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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.

As a philosophy student, I admired and feared this existentialist Nietzsche: he spoke to my faithlessness and underwrote my self-fashioning, though I was unnerved even then by his blithe surmounting of good and evil and apparent endorsement of an aesthetic (if no more) of cruelty. Smith would reassure that self with the observation that Nietzsche's self-overcoming speaks not of indifference but of "vulnerability, or fear of collapse" (26). Adopting this sensitive existentialist Nietzsche as an "heuristic" or interpretive framework, Smith sees each of his literary examples as exploring the problem of nihilism in a specific context. Accordingly, Smith writes of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: "As the novel focuses upon personal and collective experiences of paralysis and exhaustion, I shall stress that its depictions of erotic regeneration and power relations seek to address this nihilistic condition, to engender new hope and meaning" (70). Franz Kafka's *The Trial* dramatises Josef K's futile efforts to give meaning to his apparently "useless, unredeemable suffering" (156) through interpretative activity, and Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* portrays characters in protracted physical pain who can neither find meaning in it nor cease the search altogether.

Taking Nietzsche's preoccupation with nihilism as an "heuristic" allows Smith to follow the thread of the nihilism argument through his chosen literary texts in a largely compelling and illuminating fashion. This approach takes too little account, though, of the different biographical and historical relationship of Nietzsche's work to each of the authors. Lawrence's initial response to Nietzsche was shaped by his reading of the Oscar Levy translations from the Croydon library and the various interpretations published in A. R. Orage's *The New Age*. Later, during the middle period of the Great War and immediately afterward, Lawrence was frequently reported as arguing about Nietzsche with Frieda, who had been persuaded by the psychoanalyst Otto Gross that she was a Nietzschean *überfrau* who needn't concern herself with bourgeois morality. Over and above the evidence of direct "influence" by texts and ideas, then, there is a

Nietzschean theme within Lawrence's own tumultuous marriage. To use a Nietzschean "heuristic" to interpret a literary work that may, to some unknowable degree, be *intended* to address problems the philosopher posed suggests a kind of circularity Smith seems unwilling to consider. In his sparse explicit statements on Nietzsche Lawrence depicts himself as challenging or testing the philosopher's ideas, so it seems rebarbative to suggest he is essentially illustrating them. Nietzsche himself considered that life could only be justified as an aesthetic phenomenon, so why not pursue that conviction with real courage? Literature is too often the handmaiden of philosophy and theory.

Smith's book is a converted thesis, which accounts for its patient exposition and extraordinary breadth of reference. The scope of the research is impressive – each chapter could almost function as a summary of critical perspectives on the author discussed – but it creates the impression of painstaking triangulation from existing perspectives rather than a fully original statement. The prose, too, remains thesis-like, with a lot of "I argue ..." and "x notes ...". Early career authors really ought to be coached towards livelier and more confident prose for their first monograph.

Smith's analysis of a Nietzschean concern with nihilism speaks to our historicised understanding of how modernism was, precisely, an urgent anguished response to what was then modernity. But, philosophy undergraduates aside, are we still assailed by the futility of existence? The question seems at once too cosmic and too parochial. The unfolding of secularisation in societies that have never been Christian might allow us to test whether nihilism is a uniquely post-Christian phenomenon. At the same time, consumer societies minister assiduously to the appetites of at least some human bodies, but are unable, as Zarathustra put it, to be "true to the earth". In light of contemporary environmental concerns – which Lawrence anticipated in some respects – Smith's assumption of the centrality of human, all-too-human, suffering ends up making Nietzsche and modernism seem *more* dated than they need to be.