

**A Jungle of Depression: An Explication of D.H. Lawrence's
Last Poems in the Light of Julia Kristeva's Depressive**

Discourse

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غاية من الاكثتاب: شرح لمجموعة د. ه. لأورنس اخر القصائد في ضوء نظرية خوليا
كرستيفا"الخطاب الاكثتابي"

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ABSTRACT

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 and describes Lawrence's change in mood in the approaching end of his life. Julia Kristeva theorizes in *Black Sun* that depressed persons have difficulty to communicate through ordinary symbolic means of language. In order to communicate, they must find new linguistic means to overcome sadness. Kristeva names this attempt to overcome sadness through poetic language as "depressive discourse". 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/ her sadness, the sufferer may experience a reprieve from depression.

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.

This paper, then, is an investigation of depression in D.H. Lawrence's *Last Poems* in terms of kristeva's theory of depressive discourse, showing that Lawrence was attempting to overcome his depression through poetry, as well as attempting to prove, contrary to the current portrait, especially in Iraq, that Lawrence is indeed thinking in terms of God and religion.

المستخلص

تُبين مجموعة د.ه. لورنس الشعرية /*آخر القصائد*، التي كتبت في الأشهر الست الأخيرة من حياته ونشرت بعد مماته، أزمة الاكتئاب في رجل مقبل على الموت كما تصف التغيير المزاجي للورنس في النهاية القريبة لحياته. نُظرت خوليا كرسنيفا في كتابها *الشمس السوداء* إن الأشخاص المكتئبين يعانون من صعوبة في التواصل من خلال الأساليب الرمزية الاعتيادية للغة. كي يتواصلوا، على هكذا أشخاص إيجاد أساليب لغوية جديدة للتغلب على الحزن. سمّت كرسنيفا هذه المحاولة للتغلب على الحزن من خلال اللغة الشعرية بـ "الخطاب الاكتئابي". ممكن للكتابة والفن، وخصوصاً الشعر، أن يكونوا تخاطباً إكتئابياً، مما يسمح بحدوث مستوى معيناً من التعافي. حالما يتمكن الفرد من الكتابة عن أجزائه فإنه سيُشعر بأرتياح من الاكتئاب.

من الموائمة بمكان تعريف إستعمال لورنس الخاص للايقاع، النغمة والتصوير الشعري بأنه محاولة للتغلب على هذه الازمة من خلال الكتابة. تعرض القصائد خصائص شكلية معينة كالوزن غير المنتظم، الصوت الرنان، والتكرار التتويمي للكلمات والمقاطع، بالإضافة الى إستعمال صور الظلام، السقوط، النسيان والجنة والنار، التي من الممكن تفسيرها، الى جانب المعرفة بحالته الشخصية، على إنها من خصائص التخاطب الاكتئابي.

لذا فإن هذا البحث هو سبر لأغوار الاكتئاب في مجموعة د.ه. لورنس الشعرية /*آخر القصائد* حسب نظرية الخطاب الاكتئابي لخوليا كرسنيفا، موضحاً أن لورنس كان يحاول أن يتخطى كآبته من خلال الشعر، كما وسنحاول أن نثبت، على العكس من الصورة الحالية، خصوصاً في العراق، بأن لورنس يفكر فعلاً بأمور الربوبية والدين.

A Jungle of Depression: An Explication of D.H. Lawrence's Last Poems in the Light of Julia Kristeva's Depressive Discourse

Huxley rightly observed Lawrence's state in his final days and appropriately said that "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."

¹ Thus Lawrence was obscured and his poems were attempts at clarity. His final poems, entitled *Last Poems* by his friend Richard Aldington were written during his final months. They show the suffering felt by Lawrence as he tries to examine life and mortality in the face of his own impending end. In his book *D.H. Lawrence: Self and Sexuality*, James C. Cowan asserts that the "final personal effort of Lawrence is perhaps the most courageous: the sharing of the self while confronting his own death."² Through their self-examination, the last poems show a pattern of depression in form, imagery, sound and word.

In her *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva assumes that a specific combination of sound and imagery in poetry reveals the poet's depressed state. She

suggests that poetry is as close to pure emotion as one can get through language, bridging the gap between the semiotic (the primordial thought and affect), and the symbolic (the code that allows speech). She adds that communication occur without the symbolic, as social beings require this code, but the semiotic allows humans 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 reexamine the 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. Thus writing can be a rational attempt against depression and as a healing process, taking the sufferer out of the non-communicable grief of depression and back into the world of the symbolic.³

Lawrence's life and writing clearly illustrate this theory. He suffered in life and used that suffering in his writing. His *Last Poems* is pregnant with images of death, sadness and depression that run over each single poem in the collection. Each poem follows the overall formula of the collection which is made by Lawrence to be citing examples of sadness, trying to explicate it and then laboring to figure out a means of recovery from depression. Mythological allusions to gods and mythic figures such as Dionysus and Odysseus are recurrent in the opening poems due to the fact that at this stage Lawrence is intrigued by the immortality of such paragons and yearns for immortality himself. In "bodiless God" and "Mana of the Sea" Lawrence is completely overwhelmed by the thought of life after death. The speaker of "*Bodiless God*" asserts that "*Everything that has beauty has a body, and is a body.*"⁴ Lawrence's own body was failing him

at the moment, which makes him totally positive that he will soon cease to have a body. Nevertheless, he argues that since God does not have a body yet He still exists, then Lawrence will in fact exist, in one form or another, after death. A similar sentiment is still recognized in “Mana of the Sea” upon saying: “*I am the Sea, I am the Sea!*”(L.18). For the aim of accepting and welcoming the approaching death, Lawrence needs reassurance that life will not end with the end of his body. The imagery, as well as the rhythmic structure, pictures a rough struggle with depression. He seeks to control and win victory over his fear and his sadness with the hope of these images, and writing them down will definitely make him successful in doing so.

A significant degree of emphasis upon the imagery of the poem comes from Kristeva’s interpretation of Nerval’s “El Desdichado”. The title itself is a metaphor opening the explanation of the poem to myriad meanings relating to that particular translation.⁵ Kristeva’s reading of Nerval sheds light on non-disputed importance of imagery within depressive discourse. The depressive person suffers and struggles with internal pain to convey meaning and must use non-literal and not usual communicating methods. So as to express the semiotic within the symbolic, the depressive uses the “polyvalency of symbolism”: “those 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.”⁶ Kristeva adopts the term “multivalency,” or “polyvalency,” to refer to the many latent meanings of words within such depressive speech. Nerval’s poem signifies on many levels, each conveying the speaker’s ‘wretchedness’ even if those levels seem disparate.

Lawrence's poems heavily rely on "multivalency" of meaning as well. Kristeva asserts that structure is an aspect of depressive discourse, thus imagery is manipulated by Lawrence as a connecting means of overcoming his grief and fear of death. Therefore, it is a mandatory process to analyze *Last Poems* in its own context, within its poetic web. According to Aldington, the poems are arranged in the order in which they were written, suggesting that changes in the imagery mark the progression in Lawrence's struggle to overcome despair.⁷ By the end of the volume, Lawrence's views, notions and feelings have changed radically; from "they are not dead!" ("The Argonauts"- L.1) to "'immortal bird" ("Phoenix"- L.12), *Last Poems* itself is used by the poet to form an attempt to overcome his grief. Though Lawrence cannot put an end to his body's process of decay, he can still maintain a sharp and attuned mind; more importantly, he can retain his spirit. By the end of the sequence he will no more accept death as the utmost end of his being, but merely the end of his body.

Lawrence makes his poems full of modes and images of melancholy, ranging from darkness to falling to death. By illuminating these images Lawrence mirrors his sadness for metaphors of sadness are common to depressed persons. Andrew Solomon assures readers that depression "is like going blind, the darkness at first gradual, then encompassing,"⁸ while William Styron goes even further to compare his depression to a Miltonian hell.⁹ Linda McMullen and John Conway identify three major metaphors to describe depression; depression as darkness, depression as weight, and depression as descent.¹⁰ The first of them is represented by images of "cloudy, rainy weather" or "feeling dark and...being blue".¹¹ The depression as weight metaphor compromises images of captivity and here McMullen and Conway refer to Styron's image of "solitary confinement"¹²

as an example. Depression as descent is the third and ultimate extent of depression which also signals the most common metaphor.¹³ Manifestations of being ‘down’ or ‘low’ are extremely common when describing the emotional state. The descent metaphor can be easily apprehended by sufferers of depression, as it is a familiar device in pointing out to feelings of sadness;

Arising out of this central sense of depression as feeling of being down or

were numerous metaphorical entailments or elaborations derived from our

knowledge and experience as 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 spiraling 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 again,

is difficult, if not impossible, to stop.¹⁴

Upon being influenced by a crisis, the depressed person is immediately and continually held ‘down’ prone to anticipation and dread of the difficult task of getting back ‘up’.

McMullen and Conway confirm that this metaphor refers not only to emotional state but also cultural perception. Along with sadness, the

metaphor of descent may also point to the 'low' status in which 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.¹⁵

In such cultures that reward the uphill climb of success, depression is surely going to affect one's personal perception of oneself and thus compounds "the sad affect that appears to be the core of depression with associations of failure and loss of control."¹⁶ That is why McMullen and Conway demonstrate that certain specific metaphors are common in describing depression. In *Last Poems*, Lawrence delineates these common metaphors to describe his depression.

The confusion and frustration at the prospect of silence cause extreme feelings, but writing about them can only take place 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 tasted his sadness, and now he is going to give it a try to communicate it in order to reconnect with the symbolic. Kristeva writes that depressives seek to jump over their sadness by communicating it, often in a new and novel way different from normal speech. They must reform language to suit and carry their feelings of sadness, and the outcome is a semiotic language close to the rhythm of the body that produces it. 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. The images of sadness maintained by Lawrence are forward,

uncensored, and with the goal of influencing the readers' senses by touching the very bodily sadness that consumes them.

In "Bodiless God," Lawrence touches the heart of 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: *"Everything 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"* (L.1-3). Lawrence's dissatisfaction with his present diseased body is clear cut because a human's happiness and existence are tied directly to his flesh. Here Lawrence draws on a full emphasis upon the importance of the body because the previous poems mainly focus on the mind and thought; yet these cannot exist without a body, and the body is what gives the thought its fulfillment. The speaker in "Bodiless God" implies that nothing can make a difference unless there is a physical body; *"and he is supposed to be mighty and glorious"* (L.9), yet Lawrence says that God does not have a body but He is still mighty and glorious. Thus he dotes on questioning himself if there is nothing, then, without a physical existence but still having importance. This is the question that troubles Lawrence much. He must contemplate his own existence with less of a body, as he diminished spiritually because of this lack. God is said to *"have a voice/ and emotions, and desires, and strength, glory and honour"* (L.5-6); with no body, yet Lawrence's speaker is not able to understand this fact. The concentration on the lack of a body in this group of poems ("The Work of Creation", "Demiurge", "The Body of God", "Red Geranium and Godly Mignonette", and "The Rainbow") 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 possible recovery from this state comes in "The Rainbow," where the speaker realizes that though "*you can't lay your hand on it*" (L.5), still "*the rainbow has a body*" (L.1). Despite the fact that Lawrence will not have a physical existence, he will still have a body of some sort, either spiritual or in the memory of others.¹⁷

"The Argonauts", like "Bodiless God", has its main theme to be the existence in the world beyond physical presence. The exhortation "*they are not dead, they are not dead!*" at the poem's embarking point reveals an urgency in the speaker's voice. When he cries that they are not dead, he is aiming at drawing readers' attention to his own health and state; he is not dying. Though the sun "*like a lion, licks his paws / and goes slowly down the hill*" (L.2-3), the moon "*remembers, and only cares/ that we should be lovely in the flesh*" (L.4-5). Lawrence's fear is palpable here. There are memories and recollections of heroes of old encouraging "*the dawn is not off the sea, and Odysseus' ships / have not yet passed the islands, I must watch them still*" (L.11-12). Despite that those heroes are bodiless, still they have existence, immortal within folktales, legends, myths and landscapes, and therefore, not forgotten. The end of the poem, "I must watch them still," performs as a light at the end of the tunnel for the poet, for as he watches so he will be watched.

"Bavarian Gentians" is an expression of sadness and fear. A sick man on his deathbed forsakes his body behind and enters Hades. The pilgrimage is dark, brilliantly blackened with the "*blaze of darkness*" (L.5); the speaker descends into the underworld, pretending power by shouting commands on his dark master. He links himself to Persephone, a helpless bride taken into captivity by force and sentenced to an underworld prison.

The two most focal metaphors at work in this poem are the myth of Persephone and the influx of darkness. The speaker regards 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*” (L.1-2). He has been singled out and different from other men, healthy men. Along with the presence of illness comes the presence of the archangel St. Michael, after whom ‘Michaelmas’ is named. Among a variety of symbols and roles attached to him, he is the “protector against the devil, especially at the time of death.”¹⁸ The date is even of great significance, as Michaelmas, September 29th, comes after summer and is at the beginning of autumn. After enjoying the spring and summer seasons on earth, Persephone returns to Hades, causing her mother, Demeter, to blanket the earth in darkness and death due to her sadness.¹⁹

Through the persistent repetition of the words ‘dark’ and ‘darkness’ and their variants, the darkness starts to permeate the poem, signaling the speaker’s own approaching death; “*Bavarian gentians, big and dark, only dark/ darkening the day-time*” (L.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 arouse fear and pain of death. As well, darkness brings with it an emotional and spiritual darkness, a lack of life on a psychological level, that is, depression.

Not only one of the depressives describe their illness as darkness, a gloom, or simply a feeling of being ‘blue’.²⁰ It is really an astounding metaphor, as darkness is oppressive in the fear and uncertainty it brings. Depression, too, is about uncertainty; the fear of the unknown, of what is the source of their sadness or whether it will ever end, depressives grow more withdrawn, more anguished, and more afraid. Lawrence’s speaker

sinks down into darkness, succumbing to the weight of fear and pain. The gentians in his room at once 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 affords himself the chance to be swallowed within such dominating darkness: *“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”* (L.7-9).

In spite of his passage into darkness, the speaker shifts from fear into valour. After approving of the inevitable death, at the end of the second stanza, the speaker says: *“lead me then, lead the way”* (L.10), and at the beginning of the third stanza there is another shift: *“reach me a gentian, give me a torch!”* (L.11). the speaker is now having a new type of strength; an acceptance of fate. He will go into the darkness himself. This is Lawrence’s intention in the poem; he too, with the help of the poem will confront depression and darkness in an attempt to regain strength and the will to live.

Thus the speaker plunges further into blackness in trying to name his fear so as to be able to overcome it. The blackness is now getting 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. (L.13-17)*

The passage progresses from blue or some light to darkness invisible or no light, no sight, nothing. Lawrence deliberately uses the latter phrase to increase the sense of dread, for Lawrence's speaker is driven to a place worse than Hell; 'darkness invisible' is a double-layered Hell. The darkness and gloom of depression is far more torturous 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*" (L.18). 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 temporally.

In "Abysmal Immortality" Lawrence expounds on the theme of endless oblivion. The theme of oblivion is prevalent in *Last Poems*, though the word oblivion itself does not appear until "The Ship of Death" (one of the last poems in the collection). The poet dwells on the notion of a permanent afterlife and employs imagery of falling, sinking, darkness, and an endless, bottomless abyss. In "Bavarian Gentians" the speaker indulges in a quest into the deeper dark of Hades, and in the "Hands of God" he offers a prayer to be saved from the "*sickening endless sinking, sinking*", and the in "Abysmal Immortality" he 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*" (L.10-12). The abyss is the consequence of abandoning God for "self-knowledge" ("Only Man, L.6).the imagery of infinite regression in this poem is strengthened 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 in the midst of this abyss of

darkness, Lawrence chooses to express his belief in God by using standard symbols: “the hands of the living God” (L.1), and “the godless plunge” into hell (L.7).

The initial lines of “Abysmal Immortality” picture humans in a naturalistic manner as petulant children struggling to free themselves of their parents’ authority: “it is not easy 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 man can get himself away” (L.1-3). Because God’s hands are seen cradling humans, they want to rebel. The imagery of the fall is introduced in not one of the religious books when Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree and thus from the grace of God. Contrary to the humans of the poem, Lawrence’s image of God is one of a loving God who continues to “cradle” humans “even through the greatest blasphemies” (L.4). The second stanza makes it clear that man is not falling from the grace of God, but “into himself alone” (L.7). Therefore, in a similar vein to that found in Dr. Faustus, the core point “The Hands of God” as well as “Only Man” is the idea of destructive self-knowledge and human nature.

This image of falling from God reflects a sense of worry inside Lawrence who is contemplating death and what is to follow after. Previous poems such as “Bodiless God” and “The Argonauts” clearly set Lawrence’s belief in the afterlife, and the following poems, like “Pax” and “Abysmal Immortality” show that his attention has turned to the prospect of eternity. He has turned to God because he does not want to suffer and taste the pains of ‘abysmal immortality’, away from “the presence of the living God” (Pax, L.10). But the image of falling recurs in *Last Poems*, and particularly in these poems. The constant repetition of words as ‘plunging’, ‘sinking’, ‘seething’ into ‘endless’, ‘bottomless, ‘fathomless’ places, all

indicate the despair of depression and separation from God. One who is depressed is in an overwhelming fear and in complete withdrawal, eventually losing the ability to communicate or even live, in despair succumbing to silence or suicide. These poems “The Hands of God”, “Silence”, “Abysmal Immortality” and “Only Man”, demonstrate Lawrence’s need to enunciate his desperation, his fear of falling into hopelessness. Thus the poet seeks the help of language to exhibit his fear and sadness in these poems.

Still moving in the same direction “The End, The Beginning” makes use of the imagery of despair in an attempt to reconcile with death. Here the central themes of oblivion and forgetting indicate an ailing Lawrence hoping for in order to enjoy a peaceful existence after death. Surprisingly enough, the poet speaks in the present tense in this group of poems delivering to us the message that oblivion is not something he will experience; but rather it is something he is already experiencing. The idea that he is within oblivion, in an utter and absolute darkness before the death indicates the level of despair he already feels. He does not know what is on the side of oblivion, but due to the physical illness and mental depression he experiences *“a silent, sheer cessation of all awareness”* (L.11). Thus the imagery of darkness dominates the poem. In religious terms, darkness precedes light and creation, therefore, the darkness of death will be followed by the eternal light of the afterlife. Lawrence’s imagery of ‘end’ and ‘beginning’ forms a necessary transitional state 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”* (L.14-15). Lawrence dwells on darkness because he cannot fathom what is to come, linking thus the darkness of death with that of depression and affording

then a suitable effective medicine to it. To move beyond it, one must write about it, and Lawrence focuses on and welcomes darkness as a means of escape into the light of recovery.

Just coming before “The End, The Beginning” is “Song of Death”. As implied by its title, this poem also centers on darkness. But the main image here is not the process of dying itself, but it is the song itself, because without it, *“the song of life/ becomes pointless and silly”* (L.2-3). This song itself is the significant matter, 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”* (L.4-6). The singing is the important part, the preparation for death and the recognition that before *“the soul at last is lost / in utter peace”* (L.11-12), it is lost in the *“dark whorled shell”* (L.7) of the cosmos or oblivion. Again, the images of journeying and darkness are prominent. Lawrence, the, is capable of overcoming his sadness and fear through means of 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, L.21). Without the ritual of preparing for death, the soul is ‘unhappy’ and filled with *“cold, ghostly rage”*(Beware,L.11).

The final stanza of this poem reveals the desperate need to sing the song of death. Lawrence shows his own need to reconcile himself with death: *“sing then the core of dark and absolute / oblivion”* (L.10-11). Here Lawrence is seen feeling what Nerval felt. He sings the song of death, his poem, in order to make sense of the fear that debilitates him. Within this context, the “Song of Death” is therapeutic just like Nerval’s poem; similarly, a song of sadness is therapeutic.

It is clear cut then that all the poems in *Last Poems* are songs of death. The constant repetition of images of darkness, falling, journeying, fatigue, evil, and prayer all indicate songs of desperation. “The Ship of Death” is the ultimate song of death in the collection. It is divided into ten ‘songs’, each of which is contemplating death differently. The prevailing image is the ship, the vessel that will carry the soul into oblivion.

The opening song majorly concentrates on autumn. The falling apples represent the dying body: “*the apples falling like great drops of dew / to bruise themselves an exit from themselves*” (L.3-4). The word ‘bruise’ of falling is the pain of death, the apples are damaged in a similar process to that of a dying body. The image of autumn indicates the declining period of one’s life, as it also signals the end of the growing season and denotes 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*” (L.5-7). The phrase “it is time” here refers to the coming of death, 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 represents the vessel: “*have you built your ship of death, O have you? / O build your ship of death, for you will need it*” (L.8-9). As in “Beware” and other poems, the “you” is Lawrence himself as well as an imaginary listener. He is reminding himself to prepare for death, for “*the grim frost is at hand*” (L.10). The ship thus is 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 stems 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 “love the Etruscans because of what he takes to be their simple yet profound affirmation of life and death as on joyous whole.”²¹ The ships pictured on the tombs were bronze and ornate, which seemed to Lawrence a very suitable way to pass into death. Clark points out that “these Etruscan ships of death, with most of their accoutrements, were the pattern for Lawrence’s own, which he was already building.”²¹ Therefore, 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,”) to “*passing through the waters of oblivion*” (“Change”).

The ship of death is a metaphor of the speaker’s willing acceptance and preparation for death. Lawrence questions if the speaker has built his ship of death because “*death is on the air like a smell of ashes!*” (L.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*” (L.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 suggests 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?*” (L.17-18). The answer is no, “*for how could murder, even self-murder/ ever a quietus make?*” (L.22-23). The only way to obtain this quietus is to prepare, to build the ship of death. Hamlet regards suicide as a means of escape from the duty of killing another; Lawrence too wants to escape the duty and necessity of enduring his own prolonged death. He contemplates on ‘self-murder’ only to dismiss it, he will do his duty to ensure the passage across oblivion.

“The Ship of Death” points the first appearance of the image of oblivion in Last Poems. Until this point, Lawrence did not have a conception of death; only vague reference such as ‘abyss’, ‘darkness’, ‘katabolism’, ‘endless and living silence’, ‘darkness invisible’, and ‘black winter’. All these are metaphors of death, multivalent image of the end of life. They also bear elements of fear and pain. Oblivion, however, contains no such connotations; it is a relief, a finality, and welcoming it will put an end to the pain of the flawed body and give way to the soul to pass into a higher plane of existence. Indeed, Lawrence felt that oblivion is a renewal, a rebirth for the soul, another chance of living. The notion that death is cleansing is typical of the suicidal mind. The contemplation of suicide 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 oblivion to another life: *“and die the death, the long and painful death / that lies between the old self and the new”* (L.30-31). Oblivion is the needed 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 portrayed as an *“ocean of the end”* (L.35), a threatening flood, in a biblical allusion to Noah’s deluge. Thus to escape such a threatening flood, one only way is provided, that is, through building an ark, again similar to that of Noah. 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 *“oozes to through the exit”* of that *“cruel bruise”* (L.33-34). The ship will metaphorically 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”* (L.38-40). The

idea of filling the ship with supplies is also taken from the Etruscans. But in this line Lawrence speaks of 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 IV instills this 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*” (L.41-2). Lawrence’s body is 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: “*nothing will stay the death-flood rising within us / and soon it will rise on the world, on the outside world*” (L.44-5), like the biblical flood. Lawrence expresses his difficult acceptance of physical death. The final stanza brings a terrible understanding to the scene:

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.

(L.46-9)

The repetition of word and image is to release the 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.”²² In each case, then, the poem forms 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 triumphant, but also uncertain”²³ Lawrence preserves his identity by building a ship of death, a little ark.

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*” (L.50-1). The flood of pain and dread has risen and passed, and Lawrence, being successful to describe 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 becomes now the ship of courage, the ark of faith he has entrusted with his soul. He does not know what is to come next; the darkness and uncertainty come 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!*

(L.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 more on 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”* (L.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 further than the end. Yet he writes it, describes it, repeats it: *“the little ship / is gone / she is gone”* (L.78-80). Then, one can only now overcome the end once is named, and since it is written, it cannot be the end.

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”* (L.82-5). What is left if the ship is gone is a mere ‘thread’, 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 gained his victory over sadness; he is ‘pallor upon the dark’ of sadness. Yet he still feels pain: *“is it illusion”* (L.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”* (L.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”* (L.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”* (L.99-100). There is now 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”* (L.103). For Lawrence, the trial is the poem itself; he had to write it to come out from under the weight of depression. Though his body will fail him, his spirit will not, as it is renewed with peace due to 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, form a consolation for him in his own time of dying. This poem is testimonial of that wish: “death is to be regarded as the last and greatest experience of the soul.”²⁴ Yet still, 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. Lawrence writes of death as renewal, a passage into a new life of freedom, not in itself a finality. In “Phoenix,” the last poem of *Last Poems*, renewal is not just a preference, but a certainty.

The opening line of “Phoenix” 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?”* (L.1-3). Lawrence has already shown himself willing in poems such as “Bavarian Gentians”, “Shadows”, and “The Ship of Death.” 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. (L.6-12)*

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" (L.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 and thus makes him immortal. It is a vision of hope. The speaker links himself to the mythical creature, changing from old and damaged to new and strong. The speaker's present state is described in two previous poems; "Sleep" and "Fatigue". 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" (L.1-3); and in "Sleep" the speaker will find relief "from all this ache of being" (L.4). In each of these poems the speaker describes the state of the Phoenix before her renewal. The Phoenix is old, tired and 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.

Therefore, it is clear that the imagery in Lawrence's poems serves a cathartic objective 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 hope of life after death, and thus they provide a relief from tremendous suffering.

NOTES

¹Aldous Huxley, "Introduction" in *Selected Letters* by D.H. Lawrence, ed. Richard Aldington (UK: Penguin Books, 1954), P.30.

²James C. Cowan, *D.H. Lawrence: Self and Sexuality* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), P.176.

³Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), Pp.85-90.

⁴D.H. Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, eds. Vivian De Sola Pinto and F. Warren Roberts (New York: Penguin Books, 1993). All subsequent references to the poems will be from this same book.

⁵Kristeva, p.144.

⁶Ibid., p.147.

⁷Richard Aldington, "Introduction to *Last Poems and More Pansies*" in *Complete Poems by D.H. Lawrence*, eds. Vivian De Sola Pinto and F. Warren Roberts (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), P.591.

⁸Andrew Solomon, *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression* (New York: Scribner, 2003), P.50.

⁹William Styron, *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), P.30.

¹⁰Linda M. McMullen and John B. Conway, "Conventional Metaphors for Depression" in *The Verbal Communication of Emotions*, ed. Susan R. Russell (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), Pp. 170-1.

¹¹Ibid., p.170.

¹²Ibid., p.179.

¹³Ibid., p.170.

¹⁴Ibid., pp.171-2.

¹⁵Ibid., p.178.

¹⁶Ibid., p.179.

¹⁷This reminds us of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium", in which he wanted to leave his country and travel to Byzantium so as to be immortal in the memory of others through his art.

¹⁸"Michaelmas," *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁹Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), P.97.

²⁰McMullen and Conway, p.170.

²¹L.D. Clark, *The Minoan Distance: The Symbolism of Travel in D.H. Lawrence* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1980), P.384.

²²Kristeva, Pp.143-4.

²³Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), P.145.

²⁴Elizabeth Cipolla, "The *Last Poems* of D.H. Lawrence," in *The D.H. Lawrence Review* 2 (Summer, 1969), P.112.

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