

## BRANGWENS AND BUDDENBROOKS: MAKING THE FAMILY CHRONICLE NEW

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Critical discussion of D.H. Lawrence has long focused on his supposed rejection of literary form. From F.R. Leavis to Keith Sagar to Terry Eagleton,<sup>96</sup> the canonical assessments of Lawrence's novels, and particularly those of *The Rainbow*, have tended to insist upon Lawrence's rebellion against established literary convention. This interpretation also comes down to us from Lawrence himself. In a well-known letter to J.B. Pinker in 1915 about the publication of *The Rainbow*, Lawrence advised his editor to

Tell Arnold Bennett that all rules of construction hold good only for novels which are copies of other novels. A book which is not a copy of other books has its own construction, and what [Bennett] calls faults, he being an old imitator, I call characteristics. (Huxley 299)

To a large degree, the passage does describe Lawrence's aesthetic project, but it also leaves us to grapple with a difficult problem. If Lawrence was so committed to narrative innovation, if he really believed that a novel that merely copies other novels

<sup>96</sup> See Leavis's famous evaluation of *The Rainbow* in his *D.H. Lawrence Novelist*; Sagar's similar assessment in *The Art of D. H. Lawrence*; and Eagleton's assertion that *The Rainbow* "explodes realism" in *Criticism and Ideology*

must be deemed imitation and, therefore, failure, why then is *The Rainbow* just such a copy? For three other hugely successful family-chronicle novels appeared in print shortly before Lawrence began writing *The Rainbow* in 1913: Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, which was first published in 1902; Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, which appeared posthumously in 1903; and John Galsworthy's *The Man of Property*, the first of *The Forsyte Saga* novels, which was published in 1906 - all works that Lawrence is known to have read.<sup>97</sup>

So the question I would like to raise and to explore is that of why Lawrence, the self-proclaimed iconoclast, would have chosen to write a family chronicle style novel at all. The structure of what I will be calling the family novel - that is, the three-tiered, multi-generational, family narrative - is, after all, the logical inheritor of the Victorian triple decker and is virtually synonymous with the most successful literary lights of late Victorian and Edwardian realism: the very literary forefathers against whose influence Lawrence was ostensibly rebelling. One potential answer, of course, is that Lawrence adopted the family-chronicle novel only to adapt it, in the same way that his *Lost Girl* constitutes not only a retelling of, but a rejoinder to Bennett's

<sup>97</sup> Moore tells us that Lawrence advised Blanche Jennings in a letter of November 1, 1909, to read Galsworthy's *Man of Property* (Moore 57). He also notes that "At Gargnano [in 1912], ... Lawrence had found fault with the contemporary writers - Conrad, Bennett, Galsworthy - whose books Garnett had sent him" (199). The 1913 Mann essay establishes that Lawrence had already read *Buddenbrooks*. And Else Jaffe-Richthofen recalled that Lawrence had given her a copy of *The Way of All Flesh*, though the year of the gift is unspecified (Nehls 426). Daniel Schneider lists Butler as one of the authors, along with John Galsworthy, whom Lawrence would have read by "1910 or earlier" (47)



*Anna of the Five Towns*.<sup>98</sup> I believe Lawrence both adopts and adapts the family narrative, and the argument that I will present, therefore, is two-fold. First, I will contend that Lawrence reverted to the family chronicle form because that narrative structure embodies, by its very nature, a particular ideological critique of nineteenth-century Britain that Lawrence himself also wants to articulate. Second, after delineating the nature of that critique, I will go on to examine the ways in which Lawrence not only made use of the form but also altered it, thereby modifying as well the nature of the political and ideological analysis that his family narrative offers.

Before we can explore Lawrence's modification of the form, though, we need to consider what he gained in his adoption of it; and the issue becomes even more intriguing and confusing when we consider Lawrence's devastating public critiques of both Mann and Galsworthy. The Mann essay, interestingly enough, was written in Irschenhausen in May of 1913, at the very same time that Lawrence was continuing his work on *The Sisters*.<sup>99</sup> Although the piece concerns itself primarily with *Death in Venice*, and not with *Buddenbrooks*, it illuminates this discussion for a number of reasons. As Lawrence mentions *Buddenbrooks* in the essay, it establishes not only that he had read the novel before embarking on the work of *The Rainbow*, but that he was actively thinking about Mann's family chronicle as he did so. More germane, the

essay criticizes Mann precisely for what Lawrence saw as his crippling reliance on form. As Mark Kinkead-Weekes has helpfully paraphrased the argument, Lawrence decried Mann for representing the high point in Germany of the Flaubertian craving for form-as-mastery, seeking to impose the will of the artist over the formlessness and corruption of life (79).

The scathing Galsworthy diatribe comes much later - not until 1928 - but the enmity it expresses toward Galsworthy also dates to 1913, when Lawrence wrote to Edward Garnett, calling for "a reaction against Shaw and Galsworthy" and other writers of the older generation (Huxley, 105). Moreover, in this essay, Lawrence does attack Galsworthy's family chronicle specifically, dismissing its characters as mere "social beings" who are cut off from what he called "the sense of being at one with the great universe-continuum of space-time-life" (541). Once again, Lawrence juxtaposes flux, continuum, and formlessness against the social and the crafted, which become related, and analogously vilified, terms.

Why then, particularly in view of these bitter manifestoes, would Lawrence himself have turned to the very narrative form that had been popularized by precisely these literary arch nemeses? In order to explore this question, we need to theorize the family novel and the function of that narrative form. Rosemarie Bodenheimer, in *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction*, has made the argument that narratives which appear at the same historical moment and share a similar narrative structure "attest

<sup>98</sup> Richard Aldington, in his introduction to the Penguin Edition of *The Lost Girl*, relates the anecdote of how Lawrence conceptualized his novel as a response to Bennett's.

<sup>99</sup> According to Keith Sagar, Lawrence was working on *The Sisters* and the Mann essay simultaneously at Villa Jaffe in Irschenhausen during May of 1913.



to shared channels and impasses in social thought"(5). Drawing upon Fredric Jameson's assertion that narrative offers an "imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" (77), Bodenheimer goes on to say that "it is in the shape and movement of narrative ... that we may find the 'politics' of the novel ..." (3). The temporal trajectory that a narrative embodies, according to Bodenheimer, simultaneously negotiates ideological territory, thereby "giving fictional shape to social questions that were experienced as new, unpredictable, without closure" (4).

All four of the family chronicle narratives - Butler's, Mann's, Galsworthy's, and Lawrence's - do traverse the same "highly charged ideological territory." Each novel rehearses nineteenth-century social history in general and engages questions of class mobility and the shifting financial fortunes and social mores wrought by industrial and investment capitalism more specifically. Genealogical succession provides a convenient vehicle for portraying such temporal narrative movement, rendering the changing social landscape in the lives of three generations as they confront these upheavals. In fact, I would like to argue that the negotiation of just this temporal and political landscape constitutes the *raison d'être* of the Edwardian family novel. The narrative structure, by definition, requires a move back in time by two generations - in each case, therefore, to approximately 1840, the starting point of *The Rainbow* - and then a tracing forward of the genealogy to the present day. The emergence of the family chronicle as a sub-genre at just this historical moment suggests

that the form bespeaks a cultural anxiety about and an intense desire to make sense of this recent Victorian history.<sup>100</sup>

It is useful, I think, to contextualize Lawrence's narrative within this literary history, particularly in light of Charles Rcass's research that tells us Lawrence did not set out to write such a linear-historical narrative. He began by writing the story of Ursula and Birkin and Gudrun and Gerald Crich, and only subsequently felt the need to relate the history of Ursula's ancestors. What Lawrence discovered, I believe, is that there is a narrative logic embedded in the family chronicle; that one must employ this narrative structure in order to tell a certain kind of story - the kind of story he himself wanted to tell. And the narrative Lawrence ends up giving us, of course, is that of England's move, by way of the Brangwens, into a modern, industrial landscape and the social ramifications of the incursion of industrial capitalism into the Midlands. Although we cannot reduce *The Rainbow* and its significance only to that economic narrative, it is certainly true that much of the ideological work of the novel involves tracing the rise of the Brangwen family from agricultural labour to wage labour to petty bourgeois professionals, and from farm to village to modern red-brick suburbia.

To greater and lesser degrees, this is the story that all of the family narratives tell. In virtually every case, the narrative follows

<sup>100</sup> The psychoanalytic critic Peter Brooks has noted the intense desire during this period, exhibited by historians, sociologists, and others, for "an explanatory narrative that seeks its authority in a return to origins and the tracing of a coherent story forward from origin to present" (6)



the steadily rising trajectory of the family fortunes<sup>101</sup>, and that social mobility does not figure as an unproblematic good. In fact, in all of the English versions of the family narrative, the results of that mobility, and particularly the obsession with material prosperity, are presented as obstacles the modern generation must overcome. Each narrative, therefore, culminates with a protagonist who rebels against and thwarts that social and narrative trajectory. In all four cases, the final generation refuses to participate in and carry on the financial world of the previous generations, and at the same time fails to procreate and produce yet another generation to continue the upward socio-economic trajectory. Butler's George Pontifex, Mann's Hanno Buddenbrooks, and Irene Forsyte all engage in the same rebellion as Ursula's, with minor variations, against a conflation of family, capital, and the imperative of ever-rising social and monetary trajectories. Narrative structure, in this way, becomes complicit in this politically-valenced formulation. The narrative first establishes the family as an entity that moves through time and that embodies and reflects social, political, and economic trends - particularly those linked to capitalism and the resulting expansion of the middle class. But all four narratives then proceed to stymie that movement and, invariably, end with the death of the last protagonist or with emigration. In either version, the ending signals the death of the family, either literally, as the last generation dies out without progeny, or symbolically, as the last descendants leave England permanently. Insofar as the family is conflated with England and with the political and economic

system that drives it, these conclusions register protests, of varying degrees, against the national history that the family embodies. The structure offers an imaginary solution to the contradiction of reconciling individual fulfilment in a commodifying universe.<sup>102</sup> And this, of course, is the ideological work that Ursula accomplishes at the end of *The Rainbow*, when she seeks a new life in the "man's world" of work, only to find that she must look elsewhere, and, in the process, puts a stop to the family's upward mobility and its solidification in the bourgeoisie.

So, we can see that, in spite of Lawrence's claims to innovation and experimentation, *The Rainbow* is in many ways a product of its era, participating in an established genre in order to make a shared claim about Victorian history and the contradictions of the capitalist system. The related narrative trajectories of all four chronicles indicate that Lawrence's fundamental political analysis, ironically, is not unlike that of Butler, Mann, or Galsworthy. There are, undoubtedly, variations and relative degrees of political radicalism and conservatism among them, depending mostly on the class origins of the author; but the social conditions to which each narrative responds are the same, and the imaginary resolution that each posits is similar.

<sup>102</sup> Moore notes that *The Rainbow* resembles *Buddenbrooks*, but he maintains that Mann's novel "remains throughout a family-chronicle novel. *The Rainbow*, Moore argues, "begins in this fashion but becomes something quite different, a vehicle for expressing the consciousness of a single character, a character of a very special kind" (224). The distinction fails, however, because all of the family chronicles move into this mode, abandoning the family and following instead the vicissitudes and desires of the championed individual subject. While, as I will discuss, Lawrence's modernist preoccupation with subjectivity itself, is obviously a difference between him and his Edwardian predecessors, this distinction applies to the entire narrative, not only to the third section dealing with Ursula. The difference between Lawrence's work as a family novel resides in its matrilineal trajectory, and not in its ultimate focus on Ursula.

<sup>101</sup> Only in Mann is the trajectory that of the "decline of a family", which is the novel's sub-title



There is a crucial way, however, in which Lawrence's narrative trajectory differs from those of his three predecessors and, in that difference, his novel adapts and even subverts the family narrative that the others offer. Most critics would probably locate that difference in Lawrence's privileging of subjectivity and depth psychology, as opposed to the "old stable ego" and the surface of social life for which both Lawrence and Virginia Woolf attacked realists like Galsworthy.<sup>103</sup> The difference might be located in the broader divergences of Victorian high realism and an incipient modernism. Such a schematization is obvious and important, but I would like to distinguish Lawrence's family chronicle from the others in different terms, and ones which again situate meaning, and political ideology, in narrative trajectory. The key distinction to be made in terms of narrative form is that Lawrence is the only of the four authors who structures his genealogical narrative matrilineally. In doing so, he locates the narrative outside of the trajectory of work and social mobility and instead traces the family narrative in a parallel world of private domesticity.

In offering a family trajectory that runs along matrilineal as opposed to patrilineal lines, and focusing on the domestic as opposed to the public sphere, Lawrence privileges private time, and private life, over historical time and the realm of public life in which Galsworthy's hated "social beings" exist. Lawrence could have structured the novel in Galsworthy's, or Mann's or Butler's

<sup>103</sup> See, for example, Woolf's essays "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown"; "Modern Novels"; and "Character in Fiction".

terms, had he focused exclusively on the male line: on Tom Brangwen and his life and work, followed by Will, and then a third male ancestor. In doing so, the primary emphasis would fall, if one follows the prototype, on the changing fortunes, the profession, and the public life of each protagonist. By ordering the narrative instead along the lives of the women of the family, *The Rainbow* covertly works against the ideology of the family novel as a genre, which, even as it rebels against it, situates meaning and purpose in the economic and public sphere. In Lawrence's narrative, the private, the domestic, and the female take precedence, marking a de facto protest against the public world of the Edwardian family novel. Such a critique resonates in Ursula's childhood conviction that there existed an

old duality of life, wherein [was] a weekday world of people and trains and duties and reports, and besides that a Sunday world of absolute truth and living mystery. (266)

That Sunday world signifies here not only the religious and sacred but, more importantly I think, that which is opposed to the male world of work. That male world is public and commercial and dulling; the Sunday world is female and private, and in it one can find "truth".

It is because of its focus on interpersonal relationships and the metaphysical, as opposed to the social and historical, that Graham Holderness has argued provocatively that *The Rainbow*



actually "ceases to be a historical novel" at all (12). Because this domestic realm takes place outside of the historical framework that the novel sets up, Holderness argues that *The Rainbow's*

'evolving generational' structure' has no historical content. It merely presents three different settings for dramas of personal relationship: agricultural pastoral, rural village, and industrial city. (186)

I would like to argue the point somewhat differently. Bodenheimer notes that departures from the realist and historical, rather than deserting the real, the political, and the ideological, actually engage them all the more in their insistence upon the need for alternatives to that so-called real world. *The Rainbow*, in its inversion of what would normally be taken to represent the real and historical in the literature of the day, only serves in its alternatively gendered narrative structure to call that interpretation of "the real" into question. In Jameson's terms, we might note what is absent or repressed in *The Rainbow*. The answer, I would argue, considering *The Rainbow* as a family chronicle novel, is that it suppresses what is usually foregrounded: the historical and the economic. In doing so, Lawrence's novel registers both anxiety about and a rebellion against that very definition of the real.

*The Rainbow* paradoxically both engages and represses social history, and it does so by offering two simultaneous narrative trajectories that complement and critique one another.

The external, social, historical trajectory resides in the world of work and, for the first two generations, is carried on by the Brangwen men, as Tom's agricultural labour is replaced by Will's wage labour in the lace factory. At the same time, however, the Brangwen women occupy a redeeming domestic space, which acts as the opposite of and an antidote to that commodifying and alienating "man's world." The private displaces the public. As the novel privileges the female, the private, and the sacred - the opposite of the male and the economic - it also suggests the relative nature of that "man's world." Ursula's foray into, and ultimate rejection of, that economic world echoes a critique that the entire narrative has made, implicitly, all along.

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