

Pivotal Poems: Turning Back to Lawrence's *Bay*

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My spirit hears

Voices of men

Sound of artillery, aeroplanes, presences,

And more than all, the dead-sure silence,

The pivot again.... (“Going Back,” *Poems* 127)

The lines above are taken from a “pivotal” poem within Lawrence’s *Bay* collection. *Bay* is a little book of war poems published by Cyril Beaumont in 1919, after Beaumont had rejected another war sequence by Lawrence—“All of Us”—during the previous year.¹ The *Bay* poems were principally composed during 1917-18, although several of them drew on verse drafted in Lawrence’s earlier notebooks. There are eighteen poems in all and—although these poems have received relatively little critical attention—there has been some debate about the best way to approach their structure and sequencing. Keith Cushman has argued that “The structure of the book is essentially but not perfectly or purely narrative in nature” (188), arguing that the majority of the poems chart the development of a young soldier from the provinces who leaves home in order to travel to the front, is killed in battle, and subsequently engages in a kind of ghostly dialogue with the living. In contrast, Holly Laird feels that there is “no detailed evolution in *Bay*

either of Lawrence's personal history or of the war” (113). Nonetheless, she does proceed to categorize clusters of poems according to theme or trajectory (for instance, the first five poems are about towns and cities on the eve of war, while the five progress from leave-taking to climactic attack).

Both Laird and Cushman consider the implications of Lawrence's reordering of these poems when he incorporated them within his *Collected Poems* in 1928, and I am entirely in accord with Laird's sense that the sequence became “more arbitrary” (114) through this reordering, which seems driven by poem titles rather than content. My approach here is to take the original *Bay* collection as my starting-point, as it is likely (though not absolutely certain) that Lawrence dictated the order in which the poems appeared.² I will use the idea of a pivot—derived from a central poem in this collection—as a way of framing my alternative interpretation of the poems' imagery and structure. In addition to the pivot, I will foreground related images of circling, wheeling, and turning that play a crucial role in evoking the oppositional forces of dynamic movement and fixity or constraint.

The notion of a pivot seems an interesting and important one here, and some selected definitions of this term might be usefully applied to the poem sequences collected within *Bay*. The term is apposite particularly given that it has a specific military meaning, namely: “The officer or soldier about whom a body of troops wheels; the flank by which the alignment or dressing is corrected” (definition 4, *OED*). Yet it is striking that in “Guards!”—the first poem in *Bay*—a white plumed General who gaily “canters across the space” to mobilize his troops clearly does not fulfil the function of a stationary, guiding pivot. Instead, the “red range heaves in slow, magnetic reply” (*Poems* 34) to his forward momentum, and he directs them as “they turn” in a motion described through reference to the ebbing and flowing of a wave. In Lawrence's short

story “The Prussian Officer” (1914), the Captain also cuts an impressive figure on horseback in the early stages of the narrative, and his horse circles with barely contained physical energy: “And [the Orderly] saw the fine figure of the Captain wheeling on horseback at the farm-house ahead, a handsome figure in pale blue uniform with facings of scarlet, and the metal gleaming on the black helmet and the sword scabbard, and dark streaks of sweat coming on the silky bay horse” (*PO* 1–2).

“Guards!” is the only poem within *Bay* in which we witness a battalion directly, and Lawrence conveys its movement as natural and dynamic—imbued with life—as well as sexually charged. The wave of soldiers becomes a “throbbing red breast of approach,” while their “closed warm lips” and “dark / Mouth-hair” (*Poems* 35) hint at their potency as well as the potential “dark threats” they pose. The anticipated violation is seen in symbolic terms as broaching a “beached vessel,” resulting in a “darkened rencontre inhuman.” This poem, originally drafted by Lawrence in an earlier notebook long before war began,³ provides a striking opening to the collection. The subsequent, odder “action” poems co-exist with those conveying the experience of exclusion, loss, or stasis and will be seen below as pivotal in many senses.

The primary definition of the term “pivot” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is as follows: “1a. A short shaft or pin, usually of metal and pointed, forming the centre on which a mechanism turns or oscillates, as the pin of a hinge, or the end of an axle or spindle; a fulcrum. Also *gen.*: any physical part on which another part turns.”⁴ The *Bay* poems “Going Back” and “Nostalgia” (sixth and eighteenth in the sequence, respectively) create an antithesis between turning and arrested movement, while the former is reliant on the image of a pivot to position its soldier. “Going Back” begins with the line “The night turns slowly round” (*Poems* 127), while “Nostalgia”—the last poem in *Bay*—contains the lines: “The waning moon looks upward; this

grey night / Slopes round the heavens in one smooth curve // Of easy sailing” (*Poems* 130).

These poems counter-balance each other: while the former is a poem of departure, the latter is a poem of return, although the ghostly reappearance at a lost home is troubled, compromised, and painful. The turning image in each marks a slow but certain, cyclical progression onwards: one that is effortlessly casual (“Slopes”) or “smooth” and “easy” for the waxing and waning moon. However, against the backdrop of circular motion, the soldier/ghost is either suspended in time or painfully caught within a liminal space.

“Going Back” is pivotal in several senses: it marks a key moment in which the soldier has to relinquish his home and journey back to a dangerous situation that may result in his death. It also represents a paradox: intense emotions “Sleep on speed” in a moment of suspension at what T. S. Eliot expressed as the “still point of the turning world” (191). The departure and journeying tropes within “Going Back” are anticipated by an earlier poem in the sequence— “Last Hours” —in which time’s inexorability is explicitly lamented: “But not even the scent of insouciant flowers / Makes pause the hours” (*Poems* 20). This earlier poem hinges on the rapturous acknowledgment of “How lovely it is to be at home / Like an insect in the grass / Letting life pass!” (*Poems* 20), but pivots towards a sense of loss through imminent departure.

Even the images of vital, animate nature early in “Last Hours” are double-edged as they implicitly evoke their military counterparts:

The cool of an oak's unchequered shade
Falls on me as I lie in deep grass
Which rushes upward, blade beyond blade,
While higher the darting grass-flowers pass

Piercing the blue with their crocketed spires
And waving flags, and the ragged fires
Of the sorrel's cresset—a green, brave town ...(*Poems* 20)

The scene is simultaneously one of natural beauty and implied violence—even violation. The “unchequered shade” should be protective yet falls on the soldier who is prone and vulnerable, the impact heightened by the positioning of “Falls” at the beginning of the second line. The threat from above is balanced by the “blade beyond blade” rushing upward, while the “crocketed spires” of the grass-flowers pierce the sky like the slanting bayonets evoked in the poem “Guards!” (*Poems* 34). The flags and “ragged fires” function equally as a vivid evocation of the natural scene and a nod to the military context. In its final stanza the poem becomes an explicit lament as the garden in which the soldier lies is penetrated by a noisy and sinister reminder of his inevitable movement away:

Down the valley roars a townward train.
I hear it through the grass
Dragging the links of my shortening chain
Southwards, alas! (*Poems* 20)

The enjambment across the last two lines enacts a brief poetic resistance to entrapment, but the poem ploughs on with the inevitable relentlessness of the train and indeed the war itself.

After two intervening poems, “Going Back” takes up the above image in its opening stanza: “Swift trains go by in a rush of light; / Slow trains steal past. / This train beats anxiously,

outward bound” (*Poems* 127). The word “beat” captures the mechanical thud of the train’s wheels over the joins between sections of the track: it is regular and relentless. Rather than the beast-like roar of a train that is threatening yet distant, the returning soldier of this later poem conveys his direct experience on board and witnessing other trains of varying speeds close by. The soldier experiences some of the predictable emotions of grief and loss: he is in tears, and his heart is “torn with parting” at the thought of the platform from which he had to depart. More interesting, though, is the sense of absence or suspension occasioned by the positioning of this soldier at the “pivot”:

But I am not here.

I am away, beyond the scope of all this turning;

There, where the pivot is, the axis

Of all this gear. (*Poems* 127)

Although “gear” may seem a vague term chosen principally for its rhyme with “here,” it is highly appropriate in yoking together a number of distinct but related associations. “Gear” can refer to equipment in general; apparel; habits or manners; armor, arms or warlike accoutrements; “A combination of wheels, levers, and other mechanical appliances for a given purpose; *esp.* the appliances or furnishings connected with the acting portions of any piece of mechanism”; or indeed “a train of gears” (definitions 1, 1a, 1c, 6a, and 6v). Inhabiting the pivot seems to entail or achieve an evasion of all these encumbrances through being at the center and therefore “beyond the scope of all this turning.” This “turning” can be related to the circular movement of the earth, a literal curve in the rail track, and the relentless spinning of the train’s wheels.

The poem progresses towards a definition of this state of suspended being through the resonant phrase “dead-sure silence” (l. 15). The term “dead” could indicate absolute certainty in the preservation of this silence, and/or hint in a more sinister way at the literal deaths that must occur for this silence to be guaranteed. The former meaning is highlighted in the phrase “dead certainty” in the penultimate stanza, which segues into a denouement emphasizing the positive term “perfected,” but still predicated on an impermanent moment of suspended time “at the pivot”:

There, at the axis
Pain, or love, or grief
Sleep on speed; in dead certainty;
Pure relief.

There, at the pivot
Time sleeps again.
No has-been, no here-after; only the perfected
Presence of men. (*Poems* 127-8)⁵

The final image appears one of solidarity and perfection, yet this moment of respite is a fleeting illusion: time will reawaken from sleep and presence can turn to absence.

While “Going Back” engenders a liminal state through the experience of departure and separation, “Nostalgia” conveys the perspective of a returning soldier who is excluded from his old homestead in perpetuity as he finds that he no longer belongs there. As Christopher Pollnitz

observes, the homestead described resembles that of the Hocking family in Cornwall,⁶ and arguably, as the poem does not explicitly evoke the war, it became a war poem principally through context and association. The lines “Yet the shadowy house / Is out of bounds . . . the place is no longer ours” suggest that only the most recent possessors are allowed to haunt the house and that, as someone who has been alienated from the house in life, the speaker cannot enter it as a spirit. As suggested above, the motion of the waning moon as it curves slowly through the heavens establishes an ironic backdrop to the rest of the poem, which poignantly conveys the arrested movement of the soldier who laments: “Must we hover on the brink / Forever, and never enter the homestead any more?” (*Poems* 130). Again enjambment is used effectively, this time to enact the experience of being caught on the periphery, “on the brink”—suspended—without the desired progression onwards.

Instead of the “perfected / Presence of men” within which the soldier is subsumed in the earlier poem, here the returning soldier finds companionship only among the “old ghosts,” in the lines, “we mourn together, and shrink / In the shadow of the cart-shed” (*Poems* 131). It is possible to infer that the returning soldier has become a ghost himself. Lawrence alludes to eyes widening with fear and lips that kiss the stones and moss outside the home; nonetheless the narrator is curiously disembodied. He possesses the ghostly attribute of invisibility: “only the old ghosts know / I have come” (*Poems* 131). It may simply be that no human being is there to see him (“the place is dark”), yet his natural position seems to be among the ghosts who “whimper” and “mourn,” providing the only welcome he receives.

However, as Cushman has noted, this poem (and hence the collection) ends not with gentle nostalgia or quiet mourning but with imagined apocalyptic violence (197):

[I] ... wish I could pass impregnate into the place.

I wish I could take it all in a last embrace.

I wish with my breast I here could annihilate it all. (*Poems* 131)

The soldier paradoxically wishes to be sufficiently ghostly to “pass ... into” the old home, yet uses the bodily terms “impregnate,” “last embrace,” and “breast” to express the extent of his yearning. Finally, the thwarted attempt to reclaim his pre-war past catalyses a destructive urge—a fitting closing comment on the nature of war and its consequences.

In addition to considering imagery of pivoting and turning, as in my discussion of the two poems above, the stationing of “pivotal” poems within the *Bay* sequence merits analysis: poems on which the surrounding verse seems to hinge, through connection and/or contrast. Such poems might approach the definition of pivot as “The crucial or central point of something; that on which everything depends” (*OED* 3a).⁷ The first of two poems central in their numerical positioning (number nine of eighteen) is “Winter-Lull,” a poem about the chilled, ominous experience of watching and waiting during a gap in the bombardment. In the relevant Explanatory Note in *Poems*, Pollnitz writes: “New heavy artillery was developed during World War I, and the winter of 1916–1917 in France and Flanders was, as DHL recalled, ‘bitter’ ... indeed, it was the coldest in living memory” (903). In this poem, instead of “dead-sure silence,” we are alerted to the oppressive, hostile, and unnatural lack of sound. Although at first this imagery seems benign—“silent snow” through which the soldiers are “hushed / Into awe”—this ambiguous opening soon becomes explicitly negative in the following lines:

No sound of guns, nor overhead no rushed

Vibration to draw

Our attention out of the void wherein we are crushed. (*Poems* 124)

These lines reverse our assumptions about the desirability of battle-noise: at least active bombardment would provide the soldiers with distraction from their current state of nullity and with a sense of directed purpose.

Later in the poem their enforced inactivity is seen as a form of denial and one which undermines their “normal” soldierly bonds with their comrades: they are unable to make eye contact. The noiselessness is extended to the crow that floats past “on level wings” (also suggesting a lack of exertion and movement). Among a plethora of associations, crows are linked in mythology with war and death, while in medieval times they were thought to live abnormally long lives—an appropriate association given the endlessly protracted sense of being “folded together” and nullified by the blanketing snow.

Perhaps the most original image within the poem occurs in the following lines:

Uninterrupted silence swings

Invisibly, inaudibly

To and fro in our misgivings. (*Poems* 124)

If silence is seen to exist at the pivot (as in “Going Back”), it appears as a point of oscillation rather than of turning and evokes an internal pendulum, moving back and forth ceaselessly, marking time—caught within an endlessly reiterative pattern of negative emotion. The final line

could be interpreted as double-edged: the soldiers are “disastrously silence-bound!” in the sense of being trapped or encased within the muted scene; they are also bound for silence given that when the lull ends they may be destined for death. However, the latter implication is secondary within this poem of stasis and entrapment: “Winter-Lull” does not enact even an imagined progression beyond the moment of fatal calm.

“Winter-Lull” is flanked on either side by poems about invasion: “Bombardment” and “The Attack.” Interestingly, while Lawrence exchanged these poems with each other when incorporating the *Bay* verse within *Collected Poems*, he retained “Winter-Lull” as the pivot between them. Both “attack” poems are highly symbolic, imagistic, and (implicitly or explicitly) intertextual. “Bombardment,” with its image of a “sinister flower” (*Poems* 125), might be considered Lawrence’s “fleur du mal” poem⁸—although it seems that the flower is *made* sinister by the invasive violence rather than inherently harboring evil within. As in William Blake’s “The Sick Rose,”⁹ there is a sense that the flower/town is being penetrated: rather than the “invisible worm,” it is a “dark bird” that “falls from the sun” to the heart of the vulnerable red lily. The color-schemes too are similar: the rose’s “bed of crimson joy” finds an equivalent in the “flat red lily with a million petals.” While in the Blake poem the dark, secret penetration of the rose is explicitly linked with destruction (“its dark secret love does thy life destroy”), Lawrence ends his poem with the ambiguous phrase “the day has begun.” Out of context this sounds positive, yet at the close of “Bombardment” we are aware that this will be a day of killing.

Lily flowers, like crows, have numerous (contradictory) symbolic associations: they are typically used as funeral flowers, yet they can also connote fertility and passion, while white lilies have been associated with purity (particularly in relation to the Virgin Mary). Lilies have often been associated with maleness, due to the long pistil at their centre, yet Lawrence’s red lily

is clearly female: “She unfolds, she comes undone” (*Poems* 125). The term “undone” hints at a sexual violation more clearly conveyed in Blake’s poem through the symbolic association of passion and destruction. Then again, while Blake’s “invisible worm” acts under cover of darkness, Lawrence’s “dark bird” plummets to the heart of the flower at daybreak. The suggestion that the dark bird thus also represents a mortar shell recalls a passage from the story “England, my England” (1915)), in which Egbert operates a gunnery unit, waiting for his orders after the “lull” of a short intermission:

And in confirmation came the awful faint whistling of a shell, advancing almost suddenly into a piercing, tearing shriek that would tear through the membrane of life. He heard it in his ears, but he heard it also in his soul, in tension. There was relief when the thing had swung by and struck, away beyond The officer was giving the last lightning-rapid orders to fire before withdrawing. A shell passed unnoticed in the rapidity of action. And then, into the silence, into the suspense where the soul brooded, finally crashed a noise and a darkness and a moment's flaming agony and horror. Ah, he had seen the dark bird flying towards him, flying home this time. In one instant life and eternity went up in a conflagration of agony, then there was a weight of darkness. (*EME* 31-32)

The “dark bird” of the poem is deadly as it “curves in a rush to the heart of the vast / Flower,” though Lawrence steers away from verbalizing its consequences.

While “England, my England” is a story about a fully characterized individual who is killed in action, “Bombardment” is a symbolic poem in which the threatened civilians are seen

merely as “Hurrying creatures” running through the labyrinth of the flower/town as the shells begin to fall. Amid this suggestion of panic and disarray, the “creatures” are not individualized and the dominant aerial perspective has a distancing effect. A similar scene of hurry occurs in an earlier *Bay* poem initially entitled “Town” (subsequently “Town in 1917: see *Poems* 906–07)—a poem about London under blackout. This poem vividly reveals how the River’s gleams, “goggling clock” (Big Ben), “Sound from St Stephen’s,” and “lamp-fringed frock” have all been replaced in war-time by

Darkness, and skin-wrapped
Fleet, hurrying limbs,
Soft-footed dead. (*Poems* 129)

These lines evoke more disturbing images than the scurrying creatures of “Bombardment, which can be explained by the pattern of imagery that develops in the rest of the poem. “Town” reflects on the wartime changes to London’s “luminous / Garments”: the elaborate and decorative facade that the city adopted in pre-war times and that has now been forcibly replaced by “London / Original, wolf-wrapped / In pelts of wolves” (*Poems* 129). The poem oddly applauds the town’s reversion to a primeval, pre-Roman state of literal and figurative darkness—of wolves, marshes, and rushes. Animal skins provide a natural covering in contrast to the artificial fringes and shawls shed by the town. The “fleet” movement of rapidly moving limbs, which is celebrated in other Lawrence poems (see “In the Cities,” *Poems* 617), contrasts with more modern modes of transport. In many of his poems Lawrence evokes co-existence between the living and the dead—or the living and visitors from a mythological past—suggesting that the phrase “soft-

footed dead” employed here may not refer merely to civilians who are failing to escape the falling bombs. After all, the poem ends with the assertion that “It is well / That London ... / Has broken her spell” (*Poems* 129). The city has cast off its superficiality and artifice, thus recapturing its darker, more primeval past.

“Bombardment” precedes “Winter-Lull” in the original *Bay* collection; after the intervening, pivotal “Winter-Lull,” the sequence proceeds to its only battlefield poem: “The Attack.” Cushman sees this as the “climactic” poem of the sequence in which the soldier meets his death, and this is “experienced in visionary terms” (194). He sees the moment of death as occurring in the lines “A pale stroke smote // The pulse through the whole bland being / Which was This and me” (*Poems* 123), yet his sense also of this death-image as “clumsy” highlights the deeply ambiguous nature of the poem. While undoubtedly visionary, ending with specific references to biblical Transubstantiation and Transfiguration (discussed below), this visionary experience, with its recurrent brightness and white light, both evolves from the preceding poem and evokes a battleground illuminated literally by a searchlight.

In “Zeppelin Nights” from “All of Us,” Lawrence’s narrator exclaims:

Look in the sky, at the bright

Moon all ablaze!

Look at the shaking, white

Searchlight rays! (*Poems* 146)

Natural and man-made sources of light are here juxtaposed: the effect is both beautiful—even mesmerizing—and intensely threatening. The searchlights are employed to pick out the

Zeppelins in the sky so they might be targeted, but during World War I searchlights were also used at ground level to create “artificial moonlight” and thus facilitate night attacks. The latter could explain the extraordinary “great light” that startles the soldiers as they emerge from the woods at the beginning of “The Attack.” The way in which the searchlight illuminates the grass and the previously hidden trees is vividly conveyed in “The bright / Stubble upon the ground / Shone white” and “every black tree / Blossomed outright” (*Poems* 123-24). The impact is heightened by the numerous repetitions of “white” in conjunction with “bright,” “alight,” and “glistening.” The simile chosen for this field of artificial whiteness is “Like any field of snow,” immediately suggesting that this pivotal image derives specifically from the preceding poem, “Winter-Lull,” in which the coldness of the snow is associated with the nullification and ominously silent condition of the soldiers.

Through contrast, Lawrence again reverses the assumptions we are likely to have about the experiences of war, whether of exclusion from or involvement in fighting. In “The Attack” he notes how “warm the night was,” and the snow simile is immediately followed by “Yet warm the chase / Of faint night-breaths did go / Across my face!” (*Poems* 123). This atmosphere of warmth and blossoming clearly contrasts with the frozen void of the previous poem. Nonetheless, the description of the night as “Sweet-scented to hold in the throat” is both deceptively appealing and quietly ominous. The poison gas used during combat by both sides in World War I had a sweet smell but, if held in the throat, occasioned a devastating, torturous death—of coughing, choking, frothing, and drowning from within. If we engage with this scene as one of implicit horror, it casts doubt on the otherwise positive, or transcendental, nature of a visionary experience. Could this moment in which the soldier is transfixed by the night that “was so fair” be his downfall?

Even if the poem does harbor sinister implications, it remains a visionary poem about transcendence or metamorphosis, which is most aptly conveyed in the repeated term “wonder”:

In front of the terrible rage, the death,
This wonder stood glistening!
All shapes of wonder, with suspended breath,
Arrested listening ... (*Poems* 124)

The phrase “In front of” (rather than “After,” as in one version of the poem), points to a visionary experience that can oddly co-exist with the horrors of war, and the idea of being “suspended” or “arrested” situates this experience at the pivot described in “Going Back.” Unlike the earlier poem, however, this poem is given explicitly biblical resonance at its close. This is hinted at in the images of the white night “uprisen” and its “ecstatic reverie,” before being made explicit in the final stanza of the poem:

I saw the transfiguration
And the present Host.
Transubstantiation
Of the Luminous Ghost. (*Poems* 124)¹⁰

In the Explanatory Note to this stanza in *Poems*, Pollnitz indicates that, in archaic usage, the term “Host” can refer to an army or a company of angels. For Christians, it also designates the consecrated bread or wafer that symbolizes the body of Christ, while for Catholics specifically,

“Transubstantiation is the conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the body, and of the wine into the blood, of Christ, only the appearances ... of bread and wine remaining” (*Poems* 903). Transfiguration, defined as “metamorphosis,” has a specific biblical association as conveyed most fully in Matthew 17: 1-9: “1. And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, 2. And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light” (King James Version). Lawrence’s wording “Luminous Ghost,” of course, comes close to “Holy Ghost.” It seems that it is the night rather than the narrating soldier that undergoes a magical metamorphosis in this poem, so that the transformed battlefield and ranks of troops (the present host) are thrown into visual relief.

Lawrence’s engagement with these biblical and theological sources remains highly ambiguous: it is even difficult to decide whether he is conveying a moment of genuine wonder and transformative vision or whether he is including these references for ironic effect. The religious experience may simply reflect a moment of distorted perception or delusion. Undeniably, though, “The Attack” proves pivotal in moving the sequence beyond the battlefield into a series of poems reflecting on the borderline between life and death and lamenting a soldier’s departure.

These subsequent poems often explore this borderline through patterns of light and shade, or indeed through an interesting combination of biblical and pagan imagery. The next poem, “Obsequial Ode,” reflects the life-death transition through the approach to a door and the progress of a vessel, which embarks on a journey and unloads its cargo in the company of the “eager dead” who provide a welcome. This voyage is conceived in pagan, mythological terms, with implicit allusion to the ship in which Charon, the ferryman of Hades, carried souls of the

newly deceased across the rivers Styx and Acheron, which divided the world of the living from that of the dead:

... man has a course to go

A voyage to sail beyond the charted seas...

Now like a vessel in port

You unlade your riches unto death,

And glad are the eager dead to receive you there. (*Poems* 126)

This imagery anticipates that of late poems such as “The Ship of Death” in which Lawrence draws on Egyptian and Etruscan customs involving the burial of a death-ship and other “accoutrements” within a tomb to equip the deceased for his or her passage over the “last of seas.”¹¹

However, one stanza in particular, which emphasizes the continuity between “Obsequial Ode” and the preceding poem, foregrounds the religious resonances of the sequence:

I imagine dead hands are brighter,

 Their fingers in sunset shine

With jewels of passion once broken through you as a prism

Breaks light into gems; and dead breasts whiter

 For your wrath; and yes, I opine

They anoint their brows with your pain, as a perfect chrism. (*Poems* 126)

While Jesus' face shines in the sun during his Transfiguration, in the second line here the fingers of the dead radiate a split light that reflects the many colors of a sunset. Instead of "pain" with its connotations of Christ's suffering, Lawrence originally wrote "blood": blood whose religious significance provides the basis for a paradoxical baptism of the dead. The "perfect dead" who receive the soldier are "elate": they are enriched by the transference of his "allegiance" to them through this movement away from the living. At the end of the poem it is the living who are left uncertain and bereft.

The next poem, "Shades," was entitled "Pentecostal" when published in the 1919 issue of *Poetry*, but retained its pagan title within *Bay* and *Collected Poems* (Laird 119). Possibly reflecting the perspective of the dead soldier speaking back to the living, it seems prophetic and visionary in a Blakean sense—with its declamatory, mystical, and ambiguous interplay of light and shadow imagery—beginning with the line "Shall I tell you, then, how it is?" (*Poems* 128). These lights and darkneses seem to penetrate the borderline separating life and death, crossing over and establishing lines of communication between the living and the dead, who can still be "hand in hand." A "cloven gleam" and "tongue of darkened flame," vestiges of the living, come to "flicker" in the dead soldier, including him "in one world" with the narrator. The poem proceeds through references to "our shadow" and "our darkness," generating at least an illusion of unity across the chasm. While the dead soldier receives light across the borderline, the shared shadow of death seems to permeate the living creatures left behind and is glimpsed in moments of beauty or aliveness:

In the flicker of a flower,

In a worm that is blind, yet strives,
In a mouse that pauses to listen

Glimmers our

Shadow; yet it deprives

Them none of their glisten. (*Poems* 128)

The shadow is animated by “flicker,” “strives,” “pauses,” “glimmer,” and “glisten,” as well as “shaken,” “tremble,” and “rippled”: it is a vital force and is celebrated here with a sense of narrative authority, while the poem ends, as it began, with a powerful assertion. However, when considered in conjunction with the following poem, “Bread upon the Waters” (again with its specifically biblical resonances), the assertive impact of the ending is compromised, if not completely undermined.

The title of this following poem alludes to Ecclesiastes 11:1: “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days” and the poem imaginatively toys with the loved one’s return after a certain period, but is nonetheless bookended by the despairing lines, “So you are lost to me!” and “For you are lost to me!” (*Poems* 129-30). The possibility of return is reflected tentatively in an interrogative plea that lacks confidence and assurance:

Will you come back when the tide turns?

After many days? My heart yearns

To know! (*Poems* 130)

A tide predictably ebbs and flows, as though governed by a pivot on which the scattered bread might turn. Yet the line break between “yearns” and “To know” indicates the frighteningly wide gap between the longing for and reassurance of affirmed knowledge and understanding. The subsequent repeated command “Drift then ... Drift then ... Drift” is, on the one hand, an injunction to the departed to imitate the bread and move with the tide which will ultimately steer him back home. On the other hand, the very term “drift” denotes aimless, directionless, and perhaps futile movement.

The evolving biblical imagery discussed above arguably reaches its apocalyptic culmination at the end of “Ruination” (fourteenth in the sequence) with the lines: “the elms are loftily dimmed, and tall / As if moving in air towards us, tall angels / Of darkness advancing steadily over us all” (*Poems* 123). Lofty angels of doom dominate a misty and mud-flooded landscape: Lawrence’s version of a “waste land.” The sun is bleeding; the sea is drear and gray; the earth has become “sodden filth” and “sombre dirt”; and (in “Rondeau of a Conscientious Objector”), a “twisted thorn tree” is the only reminder of pre-war fertility. Interestingly, “Tommyes in the Train” (the sixteenth poem) reverts to a pagan image of teeming nature: the sun and coltsfoot flowers shine while daffodils sparkle, and it is Jove who has strewn the bright flowers along the banks. The “cosmic gold” of the spring contrasts with the “mould” that rots away the heart of England. At the core of this poem is the idea that we “fall apart / in an endless departure from each other,” as though we are being projected helplessly into orbit:

Is it the train

That falls like a meteorite

Backward into space, to alight

Never again?

Or is it the illusory world

That falls from reality

As we look? Or are we

Like a thunderbolt hurled? (*Poems* 121)

The thunderbolt image might suggest deployment of the soldiers as weapons of a vengeful deity, flung into battle with violent intent, though resulting merely in a severance of contact with their fellow men. After this sense of violence and severance, the following poem, "War-baby," abruptly employs religious imagery in its final line in a more positive way: the "little, hasty seed," "mustard-seed," or "little weed" will take root and "flourish its branches in heaven when we slumber beneath" (cf. Matthew 13:31-32, *KJV*). Hope for peace and regeneration is provided by the promise of new life, a product of insouciant "faith." It is striking, though, that after this vision of flourishing Lawrence turns to the themes of regret and exclusion for the final poem in the collection ("Nostalgia," discussed above).

Key images within these poems spiral back on themselves as they gather oscillating associations. For instance, darkness or shadow is associated with soldiers' eyes and busbies, a moving battalion, nightfall covering shame, a shrouded church, a child's eiderdown, London and its primeval people during blackout, patterns of shade fleeing from marching men, a (shared) quality of death-within-life, sexuality, shoals of fish, lofty angels, and a lost homestead. Whiteness, paleness, or brightness designate a general's plume, moonlight, London's pre-war

artifice, the cold light on an open road, sleepy phantoms, distant glimmering lights, chimney-tips, snowscapes, transfiguring holy light, weapons of destruction, dead hands, searchlights, cloven gleams and flames, sparkling flowers and emerging spring. Mara Kalnins has described such a cyclical, accumulative process as follows, in reference to Lawrence's *Apocalypse*: "In *Apocalypse* he defined this poetic method more precisely, as one which 'starts with an image, sets this image in motion, allows it to achieve a certain course or circuit of its own, and then takes up another image' and allows 'the mind to move in cycles, or to flit here and there over a cluster of images'" (A 14). An acknowledgement of pivoting and turning within and between these poems (like "rotary-image thought" A 95) offers a way of approaching them that allows their inconsistencies, contradictions, oddities, and resistance to straightforward narrative progression to be better understood.

In "Nostalgia" the returning soldier (or ghost) asks "Is it irrevocable?" when pondering the uni-directional process of alienation through time's cruel passage. There are many moments in these poems of disbelief at the impossibility of finding a pivot and executing the desired turn away from war and back to human contact. For fleeting moments it is possible to inhabit a pivot point: to achieve a moment of suspended animation in which time seems to stand still and human co-existence is "perfected." But these moments of poise and pause are counterbalanced by other glimpses of helplessness, manipulation, and inevitable violence. As the pivot on which these poems turn or oscillate is war, and Lawrence is exploring the changing faces both of participation and exclusion, they remain in continuous motion and rarely settle. Searching and restless, these poems achieve unification not through a coherent narrative progression but through an interlinked pattern of related (often antithetical) images: images of turning tides and moons, waste lands, homes and gardens, trains, weaponry, bread and blood, cold/warmth,

speed/stillness, rising/falling, light/shade, exclusion/belonging, and profuse, lavish nature often symbiotically connected with the invasive colors and sounds of war. In a process of “rotary-image thought,” these motifs slowly turn and return in different guises and combinations, allowing Lawrence to convey the sense that there is no stable core of meaning at the pivot point of this conflict.

Notes

1. See Cushman 182; Laird 112; Introduction, *Poems* xxxiv.
2. See also Laird 118.
3. See explanatory notes to “Guards!” in *Poems* 843.
4. In one of his late poems—“Astronomical Changes”—Lawrence borrows such images of “pivot” and “axle” in order to convey figuratively and symbolically the progression of the heavenly bodies:

Even the Pole itself has departed now from the Pole Star
and pivots on the invisible,
while the Pole Star lies aside, like an old axle taken from the wheel. (*Poems* 531)

I have previously elucidated this poem in terms of the “Precession of the Equinoxes,” or “the Earth’s ‘wobble’ about its polar axis creating the illusion that even the ‘fixed’ stars are moving because (for instance) the North Pole no longer points to the Pole Star” (Jones 96). The apparent shift from Pisces into Aquarius mirrors a change in human perception as well as a shift beyond the era of Christianity and disembodied spiritualism.

5. For sleep and wheels, see the explanatory notes in *Poems* to “Going Back” (906 n. 8 and 17) and to “The North Country” (892 n. 8).

6. See explanatory notes to “Nostalgia” (*Poems* 909).

7. The *OED* listing includes a reference to Lawrence's *Women in Love* to exemplify this particular meaning of “pivot”: “1920 D. H. Lawrence *Women in Love* xxx. 491 ‘She felt strange and inevitable, as if she were centered upon the pivot of all existence, there was no further reality.’”

8. Lawrence admired Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal poems*: see *IL* 179. It has also been suggested that the city evoked in the poem may be Paris (see Kendall).

9. “O Rose thou art sick. / The invisible worm / That flies in the night, / In the howling storm: // Has found out thy bed / Of crimson joy: / And his dark secret love / Does thy life destroy.” (Blake). Cf. Laird's reference to this poem as “a step-sister of Blake's sick rose” (116).

10. It is possible that this image was influenced by the “Mons Angels.” In September 1914, the Welsh author Arthur Machen published a short story entitled “The Bowmen,” based on British soldiers’ accounts of their experiences during the battle of Mons in the previous month. This story catalyzed a number of related accounts of divine/supernatural intervention on the battlefield in the form of bowmen, warrior angels, or even luminous clouds.

11. See explanatory note to the title “The Ship of Death” (*Poems* 1299).

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