Organic Metaphor as Mutual Agency in *The Rainbow*

Published in *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, November 2020 at

https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/JEZ7V3CDJHKDY5ZVHQB8/full?target=10.1080/14688417.2020.1844034

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Abstract:

The material turn in ecocriticism has been partly based upon Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) and Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010). Whilst Barad proposed the notion of 'intra-action', Bennett developed the idea of agency in matter and its apprehension in human affect. Taking its starting point in D. H. Lawrence's remarkable articulation of the mutual biosemiotics of his relationship with a tree in his essay 'Pan in America', this paper challenges the conventional anthropocentric way of reading organic metaphors in Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow* to open the possibility of a more complex understanding of mutual agency and affect in the performativity of natural matter's intra-action with Lawrence's characters. Can flowers and floods be read as acting, not as metaphors for human emotions, but actually cause those states of being – not correlative, but causal? Was Lawrence implying a kind of mutual agency in some key organic metaphors in *The Rainbow*?

Keywords: metaphor, agency, D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, ecofeminism

Organic Metaphor as Mutual Agency in *The Rainbow*

Over the last twenty-five years I have been undertaking ecofeminist readings of D. H. Lawrence, the first of which was published in *Études Lawrenciennes*, No 12, in 1996. In that essay, '"Anotherness" as a Construction of Nature in D. H. Lawrence's *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*' I took the notion of 'anotherness' from pioneering American ecofeminist, Patrick Murphy, who, in turn had taken this idea from Bakhtinian dialogics. This seventh essay in my series shows the extent of the development of the notion of 'anotherness' – of 'being another for others' in 'the ecological processes of interanimation' as Murphy put it (1995, 23). We now have the study of 'biosemiotics' – how organic subjects read each other's sign systems – and of 'vibrant matter' – how all matter has agency and therefore 'intra-action' – mutual, penetrative, bringing forth of action. The speed of the

development of new terms in ecocriticism might tempt some of us who were in at the beginning, in the UK at any rate, to observe the reinvention of the wheel. But actually each reinvention is usually a refinement and hence I am happy to explore here the refinements and further implications of my earlier use of 'anotherness'. Of course, the term 'ecofeminism' has itself evolved from the work of French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in the early 1970s when women world-wide were seen to be on the sharp end of environmental degradation and therefore privileged voices in engagement with issues of what is now called 'environmental justice' (see Shiva 1989). If this present essay appears to be less concerned with gender than the implications for reading metaphor in Lawrence, it has reached this position as a result of an ecofeminist reading of *The Rainbow* that has been influenced by the theories of a number of ecocritics to whose work I am indebted.

In Dorothy Brett's painting 'Lawrence's Three Fates' (1958) his wife Frieda sits at the head of a table in the kitchen of the cabin at the Kiowa Ranch in New Mexico, whilst to her right sits Mabel Dodge Luhan, who invited the Lawrences there, and to her left sits Brett herself, typing Lawrence's manuscripts. Lawrence himself is seen through the doorway sitting writing whilst leaning against a great tree. When Lawrence was searching for an image to represent the spirit of 'Pan in America' in the essay of that title, he needed to look no further than to turn his head towards the huge ponderosa pine outside his cabin at the Kiowa Ranch, against which he was probably leaning at the time. What he expressed in this writing was a dynamic process of mutual affect that only now has the potential of being theorised by the material turn in ecocriticism.

> I have become conscious of the tree, and its interpenetration into my life. Long ago, the Indians must have been even more acutely conscious of it, when they blazed it to leave their mark on it. I am conscious that it helps to change me, vitally.
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> I am even conscious that shivers of energy cross my living plasm from the tree, and I become a degree more like unto the tree, more bristling and turpentine, in Pan. And the tree gets a certain shade and alertness of my life, within itself. (2009, 158)

The material turn in ecocriticism has been partly based upon Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007) and Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010). Barad proposed the material entanglement of things, human and non-human, at such a deep level of 'intra-action' between their elements as to eradicate, to a degree, boundaries between matter and human subjectivity. Bennett developed the idea of agency in matter, but, as Pippa Marland has pointed out (2015, 122), neglected its apprehension in human affect. Wendy Wheeler has drilled down into the biological structures of affect in her exploration of the cultural implications of biosemiotics, the intuitive mutual readings of sign systems between the human and the non-human. From the perspective of phenomenology Kate Rigby has explored Gernot Böhme's sense of 'participating in the articulate presence of things' (2020, 63). Ecofeminist literary criticism has, meanwhile, been considering the gender implications of this re-enchanted material turn, especially in the work of Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino. Here I want to explore the

implications of these theoretical approaches for a new way of reading metaphor, symbolism and affect in *The Rainbow* that will lead to a remarkable expression of the empowerment of Ursula at the novel's conclusion.

It is quite clear that what Lawrence was intuiting in his relationship with his tree is an 'intra-action', to use Barad's term, that assumes his tree's relationship with him. We are beginning to scientifically understand much more of the way trees know and remember and take action in relation to the organic and inorganic presences in their environment, including the human, so that it is not in the least fanciful when Lawrence writes that 'the tree gets a certain shade and alertness of my life, within itself'. 'Of' is an interesting word here, suggesting that the tree might know more than the human expects; and the almost throw-away phrase 'within itself' deepens the mystery of what we know we do not know. The German forester Peter Wohlleben's recent popular book *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016) reveals the scientific evidence for the way in which humans and trees read each other's signs in a biosemiotic exchange that has a time-scale beyond a human life. But within a short time of living next to this particular pine tree Lawrence was, 'conscious that it helps to change me, vitally'. In advance of Jane Bennett's notion of 'vibrant matter', this tree has made 'its interpenetration into my life', says Lawrence, in such a way as to change it at the deepest level, 'vitally'. When, only a few years earlier, Lawrence had been trying to write a chapter for his book *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922) about the unconscious in a baby, he was so distracted by his awareness of the 'soundless drumming' of the 'tree-blood' in the tree against which he was leaning at the time that his pencil covered pages of his exercise book with a 'digression' on the

significance of tree-worship. At first he deleted this passage from the manuscript, but, with an apology to the reader, he finally left this 'digression' in the published version of *Fantasia of the Unconscious* because it illustrates the futility of trying to keep separate the realms of the 'sensual' and the 'spiritual', the conscious and the unconscious (2004, 85-88). So when, in *The Rainbow*, as a teenaged university student Ursula is in the depths of alienation from other human beings, she clings to her connectedness with the organic world by expressing this in relation to a tree: '"I could never die while there was a tree," she said passionately, sententiously, standing before a great ash, in worship' (1989, 311). That Lawrence is aware of the exaggerated earnestness of this teenage declaration is suggested by his use of 'sententiously'.

There is more to be said about the role of trees and the attitude to tree worship for Lawrence (Gifford 2021), but here I want to consider the literary implications of the 'intra-action' that Lawrence identified in 'Pan in America'. Ursula's passionate 'worship', with all the spiritual suggestiveness of that word, arises, Lawrence is at pains to point out, from what he has identified in the previous sentence as 'odd little bits of information'. It is the material reality of vibrant matter that connects Ursula as an organic being to the living universe in which she has a sense of herself:

> When she knew that in the tiny brown buds of autumn were folded, minute and complete, the finished flowers of the summer nine months hence, tiny, folded up, and left there waiting, a flash of triumph and love went over her. (1989, 311)

'Triumph' may be an inward feeling, but 'love' is an outgoing one. 'Triumph' may need

some explanation, which Lawrence supplies a few lines later: 'She was not afraid nor ashamed before trees and birds and the sky. But she shrank violently from people, ashamed she was not as they were, fixed, emphatic, but a wavering, undefined sensibility only, without form or being' (1989, 311). So is it possible that when Lawrence uses images of trees, birds or sky he is, at times, demonstrating their affect, rather than using them as what T. S. Eliot called an 'objective correlative'? If trees, birds and sky have agency might they not, on occasions, be causal rather than correlative? Do flowers and floods sometimes act, in Lawrence's novels, not as metaphors for human emotions, but actually cause those states of being? In other words, might some organic metaphors in *The Rainbow* act in what might be thought of as a 'mutual agency' rather than how a conventional anthropocentric reading would expect them to be acting?

If Lawrence believes in the agency of organic matter as an 'intra-action' with the human he is refuting Ruskin's 'pathetic fallacy' with a much more complex dynamic in his use of organic imagery which renders symbolisation simplistic and anthropocentric. Ursula does not project her love upon the great ash tree, but, on the contrary, takes her love from the 'information' its buds contain. And this is not a symbolisation of renewal but its material reality that speaks to her and includes her. An ecofeminist reader would note that the force of Ursula's apprehension of rebirth within those autumn buds gives her 'a flash of triumph' as a woman particularly aware of a shared significance in those words 'nine months hence'. She offers the tree her love because the tree has offered her its connectedness in fertility and renewal. At this moment in *The Rainbow* Lawrence reveals both woman and tree acting upon each other, rather than one simply reflecting the other,

or one standing as an external correlative of the internal state of the other. Similarly, information and emotion act upon each other within Ursula, just as the material and the spiritual cannot be separated in this 'flashing' moment of insight and empathy. Such a complex state of 'intra-action' puts a strain on the word 'causal' which might assume separate subjects, as in 'interaction'. The limitations of language are being challenged here, in the attempt to convey the mutual affect that Lawrence attempts to convey with the word 'interpenetration'.

Of course, *The Rainbow*, as its title indicates is undeniably a novel in which symbols play a central role. But a closer reading of some of those key passages reveals a more complex dynamic at work in which the agency of rainbow, moon, stars and sky is an active element in the novel as Lawrence chooses to tell it. In the opening chapter Tom Brangwen, lambing under a February sky, makes a connection which Leavis was one of the first to recognise (1964, 114) as enlarging any sense of what it is to be human: 'looking out from the shelter into the flashing stars, he knew he did not belong to himself' (1989, 40). He is not looking 'at', but 'into' the stars, perceiving a sense of 'the whole host passing by on some eternal voyage'. The mystery of that voyage is overwhelming, but also paradoxically enlarging at the very moment of belittling: 'So he sat small and submissive to the great ordering'. Feeling part of 'the great ordering', and being on a voyage within it, is what Lawrence explores in the generations of the farming family in this novel. When, in the next generation, Anna Brangwen is expecting her second child, secure in her deep knowledge of her husband, Lawrence again expresses her understanding of her position in relation to universal voyaging. She sees the dawn and

says, '"It is here". And when, at evening, the sunset came in a red glare through the big opening of the clouds, she said again, "It is beyond"' (1989, 181). The present is also within the 'beyond', as suggested by 'and' rather than 'but', endorsed by the word 'again', as though they are the same thing to her. When Lawrence writes that 'Dawn and sunset were the feet of the rainbow that spanned the day, and she saw the hope, the promise' (1989, 181), he has first introduced his central symbol as 'an archway, a shadow-door' (1989, 181) through which Anna questions where she must journey. But by the end of the chapter, which is titled 'Anna Victrix', she has understood that she herself is a natural doorway: 'still her doors opened under the arch of the rainbow, her threshold reflected the passing of the sun and the moon, the great travellers, her house was full of the echo of journeying' (1989, 182). Anna has seen the moon that 'had looked through a window of the dark night, and nodded like a magic recognition, signalled to her to follow' (1989, 182), but has now understood that her 'journey' is to 'stay at home now'. To fully understand the symbolic role of the rainbow in this novel is to see dawn and sunset, sun and moon, as vibrant matter to which Anna is responding with a corporeal connectedness. In a sense, what might appear to be a static symbol of an arch, is actually the great frame under which dynamic natural processes take place that Anna now knows link her to universal processes: 'her threshold reflected the passing of the sun and moon'.

It was not ever thus for Will and Anna Brangwen. In the early days of their marriage, 'He came to her fierce and hard like a hawk striking and taking her' (1989, 151). Anna's response is to become a hawk herself, but with more than one bird's repertoire of behaviour: 'She too was a hawk. If she imitated the pathetic plover running

plaintive to him, that was part of the game.' The biosemiotic behaviour of the female lapwing is to deceive a predator into thinking that she is injured, plaintively calling whilst limping just out of reach, to lead it away from her chicks. More than metaphor here, Lawrence lends to Anna learned bird strategies that she consciously, he says, 'imitates'. This empowers her as a female: 'she goaded him from his keen dignity of a male, she harassed him from his unperturbed pride, till he was mad with rage' (1989, 151). What began as simile in Will ('like a hawk') becomes, in the changing dynamics of the encounter, empowered conscious 'imitation' in Anna that might be called 'reverse metaphor'.

In her recent book *Reclaiming Romanticism* (2020) Kate Rigby has explicated for English speaking ecocritics what she calls Gernot Böhme's 'ecological aesthetics'. She translates from the German Böhme's notion of the human experience of atmosphere in place as, not intrinsic to place, but a participation, a sharing of a physical existence that is sensuously apprehended: 'An aesthetic relation to nature consists in allowing oneself to be spoken to by it. Sensual perception means participating in the articulate presence of things' (2020, 63). In the famous night corn harvesting scene in Will and Anna's courtship, where 'a large gold moon hung heavily to the grey horizon' (1989, 113), Lawrence's creation of a charged atmosphere is usually focussed upon the tension between the two lovers as they at first avoid touching in their rhythmic collection and stacking of sheaves. This is, indeed, the narrative purpose of the scene. But the moon does more than heighten the visual atmosphere. It does more than act as a metaphor for Anna's female power. Anna experiences what Rigby calls, after ecofeminist Val

Plumwood, her 'ecological self'. When Will draws near to her with his sheaves, Anna turns away to fetch hers. 'And there was the flaring moon laying bare her bosom again, making her drift and ebb like a wave' (1989, 114). Rigby's words might be about this very scene in *The Rainbow*: 'Recovering a sense of our own corporality, we discover also that we are ineluctably, for better or worse, ecological selves, existing in environments and with others by whom, like it or not, our psycho-physical state of being is inflected' (2020, 63). The agency of the moon has been felt by Anna, heightening and strengthening her sexual awareness, so that her 'drifting' in this moment is as natural as a wave's ebbing under the moon's agency. To push the notion of 'reverse metaphor' to its limit one might say that in this moment Anna is a metaphor for the moon's power. Indeed, when they kiss for the first time here she *is* the mystery of the moon and darkness for Will:

> He wondered over the moonlight on her nose! All the moonlight upon her, all the darkness within her! All the night in his arms, darkness and shine, he possessed of it all! All the night for him now, to unfold, to venture within, all the mystery to be entered, all the discovery to be made. (1989, 116)

Tom Brangwen's death in the flood at Marsh Farm is an interesting example of mutual agency and subsequent reverse metaphor in action. It is possible to view Tom Brangwen's drowning as the symbolic conclusion to what Colin Clarke calls the '*downward* movement' in the novel (1969, 46) and in the latter part of Tom Brangwen's life in particular. H. M. Daleski's language is significant here: 'In the end he slips back into a submersion in the physical immediacies and mysteries of farm life' (1965, 90). Daleski's sense of the lack of growth in Tom Brangwen's life, and his frustrated

awareness of this failure is caught in the line he quotes from Lawrence: 'He trampled himself to extinguish himself' (1989, 120). But in Lawrence's writing the flood is not a correlative but causal, or, if you prefer, both, since they are not mutually exclusive. Tom's early frustration is caught in a telling sentence: 'And Brangwen went about at his work, heavy, his heart heavy as the sodden earth' (1989, 70). It is his attraction to the water over the earth of his farm that draws him into the flood:

> He went to meet the running flood, sinking deeper and deeper. His soul was full of great astonishment. He had to go and look where it came from, though the ground was going from under his feet. He went on, down towards the pond, shakily. He rather enjoyed it. (1989, 228-9).

Certainly he is drunk and certainly astonishment quickly turns to fear, anguish, suffocation and blackness. But Lawrence begins this brief narrative of death with a recognition of what the vibrant force of the flood gives before it takes, and what the human 'intra-action' with water takes – a soul-filling wonder - before he gives up his life to the flood, becoming, as a 'rolling' body, himself part of the 'rolling' water's affect upon cattle and farm dog: 'The cattle woke up and rose to their feet, the dog began to yelp' (1989, 229). Fiona Becket, in her discussion of modes of metaphor in *The Rainbow*, does not specifically identify the mutual reversals suggested by Lawrence's mode of metaphor here, but recognises its implications: 'The "freedom" evinced by the "wave" is the freedom to be a part of the whole, within the larger milieu. The individual and the background become one, which is the mode, the specifically linguistic mode, of *The*

Rainbow' (1997, 125).

I began with Ursula's affinity with trees and I conclude with her association with flowers which, as in any Lawrence novel, play a recurring and complex role in *The Rainbow*. Ursula learned her affinity with flowers from her father who, despite his love for the church, was acutely aware that 'There was much that the church did not include' (1989, 191). Lawrence cites the field of dandelions Brangwen crossed on his way to work in the cathedral: 'the bath of yellow glowing was something at once so sumptuous and so fresh' (1989, 191). The anthropocentric language is so surprising as to suggest cause more strongly than correlative – 'sumptuous' in 'glowing' yellow, and 'fresh' as a 'bath'. It is this attunement to nature and to flowers that her father awakens in Ursula, rather than the other children, before she is really aware of what is happening: 'Wide-eyed, unseeing, she was awake before she could see' (1989, 205). But this sensitivity is endorsed by her Polish grandmother who tells her about wearing, as a girl, 'a wreath of little blue flowers, oh, so blue, that come when the snow is gone' (1989, 237). This seasonal folk tradition is echoed in the Christmas decoration of the church where Ursula weaves holly, fir, yew and mistletoe until, Lawrence writes, 'a new spirit was in the church, the stone broke out into dark, rich leaf, the arches put forth their buds, and cold flowers rose to blossom in the dim, mystic atmosphere […] and the church was like a grove' (1989, 260). This 'cycle of creation' in the church year, which Lawrence rather heavy-handedly goes on to emphasise, is also echoed in the generational associations when Ursula walks with her lover Skrebensky, with flowers 'quivering like shadows under the ash trees of the hill, where her grandfather had walked with his daffodils to make his proposal, and where her

mother had gone with her young husband' (1989, 278). This is more than mere location to Ursula's trained sensitivity: 'Ursula was aware of the dark limbs of the trees stretching overhead, clothed with leaves, and of fine ash-leaves tressing the summer night' (1989, 278).

All these details of accumulating sensitivity and affinity build towards Lawrence's final claim that she is herself a flower when Ursula comes into herself as woman in love fully embedded in nature. She has listened to her affinity with flowers when making crucial decisions, providing critiques of her role as a teacher – her 'little weeds' could not 'blossom' in the system of the unnatural classroom (1989, 341, 346). At university, despite changing from studying French to Botany, she still saw the 'sham' of the university's purpose in serving 'the god of material success' (1989, 403). In each case Ursula has engaged with flowers on her way to classrooms that she came to despise and reject. These are the social conditions in which she must attempt to find fulfilment, so, of course, Lawrence tests her idealism against the darkness and dissolution to which Colin Clarke drew attention. But at one moment in the novel Ursula 'became proud and erect, like a flower putting itself forth in its proper strength' (1989, 411) and at this moment the organic simile has earned, through Lawrence's recognition of mutual agency, something of an equity with other natural beings that deepens what we call simile and metaphor. This enlargement beyond selfhood is brought forth by the process of 'interpenetration' with a lover that has its origins in the human erotic but includes her wider organic universe. In an exemplification of reverse metaphor Ursula 'flowers' in an organic sense as a natural being finding her 'proper strength' in her womanhood as the universally

connected ‘flower of humanity’:

> She became proud and erect, like a flower putting itself forth in its proper strength. His warmth invigorated her. His beauty of form, which seemed to glow out in contrast with the rest of people, made her proud. It was like deference to her, and made her feel as if she represented before him all the grace and flower of humanity. She was no mere Ursula Brangwen. She was Woman, she was the whole of Woman in the human order. All-containing, universal, how should she be limited to individuality? (1989, 412)

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