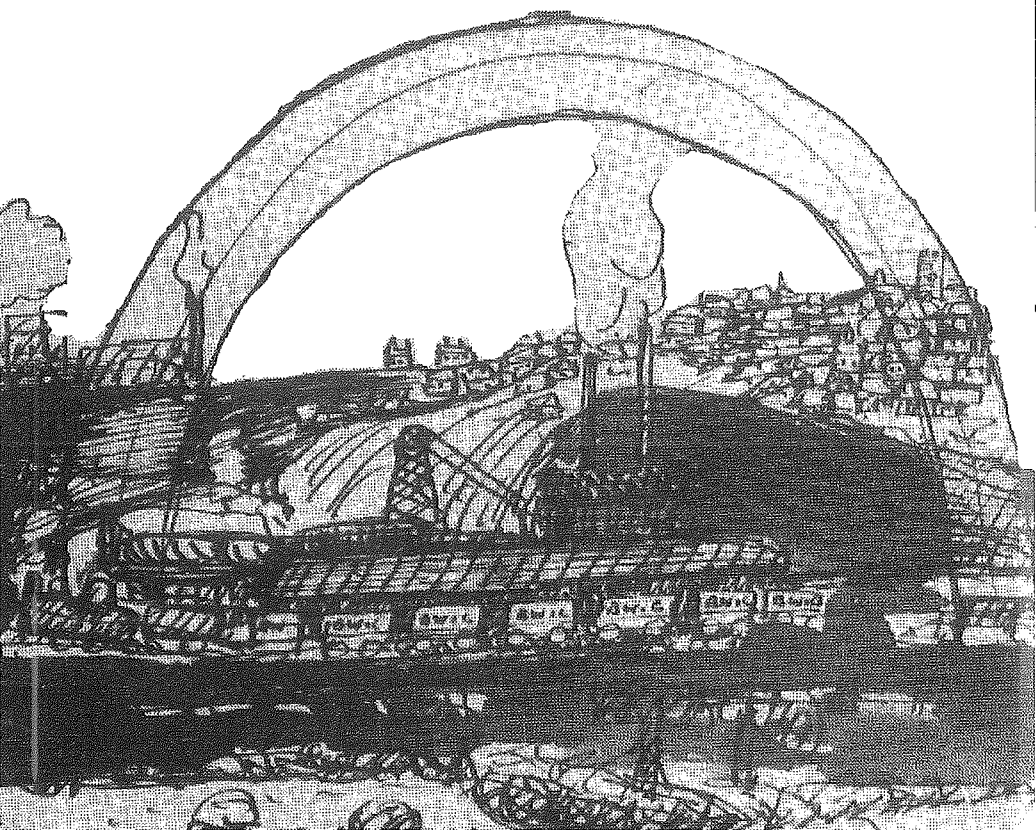
| STUDI DI ANGLISTICA / 21

D.H. LAWRENCE'S THE RAINBOW

RE-READINGS OF A RADICAL TEXT

Edited by
Renzo D'Agnillo



STUDI DI ANGLISTICA / 21
Collana diretta da Francesco Marroni

D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*

The Rainbow marked a turning point in D.H. Lawrence's writing career. Originally intended as a vindication of the female suffragette movement, the novel underwent a complex compositional process through which it launched a broader revolutionary programme that comprised a redefinition of sexual relationships. Banned almost immediately after its publication, it remains to this day one of the most provocative and powerful texts of the 20th century. This volume brings together a collection of new interpretations of the novel and their wide range of themes and critical perspectives are a testimony to the continual relevance of Lawrence's narrative and moral vision.

Contributions by Raffaella Antinucci, Carla Comellini, Renzo D'Agnillo, Anthony Dunn, Francesco Marroni, Stefania Michelucci, Peter Preston, John Worthen, Claudia Zilletti.

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Cover
D.H. Lawrence, *Drawing*,
sent to Viola Meynell in 1915.

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Introduction

The Rainbow occupies a special place in D. H. Lawrence's fiction. Not only did it signal a crucial transition in his artistic development, but its thematic preoccupations and critique of modern Western society would be reiterated, to various degrees, in all of his future works. Furthermore, the chorus of disapproval followed by its prosecution (the first of a series for the writer, culminating in the thirty-two-year ban on *Lady Chatterley's Lover*), led to Lawrence's life-long rift with his native country.

It is only too easy for modern readers to overlook the shock that the publication of *The Rainbow* produced on its contemporaries, particularly in the light of post-1914 literary productions. Yet, it was really without precedent. For Lawrence, who had no interest in the "art for arts sake" approach of formal experimentation, was seeking to redefine the moral scope and function of the novel by confronting areas of human experience no novelist before him had contemplated, and was aware that this necessarily entailed a radical re-conception of linguistic and rhetorical strategies. Consequently, the compositional process of *The Rainbow* was lengthy and laborious. With no recourse to a programmatic 'agenda', Lawrence felt like he was starting afresh and was compelled to write and re-write the text several times over before he was satisfied with the end result. As is known, the first draft, titled "The Sisters" was begun in Italy in 1913, only to be re-written after his return to England in 1914 and re-titled "The Wedding Ring", after which, realising his saga of the Brangwen family had gone well beyond the original plan he had intended, becoming, in effect, two very different novels, Lawrence wrote the first part all over again and published it as *The Rainbow* in 1915. Its sequel, *Women in Love*, was finally published in 1920.

Although he was profoundly influenced by George Eliot's representation of psychological point of view, not to mention Thomas Hardy's characterisation of sexual relationships (his

"Study on Thomas Hardy" dates from the same period), *The Rainbow* bears out Lawrence's complete rejection of nineteenth-century literary conventions. Like *Sons and Lovers*, it is a family saga, but, unlike the former, it deliberately eschews the methods with which such a convention is traditionally narrated. Indeed, with no literary model at his disposal, Lawrence was free to invent his own narrative 'grammar' as well as promote his unique world-view in the hope that it would be understood by a new generation. Fuelled by an ideological conviction of the moral function of the novel form and inspired by his newly discovered conception of character as a field of conflicting forces, rather than an individual 'personality', Lawrence turns the diegetic dimension of the novel inside out conferring maximum priority to the internal, pre-conscious states of his characters at the cost of disregarding external events. This radically different narrative approach is complementary to his revolutionary vision of social transformation through the redefinition of sexual relationships, especially in terms of a re-evaluation of female experience.

After having rocked the genteel sensibilities and complacencies of pre-1914 middle-class England, it fell to future readers to recognise the power of Lawrence's insights. Yet, perhaps even more so today, to read *The Rainbow* one must bear with the text. It demands a patient and persistent engagement on the reader's part. Its narrative moves slowly, cumulatively, yet overpoweringly; its language is brooding, obsessively iterative, yet risky and uncanny. That it continues to challenge and provoke readers' responses ninety-five years after its first publication is a sure testimony of its enduring audacity as a radical text.

The present volume brings together eight new readings on *The Rainbow* by British and Italian Lawrentian scholars and its wide ranges of topic, confronted under a variety of critical perspectives, are confirmation of the continual relevance and vitality of Lawrence's text. It opens with Peter Preston's essay "The Polish Dimension of *The Rainbow*", which explores the significant, though critically neglected, aspect of the foreign

Other in terms of the representation of the novel's Polish characters, as manifested in the complex interrelations between Brangwens, Lewenskys and Skrebenskys. Preston illustrates how with "each Brangwen generation an encounter with Polishness brings some sense of expansion". Thus, while Tom Brangwen's inability to comprehend Lydia's Polish identity is overcome by an understanding that transcends the idea of national difference, Anna's various encounters with Baron Skrebensky gives her an insight into the complications of her Polish identity which conflict with Brangwen "blood-intimacy". Subsequently, Ursula's initial longing to escape the limitations of the Marsh Farm is stimulated by her grandmother Lydia's memories of Poland. Ultimately, the diminishing presence of Poland in the novel is embodied in Anton Skrebensky, Ursula's lover, who has lost all connection with his father-land.

In his reading of the linguistic and discursive strategies of the novel, Francesco Marroni in "D. H. Lawrence's Ontological Aporias: Ursula and the Broken Rainbow", demonstrates how Lawrence's attempt to break away from nineteenth century realism, leads to an "unresolved linguistic tension" that underlies its unstable semantic-structural organisation. As a polemical reflection on English society and eager response to the crisis of representation, the novel's discontinuity is reflected in a language of confusion in which text submerges context. This is not to detract from the fact that, as Marroni observes: "the evolutionist model that dominates the diegetic framework of *The Rainbow* derives directly from George Eliot's social vision". Yet whilst the novel's semantic axis points into the future, its formal aspects are characterised by iterative linguistic and discursive strategies that deny the idea of progression and reinforce a circularity "that seems symptomatic of an unresolved linguistic tension".

The fact that Lawrence himself was not unconscious of this paradox is the underlying motif of my own essay, "'Wedding at the Marsh': Lawrence's Rhetorical Strategies in Chapter V of *The Rainbow*", which highlights the stylistic and rhetorical features of his language in what is, in effect, the most atypical chapter in the novel. "Wedding at the Marsh" contains an

autonomous structure (a complete story in itself) which, at the same time, prefigures its thematic developments as Lawrence abandons the intense verbal excesses of his 'analytical' passages in favour of a dynamic and humorous description of the wedding ceremony between Anna and Will Brangwen. Through Tom Brangwen's wedding speech, Lawrence establishes an intratextual dialogue in which the rhetorical strategies of his own essays are, to a certain extent, parodied to create a complex interaction between authorial intention and the reliability of the narrative voice.

Stefania Michelucci in "Uprooting: The Beginning of Existential Crisis in *The Rainbow*", explores the centripetal and centrifugal processes which mark the characters movements from "rootedness in an organic, self-sufficient home life, to total uprooting". In both *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* can be seen the tendency "to absorb external space into the home and the opposite tendency to expand the self in a space free of predetermined limits". The problematic search for the Other place conduces the characters to a process of involution in which the contraction of the space of the home acquires negative connotations evoking imprisonment and the loss of values associated with human cohabitation. Threshold states in both novels are synonymous of the characters' uprooting and lead to such illusory perceptions as Ursula's vision of rebirth through her sighting of the rainbow at the end of the novel.

It was initially Lawrence's concern with female education and emancipation that gave the initial impetus for the composition of *The Rainbow*. Anthony Dunn in "Generation and Education in *The Rainbow*" investigates the nature of education, tracing its social and metaphysical implications in both male and female characters. The Brangwen women's initial dissatisfaction with generation and their aspiration towards the world of knowledge and education leads to a sense of the limitations of formal education in the knowledge of self and other which, for Lawrence, can only be obtained through sexual relations. Women and marriage in relation to knowledge is precisely the area of experience with which Lawrence

struggles to find a new language. In this respect, as Dunn notes, with the exception of the influence of Hardy, Lawrence had no real "anxiety of influence when he came to write his accreting, mutating saga of the internal and external lives of the Brangwen generations. His only anxiety was whether his saga would have a public."

In "*The Rainbow* and the Metaphor of Food", Carla Comellini focuses on the symbolic function played by food in the novel. She notes, for example, how the recurrent references to English food, in particular, become a means of underlining the novel's Englishness. But food also has important metaphorical functions, as with the Brangwen women's eating of the apple of knowledge which is a sign of their feminine rebellion. Besides noting the symbolic valence of such images as the seed and chestnut, Comellini draws parallels with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* with regard to the novel's connection between food and cannibalism and traces the destructive effects of the relationship between Ursula and Skrebensky in terms of a symbolic cannibalism which sees a reversal of gender roles.

Ken Russell's notorious film adaptation of *The Rainbow* appeared twenty years after his critically acclaimed film version of *Women in Love*. Raffaella Antinucci in "Going 'Beyond': Ken Russell's *The Rainbow* (1989)", addresses the various levels of the film's interpretation of Lawrence's novel which focuses exclusively on the second part of the story beginning with Ursula's infancy. Antinucci points out how Russell's 'return' to Lawrence necessarily entailed a new perspective that conditioned a choice of themes that would appeal to a contemporary audience, such as Ursula's sexual education, which Russell updates in terms of the modern day debate on feminism and sexual liberation. Antinucci analyses the film techniques through which Russell solves the problem of rendering the complexities of Lawrence's text, including linear narration and recurrent visual motifs, and discusses the broader question of the "heritage film" as an attempt to re-create an imaginary identity of Englishness.

Taking the biblical archetype of the Garden of Eden as her

premise, Claudia Zilletti in the concluding essay in the volume, "Gardens of Initiation: Experience and Growth in D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*", analyses the semiotic function of the garden as a liminal space representing "a threshold marking the characters' passage towards a more complete self-knowledge of crucial vital experiences." Lawrence's natural and garden descriptions form the basis of a dichotomy that generates a series of thematic preoccupations: "nature *vs* culture, past *vs* present, fertility *vs* inner death, the rural euphoric world of the Farm *vs* the dysphoric hell of the coal-mines". Zilletti underlines the ambivalent valence of the Marsh Farm as a place of refuge and a locus preventing self-realisation as well as illustrating numerous examples which highlight the symbolic importance of gardens as a passage in the sentimental and sexual education of the main characters.

Finally, an expression of gratitude to John Worthen who had, by the time this collection was conceived, published his valedictory book on Lawrence. His personal contribution has been appreciated as a generous exception and bears testimony to his abiding enthusiasm for an author on whom he has been such a lively authority.

Renzo D'Agnillo

I would like to give my sincere thanks to Eleonora Sasso for her precious help with the page-proofing of the volume.