

1

THE HEALING EFFECTS OF WRITING ABOUT PAIN

Literature and Psychoanalysis

Recalling periods of inner turbulence, plummeting into black moods can be a disquieting, if not distressing, experience. The mind, as Milton observed, “is its own place.” But, if biographer Leon Edel is right, pain can also be a powerful catalyst for art: “Within the harmony and beauty of most transcendent art works, I see a particular sadness . . . but it is a sadness that becomes a generating motor, a link in the chain of power that makes the artist persist, even when he has lived an experience, to transform it within his medium.”¹ Writing can perhaps help to transform intense psychological pain into a discursive art form that has significance for others and serves to aid or abet their own emotional trials. In recent years, psychoanalytic pedagogy in writing institutions has furthered the effort to use writing as a means of confronting, as Mark Bracher writes, our “deepest, unconscious desires and gratifications” while cultivating, through self-knowledge, a means of intervening in social problems caused by intolerance and prejudice.²

The authors I discuss in this book have used their writing as a therapeutic outlet, although that may not have been their intention. Out of a sense of personal tragedy or conflict, these writers have sought a literary representation that would help them to comprehend better their histories from a present perspective. They share a belief in the therapeutic use of “voice” as a means of confessing and confronting present feelings of shame, guilt, loss, grief, or anger. And they deploy the narrative strategy of voice to use human suffering in the hopes of better comprehending it. Writing is more than a defense—an asylum or refuge into which one can withdraw—it is also an armor one puts on to do battle. Coming to voice is not as simple as it sounds; and it is not the same as using voice, vocalizing, or even signifying. Voice, in both the psychoanalytic and literary encounter, is not only a means of expressing one’s pain, but it is also a means of repeating painful experiences that cry out for understanding. Freud’s observation, that an individual who cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him or her is obliged to repeat the ordeal as a contemporary event, rather than remembering it as something that belongs exclusively to

the past, helps to explain in part why painful experiences are often dramatized in confessional art.

The struggle to remember in order to alleviate the strain of always having to forget is toilsome for both the patient and the writer. For each, language is often a labor of unburying the buried. Equally as powerful as the desire to deny a traumatic experience is the conviction that the denial does not work. As Judith Herman writes in *Trauma and Recovery*: “Ghosts come back to haunt. Murder will out. Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites for the restoration of social order and the healing of individual victims.”³ Yet, in the protracted effort to unearth what is hidden, we often experience our psychic pain as a cry of protest against what or who violated our sense of safety. An anguished voice remits from a deep and primary source that is not ours, but is, at the same time, indistinguishable from our own. How can that be? How does wood burn without becoming fire? How can the voice within ourselves, the voice of memory or literary evocation, be different and the same as ourselves? Certainly the emphasis on pain and expressing pain connects the writer to the work in important ways. For these writers, particularly, signification is not just about manipulating language into a poetic or discursive form; it is about how we suffer and how we seek not to suffer. It is about mitigating pain that cries out across the years for condolence.

Therefore, when I use the verb *to come to* or *to approach* voice, I am suggesting that already present within a poem or narrative is a language to be embodied by the suffering self. I am also suggesting that giving voice to what is not, or will not be, easily uttered is an arduous and sometimes agonizing process. Speaking the unspeakable, unlocking the door, and opening the box are all modes of self-disclosure and self-acceptance, as well as confession. As Freud knew, confession is not the only rhetorical use of voice in the clinical situation; it is not the only talking cure. There are also the voices of outrage, confusion, accusation, mourning, and forgiveness. These are the emerging voices that make personal and confessional writing a variable and provocative literary form.

Before Freud’s time, Keats was already vigilant about examining his own emotional states and recording them in a prodigious set of journal letters, which include startling axioms, insights, and propositions. Keats apparently understood that writing poetry was a painful mode of literal and rhetorical exchange between what one is and what one wants to be. The signifying self speaks of its desire to be heard or seen by the reader in a particular light. Even the painful aspects of the self must be expressed through the language that formulates an individual into a particular and unique being.

However, what distinguishes confessional writing as a kind of talking cure from other modes of poetic discourse is its insistence on speaking

as a means of clearing away repressed or traumatic material. Suffering is a particular system of discourse; if the word that is embedded in emotional pain can be removed from psychic structure then perhaps pain can be carried around by language and finally unburdened. There is something “unspeakable” about psychological trauma that has found its way, in part, into the symptom of the suffering body. If silence is not liberated to speak it can become its own condemnation. Traumatized people are often caught in the double bind of calling attention to the existence of some secret while simultaneously trying to protect themselves by deflecting attention away from it. What results is an inherent appeal to the reader to listen to the emotional tone of a text and to empathize with a speaker’s painful experience firsthand.

Such an appeal makes specific demands on a reader. Mental events, associations, or reflections emerging from the past or from fantasy must be translated into words and images a reader can apprehend. Texts themselves cannot communicate pain. Readers respond to writers’ pain when they are able to empathize with a narrative’s ethos or character, when they are able to assume that a person is behind the writing. But how does the neutrality of a text and its signifiers take on proportionate suffering to engender responsiveness from a reader who is clearly removed from the writer’s plight? How does the writer communicate to a reader painful or shocking experiences that the reader would ordinarily want to resist or censor because it makes him uncomfortable?

Keats understood that dramatizing the suffering self demanded of the speaking self a certain bifurcation and self-distancing. And this kind of self-distancing could be, in both clinical and creative circumstances, therapeutic and healing. In fact, Keats foreshadowed many future things, but Keats’s project of “Soul-Making” would find its best coordinate in the idea of psychotherapy. Out of deep suffering, a soul is made. In the chapter on Keats, I explore how Keats strategically brings the lost object of the mother back into present awareness so that he can mourn her loss adequately. Continual displacements of suffering and affect into the language of art and therapy eventually empty the hollowness of pain, filling it with something else—the language of surviving, the language of testimony, and critical focus. Not writing can make one an outcast from one’s own sense of location, causing further alienation. In one of her sparest poems, Jane Kenyon reveals the analogue of the mind’s disaffection from itself:

A wasp rises to its papery
nest under the eaves
where it daubs
at the gray shape,
but seems unable
to enter its own house.⁴

Kenyon admired Keats and the way he pursued resolution through the writing of the poem. Indeed, Keats was a confessional writer, just as Wordsworth was. Both Romantic poets made similar claims about the therapeutic uses of poetry as transforming of the self, as a process that could not help but recover and reenact half remembered, half forgotten psychic material. As "Ode to Psyche" shows, Keats used the power of myth and story as means of dramatizing both personal wish and perpetual fulfillment; he used the magical power of the word to "enter his own house." After Keats and Wordsworth, twentieth-century writers continue to use poetry and confessional writing without apology, as both a psychoanalytic tool and powerful creative inducement.

As examples of what is best and most powerfully achieved through confessionalism, I have selected writers who demonstrate an inversion of what some ordinarily think of as the negativity of confessionalism within a dark penumbra of memory's violence. Instead of ending with the inevitability of death or with the internalization of death, which is also the death of speech or protest, these poets end with a reason to speak, agency. They also implicitly challenge the reader to meet the responsibility demanded of him to bear witness. If the community or reader fails to approach the writing with empathy for human frailty, the poem falters in power.

Louise Bogan avowed that self-detachment was necessary to her craft. Still, she understood that the postmodernist poem could not exist outside of the poet's emotional circumference. The poet had to struggle not only with composition, but also with the elements of her own daily life. In *Journey around My Room*, the memoir that includes her struggle with mental illness and hospitalization, Bogan writes:

The poet represses the outright narrative of his life. He absorbs it, along with life itself. The repressed becomes the poem. Actually, I have written down my experience in the closest detail. But the rough and vulgar facts are not there.⁵

Herein may lie the divide between the shared territory of psychoanalysis and literary genesis. The narrative must alter itself for the sake of precision and effect; it changes according to the fluctuations of its sounds and its principal relation to sense. "One cannot fib; it shows. One cannot manipulate [the poem]; it spoils."⁶ The prospect of finding words to express one's deepest, and often most painful, feelings is always threatening. The poet always hesitates for a moment; the way the patient in therapy may hesitate to claim some painful or traumatic experience. According to Bogan, the poet must have an absolute compulsion to bare something so absolute, or else there will be no resolution, no end to the terror. The poem betrays its own silence and is "always the last resort."⁷

The relationship between the literary artist who searches for some intrinsic truth and the psychoanalyst who searches for the same kind of truth has always been a contentious one. Psychoanalytic theory was conceived at the time in which Freud discovered that the power of merely two literary works, *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*, were sufficient for basing his psychiatric theories on. He named the Oedipus complex after the legendary tragic hero.⁸

Freud believed that artists were investigating the same psychic terrain psychoanalysts were and that they were in some ways more forward-reaching in their grasp of human behavior. Although Freud admired artists, he thought their creative natures, which he believed originated in neurosis, compromised their ability to live normal lives. In Freud's judgment, the artist is responsible for creating the art object, but lacks the rationality to properly understand it. Only the psychoanalyst possessed the rational forethought to be able to analyze its meaning. Even so, Freud conceded that creative writers were presaging much of psychoanalytic theory in their exploratory works and that their themes were expressions of conflicts that cut deep into the strata of the collective and individual psyche.

In the 1950s many poets, influenced by Lowell's provocative autobiographical work in prose and poetry, *Life Studies*, deliberately began to introduce psychiatric themes into their works. They sought moments in life that were of pain more than of pleasure and saw such moments as epitomes of the general condition of humanity. But more significantly, these poets turned inward to reflect on their own histories, seeking the origins of their mental afflictions in their memories of being shamed or abused. Writing things out, like talking things out, was an alternative to acting on more symptomatic behavior.

But first the poet or writer must confess. The word *confess* is both a noun and a verb, meaning, (1) to acknowledge or disclose one's guilt; (2) to disclose one's sins in search of absolution; or (3) a place or small stall in which one hears confessions, "a confessional." In fact, the words *confessor* and *confesser* are, by definition, interchangeable for there is a mutual identification between the priest who lifts the burden of the "sins" and the sufferer who expels it through a reciprocal relationship of transference and forgiveness. The confessional poet or writer has acquired the power of articulation to amend or confess the past. But "sin" and suffering also may be accompanied by blame. Where does guilt end and suffering begin? How is the intensification of the memory diluted by a conscious awareness that the past is merely a reflection, not an actuality of the present?

Confessionalism derived much of its power and impetus from psychoanalytic theory, although it was always hoisted on the precept that private pain is not the sole province of the individual; it is more than that; it is symptomatic of a larger society. Assuaging painful symptoms through

talking or writing is the fundamental therapeutic precept behind Freudian psychoanalysis. The “talking cure,” as Bertha Pappenheim (Anna O.) coined the phrase, presumes language’s referential power to represent and dramatize self-identity.⁹ As will be seen, many confessional writers who use the writing process as a form or substitution for therapy were themselves patients in analysis. Both processes, psychoanalytic theory and creative writing, are modes of self-examination and self-description. Both processes involve a painful excavation into the dramatic center of the psyche, the unconscious signs and symbols that construct a person’s libidinal responses to language and experience. As social and political history become increasingly relative to an artist’s subjective response, history becomes more and more an internal process of autobiography.

In September, 1950, Lowell was treated for depression at the Payne Whitney Clinic here he was diagnosed with manic-depression. He began frequent therapy and by the time he left the clinic he had begun to ask his parents about “the first six or seven years” of his life. By 1953, Lowell was reading Freud enthusiastically and wrote in a letter to Elizabeth Hardwick, “I am a slavish convert. . . . I am a walking goldmine.”¹⁰ Steven Axelrod points out that Lowell’s concern with memory and time is always referring us to the Freudian theory that “self-examination can yield insight which in turn can yield self-transformation, and that this self-transformation must begin in the past.”¹¹ Lowell’s concern with his family’s history or past in *Life Studies* points like the compass needle toward the hope that it will expose some deeper insight into inner chaos and anguish that informed the violence and beauty of his vision.

Life Studies marked a decisive break with the formal verse patterns and the lavish rhetoric of the early period that had established Lowell as a leading poet alongside Eliot in the high Modernist mode. Lowell rejected the Modernist ideal of the authorial impersonality in favor of what seemed at the time (1959) to be more private and self-revelatory. Lowell’s existential despair was, therefore, bound up with the anguish of his times, and *Life Studies* is generally understood as an odyssey through the author’s past and madness-ridden present. At the end of “Skunk Hour,” Lowell confronts his own preposterous position as a poet who must scrape the garbage for subject matter now that the modern condition has crept into lethargy and has nothing left but stunned anxiety and fear:

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.¹²

The speaker, in mocking self-parody, looks down from his lofty stance to the scavenger who dives, unheeding, for the remains of an empty cup of sour cream. Romanticism is dead; the external world is no longer responsive to the sympathetic imagination; as Frost had so masterfully articulated in “The Oven Bird,” “what to make / of such a diminished thing?”¹³ The poet has only the contents of his own mind and buries his head like an “ostrich” in the sand. Art is no longer about subjective reflection or inner illumination in an ongoing dialectic between nature and mind. It is not an outward spiraling movement such as Shelley’s west wind or Keats’s nightingale; nor is it a mode of synthesis or repetition of the infinite “I am” in the finite mind. For Lowell’s speaker art is not progressive but regressive, turned inward and encased within itself as a nut within its shrewd shell. Rather than accepting the model of the poet as exquisitely vulnerable and etherealized—a personified transparent eyeball in Emerson’s transcendental vista making, Lowell’s speaker is debased by the skunk he expects to scare. The odious skunk rattles the mind with its impervious submission; a degraded symbol of modern times.

What the poet has to say about these lines (that they provoke both amusement and defiance) casts an even darker shadow over their pessimism.¹⁴ Lowell’s skunks are quixotic and therefore absurd, hence, the ambiguous tone of the lines. They are less affirmative than they are puzzling.

Like Walcott’s and Plath’s, Lowell’s grasp of civilized history is as ineludible as his grasp of his own family history. In the latter, he saw a degenerative strain of mental and physical disease that sullied the family’s health and reputation. Aware of the childhood figure as both available and self-affirming in its continuity, Lowell used the child’s imagination to reconcile himself with his arduous personal past. Indeed, as Wordsworth intuited, when the child’s imagination has been recovered through the adult’s revival of the past,—whether to conceal the harsher aspects of reality or to palliate the threat of derangement and morbidity,—it is beneficial. Childhood memory is auspicious as a “gold mine” because it offers the poet a double consciousness—a capacity for overstepping the limits of time and space to take an implausible yet overwhelmingly satisfying omnipotent position: watching himself watching. The poem as such is always self-contained, even confined within the outer orbit of the mind’s observation of itself, continually projected and refracted by the reality of things.

Literary critics associate the confessionalist movement with Robert Lowell and the appearance of *Life Studies*, which was grafted on Lowell’s puritanical self-examination. Lowell was seeking a way that would bring the reader into his chaotic world and still allow the reader to escape it, as he did, through the various rhetorical strategies he used—including self-derision,

ironic sets of portraiture, and transcendent parody. Seeking to define the confessional movement and its goals, M. L. Rosenthal stated in 1967:

The term “confessional poetry” came naturally to my mind when I reviewed *Life Studies*, and perhaps it came to the mind of others just as naturally. Whoever invented it, it was a term both helpful and too limited, and very possibly the conception of a confessional school has by now done a certain amount of damage.¹⁵

Rosenthal’s emphasis on the way the term came to mind, as “natural,” is revealing. In reviewing *Life Studies*, the critical reader of the 1950s, confronting something so new, must have been left with an impression, even a question, as to why the speaker of the poem is so intent on confiding his most perverse or self-incriminating thoughts and impulses. One is reminded here of Hawthorne’s unforgettable Dimmsdale, excoriating his sins on the scaffold, while scanning his own oration for the signs of civil and moral corruption. Lowell “confesses” what he has not perhaps shared with anyone else, but what he can now reveal to the anonymous reader. This is the way in which a patient in therapy confides in his psychiatrist, intentionally searching, through any disclosure, for the causes and motives behind his guilt, anger, or depression. Lowell, like Berryman after him, wants both to evoke the immediacy of experience through a persona or speaker who is willing to speak extemporaneously, however self-degrading the truth may be, and at the same time, hear those “ravings” of the ostensible madman with the cool detachment of an analyst.

Lowell’s *Life Studies* forces both poet and reader to reveal the “content” of the “self,” or personality, through its own alienation, giving way to private insights about one’s own banal and even shocking experience. Lowell did not avoid realistic aspects of human nature, including cruelty and ugliness. Instead, he affirmed their validity, as human qualifiers, worthy of “study” alongside the more acceptable human emotions of pleasure, delight, and beauty.

Obviously, confession is not “natural” to speech; it is a sustained and resisted effort toward self-realization and self-acceptance. Lowell’s confessionalism inspired a movement of writers who were willing to see what was not easily seen or admitted to. However, as Rosenthal concedes, the word itself, *confessional*, may have carried overcomplicated connotations. Rosenthal had meant it to be descriptive of the character of this kind of idiosyncratic, personal writing. He did not intend it to become definitive about its method or worth. Still, the implied analogy between poetry “confession” and religious confession, as Rosenthal implied, is worth exploring.

What aspect unites confession with contrition, “voice” with dramatic situation? Like the Puritan confessor, the confessional poet has no assistance in the act of confession but bears, as the psychiatric patient does,

self-consciousness alone. Whether he is writing from a Puritan, Catholic, or even an agnostic perspective, Lowell's vision as a patient's is ultimately tragic. His predilection for turbulence, like Plath's and Sexton's, is an indication of the moral ambiguity of a universe from which God and orderliness have already withdrawn.

Following World War II, the otherwise disenfranchised groups in the United States represented by the confessional poets, found "voice" in the context of social liberation. Confessional poets were considered to be antistructural and antielegant, reflecting the alienation many felt as a result of being radically estranged from the leadership to which they were asked to pledge allegiance.¹⁶ In such a climate, more marginalized ethnic groups became "visible." For Lowell, particularly, the dark side of human nature in this period was marked by its banal or thoughtless capacity for evil, particularly prejudicial evil that is arbitrary and sadistic. In "For the Union Dead" the courageous soldiers who fought for a virtuous cause are monuments relegated to "bubbles" in time's "ever steady servility" to the fixed end, which is death, although the cycle of war refuses to end itself. Flux seemed to trouble Lowell, when life is most radically unstable and unconfirmed. Like the banal and quixotic skunks in Lowell's "Skunk Hour," the poet feels existentially bereft. Although there is striving, such striving is absurdly set against the human lovers who become a parody of Keats's lovers signifying mutability on the urn. For Lowell, beauty and truth are not equitable but in contradiction.

Indeed, Lowell wrote a great deal about his conflicts and anxieties surrounding his relationships to loved ones. But what is interesting about Lowell's confessionalism is that the term is almost never applied pejoratively to him, but only to women poets who use poetry as a therapeutic outlet. For example, in the poem, "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage,"¹⁷ Lowell speaks through a soured, termagant wife, who both fears and submits to the man who not only betrays her with prostitutes and alcohol, but also with the "meanness" of his lust. Do we condone Lowell's vision of womanhood as tragic, when his dramatic speaker tells us that "Each night now I tie / ten dollars and his car keys to my thigh" just to keep her husband with her, degrading herself under the weight and representative power of a man she disdains?¹⁸ Her attempt to control him by offering sexual favors is paradoxical and self-defeating, because she confesses to the reader that she feels "gored by the climacteric of his want" as he stalls above her "like an elephant." What if a woman had written that poem, deliberately confiding or confessing her own misery, lust, and loneliness all at once?

If a woman, such as Plath or Sexton, or later Olds or McCarriston, had written this poem, the term *confessional* would most likely connote vulnerability, even weakness, or confusion. The wife is self-destructive; yes,

but is the fault hers or marriage's? Should we or can we judge? If we do not subject Lowell to the same "moral" interrogations about what and why he confesses a woman's desperate servitude to a man she would otherwise despise, we are already saying something in favor of the speechlessness of women. A woman might confess her ambivalence in therapy or in the confession box; a woman would then be confessing her victimization and her powerlessness. But if a man confesses for her, we often respond with pity. We do not blame the persecutor for her pain; we are most likely to assume something else and remain more conflicted about who is actually culpable. Lowell, like Browning before him, is most interested in his own cruelty and is willing to explore it. Plath or Olds is interested in the cruelty done *to* her, and therefore Plath's or Olds's tone is more conflated with feelings of deep deprivations, disappointments, and the need for justice to help her break out of the molded "cast" society has put her in.

Lowell's *Life Studies* is a series of frozen studies in life. Ironically, the child is better able to portray the corrupting ascendancy of the Lowell family in which nothing is valued that is not temporary, illusory, or hypercritical. The child, in fact, sees more than the adult poet can and becomes a better judge of the events he witnesses. Even if the speaker is the mature poet reminiscing, one sees the child's visualization, as in the unforgettable close to "Sailing Home from Rapallo":

In the grandiloquent lettering on Mother's coffin,
Lowell had been misspelled LOVEL.
The corpse
was wrapped like *panetone* in Italian tinfoil.¹⁹

The witnessing child's tainted participation haunts the adult poet. It may be that personal guilt for Lowell is associated with the child's failure to act heroically because to act, rather than to think about acting, is one way of mitigating later guilt and self-retribution for having been passive and uncommitted when the moment was ripe. Lowell's choice to restrain the speaker, rather than to give way to more assertive soliloquy, results in a mute objectivity and a child's stunned horror watching fraudulent characters such as Uncle Devereax destroy themselves. *Life Studies* is a brilliant repertoire of tragic or comic characterizations in a decadent society. The poet himself acts in the role of both confessor and confesser, both patient and analyst, absorbing his own pain in the child speaker and absolving it through the pensive act of verbalizing suffering.

On the other side of the confessional spectrum, Plath's frequently discussed "Daddy" is also a degraded icon in a world that has lost both order and rationality. Another one of the poems collected in *Ariel*, "Mary's Song," seems far removed from the realism of domestic life.²⁰ Yet with all of

its allusionary majesty, this poem suggests that nothing is more universal than the home and family and that a housewife's private experience is the essential foundation for more public structures that tend to confine or minimize women in the household. In religious enactment, Plath attempts to transcend her own circumstances and provide an allegorical or mythic context for human suffering, guilt, and sacrificial hope. Whereas self-victimization and tenuous identification with the exterminated Jews are the ostensible themes of the poem, it is also about the inexorable hardship of mental illness, which Plath struggled with each and every day. The poem begins as an ordinary domestic ritual, which is characteristically punned with double meaning:

The Sunday lamb cracks in its fat.
 The fat
 Sacrifices its opacity . . .

A window, holy gold.
 The fire makes it precious,
 The same fire

Melting the tallow heretics,
 Ousting the Jews. . . .
 Their thick palls float. . .

Gray birds obsess my heart,
 Mouth-ash, ash of eye.
 They settle. On the high

Precipice
 That emptied one man into space
 The ovens glowed like heavens, incandescent.

It is a heart,
 This holocaust I walk in,
 O golden child the world will kill and eat.²¹

In an astonishingly brief number of strokes, Plath is able to resurrect the martyr, who is not only the lamb, Christ, but also more significantly, the mother, Mary. In an ironic, if not strategic subversion of Lowell's practice of using the private to invoke the public and political implications of suffering, Plath immediately invests the mythic with the personal. We suffer individually, and we suffer in imitation of Christ's martyrdom (or "mar[t]yrdom"). The frying of the Sunday lamb is a primitive symbol of the passive slaughter of the purely good and innocent—the soul that escapes the putrid body that, as Plath writes, "cracks in its fat" and "sacrifices its opacity." From the sacrificial and domestic, Plath deepens her vision toward the demonic: "The burning of the sun" is immediately linked with the burning of heretics on the cross and with the "ousting of the Jews."

The sun (or son's) burning is synonymous and simultaneous with the martyrdom of other tortured souls who represent the lamb, the child, and the innocent all merging within one "vaporous cloud" the steam or essence of the body that will not expire. The tortured soul will not die, but only land on the precipice as far as man has ventured into space. The man-made modern "ovens" that cremated the Jews "glowed like heavens," a harsh betrayal and deception on God's part for initially letting loose evil in the world. Civilization has not spared the lamb, but invented a savage evil to destroy it, as a carnivorous fire burns the meat. The speaker is then haunted by the ashes that seem to fly like gray birds unable to pass into paradise, becoming old tokens of the light of belief that was doused and charred within the Jewish souls that were incinerated. Hence, what is left to this woman is a vision of a universe of torrid destruction equitable with her own mental anguish. She confesses to a heart that is equally cruel, suffering and dangerous because it is a heart that torments her. This is the poet's most difficult part of confession: showing her human guilt for the genocide of the innocent, "the golden child" that the world (not she) kills and eats.

From a Christian standpoint, humanity has destroyed its own opportunity for salvation, and the poem suggests that this is already determined by the inevitability of an evil predicated on the vulnerability of the "meek and the mild," the victim, the subjugated. Plath's horror eats at the heart, as the fire consumes its victims. In the final lines, Plath clearly hurls blame at the world for her own suffering. The heart, turned against itself as an agent of blame rather than forgiveness, may itself be cruel and self-destructing as a holocaust. The indeterminacy of where blame ends, where self-pity begins, and where expiation or forgiveness is asked for is the crux of "Mary's Song." Self-pity is not to be confused with self-indulgence here, but is part and parcel with the divided self who both confesses and then forgives and embraces; it too can be seen as a personal process that has its correlative in the outer world.

All poetry, whether confessional, lyric, or narrative, is a mode of self-dramatization or the talking of a self into being. Psychoanalysis and confessional writing are unique in that both practices deliberately and self-consciously involve the surfacing of painful or traumatic memories. In fact, poetry pedagogy has followed the techniques and strategies of psychoanalysis in an effort to locate what is arguably the most powerful locus of the psyche—the unconscious. But there is always resistance to the unbaring of unconscious memories because this is why memories are repressed in the first place. Freud's intuition told him quite early in his career that the conscious mind seeks to deny the unbearable wound that cannot be admitted into consciousness. It splits off into a bodily sign, a physical symptom, a

hemorrhaging, what might be said to be a “scarlet” letter of the text. The poetic text is comparable to various metaphorical substitutions: Gilman’s wallpaper, Browning’s lover’s mask, St. John’s yellow gloves, Plath’s plaster cast—each one the outer wrapping or container of inner psychic space.

Psychoanalysis, like poetry, breaks through this resistance through dramatic language. Freudian analysis, too, encourages a patient to reexperience some portion of the forgotten life, and, at the same time, to retain a present perspective. He must realize that “in spite of everything”, anxiety is often a reflection of a forgotten past. In both cases, the patient, or author, simply by virtue of having to use language, is often split between being a participant and an observer. But once the trauma is reenacted, it must be displaced, dispensed, or put away into a pattern such as language, or put back into the larger pattern of an identity theme. Like the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the patient/poet continually has to look backward to make sense of the entire pattern; therefore she is never where her subjectivity is centered, but always at one remove.

Over the years, I have been writing about poets and writers who have deliberately used psychoanalytic processes to mine the unconscious and disclose certain truths about the psyche. I would predict, as most readers would, that these writers’ accounts of traumatic experiences have also been therapeutic. Victims and survivors of political oppression or domestic abuse exercise their pain through art, confession, or testimony. Because art demands a certain amount of detachment (even if this detachment is subordinated to the exigency of communicating something meaningful in the rendering of qualitative elements), artistic activity perhaps accelerates the therapeutic process. A painter or poet understands that a “disinterestedness” weighs on the principles and determinants of her art. Materials of expression must be molded to achieve a particular effect. This investment in the larger principles of the art, as a product as well as a process enables the writer or artist to step back from the traumatic event before being able to depict it. Indeed, a relief exists concomitant with unburdening one’s self to an/other, even when that process is seemingly outside conscious apprehension. Transferring pain, with the belief that an objective observer, analyst, or reader can shoulder pain, seems very much at the heart of these writings.

Both psychoanalysis and literature are interested in the therapeutic process of bringing disorder into order, the chaos of the inner self into control and coherence. Language is the medium that mirrors the struggle, and the interplay between subjectivity and objectivity. In language and articulation, the introspective writer explores the complex relation of knowing and not knowing, the point in perception in which sometimes, tragically, knowing and not knowing meet. Trauma, unlike anxiety, presupposes that the psychic wounding happened unexpectedly, by surprise, that the threat to

one's existence was so overwhelming that it could not be fully absorbed by consciousness. Therefore actual experience associated with pain enters a liminal realm in which it is both acknowledged and unacknowledged. Like the word itself, the representation, or signification of pain, is always beckoning toward what is inexpressible, except through the body. Some people are compelled to repeat what is most painful, and, yet, what is not remembered.

This conflict between the will to deny what has happened and the will to speak it aloud is the central dialectic of trauma. Victims who speak about trauma often do so in a fragmented, emotionalized discourse, which may seem to undermine their credibility; they may seem contradictorily dispassionate or even numbed. But victims who do *not* speak, who repress the trauma to protect themselves, the perpetrator, or both, may often suffer somatic symptoms in which the verbal narrative is displaced to the suffering of the body. This was the phenomenon that so baffled and compelled early psychoanalysts such as Charcot and Freud to decipher the body's language of pain from the signifying symptom of hysteria in women patients.

Although a patient's or writer's trauma may be forgotten, recurring patterns of behavior suggest that catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them. But why does this happen? Perhaps the pattern is perpetuated because the afflicted psyche does not remember the pain and can only reproduce it as something seemingly disconnected but, as we shall soon see, actually deeply connected with the early event. The cry is always only on the verge of speaking, because it is not the wounding but the reply to shock. Hence trauma is always belated rather than immediate: one feels the shock of pain after the delivery of the blow. It is in that moment, between the impact and the response, that Freud imagines a body is able to defend itself by forgetting, by denying what has come to pass. As Freud writes in his early *Preliminary Communication* with Breuer :

But the causal relation between the determining psychological trauma and the hysterical phenomenon is not of a kind implying that the trauma merely acts like an agent provocateur in releasing the symptom, which leads to an independent existence. We must presume that the psychological trauma—or more precisely the memory of the trauma—acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent still at work. . . .²²

What cannot be remembered will be repeated in various ways through different reissues of associated thoughts, actions, and inclinations. The memory of trauma is something ingrained in the psyche and can be brought to the surface only through abreaction of that trauma in which painful affect is “put into words.”

When regarding trauma, Freud finds the universal in the idiosyncratic, the mythic in the mortal. In his reading of *Gerusalemme Liberata*, which Caruth cites so artfully in *Unclaimed Territory*, Freud explains that the hero, Tancred, unwittingly slays his beloved (who had been disguised in the armor of an enemy knight).²³ After her burial, he finds himself in a strange forest where he slashes his sword at a tree, but blood streams from the cut. Then, the voice of his beloved, her soul imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded her yet again.

Freud calls this “moving” and symbolic. He intuited that Tancred’s trauma repeats itself through the unknowing acts of this survivor and against his very will. The trauma, however horrible, cannot be left behind because consciousness would not allow it. A voice is released through the wound, and this voice witnesses a truth it would rather resist. Hence as both patient and creative writer turn back to memory to hear the unbearable voice of the past, they are compelled to tell the story of what happened. This story can be told only from the perspective of the one who has already survived the wound, but it will have meaning for others. In trauma, the ego is breached; and this piercing of the stimulus barrier is also a sudden separation from relatedness, a frightening and isolating experience.

Critics, literary and psychoanalytic, including Judith Herman, Shoshana Felman, Jeffrey Berman, and Cathy Caruth, have explored the linkages between literary expression and psychoanalytic theory. These critics have demonstrated the therapeutic advantages of giving testimony to personal and often painful experience, and they have not avoided the controversies surrounding private and political testimonies that have found their most powerful expression in literature. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl and Faith Bethelard have offered a new way of thinking about familiar concepts such as love and attachment, showing us how cherishment (*amae*) is really the emotional bedrock of adult relationships, formed in childhood, and without which individuals are susceptible to profound feelings of deprivation, anger, and a lack of relation to others.²⁴

Postmodernism invites us to deconstruct the idea of a unified, emergent self, not so much because the poet’s self is conceived of as a mosaic of fragmented signifiers, but because the subjectivity of the poet is always darting out and into the position of the Other. The writer’s self-description cannot stay impervious to outside influences. A writer, like a patient in psychoanalysis, who is aware of exposing raw material in the form of dreams, associations, or even confessions, knows that whatever she has to say, however upsetting or shocking, is always dependent on a listener’s readiness to hear it.

Too close a knowledge of vulnerability, of human insufficiency, is thought to be ruinous.²⁵ Silence may seem an appropriate response to the “unspeakable,” but when it deliberately censors or prohibits expression, it

can only be detrimental to well being. A text is always its own silence, which is its world, until the spell is broken by the literal sound of the turning page. The writer, like the patient, must speak through the text not only to summon pain, but also to grant it absolution. Writing about suffering is a complex private and social act. For when testimony enters public consciousness, seeking to modify the moral order to which it appeals, it has implicit value. Confessional poets such as Lowell and Plath felt the urgency to record their personal anguish, not to perpetuate self-pity, but to bring pity into human consciousness, eliciting in the reader deep and comprehensive emotions that could be brought about only through human identifications. Writing also assuages grief by giving the writer a reprieve from inexorable suffering in isolation or silence. In his book-length elegy for his wife, Jane Kenyon, American poet and critic Donald Hall recalls his years of matrimony: "Remembered happiness is agony; so is remembered agony."²⁶

Although sadness, characterized by flatness of mood and decreased energy, is a normal response to certain events or crises in life (such as the death of a loved one), depression is unrelenting in its misery; it is an illness. Mania and melancholia have often haunted the artist, subjecting him or her to exhilarating highs and, then, catastrophic depression. In Dürer's *Melancholia*, the angel, in buckling gown, broods under the blazing dark star of Saturn, while a tiny Eros sleeps. Her tools are scattered everywhere in disarray, disuse.²⁷ In melancholy, faith is broken, the spirit dejected. Depression compels us to view a more fleeting reality, nature at its decaying core, the diminishment of energy to alter things. As Jamison reveals in her stunning memoir, depression turns us inward, decelerates us; pleasure is scorched and all but annulled. And yet, self-absorption can work to a patient's benefit, leading him or her to tap into emotional tarn and find access to the unconscious.

A life subject to erratic mood swings is, no doubt, a difficult life. Many acclaimed artists and writers have been diagnosed with manic-depressive illness, or bipolar disorder, a subject literary critics have only recently addressed. They have been reluctant to comment on the significant role mental illness and its various clinical and chemical treatments has played in writers' lives and careers. Jamison, who has written on the biochemical data supporting a causal link between manic-depression and creativity, has described the alternation of dark and light moods as the "dangerous crackling together of black moods and high passions."²⁸

Kenyon's poetry deals starkly and directly with the subject of mental illness, perhaps more directly than any poet after Lowell, Sexton, and Plath. She was widely acclaimed as one of the finest poets writing in the United States. In the years between 1978 and her death from leukemia at forty-seven in 1995, she published four books of poetry including *Otherwise: New and Selected Poems*. Her death is one of greatest tragedies

in American letters, and her central importance to the twentieth canon is undisputed among critics. An avid reader of Keats's, Kenyon saw nature through his tragic vision—although she was realist at heart and did not reach beyond what would in its economy and precision offer itself to the poem. In moments of unmovable despair and anguish, Kenyon grasped for the smallest solaces in life. After great struggle, there are always sacramental moments in her poetry unlike any other poet's, in which mercy is fierce, but bitterness is undone. When silence comes at the end of a Kenyon poem, there is no other sound but the poem still breathing.

In "Having It Out with Melancholy," (an obvious allusion to Keats's "Ode to Melancholy") Kenyon reaches down into the origins of her invisible incubus, Melancholy, who holds her captive in darkness. She has known her torturer since birth: "the anti-urge," the "mutilator of souls," "bile of desolation," the one who crucifies her, and chars her from within like "a piece of burned meat."²⁹ At the same time, she is resigned to the fact that Melancholy has given her added precipitance: a more profound appreciation for a world as savagely divided, and as indeterminate as the mind is, when it is tormented by periods of morbidity and welcome hiatus. When antidepressive medications set in, "stopping the pain abruptly," the poet is astonished by the fact she has forgotten what the hurt was, because she no longer hurts, and pain is not memorable. Stepping out of herself, she is graced with a renewed interest in objects and notes a bird "with its small, swiftly beating heart, singing in the great maples, with its bright, unequivocal eye."³⁰ The bird's eye is not mercurial, but absolute. Unclouded by bias, untouched by tremor of mania, or terror of depression, the bird sings in its strange certitude, an emblem of equanimity. Its redemptive power is in the affirmative, restoring and recreating hope out of an inherent sadness that is suddenly, and inexplicably, made bearable.

In a like manner, Jamison, coming to terms with a suicidal depression, finds a sanctuary from the mental sea, a breakwater wall filtering in just enough light and vitality to balance perilously dark, stagnant periods:

We all build internal sea walls to keep at bay the sadnesses of life and the often overwhelming forces within our minds. . . . One of the most difficult problems is to construct these barriers of such a height and strength that one has a true harbor, a sanctuary away from crippling turmoil and pain, yet low enough, and permeable enough, to let in fresh seawater that will fend off the inevitable inclination towards brackishness.³¹

The belief that art helps to heal the artist and subsequently helps heal others is an ancient one—and in many instances writers and artists have found salvation and sanctuary in writing. Sexton declared, "Poetry led me by the

hand out of madness,” suggesting that pain, if not elided, is a curse, an original sin, but it is also an innocent’s punishment, and therefore worthy of study. Sexton described, however ambivalently, the importance of using pain in her work: “I, myself, alternate between hiding behind my own hands, protecting myself any way possible, and this other this seeing ouching other. I guess I mean that creative people must not avoid the pain they get dealt with. . . . Hurt must be examined like a plague. . . .”³²

Writers who write about states of mind, as well as being, do not avoid their own pain, but seek to signify it for others, as they do for themselves, and survive it. Inspired by saturnine states, these writers cast their shadows over the images of things and form a kind of dark tide. In that “awful rowing towards God,” Sexton speaks as a woman who has had to come to terms with desperate hopelessness and death, even finding a tremendous resource in them: “Depression is boring, I think / and I would do better to make / some soup and light up the cave.”³³