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Language and the Unconscious: The Radical Metaphoricity of Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious and Fantasia of the Unconscious

We profess no scientific exactitude, particularly in terminology. We merely wish intelligibly to open a way.
(Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious, F&P, pp. 234–5)

Language is not identified explicitly as one of Lawrence’s themes in Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious and Fantasia of the Unconscious, even though metaphor is so evidently the starting point for saying anything. The focus in this chapter is chiefly on the relation in his work between metaphor and ‘metaphysic’, a word that acquires a Lawrentian specificity. It does so as Lawrence repudiates, in the course of his career, Lascelles Abercrombie’s view that fiction must be in possession of a controlling ‘metaphysic’. Lawrence took an alternative view: ‘[I]f I don’t “subdue my art to a metaphysic”, as somebody very beautifully said of Hardy, I do write because I want folk – English folk – to alter, and have more sense’ (Letters, I, p. 544).

In the course of this examination I shall concentrate attention on some of the key areas of Lawrence’s ‘metaphysic’ as they are mediated by his books on the unconscious: these areas include his approach to the body/psyche polarity which Lawrence perceives to lie at the centre of modern thought, and which he at-
tempts to dismantle; vision and its relation to knowing; the metaphoricity of dream. In examining these preoccupations of Lawrence the discussion consistently returns to language: much of what is important in Lawrence has its own metaphoricity, or is articulated metaphorically, and for this reason, even, or perhaps especially, where the critical focus apparently lies elsewhere, the real subject of this chapter, and the next, is language and principally metaphor as an unavoidable mode of thought.

Lawrence’s books on the unconscious are not marginal although they are typically relegated to that status. Critical approaches to them tend to concentrate on the ‘literal’ status of Lawrence’s ‘metapsychology’. As these books are nominally about the unconscious, the reader first encounters Freud, or at any rate Lawrence’s Freud: of *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* Lawrence said, ‘It is not about psychoanalysis particularly – but a first attempt at establishing something definite in place of the vague Freudian Unconscious’ (*Letters*, IV, p. 40). The distinction is useful and interesting from one whose friends included a number of pioneering psychoanalysts in Britain. Lawrence ‘reads’ Freud by interacting with certain levels of his thought and bypassing others, but with his own ‘metaphysic’ clearly in view. Given the temptation to read Lawrence ‘reading’ Freud, I suggest that, in assessing the significance of Freud in Lawrence’s thought, the emphasis should be less on doctrinal questions and more on discourse. Lawrence’s sensitivity to Freud was in the first place a sensitivity to Freud’s metaphors, particularly as they, in Lawrence’s view, constituted an unacceptably rigid model of the psyche. It is largely the fixed term, the dominant discourse, which Lawrence finds inadmissible.

Evidently Freud’s ideas do not consistently determine the direction of Lawrence’s books on the unconscious. My emphasis is on Lawrence responding to a certain kind of language in Freud, but I do not see these books of the early 1920s as merely a response, a repudiation or a commentary. Freud’s metaphors, his conceptions, might have given rise to Lawrence’s essays but by the same token these essays also give rise to (Lawrence’s) Freud. This figure appears through the medium, as it were, of Lawrence who is creatively working in part with Freud’s terminology, his discourse.

These preliminary remarks attempt to reveal a particular appropriation of Freud in relation to Lawrence. There is no attempt