

A Spectral Dog Wordlessly Speaking Metaphorically in D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*

Already at the advent of animal studies, a wariness of metaphorical readings of animals was common. In 1985, Margot Norris argued that literary animals are typically “pressed into symbolic service as metaphors, or as figures in fable or allegory (invariably of some aspect of the human)”¹. The continuously prevalent concern is that reading an animal metaphorically absents its being from the text since its primary function is then to represent something other than itself.² Although these misgivings are warranted, shunning metaphor is an unfortunate strategy in reading literature, diminishing both the potential meanings of texts and those of literary animals.

Lawrence is a particularly useful writer for thinking about these issues. As Carrie Rohman has shown, “the animal possesses the kind of *being* that Lawrence wants to recuperate in humans”.³ She further identifies a risk that symbolism becomes “the abstraction that Lawrence rails against.”⁴ This would reduce animals to mere vehicles conveying human animality. However, Lawrence’s meticulous attentiveness to precisely the “being” of all creatures, together with his emphasis on embodiment, highlights the specificity of each animal in his texts.

With the help of Jacques Derrida, I think of metaphorical animals in terms of spectrality, in the sense of a ghost, but also of a scale with figurativity on the one end of the continuum and literality on the other. There is a haunting spectrality in metaphor since it presupposes a concurrent presence and absence, like a ghost simultaneously there and not there.⁵ Additionally, to evoke ideas associated with a metaphorical vehicle—say, an animal—the characteristics of this animal must also be conjured, quite literally. Any representation thus moves upon a spectrum, vacillating between figurativity and literality.

In *The Rainbow*, this is demonstrated by Tom Brangwen’s dog, who signifies in a scene at the beginning of the novel, where Lydia visits Tom to ask for butter for the vicarage. Although the two are barely acquainted, Tom is soon to propose to Lydia, and the meeting is dense with undercurrents that oscillate between alienation and pre-conscious attraction. This attraction is both illustrated and enforced by a dog, who, when Lydia enters the kitchen, “rose from the hearth and went to her.”⁶ Thereafter, in the middle of the verbal and emotional exchange between the two

¹ Norris, 17.

² As a typical example of this, Susan McHugh argues that metaphorical animals are “inhabiting literature without somehow being represented therein” (6). See also for instance Baker, ix; Armstrong, 2; Tyler, 23; Adams, 20ff.

³ Rohman, 101, italics in original.

⁴ Rohman, 123.

⁵ Derrida states that “the figure of the ghost is not just one figure among others. It is perhaps the hidden figure of all figures” (150).

⁶ Lawrence, 34.

humans, the dog “walked away from her to him. He bent down to it.”⁷ Ostensibly, this dog is a foreshadowing symbol of the loyalty and marital fidelity to come. In addition to this conventional image, it is also a metaphor of the wordless emotional exchange between Tom and Lydia: the dog’s movement between them simultaneously illustrates and strengthens their fragile connection, and when Tom bends toward it he indirectly also approaches Lydia whom it has just left. Thus, the dog figuratively signifies what is occurring between the humans while also physically contributing to it.

Accordingly, the dog is *there*, present in the room with them, and it communicates, showing that interaction can be primarily wordless, just as their nascent relationship. Tom responds to the dog’s advance by approaching it in a vertical movement of his body that parallels the dog’s recent horizontal one, and this is itself a form of precisely the unspoken communication that the dog is a metaphor of and that is thus also *taking place* in the scene, unmetaphorically. Likewise, the loyalty that the dog symbolizes is really there and is being expressed toward Tom. Had the dog been a different individual, growling and snapping at the intruding Lydia, it may still have functioned figuratively, but it would have evoked other dog connotations, and by extension it would have represented something very different. This dog represents devotion and nonverbal communication precisely because it is in fact itself devoted and speaks wordlessly. It is not reduced to figurativity; it communicates figurativity.

Hence, the dog’s metaphoricity does not eradicate its being in the text but at once highlights and draws upon this being. Its figurative connotations interact with its textual characterization, the two continuously reinforcing each other. They are not the dog itself, but neither do they eliminate it. The dog is spectrally present in the process, simultaneously itself there and not there, and it moves over the spectrum of figurativity, at once signifying figuratively and literally.

This spectral movement can be understood with Paul Ricoeur’s conception of metaphor as a trope of resemblance. Metaphor, Ricoeur asserts, is based upon similarity “perceived *despite* difference, *in spite* of contradiction.”⁸ This does not imply a fusion of two different things (such as a dog and wordless communication), but rather the perpetuation of their difference. In Ricoeur’s words, “the literal contradiction preserves difference within the metaphorical statement; ‘same’ and ‘different’ are not just mixed together, they also remain opposed.”⁹

Such a spectral fusion of likeness and difference is not explicit in Lawrence’s scene, but the text enables the reader to explicate and project it. Unless brought into intellectual focus, it will typically not be overtly stated in the reader’s mind (“the dog is/represents wordless communication”).

⁷ Lawrence, 36.

⁸ Ricoeur, 232, italics in original.

⁹ Ricoeur, 232.

Rather, the metaphor is embedded in the textual scene and realized through the reader's response to this scene as a whole rather than meditations upon the dog specifically. And it is in this response that the dog at once *is* this particular textual dog and *is not* a dog but a vehicle of figurative expression. However, since in metaphor the differential *is not* does not eradicate the identifying *is*, the dog is spectrally present even in the figurativity. Furthermore, it signifies not just by connoting meaning but also by producing it in the textual passage, communicating with the human characters through its body, as well as with the reader through its contribution to the sense of the scene. This is an intratextual process, evoked by the novel, albeit one that requires a specific kind of reading to be articulated and not just experienced. But even when un verbalized, it is there in the text, signified with, by, and through the dog and its spectral presence as absence.

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