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Part I

“Could It Be Madness, This?”
Affective Difference and the Work of Composition
“What Ceremony of Words Can Patch the Havoc?”:
Composition and Madness

Stephanie Stone Horton

Abstract: In a 15-year longitudinal study little known outside of psychiatry, fully 80 per cent of a writers’ group at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop reported living with, or experiencing an incidence of, an affective disorder – as opposed to 30 per cent of non-writer controls. Springing from this study, this survey breaks ground by examining the persistent linkage of affective disorders (depression and bipolar disorder) and writing creativity, from the Phaedrus to today’s stunning PET and SPECT scans of depressed, manic, and non-affectively disordered brains. The essay also calls for new research alliances between composition studies and neuroscience – research into states such as writer’s block, hypergraphia, and the exuberant pressured speech of mania. The year 2013 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Sylvia Plath’s suicide; her work provides fertile ground for this exploration of affective madness and invention.

Keywords: Affective disorders; creativity; depression; bipolar disorder; writer’s block; hypergraphia; neuroscience; Sylvia Plath

Cutting through

To be a poet is a condition, not a profession.

Robert Greaves

Of all that is written I love only what a man has written with his blood.

Nietzsche

First day of a graduate class, and we must create a metaphor for our own writing. A free write-and-share, a little harmless fun.


“What on earth – you can’t write that!” it whispers.

The room is quiet, save for scribbling. My knot-heart turns to stone. Now that I think of it, this metaphor is bizarre; I have no idea where it is trying to go. I try to think of another, but this unwanted child of the mind crowds out all others. The chorus weighs in again, oracular:

This metaphor has nothing to do with writing! It’s gratuitous. These people are going to think you’re a freak.

The minutes tick by. I cast a furtive glance at the writer on my left (“For me, writing is like cooking”) and the notebook on my right (“For me, writing is like gardening”). Both knowledgeable, ethos appropriate to audience. My throat closes. Once again, I try – hard – to commit even a single word to paper, to capture sky and wind and horror. Now the chorus gets personal:

You just want attention, don’t you? You’re pathologically morbid. You’re already an outsider here; this little trick will cement it.

Out of time and ideas, I force metaphor to paper:

For me, writing is like opening a vein. Mind you, I’ve never actually opened a vein. But that’s how it feels when I try to write. I’m not a cutter, but I know they find relief in the cutting through of things, in the warm living flow.

When I was 19, I saw a girl die in a motorcycle accident. A station wagon ran a stop sign and broadsided the bike and its two riders, who flew over the car like rag dolls. One tried to get up despite an ankle snapped 90 degrees. The other landed on her head, and was utterly still.

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A passing nurse began CPR. A halo of dark red blood fanned on the pavement around the girl’s helmet. I couldn’t help her, but I couldn’t leave her, either. The frantic lifesavers began to sound far away.

That’s when I noticed it, from a place beside myself. Her blood was clotting, there on the street. All of it. Hundreds of little clumps forming on the smooth gray pavement. The girl was dead, but the blood language was alive – a consciousness of its own, a last beautiful grasping at life.

I don’t like to bleed. That’s why it’s hard for me to write. I want to stay whole and safe and keep my words in. Once spilled, my words take on a life of their own.

I read first, and for a long moment, there was silence. “Well”, said the gardener. “I hate to follow that.”

My writing was not rejected – far from it. The blessing of strangers allows me to exhale. Yet physiologically, I remain poised for imminent conflict, adrenals surging with cortisol, stone heart pounding. I feel devastated. Listening to the other students read, I slowly begin to calm, and realize I had cut through to something vital. This long-ago scene helped me understand the pain behind my writing – the lifeblood, the broken body, the communion with audience, the cutting through that is the job of every writer.

Much of the time, however, I can’t cut through.

On writing and depression

[We] must understand [madness] not as reason diseased, or as reason lost or alienated, but quite simply as reason dazzled.

Foucault, Madness and Civilization (108)

I owe a supreme, metaphysical lucidity to my depression…. Sometimes, I have the arrogant feeling of being witness to the meaninglessness of Being…. My pain is the hidden side of my philosophy, its mute sister.

Julia Kristeva, Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia (4)

This chapter, the one you’re reading, is way past deadline – a casual deadline, but a deadline still. My mentor, a scholar of great energy and wit, a veritable publishing machine – is through with me. Friends claim that no evidence exists for this, but I know it at the deepest levels. My amygdalae – deep-brain, almond-shaped structures, the diminutive portrait artists of the human brain, our readers of human faces – have registered a furrow in her brow, instantly obliterating a thousand smiles.
“What Ceremony of Words Can Patch the Havoc?”

With a predictability verging on the comic, my ornate and lengthy Scroll of Professional Failures unfurls – but not before I manage one moment of clarity: These despairing thoughts, these visions of failure, these distortions of memory, are madness – the depressive phase of manic–depression.

I live and write with manic–depression (I prefer this older, more descriptive term, rather than the vague “bipolar”). Yet I am a walking binary, deconstructed daily by this disease of perception. Manic–depression occurs in roughly 2.6 per cent of the American population. Nine per cent of American adults experience major unipolar depression in a given year, and half of those meet criteria for severe depression (CDC 2013). According to the World Health Organization, depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide, affecting 350 million people (WHO 2012). Ten per cent of American undergraduates seek treatment for it during any given year and seven per cent take antidepressants (ACHA 2012). It is naive to think affective difference has nothing to do with writing. Yet until very recently, the phenomenon has received only spotty attention from rhetoric and composition studies.

Long-term studies show that the affective disorders (depression and manic–depressive illness) are far overrepresented in writers. One compilation, “Suicide Rates in Writers and Artists” (Jamison 1989), yields startling data:

- Expected rate of suicide in the general population: less than one per cent.
- Expected rate of suicide, all writers: seven per cent (Andreasen 1987)
- Rate of suicide in poets: 18 per cent (Ludwig 1992, working from 30 years of biographical studies from 1000 eminent individuals, including poets). Poets had highest rate of depression of all professions. (Jamison 89)

The suicide rate for female poets is highest of all; one psychiatric researcher has dubbed this “the Sylvia Plath effect” (Kaufman 37). Theories and etiologies of depressive disorder abound, but one study suggests that depressed women may be more likely to use rumination – a profoundly isolating activity – as a form of emotional regulation (272). I am a writer who ruminates. I mull over and over my mentor’s brow; actual discourse with her is, as Robert Lowell described manic–depression, “seeing too much and feeling it/with one skin layer missing” (Goodwin and Jamison 341). In my pain, I’ve often wondered: Why do these disorders exist? Why haven’t they cycled out of the gene pool? And why do they carry strong links to artistic endeavor? Jonah Lehrer,
Stephanie Stone Horton

writing in *The New York Times*, suggests that the Pleistocene hunter-gatherer didn't have much time for self-loathing; he or she probably didn't undergo paroxysms of shame over a dumb comment in a faculty meeting. Lehrer theorizes that rumination seems to be intertwined with an obsessive cognitive style that may facilitate the production of art. Inch by inch, it extends a taproot, a deeper vision.

Depression and bipolar illness are among the most painful of human maladies, saboteurs of the delicate machinery of sleep, emotion, cognition, and perception. The semantic shift from “melancholy” to “depression” wove its way into collective discourse around 1912, the brainchild of Johns Hopkins psychiatrist Louis Meyer, the same fellow who gave us “mental hygiene”. Meyer invented “depression” to supplant the rich, millennia-old melancholy – the melan (black) chole (bile) of Hippocrates, Arteus, and Galen. In the bloodless language of psychiatry, depression involves, among other things, a dysregulation of the limbic/hypothalamic/pituitary axis; it is a neurochemical symphony far out of tune. The novelist William Styron, in *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*, decried the gross linguistic inadequacy of the word “depression” (47). What Styron described was agony beyond agony, of “slowed-down responses, near paralysis, psychic energy throttled back to zero” (47). Styron describes suicidal depression as “a fiercely overheated room with no exits...the rational mind begins to seek oblivion” (47).

Melancholy has compelled as far back as Aristotle, who famously asked:

> Why is it that all men who are outstanding in philosophy, poetry or the arts are melancholic? The same is true of Ajax and Bellerophontes...and many other heroes suffered in the same way as these. In later times also there have been Empedocles, Plato, Socrates and many other well-known men. The same is true of most of those who have handled poetry. (*Problemata*)

Writers (Byron 1853) have been drawn to the associative fluidity and creative zeal associated with some states of hypomania and mania; presumably, they do not bargain for the murky, death-obsessed, neurological hell of severe depression, that dark anarchy of the psyche, in which a writer's “breath is agitation, and their lives/A storm whereon they ride” (136).

In a longitudinal study spanning 15 years, psychiatric researcher Nancy Andreasen followed 30 writers at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, publishing data in *The American Journal of Psychiatry* (1987). Andreasen had hypothesized a link between schizophrenia and creative writing, but...
15 years of data revealed not a single case of schizophrenia among the writers. What did capture the researchers’ attention: 80 per cent of the Iowa writers reported living with, or a lifetime incidence of, an affective disorder (mainly bipolar illness), while affective disorders were indicated in only 30 per cent of controls (non-writers matched for age, sex, and educational level, hailing from careers like insurance and banking). Even the first-degree relatives of the Iowa writers were, in Andreasen’s words, “riddled with creativity and mental illness”, with these traits only “randomly scattered” among relatives of controls (1292). Two of the Iowa writers committed suicide during the term of study; statistics show that nearly one in five persons with bipolar disorder will end life in suicide, so painful is the malady (Jamison 41). Throughout the 15-year study (Andreasen and Glick 1988), the Iowa writers “consistently reported they were unable to write during periods of depression”; they also described writing produced in mania as “disjointed and often of poor quality” (212). Severe depression and mania – intensely painful and debilitating – do not lend themselves to writing; mild depression and hypomania (mild mania) seem to hold the key. For the Iowa writers, affective disorders are both “a hereditary taint, and a hereditary gift” (Andreasen 1282).

Increasingly, neuroscience research is focusing on language and writing:

1. Depressed subjects showed “clear deficits” in memory, global verbal learning ability, recall of positive memories, ideational flexibility, and the ability to recall the “gist” of a story (Turnera et al. 2012).
2. Original, creative responses to a word-association test increase threefold in mania, whereas the number of predictable responses falls by a third (Pons et al.).
3. Depression increases rumination, memory of negative stimuli, cognitive distortions, cognitive biases, inferior memory strategies, attention deficits, and decreases in executive functioning (Moffit et al. 1994, Thomas et al. 2007, Murrough et al. 2011). The writing of depressed eminent writers contains “significantly more cognitive distortions” than the writing of eminent non-depressed writers (Thomas et al. 2007).
4. Depression increases use of the first person, intransitive verbs, and passive voice (Stirman and Pennebaker 2001).
5. Bipolar writers refer to death more often, and to other people less often, than depressed and control writers (Forgeard 2008).
Engaging with rhetorics of neuroscience would open new discourse into writing. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, writing in disability studies, calls disabled bodies “extraordinary bodies”. I propose we think in terms of “extraordinary brains”, extraordinary in part because of pathology. James Kaufman found that writers who had reached a pinnacle of achievement, such as the Pulitzer or Nobel Prize, were more likely to suffer from mental illness than other writers (2001).

Academics rarely “come out” with an affective disorder. Katie Rose Guest Pryal has identified rhetorical strategies employed by mood memoirs (for instance, Lauren Slater’s *Prozac Diary*); these restorative strategies include “laying claim”, or listing famous or accomplished people with the disorder. The impulse is understandable: We lose rhetorical agency when we identify as mentally ill; our ethos incurs damage from which it will never fully recover. For Emily Martin, the performative act of diagnosis creates a circular trap; we are forever assigned to “the subject position of the irrational” (128). I compare disclosure to the purchase of a new Jaguar; the moment it rolls off the lot, its value decreases by half, with the promise of much maintenance ahead. Yet, a metastudy conducted at the Tufts University School of Medicine examined 81 studies and articles on people with bipolar disorder, and identified 5 positive psychological traits, including spirituality, empathy, creativity, realism, and resilience (Galvez et al.).

In the two and a half millennia since the *Phaedrus*, the *locus classicus* of madness and the writer’s art, the “mad writer” has become nomos, alternately romanticized and stigmatized, a rich vein waiting to be unearthed by scholars of rhetoric, composition, and literature. Of course, any inquiry into intersections of madness and art raises scores of questions, of methodology, historiography, ethics, psychiatry, psychopharmacology, criticism, and the enduring question: Who or what defines mental illness, and how? Composition scholars have long overlooked potential conversations between composition studies and rhetorics of psychiatry and mental illness. Typically, it is “pathologizing” to suggest that the act of writing involves both a body and a brain; only in “the affective turn” of the last 20 years, through the work of feminist critics like Laura Micciche, have affect and reason even been recognized as a double helix rather than a binary, with two millennia of the privileging of reason. To ignore emotion is to ignore half of ourselves. In Micciche’s work, emotions are “the heart of rhetoric”; they are “what makes meanings stick” (7). Our affective lives are dynamically rhetorical; the brain’s
affective networks drive “the continual repositioning of ourselves in the face of ever-changing situations” (3). Yet for Richard Vatz, writing in the Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition, psychiatry is “one of the least examined and most effective rhetorical systems in existence” (Enos 615). In criticism, the interrogation of pathological processes of mental illness is considered essentialist, mechanistic, and reductive. Indeed, it has become “positivist and naive and to acknowledge affective difference at all” (Kantor 31).

In the next century, neuroscience promises to do for psychology what chemistry did for alchemy, challenging dominant scripts. At the least, neuroscience will compliment, interrogate, dislodge, or echo existing critical modes; the affective disorders will serve as sites of inquiry into language and the composing brain.

What happens, neurologically, when writers write, and what happens when writing breaks down? My purpose is twofold:

1 To encourage new research into affective illness in composition studies. First of all, by “neuroscience”, I do not mean the explication of poems via fMRI, or the reduction of art to neat pathological categories. Empiricism and positivism are not synonymous. Jack and Applebaum, in “This Is Your Brain on Rhetoric”, suggest a new “neurorhetorics”: an examination of the neuroscience of rhetoric and the rhetoric of neuroscience.

2 To explore critical spaces beyond the psychiatry versus anti-psychiatry debate. We study all manner of difference: race, gender, class. Why not affective difference?

Manic–depressive illness is among the most painful of human maladies, capable of producing anguish beyond anguish. Affective illness was described by Hippocrates, demonized in the Middle Ages, idealized in the Renaissance, and medicalized since the Enlightenment (Solomon 295). Since antiquity, those who live with affective disorders have been alternately demonized and romanticized. In The Republic, Plato claimed that “no mad or senseless person can be a friend of God” (Book II). Yet in Phaedrus, his Socrates upholds the necessity of divinely inspired madness:

Madness comes from God, whereas sober sense is merely human.... If a man comes to the door of poetry untouched by madness, believing that technique alone will make him a good poet, he and his sane companions never reach perfection, but are eclipsed by the performances of the madman.
Unfortunately, Socrates does not reveal how to differentiate between “inspired” madness and “merely human” mental illness. In general, the Platonic tradition upholds sōphrosýnē, or healthy-mindedness – the neat logic of Aristotle’s golden mean. But madness tends to unravel neat packages. When manic, Virginia Woolf could talk for three days straight, whether or not in the presence of an audience; her action was not appetitive, a violation of moderation. Woolf suffered from a mental illness. The Platonic concept of appetite-as-archenemy would be used for two millennia to blame the mentally ill for their suffering.

For Kimberly Emmons, depression itself is a rhetorical phenomenon, a “dynamic entity at the intersection of physical, cognitive and emotional realities” (1). As such, it is “particularly vulnerable to the means of its own articulation” (1). For Emmons, the affective disorders are ideal for rhetorical analysis; because they lack a physiological diagnostic test, the disorders “become visible, or remain invisible, through the language used to describe them” (1). Emmons applies Susan Sontag’s theory to observe that mental illness, like tuberculosis, is ascribed to irrational, personality-based theories, often on the part of the “rational”.

In my own times of depressive madness, the mute void of writer’s block – a black wordlessness – descends quietly, like a mantle of lead. In this state, I could more easily climb K2 than generate an essay. Fragments of ideas, a word here or there, a disconnected sentence – I ruminate on each endlessly, erasing Penelope-like every word I manage to commit. These erasures are a matter of survival; the world is a hostile audience, and each word carries potential for vast ridicule.

As far as I know, no one has ever ridiculed my work. But there is always a first time.

**Writer’s block: derailed, disengaged, disembodied**

I sit down religiously every morning. In the course of a working day of eight hours, I write three sentences, which I erase before leaving the table in despair.

Joseph Conrad

A great ox stands on my tongue.

Aeschylus

Psychoanalyst Edmond Bergler coined “writer’s block” in the 1950s with “The Writer and Psychoanalysis”, in which he called “creative” writing
“What Ceremony of Words Can Patch the Havoc?”

“an expression of unconscious defenses against masochistic conflicts; writer’s block [is] the result of the breakdown of these defenses” (Rose 13). Bergler questioned the efficacy of then-current phallic and anal phase analysis in working with “inhibited writers” (13). Since Bergler, however, writer’s block has been largely excluded from the mainstream of critical discourse, a “shadowy pseudo-phenomenon” (Kantor 4). Keith Hjortshoj finds remarkable “the peculiar silence surrounding a malady that has such devastating effects on the lives of serious, capable writers” (9).

For blocked writers, the writing process is infused with anxiety, frustration, shame, and/or anger. Secrecy, missed deadlines, and binge writing are common. Some compose excruciatingly slowly, or produce only “false starts, repetitions, blind alleys, or disconnected fragments of discourse” (Rose 3). Severely affected writers speak the language of depression; they are “immobilized, motionless, stranded, mired, derailed, disengaged, disembodied, paralyzed and numb” (Hjortshoj 9). Despite the pathos of these descriptors, cognitivists like Rose and Zachary Leader view the phenomenon as mainly cognitive in etiology, the result of premature sentence-level editing, in which writers stymie themselves with rigid rules like “Never end a sentence with a preposition.” In this view, any affective turbulence is the effect of the writer’s difficulties with writing – not the cause.

To use the cognitivists’ definition, “writer’s block” occurs “when a writer is unable to write when writing is wanted, and the writer has something to say”, or is “unable to begin writing, or continue writing, for reasons other than a lack of basic skill or commitment” (Rose 3). Martin Kantor, author of the psychiatric manual on writer’s block, calls block “a severe and global composing process dysfunction” often linked to depression and manic–depressive illness (2). Writer’s block is not procrastination, although blocked writers almost always commit this painful form of self-abuse. Nor are blocks “writing delays” – when writers stop just to think, strategize, or negotiate the slipperiness of language. The classic manifestations of writer’s block mimic those of depression, including escalating self-criticism and decreased enjoyment of the writing task (Kantor 117). For me, memory – not to mention working memory – simply goes away. The chorus weighs in, with its notes of fear (This time, they’ll see that I don’t know what I’m doing) and shame (Narcissist!). In the silence of the blank page, the blocked writer finds a twisted form of solace; for Mallarmé, le vide papier, que sa blancheur defend.
Neuroscience promises exploration into what happens when we write, and when writing breaks down. In a 2005 study, Alice Flaherty examined frontal and temporal lobe changes that “may result in decreased idea generation” – perhaps the “sparse speech and cognitive inflexibility” of depression (what Kantor called its “miasmic silence”), a state that “drains away meaning” (121). In a 2010 study, Johns Hopkins researcher Alan Braun, a jazz musician, observed musical composition and improvisation using fMRI technology. Braun’s study suggests that the metabolic processes of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, an area of the front of the brain, actually slowed down during improvisation: “This area is linked to self-censoring, such as carefully deciding what words you might say on a job interview. Shutting down this area could lower inhibitions…. When you’re telling your own musical story, you’re shutting down impulses that might impede the flow of novel ideas.”

Some writers are more adept at this than others. In Kantor’s clinical experience, writing blocks “are unknown in the grandiose, the artist who truly believes that everyone is waiting for them to produce, who has the attitude of ‘If they don’t like what I do, that’s too bad – not for me, but for them!’” (26). This enviable attitude is not available to all. Kantor describes one depressed academic who:

hesitated to write and publish because she felt both she and her works were not up to standard. Her “little voices” told her “You don’t have what it takes to make it in the big city,” [and] “That’s too quirky to be appealing.” Consequently, she wrote bland, washed-out impersonal works to avoid revealing herself…. Her tight, desiccated works displeased her critics, who condemned her writing as “cold,” full of what one critic termed “unemotional outbursts.” (83)

This writer is a long way from “Never end a sentence with a preposition.”

To their credit, Rose and Leader are among the very few writers on this subject in 30 years of composition studies. A cognitivist theory, however, largely excludes “psychological problems” – an action profound in its dismissiveness, its New Critical horror of the personal, the closing off worlds of experience. In this view, the writer’s task is simply to “replace dysfunctional rules with functional rules” (Rose 16). Yet the agony of Conrad’s – and my – blocked writing (three lines in eight hours, then erase) suggests something deeper. Melville, Woolf, Hemingway, Ralph Ellison, and David Foster Wallace knew the torments of block. Dickens, in a pique while composing Little Dorrit, found himself:
Prowling about the rooms, sitting down, getting up, stirring the fire, looking out of [the] window, tearing my hair, sitting down to write, writing nothing, writing something and tearing it up, going out, coming in, a Monster to my family, a dread Phenomenon to myself. (“Letter” 1856)

The blocked Henry James’ vicious volleys of self-contempt also seem to be drawn from deep emotional wells: “I have [an] unspeakable reaction against my smallness of production; my wretched habits of work, or un-work... my perpetual failure to focus my attention, to look things in the face, to invent, to produce, in a word” (45).

Alice Brand has asserted that “no cognitive model, even a social/cognitive model, is adequate” to describe writing, an infinitely complex orchestration of language, cognition, emotion, and memory. This is not to say the cognitivist approach should be replaced by an emotivist one; rather, a blended approach is needed. In neuroscience, *emotions* are defined as “organized brain responses to events in the outer world; [they] are absolutely critical to decision-making” (Wang). The writer’s brain is the sky where near-infinite events collide; the ensuing weather systems warrant meteorological research.

**On writing and mania**

Flowers are restful to look at. They have neither emotions nor conflicts.

Freud

Little poppies, little hell flames/Do you do no harm?/It exhausts me to watch you.

Sylvia Plath, “Poppies in July” (203, ll. 1–2)

For those of us who live with manic–depressive illness, mania turns up the gain, intensifying perception – particularly of color and light. Van Gogh called mania “a terrible lucidity”; Robert Lowell deemed it “a magical orange grove in a nightmare”. Today, PET and SPECT scans of manic brain metabolism glow like storms (in scan color schemas, manic brains literally glow brighter than depressed brains; storms of red, orange, and yellow contrast to depression’s blues and greens). Andreasen, in a second study at Iowa, compared non-affected writers to non-writers hospitalized for hypomania, suggesting “The neurological state of hypomania [mild mania] mimics the state of creative activity in non-affected writers” (Andreasen and Powers 282). Yet depression and mania are not the roots of poetry; it would be overreaching to...
make such a claim. Among Andreasen’s manic non-writers, writing “is facilitated because of the rapid flow of ideas in mania, and the falling of inhibitions; yet [art] is produced only in very mild cases and when the patient is otherwise talented” (Goodwin and Jamison 33). The following poem, “God Is an Herbivore”, was written “without pause, in a few minutes” by a hypomanic non-poet in a psychiatric facility (Goodwin and Jamison 26). Kay Jamison sees in the poem “the infectious cadence, tangential and loose language, frequent punning, fast, flowing rhythm, and recurrent sexual references” characteristic of hypomania:

Thyme passes, mixed with long grasses of the field.
Rosemary weeps into meadow sweeps.
While curry is favored by the sun in its heaven...
Hash is itself: high by being.
Laws say shallots shall not – so they shant.
But the coriander meanders, the cumin seeds come.... (26)

The neurochemical cascade of mania can result in accelerated, pressured cognition (DSM-V). John Ruskin described the “flood of ideas” of manic euphoria: “I am giddy with the quantity of things in my head – trains of thought beginning and branching to infinity, crossing each other, and all tempting and wanting to be worked out” (xiv).

Such perception, such extremes of mood, cannot help but color invention. Plath’s colors, her painterly vision – ut pictura poesis – was, for Adam Kirsch, “so heightened that the ordinary becomes strange”; of course, this is a definition of poetry itself (241). Emily Dickinson’s nature poems spoke with this shimmering, almost vibratory intensity; Van Gogh saw wheeling, painfully intense stars (Kirsch 153).

In mania and hypomania, energies ascend, and inhibitions drop. Early studies, like those of Emil Kraepelin, suggested that rhymes, punning, sound association, and original responses to word association tasks increase during mania; newer studies also suggest enhanced rhyming ability and “expressional fluency” – “the creative juxtaposition of words, phrases and sentences” (Andreasen and Powers 72). Patients in an affective disorders clinic performed more fluently than controls on word association tasks (Pons et al.). Mania also brings “combinatory thinking”, wherein ideas become rapid and flexible, “extravagantly combined and elaborated” (Andreasen and Powers 397). One friend described Woolf’s manic spinning of tales as “dazzling performances”, “wild generalizations...embroidered with elaborate fantasy, sent up like rockets...one would hand her a bit of information as dull as a lump of lead, [and] she
would hand it back glittering like diamonds” (Caramagno 49). Alice Flaherty, a writer and neurologist, writes of her own experience with hypergraphia, a rare manic compulsion to write day and night, even taking a grease pencil into the shower (30).

Robert Lowell responded to lithium, which ended his hospitalizations and enabled him to write. Not all bipolar writers are so fortunate. Some claim medication blunts invention; this alone carries rich potential for composition studies. In a 1986 study in The American Journal of Psychiatry, researchers discontinued lithium in 22 people taking the drug for bipolar disorder, and the participants showed an increase in associational productivity and verbal fluidity (Shaw et al. 1986). Restoring the lithium “significantly reversed” these effects (1166). Some writers are simply unwilling to give up the highs; to complicate a writer’s dilemma, a “creativity mystique” exists, in which artists are urged to refuse medication for the sake of art (Pryal 5). Peter Kramer writes on “heroic melancholy”, in which depression’s “tortures somehow ennoble, and are the source of creativity” (37).

Whether or not Whitman had the manic–depressive gene, he captured its moments of what the Greeks called ekstasis, a Charlie Sheenian invincibility: “O the joy of my spirit – it is uncaged – it darts like lightning! It is not enough to have this globe or a certain time/I will have thousands of globes, and all the time!” (“Poem of Joys” 192). One student contrasted her writing during manic and depressed states: “When I’m hypomanic, I can write a paper in two hours – you know, proving the existence of God using string theory. But I can’t proofread it. That would mean sitting still for two extra minutes. Now when I’m depressed, I proofread very well – but it takes me six hours” (“Julie”).

In a metastudy of manic–depressive illness across professions, “more poets than any other group regarded intense moods as integral and necessary to what they did and how they did it” (Goodwin and Jamison 335). Half of bipolar writers reported euphoric states prior to intense bursts of creative activity. For a third, however, dysphoria also heralds the creative burst (392).

**Sylvia Plath and a poetics of madness**

Madness is terrific I can assure you, and not to be sniffed at; in its lava I still find most of the things I write about. It shoots out of one everything shaped, final, not in mere dribbles, as sanity does.

Virginia Woolf (Zwerding 254)
The year 2013 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Sylvia Plath’s suicide. The Plath critical bookshelf strains under half a century of biographically informed readings, many of which declare biographical criticism. For some, the Ariel poems (Plath’s last) are indictments of the multitudinous shortcomings of Ted Hughes, “Daddy” Plath, and others. Plath inspires aversion; some critics have named her an “Oedipal victim”, a “bitch–goddess”, a “monster who, in the end, choked on her hatred of humanity.” I prefer the view of Joyce Carol Oates: “[Plath] is less dramatic than all of this, and therefore more valuable.”

In “Mourning and Melancholia”, Freud posited that the melancholic has “a keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic” (246). Depression renders one painfully attuned to emotional sky and wind, to approaching storms. Plath’s many biographers – whether or not they use the term “manic–depression” (most do not), have long commented on the poet’s sparkling creative highs, her rages, and her savage, debilitating depressions. Seldom do critics contemplate the mental illness that took her life, or how its cycles of ecstasy and despair inform her art; indeed, many go to comic lengths to avoid engaging with mental illness. (One critic I read described Plath, who died with her head in an oven, “a supposedly suicidal poet”.)

How might mania inform readings of Ariel? Delusions of grandiosity often occur in this state. During his “pathological enthusiasms”, Lowell believed he could stop traffic with his stare; Plath’s journal expresses “frustration” that her powers fall short of godlike. She would be “the Poetess of America”, the apotheosis of a tradition extending from Sappho through Elizabeth Browning, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, and Marianne Moore. On 28 August 1957, she wrote, excitedly, that “the work of Adrienne Cecile Rich will soon be eclipsed by these eight poems. I am eager, chafing, sure of my gift” (360). Is this grandiosity? Or a keener vision?

Severe depression manifests a phenomenon called “early-morning awakening”, a sleep-phase disturbance characterized by nightmare visions of violence, pain, and death. Milton’s L’Allegro speaks of “horrid shapes, and shrieks, and sights unholy”. In Giving Up: The Last Days of Sylvia Plath, Plath’s friend Jillian Becker reports the poet’s final nights, when, “I heard her calling me, and she’d say, ‘This is the worst time, this hour of morning’” (12). Ariel is replete with images from this early-morning realm of nightmare. The female body of “The Jailer” is not only raped, but “hung, starved, burned, and hooked” (226, line 35).
In “Totem”: “In the bowl the hare is aborted, Its baby head out of the way.../Flayed of fur and humanity” (264, ll. 11–13). The taproot of Plath’s ruminative depression inches ever deeper, into dark aquifers of human evil and suffering, of Dachau, Auschwitz, severed-foot paperweights. From “Three Women”: “I am accused./I dream of massacres./I am garden of black and red agonies./I drink them./Hating myself, hating and fearing” (180, stanza 22).

The label “confessional”, branded on Plath’s generation of American poets, is reductive. For Oates, Ariel is “not one woman dragging her shadow around in a circle”. The poems are not emotional outbursts. Rather, personae exist in the realm of the uncanny, in “the light of the mind/cold and planetary” (172, line 1). In Ariel, we witness a self approaching the event horizon of a black hole – “and the universe slides from my side” (208, l. 62). We witness the spaghettification of a self, torn atom from atom by some inconceivable gravity. The poems are sometimes horrific in their implications. “Edge” carries a quiet suggestion of Medea, of child killing:

The woman is perfected.
Her dead body wears the smile of accomplishment...
Each dead child is coiled, a white serpent
One at each little Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden
Stiffens and odors bleed.... (273, ll. 1–16)

In the “black amnesias of heaven” (250, line 21), no one attends but the moon, and “The moon has nothing to be sad about/Staring down from her hood of bone./She is used to this sort of thing./Her blacks crackle and drag” (273, ll. 18–21). “These poems stun me”, said Anne Sexton, Plath’s friend and fellow death junkie. “They eat time.”

In “Elm”, Plath’s embodied tree is “scathed” by soft moonlight. Despite its “great taproot”, it neither enjoys nor produces greenness or shade. Rather, it suffers the “atrocity of sunsets/scorched to the root” (192, ll. 16–18). “I know the bottom”, says the tree. “And it is what you fear” (192, ll. 1–2). It even speaks of some felt tree pathology: “I am terrified by this dark thing that sleeps in me./All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity” (192, ll. 31–33).

In “Tulips”, the dysphoric speaker turns from too-vivid color and toward the elemental whiteness of her hospital room. The tulips suggest mania’s heightened perception of color and light; shimmering and
rustling, they violate the speaker’s white sanctum. The damn things just won’t go away: “The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.../ Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds” (161 ll. 36 and 49).

The title poem, “Ariel”, is less a “white Godiva” galloping through pre-dawn darkness (surely, a Freudian field event) than a suicide poem. Its destination – “the cauldron of morning” – recalls the nightmarish phenomenon of early-morning awakening. The mount, “Ariel”, is an arc of brown neck in darkness. Then, “something” – an unnamed force – unseats the rider, hurling her into space, “Thighs, hair, flakes from my heels”: “I unpeel/Dead hands, dead stringencies” (239 ll. 12–13, 16). The isolation of madness is complete: “I am the arrow/The dew that flies/Suicidal, at one with the drive/Into the red/Eye, the cauldron of morning” (239 ll. 27–28, 30).

Many read the poem “Ariel” as a will-to-power, with suicide a purposeful and empowering choice, an artist’s chosen escape from the stultifying culture of the early 1960s. But an alternate reading, with affective disorder in mind, is that of a body/mind hurtling out of control. An arrow, a powerful image for psychoanalytic criticism, also implies powerlessness; once fired, an arrow cannot change its course. “Something else” lifts this rider, bodily. “Dead hands, dead stringencies”, dead efforts to hold things together, all of these “unpeel” for good; the speaker will not survive the “cauldron of morning”.

Plath’s art navigates both dark undercurrents and icy altitudes; the poems offer a front-row seat to the terrifying instability of the self. Plath wrote through manic–depression, swimming against its tide as long as she could before eventually succumbing. Suicide is less rational choice than the unpeeling from life – gradual or sudden – of a psyche in extremis. Plath provides a richer source than mere “Oedipal victim”, “bitch–goddess”, or “monster choking on her hatred of humanity”. “Ariel” may well be her apologia of the act of suicide, for an audience she knew well would await.

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