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Losing Democracy: *Kangaroo*, *The Lost Girl*, *The Boy in the Bush*

Current erosions of political democracy, in the U.S. and elsewhere, seem to be catching up with the anti-democratic cast of mind that Lawrence invented for Richard Lovat Somers. “We’re pot-bound inside democracy and the democratic feeling,” Somers complains. He “could not stand” “that Demos was his own master” in Australia. Marxism, he asserts, “appeal[s] only to the will-to-power in the masses, making money the whole crux...the only god.” One alternative for him—ugly from a pro-democracy point of view—is a fascist model of organization, to which he is open. Somers is impressed by Jack Callcott as the exemplar of “a new life-form, a new social form.” That new social form turns out to be the cult of Kangaroo’s personality, abetted by Jack’s phalanxes of thuggish Great War veterans. This political trajectory is all too dismally familiar to us. But, of course, Lawrence’s novel doesn’t make Somers end there. Somers parts company with Jack, and with Kangaroo; and for all his apparent hostility to Willie Struthers, head of the Australian Labour party, Somers “prefers” him. For six pages of uninterrupted attention, Somers listens to Struthers’ eloquent speech on behalf of a global, color-blind working class. When Struthers’ audience reacts violently to the speech, Somers’ strongest desire is “to kill the [veteran] soldiers” who instigate the mayhem. “[I]n truth,” we are told, Somers “did love the working people.” What he does not love is “All this political socialism—all politics, in fact.”

So *Kangaroo* the novel is not only pressuring the pot-bound state of democracy and democratic feeling. As Somers’ experience and thought passes through the gamut of political models as we know them in history—liberal, democratic, socialist, communist, fascist, anarchist,—they are figured as pot-binding agents. Somers and Lawrence are trying to think outside them. We cling to democracy, despite its increasingly superficial achievements under the rule of the money-crux. Why not risk losing that model (and the others to boot)? It seems especially difficult—and reprehensible—to let that “democratic” model go. But, following Lawrence’s lead, we can contemplate the possibility, and envision its character. We can do it with the help of what I think are *Kangaroo*’s intrinsic companion novels—*The Lost Girl* and *The Boy in the Bush*. But first, lest the three novels’ views of “all politics” seem the mere product of an outlier’s crankiness, I want to note a possible repository in defense of Lawrentian views: Anglo-American novelistic tradition. The Victorian novel and the modernist novel represent groups struggling to achieve democracy and to have themselves recognized in terms of democratic feeling. Yet the same eras of fiction explore the limitations of that order and feeling. Lawrence is scarcely alone. Dickens’s novels are closer to Somers’ love of the working people than they are to any model of political order. Herman Melville’s bicentenary epic *Clarel* is a thoroughly disillusioned view of Demos. So is Henry Adams’ *Democracy*. Adams’ posthumous *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* (1919), albeit non-fiction, might also be enlisted to support Somers’ views. If Lawrence is not to stand vulnerably alone, we need a dispassionate history of fiction’s skeptical assessments of the political orders that we cling to.

Standing vulnerably alone is what Lawrence’s characters accept when they step out of the framework of a political order, democratic or otherwise, that affords them recognition and status.

The story of *The Lost Girl*'s Alvina is relevant to “democracy” because she takes a New Woman’s opportunity for independence by becoming a maternity nurse. But the money-cruelty that pervades all political orders re-directs her labor toward another democratizing endeavor: the entertainment industry. She joins a female-produced provincial vaudeville troupe that performs “Red Indian” dances, and mimes a white captivity narrative. Our impulse in 2021 is to object to Lawrence’s indulgence of the troupe’s undemocratic “appropriation” of a dark Other. In effect, however, the troupe memorializes a prehistoric matriarchal communism: an attractively tribal structure. Yet it is recoverable, Lawrence demonstrates, only as fantasy. Alvina abandons it, to take up again her equalitarian medical career. But her career proves powerless to resist her erotic entanglement with a migrant Italian member of the troupe. He takes her to his native home, only to bow—it is 1914—to Demos’s conscription of him for war duty. Betrayed by “democracy,” Alvina is lost. Nevertheless, she has always wanted to be “curiously apart,” “an outcast,” “off the map.” She accepts the suspension of guiding orientation that any political order might loan her. Eros is a mystery that she prefers to any social-political regime.

Political models are maps of social identity. We are assumed to be responsibly attached to them. Somers believes he is “one of the *responsible* members of society, as contrasted with the numerous *irresponsible*.” But new responsibilities, beyond politically- and socially-induced ones, are at issue for Lawrence’s lost boy Jack Grant, who renounces “the map” in favor of the bush. Jack’s enemy Easu is democracy’s bullying everyman. Jack’s responsibility, he is convinced, is to oppose Easu, who is the inevitable nasty side of the democratic coin. But Jack opposes Easu neither for democracy’s sake, nor for Christian agape’s sake, both of which are intermingled. As Somers says in *Kangaroo*, democracy puts old religious wine—Judaic and Christian morality mixed with assertions about love—in a new bottle. Jack’s own bottle contains a new wine: “a queer heterogeneous ethic.” It accepts hatred as unashamedly as it accepts love, and it sanctions Jack’s virtual polygamous ties to three women. The last-appearing of them is another Alvina. She too wants to be lost. But neither his will, nor her will, matters as much as their surrender to a suspense of the democratic conventions of which Australia is a typical example. Jack exists in that suspense in terms of a new religious commitment: his responsibility to a dark god, a Gnostic deity perhaps, who experiments with life, and who resists old political and social definitions. Within that resistance, Lawrence’s lost figures propose, is where we need now to live, tentatively but with undeniable newness.