

## Hugh Stevens

From Genesis to the *Ring*: Richard Wagner and  
D. H. Lawrence's *Rainbow*

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This article explores connections between D.H. Lawrence's 1915 novel *The Rainbow* and Richard Wagner's music drama *The Ring of the Nibelung*. It argues that Ursula, the novel's third-generational Brangwen, turns from Christianity to a comparative mythology that merges Christian, Hellenic, and Germanic tales of creation, destruction, and renewal. It suggests that the apocalyptic scenes of the novel's closing chapter draw both from the tetralogy as a whole as well as from its first part, the 'preliminary evening' *Das Rheingold* (*The Rhinegold*). The Wagnerian connections complicate interpretations of the novel's main image, the rainbow itself. Whereas the rainbow, in the Old Testament, symbolizes God's covenant with humanity, in *The Rhinegold* it is a symbol of the gods' delusion and folly, their desire to turn their backs on the shameful acts which have enabled them to take possession of Valhalla. Rather than making the novel easier to interpret, paying attention to Wagnerian connections intensifies the novel's ambiguities, as the novel shares the *Ring*'s uncertainty about the questions it poses so dramatically, most importantly the question of whether a realm of love can redeem a corrupted order of law and power.

### Keywords

D.H. Lawrence; *The Rainbow*; Richard Wagner; *The Ring of the Nibelung*; The Bible



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The music came in waves.  
(D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*)<sup>1</sup>

In his essay 'Coming to Terms with Richard Wagner', Thomas Mann remarks that 'it is not difficult to catch a whiff of the spirit that informs the *Ring* in my own *Buddenbrooks*, that epic pageant of the generations, linked together and interwoven by leitmotifs'.<sup>2</sup> This spirit is above all a spirit of generational conflict, with the younger generation represented by a Messianic figure who fulfils or overturns the laws of her or his divine and mortal, masculine and feminine progenitors. The generations are ostensibly connected through a patrilineal line of descent, but the patriarchy is often undermined by matrilineal influences. In the Bible, we can think of a patriarchy leading from God to Adam through many masculine generations to Mary and Jesus, or of a matriarchy leading from Eve to Anne, Mary and the Christ-child, who has no legitimate biological father. In Richard Wagner's 'stage-festival drama for three days and a preliminary evening' *The Ring of the Nibelung*, Siegfried, the masculine redeemer, is son of Siegmund and grandson of Wotan, ruler of the Gods.<sup>3</sup> Matriarchy works to undo this divine patriarchal order. Siegfried's mother is Sieglinde, Siegmund's twin sister, and these siblings have an unknown mother, described by Fricka as a 'she-wolf' (RN 143). His lover Brünnhilde, Wotan's daughter (his father's and mother's half-sister), is daughter of Erda, the earth goddess, and it is from her mother that Brünnhilde has inherited her eco-feminism. In D.H. Lawrence's 'epic pageant' – his fourth novel *The Rainbow*, first published in 1915 – the leitmotifs of earth, air, fire, and water link generations of the Brangwen family, culminating in the third-generational figure, Ursula. In Ursula's genealogy a matrilineal line (Anna Lensky/Brangwen, Ursula's mother, is Tom Brangwen's stepdaughter but is also the daughter of Lydia Lensky, the Polish woman) is pitted against a patrilineal line (Ursula's father Will, Tom's nephew, is the son of Alfred Brangwen, Tom's older brother). And in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks: The Decline of a Family* (1901), the place of the hero Siegfried is filled by the young homosexual Hanno, fourth in a line of Buddenbrook men.<sup>4</sup> This sickly, effeminate child is bullied at school and his great solaces are his love for his aristocratic friend Kai and his love of music. Although Hanno dies of typhoid fever, his effeminacy and love of Wagner seem to be the real causes of his death. Lawrence's third-generational heroine, Ursula, is vital and potent where Hanno is frail and morbid. *The Rainbow* is a tale of regeneration and renewal, unlike Mann's novel of degeneration and decadence.

We often see, in these sagas or pageants of the generations, unconventional modes of sex and breeding. It seems that it is difficult (though perhaps not impossible) to conceive a Messiah with one's spouse. In the

New Testament an unmarried virgin conceives using a divine sperm donor programme organized by an angel. In the *Ring*, a married woman conceives in an adulterous liaison with her twin brother. In *The Rainbow*, Ursula is conceived in wedlock, but her parents' love for each other involves '[a]ll the shameful things of the body . . . [a]ll the shameful, natural and unnatural acts of sensual voluptuousness'; her parents 'accepted shame, and were one with it in their most unlicensed pleasures' (R 220). And Ursula herself shows no interest in what Nancy Chodorow calls 'the reproduction of mothering'.<sup>5</sup> She conceives a child out of wedlock, but miscarries when she falls from a tree while fleeing a pack of frenzied horses. If a new growth will come, it will not be conceived through the ways of old marriage.

Nowhere does Lawrence state that he wanted his fourth novel, *The Rainbow*, to be thought of in Wagnerian terms. In his second novel, *The Trespasser*, a hero called Siegmund commits suicide, a scenario which is explicitly played out with reference to the *Ring* and *Tristan and Isolde*. In *The Rainbow*, the echoes of Wagner are less conscious. (Stoddard Martin considers that in *The Rainbow* 'overt Wagnerian motifs reappeared; but, unlike in *The Trespasser*, they were woven into Lawrence's own system so subtly as to be virtually invisible'.<sup>6</sup>) Yet the novel seems to owe more to Wagner than does *The Trespasser*. In one of his essays on Apocalypse, Lawrence remarks that 'language has a power of echoing and re-echoing in my unconscious mind',<sup>7</sup> and the motifs of the *Ring*, so consciously woven into *The Trespasser*, seem to echo unconsciously in *The Rainbow*. *The Rainbow* and the *Ring* are both three-generational sagas which begin in divinity and end in mortality, begin with creation and end in apocalyptic promise of a new order. It probably was not Lawrence's intention to structure the three generations of Brangwens, at the centre two Brangwen cousins, Anna and Will, on lines that echo the three generations of gods in the *Ring*, with its central generation of the Wälsung twins. But the echoes are inescapable.

Apocalyptic destruction followed by vital renewal: this is the mythic pattern invoked repeatedly in *The Rainbow*, a pattern present in the tale of the Flood alluded to in the novel's title. But we cannot interpret destruction and renewal in the novel with reference to any single coherent allegorical framework. The meaning, or meanings, of the novel are elusive. When Cynthia Asquith asks Lawrence early in 1916 'about the message of the *Rainbow*', he tells her, 'I don't know myself what it is', qualifying his unwillingness to authorize any interpretation, however, by continuing,

except that the old order is done for, toppling on top of us: and that it's no use the men looking to the women for salvation, nor the women looking to sensuous satisfaction for fulfilment. There must be a new Word.<sup>8</sup>

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While we cannot arrive at the final meaning of this new Word, as we cannot arrive at that one meaning which does not exist, we can trace the pathways which lead to its formation. *The Rainbow* might be seen as involved in that very process – the novel narrates the history which brings it into being, charts the route which leads from a Victorian evangelical understanding of Apocalypse to a new mythology which ‘took religion and rid it of its dogmas, its falsehoods’ (R 317).

*The Rainbow* begins in the Old Testament, but ends in a different world, in which the rainbow has the myriad colours of Hebraic, Hellenic, and Germanic mythologies. And the flood and fire which combine to form the rainbow took on especially modern colourings when Lawrence worked on the fourth and final version between November 1914 and August 1915.<sup>9</sup> During these months he completely revised the book, and in this new version, he claimed in a letter to his former colleague, the schoolteacher Arthur McLeod, there will be ‘a new sort of me for you to get used to’. He anticipates that ‘when Methuen gets the *Rainbow*, he’ll wonder what changeling is foisted on him. For it *is* different from my other work . . . I am coming into my full feather at last’. These changes stem in large part from Lawrence’s reaction to World War I. After proclaiming the birth of this new me, Lawrence goes on to reproach McLeod for his willingness to fight.

What do you mean by saying you’d go to war? No, the war is for those who are not needed for a new life. I hate and detest the war, it is all wrong, all foolish, all a wicked mistake. (Letters II, 255)

The war hastened Lawrence’s development from realist novelist to mythic visionary, and intensified his own war, a quixotic war fought against the towering windmills of Western Civilization itself. The changeling Lawrence becomes a prophet railing against the madness of a world which refuses to listen to him. He is Cassandra, Isaiah, Jeremiah, John of Patmos. In a letter to Ottoline Morrell in which he complains that ‘the state is a vulgar institution’, Lawrence announces that ‘the time has come to wave the oriflamme and rally against humanity and Ho, Ho, St John and the New Jerusalem’ (Letters II, 254). He informs Katherine Mansfield of the need to ‘kill the monstrous existing Whole, and then declare a new order, a new earth’ (Letters II, 658). Death and rebirth, destruction and renewal, crucifixion and resurrection, ashes from which birds and flowers emerge: Lawrence’s vision of a new world emerging from the ashes, or the flood, or from some other great disaster, reminiscent of the terrible disasters wrought by God in the book of Genesis, or of the sufferings of the Christ, is drawn constantly in his letters, essays, poetry, and fiction of the war years.

In his poem 'Resurrection', written in October 1915 and published in *Poetry* in June 1917, a crocus flower and a cyclamen emerge from the ashes of a funeral pyre:

Now, like a crocus in the autumn time,  
My soul comes lambent from the endless night  
Of death – a cyclamen, a crocus flower  
Of windy autumn when the winds all sweep  
The hosts away to death, where heap on heap  
The dead are burning in the funeral wind.<sup>10</sup>

This great conflagration suggests the dead of World War I, a connection Lawrence makes explicit in a letter written on 28 November 1915 to Lady Cynthia Asquith, in which he quotes (or slightly misquotes – he writes 'My soul comes naked from the falling night/Of death', an improvement on the version printed in *Poetry*) these lines, and comments: 'They burn the leaves in heaps on [Hampstead] heath – and the leaves blow in the wind, then the smoke: and the leaves are like soldiers' (Letters II, 455).

Although Lawrence has often been castigated as a misogynist, patriarchal prophet of the phallus, his vision of cultural renewal, during the war years, draws on feminine inflexions of millenarian rhetoric. Anne Fernihough alerts us to connections between *The Rainbow* and socialist uses of the 'visionary language of millenarianism for more secular purposes', and the relevance of late nineteenth-century feminist writings which were 'part of this utopian vision'. Fernihough discusses the belief 'in a female Messiah whose appearance would prefigure the transition from old to new', and claims that it is possible to view 'Ursula Brangwen as a latter-day female messiah, proffering redemption from a world characterized . . . by a masculinism run riot'.<sup>11</sup> In the end of masculinism, then, will be a new feminine beginning. This mucky world will be destroyed, and a new world will dawn, with good, clean, naked people. As Ursula thinks at the close of the novel, the 'sordid people who crept hard-scaled and separate on the face of the world's corruption . . . would cast off their horny covering of disintegration', and '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' (R 459). A blurb for the first edition of the novel – printed on the spine of the dust jacket, and possibly written by Lawrence himself – claims that

This story, by one of the most remarkable of the younger school of novelists, contains a history of the Brangwen character through its developing crises of love, religion, and social passion. It ends with

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Ursula, the leading-shoot of the restless, fearless family, waiting at the advance-post of our time to blaze a path into the future.<sup>12</sup>

The Biblical patriarchy has produced a female inheritor, a female saviour.

A heroine blazing a path into the future: this formulation could also describe Brünnhilde, another pyromaniac messianic female. In the closing scene of the fourth instalment of Wagner's tetralogy, *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*), Brünnhilde sets fire to Siegfried's funeral pyre and the hall of the Gibichungs. Men and women, 'moved to the very depths of their being', watch as the flames miraculously rise up to the sky 'and seem to flare up in the hall of the Gods' (RN 351). At the end of the first part of the tetralogy, *Das Rheingold* (*The Rheingold*), a rainbow bridge escorts the Gods to their heavenly home; but at the close of *Götterdämmerung* the flames are destructive. Brünnhilde knows that with her actions, 'der Götter Ende/dämmert nun auf' ('the end of the gods is dawning now', RN 350).

*The Rainbow's* blending of myth and realism has fascinated critics, but has also proved difficult to interpret. At the beginning of the novel we are presented with a portrait of several generations of a farming family in the British Midlands. The repeated use of Biblical motifs – in particular, invocations of the book of Genesis, 'the book of the generations of Adam' (Genesis 5:1) – suggests that the Bible will be the novel's major structuring myth. 'The Brangwens had lived for generations on the Marsh Farm' (R 3), we are told in the novel's first sentence, and these 'generations' are like the generations of Adam, Seth, Enos, and their descendants. The Brangwens are sons and daughters of God and of Adam, children of the Bible's founding fathers. They are celestial creatures who have become terrestrial, rooted in the rich land by the Erewash river 'separating Derbyshire from Nottinghamshire' (R 3).

But this is a novel as much about God's retreat from the world as his presence in it. At the centre of the novel's three generations are Anna and Will. Will 'loved the Church' (R 159), and Anna dances naked 'to the unseen Creator who had chosen her, to Whom she belonged', just as King David had 'danced before the Lord, and uncovered himself exultingly' (R 170). (It does not escape Lawrence, just as it did not escape 'Michal Saul's daughter', David's wife, that David danced *au naturel*. Michal feels that her husband's frolics are *infra dig*, and mocks him: 'How glorious was the king of Israel to day, who uncovered himself to day in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovereth himself!' (2 Samuel 6:20). David is Lawrence's own first name, and Lawrence's own writing can be seen as a process of shamelessly uncovering himself, peeling the onion, exalting in his own body.) Anna and Will are settled in the 'buildded house',

their door ‘opened under the arch of the rainbow’, their ‘threshold reflected the passing of the sun and the moon’ (R 182). In their love they are Adam and Eve, but also they are like angels: Lawrence compares them with a range of seraphim.<sup>13</sup> The sun from the sky links them to the heaven and to God, filling them with angelic essences and attributes. Their ‘pure love came in sunbeams between them, when she was like a flower in the sun to him’, and Will feels with Anna ‘as if his soul had six wings of bliss’ (R 158). Here Will is like one of the seraphim seen by the prophet Isaiah standing above the throne of the Lord: ‘each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly’ (Isaiah 6:2). Loving Anna, Will feels infused with God’s divine substances: he feels ‘radiance from the Almighty beat through him like a pulse, as he stood in the upright flame of praise, transmitting the pulse of Creation’ (R 158). (This ‘upright flame of praise’ is just one of many of the novel’s beauties, beauties of cadence and of phrasing.) And Anna sees Will as the Angel Gabriel: ‘when he stood in the doorway, his face lit up, he seemed like an Annunciation to her . . . She was subject to him as to the Angel of the Presence’ (R 158). Here again the book of Isaiah is invoked. Will recalls the angel who saves the House of Israel, an angel who represents the Lord’s ‘lovingkindnesses’ (Isaiah 63:7), who embodies the Lord’s empathy with his people’s suffering: ‘In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old’ (Isaiah 63:9).

This succession of angelic visitations leads us to expect that Will and Anna’s child will be a saviour, a Messiah, ushering us into a new world. But as Ursula grows up, she moves from a Christian world into a post-Christian world shaped by modern understandings of comparative mythology. God abandons, or is abandoned by, the third generation. (‘What? Is man just God’s mistake? Or is God just man’s mistake? –’ Nietzsche asks in *Twilight of the Idols*.<sup>14</sup>) After the Flood (the novel’s ninth chapter is ‘The Marsh and the Flood’) the circle widens (Chapters 10 and 14 are both called ‘The Widening Circle’), and as the circle grows, so God’s presence in it recedes. The novel’s 11th chapter, ‘First Love’, is decisive in signing Christianity’s death warrant. As Ursula Brangwen ‘passed from girlhood towards womanhood’, her ‘religion, which had been another world for her . . . fell away from reality, and became a tale, a myth, an illusion’ (R 263). (Ursula is born in 1883, so this falling away happens in the last few years of the nineteenth century.) The religious stories cannot be true ‘for this present-day life of ours’, and Ursula has come to believe ‘that that which one cannot experience in daily life is not true for oneself’ (R 263). In the previous chapter, we have been told that the Brangwen

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children 'lived the year of Christianity, the epic of the soul of mankind' (R 261). In 'First Love', however, Christianity loses its central place. On a 'fresh Sunday morning' in the church, Ursula reads to herself from the ninth chapter of Genesis, 'her favourite book in the Bible', and fails to be moved by the story of God's promise that his 'bow in the cloud' will be a 'covenant . . . between me and you and every living creature of all flesh' stating that 'the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh' (R 301–302). Thinking of the story, Ursula 'wished she had been a nymph. She would have laughed through the window of the ark, and flicked drops of the flood at Noah' (R 302). She is aware that there is more than one mythology, that Christian gods compete for our attention with other mythical creatures. And these other creatures, dryads, fauns, naiads, and nereids, are preferable to Ursula than 'Noah and Shem and Ham and Japheth', full of the importance of being 'the only men on earth . . . masters of everything, sub-tenants under the great Proprietor' (R 302). Lawrence cut three pages from the typescript which describe in more detail Ursula's vision of the Biblical narrative merged with other mythologies. In this longer version of her fantasia, Ursula imagines that Jesus

shall give himself to the breasts of desire and shall twine his limbs with the nymphs and the oreads, putting off his raiment of wounds and sorrows, appearing naked and shining with life, the risen Christ, gladder, a more satisfying lover than Bacchus, a God more serene and ample than Apollo. ('Textual apparatus', R 630)

Ursula's erotic imaginings draw from German folklore as well as Grecian mythology. On the next page we are told that Ursula and her lover Skrebensky are

lovers, in a young, romantic, almost fantastic way. He gave her a little ring. They put it in Rhine wine, in their glass, and she drank, then he drank. They drank till the ring lay exposed in the bottom of the glass. Then she took the simple jewel, and tied it on a thread round her neck, where she wore it. (R 303)

This ring is one of the novel's most important symbols: *The Wedding Ring* was the working title for the novel before Lawrence decided to call it *The Rainbow*. Ursula and Anton are re-enacting a ritual described in 'Rheinischer Bundesring', or 'Rhenish Wedding-Ring', one of the poems in Achim von Arnim's and Clemens Brentano's early nineteenth-century collection of German folk poems, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*.<sup>15</sup> The poem tells how a workman, mowing grass by the Rhine, throws a golden ring into the



river, knowing that the ring will eventually be claimed by his sweetheart, after following a magical journey, into the sea, into a fish's stomach and onto a king's plate. And so Skrebensky's ring, having been thrown into the Rhine, ends up with his sweetheart. The love it symbolizes is more romantic and fantastic than Christian.

Yet the ring being thrown into the Rhine River suggests another work, not nearly so diminutive as the charming lyric from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* begins with gold being stolen from the Rhine, and ends when the magic ring that has been forged from this gold is returned to the river. The Rhinemaidens from whom the gold is stolen, and to whom it must be returned, are playful and mocking, just like the nymph Ursula imagines herself to be.

Another event in this chapter links the novel's challenge of divine authority with the waning of the power of the gods in Wagner's music drama. On a visit to Derby, Ursula and her lover Skrebensky visit a 'large church', only to find that the interior 'was filled with scaffolding, fallen stone and rubbish were heaped on the floor' (R 275). The church's 'immemorial gloom' is 'full of bits of falling plaster and dust of floating plaster', with 'scaffolding and rubbish heaped about' (R 275). This crumbling interior prefigures the apocalyptic rhetoric of the novel's close, but also suggests the ruined edifices at the end of Wagner's *Ring*. To Ursula, 'Everything seemed wonderful, if dreadful, to her, the world tumbling into ruins, and she and he clambering unhurt, lawless over the face of it all' (R 275). As in the *Ring*, an order of law, embodied by Wotan, the ruler of the Gods, is being supplanted by a new order, a 'New Word', built on the power of love. As Ursula and Skrebensky drive home from Derby, he tells her of a subaltern, Chatham, and his 'girl in Rochester', who like to use 'a particular corner in the cathedral for . . . love-making' (R 276). When Skrebensky suggests that these actions might be regarded as 'a profanity', Ursula defends the couple: 'I don't think it's a profanity – I think it's right, to make love in a cathedral' (R 276). It is not likely that the 16-year-old girl has read Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, published in English in 1854 in a translation by George Eliot. But her thoughts are very close to one of Feuerbach's central ideas. Like Ursula, Feuerbach wants to renounce the importance of orthodox monotheism for the sake of love:

As God has renounced himself out of love, so we, out of love, should renounce God; for if we do not sacrifice God to love, we sacrifice love to God, and, in spite of the predicate of love, we have the God – the evil being – of religious fanaticism.<sup>16</sup>

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In the novel's last chapter, 'The Rainbow', parallels between the novel and the *Ring* are at their most intense. At the beginning of the chapter, it occurs to Ursula that she might be pregnant. Here is Lawrence's description of her reaction to this discovery:

In the first flaming hours of wonder, she did not know what she felt. She was as if tied to the stake. The flames were licking and devouring her. But the flames were also good. They seemed to wear her away to rest. She let the flames wrap her and destroy her to rest. (R 448)

Although it is not unknown for a saint to be tied to the stake and burned (this was the fate of Joan of Arc, and also of St Agnes of Rome), Ursula's extramarital pregnancy suggests that she is being burned as a heretic by the holy, rather than as a saint by the impious. Her pregnancy distances her from her namesake Saint Ursula, the British saint martyred (slain by Huns) in Cologne together with 11,000 virginal handmaidens – a glorious harvest of souls, what Gerard Manley Hopkins might call a 'heaven-flung, heart-fleshed, maiden-furled/Miracle-in-Mary-of-flame'.<sup>17</sup> We know from what we have already read in the novel that Ursula's pregnancy is not the outcome of an immaculate conception.

Yet why do these flames, instead of destroying her, wrap Ursula to rest? Any reader familiar with the *Ring* will perceive here another connection between Ursula and the pagan goddess Brünnhilde. In the closing scene of *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*), the second part of the tetralogy, Wotan surrounds his sleeping daughter Brünnhilde with a ring of fire. He calls for the god of fire, Loge, to help, and Wagner's stage direction tells us that a 'stream of fire' (RN 191) emerges from the rock, and gradually gets brighter and brighter. Wotan directs the flames to encircle Brünnhilde. *The Valkyrie* ends with Wotan proclaiming that 'He who fears my spear-point shall never pass through the fire!' (RN 191) – Brünnhilde's fire-ring will only be penetrated by a great hero, one brave (or fearless) enough to break Wotan's spear with a thrust of his own tremendous sword. This hero is Siegfried, Wotan's grandson, the son of his daughter Sieglinde and his son Siegmund. Siegfried positively relishes the opportunity of 'bathing' himself in the fire:

<i>Ha! Wonnige Glut!</i>	Ha, rapturous glow!
<i>Leuchtender Glanz!</i>	Radiant gleam!
<i>Strahlend nun offen</i>	The pathway lies open,
<i>steht mir die Strasse.</i>	shining before me.
<i>Im Feuer mich baden!</i>	To bathe in the fire!
<i>Im Feuer zu finden die Braut!</i>	To find the bride in the flames!
	(RN 264)

Siegfried's discovery of and waking up of his bride Brünnhilde creates the hope of a new order, an order of love which replaces the old order of law.

The novel's last chapter weaves a rainbow using a spectrum of Wagnerian colours. The wood near Beldover where Ursula takes shelter from rain becomes a primeval, supernatural landscape, malevolent and threatening:

the vast booming overhead vibrated down and encircled her, tree-trunks spanned the circle of tremendous sound, myriads of tree-trunks, enormous and streaked black with water, thrust like stanchions upright between the roaring overhead and the sweeping of the circle underfoot. She glided between the tree-trunks, afraid of them. They might turn and shut her in as she went through their marshalled silence. (R 450)

This terrain is an ominous space to enter when carrying a child in one's womb. Its 'circle of tremendous sound' (or ring cycle?) is all at once operatic, heavenly, and aqueous, a river where one might encounter Rhinemaidens, a Valhalla flanked by enormous giants or tree-gods. The elements here are dangerously unstable, pregnant with possibility. Sound circles, forms physical spaces; tree-trunks become black water, water morphs into fire. Lawrence's prose rolls in sequences of waves, his words form music through the interlacing and patterning of repetitions and variations. Elemental repetitions sound through the prose like heartbeats, pulses, throbs, and waves. The complexity of the prose co-exists with a primitive music, the rites of summer, winter, autumn, and spring. Lawrence began working on the final version of the novel in 1914, a year after the premiere of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, and Ursula at times is like a dancer in the *ballets russes*, dancing madly to the powerful wild colours and smells of nature:

the scents of autumn were like a summer madness to her. She fled away from the little, purple-red button-chrysanthemums like a frightened dryad, the bright yellow little chrysanthemums smelled so strong, her feet seemed to dither in a drunken dance. (R 285)

(The purple-red and bright yellow might be colours from costumes or sets by Léon Bakst.)<sup>18</sup>

But Wagner, not Stravinsky, is the musical and poetic muse inspiring Lawrence's creation. Visually and aurally, Wagner begins the Ring Cycle with the waves of the Rhine. The orchestra builds the waves before we hear words, and the words, when they come, seem built out of water.

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The v-sound of *Wasser* (water) permeates the opera's opening cry, uttered by Woglinde as she swims gracefully around a rock reaching up into the 'thick, brightly dawning waterflood' (*die dichtere, heller dämmernde Wasserflut*):

<i>Weia! Waga!</i>	Weia! Waga!
<i>Woge, du Welle!</i>	Swell, you wave!
<i>Walle zur Wiege!</i>	Surge to the cradle!
<i>Wagalaweia!</i>	Wagalaweia!
<i>Wallala weiala weia!</i>	Wallala weiala weia! (RN 57)

The alliterative v-sounds announce with striking boldness that alliteration and repetition will cycle and circle throughout *The Ring*. Before the echo of Woglinde's name (*Woge*), Wagner has placed a primitive or baby talk version of his own name (*Waga*) in the opening line of this eerie lullaby. It is as if the waves are emerging from his own body, breaking to the rhythm of his own heartbeat.<sup>19</sup> Small inflections move *Waga* into *Woge* and *Wiege*, *Welle* into *Walle*, *Wallala*, and *weiala*; the two sequences merge with *Weia* in *Wagalaweia*, and the sequence circles round, beginning and ending with *Weia*. Missing but multiply buried or encrypted in these Wallalish lullaby sounds is *Wala*, which in the Ring cycle functions as another name for Erda, the earth goddess.<sup>20</sup> When Wotan rouses Erda from her underground condo in *Siegfried*, he calls, '*Wache, Wala! / Wala, erwach!* (Waken, vala! Vala, awake!, RN 254). It would be Freudian, but not too fanciful, to think at this moment that *Waga* or *Wagner* is calling to his own mother, or that Wotan calls his heavenly home *Walball* in homage to the mother, *Wal* being a contraction of *Wala* and *Hall* a German word for echo.<sup>21</sup> A *Hallraum* is an echo-chamber, and mothers reverberate throughout the chamber music of *The Ring*. We are echoing Thomas Mann, who writes serenely of the importance of Wagner's 'erotic mother complex', when we notice how much of Wagner is 'pure Freud, pure psychoanalysis'.<sup>22</sup> (Note how accurately Mann's comments on Wagner apply to Lawrence.)

Wagner's wavy words emerge out of a primal tidal swell of music. The orchestral prelude of *The Rheingold* builds great waves of sound out of primordial arpeggios in Eb major, and in Wagner's own (unreliable) account of the opera's creative genesis, these waves appeared to him in a strange somnolent state, in which he sank into water:

Returning home in the afternoon, I stretched out dead tired on a hard sofa, to await the long-desired hour of sleep. It did not come; instead I sank into a sort of somnolent state, in which I suddenly felt as if I were sinking in rapidly flowing water. Its rushing soon

represented itself to me as the musical sound of the E $\flat$  major chord, which continually surged forward in a figured arpeggiation; these arpeggios appeared as melodic fragments of increasing motion, yet the pure E $\flat$  triad never changed . . . Feeling as though the waves were now roaring high above me, I awoke in sudden terror from my half-sleep. I recognized instantly that the orchestral prelude to *Das Rheingold* . . . had risen up out of me; and I also quickly grasped how things were with me: the vital stream would not flow from without, but only from within.<sup>23</sup>

Such vital streams of music flow through *The Rainbow*, just as, at the wedding party of Ursula's Uncle Fred, 'Waves of delirious darkness ran through her soul' (R 295). The dancers at the wedding party are like Rhinemaidens, 'quick and fluid and as if in another element, inaccessible as the creatures that move in the water' (R 295), and Ursula and Skrebensky, dancing together, are

absorbed into a profound silence, into a deep, fluid, underwater energy that gave them unlimited strength. All the dancers were waving intertwined in the flux of music. Shadowy couples passed and re-passed before the fire, the dancing feet danced silently by into the darkness, it was a vision of the depths of the underworld, under the great flood. (R 295)

These strength-giving waves differ from the waves in the final chapter, which threaten the pregnant Ursula. She sees 'the great veils of rain swinging with slow, floating waves across the landscape', and feels herself 'far enveloped in the rain and waving landscape. She must beat her way back through all this fluctuation, back to stability and security' (R 451).

But the landscape throws up a new threat, as Ursula encounters a group of horses, with 'red nostrils flaming with long endurance', and a 'hard, urgent, massive fire . . . locked within [their] flanks', a fire that cannot be put out by 'the darkness and wetness of rain'.<sup>24</sup> Recalling sunshine flowing into dark water, or a rainbow shining after rain, the horses produce fiery colours that flash out of the darkness and wetness. They move with a 'great flash of hoofs, a bluish, iridescent flash surrounding a hollow of darkness . . . the bluish, incandescent flash of the hoof-iron, large as a halo of lightning round the knotted darkness of the flanks' (R 452). (Note Lawrence's Germanic coinage, hoof-iron, an Anglo-Saxon kenning, and his alliteration of flash and flank that binds the sentence together.) These horses, 'brandishing themselves thunderously about her, enclosing her', are not only primitive, they are also products of a sophisticated stage-machinery, resembling as they do the flying horses of the

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Valkyries, the furious movement of which is captured so vividly in the Ring Cycle's most celebrated (and ridiculed) musical moment, the Ride of the Valkyries. Pregnant in a hostile landscape, Ursula's predicament resembles that of Sieglinde, who carries Siegfried within her after the death of her brother and lover Siegmund. And the lightning-flashes from the horses' hoof-irons emerge apocalyptically out of the very meeting between industry and nature which unleashes the Ring Cycle's vicious circles, its great cycles of destructive violence.

Most striking of all, however, is the image of the rainbow itself, which closes Lawrence's novel, and seems to promise to Ursula the emergence of a new order, which will be free of the 'dry, brittle, terrible corruption spreading over the face of the land' (R 458). The rainbow is not of the earth, because it mixes fire (of the sun) with water (of the rain) and exists in air. In the novel's final chapter, the world is represented as an 'unreality'; Ursula feels she must 'break out of it, like a nut from a shell which is an unreality' (R 456). Ursula feels that through her, as through Brünnhilde and Siegfried, a new order will be born:

She was the naked, clear, kernel thrusting forth the clear, powerful shoot, and the world was a bygone winter, discarded, her mother and father and Anton, and college and all her friends, all cast off like a year that has gone by, whilst the kernel was free and naked and striving to take new root, to create a new knowledge of Eternity in the flux of Time. (R 456)

Ursula's encounter with the apocalyptic horses causes her to miscarry (a startlingly primitive or pre-modern termination), but she carries within her a new knowledge, ample compensation for the loss of a baby she does not seem eager to bear. This new reality is manifested in the apparition of the rainbow in the closing pages of the novel. The rainbow emerges out of

the dun atmosphere over the blackened hill opposite, the dark blotches of houses, slate roofed and amorphous . . . in the blowing clouds, she saw a band of faint iridescence colouring in faint colours a portion of the hill. And forgetting, startled, she looked for the hovering colour and saw a rainbow forming itself. (R 458)

The rainbow promises a connection with heaven:

The arc bended and strengthened itself till it arched indomitable, making great architecture of light and colour and the space of

heaven, its pedestals luminous in the corruption of new houses on the low hill, its arch the top of heaven. (R 458)

The scene recalls the closing of the first part of Wagner's tetralogy, *The Rheingold*. Donner, the god of thunder, feels oppressed as

<i>Schwüles Gedünst</i>	A sultry haze
<i>schwebt in der Luft;</i>	hangs in the air;
<i>lästig ist mir</i>	its lowering weight
<i>der trübe Druck;</i>	lies heavy upon me; (RN 115)

and so he clears the air with a storm, and calls his brother Froh, the god of Spring, to create a rainbow bridge (*eine Regenbogen-Brücke*) of blinding radiance, which shines in the glow of the evening sun. The gods' rainbow bridge replaces the sultry haze just as Lawrence's luminous arc emerges after a sweeping away of the 'old, brittle corruption of houses and factories' (R 459). The rainbow is usually read in connection with the Biblical story, as representing God's promise after the flood, but Lawrence's rainbow shares as much with the rainbow at the end of *The Rheingold* as it does with the rainbow of Genesis chapter 9.<sup>25</sup> As the gods approach the bridge, which leads from the mountain tops to Valhalla, Loge (whose namesake, Loerke, will appear in *Women in Love*<sup>26</sup>), thinks to himself:

<i>Ihrem Ende eilen sie zu,</i>	They're hurrying on towards their end,
<i>die so stark im Bestehen sich wähen.</i>	though they think they will last for ever. (RN 117)

*The Rhinegold* then closes with the Rhinemaidens' bleak dismissal of the triumphing gods:

<i>Traulich und treu</i>	Trusty and true
<i>ist's nur in der Tiefe:</i>	is it here in the depths alone:
<i>falsch und feig</i>	false and fated
<i>ist was dort oben sich freut!</i>	is all that rejoices above! (RN 118)

The novel ends with Ursula seeing 'in the rainbow the earth's new architecture . . . the world built up in a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heaven', but this triumphant moment perilously ignores the deep, the underworld, the underwater. The Wagnerian notes sounded in Lawrence's rainbow suggest that its promise is tenuous, radically unstable, and fragile.

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In the Bible, the rainbow symbolizes God's covenant with humanity; it promises a period of peace after a great calamity. In Wagner's *Rheingold*, it is a symbol of delusion and folly, a 'preliminary' to a drama of conflict and destruction. In an influential article on Lawrence's apocalyptic imagination, Frank Kermode argued that *The Rainbow* 'came to represent the Old Testament (Law)' which was to be fulfilled by 'the New Testament (Love)' of its successor, *Women in Love*. The earlier novel ended by projecting 'a kind of Utopia' which was 'subjected, like the rest of the apocalyptic material, to Lawrence's own brand of scepticism'.<sup>27</sup> Recognizing the rainbow as Wagnerian as well as Biblical helps us see how the novel is always undermining the Old Testament authority it so powerfully evokes, always dramatizing a conflict between Christianity and nineteenth-century modernity.

Thus the rainbow holds within its arch a spectrum of all of the novel's meanings: the novel's critique of materialist feminism, its horror of industrialism, its rejection of nationalism as a doctrine which demands that the individual join the collective enterprise of killing and being killed, its refusal of doctrinal interpretations of scripture and of religion. In other words, even if the rainbow is difficult to read – if reading involves giving the rainbow a fixed meaning – it is still Ursula's rainbow, and as such it is a rainbow of rejection, refusal, and renewal, a rainbow that disengages her 'from all the vast encumbrance of the world', even as it invites her to know the world, Erda, and her birds, beasts, and flowers, in a terrific embrace. Lawrence's comment to Cynthia Asquith that men cannot look to women for salvation, that women cannot look to sensuous satisfaction for fulfilment, illustrates the difficulty of reading *The Rainbow*. Much of the novel seems to suggest precisely that message – that in our bodies we will find salvation from 'corruption triumphant and unopposed', from the 'hideous obsolescence' of the 'old church-tower', and from the horrors of an 'amorphous, brittle, hard-edged' modernity of coalfield industrialism (R 458). But the dreadful failure of the relationship between Ursula and Skrebensky indicates that this salvation is elusive, as difficult to reach as the rainbow's pedestals. The 'new germination' and 'new growth' promised in the novel's final paragraph have nowhere been represented in the novel itself.

The novel's closing ambiguity echoes the notorious illegibility of *The Ring*. Wagner famously wrote two alternative 'endings' to his cycle, and then set neither of them to music. (The meanings, he thought optimistically, would be present in the music itself, and so Brünnhilde would not need to spell them out.) In the optimistic 'Feuerbach ending', Brünnhilde announces, 'I now bequeath to that world my most sacred wisdom's hoard . . . love alone' (RN 363). In the 'Schopenhauer ending', she claims to be fleeing from 'the home of desire' (the 'Wunschheim'), which is only a



'home of delusion' (a 'Wahnheim'), to 'the holiest chosen land', a land in which a world contaminated by 'Grieving love's profoundest suffering' has come to an end (RN 363). The changeling Friedrich Nietzsche, who morphed from Wagner's most loving, rapturously adoring admirer to his most severe, yet coruscating critic, was scornful about Wagner's failure to consolidate the meanings of his *Ring*. Wagner's ship, Nietzsche claims in *The Case of Wagner*, 'ran blithely' along an optimistic course, '*the emancipation of woman* – "the redemption of Brünnhilde" . . . Siegfried and Brünnhilde; the sacrament of free love; the dawn of the golden age; the twilight of the gods, as far as the old morality is concerned'. But then it hit the reef, and 'Wagner was stranded. The reef was Schopenhauer's philosophy; Wagner was stranded on a *contrary* worldview'. And so, Nietzsche claims, Wagner 'translated the *Ring* into Schopenhauerian'.<sup>28</sup> But of course, as many critics contra Nietzsche have pointed out, Wagner did *not* translate the *Ring* into Schopenhauerian; rather he left us with a work of art whose contradictions are manifold. The meanings of the *Ring* may be present in its music, but they are not especially transparent: critics have been disagreeing about the opera's meanings ever since the cycle was first performed.

Ursula's vision of redemption at the close of the novel is as radically illegible as the closing inferno of *Götterdämmerung*, blazing (not stranded) with contrary worldviews. At times she is thinking on Schopenhauerian lines, wishing that she 'could but disengage herself from feeling, from her body, from all the vast encumbrance of the world that was in contact with her' (R 456). This wish, however, is contradicted by her thought that she would 'recognise a man created by God. The man should come from the Infinite and she should hail him' (R 457). At one point Lawrence's Brünnhilde has moved beyond desire, beyond the corruption of relationships; at another she still seems to be waiting for her Siegfried. Does Siegfried arrive in the novel's sequel? If the man whom she should hail is Rupert Birkin, the hero of *Women in Love*, that novel also gives no clear answer to the question it poses so urgently: the question of whether we can find, in relationships between men and women, men and men, women and women, some kind of respite from a persistently destructive, all too human world.

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### **Acknowledgements**

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### Notes

- 1 D.H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, ed. Mark Kinkead-Weekes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 295. Subsequent references (to R) are given in parentheses.
- 2 Thomas Mann, 'Coming to Terms with Richard Wagner' in *Pro and Contra Wagner*, trans. Allan Blunden (London: Faber, 1985), p. 46.
- 3 All references (to RN) to the libretto and variations are to *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung*, containing the full German text and an English translation by Stewart Spencer, ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993). I give the original German as well as Spencer's translation for longer quotes.
- 4 Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks: Verfall einer Familie* (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1901).
- 5 Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978).
- 6 Stoddard Martin, *Wagner to 'The Waste Land': A Study of the Relationship of Wagner to English Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 175. Martin has a whole chapter on Lawrence and Wagner (pp. 168–193); further discussions of the influence of Wagner on Lawrence can be found in William Blissett, 'D. H. Lawrence, D'Annunzio, Wagner', *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 7.1 (1966), pp. 21–46, and John Louis DiGaetani, 'Situational Myths: Richard Wagner and D. H. Lawrence' in *Richard Wagner and the British Novel* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1978), pp. 58–89. None of this critical work discusses *The Rainbow* at length.
- 7 'Introduction to *The Dragon of the Apocalypse* by Frederic Carter' in Mara Kalnins (ed.), *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), pp. 54–55.
- 8 Letter to Cynthia Asquith, 7 February 1916, *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence, Volume II: June 1913 – October 1916*, George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 526. Subsequent references (to Letters II) are given in parentheses.
- 9 For a detailed account of Lawrence's writing and revision of the fourth version of the novel, see Mark Kinkead-Weekes, 'Introduction', R xxxvi–xlv. Kinkead-Weekes points out that changes made to the final version reflect 'Lawrence's increasing opposition to regimentation and war, and his new impatience with Christian democracy' (R xliii).
- 10 D.H. Lawrence, 'Resurrection', *Poetry*, 10 (1917), pp. 139–141.
- 11 Anne Fernihough, 'Introduction', D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, ed. Mark Kinkead-Weekes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), p. xiv.
- 12 Quoted in Keith Cushman, 'Lawrence's Dust-Jackets: A Selection with Commentary', *D. H. Lawrence Review*, 28.1–2 (1999), pp. 29–52 (35). Cushman is convinced that Lawrence wrote the blurb (pp. 34–35).
- 13 For more on angels in the novel, see Jeffrey Meyers, 'The Rainbow and Fra Angelico', *The D. H. Lawrence Review*, 7 (1974), pp. 139–155.

- 14 This is the seventh of Nietzsche's 'Arrows and Epigrams' in Judith Norman, Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (eds. and trans.) *Twilight of the Idols*, in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 157. The German title of Nietzsche's book, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, playfully puns on Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*.
- 15 'Rheinischer Bundesring' in Heinz Rölleke (ed.) *Des Knaben Wunderhorn: Alte deutsche Lieder*, collected by L. A. v. Arnim and Clemens Brentano (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1976), 3 vols. Vol. 2, pp. 16–17. The poem was set by Gustav Mahler, with the title 'Rheinlegendchen' ('Little Rhine legend'), in his cycle of songs *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (1892–1901).
- 16 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (London: John Chapman, 1854), p. 53.
- 17 Hopkins uses this phrase in his poem 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'.
- 18 The extravagant colour schemes in *Women in Love* suggest the influence of the visual aesthetics of Bakst and the *ballets russes*. In 1912 Frieda and D. H. Lawrence were treated to an impromptu private *ballets russes* performance in Icking, Bavaria, given by David Garnett:

you should see him dance Mordkin passion dances, with great orange and yellow and red and dark green scarves of F's, and his legs and arms bare . . . Such a prancing whirl of legs and arms and raving colours you never saw.

Letter to Edward Garnett (David Garnett's father), 4 August 1912, *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence: Volume 1, September 1901–May 1913*, James T. Boulton (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 429.

- 19 Wagner told Cosima Wagner that this opening song 'was like the world's lullaby'; cited in Dieter Borchmeyer, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, trans. Daphne Ellis (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 218. Stewart Spencer notes that these opening lines 'aroused amusement and incomprehension ever since the first public performance of the work in 1869, resulting in the whole of Wagner's *oeuvre* being dubbed "Wigalaweia-Musik"' ('The Language and Sources of "The Ring"', *The Rhinegold/Das Rheingold* [Opera Guides 35; London: John Calder, 1985], p. 31).
- 20 In the Old Norse *Völuspá*, the *Völva* was a giantess with prophetic powers. Curt von Westernhagen writes that Erda is 'unknown to German mythology and was Wagner's own invention, a Greco-German mother-prophetess, uniting Aeschylus's Gaea (*The Eumenides*, V, 2) and the Eddic *Völva* (from which Jakob Grimm deduced an Old High German *Wala*)'. In *Wagner: A Biography*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 161.
- 21 *Hall* is a contraction of *Halle*, German for hall. Stewart Spencer informs us:

Although Grimm glosses the name [Valhalla] as *aula optionis* (Hall of the Chosen), Wagner follows other authorities in deriving the initial

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element from ON *valr* = the slain. According to ON sources, Valhalla was a hall in which warriors who had fallen in battle, together with men and women who had been sacrificed to Oðin, would foregather to await the final battle, when they would sally forth to confront the forces of evil. Wagner has conflated this myth with another in which a single, unnamed giant is duped into building a fortress for the gods in return for the empty promise of the goddess Freyja. (*Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung: A Companion* [London: Thames & Hudson, 1993], p. 375)

Yet a modern (or nineteenth-century) German speaker hearing the *Ring* will find it easier to hear *Wala* in *Walhall* than Old Norse *valr*.

- 22 Thomas Mann, 'The Sorrows and Grandeurs of Richard Wagner' in *Pro and Contra Wagner*, trans. Allen Blunden (London: Faber, 1985), p. 98.
- 23 Richard Wagner, *Mein Leben*, translated and cited by Warren Darcy, *Wagner's Das Rheingold* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 62.
- 24 Cornelia Nixon notes: 'Nearly everyone who has written on *The Rainbow* has tried to lay a finger on the full meaning of the horses, and the variety of the results testifies to the irreducibility of the symbol'. *Lawrence's Leadership Politics and the Turn Against Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), p. 88.
- 25 See T.R. Wright, *D. H. Lawrence and the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 92–109, for the best discussion of *The Rainbow* as a 'rewriting of the Book of Genesis' (p. 109).
- 26 Loerke is often connected with Loki, most notably by F. R. Leavis, who 'taking the hint of the name Gudrun . . . can't help seeing in Loerke a connection with Loki'. Leavis considered that when Lawrence called Ursula's sister Gudrun he 'can't have been unmindful of the destructive part played by Gudrun in the saga of the Niblungs'. *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), p. 169. Loge is a Germanized version of Loki.
- 27 Frank Kermode, 'Lawrence and the Apocalyptic Types', *Critical Quarterly*, 10.1–2 (1968), p. 20.
- 28 *The Case of Wagner*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, p. 240. The ellipsis is Nietzsche's.