Maceió: Edufal, 1999), 35, author's own unpublished translation).

¹⁴ Joseph Davis, *D. H. Lawrence at Thirroul* (Sydney: Collins, 1989), 170. I am grateful to Joe Davis for his tour of Thirroul and to his family for their lively hospitality.

¹⁵ Izabel Brandão and Terry Gifford, 'The Boy in the Bush: Lawrence, Land and Gender in Australia', *Études Lawrenciennes*, No 32, 2005, 178.

¹⁶ Christopher Pollnitz points out that that Lawrence admits that he "never saw a black boy except in the streets of Sydney" (Christopher Pollnitz, 'Homosexuality, Violence and Belonging in *Kangaroo*', *The Journal of the D.H. Lawrence Society*, 2004-2005, 30). Pollnitz argues that one form of questioning in *Kangaroo* Lawrence "– how ex-European Australians can or can't relate to the Australian continent, in Lawrence's terms to the aboriginal 'spirit of place' – is an aspect of the novel that, far from dating, has become more urgent in the debate, ongoing since the late 1960s, about Aboriginal spirituality and land rights. Lawrence's anticipation of such issues in *Kangaroo* is a sign that the Australia he depicts is not a complacently colonial nation, but one emerging into uncertain post-colonial autonomy" (*Ibid.*, 13).

¹⁷ Here is an amusingly playful example of Bakhtin's notion of "the ability of the novel to criticise itself" (Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Michael Holquist and Carl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 6).