

# J·D·H·L·S

Journal of D. H. Lawrence Studies

## Citation details

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

Author: Jeff Wallace

Source: *Journal of the D. H. Lawrence Society*, vol. 5.2 (2019)

Pages: 194–8

Copyright: individual author and the D. H. Lawrence Society.  
Quotations from Lawrence's works © The Estate of Frieda Lawrence Ravagli. Extracts and poems from various publications by D. H. Lawrence reprinted by permission of Pollinger Limited ([www.pollingerltd.com](http://www.pollingerltd.com)) on behalf of the Estate of Frieda Lawrence Ravagli.

**A Publication of the  
D. H. Lawrence Society of Great Britain**

novels, stories, and poems. Take Anna Brangwen's sewing machine, for example, in *The Rainbow*. Anna Lensky marries Will Brangwen in December 1882. After a delirious honeymoon, they fight and make up repeatedly as they search for equilibrium. Since the first electrically-powered machines did not come onto the market until the late 1880s, Anna's would have been hand-cranked, or driven by a treadle. Crank or drive it she certainly does, making it start and stutter and buzz in a gesture of defiance, at once bodily and technological, to which Will has no answer (R 152). The sewing machine matters intensely to Anna. It is her weapon of choice. A synecdoche for industrial modernity? I don't think so.

**Carrie Rohman, *Choreographies of the Living: Bioaesthetics in Literature, Art, and Performance*.**

**New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.**

**Pp xv + 178. £23.99 (paperback). ISBN: 9780190604417**

*Reviewed by Jeff Wallace*

The critical wager upon which this intriguing and intensely argued book is founded is, in the words of its author, that the "aesthetic impulse itself" (2) is profoundly animal, inhuman and, as such, trans-species. Art should no longer be considered as an exclusively human activity; rather, the affective and somatic dimensions of artistic creation are one of the key ways in which our kinship with inhuman nature is expressed. While we have known since Baumgarten that aesthetics is, as Terry Eagleton puts it (in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1990]), a discourse of the body and the senses, bioaesthetics calls for a more radical rethinking of the physicality or materiality of human art.

Does this therefore, in turn, imply that animals create art? Only, it is argued, in an expanded sense of "excess", play or performance, often associated with sexual selection in animals, which challenges the proposition of post-Darwinian logic that any trait or behaviour

has evolved for its functional or “fitness” value alone. In this, *Choreographies of the Living* joins a growing body of critical thought re-examining the vitalistic philosophical legacy of Henri Bergson; its specific theoretical co-ordinates are the philosophy of “becoming” of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and the work of Australian feminist biophilosopher Elizabeth Grosz, who more than anyone has opened up the writing of Charles Darwin to the field of bioaesthetic interpretation.

This book is a development of Carrie Rohman’s work in two main senses. It builds philosophically on her highly significant *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009), which opened up new avenues of study on D. H. Lawrence from the perspective of animal studies. More surprisingly, however, it connects with Rohman’s own pre-scholarly career in contemporary dance and choreography. Rohman shares these biographical perspectives with her reader from the outset, and thus sets up an affectingly personal framework for the understanding of an intellectual trajectory.

Clearly, dance, with reference to key modernist concepts such as movement, form and “vibration”, is the main route to Rohman’s heightened awareness of the bioaesthetic, and produces three chapters, on Isadora Duncan’s “creatural aesthetic”, the hybrid forms (dance, narrative) of Rachel Rosenthal’s imagined rat “Tatti Wattles”, and Merce Cunningham’s (in partial collaboration with John Cage) de-psychologising animalistic choreography of the “horde” beyond individualism. Into this distinctive context are inserted chapters on Virginia Woolf, and on Lawrence. The “floating monkeys” of Woolf’s little-known children’s story about ‘Nurse Lugton’ gravitate into an assessment of creatureliness in the characters of *The Waves* (a novel originally provisionally entitled *The Moths*). Chapter 2, on ‘Creative Incantations and Involutions in D. H. Lawrence’, gives us new perspectives on the poem ‘Tortoise Shout’ and on *Women in Love*.

What is distinctive about Rohman’s readings of animality in these Lawrence texts is their determination to push beyond the

critical protocols of metaphor, symbolism and even of an “expressionist” aesthetic. Instead, Rohman posits an ontological relation between human and animal that is closely aligned with the Deleuzian notion of becoming. In ‘Tortoise Shout’, attention is first drawn to the “cry” and “scream” which simultaneously evoke human remoteness from and proximity to the creature. This direct appeal to the “body’s sensorium” (44) connects to the general impact of poetry itself, defined by Jorie Graham as primarily “somatic” rather than “cognitive” (42). Rohman therefore turns our attention to the “vibratory” rhythmic qualities of the poem, embodied in a restless process of renaming and rephrasing which calls to mind a “Deleuzian refrain”. A principle of shared vocalisation between the tortoise and the human/poem culminates in the poem’s final cosmic gesture of “the living in general” (51), the time-travelling cry of the tortoise that resonates through the universe.

Turning to *Women in Love*, Rohman first notes the relative critical neglect of dancing as a figure in Lawrence’s work. What she adds to extant accounts is, again, a Deleuzian/Groszian emphasis that sees dance as a mode of artistic expression/excess denoting the possibility of new relationalities or becomings. Of the first of two key dance scenes, Rohman reminds us of Birkin’s subversion of Hermione Roddice’s staging of a Ballets Russes-style event at Breadalby. This is Birkin as Deleuzian “schizo”, his movements generally acknowledged as inhuman in a way that makes Nijinskian modernism appear already conventional.

Thence, of course, Rohman turns fuller attention to the ‘Water-Party’ chapter and to Gudrun’s dancing in the presence of the Highland cattle. Again, the available framing contexts of modernism – Dalcroze, Isadora Duncan – are seen as somehow inadequate to the radical and unsettling nature of Gudrun’s rhythmical movements to the accompaniment of Ursula’s singing. Through Rohman’s own reading of Duncan, the “weightiness” of Gudrun’s dance transmits “the sense of a Deleuzian transmission of earthly forces to human shudderings” (54–5). As befits the

challenging concept of becoming-animal, Gudrun's movements have nothing to do with imitating or expressing a oneness with the cattle, but with something far less Oedipalised and humanly domesticated. If the cattle are to her, in Lawrence's word, "charming", the charm is located in an electrically-charged quality that invites Gudrun into a "mating" dance which is less sexual than artistic or "becoming-artistic" (57), and which, as such, figures an experimental approach to living and being with the potential to take us beyond ourselves. In the same way, Rohman is able at the end of the chapter to coyly sidestep the "bestial" implications of Ursula and Birkin's later sexual encounter by presenting it as a continuation of the dance of becoming and an "opening into immanence" (62) in which Lawrence has his characters engage.

Rohman's stimulating and sometimes dazzling new reading of animality in Lawrence goes some way towards suggesting that this book's opening critical wager is a successful one. What kinds of significance, or politics, the concept of the bioaesthetic allows us to dance towards, may remain a more open question. The often-impassioned pitch and register of the writing suggest that the stakes are high, and a certain energetic endorsement of Deleuzian principles asks to be taken for granted. The reader might have wished for a more grounded explanation of the difficult concept of becoming, especially when in the chapter on Lawrence a dizzying dance is sometimes performed with and around the variants on modes of becoming on offer: "becoming-intense, becoming-other, and becoming-artistic" (57), becoming-imperceptible, Gudrun's becoming-cow and Birkin's becoming-plant, all alongside the becoming-animal.

In Deleuze's own texts there is a certain tension between the affirmative rhetorical quality of becoming and the very careful analytical resistance to humanist recuperation that the concept represents, and which often seems to proceed by negation: that is, we neither imitate nor become the animal in question, nor is becoming another version of the ideas that the self either evolves or is subject to the unpredictability of constant flux. The notion of

becoming as a zone of indiscernible relatedness between a human and an other, a “block of becoming”, assumes that each is already a multiplicity, always-already generating the kinds of novelty that literature can help us to imagine and that humanism suppresses. This does not necessarily translate easily into the binary prioritising of affective over conceptual, or somatic over cognitive, that Rohman sees in the aesthetic and that she enthusiastically associates with the Lawrentian idea of art as the symbolic language of blood-consciousness.

Rohman is, at the same time, surprised that Deleuze and Guattari choose to value Lawrence’s literature of becoming on the grounds of individual genius rather than as the expression of a modernist “block” preoccupied with “humanism’s crisis vis-à-vis the animal” (58–9). Yet *Choreographies of the Living* cannot itself help but enhance our understanding of Lawrence’s unique contribution to this crisis, to literature and to philosophical thought beyond the human.

**Stewart Smith, *Nietzsche and Modernism: Nihilism and Suffering in Lawrence, Kafka and Beckett*.**

**Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.**

**Pp 250. £79 (hardcover). ISBN 978 3 3197 5534 2**

*Reviewed by Greg Garrard*

The problem of nihilism, or the debilitating meaninglessness of suffering, is at the heart of Friedrich Nietzsche’s work, according to this monograph in Palgrave’s Studies in Modern European Literature. The Christian ascetic ideal reassured believers that suffering had meaning within a providential schema, albeit at the cost of negating the human body and the Earth. Ironic offshoots of the aesthetic ideal such as scepticism and Darwinism demolished that assurance, leaving “we moderns” adrift in angst and anomie. The solution, according to Smith’s reading of Nietzsche, is to

conjure an aesthetically pleasing shape and meaning *ex nihilo* in a high-wire act of self-creation above an abyss.