

THE RAINBOW AND THE LANGUAGE OF ORIGINS

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The challenging opening pages of Lawrence's *The Rainbow* seem to demand a radical reading, founded in theories about the nature and origin of language, which they have scarcely received. The early generations of Brangwens are described as working upon the horizontal land below Ilkeston; when each man looks up, he sees the church tower in the distance 'standing above him and beyond'¹ Although they are not 'thriftless', the narrator observes, these men are conscious of a connection beyond that of money:

They felt the rush of the sap in spring, they knew the wave which cannot halt, but every year throws forward the seed to begetting, and, falling back, leaves the young-born on the earth. They knew the intercourse between heaven and earth, sunshine drawn into the breast and bowels, the rain sucked up in the daytime, nakedness that comes under the wind in autumn, showing the birds' nests no longer worth hiding. Their life and interrelations were such; feeling the pulse and body of the soil, that opened to their furrow for the grain, and became smooth and supple after their ploughing, and clung to their feet with a weight that pulled like desire, lying hard and unresponsive when the crops were to be shorn away. (p.42)

This passionate life is enough for the men, 'their faces always turned to the heat of the blood, staring into the sun, dazed with looking towards the source of generation, unable to turn round' (p. 43). The Brangwen women, in contradistinction, look out 'from the heated, blind intercourse of farm-life, to the spoken world beyond' (p. 42, italics added), seeking another sphere:

But the woman wanted another form of life than this, something that was not blood-intimacy... She stood to see the far-off world of cities and governments and the active scope of man, the magic land to her, where secrets were made known and desires fulfilled. She faced outwards to where men moved dominant and creative, having turned their back on the pulsing heat of creation, and with this behind them, were set out to discover what was beyond, to enlarge their own scope and range and freedom; (p.43)

This enlargement of scope is represented in the novel by the vicar at Cossethay, one 'who spoke the other, magic language' (p. 43, italics added), a language which eludes the speech rhythms and silences of the 'slow, full-built' Brangwen males. The authority which the cleric wields over the women 'raised him above the common men' into a more 'vivid circle of life' accessible only through 'education, this higher form of being' (p. 44). This quest for a 'higher form' is the dominant motif of the novel: as John Worthen has noted, the Brangwens of this opening section 'are less inhabitants of the English eighteenth or nineteenth century, than human beings at an early stage of development' (Introduction, p.18). The question of development is linked incontrovertibly with language.

In these mystical pages Lawrence confronts a crucial issue of modern thought, the question of human entry into history. The Brangwens, trapped contentedly upon their 'horizontal land' (p. 41), exemplify Nietzsche's description, in 'The Use and Misuse of History', of the 'unhistorical' animal 'confined within a horizon which is almost a point, but in a sense happy',². The ability to encounter life in a nonhistorical mode, Nietzsche argued, was the foundation for the works of humanity. Such a Nietzschean foundation, with its division into pre- and post-Iapsarian worlds, is of course as mythical as the opening of Lawrence's novel, but it was a myth with potent attractions for European thought. In the *Grundrisse*, for example, Marx had argued for the aboriginal existence of man within the communal group. Human beings, he posited, 'become individuals only through the process of history'. The originary appearance of

man is as 'a species-being, clan being, herd animal', and the emergence out of 'species being' is at the prompting of economic imperative:

Exchange itself is the chief means of this individuation. It makes the herd-like existence superfluous and dissolves it. Soon the matter [has] turned in such a way that as an individual he relates himself only to himself, while the means with which he posits himself as individual have become the making of his generality and commonness.

In this state of 'generality', what stands opposite to man, Marx suggests, 'has now become the true community, which he tries to make a meal of, and which makes a meal of him'.³ The *Rainbow* explores this diagnosis in its depiction of the 'harsh and ugly disillusion' which possesses Ursula at training college. Academic life and the world of learning to which her female forebears aspired stands exposed here as a 'second hand dealer's shop', 'a little side-show to the factories of the town'. College is 'a sham store, a sham warehouse, with a single motive of material gain, and no productivity' (p.485).

The dislocation inherent in a belief in human emergence from a 'herd-like' instinctual life into individual being, dramatised in *The Rainbow*, lies at the heart of a seminal modernist disagreement about language between Walter Benjamin and T.W. Adorno. In his essay 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', Benjamin emphasised the value of an Ur-state prior to linguistic differentiation. Emergence out of plenitude involves stress and suffering: 'how much more melancholy to be named not from the one blessed, paradisiac language of names, but from the hundred languages of man'.⁴ In primordial fullness, language and nature coincide. 'God's creation is completed', Benjamin argues, 'when things receive their names from man, from whom in name language alone speaks'.⁵ The 'paradisiac state' of this beginning represents a fullness of being because it 'knew only one language'.⁶ Benjamin here imagines a life, like that of the early Brangwens, complete in and for itself:

The paradisiac language of man must have been one of perfect knowledge; whereas later all knowledge is again infinitely differentiated in the multiplicity of language, was indeed forced to differentiate itself on a lower level as creation in name.⁷

Linguistic difference leads to 'the decay of the blissful, Adamite language-mind' because, in stepping outside 'the purer language of name, man makes language a means (that is, a knowledge inappropriate to him), and therefore also...a mere sign'. The fall from grace consequent upon slippage between sign and referent results in that 'plurality of languages' and 'linguistic confusion' which typifies the babel of the modern world.⁸ Benjamin's position is clear: in the prelapsarian unity with nature, with its concordance of word and object, the life of mankind 'in pure language-mind' was 'blissful'. But with the Fall, humanity 'abandoned immediacy in the communication of the concrete, name', descending into 'the abyss of the mediateness of all communication', what Benjamin designates 'the abyss of prattle' engendered by employing the word as means.⁹ Just so does Lawrence both delineate Ursula plunging into the sordid world of Brinsley Street school, and seek through the composition of *The Rainbow* to resurrect the form of the novel from the Barthesian 'prattling texts' of Edwardian realism. Benjamin's writing has aptly been characterised as 'marked by a painful straining toward a psychic wholeness or unity of experience which the historical situation threatens to shatter at every turn',¹⁰ and it is the mythical sense of primal oneness which Adorno was to critique in his essay 'Subject and Object'. Contemplating the notion of the Marxian clan-being, Adorno writes that 'it probably was only in association, by rudimentary social toil' that human beings could originally survive. The principle of individuation would thus be secondary, 'a hypothetical kind of biological division of labour'.¹¹ But the undifferentiatedness towards which Lawrence and Benjamin gesture is 'romantic', 'a wishful projection at times, but today no more than a lie'.¹² The dialectical quality in Adorno's

thought, which insists upon the falsifying tendency inherent in all theories of the world, leads him to insist upon the fragmentation of modern society which Ursula discovers for herself:

The more individuals are really degraded to functions of the social totality as it becomes more systematised, the more will man pure and simple, man as a principle with the attributes of creativity and absolute domination, be consoled by exaltation of his mind.¹³

Lawrence had embodied this insight into his portrayal of the totalised industrial system of the mining town of Wiggiston, presided over by Uncle Tom Brangwen and, later, Winifred Inger, the systemised mentality which marks Skrebensky's militarism, and in contradistinction, Ursula's exultant vision of the rainbow in the closing pages of his novel. Here the writing seeks, through evocation of one of the paradigmatic moments of modernist 'exaltation',¹⁴ to cancel or subvert the implications of its own diagnosis of the ills of an industrialised society:

And the rainbow stood on the earth. She knew that the sordid people who crept hard-scaled and separate on the face of the world's corruption were living still, that the rainbow was arched in their blood and would quiver to life in their spirit, that they would cast off their horny covering of disintegration, that new, clean, naked bodies would issue to a new germination, to a new growth, rising to the light and the wind and the clean rain of heaven. She saw in the rainbow the earth's new architecture, the old, brittle corruption of houses and factories swept away, the world built up in a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heaven. (p.548)

The contradictory power of *The Rainbow* may be said to find its imaginative source in the theoretical impasse articulated by Marxist theory. Benjamin and Adorno, for all their differences, share a sense of the dialectic involved in recognition of an interiority both blocked and insisted upon, valued and dismissed, by alienation from industrialism and materiality. This sense of alienation is enacted in the structure of *The Rainbow*. In the movement from primal community, through the two central couples, to the isolated figure of Ursula, standing at 'the advance-post of our time to blaze a path into the future', as the (probably Lawrencean) publisher's blurb put it in the quickly suppressed first edition.

In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, as is well known, the arbitrary system of classification known as language becomes our reality when we enter it as children. We are socialised, not into a world of objects, but a 'symbolic order', words which are signs of a 'presence made of absence' as Lacan puts it¹⁵ - the world of words creates the world of things. The Brangwen women of the opening pages evolve towards education and culture through the acquisition of an elaborated language code.¹⁶ They reject the primal linguistic undifferentiatedness of the Marsh; it is 'this education, this higher form of being, that the mother wished to give to her children' (p.44). What Lacan designates the 'real' (the primordial stuff of nature) is structured through the giving of meaning, but this process entails division within the self. The individual subject is produced through language in conformity to the symbolic order. Once language is entered, the man or woman can never re-attain the unity of the Imaginary, because his/her difference is constituted symbolically through difference. One cannot collapse sign and referent, except in the realm of the Imaginary, from which language bans the subject. The Lacanian child, a mass of instinctive drives, is thus analogous to the early Brangwen males who are located in the Imaginary of a maternal plenitude. The boldly conceived project of *The Rainbow* is to dramatise ways in which language works to enable individualisation out of this primal state, and to examine the costs of that enablement. In the Hardy study written concurrently with the novel, Lawrence appears intriguingly to be offering a commentary on his fictional opening gambit:

Life starts crude and unspecified, a great Mass. And it proceeds to evolve out of that mass ever more distinct and definite particular forms, an ever-multiplying number of separate species and orders.

This draws upon the evolutionary language of Herbert Spencer's *First Principles* (1862), a text which Lawrence knew well, and of which *The Rainbow* offers a kind of fictional elaboration. But the Hardy essay then goes on to refer to a process akin to the Lacanian mirror-stage:

With his consciousness [man] can perceive and know that which is not himself. The further he goes, the more extended his consciousness, the more he realises the things that are not himself.¹⁷

The rite of passage involved in entering into the symbolic order is foreshadowed when Lawrence muses upon how 'the Uttered Word can come into us and give us the impetus to our second birth'.¹⁸ The uttered comes into being through recognition of the Lacanian Other which lies on the horizon beyond the subject, but this mastery is acquired at a price - in linguistic terms, the texture of *The Rainbow* embodies the Kristevan unsettling wrought through the dialectical pull between an instinctive (maternal) poetic language and a more functional prose. The realist project is subjected to uncontainable eruptions of the 'semiotic' - not only in the opening sequence, but also for instance in Anna's pregnant naked dance before the mirror, in Will's ecstatic response to Lincoln cathedral, in the shook-gathering scene and elsewhere. Whilst in *The Rainbow* it is the female who is the agent of change, in the Hardy essay woman is characterised as 'the unutterable which man must for ever continue to try to utter'. The male, representing the 'Will-to-Motion', exists 'in doing'; the female, the 'Will-to-Inertia', exists 'in being'¹⁹:

The woman grows downwards, like a root, towards the centre and the darkness and the origin. The man grows upwards, like the stalk, towards discovery and light and utterance.²⁰

Prior to splitting, the subject is a mesh of inner and outer, a state to some extent mirrored in the Brangwen males' quasi-sexual union with nature or in Will's ecstatic response to Lincoln cathedral. Towards the end of his life, in the Galsworthy essay of 1928, Lawrence remarkably anticipates these Lacanian ideas:

It seems to me that when the human being becomes too much divided between his subjective and objective consciousness, at last something splits in him and he becomes a social being. When he becomes too much aware of objective reality, and of his own isolation in the face of a universe of objective reality, the core of his identity splits, his nucleus collapses, his innocence or his naivete perishes, and becomes only a subjective-objective reality, a divided thing hinged together but not strictly individual.

Before a man suffers the fall, Lawrence asserts, 'he innocently feels himself altogether within the great continuum of the universe'. He is not 'divided or cut off', possessing 'the sense of being at one with the great universe-continuum of space-time-life'.²¹ What is sacrificed by entry into the symbolic is powerfully expressed in the novel by Dr. Frankstone's deadly exposition of scientific materialism, Skrebensky's patriotism, or the mechanistic corruption of Uncle Tom Brangwen. If the unconscious is structured like a language, it is a potent language which lurks beneath the smooth discourse of realism to erupt with shattering effect, as in the climactic encounter with the horses.

Finally, Lawrence's opening pages might be productively reinflected in relation to Derrida's meditation upon Rousseau's 'Essay on the Origin of Languages' in *Of Grammatology*. Rousseau argued that speech is natural, and that writing ensued as a parasitic growth. Derrida, as is well known, insists on the priority of writing and the illusory nature of myths of origin.

Under the ideology of presence writing came to be defined as a condition of social inauthenticity. Society takes its origins, Derrida suggests, from the 'displacing of the relationship with the mother, with nature, with being as the fundamental signified'.²² The quest for the originary moment, in Derridean thought, is continuously undermined by the duplicity of language. The 'birth of society is therefore not a passage, it is a point, a pure, fictive and unstable, ungraspable limit'.²³ The principle of substitution, of supplementarity, is the undeclared originary principle. In describing the awakening of a small agrarian community Lawrence would, like Rousseau, illustrate the workings of a 'classical ideology according to which writing takes the status of a tragic fatality come to prey upon natural innocence; interrupting the golden age of the present and full speech'. Writing, in this tradition, signifies 'the very process of the dispersal of peoples unified as bodies and the beginning of their enslavement'.²⁴ Rousseau, like Lawrence, perceives origin as 'the inaugural decadence', since the downward spiral into history has always already begun: Ursula's closing vision of the rainbow here, Birkin's insistence upon blood-consciousness in *Women in Love*, or the sanctuary of the gamekeeper's cottage in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, are all symptomatic of the Lawrencean urge to escape the effects of that spiralling movement. Yet whilst history is 'degenerative in direction', as in *The Rainbow* it is also 'progressive and compensatory in effect'.²⁵ The binary opposition which enables us to think the emergence from non-language is that between need and passion. Language, in Rousseau's essay, 'springs forth when passionate desire exceeds physical need, when imagination is awakened',²⁶ as it is in the Brangwen females here. What the Lawrencean text nominates the 'other, magic language' of education and culture is decisive, as indeed Derrida maintains:

There is no social institution before language, it is not one cultural element among others, it is the element of institutions in general, it includes and constructs the entire social structure. Since nothing precedes it in society, its cause can only be pre-cultural or natural.²⁷

The warm ambience of the Brangwen males is characterised by the Rousseauesque archaeological moment, a first moment of the sign without speech - Derrida's moment of 'the immediate sign'. Emerging out of this Ur-world of gestural immediacy, it is speech which has engendered the Derridean endless movement of signification: because supplementarity is of the essence of language, speech is perceived as already carrying in itself death and absence. Thus Rousseau desiderates what Derrida calls the 'dream of a mute society, of a society before the origin of languages, that is to say, strictly speaking, a society before society'. With reference to this 'society of mute writing', the advent of speech 'resembles a catastrophe, an unpredictable misfortune'.²⁸ This romantic intimation of cultural catastrophe may be closely allied to the Lawrencean blood-consciousness which was to be prescribed as a panacea for the ills of a hyper-conscious civilisation.

The mystical opening pages of *The Rainbow* were paradoxically some of the last to be composed, early in 1915. In his study of the tortuous gestation of the novel out of Lawrence's earlier projects, 'The Wedding Ring' and 'The Sisters', Charles Ross observes that this section was the last altogether unforeseen section to be created. Lawrence finally saw the overarching structure of the Brangwens moving gradually, generation by generation, into history; and he shored up the structure with a late but vital cornerstone.²⁹

Leavis's insistence upon the essentially English quality of this text has recently been productively countered, notably in Tony Pinkney's proposal that the novel, whilst refracting some key ideas and images of the Ruskin-Morris tradition, embodies a distinctively modernist consciousness. In the course of his argument, Pinkney specifically identifies *The Rainbow* with the northern European modernism of German Expressionist painting and architecture exemplified by the Die Brücke group and by Walter Gropius's Bauhaus Manifesto.³⁰ This is a suggestive and fertile context, which may be supplemented by reference to the Franco-German modernist debate about language and origins briefly outlined here. As Lawrence

wrote in his essay on 'Education of the People' (1918). 'the whole sum of the mental content of mankind is never, and can never be more than a mere tithe of all the vast surging primal consciousness, the affective consciousness of mankind'.³¹ The novel dramatises the dialectical to- and-fro between a humanity wedded to mental content and progress but riven by the 'surging primal consciousness' which is internalised in the successive Brangwen generations.

1 D H Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, cd. 1. Worthen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p.41. Subsequent reference is to this edition.

2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, tr. D.Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett), p.11.

3 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, tr. M. Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p.496.

4 Waiter Benjamin, *One-Way Street & Other Writings*, tr. E. Jephcott & K. Shorter (London: Verso, 1985), pp. 121-2.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 119-20.

9 *Ibid.*, pp.121, 120.

10 Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, (1974), p. 61.

11 T. W. Adorno, 'Subject and Object', in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. A. Arato & E. Gebhardt (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), pp. 510-11.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 499.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 499.

14 Other such moments include Stephen Dedalus's encounter with the girl in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1915); the final horse-riding scene in Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924); Hans Castorp's vision in the Alps in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924); and Lily Briscoe's completion of the painting in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The Lawrencean image of the 'new, clean, naked bodies' emerging into a revitalised fallen world is echoed in some of Stanley Spencer's Cookham paintings. .

15 Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, tr. A Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), p.65.

16 On Lawrence's immersion in the literature of evolution see my essay, 'Sparks beneath the Wheel: Lawrence and Evolutionary Thought', in *D.H. Lawrence: New Studies*, ed. C. Heywood (London: Macmillan, 1987).

17 D. H. Lawrence, *Study of Thomas Hardy & Other Essays*, ed. B. Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 42.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

21 'John Galsworthy', in *D.H. Lawrence: A Selection from Phoenix*, ed. AH. H. Inglis (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 286-7.

22 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. G. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 266.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 267.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 168, 170.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 202.

26 *Ibid.*, p.217.

27 *Ibid.*, p.219.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 240-1.

29 Charles L. Ross, *The Composition of The Rainbow and Women in Love* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979), p.31.

30 Tony Pinkney, *D. H. Lawrence* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

31 D.H. Lawrence, 'Education of the People', in *Phoenix*, cd. E.D. McDonald (London: Heinemann, 1961), p. 629.

