**D. H. Lawrence and Post-Natal Depression**

At the end of the First World War, Lawrence heard from his friend Lady Cynthia Asquith describing her pregnancy:

I had your letter prescribing childbirth – or rather childbearing – as a cure for all the ills: sorry it is denied me: must think of a substitute. You had a war-baby: now a peace-baby. I tell you, you are a perfect chronicle of current events. You deliver the times to a T. – I suppose the baby will be Gabriel: or Gabrielle: unless it has to be Bolshevina. [[1]](#footnote-1)

In this letter, much of Lawrence’s sense of childbirth becomes evident. He’s at once warm, and playful and also, to a degree, at a loss. There’s something of an attempt to reassure in his letter to Cynthia: ‘You had a war-baby; now a peace-baby’ aligns her pregnancy with the coming of peace, after a war in which she had lost two brothers. Lawrence links the pregnancy with recovery, and a tentative belief in better times. ‘You are a perfect chronicle of current events’ offers a bolstering homage to Cynthia’s importance. But Lawrence is aware of being at a remove from Cynthia, writing of childbirth: ‘sorry it is denied me: must think of a substitute’. And this letter shifts attention away from Cynthia’s pregnancy itself, making it instead a symbol for other things, for thinking about war, the Russian revolution, the possibility of recovery.

Lawrence’s awareness of the limits to his own knowledge of what it might be like to have a child, and his concurrent attempt to lend childbirth symbolic significance, recurs throughout his work. His letters intimate how pregnancy is almost unimaginable, to him, but might have far-reaching imaginative significance. Lawrence stated in an early letter: ‘I think if I had a child coming, I think I should be happy too. Because if one is careful – if the mother is careful – I think all the world starts again, right clean and jolly, when a child is born..’[[2]](#footnote-2) Lawrence’s lack of personal knowledge is suggested in the repeated tentativeness of ‘I think’: ‘I think if I had…I think I should…I think all the world starts again…I think, when a child is coming’, as well in the modification from the impersonal authority of ‘if one is careful’ to ‘if *the mother* is careful’. Despite and perhaps because of this lack of direct knowledge though, Lawrence makes an expansive claim for symbolic meaning, freighting the hypothetical pregnancy with the possibility of far-reaching hope: ‘the whole world starts again’.

Lawrence’s deep interest in pregnancy, his awareness of his own lack of direct knowledge of it, and his impulse to accord it symbolic significance, are important in thinking about a richly suggestive claim made by Lawrence critics. Recently, it has been suggested that a heroine in one of Lawrence’s short stories – Juliet in Lawrence’s ‘Sun’ – might be suffering from post-natal depression. In ‘Sun’, Juliet is shown being taken away from New York to the Mediterranean with her young child on medical advice, where she undergoes a type of sunlight therapy, sunbathing and gradually seeming to relax into the new environment. It is never made explicit what Juliet has been suffering from, and why she has been sent away. But N. H. Reeve’s excellent discussion of the story notes that Maurice, Juliet’s husband, commenting on Juliet’s ‘silent, awful hostility after the baby was born’, seems to present Juliet as having ‘*a kind of* postnatal depression’ (emphasis mine – there is some tentativeness here), whilst Izabel F. O. Brandão goes further, arguing that the narrative ‘hints at the possibility several times’ and that the whole story works ‘to build up the tension of post-natal depression’. [[3]](#footnote-3) Both Reeve and Brandão build on intermittent glimpses of Juliet’s anxiety about the child, and pick up vague, persistent concerns about childbirth in the story. And yet Lawrence was writing before post-natal depression became a clinical term, at a time when there was only an equivocal, pre-diagnostic awareness of the emotional pressures of childbirth.[[4]](#footnote-4) Moreover, in writing about his character Juliet’s emotions after childbirth, Lawrence would have been aware, as indicated above, of limits to his knowledge.[[5]](#footnote-5) Within ‘Sun’, amidst descriptions of Juliet, childlessness is highlighted: at one point Lawrence describes the peasant to whom Juliet becomes attracted dancing with a child from the village, but emphasises: ‘But it was not his own child: he had no children’.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Given that there is a gap between what is explored in, and suggested by, the story, and what Lawrence could have known, I want to think further about what post-natal depression might have meant to Lawrence. Criticism on this short story has tended to read it in diagnostic terms. Juliet Ruderman has seen it as a ‘textbook case of a turning point in a child’s psychological development’, and others have implicitly treated it as a ‘textbook case’ by offering a variety of diagnoses for Juliet, from narcissism to neuroticism.[[7]](#footnote-7) I want by contrast to think further about the complex acts of imagination at work in the story. In ‘Sun’ Lawrence thinks about something like post-natal depression partly through thinking about other things, things analogous to what he feels having a baby might be like.[[8]](#footnote-8) In doing so he risks making post-natal depression a cipher for other things. But his own concerns at the time, I shall argue, are themselves involved with how we might cease to know ourselves – he is thinking, as I shall explore, about Juliet’s feelings partly in relation to his own alienation from himself through illness. ‘Post-natal depression’ in Lawrence’s work focuses a sense of how we might feel divided between selves, between lives, between optimistic faith in resilience: ‘the whole world starts again’, and doubts about the conceivability of such resilience.

Lawrence’s treatment of something like post-natal depression also suggests how a writing which at once trespasses, and acknowledges, the limits of its own capacity to imagine the experience of others might register such concerns. Lawrence’s propensity to make pregnancy and birth into symbols for other kinds of new birth has been acknowledged by critics including Carol Skelenicka, Judith Rudermann and Fiona Becket.[[9]](#footnote-9) And some critics have seen this pull towards metaphor-making in Lawrence’s work more generally as an ethical problem – John Worthen, for instance, criticises the way in which Clifford Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928) is ‘made to stand for things’.[[10]](#footnote-10) On the one hand exploring post-natal depression in Lawrence’s work illustrates this ethical problem: making post-natal depression symbolic risks, as I will explore, a type of invasive imaginative appropriation. But Lawrence’s figurative descriptions of post-natal depression often suggest an awareness of the incompletion of the acts of understanding involved in producing them. And, moreover, whilst Lawrence’s more ostensibly confident and definite attempts to describe post-natal depression, and to assign it symbolic significance, can often involve an aggressive invasiveness, such invasiveness arguably mirrors what Lawrence is describing, providing a way of thinking about how one’s own life might seem to be appropriated by forces beyond one’s control. Lawrence’s awareness of something shattering in new motherhood leads to him using the topic for its symbolic potential, but also leads to a creation that is aware of its own distance from reality, conscious of the fictionality of the emotions it depicts, and persistently concerned with how we might be estranged from ourselves.

Lawrence’s interest in the possibility of something troubling in the post-natal condition, and his awareness of his own imaginative limits when it comes to childbirth, takes shape in *Sons and Lovers* (1913). In this novel, Mrs Morel is shown as exhausted and conflicted after the birth of Paul Morel. At first the novel remains circumspect, though, on the nature of this exhaustion. The narrative records that: ‘She was very ill when her children were born’, but does not elaborate on the nature of this illness.[[11]](#footnote-11) Indeed, the novel seems to underline how unknowable childbearing is except to the woman herself. When Walter Morel comes to see his wife and the newborn baby he struggles to communicate, and is described as being ‘at a loss’ (p.43).

However, the discussion of Mrs Morel’s post-natal emotional state is elaborated upon, and Lawrence begins to bring into play some rich symbolic significations. In one scene Mrs Morel takes the new baby out into the meadow, in a ‘space of ripe, evening light, whispering’, with the word ‘ripe’ suggesting fertility and indicating how the signification of the birth begins to extend to the landscape, seeping into the condition of the atmosphere (p.49). As Lawrence describes Mrs Morel there’s an interplay of authorial certainty about Mrs Morel’s emotions, and an awareness of how such emotions might remain strange, both to the character and to the author:

She had dreaded this baby like a catastrophe, because of her feeling for her husband. And now she felt strangely towards the infant. Her heart was heavy because of the child, almost as if it were unhealthy, or malformed. Yet it seemed quite well. But she noticed the peculiar knitting of the baby’s brows, and the peculiar heaviness of its eyes, as if it were trying to understand something that was pain. She felt, when she looked at the child’s dark, brooding pupils, as if a burden were on her heart.

(p.50)

The passage reaches for Mrs Morel’s internal state: ‘Her heart was heavy’, but it is filled with conjecture. Sketching Mrs Morel’s emotions Lawrence repeatedly uses analogical modes of thought: ‘like a catastrophe’, ‘as if it were unhealthy’, ‘as if a burden were on her heart’. Sophie Ratcliffe has argued in *On Sympathy* (2008) that we turn to ‘analogical modes of thought […] because there are limits to our sympathetic comprehension; our recourse to such metaphorical means of understanding might be said to stem from the sense of our own mental confinement’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Lawrence’s repeated turns to analogy here bring into focus a struggle to understand, and a sense of his mental and physical confinement – they discuss Mrs Morel provisionally, offering similes for her feelings, and figures for her feelings, rather than evincing certainty about the feelings themselves.

This lack of authorial certainty about the character’s emotions mirrors Mrs Morel’s own ambivalence, and this feeling of only being able to understand through analogy connects up to an interest in thinking about how we might struggle to place ourselves. Mrs Morel’s feelings are repeatedly understood in relation to others: ‘She had dreaded this baby […] *because of her feeling for her husband*’, ‘Her heart was heavy *because of the child*’ (italics mine). The heaviness of her heart, too, echoes ‘the heaviness of the baby’s eyes’. In this way her feelings are located in terms of things outside herself. Lawrence is using his repeated similes and analogies to suggest what it is to feel at odds with oneself, as is evident as the passage progresses:

In her arms lay the delicate baby. Its deep blue eyes, always looking up at her unblinking, seemed to draw her innermost thoughts out of her. She no longer loved her husband; she had not wanted this child to come, and there it lay in her arms and pulled at her heart. She felt as if the navel string that had connected its frail little body with hers had not been broken. A wave of hot love went over her to the infant. She held it close to her face and breast […]Its clear, knowing eyes gave her pain and fear. Did it know all about her? When it lay under her heart, had it been listening then? Was there a reproach in the look? She felt the marrow melt in her bones, with fear and pain.

(pp50-51)

Lawrence associates motherhood with self-division, and with past and present emotions tugging against each other: ‘she had not wanted this child to come, and there it lay in her arms and pulled at her heart’. There’s the sense of being more than one person, or of her identity still as bound to the baby’s: ‘as if the navel string that had connected its frail little body with hers has not been broken’. This image of the umbilical cord, the ‘navel-string’, echoes throughout Lawrence’s writing on childbirth, as he explores the severing of the cord as the ‘first break in continuity’, bringing into being the ‘pain and splendour of individuality’.[[13]](#footnote-13) Here it indicates Mrs Morel caught between her own individuality and the baby’s identity – the pulling of strings even seems to echo Lawrence’s ‘Piano’, where the memory of the ‘tingling strings’ of the piano pulls the speaker back to their childhood identity.[[14]](#footnote-14) Through tentative figurative acts of understanding, which acknowledge their distance from what they describe, Lawrence is using the post-natal condition in *Sons and Lovers* to explore what it is like to feel distant from oneself.

The intricacies of this early imagining of something like post-natal depression are re-focussed and in Lawrence’s ‘Sun’. In this short story, any insights into Juliet’s feelings after childbirth are given belatedly. The story starts after the point of diagnosis, with the doctors’ recommendations: “‘Take her away into the sun,” the doctors said’ (p.19), and is concerned with questions of recovery rather than with attempting to provide any kind of full case-history. But it does seem that Lawrence is strenuously attempting to imagine what it is like to feel broken by childbirth, as becomes evident in the shifting narratorial voice. Lawrence reaches for Juliet’s internal world, describing her response to Maurice’s statement that ‘“These partings are no good […] I don’t like them”’:

 ‘No, neither do I’, she responded in a flat voice.

She remembered how bitterly they wanted to get away from one another, he and she. The emotion of parting gave a slight tug at her emotions, but only caused the iron that had gone into her soul to gore deeper.

(p.19)

Lawrence’s narrative moves from the external to the internalized in thinking about Juliet. He hints at her emotions through her voice, but then sketches out her inner life. ‘The emotion of parting gave a slight tug at her emotions’ evinces an intimate narratorial knowledge of Juliet. There’s a schematic knowledge of her inner world, and of the state of her soul: ‘the iron that had gone into her soul to gore deeper’.

This attempt to inhabit Juliet’s experience becomes increasingly evident in the passages following Juliet’s first attempts at sunbathing. Here her whole body becomes transparent to the narrator, and the distance that Lawrence felt from Mrs Morel’s experience, or Cynthia Asquith’s experience, dissolves:

She could feel the sun penetrating into her bones: nay, further, even into her emotions and thoughts. The dark tensions of her emotion began to give way, the cold dark clots of her thoughts began to dissolve. She was beginning to be warm right through. Turning over, she let her shoulders lie in the sun, her loins, the backs of her thighs, even her heels. And she lay half stunned with the strangeness of the thing that was happening to her. Her weary, chilled heart was melting, and in melting, evaporating. Only her womb remained tense and resistant, the eternal resistance. It would resist even the sun.

(p.21)

This description approaches the condition Juliet has been sent away for by exploring what it is to recover from such a state. It anatomises Juliet, listing parts of her body in a type of blazon: ‘her loins’, the ‘backs of her thighs, even her heels’. And then it grows ambitious in terms of its attempts to imagine, ‘penetrating into her bones; nay, further, even into her emotions and thoughts’.

What’s happening with this imaginative penetration of Juliet’s body can be thought about by exploring the knowledge that might have been available to Lawrence in thinking about the post-natal condition. One of Lawrence’s sources for understanding childbirth would have been his wife Frieda Lawrence, and Janet Byrne’s biography of Frieda suggests that during her first pregnancy she refused the advice of neighbours, instead consulting ‘anatomy and childrearing books’. [[15]](#footnote-15) Such books from the turn of the century offer glimpses of the emotional and physical pressures of childbirth, and frequently return to the idea that childbirth takes a toll on the nervous system. W.E. Fothergill argues that ‘The nervous system is the one which of all the others, suffers in the most striking manner from toxic conditions during pregnancy, labour and the puerperium’, so that ‘[t]he mind of a lying-in woman requires rest equally with the body’. [[16]](#footnote-16) There are suggestions too of a post-partum physical malaise with warnings about the ‘rigors’: shivers following the exertion of labour. Edward P. Davis and John Keating’s *Mother and Child* (1893) warns that such shiveriness is linked to nervous exhaustion: ‘It very often happens that the excessive exertion of labor and the perspiration which frequently accompanies it render the patient especially susceptible to cold, and hence the contact of the air after labor very often results in a slight chill. This is partly owing, also, to the nervous exhaustion and prostration from which the patient naturally suffers’. [[17]](#footnote-17) These scraps of knowledge seem to come into play with Lawrence’s depiction of Juliet. She is described as exhausted, and also as essentially needing to be somehow *warmed*, and Lawrence links chilliness and emotional exhaustion: ‘Her weary, chilled heart was melting’.

What Lawrence is doing here though is forcing such scraps of knowledge into metaphorical significance. He suggests not that Juliet is suffering from shiveriness just after birth – as described in books on obstetrics and midwifery – but that her heart continues to be frozen, ‘chilled’, some time after the birth of her baby. The forcefully constructed nature of symbolic significance is evident as Lawrence’s narrative voice reaches further. Throughout the story there’s an odd repeated image of Juliet’s womb shut tight: ‘Only her womb remained tense and resistant’. The story traces her womb’s unfolding: ‘her tense womb, though still closed, was slowly unfolding, slowly, slowly, like a lily bud under water’, ‘her womb inside her was wide open, wide open like a lotus flower’ (p.23, p.29). One of the things contemporary anatomy books mention is the need after labour to allow the womb to return to its previous state:

while this period is one of repose, it is a time of the greatest activity in her physical organism. The balance between various functions of the body, which has been disturbed by the presence of the child in the womb, has been restored; the mother’s blood, which was impoverished by the nourishment given to the child, begins to make good its losses; disturbances of the nervous system and mental depression have passed away, and in many cases a new era of physical development begins. The womb, which has been enlarged many times its usual size to contain the child, undergoes a process of becoming smaller, the successful completion of which is of the greatest importance to the woman.[[18]](#footnote-18)

This continual ‘activity in her physical organism’ is reflected in ‘Sun’ – the story depicts continual physical readjustment, the changing of the blood, changes to the womb recorded in Lawrence’s x-ray narrative voice. But this idea of the womb as moving from ‘resistance’ to ‘openness’, several years after the birth of a child, is Lawrence’s own. Lawrence expands and embroiders current medical knowledge, using the narrative voice to move Juliet’s womb around schematically.

This type of schematic symbolism means that it could be argued that ‘Sun’ can be seen indeed as less an imaginative construction of post-natal depression than an imaginative invasion. The emphasis on the resistance of the womb was something Lawrence added in the second draft of the story in 1928 – and this revision has been seen as something which specifically takes power away from Juliet as a character, and concurrently allows Lawrence more forcefully to push his chosen themes.[[19]](#footnote-19) Juliet and her husband, like Clifford Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, can be seen as being ‘made to stand for things’– Leavis wrote in his account of the story that Maurice, for instance, represents ‘the loss of the life of the body’, an interpretation which suggests that Lawrence’s concern in this story is less about what post-natal depression might be like, than about what its symbolic capacity might be.[[20]](#footnote-20) One of the problems with thinking about the story diagnostically, then, and thinking as previous critics have done about what might be wrong with Juliet, is that it might be argued that this story is only loosely about women’s experience at all. Indeed, it would be possible to see this story as a masculine takeover of women’s experience. Juliet in Lawrence’s ‘Sun’, with her womb moved about impatiently by a sun coded as male, seems often to be ‘made to stand for things’, and the inherently intrusive, unveiling nature of the narrative voice suggests a type of symbolic forcefulness.

The story combines this invasiveness though with an exploration an acknowledgement of how different characters might appropriate the experience of others. The description of Juliet on which previous discussions of her post-natal depression have hinged is a passage written from her husband’s perspective. Maurice reflects:

He was thinking visionarily of her in the New York flat, pale, silent, oppressing him terribly. He was the soul of gentle timidity in his human relations, and her silent, awful hostility after the baby was born had frightened him deeply. Because, he had realized that she could not help it. Women were like that. Their feelings took a reverse direction, even against their own selves, and it was awful – devastating. Awful, awful to live in the house with a woman like that, whose feelings were reversed even against herself. He had felt himself borne down under the stream of her heavy hostility. She had ground even herself down to the quick, and the child as well. […]Thank God, that menacing ghost-woman seemed to be sunned out of her now.

(p.35)

Leavis felt that this passage suggested that Maurice was a ‘conscientious husband’, and subsequent critics have looked to it for information on Juliet’s emotional state.[[21]](#footnote-21) Yet this passage is also pointedly not about Juliet. Describing ‘her silent, awful hostility after the baby was born’, Maurice appears to be focussing on his own experience – Juliet’s ‘hostility’ is ‘awful’ specifically for him: ‘Awful, awful, to live in the house with a woman like that’. The word ‘borne’ offers a pun on ‘born’, but transposes it to a context where it means exhaustion: ‘borne down’ – Juliet’s childbearing is being translated into having significance solely in terms of Maurice. The description is almost comically self-pitying, especially in its description of Juliet as ‘oppressing him terribly’. Maurice’s discussion of Juliet’s ‘hostility’, is mirrored by his own, evident in his recoiling description of her as ‘that menacing ghost-woman’, and ‘Women were like that’ (where ‘like’, here, is accusatorily dismissive). It’s difficult to believe that such a description is intended to be truly representative of Juliet’s former condition. Whilst it is the only extended description of Juliet in New York, it’s importantly written at an angle, through a lens of self-pitying hostility. It’s presented not exactly as a memory but a peculiar kind of vision: ‘He was thinking visionarily’.

Tracing the sources for Lawrence’s Juliet suggests more both about how the story makes post-natal depression a cipher for other things, and also about the intricacy of any such appropriation. Firstly, Lawrence gives his central character his own concerns about having children. Juliet is consumed by the responsibility of her young son, and the word ‘responsibility’ keeps echoing in descriptions of her feelings: ‘She felt so horridly, ghastly *responsible* for him: as if she must be *responsible* for every breath he drew’, ‘She had had the child so much on her mind, in a torment of *responsibility*, as if, having borne him, she had to answer for his whole existence’ (p.20, p.22 – emphases mine). And in a letter to Frieda early on in their relationship, Lawrence had written:

I want you to have children to me—I don’t care how soon. I never thought I should have that definite desire. But you see, we must have a more or less stable foundation if we are going to run the risk of the responsibility of children—not the risk of children, but the risk of the responsibility.[[22]](#footnote-22)

With this attempt at imagining having children, Lawrence imaginatively scopes out the risks, projecting himself into a possible future. And in so doing he prioritises responsibility as his main concern: ‘the risk of the responsibility’. Giving this concern to Juliet, then, Lawrence builds up her character by analogy with his own sense of what having children would be like for him. And, moreover, he amplifies his concerns in Juliet – rather than tentative fears they become realised in Juliet’s narrative.

But the connection between Juliet and Lawrence’s own personal experience is complex. Juliet expresses Lawrence’s half-fears about childbirth, but she is also connected with Lawrence’s life in another way. As has been noted by Reeve, Lawrence wrote ‘Sun’ at a time when he himself was unwell, with an attack of what Frieda was told was tuberculosis. He, like Juliet, had been told to lie in the sun in an attempt to recover his health.[[23]](#footnote-23) As N. H. Reeve points out, the whole story could be about health and illness:

[…] beneath its pointedly lyrical accounts of reawakening, ‘Sun’, more especially the later version, evokes with great vividness what it can be like to feel’s one body in the grip of an unremitting power, when particular organs seem to be working by themselves, or when sensations one thought had been safely stowed away rise up again unmistakably [...] as […] when Mellors, with his own history of respiratory trouble, says rather balefully, after his first sexual contact with Connie: “I thought I’d done with it all. Now I’ve begun again... if I’ve got to be broken open again, I have – ”[[24]](#footnote-24)

This type of experience suggests powerlessness: ‘particular organs seem to separate off from the whole and work by themselves’, ‘one’s body in the grip of an implacable, unremitting power’. This type of experience runs throughout ‘Sun’ – and resonates with the odd shifting of Juliet’s womb.

In terms of making Juliet ‘stand for things’, then, Juliet is being made to stand for something that itself is innately unsettling. Lawrence struggled to affix a definite signification to his own illness, and felt it estrange him from himself.[[25]](#footnote-25) Returning to the ranch to lie in the sun as instructed, Lawrence imagined putting himself slowly together: ‘I am just gathering myself together, the last bits of me, as it were, struggling in from the long journey’.[[26]](#footnote-26) This struggle to put together a coherent self connects to Lawrence’s feeling of not knowing how to interpret his illness. He attempts to affix symbolic significance to his illness in ways that keep shifting. At one point he tries to diagnose his illness according to what sounds like a traditional theory of ‘humours’, referencing ‘chagrin’, and at other moments he observes wryly that endless symbolic roles are being carried out: ‘the hemorrhage came again. Frieda wept, and I felt like all the martyrs in one’.[[27]](#footnote-27) There’s a sense of being more than one person: ‘all the martyrs’, and also of being less than a whole person: ‘I’m only half myself’.[[28]](#footnote-28) And this experience of being at once more and less than one person echoes throughout *Sun*’s focus on the listing of body parts, the imagining of incomplete bodies, the blazon of parts of the body working against themselves.

What has been identified by critics as Juliet’s ‘post-natal depression’, then, is at least partly a re-writing of Lawrence’s own illness – and Lawrence giving Juliet’s sunbathing, recuperating, post-natal self elements of his own illness is a decidedly odd analogical move. He is re-writing tuberculosis as post-natal depression. He’s writing about something that remained to him strange, difficult to symbolise, and difficult to affix meaning to – his own illness – in terms of something he *knew* was strange to him: the experience of having recently had a child. But what attracts him to the notion of thinking about post-natal depression may be partly such strangeness. One of the reasons for choosing to bring experiences of tuberculosis and post-natal depression together might have been this very sense of it as distant from him, and thus possibly reflecting his own experience of feeling distant from himself. This coming together of transparency, definite knowledge, and obliquity makes sense in the context of Lawrence’s depiction in *Sons and Lovers* of the mother’s relationship with her new child – Lawrence seems to be deliberately drawing on an experience that he felt contained its own strangeness and self-division, and was strange to him.

Something like post-natal depression also seems to have a meaning to him in terms of thinking about hope. Discussing his illness, Lawrence frequently describes attempts to recover, to come back to himself: ‘I am just getting myself together’. The possibility of recovery runs throughout Lawrence’s work – Paul Fussell argues: ‘The idea that one might go away, that one might try again, defines a repeated emotional action Lawrence performs, and his elasticity and power of recovery and capacity to rise Phoenix-like from calamity and despair are among the most striking things about him.’[[29]](#footnote-29) Childbearing in Lawrence’s work complicates this central concern. It is an image for rebirth and renewal, evident in his early letter and his notion that with newborn babies: ‘the whole world starts again’. But describing childbearing was also a way of suggesting that recovery might not be possible, that one might be trapped between past, present and future selves. In Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* (1915), Lydia Brangwen becomes depressed before the birth of her child because ‘It needed so much life to begin afresh, after she had lost so lavishly’, and that childbirth meant that ‘the old grief come back in her’.[[30]](#footnote-30) Post-natal depression in ‘Sun’, the story of which centres around the possibility of healing, acts as a reminder of the difficulties of recovery, the ambivalence of half-attempts at rebirth, and the ways in which new beginnings might yet be haunted by the past.

Whilst Lawrence may be using Juliet to ‘stand for things’, and may be engaged in a type of imaginative invasion, in writing about tuberculosis as post-natal depression he’s also engaged in thinking about imaginative distances: between mother and child, between husband and wife, between himself and a childbearing woman, between himself as he is and his imagined and hoped-for recovery. And there are moments when the story seems aware of such distances, and where there seem to be congruities between Lawrence’s description of illness, something like post-natal depression, and the very nature of fictional creation itself. After having described the house in the Mediterranean to which Juliet has been brought, focussing on the vines, the slopes of lemon trees, the ancient tomb in the garden, and the ‘bluest of seas’, Lawrence writes of Juliet:

She saw it all, and in a measure it was soothing. But it was all external. She didn’t really care about it. She was herself just the same, with all her anger and frustration inside her, and her incapacity to feel anything real. The child irritated her, and preyed on her peace of mind.

(p.20)

This description suggests a pervasive sense of distance from reality, which Lawrence takes partly from his own experience of illness – he wrote in 1928 that: ‘The worst of being ill is one loses one’s connection with nearly everything’.[[31]](#footnote-31) Lawrence seems almost to be writing about himself through Juliet. But part of this statement about Juliet’s feelings also reflects Lawrence’s position as writer in relation to the woman. For Lawrence, too, was aware that all was only ‘external’ in his attempts to understand the puerperal woman, that he himself had almost an ‘incapacity to feel anything real’ about Juliet – that anything he could write about the mother’s post-natal emotions would only be fictional.

These hints of self-awareness temper the imaginative invasion, or appropriation of another’s pain, at work in Lawrence’s depiction of Juliet – and there’s often too almost a tacit admission of the narrator’s inability to finally inhabit Juliet’s experience. Juliet feels herself transformed by her sunlight therapy, and notes looking at her body: ‘She was like another person. She *was* another person.’ (24) This leap, from being ‘*like* another person’, to *being* ‘another person’ suggests the analogous leap Lawrence is making as a writer: that he tries to piece together what her experience might be ‘like’, and through analogy almost inhabit the experience of a post-natal woman. It seems that for Juliet transformation becomes absolute:

‘I am another being,’ she said to herself, as she looked at her red-gold breasts and thighs.

The child, too, was another creature, with a peculiar quiet, sun-darkened absorption.

(p.27)

And the story as a whole seems to yearn for transformation, to absolutely inhabit another experience, and to push towards it with its narrative trajectory; the resulting struggle between identities oddly echoes Lawrence’s own struggles for imaginative empathy, his attempts to be ‘another being’.

Whilst previous diagnoses of Juliet in this story have perhaps over-simplified matters, this complex sense of being between selves, a sense bound up with thinking about illness, hopefulness, and the restrictions of the imagination, does begin to come close to describing post-natal depression. There are so many ways in which post-natal depression has been seen to suggest this experience of being poised between different selves. Psychologists Kari Vik and Marit Hafting note that post-natal depression might seem to poise one between responses: ‘Many new mothers describe the perinatal period as a paradox in which they are happy to be mothers and simultaneously unhappy due to the losses in their lives resulting from the new situation’.[[32]](#footnote-32) They suggest as well that it might position one between identities: ‘Much of the loss phenomena concentrated on loss of former identity’.[[33]](#footnote-33) They refer to Paula Nicolson’s work, which argues that women suffering from post-natal depression might find themselves trapped between their own feelings, and a socially prescribed role: ‘The linking of ‘loss’ with successful childbirth also conflicts with everyday understanding of the transition to motherhood – the archetypal ‘happy event’.[[34]](#footnote-34) It’s been suggested, too, that post-natal depression should be understood in terms of ‘life events’, moments when life changes drastically, and breaks into different epochs.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Lawrence’s ‘Sun’, with its constantly divided character, and with its odd sense conveyed through the shifting narrative voice, of being poised between identities, estranged from oneself, does echo such fraught divisions: in this way, it is not surprising that Juliet should have been understood in terms of post-natal depression. But what’s described in ‘Sun’ is importantly also not like post-natal depression at all. Lawrence’s approach to something like post-natal depression is contingent on fragile imaginative leaps, and on an acknowledgment of the limits to his own imaginative capacity. He comes close to exploring postnatal depression through the recognition that he cannot fully know what it would be like to be a woman who had just given birth. Lawrence’s ‘Sun’ depicts something *like* post-natal depression, but only through suggesting the limits of such analogical thinking. Thinking about post-natal depression, then, illuminates Lawrence’s figurative understandings, and the persistence of his exploration of how we might become strange to ourselves, how we might struggle to return to ourselves. Although something like post-natal depression is never explored elsewhere to the extent to which it is suggested in ‘Sun’, this story picks up on an ambivalence about identity, and about resilience, that runs through Lawrence’s work – in Mrs Morel’s torn consciousness in *Sons and Lovers*, in Lydia Brangwen’s struggle with giving birth and with recovery, and in Lawrence’s commitment to exploring moments where lives seem to break in half, into different epochs. Exploring forms of experience inherently inaccessible to him, Lawrence brought into play the ways in which fiction could register degrees of self-estrangement. Ultimately, it’s only through not-quite knowing about post-natal depression, but making such not-knowing central to ‘Sun’, that the story yields more than Lawrence knew, and intimates something that critics have recognised as like post-natal depression. After Juliet sunbathes for the first time she is dazed:

[…] she went home, only half-seeing, sun-blinded and sun-dazed. And her blindness was like a richness to her, and her dim, warm, heavy half-consciousness was like wealth.

(p.22)

Lawrence’s discussion of Juliet in ‘Sun’ is only ‘half-seeing’. It has half its attention on her and half on the parallels she suggests. It has a half-knowledge of what it describes. But this very ‘half-consciousness’, mingled with imaginative invasion, makes for a richness of suggestiveness that means it reaches ahead of itself, to approaching forms of experiences Lawrence could not have known about, so that, partly and only to some extent, its ‘blindness [is] like a richness’.

The simultaneous poverty of knowledge, and rich suggestiveness, at work in Lawrence’s exploration of something like post-natal depression, is perhaps most evident in ‘Sun’ when the story gestures not only to incomplete knowledge, but to the unnarrated, what lies beyond the boundaries of the story. At the beginning of the story Juliet is taken out of New York on ‘a black night’, when the ‘Hudson swayed with heaving darkness’, and Lawrence depicts Juliet looking at the sea:

She leaned on the rail, and looking down thought: This is the sea! It is deeper than one imagines, and fuller of memories.—At that moment the sea seemed to heave like the serpent of chaos, which has lived for ever.

(p.19)

This scene suggests a sense of disconnection. Juliet perceives the sea as if for the first time: ‘This is the sea!’ but her recognition has a hollowness to it, an intimation of being cut off from all around her. The passage brims with symbolic signification: the sea heaving seems likelabour contractions. And the image gestures to the Biblical, with an allusion to Revelation in the ‘serpent of chaos that has lived for ever’. [[36]](#footnote-36) It reaches further than Juliet’s situation. Yet there’s also an expansive vagueness, with the sea ‘fuller of memories’ that are never specified. And this very vagueness echoes the story’s own imaginative limits. Even as Juliet thinks about the depths of the sea she does so in terms that put limits to what it is possible for her to think or imagine: ‘it is deeper than one imagines, and fuller of memories’. Lawrence’s treatment of post-natal depression is deeper than one might imagine; it also intimates the limitations, and the value of, such acts of imagination.

1. D. H. Lawrence to Lady Cynthia Asquith, 10th May 1919, *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. James T. Boulton *et al*, 7 vols (Cambridge 1979-1993), III, pp.358-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. D. H. Lawrence to Henry Savage 18th July 1913, *Letters*, II, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. N. H. Reeve, *Reading Late Lawrence* (Houndmills, Basingstoke 2003), p.73; Izabel F. O. Brandão, ‘Lawrence and the Healing Italian “Sun”: Reweaving Links With the Body’, *Lake Garda: Gateway to D. H. Lawrence’s Voyage to the Sun*, ed. Nick Ceramella (Newcastle upon Tyne 2013) pp 125-140: 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There are differing views on when ‘post-natal depression’ first became an accepted clinical term. Ian Brockington in *Motherhood and Mental Health* (Oxford 1996) dates it to about 1950, pp.168-9. John L. Cox by contrast argued in 1986 that it was only ‘in the last decade [that] the diagnosis of postnatal depression has become of increased concern to community health professionals’: John L. Cox, *Postnatal Depression* (Edinburgh 1986), p.1. The term ‘baby blues’ is used earlier than ‘post-natal depression’ – for instance in Nicholas J. Eastman’s *Expectant Motherhood* (London 1942), p.150. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is unclear why Lawrence did not have children with Frieda, and how far this was a deliberate choice – for discussion see Carol Sklenicka, *D. H. Lawrence and the Child* (Columbia 1991), pp.30-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. D. H. Lawrence, ‘Sun’(1928), *The Woman Who Rode Away and Other Stories*, ed. Dieter Mehl and Christa Jansohn (Cambridge 1995) pp.19-38, p.29. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Judith Ruderman, *D. H. Lawrence and the Devouring Mother: The Search for a Patriarchal Ideal of Leadership* (Durham, N. C. 1984), p.179. Reeve suggests that ‘Juliet displays many of the symptoms which clinical accounts of narcissism frequently describe’, *Reading Late Lawrence*, p.75. F. R. Leavis describes Juliet as the ‘neurotic wife’ who ‘is ordered Mediterranean sun-bathing’: *D. H. Lawrence, Novelist* (London 1955), p.282. David Ellis sees her as ‘a young woman who is nervously exhausted’: *D. H. Lawrence: The Dying Game 1922-1930* (Cambridge 1998), p.283. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Reeve’s careful discussion of the story emphasises more generally that Lawrence’s creative method at the time is to write about one thing in terms of another, and to think in terms of ‘parallels and surrogates’ (p.77). My article will explore what post-natal depression parallels, and explore the ethics of what it means to make post-natal depression a surrogate for other concerns. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Skelenicka in *D. H. Lawrence and the Child*  argues that Lawrence moves between the symbolic and the literal in discussing childhood, being interested both in ‘birth as metaphor’ and in ‘linking the metaphorical cycles of psychic birth and rebirth with actual pregnancies’ (p.58); Cornelia Nixon in *Lawrence’s Leadership Politics and the Turn Against Women* (Berkeley, Calif. 1986) argues that ‘metaphoric birth is clearly more important to Lawrence than actual birth’ (p.100); Fiona Becket explores the ‘productive liminal space between the metaphorical and the literal’ in ‘Being There: Nostalgia and the Masculine Maternal in D. H. Lawrence’, *D. H. Lawrence Review*, 27:2-3 (1997), pp.255-68: 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John Worthen suggests that making Clifford ‘stand for things’ means that ‘[t]he realism and pathos of Clifford as a cripple are ignored almost completely’: *D. H. Lawrence and the Idea of the Novel* (London, 1979), p.178 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, ed. Helen Baron and Carl Baron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.42. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sophie Ratcliffe, *On Sympathy* (Oxford, 2008), p.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. D. H. Lawrence, *Psychoanalysis and the* Unconscious (1921), *Psychoanalysis of the Unconscious and Fantasia of the Unconscious*, ed. Bruce Steele (Cambridge, 2004), p.21. See also D. H. Lawrence, ‘Education of the People’, *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays*, ed. Michael Herbert (Cambridge, 1988), p.124 on the ‘break of the navel-string’. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. D. H. Lawrence, ‘Piano’ (written 1905-7), *The Poems*, ed. Christopher Pollnitz (Cambridge, 2013), p.108, l.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Janet Byrne, *A Genius for Living: A Biography of Frieda Lawrence*  (London 1995), p.53. Byrne does not specify which books Frieda consulted. Frieda would also have been able to draw on the knowledge of her German nurse, Ida Wilhelmy. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. W. E. Fothergill, *Manual of Midwifery For the Use of Students and Practitioners* , 2nd edn (Edinburgh1900), p.492, p.75. This concern about the effect of childbirth on the nervous system is also evident in other texts: Alfred Lewis Galabin’s *A Manual of Midwifery* 2nd edn (London 1891) notes that although the post-natal period can be one of ‘extreme relief and calm’, there may also be ‘signs of nervous exhaustion’, p.265; Fayncourt Barnes’, *A Manual of Midwifery for Midwives*, 3rd edition (London 1886) warns of an ‘excess of nerve-force’ after childbirth, p.150; Edward P. Davis and John M. Keating’s *Mother and Child* (Philadelphia1893) describes ‘nervous exhaustion’, p.63; H. Arthur Allbutt’s *The Wife’s Handbook: How a Woman Should Order Herself During Pregnancy, in the Lying-in Room, and After Delivery* (London1887) mentions the ‘marked perturbation of the nervous system’, p.701. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Davis and Keating, *Mother and Child*, p.63 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Davis and Keating, *Mother and Child*, pp.70-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Reeve notes that ‘The 1928 descriptions of the sun’s effect on Juliet’s body […] take care to emphasise her passive status’: *Reading Late Lawrence*, p.72. Brandão suggests that in the second version Lawrence is ‘pressing his thumb down hard in the scale to favor a certain bending of the story’: ‘Lawrence and the Healing Italian Sun’, p.125. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Leavis, *D. H. Lawrence*, p.284. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Leavis, *D. H. Lawrence*, p.282; Brandão sees this passage as offering essential information on Juliet: ‘here is a woman who had a baby and since then started a cycle of oppression towards her husband. That is what we learn from Maurice […]’, ‘Lawrence and the Healing Italian Sun’, p.129; Reeve suggests that Maurice is ‘mildly condescending’, but nonetheless sees him as doing his best to understand Juliet, *Reading Late Lawrence*, p.74. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. D. H. Lawrence to Frieda Lawrence, 15th May 1912, *Letters*, I, p.403. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. My article, ‘Modernism and the Medicalization of Sunlight: D. H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, and the Sun Cure’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 23:2 (April, 2016): 423-441, explores how ‘Sun’echoes Lawrence’s experiences of heliotherapy. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Reeve, *Reading Late Lawrence*, p.78. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Peter Fifield’s unpublished chapter ‘Sensory Intensity and Illness in D. H. Lawrence’ in his forthcoming monograph *Sick Literature* offers an account of what illness signified to Lawrence across his career. I am grateful to Peter for allowing me to read this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. D. H. Lawrence to Zelia Nuttall 12th April 1925, *Letters*, V, p.236. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Lawrence writes to Else Jaffe on 18th July 1917 that ‘My illnesses I know come from chagrin’, *Letters*, VI, 103; D. H. Lawrence to Giuseppe Orioli 19th July 1927, *Letters*, VI, p.104. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. D. H. Lawrence to Witter Bynner 31 January 1928, *Letters*, VI, p.278. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.147. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow* (1915), ed. Mark Kinkead-Weekes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.63. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. D. H. Lawrence to George Conway, 15th March 1928, *Letters*, VI, p.323. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Kari Vik, Marit Hafting, ‘”Smile through It!” Keeping up the Façade While Suffering from Postnatal Depressive Symptoms and Feelings of Loss: Findings of a Qualitative Study’, *Psychology*, 3 (2012) pp.810-817: 810. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., p.815. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Paula Nicolson, ‘Loss, happiness and postpartum depression: The ultimate paradox’, *Canadian Psychology*, 40 (1999) pp. 162-178: 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For discussion of ‘life events’ and post-natal depression see, for example: Jessica Gibson and Ron Gray, ‘Epidemiology of maternal mental health disorders’, *Perinatal Mental health: A Clinical Guide*, ed. Colin R. Martin ed. (Keswick, Cumbria 2012) pp.1-13, 4; E.S. Paykel, E. M. Emms, J. Fletcher, E. S. Rassaby, ‘Life Events and Social Support in Puerperal Depression’, *British Journal of Psychiatry,* 136:4 (1980): 339-346. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Dieter Mehl and Christa Jansohn note that the ‘serpent of chaos’ alludes to Revelation xx. 1-3: *Woman Who Rode Away*, ed. Mehl and Jansohn, p.387. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)