I Myself Am Hell: A Personal Poetics of Mental Illness With Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell as Corollaries

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Abstract

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Creative Writing

The purpose of this thesis is to define a personal poetics surrounding the topic of mental illness. The thesis, in execution, performs a survey of three poems that are of major import to the author himself. The poems surveyed are as follows: "Lady Lazarus" by Sylvia Plath, "Dream Song 14" by John Berryman, and "Skunk Hour" by Robert Lowell. In particular, poetic strategies such as melodrama, dark humor, and the internalization of observed landscapes are noted as important techniques in constructing a successful "mentally ill" poem. Essentially, it is the intent of the author to outline a mode of poetics in which representations of mental illness are cathartic and empowering as opposed to wholly woeful and bewildering.

I. Introduction:

The connection between mental illness and art has garnered much academic interest across disciplines and also has created a cultural mythos of the tortured genius. Artists such as Van Gogh, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, and Robert Lowell among others have done much to cement a visible relationship between sickness of the mind and astounding creative output. While my experience with life and creativity certainly differs from these artists, I both live with type 2 bipolar disorder and create art and so find myself in the commonwealth of mentally ill artists, if you will. I don't intend to prove that mental illness is a prerequisite for creative genius or that all creative geniuses possess some form of mental illness, but I will, instead, explore the relationship of my malady to the work I produce. I will also discuss the work of Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Roberth Lowell, mentally ill poets of particular inspiration for me.

A cursory discussion of mania and depression seem necessary to include here. I have the great fortune of experiencing acute suffering firsthand; so evidence from personal experience will hopefully suffice in justifying my analysis of particular sources. One such source that I've chosen to engage is Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*; the book explores the effect of mental illness on writers and their work. Kristeva brings her psychoanalytic and critical expertise to the book in a far more competent manner than I could even when writing about my own problems. A seemingly paradoxical sense of catharsis underscores *Black Sun*, and it is this concept of catharsis that I find particularly resonant in my own work.

Early on in the book, Kristeva describes the ungroundedness of the depressive experience; "with those affected by melancholia, primary identification proves to be fragile, insufficient to secure other identification" (Kristeva 14). In the habitation of suicidal ideation, the

afflicted person cannot rely on a God, a faith, an affect, a celebrity, or any other means by which a vox populi finds significance in life. The experience, while spiritually nauseating, feels, to me, like an opening of possibilities rather than a closing of them. For example, "although atheistic, those in despair are mystics[. . .] steadfast devotees of their own inexpressible container" (Kristeva 14). The lack of a ready-made God necessitates that the depressed person build up a will to live piece by piece; the process is monastic, often painful, yet also cathartic.

As it relates to creative output, a wealth of images and metaphors surge from a lack of conventional identifications. For example, it might be the habit of well adjusted, beginning poets to liken love to a rose; the metaphor will read as flat, stale, and mass-market produced. However, a depressed writer will likely find something vastly more interesting to write about due, in part, to a simple lack of popular affect. This is not to say, however, that a lack of affect is never destructive; in fact, depression can cripple investments to such an extent that you find yourself staring blankly at a wall imagining all the various ways to kill yourself. The poetry of this experience only appears in retrospect, following a hard-fought recovery and (for me) medicinal assistance. In the now of such a time, the mind doesn't care how sexy and creatively generative its pain may be in the future, it numbs itself into submission.

II. Sylvia Plath's Rebellious Depression

Even so, there is an undeniable attraction to the work of the mentally ill and even, to some extent, the illness itself. I do admit some pride in my condition because it signals an alternative experience and a perhaps above-average resilience. It is a life set on hard difficulty, if you will, that can give an "uphill both ways" brand of ego inflation. Yet, as far as poetics are concerned, one can only get so much mileage out of suffering and an overcommitment to it can

nosedive into melodramatic territory. Granted melodrama has a kind of draw in its own right. For example, in her poem “Lady Lazarus” Sylvia Plath writes “Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well” earns its high drama through the well-placed line breaks and the shockingly confrontational nature of the admission. To provide “Lady Lazarus” in full:

Lady Lazarus

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it——

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?——

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot——
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

‘A miracle!’
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart——
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there——

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

The poem is incredibly confrontational and immediate in its imagery and emotion. For instance, Plath invokes imagery of the Holocaust to frightening effect when she writes about her "skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade". While Plath has received criticism for using the Holocaust as a source to draw from when writing about her personal life, she at least does so with the knowledge of how horrific it was; and certainly her experience with extreme manic-depression seems horrific in ways to at least clarify why she might employ such language. The Holocaust is often described on the basis of its "unspeakable" horrors, and describing a heavy depression that gives one suicidal thoughts does appear as an "unspeakable" task for the one living with it—one needs metaphors and figurative language, and often such language can lean heavily into negative extremes.

In *Black Sun* Kristeva writes that "dreams of borderline patients, schizoid personalities, or those undergoing psychedelic experiments are often 'abstract paintings' or cascades of sounds" which she signifies as the "dissociation of form" occurring in the minds of those preoccupied with death (Kristeva 27). If read literally, lines in the poem such as "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" do seem like descriptions of an intense spiritual vision or fever dream that is unbound by logic. It is by way of "abstract painting" via metaphor, simile, and imagery that Plath addresses the unspeakable horror of her depression and constant suicide attempts. Only, "Lady Lazarus" is transformative in regards to how it renders suicide attempts as artful and as a kind of disturbed craft which someone can "do exceptionally well". It is this active, bitterly ironic yet sort of humorous attitude that I feel some poetry (especially my own earlier work) of mental illness can lack even if it does keep the melodrama; without such an attitude, these poems can feel like pity parties.

With respect to technique, the rhymed and unrhymed tercets engage formally and sonically in a kind of danse macabre. On one hand the tercets formally play with the speaker's position as both alive and dead along with the liminal nature of being pulled from one pole to the other by virtue of constant suicide attempts. On the other hand, the rhyming tercets have a way of parroting madness and can even feel like reading an ominous nursery rhyme as in the lines "Soon, soon the flesh / The grave cave ate will be / At home on me" while the unrhymed moments underscore a tension between lucidity and insanity, between life and death. Also, the occasionally long lines have a tendency to either dismiss or linger on violent images. Where a longer line such as "Do not think I underestimate your great concern." is dismissive, the longer line "And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls." in this way the poem communicates a great violence and burden implicit in reassuring others while simultaneously finding a morbid fascination with death.

For better or worse though, I feel that only Plath could get away with such high drama and disturbed showiness in part due to the poem's historical context. The time in American culture of Plath's "Lady Lazarus" was one wherein wives and mothers were expected to serve as submissive homemakers; a woman admitting to taking Lithium at a dinner party would constitute a form of social suicide. This is to say that the confessional nature of Plath's speaker and her many attempts at suicide is a potent act of resistance and therefore substantially cathartic to me as the reader. Additionally, the active and even self-congratulating tone of the 15th stanza is paradoxically empowering.

I also believe that Plath's high drama is far more successful for her than myself due both in part to her talent and her gendered form of resistance. It's far too easy as a mentally ill poet to lean on an inactive melodrama levied purely to make the reader sad or to pity me, the speaker.

However, I draw a lot of inspiration from the poetic idea of suicide and illness as revolutionary. I feel that those who are afflicted as I am are far too underestimated as entities to be cured rather than people who can provide the world with sharp, valid, and poignant critiques of society; the rage that comes from this is a powerful motivator. I see irony as an excellent tool to subtly express such rage, and even exhaustion can be active.

III. John Berryman's Ennui

I love how John Berryman achieves a subtly powerful representation of mental illness in "Dream Song 14" with irony as a driving force. He famously writes "Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so" and, later on, "I conclude now I have no / inner resources, because I am heavy bored." I will again include the poem in full:

Dream Song 14

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
we ourselves flash and yearn,
and moreover my mother told me as a boy
(repeatingly) 'Ever to confess you're bored
means you have no

Inner Resources.' I conclude now I have no
inner resources, because I am heavy bored.
Peoples bore me,
literature bores me, especially great literature,
Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes
as bad as achilles,

who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.
And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag
and somehow a dog
has taken itself & its tail considerably away
into mountains or sea or sky, leaving
behind: me, wag.

The poem, of course, is funny and clearly ironic with respect to its bored view of literature and its position as a literary work itself; however, there is a compelling emotional force beneath its jokiness. The mentally ill life is also one of boredom and exhaustion as much as it is one of sharp pains (and even joy); and "Dream Song 14" exudes an existential boredom that deeply resonates with my experience with bipolar disorder. I find this particularly true as it relates to my life as it is on medication; while life is much more tolerable this way, my emotions are noticeably blunted, for better or for worse. But as a reader with this perspective I find Berryman's biting irony cathartic; it reminds me of how enjoyable and liberating it is to admit to students, peers, and mentors that I think a balanced measure of hatred for life is a good thing especially because it is something that I "must not say so."

To draw from Kristeva again, she writes "persons in despair become hyperlucid by nullifying negation. A signifying sequence, necessarily an arbitrary one, will appear to them as heavily, violently arbitrary; they will think it absurd, it will have no meaning" (Kristeva 51). I find this statement perfectly reflected in "Dream Song 14" and admittedly this position of Berryman's speaker in his blank-faced gaze at absurdity is what makes the poem, dare I say, fun. Granted, I'm not grinning along with the speaker even if I suspect him to still pick up that gin he mentions, yet the disaffected nature of depression can for better or for worse make everything seem like a joke in a way that is, to some degree, liberating. I believe that Berryman and myself often operate from this emotional perspective because it can make complaining in witty and artful ways that much easier. Also, simply put, dressing up an extreme bitterness as a joke can feel cathartic—I want the world to know it's guilty and to laugh at it out of spite.

In a more technical sense, Berryman's odd syntax gives one of the poem's greatest pleasures to the reader. The subversion of syntactical expectations, as in the phrase "because I

am heavy bored" animates the otherwise flat tone inherent in a poem about boredom. It is as if the more grammatically correct adverb "heavily" is in itself too cumbersome. And in the use of "heavy" Berryman affirms, in one simple flourish, the boredom's truly staggering weight.

The final line in particular cements the poem in my mind by virtue of its unorthodox syntax and wordplay. The previous line ends on "leaving" and then breaks into "behind" which creates a lagging effect. In film, the technique of having what's visually on screen directly respond to music is called "Mickey Mousing" which I think is an entertaining phrase to apply here in reference to how the form and music of the diction Mickey Mouse "Dream Song 14"'s thematic approach to existential boredom. The line continues operating in this mode as "me" appears behind "behind" in order of appearance; if we assume the position of the speaker, we as readers feel that dragging effect and left-behindness occurring within the line. And while "wag" is, in part, a description of an active motion in a dog's tail; it falls, sonically, with a monosyllabic thud playing into the weight (and powerlessness) of a depressive boredom. On the other hand, "wag", as it's syntactically positioned as an appositive renaming "me", signals the word's definition as a term for a clown, a joker, or even a truant. The self-deprecating doubleness of describing oneself as a wag along with the powerlessness implied in being left behind by a wagging tail creates a potently troubling, sad, and funny effect.

Cartoon mice, unseriousness, and wordplay aside, I do find this poem deeply moving in addition to being quite funny. The, at times, capital "B" Boredom of life seems like a relatively unexplored territory of art; it carries none of the magnificence of a Grecian marble statue nor the gravitas of a Romantic painting and so slips by criminally unnoticed. It feels good to sit with the work of an artist who tells you that his art, and the great works of humanity, can sometimes feel artless, arbitrary, and absurd.

It is very easy to write something akin to “I am suffering. Please be sad now” and veil the sentiment in competent metaphors, but the best mentally ill poets often round out a discussion of suffering with darkly self-aware humor. Something tragically comedic even exists in “Lady Lazarus” i.e. the mentioning of dying as an art that someone can do well. In Berryman’s case, the humor is more conventional, but the tone of ennui is palpable and even sad. In my own work I find myself reaching towards this effect; for example, in my poem “Double-Dosing” I create the faulty syllogism: “Mornings are miserable. / Life is miserable. / Morning is eternal.” The sentiment is grim but hopefully a little funny and self-aware. As a reader I think that this technique helps me further relate to a speaker and therefore more acutely feel their pain in places where it does appear.

IV. A winter-dark New England lives in my head

Even with the mention of Plath and Berryman as notable inspirations, I am more so drawn to the work of Robert Lowell. Lowell’s most lauded collection of poems *Life Studies* was published in 1959 making him a contemporary of both Plath and Berryman (his collection *Day by Day* itself includes an elegy for Berryman); yet his approach to illness attracts me more—also he was the only poet out of the three who didn’t kill himself, so I’d hope to find a stronger creative kinship with him over Plath and Berryman. Lowell’s long poem (which appears in *Life Studies*) “91 Revere St.” provides many autobiographical details. Though Lowell, as is the poetic habit, likely embellished these details, it can be safely claimed that he came from old-money. I mention this because Lowell and I have very different backgrounds; I grew up in poverty and my genealogy cannot be so neatly traced as his, but New England appears significantly in both his work and mine. This may seem like a superficial detail, but New England as a site of poetic inspiration is worthy of an entirely new (and longer) thesis all its own.

As a “closeted” New Englander or more accurately a tourist of New English melancholy, I admit to feeling a twinge of envy for those writers who have suffered there as residents. It is perhaps an unfortunately internalized belief in elitism that ever leads me into an undeserved jealousy. But Astrid Franke in her essay “Revisiting Lowell’s Mental Hospital Poems” describes how McLean, located in Belmont near Boston, is probably America’s most aristocratic and definitely its most literary mental institution, hosting ‘The Mad Poets’ Society’ of Plath, Lowell, and Sexton, as Alex Beam calls them in his recent [as of 2019] book” (Franke 18). Franke’s tone definitely reads as sardonic and rightfully pokes fun at high-brow literature, yet, personally, I struggle with feeling not insane enough to write important poetry. Not only have I never been to McLean, but I have never seen inside the walls of any mental institution of the past or present. This idea of inadequate mental pain also feels central to my work somehow, as in my aforementioned poem “Double-Dosing”; “A winter-dark New England lives / in my head” communicates a preoccupation with the distinguished mental illness of New England.

I also feel that, while considered antique for our current generation, the prosaic language of many old New England poets has a great appeal for me—Lowell’s work is no exception. I feel as if I am there breathing in the dust of her room and looking out a window at a dreary New England landscape when Emily Dickinson writes “Because I could not stop for Death – / He kindly stopped for me” in part due to its voiced up diction. The stuffy feel of the diction among such poets also betokens minds dwelling in houses of the dead.

I would not assert that all my poems are New England poems or that the region feels especially central to everything I do though. Lowell’s poetry is certainly more situated in New England as an actual place with actually long-dead ancestors. And though I mention all of this, I feel like the New England with which I am fascinated is foremostly a personal mental state and

internal aesthetic. I see this region of the US as correlative to mental illness with its colorful Falls and harsh Winters, the "high literature" feel to the environment and its sickly writers, the profusion of corpses encountered so casually across the landscape, and the solemn weight of history, especially a perpetually guilty history. If I may be so indulgent as to include one of my shorter New England poems:

Vermont Pastoral In A Woodcarver's Studio

One day, I'll be old in a New England window;
there will finally be time to think

as if I—with downy & painted eyes—
am at last the wood carving

of the hazel grouse
given to my grandfather's straight gouge.

Roosting in the garage,
I could become the lifeless thing.

I believe that this poem is helpful in exemplifying my conception of New England as an aesthetic and mental state, which will again become relevant later with respect to Lowell's poetry. Foremostly the pastoral poem is one that idealizes a landscape, a genre specifically associated with shepherds and livestock; with this poem I intended to both comply with and ironize a pastoral representation of my "idealized" version of New England. My poem immediately preoccupies itself with a projected old age; I am inclined to cringe at the mention of a young person as having an "old soul", but my bipolar disorder just might give my "exhausted soul" the affect of an old one hence my consistent obsession with aging as it appears throughout my work. To me this older self is very much a New Englander, and I liken him to the wooden

imitation of a living thing; the appearance of my grandfather adds even more oldness to the poem. This New England in my mind is at once desolate and lifeless yet restful; nothing like my struggle with bipolar disorder has made me crave such frozen inaction. The New England I write about is one where old people live, carve furniture and eventually become furniture themselves.

V. Lowell's Poetry

I find that Lowell's poetry in particular addresses mental illness in subtler ways than other poets considered as confessional—Lowell himself was resistant to the "confessional" categorization of his work. Still, I feel a higher degree of kinship to Lowell's confessional mode that (usually) simmers rather than implodes. There are notable (and implosive) exceptions however, as when he writes "my mind's not right" and "I myself am Hell" in perhaps my favorite poem of his "Skunk Hour". These examples I mention are implosive because they remove the reader from the poem's narrative and place the reader's perspective in the sharp and personal mental anguish of the speaker. Yet such moments are benign in comparison to Plath comparing her skin to a "Nazi lampshade" in "Lady Lazarus", which isn't to diminish the terror, power, and immediacy of Plath's images and "confessions"; Plath's is simply a mode of portraying mental illness that I'm not quite as interested in replicating in my work when compared to Lowell.

I do find that the unenthused expression "I myself am Hell" strongly resonates with my own experience; "Skunk Hour" is a poem of loneliness and small observations, and its presence as such situates me directly in that underwater feel of heavy depression. It may prove useful (yet again) to myself and the reader to give "Skunk Hour" in full:

Skunk Hour

Nautilus Island's hermit
heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage;

her sheep still graze above the sea.
Her son's a bishop. Her farmer
is first selectman in our village;
she's in her dotage.

Thirsting for
the hierarchic privacy
of Queen Victoria's century,
she buys up all
the eyesores facing her shore,
and lets them fall.

The season's ill—
we've lost our summer millionaire,
who seemed to leap from an L. L. Bean
catalogue. His nine-knot yawl
was auctioned off to lobstermen.
A red fox stain covers Blue Hill.

And now our fairy
decorator brightens his shop for fall;
his fishnet's filled with orange cork,
orange, his cobbler's bench and awl;
there is no money in his work,
he'd rather marry.

One dark night,
my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;
I watched for love-cars . Lights turned down,
they lay together, hull to hull,
where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . .
My mind's not right.

A car radio bleats,
"Love, O careless Love. . . ." I hear
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
as if my hand were at its throat. . . .
I myself am hell;
nobody's here—

only skunks, that search
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.
They march on their soles up Main Street:
white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire
under the chalk-dry and spar spire
of the Trinitarian Church.

I stand on top
of our back steps and breathe the rich air—
a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail
She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
and will not scare.

Lowell further differentiates himself from other "mad poets" via his mediation between the internal and the external; the crumbling shore properties of the Maine town in "Skunk Hour" are images, fixtures of a setting that mirrors Lowell's mental state and such a technique truly impresses me. For example, I find something about the "hermit heiress" and how "she buys up all / the eyesores facing her shore, / and lets them fall" particularly poignant. As a reader, this line sequence is full of wonderful surprises. Initially "buys up all" seems like an act of a rich person's exorbitant spending for the sake of spending exorbitantly itself; the next line seems to continue in this mode by reinforcing a conception of the poor taste and needless expenses of the wealthy. But then the third line reveals her destructive and isolationist purpose which is to let the eyesores fall. To me this feels like a perfect metaphor for suicidal ideation, a desire to shove away the world and allow things to resolve into their natural order by means of vehement negation or neglect i.e. allowing the eyesores to fall and reveal the shore. While the heiress' purchasing of the eyesores certainly would have a negative effect on the local housing market, I find something profoundly honorable in her refusal of them; like suicide, it is foremostly a selfish act to seek such "heirarchic privacy", but it serves the greater interest of the environment

without the human life that would only propagate the eyeshores which obfuscate the ocean's cold and natural beauty.

The third stanza in particular signals a more explicit blending of the personal and external when Lowell writes "The season's ill— / We've lost our summer millionaire[. . .] His nine-knot yawl / was auctioned off to lobsterman". The illness of the season foregrounds the speaker's own illness; the mention of the dead "summer millionaire" also falls with a heavily ironic thud. The yawl and wealth of the summer millionaire reveal themselves as frivolous in the face of death which is in keeping with the theme of stagnation established foremostly with the "hermit heiress." Again, Kristeva's position that "primary identification proves to be fragile" (Kristeva 14) among the mentally ill insofar as the speaker of "Skunk Hour" does not believe in or see significance in anything, only frivolity and ruin.

Only in the fifth stanza does the speaker mention himself in the first-person by which time the vapidity and ruin of the Maine town has been established. The foregrounding of the heavy boredom/depression/ruin of the town itself subtly invests the reader in the speaker's emotional states. However, in relation to the world of the poem, the speaker seems dispossessed of himself as much as the heiress is dispossessed of the eyesores even if she bought them in the first place—the self seems like an obstacle, or a meaningless means of physical conveyance in a dissociative fugue.

As far as environmental details are concerned, the speaker's Tudor Ford is the climbing entity rather than the speaker thereby removing agency; the mention of the hill's skull which it climbs portrays the scene as a morbid transversal across a corpse. Though, the speaker is noticeably detached from himself as he watches "love-cars" which are themselves described according to the site of "loving" re:cars rather than the lovers within the cars themselves.

Immediately following this description, the speaker mentions that this is happening “where the graveyard shelves on the town”. Instead of portraying the act of sex as connotative of reproduction and new life, sex seems rather like an impersonal multiplication of the dead. And when the speaker admits “My mind’s not right”, it comes as such a neat encapsulation of a depressed mind with respect to the manifold ways in which the mechanism of the mind is faulty. On one hand the un-rightness of mind could refer to a self-disgust prompted by the speaker’s voyeuristic observation. It could refer to a self-conscious lack of arousal upon seeing the love-cars and hearing the bleating radio. Or it could refer to the fact that the graveyard as an image and location unhealthily presides over the vibrance of life as it occurs within the love-cars. Likely, it’s a coalition of all these possible interpretations, and the multiplicity of meaning created by this simple phrase as it appears in a context of oppressive meaninglessness is something I find worthy of emulation.

Lowell is highly invested in places, narratives, and genealogies as means of philosophically interrogating illness, but in the sixth stanza the speaker brings awareness to the body, he explains how “I hear / my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell, / as if my hand were at its throat” yet the speaker is still divested of himself when he portrays his “ill-spirit” as a separate entity which he himself commits violence against. The sixth stanza especially resonates with me in how it shows someone with depression who is detached from a self-destructive self yet is still forced to inhabit the body/location of this conflict. This is why “I myself am hell” rattles around so much in my brain; the narrative, the setting, and circumstances in the world of the poem coalesce into a singular ontological assertion. Paradoxically, details of the external slowly reveal the speaker’s internal state so that when Lowell writes “I myself am Hell” the expression, as

simple and dramatic as it is, it reads as a profoundly logical conclusion even as it catches the reader off-guard.

As opposed to some of Lowell's later poems, such as those in *Day by Day*, "Skunk Hour" doesn't explicitly mention Lowell's time in mental institutions, nor does it directly address suicide (as Lowell does in his poem "Suicide"); yet, in my personal canon, it remains a quintessential poem about mental illness and the one that captivates me most. This certainly relates to how the poem subverts the expectation of a mentally ill poet to rave, rant, or have potent visions of deities, burning tigers, and so on.

One might expect a bipolar person who has experienced mania to have an effusion of poems that directly communicate with God or something, but I've noticed that myself and other writers who were manic at one time or another scarcely write about their delusions. Instead the poems I write and enjoy dwell within that aforementioned morose mundane; for myself this is because depressive episodes are substantially longer than manic ones and because illness makes the moment to moment boredom of life sharper and even more meaningful. Following what was my longest depressive episode in 2021, all I wanted was to reach a consistent neutrality of life instead of spending all my waking hours mentally preoccupied with suicidal ideation. All my ambitions, my desires, my beliefs, and my concerns were stripped down to make a concerted effort of just being alive; the bored speaker of "Skunk Hour" who somewhat offhandedly claims to be, himself, hell is someone I can I easily identify with. The same is true of Berryman's Dream Song speaker who admits "Life, friends, is boring". The feeling is that of so much wanted and so little given.

To circle back to my rather lengthy examination of New England as a concept, I think an attitude of either the joyful mundane or the morose mundane supplement the aesthetic I hold and

write from in my mind. Certain things like carved birds are quaint and enviably lifeless and yet the shelving graveyards can lead an ill-spirit to sob just as well. There is so much available exhaustion there by virtue of inheritance, age, colonial guilt, and unwellness that I find it hard not to imagine orange maple leaves when I start writing something on the page, hard not to think of all the inhabited graves, and hard not to think of a fundamental meaninglessness.

This technique dwells especially within the poems of *Day by Day*; the poems read as weary and they strongly underscore the insufficiency of language as an escape from suffering. In this way, *Day by Day* feels like Lowell's strongest sinew connecting me to Lowell, as much as I adore "Skunk Hour" and am fascinated by *Life Studies*. Poems in this collection address the recovery process point-blank in a way that I would like to do more myself. The difficulty I encounter is the fear of revealing my soul to a critical audience, but, as ever, personal poetic struggles often resolve themselves by reading more.

As an example, "Home" in *Day by Day* is somewhat of a companion piece to the poem "Home After Three Months Away" which appears in *Life Studies*. To mention Astrid Franke's article on Lowell's mental hospital poems again, Franke posits that "'Home' may initially remind experienced Lowell readers of *Life Studies'* 'Home After Three Months Away' only to be alerted to the fact that 'home' is a deictic word that refers less to a place and more to a relation to a place" (Franke 20). I find that this is an apt analysis given that "Home" is not about the more conventional kind of home in the same way that "Home After Three Months Away" is. In the latter (which is the former's predecessor, chronologically), Lowell's actual home is presented with a quietly bemused reverence. For example, the speaker plays with his daughter and comes across as sentimental in tone in his descriptions even though the poem ends with the line "Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small".

"Home" as a poem is instead set in a psychiatric facility and keeps much more in tune with the final line of the poem in *Life Studies*. "Home" drips with an irony that borders on contempt at times; "I am a thorazined fixture / in the immovable square-cushioned chairs / we preoccupy for seconds like migrant birds". These images embed a sense of reluctant resignation to order, uniformity, and conformity within the poem that persists throughout. I'm fascinated by the speaker's presence as a "thorazined fixture" and find myself similarly drawn to this poetic representation of someone who is medicated and bored as expressed through a humorous malaise.

Later on in her essay Franke refers to Freud's idea that humor is an effective mode of staving off the pain of an unwelcome reality (Franke 21); while modern psychology has left Freud behind, so to speak, I do feel that this is evidently true. Living on medication is to ever be in a state of in-between-ness; you don't want to rely on pharmaceuticals because of their tendency to dull your experiences and render you complacent, even to the point of callousness, but you also don't want the volatility of an unmedicated life.

One feels liminal and unsure of themself (consistently lacking in that "primary identification" Kristeva mentions); the best reach towards a greater agency is to ironize the situation—to ask, as Lowell does in "Home", "*Why is it so hard for them to accept / the very state of happiness is wrong?*" Insisting on irony makes me feel a mild empowerment over my condition and over my creative work, and I also think it does much to humanize a person who is suffering through any given hardship. Granted, there are many ways to overcommit to cynicism in manners that are uninteresting to read at best and self-destructive or even hateful at worst; so a sure hand requires a balance between the sincere and the sarcastic.

VI. Conclusion

While establishing an idea of a "poetics of mental illness" may seem like a simple task of identifying and anthologizing notably sad writers who wrote notably sad poems; techniques and approaches to such a broad sense of being are, of course, multifaceted. Ideally, I would like to achieve some sort of mediation between the three poets I presented in this paper. I believe that Lowell in particular maintains the most delicate balance between Plath's madness and Berryman's affectless irreverence in ways that I find inspiring. Even with so much material to read and discover, it is quite difficult to write on, about, and around mental illness in ways that are consistently resonant; it is also difficult, at times, to communicate that a great deal of care, love, confidence, and even happiness exist in the lives of the mentally ill in ways that do not compromise or ignore the value of suffering. As in Julie Kristeva's *Black Sun*, a "melancholic" person is at every turn obsessed with themself and also with the constant insufficiency of language to express the difficulties of living with such a self. Some may see this position as an unenviable one, but I never seem short of struggles to write about.

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