

D.H. Lawrence's *Last Poems*: "A Dark Cloud of Sadness"

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## ABSTRACT

### D.H. Lawrence's *Last Poems*: "A Dark Cloud of Sadness"

This thesis is an examination of depression in D.H. Lawrence's *Last Poems* in the light of Julia Kristeva's theory of depressive discourse. Kristeva theorizes in *Black Sun* that depressed persons have difficulty communicating through ordinary symbolic means or language. In order to communicate, they must find new linguistic means to overcome sadness. Kristeva calls "depressive discourse" this attempt to overcome sadness through poetic language. Writing and art, and specifically poetry, can be depressive discourse, thereby allowing a certain level of recovery to occur. Once an individual can write about his or her sadness, the sufferer may experience a reprieve from depression, if only temporarily.

D.H. Lawrence's *Last Poems*, written in the last six months of his life and published posthumously, shows the crisis of depression in a dying man. The citation in the title is from Aldous Huxley's 1932 introduction to a volume of Lawrence's letters, describing Lawrence's change in mood in the last few months of his life (Huxley 30). Lawrence's particular use of rhythm, tone and imagery can be identified as an attempt to overcome this crisis through writing. The poems exhibit specific formal features such as irregular metre, sonorous sound and hypnotically repeated words and phrases, as well as images of darkness, falling, dying, oblivion, and heaven and hell, that, coupled with the knowledge of his personal state, can be interpreted as features of depressive discourse. Using particular examples of depressive discourse within D.H. Lawrence's *Last Poems*, this thesis will show that Lawrence was attempting to overcome his depression through poetry.

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## Introduction

Throughout his short life, D.H. Lawrence lived with sickness. He was a sickly child and he suffered more serious illnesses as an adult. In 1924, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and managed to live far longer than anyone expected (Huxley 28). Yet he himself expected to live: he refused to accept his illness until, finally, in early 1930, he died of the disease. Aldous Huxley was a close friend of Lawrence and was at his bedside upon his death. He writes that “in Lawrence there was a continuously springing fountain of vitality” (28). This describes Lawrence’s life; but in the two years before his death, “the laughter was bitter, and the high spirits almost terrifyingly savage” (28). Lawrence was a dying man and his “fountain of vitality” turned to “an overpowering sadness” (28). In his letters, “[w]e see [Lawrence] being drawn towards his fellows and then repelled again, making up his mind to force himself into some relation with society and then, suddenly, changing it again, and letting himself drift once more on the current of circumstances and his own inclinations. And finally, as his illness begins to get the better of him, we see him obscured by a dark cloud of sadness” (29-30). In that dark cloud, however, was a silver lining: some of Lawrence’s best poems were written within six months of his death. And what Huxley saw at first hand we see through those poems of the posthumous *Last Poems* volume. Though confined to bed most of the time, Lawrence still wrote. His poems, like his letters, convey his sadness, for he was trying to negotiate the grief and pain of his approaching death through writing. If he could describe the very things he feared, perhaps they would not scare him so much; perhaps he would be prepared for the “longest journey” (Lawrence, *Complete Poems* 724).

Lawrence writes that his *Collected Poems* of 1928 “make up a biography of an emotional and inner life” (CP 27). Aldington agrees: “Lawrence’s writing was not something outside himself, it was part of himself, it came out of his life and in turn fed his life” (594). Critic R.P. Blackmur, in his essay “Lawrence and Expressive Form,” famously argues that since Lawrence incorporates so much of his personal life into his writing he fails as a poet: “Lawrence developed as little art as possible, and left us the ruins of great intentions; ruins which we may admire and contemplate, but as they are ruins of a life merely, cannot restore as poetry. Art was too long for Lawrence; life too close” (300). Vivian de Sola Pinto titles Lawrence a “poet without a mask”: his expressive form and intensely personal subject matter allow Lawrence to express his thoughts and feelings in poetry without impediment (De Sola Pinto 1). Graham Hough concurs, arguing that Lawrence’s poems are best read as separate pieces of a whole rather than independent works: “Lawrence’s poetry is rarely read as a whole. Perhaps it should be, for it is poetry rather than poems – a body of work poetically felt and conceived whose individual units rarely reach perfection or self-subsistence” (Hough 191). From his early novels to his later poems, elements of his life and life’s experiences have been inextricably included within his writing. *Sons and Lovers*, written in 1912, tells the story of Lawrence’s childhood and adolescence in the form of Paul Morel’s. *Women in Love* describes the complex relationship between Lawrence and his wife, Frieda, as well as between Lawrence and his friends.

Born in 1885 in Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, to a collier father and a devout Christian mother (Worthen 13), Lawrence grew up in a house of constant tension, as his father escaped the toils of his job and marriage through alcohol, leaving the family in

perpetual financial uncertainty (5, 7). Lawrence had a particular affinity for his mother. He was the youngest son and was affected the most by his mother's damaging stories about his father, and he later said that he "was born hating [his] father" (11). Affected as he was by his upbringing, "Lawrence knew his mother in a way that, both before and after her death, he wished to know others" (10). This desire, however, became difficult for him, as he "came to distrust his very capacity for intimacy" when he could never recreate the bond he had with his mother (10).

He tried to recreate this bond with Frieda. Lawrence met Frieda Weekly through her then-husband, Ernest Weekly, in 1912. Soon the two left for Europe and were married in 1914. Though the marriage seemed troubled to the outside eye, each remained devoted to the other until Lawrence's death (Worthen 177). Lawrence and Frieda left England for good in 1918 after several unfortunate wartime experiences: Lawrence's weak lungs made him ineligible for active military duty, yet he was nevertheless subjected to three humiliating medical examinations; Lawrence's novels *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* were censored in England (the latter was not published until 1920); finally, Frieda's German heritage and relation to Baron Von Richthofen ("The Red Baron") drew suspicion from local and government authorities and the couple was routinely harassed. Upon leaving England the couple traveled extensively, living in Italy, Ceylon, Australia and America between 1918 and 1930. Lawrence made many friends and acquaintances in his lifetime, thanks to "an extraordinary gift for establishing an intimate relationship with almost anyone he met" (Huxley 20). Yet even these relationships were doomed, for "whenever the tangle [of relationships] threatened to compromise his activities as an artist,

it was the tangle that was sacrificed” (20). The exception to this rule was Frieda:

“Lawrence’s only deep and abiding human relationship was with his wife” (20).

The illness that killed Lawrence had been with him in varying degrees of severity throughout his life: “In 1911, one of his reasons for giving up school had been the fear that he might grow ‘consumptive’, and long before 1924 people linked his pallor (that of the fair-skinned and red-bearded man), his thinness and his frequent chest illnesses with tuberculosis” (Worthen 184). As a child he repeatedly missed school because of illness, and he nearly died on one occasion. The event is recounted in *Sons and Lovers*:

Paul was very ill. His mother lay in bed at nights with him. They could not afford a nurse. He grew worse, and the crisis approached. One night he tossed into consciousness, in the ghastly, sickly feeling of dissolution, when all the cells in the body seem in intense irritability to be breaking down, and the consciousness makes a last flare of struggle, like madness.

“I s’ll die, mother!” he cried, heaving for breath on the pillow.

(*Sons and Lovers* 40)

Lawrence’s life was affected by his weakened lungs. He could not travel as readily as he wanted, nor could he depend on his health. In 1924 he had a furious fit in New Mexico, in which he “began to spit bright red blood” (Ellis 195). This marked a turning point in his illness: Ellis notes that “Lawrence’s haemorrhage. . . makes it certain as these things can be that from August 1924 it is legitimate to regard him as tubercular” (195). Lawrence, however, continued to deny the sickness. Ellis comments that Katherine Mansfield, a close friend of Lawrence’s, had died of the disease shortly after first spitting blood; Lawrence “was to live another 5 ½ years after the visit of Dr. Martin [in Taos] and for

almost half that period he was often physically active. Whether this was because of a sounder constitution, or of one with some previous practice in fighting and overcoming tuberculosis is impossible to establish, just as it is impossible to know how much his refusal to recognize that he was suffering from a disease for which in his time there was no cure helped him to resist it” (196). Lawrence’s denial continued to the very end of his life, when he finally relented in France, in March, 1930 (530). John Worthen writes that at his death he cried out in pain, and that “[i]t was perhaps the first time he had cried out to anyone; he remained totally self-contained, heroically or crazily proud according to one’s perspective, to the end” (415).

Lawrence’s illness certainly affected his entire body of work, not only in his characters’ physical limitations (*Sons and Lovers*, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*) but also in the prevailing psychological affect. His poems of 1929-1930, however, show the effect of his illness directly. Sandra Gilbert writes that *Last Poems* was in itself a “ship of faith” designed to “prepare the poet to endure the experience” of death (312): The dying Lawrence is revealed in the 67 poems of *Last Poems*<sup>1</sup>.

Richard Aldington writes that Lawrence’s “mass of writing forms one immense autobiography” (594). *Last Poems*, written in 1929-30, is the final chapter:

The poems printed here are a kind of diary of the last year of Lawrence’s life. [Y]ou will find his daily moods and thoughts, often repeated and repeated. There is the irritability of the consumptive breaking out all the time – irritations over the petty annoyances of suppression by law and the stupidities of journalists, irritations with

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<sup>1</sup> The poems of *Last Poems* were not numbered by Lawrence or Aldington, but as Aldington believed that they were in the order that they were written, for the purposes of this thesis I will number them 1-67.

healthy people and the people of a different class and machines and machine men, in fact with almost everybody.

(595)

Lawrence used writing as an outlet for these irritations. His sadness disallowed a normal expression of grief for his dying body. Julia Kristeva writes that poetry is the form in which a writer seeks to express this “noncommunicable grief”: “For those who are racked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia” (*Black Sun* 3)<sup>2</sup>. Kristeva argues that writing is a means of breaking the silence caused by depression: “Let us keep in mind the speech of the depressed – repetitive and monotonous. Faced with the impossibility of concentrating, they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill. Even phrases they cannot formulate. A repetitive rhythm, or a monotonous melody emerge and dominate the broken logical sequences, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies” (33). The speech of the depressed is identified as such because “the succession of emotions, gestures, actions, or words considered normal...becomes hampered during depression” (34). Kristeva’s theory of writing as a counterdepressant<sup>3</sup> is exemplified by Lawrence’s *Last Poems*. Lawrence’s poems, too, are “recurring, obsessive litanies”: many of the themes and images are repeated, and rhythm and structure fluctuate; at times, they are repeated and vary from line to line.

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<sup>2</sup> Though there are other definitions and theories of depression, for the purposes of this thesis, Freud’s definition will be used, as Kristeva bases her theory on a Freudian definition of depression. Similarly, there are other treatments for depression. While Kristeva argues that creative expression is a way of expressing the semiotic and thus overcoming depression, it is not the only form of treatment; however, she is not arguing that it should be used independent of other treatments (*Black Sun* 38).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that Kristeva repeatedly emphasizes the temporary nature of the relief achieved through creative expression. She writes of Nerval “Albeit a temporary one, [the poem] nevertheless secured him a[n] ... identity” (*Black Sun* 144).

It is the connection of the poet to the poetry that makes Kristeva's theory of poetry as counterdepressant useful in reading *Last Poems*. Lawrence's life and his closeness to death make his poems poignant. Without this personal investment, the poems would not have the same resonance and as such could not be illuminated by Kristeva's theory. To explain her theory, she chooses Gérard de Nerval specifically because of his depression:

After his fit of madness in May 1853, Gérard de Nerval (1808-1855) set out for his native Valois. . . In August the symptoms showed up again: there he was, like a threatened archaeologist, visiting the osteology wing at the Jardin des Plantes, convinced, in the rain, that he was witnessing the Flood. Graves, skeletons, the irruption of death indeed continually haunted him. Within such a context, "El Desdichado" was his Noah's Ark. (143-44)

In his depression, Nerval turned to writing to relieve his grief. He succeeded, albeit temporarily, as he eventually committed suicide. His poem, however, will survive, and it helped him survive, if only for a short time: "At the very heart of the value crisis, poetic writing mimics a resurrection. 'I've twice, as a conqueror, been across the Acheron . . . ' There would be no third" (Kristeva 171). Writing was all Lawrence needed, too. His poems helped him through his crisis, and, though his death was inevitable, he lived far longer than anyone expected.

Published posthumously in 1932, *Last Poems* is ordered roughly chronologically<sup>4</sup>, and as such the collection can be read as a progression of thought. The opening poems express his struggles with his coming death. He refuses to accept the loss of ancient heroes in "The Argonauts" (#1) - "They are not dead, they are not dead!" (CP 687) – while on the

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<sup>4</sup> By Aldington: "Thus I have tried to treat these Lawrence MSS. with the utmost respect. I have not imposed my own ideas, but have set out to give these poems exactly as he wrote them" (CP 593).

other hand the final poems in the volume express calm and rebirth: “I am in the hands of the unknown God, / he is breaking me down to his own oblivion / to send me forth on a new morning, a new man” (*CP* 727). These poems also mark a change from his earlier verse. Two poems from different periods with similar subjects exemplify this point. The first is “Purple Anemones” from *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, published in 1923. The speaker insists that the purple anemone came “[u]p out of hell, / From Hades” (4-5). They are majestic, royal flowers, not from heaven or Jesus or Apollo but from “Infernal Dis” (6). It is the dark colour of the flower that Lawrence wishes to evoke with an image of a royal Underworld:

Caverns,  
Little hells of colour, caves of darkness,  
Hell, risen in pursuit of her; royal, sumptuous  
Pit-falls. (26-29)

The flowers are from Hades<sup>5</sup> because their dark colour evokes the Underworld, the opposite of light and sky, Heaven and God. In this poem, Lawrence references the myth of Persephone to add to the mythology of the “Dark blue anemones” (55).

Lawrence also writes about “dark-blue” flowers in “Bavarian Gentians,” written in September 1929 and part of the *Last Poems* collection. At this time, Lawrence is clearly depressed. His illness is not improving and he is having a terrible time in Germany with Frieda’s family: “I feel as if wild horses would never again drag me over the German frontier. . . . I feel so feeble, and as if I hardly want to live. How I hate it!” (*Selected Letters* 178-79). In “Bavarian Gentians,” this frustration and hopelessness is clear. He

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<sup>5</sup> Here Lawrence uses Hell and Hades synonymously, combining imagery from two mythological sources, as he did in many other poems, including those of *Last Poems*.

evokes images of flowers and Hades once again, but instead of using the Underworld to describe the dark colour of the flowers he uses the infernal darkness of the gentian to describe his mood, his deep sadness:

Bavarian gentians, big and dark, only dark  
 darkening the day-time torch-like with the smoking blueness of Pluto's gloom,  
 ribbed and torch-like, with their blaze of darkness spread blue  
 down flattening into points, flattened under the sweep of white day  
 torch-flower of the blue-smoking darkness, Pluto's dark-blue daze,  
 black lamps from the halls of Dis, burning dark blue,  
 giving off darkness, blue darkness, as Demeter's pale lamps give off light . . . (3-9)

The incredible darkness of the flower, second only to the darkness of Hades, symbolizes the immense sadness of the speaker. These flowers are not royal or sumptuous but heavy with depression, sinking away from the light further into darkness. Lawrence evokes the myth of Persephone in this poem not to mythologize the flowers but to speak of his fate: unlike in "Purple Anemones," where Persephone escapes the "Hell-glamorous" (33) anemones "snapping at her ankles" (51) into the arms of her mother, in "Bavarian Gentians" Persephone travels down to Hell into "the deeper dark / of the arms Plutonic" (17-18). Winter is approaching, not spring.

This thesis will demonstrate that Lawrence's melancholy in the face of death is exhibited and attempts to find resolution within the poems he wrote during that time. Many of Lawrence's poems in *Last Poems* exhibit a specific combination of sound and imagery that corresponds with that of depressive discourse outlined in Kristeva's theory. A selection of these will be discussed in this thesis. The opening chapter will explain

Kristeva's theory of poetry as counterdepressant and suggest how it applies to Lawrence. Kristeva's previous theoretical works are also briefly recounted. Her early writing focuses on semiotics and language; her theories of the power of poetic language are useful in understanding the difficult speech of depressed persons and the need to regain that speech, the connection with the world. The second chapter will apply this theory to the structural features of Lawrence's *Last Poems*. The poems are unconventional at times, employing unexpected structural changes, such as varying line length and abnormal rhythm, which together contribute to a "speech of the depressed" as described by Kristeva. The third chapter looks at the imagery of the poems. Images and metaphors are important to depressed persons, as they struggle to connect with others and communicate effectively when the mechanism of communication has been severed: depressed persons rely on any means necessary to communicate. Lawrence uses images and metaphors in an attempt to overcome his sadness, to manage it, by facing his worst fears.

## Chapter 1

*Last Poems* through a Linguistic Lens: Julia Kristeva and Poetry as Counterdepressant

In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Julia Kristeva theorizes about what she calls “depressive discourse” or the speech patterns of depressed persons. She argues that writing and art, specifically poetic language, allow the depressive person to communicate when normal communication or speech is impossible: “[L]iterary (and religious) representation possesses a real and imaginary effectiveness that comes closer to catharsis than to elaboration; it is a therapeutic device used in all societies throughout the ages” (24). Kristeva contends that such therapy should be used in order to heal patients; writing and art should be “lucid counterdepressants rather than neutralizing antidepressants” (25). I will apply Kristeva’s theory to D.H. Lawrence’s final volume of poetry, *Last Poems*, to support my contention that Lawrence was seeking relief from the “excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos” of depression (33).

Kristeva bases her ideas of melancholy and depression on Freudian psychoanalytic theory, namely Freud’s 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia.” A summary of this work should therefore contribute to understanding the theory of “writing as counterdepressant” Kristeva puts forth in *Black Sun*.

“Mourning and Melancholia”

Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" connects the normal process of mourning to the abnormal condition of melancholia<sup>6</sup>. He states that even though the work of mourning "involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life," it is not considered a pathological condition; instead, it is expected to take a normal amount of time to work itself out (Freud 243-44). However, the same factors that cause mourning sometimes produce melancholia, and analysts subsequently "suspect . . . a pathological disposition" (243). Despite the difference in treatment and the stigma of depression, the two processes are essentially the same: "In one set of cases it is evident that melancholia too may be the reaction to the loss of a loved object" (245). Freud lists the common features of both:

Profound mourning, the reaction to the loss of someone who is loved, contains the same painful frame of mind, the same loss of interest in the outside world . . . the same loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love . . . and the same turning away from any activity that is not connected with thoughts of [the loved object].

(244)

The processes of mourning and melancholia, then, share many features. The difference in treatment and attitude developed, then, because early psychologists knew "so well how to explain" mourning but had no such clear definitions for melancholia.

Freud first outlines the process of mourning: "Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (243). This loss demands "that all

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<sup>6</sup> Freud uses the term "melancholy"; "depression" is a more contemporary term. Kristeva regards "melancholy" and "depression" as synonymous for her purposes: "The terms melancholia and depression refer to a composite that might be called melancholy/depressive, whose borders are in fact blurred" (*Black Sun* 10). Because of this "blurred" border, she warns, she will "speak of depression and melancholia without always distinguishing the particularities of the two ailments but keeping in mind their common structure" (10-11).

libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object” (244) because the object no longer exists. However, the process is not an easy one: “this demand arouses understandable opposition,” for “people never willingly abandon a libidinal position” (244). This opposition causes the person sometimes to remove himself/herself from reality, choosing instead to focus on the object. But normally “respect for reality gains the day” (244), and the demand for detachment is carried out. Once this process is completed, “the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (245). Thus the work of mourning occupies the ego for a certain amount of time, during which the normal work of detachment allows the person to be reconciled to the loss of the loved object.

If the process of mourning is not completed, however, the result is melancholy. This loss is usually “the loss of a more ideal kind”: “The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love . . . In yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either” (245). The unconscious loss will cause the same process as mourning, “a similar internal work [,] and will therefore be responsible for the melancholic inhibition” (245), a withdrawal from reality. As in mourning, there is “a withdrawal of the libido” from the lost object. However, because there is no conscious object-loss, the ego is mistaken for the object and the sufferer turns on himself/herself. This creates a position of “ego-loss” (249). The ego is treated as an object and the ambivalence directed toward the lost object is now directed toward the ego. Thus, the ego turns on itself “execution”-style, “able to direct against itself the hostility which relates to an object . . . in the external world” (252).

The hostility and ambivalence toward the ego is indicated by what Freud identifies as “the most outstanding feature” of melancholia: “dissatisfaction with the ego on moral grounds” (248). This results in overwhelming self-doubt and guilt because the ego no longer accepts that it is a “good” object; the superego or conscience thus dominates. Symptoms of melancholia are “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings . . .” (244). These symptoms are extensions of the superego’s “dissatisfaction” with the ego, and the sufferer seeks to expose his own shortcomings. Thus, the sufferer “abases himself before everyone and commiserates with his own relatives for being connected with anyone so unworthy” (246). The self-reproaches result in sadistic tendencies toward the self: “This picture of a delusion of (mainly moral) inferiority is completed by sleeplessness and refusal to take nourishment, and . . . by an overcoming of the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life” (246). The sleeplessness and lack of appetite are consistent with the underlying sadistic tendencies present with melancholy. The sufferer seeks punishment for herself, as she does not consider herself worthy of life or good things<sup>7</sup>. Freud argues that such sadism against oneself solves “the riddle of the tendency to suicide” (252): “The self-tormenting in melancholia, which is without doubt

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<sup>7</sup> Freud’s distinction between sadism and masochism can be found in an article from 1915, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” (*Standard Edition* Vol. 14, 117-140): “In the case of the pair of opposites sadism – masochism, the process may be represented as follows:

- (a) Sadism consists in the exercise of violence or power upon some other person as object.
- (b) This object is given up and replaced by the subject’s self. With the turning round upon the self the change from an active to a passive instinctual aim is also affected.
- (c) An extraneous person is once more sought as object; this person, in consequence of the alteration which has taken place in the instinctual aim, has to take over the role of the subject.” (127)

By the third stage, the affected person seeks satisfaction from an extraneous person and the ego becomes passive in seeking its goal. However, self-abasement *without* a passive ego is still regarded as sadistic: “The desire to torture has turned into self-torture and self-punishment, not into masochism. The active voice is changed, not into the passive, but into the reflexive, middle voice” (128).

especially enjoyable, signifies, just like the corresponding phenomenon in obsessional neurosis, a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned round upon the subject's own self" (251). It is pointless "to contradict a patient who brings accusations against his ego" because the patient has already convinced himself that it is so (246); furthermore, the accusations become true as the patient continues to lose self-respect. In Lawrence's poems, we see this trend in "Sleep and Waking" (#59). He writes that "nothing in the world is lovelier than sleep. / ... / Nothing in life is quite so good as this" (*CP* 3-5). He is convinced that his own life is worthless and wishes for his death to come and be "created afresh" (10).

Freud changed the thinking about melancholy by comparing the condition to mourning. In both conditions a loss is mourned; however, in melancholy the loss is unconscious and thus more difficult to overcome. Kristeva builds on this foundation in her work on melancholy; *Black Sun* is informed directly by Freud's psychoanalytic theories by accepting this premise.<sup>8</sup> But Kristeva is also a linguistic theorist. Her early essays and studies examine language, particularly poetic language, and the role of the subject within language. She has been a significant contributor to the field of linguistics, as she built upon and modified the theories of Saussure, Barthes, Jakobson, as well as other prominent linguistic theorists of the twentieth century. As *Black Sun* draws on both psychoanalytic theory and linguistic theory, a summary of the latter will be helpful.

#### "The Ethics of Linguistics"

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<sup>8</sup> Kristeva writes, "I shall examine matters from a *Freudian point of view*. On that basis, I shall try to bring matters out, from the core of the melancholy/depressive composite, blurred as the borders may be, what pertains to a common experience of *object loss* and of a *modification of signifying bonds*" (*Black Sun* 10).

In “The Ethics Of Linguistics,” Kristeva writes that studying linguistics from a structuralist or formalist point of view removes the “speaking subject” from the signifying process, so that “the problem of *truth* in linguistic discourse [becomes] dissociated from any notion of the *speaking subject*” (*Desire In Language* 24, emphasis hers).

Consideration of this subject reveals language to be an “articulation of a heterogeneous process, with the speaking subject leaving its imprint on the dialectic between the articulation and its process” (24-5). This process of articulation, relating signifier to signified, is not possible without the speaking subject.

This subject draws on two dimensions in order to communicate: the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic is inherent in “speech practice”; Kristeva believes that structural linguistics has ignored this fact: “The speech practice that should be its object is one in which signified structure (sign, syntax, signification) is defined within boundaries that can be shifted by the advent of a semiotic rhythm that no system of linguistic communication has yet been able to assimilate” (24). Signified structure, or the symbolic, limits the “speech act” to signs and their signifiers. But the semiotic exists within this basic symbolic articulation of speech, and gives expression to the drives of the human subject. The symbolic aspects of language, sign and syntax, cannot communicate the semiotic: the semiotic is pre-symbolic, pre-linguistic. Kristeva calls the rhythm of the semiotic a “struggle between word and force gushing with the pain and relief of a desperate delirium” (28), a rhythm contrasting with the “sign, word, structure, contract, constraint” of the symbolic (29). Linguistics, then, by studying only the symbolic aspects of language, ignores the subjective aspect of human speech.

Poetic language is the clearest demonstration of the dialectic between the semiotic and the symbolic. Kristeva argues that “[p]oetic discourse measures rhythm against the meaning of language structure and is thus always eluded by meaning in the present while continually postponing it to an impossible time-to-come” (33). Meaning is thus deferred in poetic language because the very process of symbolization denies the “pure signifier”; thus, while this signifier is always theoretically possible and striven for, it is never reached.

Language, then, is continually disrupted by rhythm. The rhythmic elements of language are tied to the body, to the “speaking animal” instead of a detached signifying system. Kristeva argues that contemporary linguistic theory does not accept these rhythmic elements as viable extensions of the speaking subject: “the dramatic notion of language as a risky practice, allowing the speaking animal to sense the rhythm of the body as well as the upheavals of history, seems tied to a notion of signifying process that contemporary theories do not confront” (34).

#### “The System and the Speaking Subject”

“The Ethics of Linguistics” thus posits the existence of two aspects of language, the symbolic (sign, syntax, signification) and the semiotic (utterance of the human drives). In her essay “The System and the Speaking Subject,” Kristeva argues this point further. She suggests the existence of a dynamic “speaking” subject within the system of signs that makes up language. The subject is governed by time and place; because social constraint defines language, it defines the subject, and “the science of linguistics has no way of apprehending anything in language which belongs not with the social contract but with

play, pleasure or desire” (26). These are the elements of language uncontained by social constraint.

The speaking subject is not a “*transcendental* ego, cut off from its body, its unconscious and also its history,” but a “divided subject” (28, emphasis hers). The division of the human subject into conscious and unconscious mirrors the division of the speaking subject under the pressure of social constraints and “bio-physiological” drives (28). In this theory, semiology “conceives of meaning not as a sign-system but as a *signifying process*” (28, emphasis hers). Thus, language is not a stable system of codes but a dynamic process of signification, changing as the speaking subject changes. Kristeva says that identifying language as a process will allow further illumination: “Within this process one might see the release and subsequent articulation of the drives as constrained by the social code” (28). The bio-physiological “drives” of the speaking subject are vital to language because they are imperative to the subject; an understanding of language must therefore take into account these drives.

The semiotic, being the process of conveying human drives, allows the subject to “renovate” the signifying process. The process of signification can never be static, as the speaking subject is always changing. This modification is a movement toward freedom from the constraint of code systems, yet such freedom can never be fully achieved as the subject by definition must adhere to some sort of code in order to speak. The subject will always, in signifying, be striving for release from its bonds. Poetic language is the closest the speaking subject can come to freedom. Lawrence consistently used images of oppression and restraint in his poems, citing the oppressive nature of darkness (“Bavarian

Gentians”), religion (“Lucifer”), or ideas (“For The Heroes Are Dipped In Scarlet”) specifically. He used poetry in search of freedom from oppression of all kinds.

For Kristeva, poetic language, “music, dancing, [and] painting” succeed in “reordering the psychic drives which have not been harnessed by the dominant symbolization systems and thus renewing their own tradition” (30). The ability to “renew” the tradition means a release from “dominating” code systems. Poetic language, while necessarily within the symbolic, can continually renew its practice, ensuring the “infinite of the symbolic limit” (30). Poetry cannot fully transcend language, but it shows the possibility of “heterogeneity” in language and reveals the “ensuing fracture of a symbolic code which can no longer ‘hold’ its (speaking) subjects” (30). Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic, then, is also a theory of the genesis of poetic language. In expressing the psychic drives, poetic language disrupts the symbolic code, an idea she explores further in *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

### *Revolution in Poetic Language*

Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language* develops the idea of the semiotic, the symbolic and the divided subject. Leon Roudiez writes that “[Kristeva’s] aim is to investigate the workings of ‘poetic language’ . . . as a *signifying practice*, that is, as a semiotic system generated by a speaking subject within a social, historical field” (1, emphasis his). Kristeva argues against the idea that the relation between signifier and signified is “arbitrary,” as Saussure theorized<sup>9</sup>; it is instead informed by a heterogeneous

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<sup>9</sup> Kristeva bases her theories of language on the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure identifies language as a system of signs, where a sign is made up of a signifier and a signified: the signifier represents a concept while the signified is the concept being represented. The relationship between the two is the basis of language, but he also points out that that relationship is arbitrary, as there is “no intrinsic or natural

subject within a subjective environment. Roudiez also clarifies her concept of “poetic language”: “it stands for the infinite possibilities of language, and all other language acts are merely partial realizations of the possibilities inherent in [it]” (2). As poetic language is informed by the semiotic, it is the disruptive element that modifies language, discourse, and, consequently, socio-political structures. She writes in the *Prolegomenon* to *Revolution* that “we must therefore break out of our interpersonal and intersocial experience if we are to gain access to what is repressed in the social mechanism: the generating of signifiante” (13). Modern literature and art strive for signifiante, “the meaning produced by the semiotic in conjunction with the symbolic” (McAfee 38). Thus, the semiotic and the symbolic are both required within the signifying process: “Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either ‘exclusively’ semiotic or ‘exclusively’ symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both” (*Revolution* 24, emphasis hers).

To facilitate this theory, Kristeva reintroduces a Platonic concept: the *chora*.<sup>10</sup> This is the “psychic space” where “the infant experiences a wealth of drives” grounded only by the connection to the mother (McAfee 19). It develops as the subject develops into a speaking being, and allows the expression of drives within the social and family constraints imposed on the subject. It “precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality,” and “all discourse... moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it” (26). Although the speaking subject requires

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relationship” between signifier and signified (10). Furthermore, the signs themselves have no significance other than their relation to other signs: “Meaning is not inherent in the signs themselves, but is derived from the differences among signs” (10).

<sup>10</sup> Plato *Timaeus*: 52b-c) Plato’s notion of the *chora* is the “container and producer, of what the universe is before and as anything exists” (McAfee 19). McAfee explains the difference between this meaning and Kristeva’s : “Plato meant by the term the original space or receptacle of the universe, but Kristeva seems to have meant something in mind that belongs to each person in particular before he or she develops clear borders of his or her own personal identity” (19).

the *chora* because it contains the drives, he “refuses” it in order to communicate symbolically, as the semiotic *chora* precedes the symbolic (26). The symbolic, therefore, is dependent on the semiotic. The symbolic is a “social effect” created by social and family constraints imposed upon the subject (27). It is the filtered semiotic, revealing only those elements that have been transferable in the process of verbalization: the symbolic in language is only the beginning of the signifying process.

Kristeva introduces another concept, the thetic phase, in order to explain the role of the semiotic. The thetic phase is a “threshold” between the semiotic and symbolic (45). This threshold of the speaking subject is “that crucial place on the basis of which the human being constitutes himself as signifying and/or social – . . . the very place textual experience aims toward” (67). The endeavour of art and artists is to reach the semiotic through language; finding this impossible, they strive for the next best thing, the thetic. Kristeva argues that this threshold is also the place that disrupts society and the social contract: “textual experience reaches the very foundation of the social – that which is exploited by sociality but which elaborates and can go beyond it, either destroying or transforming it” (67). This destruction or transformation is what constitutes both poetic language and the speaking subject. The journey to the threshold is a painful one, revealing to the subject his “constitutive process” (67). Kristeva thus likens the thetic boundary to death. The artist, wilfully sacrificing himself to transgress the symbolic, commits self-murder inasmuch as crossing this threshold means the destruction of the symbolic: “It assumes murder insofar as artistic practice considers death the inner boundary of the signifying process. Crossing that boundary is precisely what constitutes ‘art’” (70). But this boundary can never be fully crossed, as the speaking subject is always within the

symbolic; no signifying process can be purely semiotic. Thus, the semiotic “exists in practice only within the symbolic and requires the symbolic break to obtain the complex articulation we associate with it in musical and poetic practices” (68).

The relationship between the semiotic and symbolic is thus necessarily symbiotic, each informing the other in the signifying process. But Kristeva warns that this process is not always completed: “Multiple constraints – which are ultimately sociopolitical – stop the signifying process at one or another of the theses it traverses; they knot it and lock it into a given surface or structure” (88). Language will often be forced into familiar patterns of signification, thus removing the disruptive elements that are a result of the thetic breach. However, she says, “certain literary texts of the avant-garde (Mallarmé, Joyce) manage to cover the infinity of the process, that is, reach the semiotic *chora*, which modifies linguistic structures” (88). This modification, though rare, is revolutionary in scope. In *Last Poems*, Lawrence shows this ability as well. He reaches the semiotic at times through particular uses of sound, rhythm and imagery. These texts overthrow the constraints of the symbolic.

Kristeva’s early work on linguistic theory is important when reading *Black Sun*. Her ideas of the semiotic in language inform her examination of those elements in art and literature that operate beneath language and symbol and thereby modify language and, consequently, human understanding. Kristeva’s theory of language is a natural extension of psychoanalytic theory, as it seeks to understand the workings of the unconscious in the human mind. In *Black Sun* she combines linguistic theory and psychoanalysis in examining the “discourse of the depressed” or depressive speech. Because the semiotic elements of language have the ability to modify human understanding and mood, she

argues that writing and art are counterdepressants to a condition, depression, that immobilizes the sufferer in speech and life.

### *Black Sun*

In *Black Sun* Kristeva explores the experience of language in sufferers of depression. Her main position is that depression brings about “asymbolia” and speech acts as a counterdepressant. Sufferers of melancholy and depression, because they are overwhelmed by affect, namely sadness, rely on the semiotic more than the symbolic to communicate. Kristeva argues that their depression has caused a reattachment to the maternal object: the depressive is no longer satisfied with the symbolic representation of the object and wishes to have that object, which has been lost, in its original form. The depressive seeks a pre-symbolic state, which, by definition, is also pre-linguistic. The resulting inability to communicate within the bounds of the symbolic forces the depressive to rely on semiotic forms of expression.

In her analysis of depressive speech, Kristeva adopts the Freudian theory of melancholy. Melancholy, like mourning, demands a recognition that a loss has occurred; however, the depressed person is unable to reconcile himself with that loss, and it becomes an “*impossible mourning for the maternal object*” (*Black Sun* 9, her emphasis): as an infant must pass through a period of separation anxiety over the loss of the breast, an adult must repeat this process with each subsequent loss.

While agreeing with Freud about the mourning inherent in melancholy, she adds that the lost object is actually a “preobject,” which she terms the “Thing”: “Let me posit the ‘Thing’ as the real that does not lend itself to signification, the center of attraction and

repulsion, seat of the sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated” (*Black Sun* 13). Usually, primary identification with a “third party” will “enable one to become reconciled with the loss of the Thing” (23, 13). But in the depressed person, primary identification is too fragile; it is “insufficient to secure other identifications” that will allow the “*erotic Thing*” to become an “*Object of desire*” (14, her emphasis). The Thing also conjures ambivalent feelings: it is the “delightful focus of . . . hatred” (15) as well as the subject of a daydream that promises the “delights of reunion . . . through the nuptials of suicide” (14). The ambivalence toward the Thing is “fearsome” because it “lack[s] the filter of language” (15). It has no outlet: only “gestures, spasms or shouts” can demonstrate the “violence” of the sufferer (15).

Melancholy is a “noncommunicable grief that at times, and often on a long-term basis, lays claims upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself” (3). The focus of her study is less the general “psychomotor retardation” (34) of the sufferer than the resulting silence. Depressive persons are unable to reconcile themselves with the loss of the Thing; thus, they are unable to “concatenate” signifiers. Kristeva describes the resulting speech of the depressed:

Faced with the impossibility of concatenating, they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill. Even phrases they cannot formulate. A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerge and dominate the broken logical sequences, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies. (33)

The repetition and broken sequences suggest the semiotic breaking into communication: unable to “concatenate,” they are left only with instinctual gestures.

Furthermore, depressed persons “*disavow the negation*” of the object in the symbolic order (43): they refuse to accept the symbol for the object and thus seek the real object. They “remain painfully riveted” to the Thing (44), and the resulting connection to the symbolic is fragmented:

The *denial . . . of negation* would thus be an exercise of an impossible mourning, the setting up of a fundamental sadness and an artificial, unbelievable language, cut out of the painful background that is not accessible to any signifier and that intonation alone, intermittently, succeeds in inflecting. (44, her emphasis)

The symbolic is lost and the depressed person must communicate through “intonation alone”. The “unbelieving language” may indeed sound like normal discourse, but the discourse of the depressed includes a “variegated emotionalism” within intonation that reveals the depressive mood (55). The depressive’s speech either is “somewhat removed from the head and body of the person who is speaking” or “is from the very beginning evasive, uncertain, deficient, quasi mutistic” (43). In the second instance, the depressive speaker is so convinced of meaninglessness that there is no belief in the signs; hence, the “unbelievable language” of an “impossible mourning” (44). The loss of belief in signs is the loss of meaning in life:

The spectacular collapse of meaning with depressive persons – and, at the limit, the meaning of life – allows us to assume that they experience difficulty integrating the universal signifying sequence, that is, language. . . . In contrast [to the speech of non-depressed people], the speech of the depressed is to them like an alien skin; melancholy persons are foreigners in their maternal tongue. (53)

The “asymbolia” of depressive speech removes the depressive person from language and therefore connections to others. But because of the depressive’s self-hatred, the “lack of meaning” is not “tragic” to the sufferer; on the contrary, it “appears obvious . . . glaring and inescapable” (3). The depressive is intensely introspective, obtaining a “supreme metaphysical lucidity” from depression (4). Though deluded, the sufferer feels that he has a closer knowledge of his own existence than anyone else has of his or her own.

Lawrence’s proclaimed knowledge of death and “oblivion” is an example of this delusion. He instructs others to “build [their] ship of death” (“Difficult Death” (#51) 8): “Be kind, Oh be kind to your dead / . . . / For the soul has a long, long journey after death” (“All Souls’ Day” (#52) 10, 13). He indicates a special knowledge of his own impending death.

Kristeva writes that this hyper-knowledge of oneself, though overwhelming, is a protective device used to avoid permanent seclusion: “As for the discourse of the depressed, it is the ‘normal’ surface of a psychotic risk: the sadness that overwhelms us, the retardation that paralyzes us are also a shield – sometimes the last one – against madness” (42). Depressive discourse is necessarily a defence against further psychological damage. The mourning is incomplete, forcing depressed persons to create new names for the “alien” signs and return to a level of communication with the surrounding society: “The excess of affect has thus no other means of coming to the fore than to produce new languages . . . Until the weight of the primal Thing prevails, and all translatability become impossible” (42). The sufferer seeks to communicate using the symbolic but finds it impossible and so must communicate through “strange concatenations, idiolects, poetics” (42).

This is a point that therapists should take into account, Kristeva says, when attempting to rehabilitate sufferers of depression. She feels that the field of psychoanalysis has discounted the role of the semiotic in therapy. The semiotic does not rely on the constructed symbolic order of the organized mind (which also represents society's primary mode of communication). Depressed persons cannot communicate in the same way as non-depressed persons; Kristeva feels that this should be taken into account when therapists seek to reintegrate depressed persons: "There is perhaps a chance, then, for analysis to . . . endow discourse with a modifying power . . . by favoring a better integration of semiotic agitation within the symbolic fabric" (66). The discourse of the depressed can, and should, be given a place within the analytic cure:

[T]he importance of speech's suprasegmental level (intonation, rhythm) should lead the analyst, on the one hand, to interpret the voice, and on the other, to disarticulate the signifying sequence that has become banal and lifeless – the purpose being to extract the infrasignifying meaning of depressive discourse that is hidden in fragments of lexical items, in syllables, or in phonic groups yet strangely semanticized. (55)

These semiotic fragments present within or beneath ("infra") the discourse of the depressed will inform the analyst's attempt to relieve the depressed person. This idea, which Kristeva claims is part of her own experience as a therapist, can also inform criticism. The very medium of literature, she says, displays the semiotic aspects of language.

Kristeva quotes Elizabeth Jacobson in describing mood as a "generalized transference" . . . that stamps the *entire* behavior and all the sign systems (from motor

functions to speech production and idealization)” (21). Thus, sadness is an “apparently very rudimentary representation” that is “presign and prelanguage” (21). Literary creation “bears witness to the affect” in its “rhythms, signs, forms” (22). Thus, the “‘semiotic’ and the ‘symbolic’ become the communicable imprints of an affective reality, perceptible to the reader” (22). The “gestures, spasms, shouts” of the depressive’s attempt to communicate are visible in literature and in art: “[A]esthetic and particularly literary creation . . . set forth a device whose prosodic economy, interaction of characters, and implicit symbolism constitute a very faithful semiological representation of the subject’s battle with symbolic collapse” (24). This representation is a “catharsis,” a “therapeutic device used in all societies throughout the ages” (24). Because the depressive person is inhibited in language by depression, writing and art will allow the representation of affect and thus a chance to “signify the sadness” or bring it into the symbolic. To therapists, works of literary creation and art are “lucid counterdepressants rather than neutralizing antidepressants” (25). Understanding the attempt to represent affect semiologically is vital in the treatment of depressive persons.

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva closely studies a poem by Gérard de Nerval, from which the phrase “Black Sun” comes. Kristeva argues that Nerval’s “El Desdichado” exemplifies the theory of writing as counterdepressant. Nerval suffered from severe depression, eventually committing suicide. However, at the time he wrote this poem, though at the point of suicide, Nerval did not succumb to despair. In this poem, Nerval is able to write about his sadness, thereby overcoming it and asserting authority over it. His sadness is no longer a mute Thing but an object; Nerval has accepted the loss of the Thing so that he can find it

again in the realm of signs. The poem signals a respite from sorrow; temporarily, at least, Nerval is able to find meaning in life since he can sublimate his grief.

The title itself is evidence of not only respite from but “triumph” over grief (144), Kristeva argues. The sound of “El Desdichado,” Spanish for “The Disinherited,” is markedly different from the “shaded discreet vowel pattern of the French language” (144). The break in the symbolic through sound marks a connection to the semiotic; the writer has broken through immobility and enunciated his grief in the realm of signs.

Nerval is able to write about his sadness by means of a “polyvalency of symbolism” (147) within a poem, achieved by the break in the symbolic. This allows Nerval two advantages: first, it ensures a “stable meaning” within the structure of words and thus access a “secret community,” where his sadness can be “heard, accepted, and, in short, solaced” (147); second, it moves away from “monovalent meaning . . . in order to reach as closely as possible the specifically Nervalian object, sorrow” (147). The act of writing allows Nerval to construct an “I,” an identity, though “fluid” and “temporary” (144). It is an uncertain triumph (145), scoring a temporary victory but remaining dangerously close to asymbolia. The making of the temporary “I” suggests “the necessary condition for the poetic act. To speak, to venture, to settle within the legal fiction known as symbolic activity, that is indeed to lose the Thing” (146). Kristeva feels that Nerval is only able to write about his sadness because he has felt it; the “necessary condition” of writing is loss (146). She calls “El Desdichado” his “Noah’s Ark” (144), a structure built to survive the coming flood. But the uncertainty of this “Ark” leads to a necessary question: “[W]ill the traces of that lost Thing sweep the speaker along, or will he succeed in carrying them away – integrating them, incorporating them in his discourse, which has

become a song by dint of seizing the Thing” (146)? Nerval is stable, for now; but prosody is a “fragile filter” for affect and could break down at any moment (161).

Nerval’s poem is thus an example of writing as counterdepressant. Kristeva cites the “assimilat[ion of] an archaic state into the language of poetry” and the “oralization and musicalization of the signs themselves” (171) as important steps in overcoming sadness. Furthermore, “poetic writing mimics a resurrection” (171). Poetry written from the heart of sadness means that the subject has overcome the lost Thing and triumphed over immobilizing depression: “Creating prosody and an undecidable polyphony with symbols centred in the ‘black spot’ or the ‘black sun’ of melancholia thus provide[s] an antidote to depression, a temporary salvation” (170). Like Nerval, D. H. Lawrence wrote from the heart of sadness. Though Lawrence did not commit suicide, his final poems exhibit depressive discourse; the illness that was destroying his body was also affecting his mind. But the poems served as life preservers, keeping Lawrence afloat before the fatal illness took him.

“The Breath of Life” (#19) is a short poem that demonstrates, like “El Desdichado,” both linguistic and imagistic evidence that Lawrence was writing poems as a means of staving off depression:

The breath of life is in the sharp winds of change  
mingled with the breath of destruction.  
  
But if you want to breathe deep, sumptuous life  
breathe all alone, in silence, in the dark,  
and see nothing. (*CP* 698)

“The breath of life” is a metaphor for human unity with God, as stated in Genesis 2:7: “[T]hen the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (NRSV). Since Lawrence associates the “breath of life” with “the sharp winds of change” and “the breath of destruction,” he portrays God as vengeful and cruel. For Lawrence, each tubercular breath was a reminder of death; as Susan Sontag writes, “A disease of the lungs is, metaphorically, a disease of the soul” (62). Lawrence urges himself to “breathe all alone” rather than in God.

Lawrence’s opinion is conveyed by the structure of the poem. The metre of the first two lines, the sentence outlining the “breath of life,” is stoic and sterile: the rhythm is iambic, apart from a few substitutions, notably in “sharp winds” in the first line. It is as though Lawrence is quoting a sermon, but stating the words without truly believing them. There is no particular voice in these lines; it is standard rote from Lawrence’s Puritan upbringing. The speaker feels that the “breath of life” is the “deep” breath, the one that connects the soul with the cosmos, using the senses as guide. The second sentence is an impassioned plea to turn away from expected behaviour; accordingly, the rhythm deviates from that of the opening lines. The second sentence is irregular and vigorous, using stresses and assonance at important points rather than where tradition dictates: “breathe deep”; “see nothing.” The speaker addresses the reader directly with special knowledge of the correct way to experience “deep, sumptuous life.” He gives a choice (“But if”) yet states so definitively, so passionately, that the true choice is the one he posits. The structure of the second sentence indicates Lawrence’s true opinion, the path he himself follows or, at least, hopes to follow.

The imagery of the poem conveys that hope as well. While the opening lines promise destruction and chaos in following others, the second sentence promises only “deep, sumptuous life” in following oneself. Thus “in silence” means not listening to God or His followers; “all alone” means apart from God, and “see[ing] nothing” is a realistic expectation for the end of one’s life. This short poem cannot do much with these metaphors, but the images that are conveyed are direct and effective. Lawrence feels that he is truly living a “sumptuous life” apart from God. Yet the images of isolation betray sadness rather than joy: though invigorated at the thought of following his own path, the loneliness and darkness along that path mean that Lawrence feels that sadness only too much. The impassioned speech of the second sentence is a break in the symbolic, but it is also Lawrence struggling to communicate his sadness before it overtakes him. Lawrence’s darkness and silence is also the life of many depressed persons. Kristeva shows that “silence” is a major feature of depressed persons: unable to enunciate thoughts, they remain silent. Like Nerval, Lawrence writes about his sadness in order to overcome it. Though not as directly as his other poems, “The Breath of Life” shows Lawrence’s struggle to address his sadness; it is a momentary reprieve from melancholy as he waits to die.

The following chapters will examine more closely the elements of structure and imagery in Lawrence’s *Last Poems*. These poems, or more specifically the volume of poems, become an “Ark” to protect Lawrence against the wave of grief and mourning he feels. The poems allow Lawrence to express these affects; he will not slip into silence and incoherence and, eventually, suicide. Chapter Two will examine the structural indications of depressive discourse: monotonous, repetitive speech along with unexplained deviations

from standard syntax and grammar are revolts against the symbolic. The structural elements of Lawrence's poems show the struggle to capture and maintain a voice in the face of silence and despair. Chapter Three will examine how this same struggle manifests itself in images – of darkness, pain, sadness, withdrawal and death.

## Chapter 2

### “Sing the song of death, O sing it!”: Depressive Discourse Through Rhythm and Sound

Kristeva argues that the process of articulation initiates recovery from depression. The fact that a depressed person can, in poetry, embrace and identify overwhelming sadness is a sign in itself that the sufferer has changed the lost Thing into an object. The Thing's hold over the sufferer loosens, and a temporary reprieve is granted. Though Kristeva acknowledges that depression is often “long-term” (*Black Sun* 3), writing can demonstrate the recovery of the writer. She asks, “[W]ould *poetry* and, more generally, the style that bears its secret imprint bear witness to a (for the time being) conquered depression?” (65). Often the “time being” is for the short duration of the poem. A poem conveys a new language of “primary processes” (65), a result of “the struggle between imaginary creation (art, literature) and depression” (65). Furthermore, “[r]hythms, alliterations, condensations shape the transmission of message and data” (65). The poetic form, the medium itself, is as important as the message. The writer undertakes depressive discourse in an attempt at recovery.

In *Last Poems*, Lawrence's particular uses of alliteration, repetition, sound, and rhythm convey his struggle with depression. By articulating his grief, he seeks to overcome, or at least manage, his sadness. Kristeva writes that creativity is a conductor of reconciliation, as the sufferer seeks to re-integrate into society:

[T]he work of art that insures the rebirth of its author and its reader or viewer is one that succeeds in integrating the artificial language it puts forward (new style, new composition, surprising imagination) and the unnamed agitations of an

omnipotent self that ordinary social and linguistic usage always leave somewhat orphaned or plunged into mourning. Hence such a fiction, if it isn't an antidepressant, is at least a survival, a resurrection . . ." (51, ellipsis hers).

The sufferer seeks new ways to communicate since "ordinary social and linguistic usage" has failed him. He uses an "artificial language," a constructed attempt at reaching the symbolic. The work of art that mediates between the artificial language of the sufferer and the accepted social and linguistic forms of communication is often successful in relieving the sufferer of grief, if only temporarily. Kristeva writes that the sounds and rhythms of such a language demonstrate more than what the written words denote:

Prosody will then be the basic, fundamental sieve that will sift the "black prince's" sorrow and joy into language. A fragile filter but often the only one. Does one not, when all is said and done, and beyond the multifarious and contradictory meanings of words and syntactic structures, hear the vocal gesture? With the very first alliterations, rhythms, melodies, the transposition of the speaking body asserts itself through a glottic and oral presence. (161)<sup>11</sup>

That "sieve" or "filter" of prosody is the means of communication through which the sufferer's "speaking body" integrates with "ordinary" communication. The sufferer's "artificial language," in the form of prosody, is the means of relief. It is "fragile" because the sufferer's state of mind is fragile; when the ability to convey the "artificial language" is lost, so is the filter. Though Kristeva is speaking specifically about Nerval's poem, these identifying features are also found in Lawrence's poems; his use of sound and rhythm comes from "vocal gesture" and "the speaking body" as directly as the words

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<sup>11</sup> Kristeva personifies depression as the "Black Prince": "Orpheus, once again, retained victory over the Black Prince" (*Black Sun* 144).

themselves convey these elements. With the “fragile filter” of his late poetry, Lawrence attempts to resist depression.

In “The Hands of God” (#21), Lawrence enunciates the dangers of failing to reconcile oneself with God before death. Yet more important than the philosophy of the poem is the new language he provides to convey that belief. The philosophy of the poem is summarized in the first stanza: “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. / But it is a much more fearful thing to fall out of them” (1-2). Lawrence admits the difficulty of exposing oneself to God, but he seems fully aware of the dangers of not doing so. The remainder of the poem reiterates this idea, not only in meaning but in form. Lawrence uses constant repetition and alliteration to simulate the inevitable fall one will experience once out of “the hands of the living God.” In the poem a downward spiral is indicated and initiated by a word or image, and the repetition of that word or image becomes a repetition of falling, emphasizing that collapse. For example, the first line in the fourth stanza repeats “sinking,” but also includes “sickening,” which means three repeated words in effect: “That awful and sickening endless sinking, sinking” (10). If the “sinking” is “endless,” the repeated slant rhyme (“sickening” / “sinking”) emphasizes that fact. The inclusion of “endless” is important not just in concept, but in sound as well. Its final sibilant blends into the sibilance of the next word, thus prolonging the downward spiral. Line 13 furthers the effect with more sibilance:

and sinks, seething and sinking, corrupt

and sinking still, in depth after depth of disintegrative consciousness

sinking in the endless undoing, the awful katabolism into the abyss! (13-15)

The imagery is painful, culminating with “katabolism,” a variant of “catabolism.”<sup>12</sup> But the repeated words (“corrupt” after “corruptive” in line 11, as well as “endless” and “awful” from line 10) and sounds have a similarly pronounced effect. The repeated sibilants become trance-like. The only respite in this cacophony of hisses is “corrupt” in line 13, but the “sinking still” immediately following suggests that this fall is indeed “endless.” Lawrence’s plea in the fifth stanza, repeating the pleas of the third stanza, is thus strongly felt: “Save me from that, O God!” (17). Lawrence successfully recreates in sound the fall into the endless abyss of Hell, making his desperate cry all the more urgent.

The poem “Only Man” (#24) explores the same ideas as “The Hands of God”: “Only man can fall from God / Only man” (1-2). However, the desperation in “The Hands of God” is not found in “Only Man.” While “The Hands of God” is a prayer against falling, “Only Man” acknowledges that it is inevitable for humanity to seek “self-knowledge” (6) and thus “slip entirely through the fingers of the hands of god” (5). The second stanza reinforces this idea, as Lawrence states, “No animal, no beast nor creeping thing / no cobra nor hyaena nor scorpion nor hideous white ant” can fall from God, only man (3-4). This stanza is comparatively devoid of device, repeating only “knowledge” and “self” in addition to the list of nasty animals and their accompanying negatives. The final line of the stanza, “knowledge of the self-apart-from-god” (7), is also the first line of the next stanza, preparing the reader for the repetition and reinforcement that is to follow.

The opening two lines of the third stanza make a statement that, as in the first stanza, summarizes the argument. Lawrence uses the remaining thirteen lines to describe, as well as enact in sound and rhythm, the fall into the “abyss down which the soul can

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<sup>12</sup> Catabolism is “the breakdown of complex molecules in living organisms to form simpler ones, together with the release of energy”; it is “destructive metabolism” (*Oxford Concise English Dictionary*).

slip” (9). In addition to the allusion to “The Hands of God,” the terror of the “abyss of self-knowledge” is emphasized by the many repetitions, alliterations, and assonances, each of which overlaps into the next:

For the knowledge of the self-apart-from-God  
 is an abyss down which the soul can slip  
 writhing and twisting in all the revolutions  
 of the unfinished plunge  
 of self-awareness, now apart from God, falling  
fathomless, fathomless, self-consciousness wriggling  
 writhing deeper and deeper in all the minutiae of self-knowledge, downwards,  
                   exhaustive,  
 yet never, never coming to the bottom, for there is no bottom;  
 zigzagging down like the fizzle from a finished rocket  
 the frizzling falling fire that cannot go out, dropping wearily,  
neither can it reach the depth  
for the depth is bottomless,  
 so it wriggles its way even further down, further down  
 at last in sheer horror of not being able to leave off  
 knowing itself, knowing itself apart from God, falling. (8-22)

This constant repetition causes an effect of continual “plunge” (11): “falling / fathomless, fathomless” (12-13) describes an immeasurable depth as the abyss cannot be measured and comprehension founders; there is no understanding because there is no end to the abyss (8). But Lawrence understands: the “abyss” of his sadness is being evoked here

through rhythm and sound, in the repeated “wr” sounds of “wriggling/writhing” and the repeated “z” and “f” sounds of “zigzagging down like the fizzle from a finished rocket / the frizzling falling fire . . .” (16-17). The “z”s are obvious alliterations: Lawrence resorts to archaic sounds and tropes to express his feelings. Kristeva describes “depressed speech” as “absurd signs, slackened, scattered, checked sequences” (*Black Sun* 52), like the “zigzagging” and the “fizzle.” A collapse of meaning is apparent; the speaker has suffered “a loss of reference”: “No word, no object in reality will be likely to have a coherent concatenation that will also be suitable to a meaning or referent” (51). Lawrence knows what he means to say, but what he says has no ready meaning. The repeated “f” sounds connect the lines to “falling,” which is also the last word of the poem. In fact, every sound in the last lines refers to “falling”: the “th” of “depth” reminds the reader of the “f,” and as a result all the “d” sounds are connected to the “f” sounds, as in “further down”; the suffix “less” connects to “fathomless” or “bottomless” and thus to “falling”; and the repeated “n” sounds of “knowledge,” “-ness,” and “down” connect to “falling” in “finished.” The stanza is a single sentence evoking, through repeated and varied sound, endlessness and the abyss. It is the rhythm of the “speaking body” (Kristeva, “Ethics” 34). The words themselves are not as important as the sounds they make, which are enhanced further by the variation of long and short lines. It is this sound and rhythmic variation that makes this poem an “Ark” for Lawrence. He uses words and sounds and rhythm to describe suffering and by doing so, he claims a temporary alleviation of pain.

“Kissing and Horrid Strife” (#37) is another desperate poem conveying sadness. The first line immediately recalls Nerval: “I have been defeated and dragged down by pain” (1). Compare this to “El Desdichado”: “I am saturnine – bereft – disconsolate” (1).

Both are admissions of sadness, of grief. Lawrence claims that there is “bliss” (“kissing”) in life but also “dread” (“horrid strife”). The two stanzas following the opening line describe the “delights” of life and have a light rhythm, indicating happiness and “bliss” (4). The metre, though still irregular from line to line, is predominantly iambic, exemplified by line 3:

~   ,   ~   ,   ~   ,   ~   ,   ~   ,  
But still I know that life is for delight

The iambic pentameter in this line sets the light rhythm for the next ten lines, which further describe “delight.” There is little repetition of either word or sound. Unlike the lines in the fourth stanza, the lines here do not lead inexorably toward a prevailing image or meaning; there is no underlying sense of danger. However, the third stanza closes with “kisses of the soft-balled paws, where the talons are” (13), which suggests Lawrence’s actual view of the world, full of “horrid strife.” As in “Only Man,” Lawrence uses the final line of one stanza to indicate the theme and tone of the next. And indeed the fourth stanza is an evocation of the “dread” of life:

And life is for dread,  
for doom that darkens, and the Sunderers  
that sunder us from each other,  
that strip us and destroy us and break us down  
as the tall foxgloves and the mulleins and mallows  
are torn down by dismembering autumn  
till not a vestige is left, and black winter has no trace  
of any such flowers;  
and yet the roots below the blackness are intact:

the Thunderers and the Sunderers have their term,  
 their limit, their thus far and no further. (14-24)

There is much more repetition than in the earlier stanzas, both in image and in sound. The first line of the stanza offers a key for the many other “d” sounds that follow: “And life is for dread” (14). The heavy-sounding “dread” is not only different from the buoyant sound of words such as “bliss” or “plays with the wavelets” in the second and third stanzas, it indicates that any similar sound (“b” or “break”) is meant to invoke this mood. Thus, line 15 has “doom that darkens” and “Sunderers.” Like “doom” and “darkens,” “Sunderers” (and “sunder” in line 16) has the familiar “d” and “r” consonance of “dread.” Lawrence creates an atmosphere of death with these sound connections: everything in the fourth stanza leads to and from “dread.” Lawrence’s grim understanding of “strife” is felt much more strongly when contrasted with earlier stanzas. Each is an exaggeration of “bliss” designed to illuminate the divide between “delight” and “strife”.

The poem ends with a message that “life is for kissing and horrid strife” (35) – opposites, yet “strife” is given a descriptor while “kissing” is not, indicating the prevailing emotion. In this single line Lawrence mimics the form of the poem; he also indicates which experience he feels more strongly. In this poem Lawrence’s repeated consonance and alliteration are a new language, a new way to express his grief. He is mediating this sadness through poetry: by representing it in sound, he has triumphed over sadness, albeit temporarily.

In “Silence” (#20) Lawrence uses “silence” as a metaphor for death: “Come, holy Silence, come / great bride of all creation.” (1-2). Death is the “great bride of all creation,” for life cannot exist without death and must therefore “reach / from the presence of God”

(3-4). The third stanza calls on the sea and the stars to remain silent, referring to two of God's acts of creation before humanity. Humanity, however, is "the last of the seven great laughs of creation" – by definition, of destruction as well: God's "last great . . . laugh" is "thunderous," and all that remains in the wake of the Apocalypse is utter and complete silence.

The prevailing device in this poem is caesura. If the poem invites "Silence" and asks to be enveloped by it, the prevailing tone should be to mimic that silence, to seem silent. But the metre and rhythm of the poem are opposite; Lawrence's speaker shouts his request, screaming loudly for silence to come: "Come, holy Silence!" (3). The breaks in the lines become breaks in the anticipated silence; though themselves moments of silence, they serve to underscore the sound. The form of the poem ostensibly "laughs" at God, defying what the speaker claims in the poem: that God has the last laugh. As the poem progresses, the speaker becomes stronger in opposing the silence. It is clear that the speaker, though appearing to court silence, defies it.

The fourth stanza is the speaker's most deliberate act of defiance:

Lo! the laugh of God!

Lo! the laugh of the creator!

Lo! the last of the seven great laughs of God!

Lo! the last of the seven great laughs of creation! (8-11)

The repetition and variation of phrases is broken by the numerous exclamation points. The seriousness of the speaker's plea is thus questioned; he is too emphatic and ironic in his prayer for silence. The fifth stanza continues the hyperbole:

Huge, huge roll the peals of the thunderous laugh

huge, huger, huger and huger pealing  
 till they mound and fill and all is fulfilled of God's last and greatest laugh  
 till all is soundless and senseless, a tremendous body of Silence  
 enveloping even the edges of the thought-waves,  
 enveloping even me, who hear no more,  
 who am embedded in a shell of Silence,  
 of silence, lovely silence  
 of holy silence  
 the silence of the last of the seven great laughs of God. (12-22)

Silence (or death) is a lack of sound (or life), yet Lawrence uses paradoxical images of mass, volume, and substance to describe that lack. The consonance of "l" sounds reminds the reader of the "laugh" of God, the sound of God's laugh being ever-present. To emphasize this point, he repeats "huge" six times. The immensity of "silence" is beyond further description and can only be repeated. The greatest lack of sound in creation is bigger than the speaker can possibly fathom: "a tremendous body of Silence!" (15). The "thunderous laugh" of God renders all "soundless and senseless," as though sound is tied to consciousness. The speaker claims that he hears "no more" (17) as he is "embedded in a shell of Silence" (18). Serious for the first time, the speaker admits that death is near, surrounding him; everlasting life is in doubt. This stanza is void of exclamations, indicating, in this instance, the speaker's honesty. Now the "laugh of God" is opposed with a quiet sneer instead of a laugh: "the silence of the last of the seven great laughs of God" (22). The lack of caesura marks this line from the rest. The speaker is angry that he and everyone else are going to perish eternally because they trusted in God.

The next stanza returns to the playful jest of before. In fact, Lawrence writes a lyric in the opening lines: “Ah! the holy silence – it is meet! / It is very fitting! there is nought beside!” (23-24). The assonance of “silence” – “beside” and the consonance of “meet” – “fitting” turns the poem into a child’s lyric, the ultimate response to God’s great joke. The stanza ends with the ceremonial passage through the “gates” (of either heaven or hell):

in the sacred silence of gates  
in the silence of passing through doors,  
in the great hush of going from this into that,  
in the suspension of wholeness, in the moment of division within the whole! (26-29)

These lines are chant-like, with only two commas to break the rhythm. Overall, the stanza is ambiguous. Where do the doors lead? Is God laughing because no one is worthy of his love, or does he laugh because he has fooled everyone? The stanza does not give an answer:

Lift up your heads, O ye Gates!  
for the silence of the last great thundrous laugh  
screens us purely, and we can slip through. (30-32)

Line 30 is from Psalm 24: “Lift up your heads, O ye gates; even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in” (KJV). The intent is to offer one’s soul to God to be admitted into heaven: “Unto thee, O LORD, do I lift up my soul” (Psalm 25 KJV). However, the speaker does not lift up his soul but resents the fact that he must do so; indeed, he laughs in the face of God. By mocking the very “Silence” he calls upon,

he mocks God and thus life itself. He is angry at the joke he fell for; death has come and he feels no salvation, no eternal reward.

Sandra Gilbert calls the poem “Silence” another image of “cosmic duality” suggested throughout *Last Poems* (305). The “Silence” is “paradoxical” since it is represented by the “laugh of God” (300). Gilbert explains the exclamation points as demonstrations of the “cosmic joy” (300) indicated by Revelation as well as the philosophy of Thomas Carlyle, both of which would have been familiar to Lawrence. But she does not question Lawrence’s sincerity here; for her, the poem is an enthusiastic celebration of “union with the divine,” as the soul, divided, must reunite with God (300). She uses the nearby poems in the volume, specifically “Bavarian Gentians” and “Pax,” to identify this sentiment. But in my view the tone and imagery of those poems, as well as “The Hands of God” (immediately following “Silence”) and “Lucifer” (preceding it), are grave and without joyous expression. “The Hands of God” expresses fear and concern about his inevitable death, and “Lucifer” asks if Satan was indeed dealt with justly. Gilbert’s thesis does not account for the strange shift in tone: Lawrence suddenly embraces death after expressing such doubt and fear. Had “Silence” come at the end of the volume it would, like “Shadows,” indicate such a reconciliation. But here Lawrence is still angry and doubtful, shaken spiritually by his weakened physical self.

“Beware the Unhappy Dead!” (#54) is part of a group of poems near the end of the volume. Four of these poems, “All Souls’ Day” (#52), “The Houseless Dead” (#53), “Beware the Unhappy Dead,” and “After All Saints’ Day” (#55) work together in series as they all address similar themes and have similar titles. Examining these four poems as a group reveals a struggle on Lawrence’s part to convey his fear of death; moreover, the

contrasts within “Beware” show distinct features of Lawrence’s depressive discourse. The title “Beware” indicates an urgency in Lawrence; the repetition of “un” as negation reinforces this warning:

Beware the unhappy dead thrust out of life  
unready, unprepared, unwilling, unable  
 to continue on the longest journey. (1-3)

The warning is direct, and, like “Kissing and Horrid Strife” and “Only Man,” the poem continues the message through repetition. The rhythm of the second line is repeated in line 12: “old haunt, old habitats, old hearths” (12). This repeating rhythm reinforces the original list. Another list indicates unrest but also healing, as it details a process to appease the “unhappy dead”: “and put a plate, and put a wine-glass out / and serve the best of food, the fondest wine / for your dead . . .” (22-4). This process will end the unhappiness of the dead, just as the process of listing temporarily eases Lawrence’s fears.

Lawrence also repeats several important words: “rage,” “malignant,” “existence,” “angry” and, most importantly, “beware.” The final lines are the culmination of the repetition and they are the ultimate warning:

Oh, they can lay you waste, the angry dead.  
 Perhaps even now you are suffering from the havoc they make  
 unknown within your breast and your deadened loins. (28-30)

Now this warning becomes clear. Lawrence urges respect for the dead, for he will soon be one of them. “Perhaps even now” indicates his own suffering. The repetition here, then,

serves as a reminder, to himself and to his readers, of his proximity to death. It also indicates the focus of a dying man, struggling to enunciate his great fear.

An exasperated “Oh” comes in at the opening of each stanza of “Beware.” “The Houseless Dead” also contains the “Oh” refrain: “Oh pity the dead that are dead” (1); “Oh pity the dead that were ousted out of life” (4); and “Oh think of them, and with the soul’s deep sigh / set food for them” (12-13). The theme of “The Houseless Dead,” as the title indicates, is a variation on that of “Beware”: lost souls, agitated and vengeful, must be appeased. However, in “The Houseless Dead” the reader is asked to “pity the dead that are dead, but cannot take / the journey” (1-2). Pity them, “think of them” (12), but do not fear them – yet. “Beware” reveals that Lawrence has had a change in feeling, perhaps from pity to empathy. The request becomes a plea to others, for Lawrence empathizes with the dead. Still, both poems are prayers: the refrain-like stanzas are songs, chant-like, in which the poet is hoping to manage the fear and sadness that comes with the thought of death by representing that fear and sadness in poetic language. In “All Souls’ Day,” immediately prior to “The Houseless Dead,” we also find the familiar “Oh” refrain. Line six asks, “Oh where are they to go?” and line ten exclaims, “Oh be kind to your dead,” contributing to the song-like structure found in this group of poems.

The poem immediately following “Beware” is “After All Saints’ Day.” Lawrence went through his crisis on Halloween and by November 2nd, the day after All Saints’ Day, he was temporarily reconciled with coming death. “After All Saints’ Day” has no “Oh”s, no warnings, no requests. It is a peaceful song, detailing the soul’s journey into oblivion:

Wrapped in the dark-red mantle of warm memories

the little, slender soul sits swiftly down, and takes the oars

and draws away, away, towards dark depths  
 wafting with warm love from still-living hearts  
 breathing on his small frail sail, and helping him on  
 to the fathomless deeps ahead, far, far from the grey shores  
 of marginal existence. (*CP* 723)

The poet is not afraid, or seems not so, and the structure and the rhythm reflect this tranquility. The tone is calm, and the “s” sounds soft and sleepy: “the little, slender soul sits swiftly down” is not a harsh action but a gentle one, though “swiftly” indicates haste. “Wafting . . . warm love” defines the poem; the soul’s journey is delightful rather than painful, as was feared in “Beware.” Indeed, this soul—Lawrence’s—is not unhappy. The emphatic repetition of “unready, unprepared, unwilling, unable” (“Beware” 2) is replaced by easy rhymes such as “small frail sail” (“Saints” 5). The difference in rhythm here signifies surrender after struggle. The short poem shows a regular rhythm, a familiar song among “strange concatenations.” Though Kristeva argues that all poetry shows the struggle to overcome depression, some poems must represent breakthrough. This poem contains the rhythms and alliterations of the primary processes found in phrases like “small frail sail” and “wafting with warm love from still-living hearts,” but also the “symbolic processes” of “grammar and logic of discourse” (65) that are familiar, or at least less unfamiliar, to readers. The struggle of “Houseless Dead” and “Beware” brought temporary relief, indicated by “After All Saints’ Day.”

“After All Saints’ Day” was written close to the end of Lawrence’s life, when he was suffering greatly and could not hope to recover from his illness. Another poem written in this period is “Shadows.” As in “All Saints’ Day,” the tone of “Shadows”

indicates readiness and relief, not despair. The speaker knows he will walk with God if his “spirit darkens and goes out” (6). The poem is organized into four hypothetical questions; with each stanza the question becomes more elaborate, explaining further the bodily state he contemplates. The answers expand with each stanza as well, beginning with one line in the first stanza to four lines in the last. In the opening stanza the speaker states that if he dies in the night but wakes in the morning, he will have “been dipped again in God, and new-created” (4). It is a short stanza, four lines, and iambic with a few substitutions; Lawrence writes in traditional form:

And if tonight my soul may find her peace  
in sleep, and sink in good oblivion,  
and in the morning wake like a new-opened flower  
then I have been dipped again in God, and new-created. (1-4)

The rhythm is gentle and the sound is calm from the sibilance, barely above a whisper as Lawrence lies on his death bed. The speaker is assured, calmed by the presence of God and the idea that he will be “dipped in God,” or reborn, soon. There is no rebellion in these lines, only acceptance. He calls death “good oblivion,” and the speech pattern does not belie the thought.

The second stanza begins with another conditional conjunction, showing an emerging pattern. The running thought of the opening stanza is repeated in the second, only this time the speaker contemplates more deeply. He scrutinizes the possibility of death further:

And if, as weeks go round, in the dark of the moon  
my spirit darkens and goes out, and soft, strange gloom

pervades my movements and my thought and words . . . (5-7)

The idea of death is more disturbing to the speaker, as darkness and “gloom” replace “sleep” and “good oblivion.” The assonance of “gloom” and “moon” and “move-“ brings heaviness of sound to the lines: he is daring himself to consider the depth of death, the heaviness and consequences. The rhythm, however, shows none of this heaviness: starting with the same form as previously, Lawrence retains the somewhat regular metre and sound. The rhythm is not interrupted here, except in “soft, strange gloom” in line 6: three stresses in a row, a pause in thought. Lawrence’s “answer” in this stanza is, similarly, more elaborate than in the previous stanza: “then I shall know that I am walking still with God, we are close together now the moon’s in shadow” (9). The line maintains the rhythm of the first stanza, calm and assured. The stakes are higher but the reward is better; through all that might happen in the dark, the speaker will come out stronger.

However, though the tone is serene and “religious” (Gilbert 314), the content is dark and self-destructive. The speaker contemplates his own bodily “dissolution” and prays for renewal (Laird 235). Holly Laird writes that this idea of renewal is a “Keatsian dream” (235), but Lawrence modifies it with dark imagery: “singing darker than the nightingale, on, on to the solstice” (“Shadows” 16). Even in calm acceptance, Lawrence encodes his struggle within the poem. The “strange gloom” is not only the gloom of Hades or death, but also that of depression and illness. It has “pervade[d his] movements and . . . thoughts and words” (7). Sandra Gilbert writes that in “Shadows” (#65), Lawrence “at last speaks in his own person and speaks directly of his own illness” (314); the images of depression as “gloom” or “the drowse of a low, sad song” (“Shadows” 15) also appear in poems like “Bavarian Gentians” (#17) or “Song of Death” (#56). The speaker’s admission

that a “soft, strange gloom / pervades my movements and my thoughts and words” indicates that he is nearly immobilized by his depression, as it affects not only his “thoughts and word” but also his “movements.” The speaker is indeed in despair:

And if, as autumn deepens and darkens

I feel the pain of falling leaves, and stems that break in storms

and trouble and dissolution and darkness

.....

then I shall know that my life is moving still

with the dark earth, and drenched

with the deep oblivion of earth’s lapse and renewal. (10-12, 18-20)

The imagery is apparent: Lawrence’s body is breaking and “darkness” is creeping in. Yet though this imagery is of “dissolution” and pain, the lines themselves are sombre, with few sharp notes to break the trance. Perhaps he does not wish to disturb his sleep.

In the third stanza the speaker elaborates on the idea of painful death. Instead of his soul “find[ing] her peace / in sleep” (1-2), the speaker feels “the pain of falling leaves, and stems that break in storms” (11); sleep is not peaceful but “the drowse of a low, sad song” that amplifies “the silence of short days, the silence of the year” (17). This stanza also breaks from the “simple beauty” (Gilbert 314) of the first two, with longer lines and more repetition of sound. It is now a “low, sad song / singing darker than the nightingale” (“Shadows” 15-16). The repeated sibilants mixed with “d” sounds become the loud whisper of a man lacking strength, struggling to get those final words out. The speaker is assured that he is caught in the “earth’s lapse and renewal” (20), but the promise of new “renewal” is not enough; he feels “drenched / with the deep oblivion,” tied to the “dark

earth” (19-20). The speaker has faith in God but is not immune to the pain and fear of earthly death.

The fourth and final stanza is actually three stanzas held together by the punctuation. It begins as the others do, with the “And if” supposition, but the rhythm of the stanza is interrupted by the colon at the end of line 25. Lawrence portrays the “changing phases of man’s life” in the structure of the stanza, as it is not only different from the other stanzas but changes direction halfway through:

And if, in the changing phases of man’s life

I fall in sickness and in misery

my wrists seem broken and my heart seems dead

and strength is gone, and my life

is only the leavings of a life:

and still, among it all, snatches of lovely oblivion, and snatches of renewal

odd, wintry flowers upon the withered stem, yet new, strange flowers

such as my life has not brought forth before, new blossoms of me –

then I must know that still

I am in the hands [of] the unknown God,

he is breaking me down to his own oblivion

to send me forth on a new morning, a new man. (21-32, brackets in original)

The short lines of the first section become long and sonorous in the second part and the stanza finally ends with short, terse lines. It is as though those three lines in the middle are the “new, strange flowers” on the “withered stem.” Though the punctuation connects the

three parts logically, the stanza is severed rhythmically by the caesuras and does not have the intensity of the third stanza. Just as the speaker feels “the changing phases of man’s life,” the poem undergoes that change, from the rather regular verse of the opening stanza to the fractured closing stanza that reveals the mystery to all. The closing stanza does not have the fervent repetition of the penultimate stanza, nor the regularity of the opening stanza; its form is new, a triptych, a form resulting from the struggle within.

Lawrence’s sadness in the face of death does not waver with the ultimate confidence of “Shadows.” Aldington writes that “Shadows” shows Lawrence’s “new voice of grandeur and dignity” (*CP* 598). Lawrence is certain that upon death he will come through the darkness of oblivion to walk with God in heaven. The sadness comes as he reaches the point of assurance: he has needed to write about death to gain the confidence to overcome fear. The destructive imagery, like the broken branches and “dissolution and distress” (12) and fractured rhythm of the closing stanza, shows the growth, the reconciliation, the partial recovery. The verses are tentative, but Lawrence has already experienced the pain of sadness and gloom, the “sickness and . . . misery” (22) of death – through writing, for he cannot speak it: “the silence of short days, the silence of the year” (17). His toil is over, for he has written through his sadness and cast it off, and is now ready to accept physical “dissolution.”

The structure and rhythm of the poems in *Last Poems* indicates much about Lawrence’s emotional state. He was deeply affected by his illness and coming death. The change in tone over the course of the volume speaks loudly, and it is as remarkable as the change in the imagery of the poems. “Shadows” was not the last poem Lawrence wrote. His final poem, according to Aldington, was “Phoenix” (*CP* 593), a significant image of

rebirth for Lawrence. *Last Poems* contains many profound images, important to Lawrence's reconciliation.

## Chapter 3

“A Dungeon Horrible”<sup>13</sup>: Images of Depression in *Last Poems*

The imagery of death and sadness within *Last Poems* cannot be ignored. The sixty-seven poems of the volume are all rich in imagery, each instance seeking an explanation for, and a recovery from, sadness. The opening poems allude to gods and mythic figures such as Dionysos and Odysseus; Lawrence is intrigued by the immortality of such figures and yearns for immortality himself. Poems such as “Bodiless God” and “Mana of the Sea” suggest that Lawrence is preoccupied with the thought of life after death. In “Bodiless God” the speaker states, “Everything that has beauty has a body, and is a body” (1). Lawrence’s own body was failing him at the time, and he knew that he soon would not have a body; still, he argues that since God does not have a body and he still exists, then Lawrence will in fact exist, in one form or another, after death. “Mana of the Sea” suggests much the same sentiment: “I am the sea, I am the sea!” (18). In order to accept the coming death, Lawrence needs reassurance that life will not end with his body. The imagery, like the rhythmic structure, suggests struggle with depression. He seeks to overcome his fear, his sadness, through these images; by writing them, he will temporarily succeed in doing so.

Kristeva’s explication of Nerval’s “El Desdichado” places particular attention on the imagery of the poem. The title itself is a metaphor opening the interpretation of the poem to myriad meanings relating to that particular translation (*Black Sun* 144). Kristeva’s reading of Nerval demonstrates the importance of imagery within depressive

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<sup>13</sup> John Milton. *Paradise Lost*, Book 1, line 61.

discourse. The depressive person struggles to convey meaning and must use non-literal means of communication. In order to express the semiotic within the symbolic, the depressive uses the “polyvalency of symbolism”: “[T]hose references that make up Nerval’s ideology are inserted in a poetic web – uprooted, transposed, they achieve a multivalency and a set of connotations, all of which are often undecidable” (147). Kristeva adopts the term “multivalency,” or “polyvalency,” to describe the many latent meanings words will invariably have within depressive speech. Nerval’s poem signifies on many levels, each conveying the speaker’s “wretchedness” even if, or perhaps especially if, those levels seem disparate.

Lawrence’s poems rely on “multivalency” of meaning as well. While structure is an aspect of depressive discourse, imagery is a connected means of overcoming his grief and fear of death. Thus, *Last Poems* must be considered in context, within its own “poetic web.” According to Aldington, the poems are arranged in the order in which they were written, suggesting that changes in the imagery document the progression in Lawrence’s struggle to overcome despair (*CP* 591). By the end of the volume, Lawrence’s opinion and feelings have changed completely: from “they are not dead!” (“The Argonauts” (#1) 1) to “immortal bird” (“Phoenix” (#67) 12), *Last Poems* itself becomes an attempt to overcome his grief. Though Lawrence cannot stop his body from decay, he can maintain a sharp and attuned mind; more importantly, he can retain his spirit. By the end of the sequence he does not accept death as the end of his being, only the end of his body.

Lawrence’s poems are filled with images of melancholy, from darkness to falling to death. Through these images Lawrence voices his sadness; metaphors of darkness and falling are common to depressed persons. Andrew Solomon writes that depression “is like

going blind, the darkness at first gradual, then encompassing” (50), while William Styron compares his depression to a Miltonian Hell.<sup>14</sup> Linda McMullen and John Conway identify three major metaphors to describe depression: depression as darkness, depression as weight, and depression as descent (170-1)<sup>15</sup>. The first is manifested in images of “cloudy, rainy weather” or “feeling dark and . . . being blue” (170). The second metaphor also includes images of captivity; McMullen and Conway refer to Styron’s image of “solitary confinement” (179) as an example. “Depression is descent” is the third and most common metaphor (171). Statements about being “down” or “low” are extremely common when describing the emotional state (171). The “descent” metaphor is easily understood by sufferers of depression, as it is a common tool in describing feelings of sadness:

Arising out of this central sense of depression as feeling of being “down” or “low” were numerous metaphorical entailments or elaborations derived from our knowledge and experience of descent. For example, we know that going down is quick, easy, and requires no will, but coming back up takes a long time, is difficult and effortful, and requires will. Consistent with this knowledge, clients spoke of *spiralling down . . . , slipping into depression* and *falling in and out of depression*. These phrases denote clearly the sense that depression is conceptualized as a downward progression that, once begun, is difficult, if not impossible, to stop.

(171-2)

Once affected by a crisis, the depressed person is continually held “down” due to the anticipation and dread of the difficult task of getting back “up” (172).

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<sup>14</sup> The title of William Styron’s personal account of depression is *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (1990), a reference to *Paradise Lost*, Book 1.

<sup>15</sup> These metaphors are common in Western culture and are not limited to indicating depression: for instance, they can characterize Cancer discourse. This thesis argues that it is the context within Lawrence’s poems that gives the metaphors a particular meaning that is specific to depressive discourse.

McMullen and Conway specify that this metaphor describes not only emotional state but also cultural perception. Along with sadness, the metaphor of descent may also refer to the “low” position in which Western cultures place illness or failure:

Considering the importance we attach to our position or place in society and to the sense of having control over our lives, it is possible that many of the seemingly banal instances of DEPRESSION IS DESCENT metaphor serve a determinative function and actually contribute, in part, to the degree of misery experienced by a depressed person. That is, presenting oneself as “our culture’s failure” might actually exacerbate one’s level of despair. (178)

Depression affects one’s personal perception of oneself in a culture that rewards the uphill climb of success, and thus compounds “the sad affect that appears to be the core of depression with associations of failure and loss of control” (179). Thus McMullen and Conway demonstrate that certain metaphors are common in describing depression. In *Last Poems*, Lawrence uses these common metaphors to describe his depression.

The confusion and frustration at the prospect of silence cause extreme feelings – but writing about them occurs after the experience. Lawrence has already felt the darkness, the sensation of falling, or even the pangs of death or else he could not write about it. He knows his sadness, and now he must communicate it and reconnect with the symbolic. Kristeva writes that depressives seek to overcome sadness by communicating it, often in a new way different from normal speech. They must reform language to fit and carry their own feelings of sadness, and the result is a semiotic language close to the rhythm of the body. The successful poem shows a bodily confrontation with the grief that overcomes the poet. The imagery of such a poem will be brutal and graphic, taking author

and observer beyond mere words. Lawrence's images of sadness are direct and uncensored, affecting the reader's senses by touching the very bodily sadness that consumes him.

In "Bodiless God" (#8), Lawrence identifies this source of sadness. Though he does not describe his mourning for his own body, by exploring God's "lack" of a body he reveals this source. The opening stanza shows the human ideal in the physical world:

Every thing that has beauty has a body, and is a body;

everything that has being has being in the flesh:

and dreams are only drawn from the bodies that are. (1-3)

Lawrence reveals his own discontent with his sick body. His happiness and existence are tied directly to his flesh. But why the focus on the lack of a body? The previous poems concentrate on the mind and thought: yet these cannot exist without a body, and the body is what gives the thought fulfillment. The speaker in "Bodiless God" suggests that nothing can make a difference unless there is a physical body. "And he is supposed to be mighty and glorious" (9): yet God does not have a body and thus cannot be "mighty" or "glorious." Can nothing, then, without a physical existence be important? This is the question that troubles Lawrence. He must contemplate his own existence with less of a body – is he diminished spiritually because of this lack? God is supposed to "have a voice / and emotions, and desires, and strength, glory and honour" (6); with no body, Lawrence's speaker asks, how can that be so? The focus on the lack of a body in this group of poems ("The Work of Creation" (#6), "Demiurge" (#5), "The Body of God" (#9), "Red Geranium and Godly Mignonette" (#7), "The Rainbow" (#10)) shows Lawrence's distress over his present state. By examining this fear, he describes his own

sadness, and through such communication comes preservation of one's self. A recovery comes in "The Rainbow," where the speaker realizes that though "you can't lay your hand on it" (5), even "the rainbow has a body" (1). Even though Lawrence will not have a physical existence, he will still have a "body" of some sort, either spiritual or in the memory of others.

"The Argonauts" (#1), like "Bodiless God," is concerned with existence in the world beyond physical presence. The exhortation "They are not dead, they are not dead!" at the beginning of the poem reveals an urgency in the speaker's voice. When he cries that "they" are not dead, he is really insisting on his own health: he is not dying. Though the sun, "like a lion, licks his paws / and goes slowly down the hill" (2-3), the moon "remembers, and only cares / that we should be lovely in the flesh" (4-5). Lawrence's fear is palpable here. That the heroes of old are remembered is encouraging: "The dawn is not off the sea, and Odysseus' ships / have not yet passed the islands, I must watch them still" (11-12). The heroes are bodiless, yet still they have existence, immortal within stories and landscape, not forgotten. The end of the poem, "I must watch them still," indicates a reprieve, for as he watches so will he be watched.

"Bavarian Gentians" (#17) is, in one way, an expression of sadness and fear. A sick man on his deathbed leaves his body behind and enters Hades. The pilgrimage is dark, brilliantly blackened with the "blaze of darkness" (5); the speaker descends into the Underworld, feigning power by shouting commands to his dark master. He identifies himself with Persephone, a helpless bride taken by force and condemned to an Underworld prison.

The two major metaphors at work in this poem are the myth of Persephone and the influx of darkness. The speaker relates his passage into Hades, the death of his physical body, as unjustly painful. He should not be dead, he thinks: “Not every man has gentians in his house / in soft September, at slow, sad Michaelmas” (1-2). He has been singled out and is unlike other men, healthy men. With the presence of sickness comes the presence of the archangel St. Michael, for whom “Michaelmas” is named. Among other things, he is the “protector against the devil, especially at the time of death” (“Michaelmas,” OED). The date is significant, as Michaelmas, September 29<sup>th</sup>, is at the end of summer and the beginning of autumn, the season of death and decay. After spending the spring and summer months on Earth, Persephone returns to Hades, causing Demeter, her mother, in her sadness to blanket the Earth in darkness and death.

Through the persistent repetition of the words “dark” and “darkness” (and other variants), the darkness begins to permeate the poem, reflecting the speaker’s own coming death: “Bavarian gentians, big and dark, only dark / darkening the day-time” (3-4). The gentians are beacons of Hades’ “gloom,” the shadow of death. The imagery of darkness continues in each line, creating a suffocating presence meant to evoke the fear and pain of death. As well, “darkness” carries with it an emotional or spiritual darkness, a lack of life on a psychological level – depression.

Many depressives describe their illness as a darkness, a gloom, or simply a feeling of being “blue” (McMullen and Conway 170). It is a convenient metaphor, as darkness is oppressive in the fear and uncertainty it brings. Depression, too, is about uncertainty: unsure of what is causing their sadness or whether it will ever end, depressives become more withdrawn, more anguished, more afraid. Lawrence’s speaker falls into darkness,

succumbing to the weight of fear and pain. The gentians in his room quickly envelop everything with their dark and dominating blue; every eye is drawn to the rare appearance and magnificence of the gentians. Their darkness is overwhelming. The speaker allows himself to be swallowed within such dominating darkness: “[T]orch-flower of the blue-smoking darkness, Pluto’s dark-blue daze, / black lamps from the halls of Dis, burning dark blue / giving off darkness, blue darkness” (7-9).

Despite this passage into darkness, the speaker goes from fear to courage. After accepting the inevitable death, at the end of the second stanza the speaker says, “[L]ead me then, lead the way” (10), and at the beginning of the third stanza there is another shift: “Reach me a gentian, give me a torch!” (11). The speaker now possesses a new strength; an acceptance of fate. He will go into the darkness since he seems to have nothing else left. This is Lawrence’s goal for the poem, too: by means of the poem he will confront depression (darkness) in an attempt to regain strength and the will to live.

Thus the speaker plunges further into blackness in an attempt to name his fear and thereby overcome it. The blackness becomes more intense with each step / line

down the darker and darker stairs, where blue is darkened on blueness  
even where Persephone goes, just now, from the frosted September  
to the sightless realm where darkness is awake upon the dark  
and Persephone herself is but a voice  
or a darkness invisible enfolded in the deeper dark . . . (13-17)

The passage progresses from “blue” or some light to “darkness invisible” or no light, no sight; nothing. Lawrence uses the latter phrase knowingly, increasing the sense of dread by playing on Milton’s famous description of Hell:

A dungeon horrible, on all sides round  
 As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames  
 No light, but rather darkness visible  
 Served only to discover sights of woe,  
 Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace  
 And rest can never dwell, hope never comes  
 That comes to all . . . (I, 61-67)

Lawrence's speaker is taken to a place worse than this: "darkness invisible" is a double Hell, compounded by the lack of sight even among the "dense gloom" ("Bavarian Gentians" 18). Lawrence's Hell is "deeper dark," a place where the binary of light and dark breaks down to dark and darker. Milton's Hell is a place "where all life dies, and death lives" (2.624), but Lawrence's Underworld is a place where even death is dying: "Persephone herself is but a voice" (16). The darkness and gloom of depression is far more tortuous than Hell itself. Lawrence's speaker confronts it, only to be enveloped by more darkness than previously imagined, "pierced with the passion of dense gloom" (18), married to Hades himself in eternal torment. The cloak of despair is more terrible than can be imagined. Yet Lawrence evokes it in detail, creating a gloom for the reader to experience, too. Lawrence's speaker goes to the depths of Hades, but unlike Persephone at this time Lawrence himself climbs out, if only temporarily.

In "Abysmal Immortality" (#23), part of the "Hands of God" group (poems 21-24), Lawrence expounds on the theme of "endless" oblivion. The theme of oblivion is prevalent in *Last Poems*, though the term "oblivion" itself does not appear until "The Ship of Death" (#50). Lawrence dwells on the idea of an endless afterlife and employs imagery

of falling, sinking, darkness, and an endless, bottomless abyss. In “Bavarian Gentians,” the speaker takes a journey into the “deeper dark” of Hades; “The Hands of God” (#21) is a prayer to be saved from the “sickening endless sinking, sinking”; and “Abysmal Immortality” details a paradox of human nature, the desire of each person to reach “self-knowledge / which he can never reach till he touch the bottom of the abyss / which he can never touch, for the abyss is bottomless” (10-12). Lawrence’s focus has shifted from contemplating an afterlife (as in “The Argonauts”: “They are not dead, they are not dead!”) to an afterlife without the presence of God. The “abyss” is the consequence of abandoning God for “self-knowledge” (“Only Man” 6). The imagery of infinite regression in this poem is reinforced by the constant repetition of sound and word. This repetition is a mark of depressive discourse in itself, but the imagery of “falling” that is repeated is also indicative. Yet Lawrence chooses to express his belief in God by using standard symbols: “the hands of the living God” (1) and “the godless plunge” (7) into Hell.

The opening lines of “Abysmal Immortality” present humans as petulant children struggling to be free of the authoritative parent:

It is not easy to fall out of the hands of the living God:

They are so large, and they cradle so much of a man.

It is a long time before a man can get himself away. (1-3)

God’s hands “cradle” humans and thus they rebel. The imagery of the Fall is introduced in Genesis when Adam and Eve fall from the grace of God (3:22-24). Lawrence’s image of God, however, is one of a loving God who continues to “cradle” humans “[e]ven through the greatest blasphemies” (4). The second stanza clarifies that “man” is not falling from

the grace of God, but “into himself alone” (7). The idea of destructive self-knowledge and human nature is thus the subject of “The Hands of God” as well as “Only Man.”

This image of falling from God indicates a worried Lawrence contemplating death and what must necessarily follow. Previous poems such as “Bodiless God” (#8) and “The Argonauts” (#1) establish Lawrence’s belief in the afterlife, and following poems, like “Pax” (#22) and “Abysmal Immortality,” show that his attention has turned to the prospect of eternity *without* God. He has turned to God because he does not want to suffer “abysmal immortality,” apart from “the presence of the living God” (“Pax” 10). But the imagery of “falling” recurs in *Last Poems*, and particularly in these poems. The constant “plunging,” “sinking,” “seething” into “endless,” “bottomless,” “fathomless” places indicates the despair of depression and separation from God. One who is depressed is in constant fear and in complete withdrawal, eventually losing the ability to communicate or even live, in despair succumbing to silence or suicide. This group of poems, which consists of “The Hands of God,” “Silence,” “Abysmal Immortality,” and “Only Man,” demonstrates Lawrence’s need to enunciate his desperation, his fear of falling into hopelessness. Though not specifically conveying Lawrence’s view of God, the language nonetheless exhibits Lawrence’s fear and sadness.

Similarly, “The End, The Beginning” (#57) uses imagery of despair as an attempt to reconcile with death. “The End, The Beginning” is part of a group that starts with “Song of Death” (#56) and ends with “Shadows” (#65); the central themes of “oblivion” and “forgetting” indicate an ailing Lawrence hoping for a peaceful existence after death. Yet he speaks in the present tense in these poems: oblivion is not something he will experience: it is something he is already experiencing. The idea that he is within oblivion,

“an utter and absolute dark,” before death indicates the level of despair he already feels. He does not know what is on the other side of oblivion, but because of physical illness and mental depression he experiences “a silent, sheer cessation of all awareness” (11). Thus the imagery of darkness dominates the poem. In biblical terms, darkness precedes light and creation, but the afterlife is supposed to be light: eternal light. Lawrence’s imagery of “end” and “beginning” marks a transition into death. Yet the present time is also in darkness, in oblivion: “But dipped, once dipped in dark oblivion / the soul has peace, inward and lovely peace” (14-15).<sup>16</sup> Lawrence dwells on “darkness” because he cannot fathom what is to come. It is the same with depression. To move beyond it, one must write about it; Lawrence focuses on darkness to escape into the light of recovery.

Preceding “The End, The Beginning” is “Song of Death.” As the title suggests, this poem also focuses on darkness. But the main image here is the “song” of death, because without it, “the song of life / becomes pointless and silly” (2-3). Thus song itself is important, not just the “song of death” but also that of “the longest journey / and what the soul takes with him, and what he leaves behind, / and how he enters fold after fold of deepening darkness” (4-6). The singing is the important part, the preparation for death and the realization that before “the soul at last is lost / in utter peace” (11-12), it is lost in the “dark whorled shell” of the “cosmos” or “oblivion” (7, 8). Again, the images of journeying and darkness are prominent. Lawrence overcomes his sadness and fear through poetic expression. This poem is his ritual of preparation, akin to the ritual of setting “a place for the dead, with a cushion and soft seat” (“Beware” 21) and preparing the table.

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<sup>16</sup> The imagery of being “dipped” in oblivion here is similar to “dipped in God” from “Shadows” (4); Lawrence equates “God” and “oblivion” in these cases, each of which representing an unknown afterlife.

Without the ritual of preparing for death, the soul is “unhappy” and filled with “cold, ghostly rage” (“Beware” 1, 11).

The final stanza reveals the desperate need to sing the song of death. Lawrence reveals his own need to reconcile himself with death: “Sing then the core of dark and absolute / oblivion” (10-11). Could Lawrence be feeling what Nerval felt? He “sings” the songs of death, the poem, in order to make sense of the fear that debilitates him. In this context, the “Song of Death” is therapeutic just as Nerval’s poem, also a song of sadness, is therapeutic.

Thus all the poems in *Last Poems* are songs of death. The constant repetition of images of darkness, falling, journeying, oblivion, fatigue, evil, and prayer all indicate songs of desperation. “The Ship of Death” (#50) is the ultimate song of death. It is divided into ten “songs,” each contemplating death differently. The prevailing image is the ship, the vessel that will carry the soul into oblivion. Darkness is a prevalent image, as demonstrated throughout *Last Poems*.

The opening song focuses on autumn. The falling apples represent the dying body: “The apples falling like great drops of dew / to bruise themselves an exit from themselves” (3-4). The “bruise” of falling is the pain of death – the apples are damaged just as the dying body is. The image of autumn represents the declining period of one’s life, as it also marks the end of the growing season and signals the coming of winter, of death. Thus, like the apples, the soul must depart as well:

And it is time to go, to bid farewell  
to one’s own self, and find an exit  
from the fallen self. (5-7)

“It is time” means that death is coming, that it is time to prepare for death; the speaker is not in the throes yet. The “self” has fallen, like the apple, and must “exit” the bodily vessel to enter another one, the one that will carry the self across oblivion.

The second song indicates the vessel: “Have you built your ship of death, O have you? / O build your ship of death, for you will need it” (8-9). As in “Beware the Unhappy Dead!” and other poems, the “you” is Lawrence himself as much as it is an imagined reader. He is reminding himself to prepare for death, for “[t]he grim frost is at hand” (10). The “ship” is thus the vessel to pass through death into the next world. “Oblivion” is an ocean of darkness, an unknown sea. Lawrence’s image of the “ship” comes from the paintings on the walls at the Etruscan tombs in central Italy. Lawrence was profoundly affected by these tombs, and wrote a travel diary, *Etruscan Places*, about the burial grounds. L.D. Clark writes that Lawrence “loves the Etruscans because of what he takes to be their simple yet profound affirmation of life and death as one joyous whole” (384). The ships represented in the tombs were bronze and ornate, which seemed to Lawrence a very good way to pass into death. Clark points out that “[t]hese Etruscan ships of death, with most of their accoutrements, were the pattern for Lawrence’s own, which he was already building” (386). Thus the imagery of the ship and sailing recurs throughout *Last Poems*, from “it is ships, it is ships, / it is ships of Cnossos coming” (“The Greeks Are Coming,” #1) to “passing through the waters of oblivion” (“Change,” #66).

The “ship of death” is a metaphor of the speaker’s acceptance and preparation for death. Lawrence asks, “Have you built your ship of death, O have you?” (“The Ship of Death” 8) because “death is on the air like a smell of ashes!” (12). The ship will prepare the soul and become the new vessel, for “in the bruised body, the frightened soul / finds

itself shrinking, wincing from the cold / that blows upon it through the orifices” (14-16). The body is no longer adequate for the passage into oblivion: the ship will protect it and ensure a safe journey.

Song III indicates the pain of death, the “wincing” of the soul in death. Alluding to *Hamlet*, Lawrence asks, “And can a man his own quietus make / with a bare bodkin?” (17-18). The answer is no, “for how could murder, even self-murder / ever a quietus make?” (22-23). The only way to obtain “quietus” is to prepare: to build the ship of death. The allusion to *Hamlet* is *à propos* here, for Lawrence is contemplating an easy way out from pain. Hamlet considers suicide as an escape from the duty to kill another; Lawrence, too, wants to escape the duty and necessity of enduring his own prolonged death. He considers “self-murder” only to dismiss it: he will do his duty to ensure the passage across oblivion.

“The Ship of Death” marks the first appearance of the image of “oblivion” in *Last Poems*. Until this point, Lawrence did not have a conception of death: only vague references such as “abyss,” “darkness,” “katabolism,” “endless and living silence,” “darkness invisible,” and “black winter.” These are all metaphors of death, “multivalent” images of the end of life. They also contain elements of fear and pain. Oblivion, however, contains no such connotations: it is a relief, a finality, and accepting it will end the pain of the flawed body and allow the soul to pass into a higher plane of existence. Indeed, Lawrence felt that oblivion was a renewal, a rebirth for the soul, another chance at living. The idea that death is cleansing is typical of the suicidal mind. The contemplation of suicide, even if dismissed, indicates the depression Lawrence felt. Thus, oblivion is a chance to renew his spirit. He will endure this death of the body and send his soul through to oblivion to another life: “And die the death, the long and painful death / that lies

between the old self and the new” (30-31). “Oblivion” is the transition “between the old self and the new”; the old body must be cast off in painful separation in order for a new self to emerge.

“Oblivion” is also described as an “ocean of the end” (35), a threatening “flood,” as in Genesis: God says, “For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die” (Gen 6:17). As in “The Breath of Life,” the destructive breath of God will destroy life on earth, this time with a flood; one will drown without the ship of death. The body is bruised and damaged, and the soul “ooz[es] through the exit” of that “cruel bruise” (33-34). The ship will seemingly contain the soul until the passage is complete:

Oh build your ship of death, your little ark  
and furnish it with food, with little cakes, and wine  
for the dark flight down oblivion. (38-40)

The idea of filling the ship with supplies is also from the Etruscans. But in this line Lawrence indicates the fathomlessness of “oblivion.” “Oblivion” is an expanse, like an ocean, but it is also a descent, a stairway, like the descent into Hades depicted in “Bavarian Gentians.”

Death is a rising of deadly water, a fearful end if one is not prepared. Song VI instills that fear, the dread and pain of death already felt by Lawrence: “Piecemeal the body dies, and the timid soul / has her footing washed away, as the dark flood rises” (41-2). Lawrence’s body was slowly dying, as by this time he could hardly rise from bed. He is overwhelmed by the prospect of death, as the flood imagery indicates. His world is about to be destroyed, and he desperately needs an ark to survive. Both physical and emotional

anguish are expressed in the flood imagery: “[N]othing will stay the death-flood rising within us / and soon it will rise on the world, on the outside world” like the Biblical flood (44-5). Lawrence expresses his difficult acceptance of physical death. The final stanza brings a terrible understanding to the fore:

We are dying, we are dying, piecemeal our bodies are dying  
and our strength leaves us,  
and our soul cowers naked in the dark rain over the flood,  
cowering in the last branches of the tree of our life. (46-49)

The repetition of word and image is the release of painful silence: this is Lawrence’s ark. Similarly, Kristeva describes “El Desdichado” as Nerval’s ark: “there he was . . . convinced, in the rain, that he was witnessing the Flood. . . . Within such a context, “El Desdichado” was his Noah’s Ark. Albeit a temporary one, it nevertheless secured him a fluid, enigmatic, spellbinding identity” (*Black Sun* 143-44). In each case, then, the poem becomes an ark of resistance against a rising tide of sadness and allows a preservation of self. Nerval’s ark “allows him to overcome such wretchedness by setting up an ‘I’” that is “[t]riumphant, but also uncertain” (Kristeva 145). Lawrence preserves his identity by building a ship of death, a “little ark” (38).

Song VII is the beginning of acceptance: “We are dying, we are dying, so all we can do / is now to be willing to die” (50-1). The “flood” of pain and dread has risen and passed, and Lawrence, having described it, is now able to go forward. He has recovered emotionally, but his physical death looms still. Lawrence launches his ship, fitted with the “accoutrements” appropriate for the journey. It is now the “fragile ship of courage, the ark

of faith” that he has entrusted with his soul. He does not know what is to come next; the darkness and uncertainty comes nonetheless:

There is no port, there is nowhere to go  
 only the deepening black darkening still  
 blacker upon the soundless, ungurgling flood  
 darkness at one with darkness, up and down  
 and sideways utterly dark, so there is no direction any more.  
 And the little ship is there; yet she is gone.  
 She is not seen, for there is nothing to see her by.  
 She is gone! gone! and yet  
 somewhere she is there.  
 Nowhere! (65-74)

The “darkness” replaces the “flood” of Song VI, encompassing the self. Lawrence’s depression is as painful as ever, yet in this poem he speaks his fear of losing faith. He is enveloped in darkness, unable to see around him, yet somehow believing that he is still safe. Song VIII elaborates this end, giving the final description of oblivion: “And everything is gone, the body is gone / completely under, gone, entirely gone. / . . . / It is the end, it is oblivion” (75-6, 81). Lawrence’s fear of death culminates with utter destruction, complete eradication: “It is oblivion.” This is also the culmination of his sadness as one cannot go farther than “the end.” Yet he writes it, describes it, repeats it: “the little ship / is gone / she is gone” (78-80). How can one not overcome the end once it is named? It cannot be the end, as it is written. Song IX gives that possibility.

Song IX comes after “the end”: “And yet out of eternity, a thread / separates itself on the blackness, / a horizontal thread / that fumes a little with pallor upon the dark” (82-85). What is left if the ship is gone? A “thread” remains, a shred of consciousness, of life, of hope. Lawrence’s faith is not shaken. He writes “it is the end” because he knows it is not; it has only seemed that way. When all else has failed, hope remains. He has overcome his sadness, he is a “pallor upon the dark” of sadness. Yet he still feels pain: “Is it illusion?” (86). He is not certain but he can still forge ahead and is rewarded: “Ah wait, wait, for there is the dawn, / the cruel dawn of coming back to life / out of oblivion” (88-90). He has survived the crisis. The imagery of the ship mirrors the actual suffering Lawrence feels. He has expressed his sadness in words and can now feel the “flood-dawn” of a new day: “A flush of rose, and the whole thing starts again” (96).

Song X is the last in the series. It describes the new “peace” of the “frail soul”: “And the little ship wings home, faltering and lapsing / on the pink flood” (99-100). There is no darkness, only light, though the beginning is difficult, just as death was difficult. Thus by preparing for death, by going through the trial of faith, the heart will be “renewed with peace” (103). For Lawrence, the trial is the poem itself: he had to write it to come out from under the weight of depression. He is preserved, then, for a while longer. Though his body will fail him, his spirit will not, as it is “renewed with peace” gained from confrontation and acceptance.

“The Ship of Death” is Lawrence’s most coherent vision of the dying process. His images of a grand death, like those of Etruscan kings, console him in his own time of dying. “The Ship of Death” is a testimonial of that wish: “Death is to be regarded as the last and greatest experience of the soul” (Cipolla 112).

But even as Lawrence reveres and celebrates death, it is not the “greatest experience of the soul”. He reserves that honour for life after death, the point beyond oblivion. One of Lawrence’s last prose works is relevant here. In “The Man Who Died,” written in the year before his death, Lawrence re-writes Jesus’ time on Earth after rising from death. In the Biblical account the resurrection of Jesus is a continuation of his mission and therefore not a new life but the conclusion of his previous one; in “The Man Who Died,” the man who has died is glad to be finished with his mission, glad to be free of the “compulsion” placed upon him: “I have outlived my mission, and know no more of it. . . . I am glad that is over. It had to be. But now I am glad it is over, and the day of my interference is done. The teacher and the saviour are dead in me; now I can go about my business, into my own single life” (174). The man who has died can now live a new life, away from the distractions and “interference” of his old life. Lawrence is writing his ideal: though death is painful, the person coming through that death will be free of physical limitation. In “The Man Who Died,” Lawrence writes of death as a renewal, a passage into a new life of freedom. Like “The Ship of Death,” “The Man Who Died” celebrates death as renewal, not finality. In “Phoenix,” the last poem of *Last Poems*, renewal is not just a preference but a certainty.

The opening lines of “Phoenix” (#67) indicate Lawrence’s own thoughts about the status of his physical self: “Are you willing to be sponged out, erased, cancelled, / made nothing? / Are you willing to be made nothing?” (1-3). Lawrence has already shown himself willing in poems such as “Bavarian Gentians,” “Shadows,” and “The Ship of Death.” He is preparing himself for death. The Phoenix is the symbol that has heretofore in *Last Poems* been alluded to but never identified specifically. The mythical phoenix is

the bird that renews itself by burning into ashes periodically and being reborn as a new physical entity. This is Lawrence's ideal: shedding the damaged physical self in order to be born anew:

The phoenix renews her youth  
only when she is burnt, burnt alive, burnt down  
to hot and flocculent ash.  
Then the small stirring of a new small bub in the nest  
with strands of down like floating ash  
shows that she is renewing her youth like the eagle,  
immortal bird. (6-11)

The speaker focuses on the possibility of immortality, with or without flesh. Lawrence's descriptions of the body, using imagery with which he identifies, are the root of the poem: "burnt, burnt alive, burnt down" (7). Though he believes that he, too, can be immortal – as in "The Ship of Death" – the words he uses to describe the body allow him to overcome his sadness. It is a vision of hope. The speaker identifies with the mythical creature, changing from old and damaged to new and strong: "youth like the eagle, / immortal bird." The speaker's current state is described in two previous poems: "Sleep" (#58) and "Fatigue" (#60). In "Fatigue" the speaker's will to live is weakening rapidly: "My soul has had a long, hard day / she is tired, / she is seeking her oblivion" (1-3); and in "Sleep" the speaker will find relief "from all this ache of being" (4). In each of these poems the speaker describes the state of the phoenix before her renewal. The phoenix is old, tired, useless. But the "new small bub" is the opposite, a young, strong and meaningful being free from the pain of the body, the pain and heaviness of sickness.

The imagery in Lawrence's poems thus serves a cathartic purpose in the way that Kristeva suggests depressive discourse does. His imagery is rich and complex, employing dozens of often intertwining images of darkness, falling, weight and death. In the order that they are written the poems provide a narrative through these images, moving from the blind hope of Penelope waiting for Odysseus to the desperate hope of life after death. The "multivalency" of meaning in the poems echoes that in Nerval's "El Desdichado". However, also like Nerval's, Lawrence's poems provided only temporary relief from tremendous suffering.

## Conclusion

“And finally, as his illness begins to get the better of him, we see him obscured by a dark cloud of sadness - the terrible sadness” (Huxley 30). Huxley’s observation of Lawrence in his final days and weeks appropriately uses the “darkness” metaphor that Lawrence used so much. Lawrence was “obscured”: his poems were attempts at clarity. His final poems, titled *Last Poems* by his friend Richard Aldington, were written during his final months. They exhibit the suffering felt by Lawrence as he attempts to examine life and mortality in the face of his own impending end. In *D.H. Lawrence: Self and Sexuality*, James C. Cowan writes that the “final personal effort [of *Last Poems*] is perhaps the most courageous: the sharing of the self while confronting his own death” (176). Through their self-examination, the poems show a pattern of depression – in form and imagery, sound and word.

In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva posits that a specific combination of sound and imagery in poetry reveals the poet’s depressed state. She argues that poetry is as close to pure emotion as one can get in language, bridging the gap between the semiotic, or primordial thought and affect, and the symbolic, the code that allows speech. Communication cannot occur without the symbolic, as social beings require this code, but the semiotic allows human beings to communicate independently of the prescribed social order, expressing emotion without the ordinary filter of language. Poetry, with its breaks and changing rhythms, challenges the symbolic order of language and forces others to re-examine the very words spoken millions of times previously. The depressed mind has already lost the ability to understand language as it is normally understood; it must find a new way to communicate, a new way to connect with humanity. Writing can be a “lucid

counterdepressant” used in the healing process, taking the sufferer out of the “noncommunicable grief” of depression and back into the world of the symbolic.

Lawrence’s life and writing illustrate this theory. He suffered in life and used that suffering in his writing. *Last Poems* was his last piece of writing, composed when he was suffering the most and contemplating death. Thus the various structural inconsistencies and interruptions relate to his personal suffering; similarly, at other times the repetition and monotony of depressive discourse show exactly the same thing. The imagery of the poems is mainly dark and deathly. Contemplations of death, oblivion, falling and darkness are all consistent with Kristeva’s description of depressive discourse. Though these images are not exclusively used by depressed persons, the specific combination of structure, rhythm, sound, image and life comes together in *Last Poems* to produce this effect. Lawrence burned brightly and died, all the while waiting for an indication that his death would prolong his life:

I shall blossom like a dark pansy, and be delighted  
there among the dark sun-rays of death.

I can feel myself unfolding in the dark sunshine of death  
to something flowery and fulfilled, and with a strange sweet perfume.

(“Gladness of Death” 16-19)

It is fitting that Nerval and Lawrence agree on the image of depression: a black sun, a bright shadow of death.

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