# The Finest and the Most Dangerous: Kay Redfield Jamison and Robert Lowell

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**Abstract**

Kay Redfield Jamison has spent her career as a clinical psychologist studying and writing about those afflicted with manic depression, especially artists and writers. She has been especially attentive to poets and now has completed *Setting the River on Fire,* her extensive study of Robert Lowell, in whose life and poetry madness went hand in hand with creativity, invention and artistic genius. The result is a fascinating text at the crossroads of clinical writing, biography and literary criticism, illuminating both Lowell's poetry and his life-long struggle with mental disorder. The most important question of the book is this: does manic depression help or hinder writing poetry? His illness was no doubt one of the most important subject matters in Lowell's life work. The parallel demonstrated between Lowell and other "mad" poets extends the subject matter of this book so that it becomes not only Lowell's illness, but also the relationship between mental disorder and writing poetry in general. Mania, like all mental disorders, is a synecdoche of the human psyche in general; its representation in poetry raises the problem of the mask as well as that of confession. A confessional poem, in Lowell's view, is a text which contains ("confesses") the subject's psyche in its complexity

and ambiguity. Mania is both a part of this psyche and a target of confession. As his poetry testifies, paradoxically, Lowell managed to be confessional while wearing the mask of the other. His illness partly explains why his life work is particularly open to readings that view it as an organic whole.

**Key words: Robert Lowell,** confessional poetry, manic depression, bipolar disorder, Kay Redfield Jamison



In her book, *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* published nearly twenty years ago, Kay Redfield Jamison wrote about her manic-depressive illness pointing out its controversies: "It has been a fascinating, albeit deadly, enemy and companion; I have found it to be seductively complicated, a distillation both of what is finest in our natures, and of what is most dangerous" (5). Not surprisingly, the book became a bestseller, not only because it is well written (and reads very much like a novel) but also because it is about the mysteries of the human psyche. It is telling that in the sentence just quoted Jamison mentions "our nature," with this phrase creating a community with all her readers. You may not suffer from manic-depressive illness (or, to use a more recent term, bipolar disorder), but what is "distilled" for maniacs is still something we all share. When we learn about this mental problem, we learn about ourselves. No wonder that in the same book Jamison considers the disappearance of this illness (through genetic engineering, which, in theory, could be possible) a loss to human culture. She goes as far as asking the question whether such people are an "endangered species" and suggesting that "manic-depressive illness can confer advantages on both the individual and society" (195).

Her new volume, *Setting the River on Fire*, is a book written on literature focusing on Robert Lowell's life, personality, and poetry. Manic-depressive illness would be a determining factor in any artist's work, and it seems particularly relevant (therefore, to be

explored in criticism and literary history) in the case of an author who is usually relegated into the group called "confessional poets." If there was anything important to be confessed in Lowell's poetry, it was the mental disorder that he struggled with all his life, and which caused so much suffering to other people, and even more to himself. Confession, in Lowell's understanding is "the use or exploitation of painful experience that gets on one's conscience" (qtd. in Mariani 425).

But do we need to know anything about the life (let alone the illness) of a poet if we want to understand and enjoy his poetry? Is it not the text that matters after all? Yes and no. Northrop Fry remarked in his *Anatomy of Criticism*:

> The first and most striking unit of poetry larger than the individual poem is the total work of the man who wrote the poem. Biography will always be a part of criticism, and the biographer will naturally be interested in his subject's poetry as a personal document, recording his private dreams, associations, ambitions, and expressed or repressed desires (110).

This is particularly true if the poet's life is full of events fuelling his poems. Lowell was a confessional poet in more than one sense. First, in his readers' and critics' minds he became associated with other confessional poets in mid-20th-century United States, mainly Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and W. D. Snodgrass. They did not form a group, but they shared common features. Second, his poetry is biographical; as a result, in many of his texts, the actual poet, the implied poet and the speaker are nearly identical. The poems "hold a mirror up" to his life and character. Third, his poems are also confessional in the sense as we use the word in religion: it is based on the structure of Catholic confession, in which the subject

reveals his secrets. Therefore, such texts always construct an intimate relationship between the implied poet and God or other people.

Jamison is not a literary critic, but a clinical psychologist, who has a profound interest in poetry. In the Introduction she makes it clear that mania (one side of Lowell's bipolar disorder, the opposite of the depressive periods) was both a source of destruction and construction in the poet's life. However, she concludes this chapter by suggesting that it was not mania itself but Lowell's full consciousness of its relevance that made it a creative force in his writing. To illustrate her point Jamison gives a few examples of how Lowell used the word "mania" in his translations of poetry. Importantly, where other translators used "anger" or "rage," he used "mania" in his version of Homer: "Sing for me, Muse, the mania of Achilles" (24). A perfect example of confessionalism surfacing, but also masquerading as translation.

Mania was Lowell's demon and destiny, the same as rage was for Achilles. How can a poet write poems with this disorder? The second chapter is introduced by a quotation from one of Lowell's letters to Elizabeth Bishop, in which he describes his life as walking on a narrow pathway between "pure wildness" and "the Puritanical iron hand" (27). This duality of mania and discipline, insanity and sanity was the major organizing force of his life. Although the title of this chapter is "Origins," it is not only about the "origins" of life and poetry (more precisely, this kind of life and this kind of poetry) but also about the consequences of whatever can be labelled as "origin." Jamison goes back as far as the 16$^{th}$ century to explore the poet's genealogy, and she pays particular attention to the history of mental disorder in the family—madness which, however, went hand in hand with creativity, invention and artistic genius. Those who are familiar with her first book will not be surprised, since how misery is handed on from generation to generation (to use the fellow poet's, Philip Larkin's phrase) has always been in the center of her professional attention.

Therefore, the reader can find a biography within the biography, and this short history of the family is fully justified. (It also fills in a gap in Lowell studies: you cannot find it either in Ian Hamilton's or in Paul Mariani's massive book on Lowell. Although there is a biography of the Lowell family by Ferris Greenslet, which Jamison also uses, that was published as early as 1946, the year when Lowell's first volume came out.) His consciousness of family history was important to Lowell, particularly because of his love-hate relationship with his parents. Even his self-explanation of the life-long struggle with manic depression points at his mother (59).

As the author writes, "[t]his book is in part about mania and depression and how, at times, they serve art" (194); in the Introduction she makes it clear that "[t]his book is not a biography" (5). But elements (or fragments) of the poet's life story are inevitably there. The volume is a fascinating text at the crossroads of clinical writing, biography, and literary criticism—the methods of these three fields make it possible to discuss the relationship between mania, depression and other forms of mental disorder on the one hand and writing poetry on the other. The reader will see a life that is textually constructed on the basis of texts, including Lowell's own writing (literary and non-literary), letters by his friends and clinical records. Jamison shows Lowell's life (his biography) both as subordinated to literature (his vocation) and as self-therapy. These are also two possible explanations of his Catholic bigotry, which lasted only for a few years, but was profound and extremely important.

Even more important than acknowledged in criticism and literary history. Lowell's first wife, Jean Stafford, and the fellow poet, Allen Tate, offered two different explanations. According to Stafford, he used Catholicism as long as he needed it "artistically and emotionally," whereas Tate thought that he "merely used the Church . . . to establish his mania in religious terms" (97). Elsewhere, Tate wrote that "three things held him together: the Church, his marriage and his poetry" (qtd. in Mariani 182). It follows from Stafford's and

Tate's words that religious bigotry was either subordinated to his poetry or it served as a means of self-healing. Lowell himself wrote about his Catholicism to George Santayana: "what I was after was a way of life" (98), that is, for him, it was both. Creation and therapy cannot be separated in his life, and the links between confessionalism and Catholic devotion are still to be explored. A number of questions are waiting to be answered. Was this dedication a consequence of mania? Does it have anything to do with the confessionalism of his verse? Did it make him similar to or different from the other confessional poets? We will need to find the answers, and this book will help.

Those who suffer from bipolar disorder become a battlefield for depression and mania. Jamison uses the poet as an authentic source: "Depression, Lowell once said, is an illness for oneself, mania an illness for one's friends" (115). One is inclined to ask: also an illness for his readers? Is poetry, actually, mania that has gone public? One central question of the book (particularly sharply addressed in Chapter III) is this: does manic depression help or hinder writing poetry? Once again, no answer is found, but his illness was no doubt one of the most important subject matters in Lowell's life work. This leaves us with a further problem: was it more than just a subject matter? Was it perhaps the ultimate source of creative energy or a condition determining the form of his writing? Should we accept Helen Vendler's suggestion which Jamison quotes approvingly: "Perhaps one of the consequences of having his extreme ups and downs was his interesting pendulum-swings between counted and free-verse, in both of which he could be masterful" (182). Whereas we are not offered any answers in the monograph, readers will surely find enough ideas and quoted documents to make their own hypotheses. In the usual process of literary scholarship, these will need to be substantiated by evidence or refuted.

The parallel demonstrated between Lowell and other "mad" poets extends the subject matter of this book so that it becomes not only Lowell's illness as Jamison suggests (117), but

also the relationship between mental disorder and writing poetry. The danger is that this topic can easily lead one to the myth of the mad poet: all great poets are insane by definition. Although Lowell never claimed this (neither does Jamison), his identification with mythical heroes such as Prometheus (171) could fuel this notion. The Greek Titan was a particularly tempting figure for Lowell's self-definition with the two aspects of the myth: Prometheus *plasticator* (somebody who created humans from clay) and Prometheus *pyrphorus* (who rebelled against the supreme god by stealing fire and giving it to humankind). Construction and destruction, sanity and insanity within one person.

Jamison does not create or reinforce such a myth, but she puts the figure of Lowell in a universal context; as a result, it will be difficult not to see him as a hero of the world. Reading some passages the reader will nod to the author's own definition: this book is really "not a biography," at least not in the sense we usually use the term. Contextualization makes it different, and brings it close to a belletristic text. Many will be surprised when in the middle of the description about lithium treatment they will read this:

> Lithium spewed out in the first minutes of the creation of the universe. Fifteen billion years later it was discovered by a chemist analyzing minerals in an island cave off the coast of Sweden. The element, which exists in mineral springs and igneous rocks, was named *lithos*, the Greek word for stone (177).

Yes, the reader will say, in the beginning God created lithium, and later in the history of the universe Lowell was cured with that. The daring metalepsis does not reveal anything about the poet explicitly, but if such a leap is possible, the poet can only be seen as a hero of the universe who can (and should) be linked with divine creation, Nature, and Greek culture.

Jamison does not create such links without good reason: Promethean fire was a central metaphor of both mania and creation in Lowell's texts (hence the title of the book). Once again, Jamison turns to his translation, this time that of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*: "I made men look into the fire [and] they studied the fire's whirling and consuming colors" (171). In one myth Prometheus created humans from clay; in the other, more widely known narrative he stole fire from the Olympian gods, gave it to humankind, and also taught them the basic skills needed for constructing their culture. Fire, therefore, is an archetypal symbol of thinking. The British poet Tony Harrison writes in his introduction ("Fire & Poetry") to his own Prometheus poem:

> As a child I learned to dream awake before the coal-fire in our living room. Staring into the fire, with its ever-changing flames, shifting coals, falling ash, and what were called 'strangers'—skins of soot flapping on the grate—evoked in me my first poetry. My first meditations were induced by the domestic hearth, I have always associated staring into flames with the freedom of poetic meditation. It has been proposed by Gaston Bachelard that it is brooding before flames that early man developed his interior life (VII).

This suggests that fire is also a sign of what is inside the poet. As one of the four elements, it is an inexhaustible source of destructive and constructive energy, a metaphor of mania for Lowell. But mania was also metaphorized in his life work: it became the vehicle of poetic thinking.

The titles of the big chapters are: Introduction, "Origins," "Illness,", "Character," "Illness and Art," and "Mortality," and if we consider the structure of the book signified by them, we may ask: is illness related to art through character? Or is character constructed in the

manic person's artistic activity? Both are justified. Like most artists' lives, Lowell's can also be interpreted as "continuous self-sacrifice"; not on the altar of the object (as in John Keats), neither for the sake of tradition (as in T.S. Eliot), but for his own mania. This is reinforced by a medical record that Jamison quotes: "Patient says he 'thinks in hallucinations.' This is representative of the entire tone of the patient which almost suggests the desirability of psychosis as a qualification for great artistry" (290). The reader can, then, ask another question: why should one be interested in a poet who is a manic and uses this disorder to represent mania itself? Is there anything else than a vicious circle in it? A possible answer is that mania, like all mental disorders, is a synecdoche of the human psyche in general, which is why the very detailed outline of mania in Chapter V is significant. This is also the reason why the almost absurdly long list of those writers who suffered from mental disorders (253-254) is relevant. All of them represent their specific problems in their texts; in Lowell's case (and in all "confessional poets") it raises the problem of the mask.

Jamison quotes from a letter that Lowell wrote to Randall Jarrell, a fellow poet who also suffered from mania. To encourage him, Lowell explained: "What looks as though it were simply you, and therefore would never pass does turn out to be not you and will pass" (256). The general problem of writing poetry comes into the picture at this point. Can a poet be "himself" in the poem? Strictly speaking, the answer is no: the speaker of the poem is always a textual construct, just like the narrator of a short story or a novel. But in lyric poetry representing the self and covering it with a mask are two sides of the same coin. The mask is always already there, since by writing a poem the poet constructs a speaker that is outside him/her by definition. It is equally true, on the other hand, that something of the poet's subjectivity is always preserved. What Lowell wrote to his friend is simplified, and he knew it very well. Something of the manic periods always stayed with him and helped him write poetry—as a number of references to his poems in Jamison's book demonstrate. The self he

presented in his manic periods was he and not he at the same time; this is why he was able to use the residue of such periods as a textually constructed mask.

In the chapter about Lowell's character we read: "His imagination allowed him to create his way to a new poetry" (237), then Jamison adds that he also needed courage to create "a new world on the ruins of the old" (238). But what is this novelty? On the next pages, from a discussion of "Skunk Hour" (one of Lowell's best known poems) we learn that Skunks are a symbol of this novelty, and their ambiguity is definitely a part of their meaning. They stand for our nameless fears, in the poet's own words, for "horrible blind energy" (241), but this is only a part of the meaning. His own reference to John of the Cross's poem, "Dark Night of the Soul" particularly opens the text up for a fascinating intertextual reading. Although Lowell emphasized the contrast between the two ("My night is not gracious, but secular, puritan, and agnostic" [240]), reading it in a mystic context is certainly possible. Mariani is right: "this is Lowell's radically Calvinist vision reinstating itself in place of his earlier Catholic vision" (256). Importantly, at a reading when he was asked to read a "confessional poem," Lowell chose "Skunk Hour," claiming: "It's one of my confessional poems" (Mariani 390). This reveals as much about his notion of this type of verse as about this particular poem. A confessional poem, in his view, is a text which contains ("confesses") the subject's psyche in its complexity and ambiguity. Mania is both a part of this psyche and a target of confession.

The revelation of the character is only possible through imagination. This is another central category in the book, as Jamison makes it clear right at the outset: "It is about the poetic imagination and how mania and imagination come together to create great art" (4). Famously, Shelley defined poetry as "the expression of the imagination" (635), a definition open to critical remarks: poetry is not only the expression of imagination, and the expression of imagination is not necessarily poetry. But before we accept these hairsplitting remarks we

should consider: Shelley uses the word poetry metaphorically, as the rest of his essay "A Defence of Poetry" testifies. Just like in the romantic poet, all words become metaphorical in Lowell; this is why "truth" does not mean "facts" for him: the autobiographical poems are "not always factually true" (8).

The power of vision was one of the strengths that his fellow poets respected, even envied. Jamison quotes Philip Larkin: "I only wish I had one-eighth of his creativeness" (258). This is telling and flattering, although six years earlier, in 1970, Larkin also wrote in a letter that Lowell was "an American poet for whom I have no admiration at all" (463). Lowell, on the other hand, admired Larkin, probably sharing Randall Jarrell's enthusiasm ("Randall was for Larkin, Larkin, and Larkin" [Mariani 316]). His poem entitled "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage," published in *Life Studies*, is similar to Larkin's "Wedding Wind" (a poem written ten years earlier), although much more painful:

> . . . My only thought is how to keep alive.
> What makes him tick? Each night now I tie
> ten dollars and his car key to my thigh. . . .
> Gored by the climacteric of his want,
> he stalls above me like an elephant.
> (Lowell 190)

Both in Larkin and in Lowell, the mask of a woman represents "the other," somebody the poet wants to become. The two poems are also similarly placed in the volumes: Larkin's "Wedding Wind" follows "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" in *The Less Deceived* (and the two construct a male and a female voice, respectively), Lowell's poem precedes "Skunk Hour" in *Life Studies* (and offers a detached view of his experience represented much more

personally in the other poem, the distance specially emphasized by the quotation marks around the title and the text). It is difficult not to notice the pain of the actual poet in the line "My only thought is how to keep alive." This is how, paradoxically, he managed to be confessional while wearing the mask of the other. Jamison quotes a letter that Lowell wrote to Elizabeth Bishop: "It was necessary, he told Bishop, 'to hold a shield before one's feelings and the reader'" (372). One can add: the shield is also for the poet to save himself from himself.

The problem loomed when the poems became "factually true": in his late volume, *The Dolphin*, which is so open not only about his own manic period but also explicit about two of his marriages, using texts from private correspondence. (Two versions of the book, as well as a collection of "The Dolphin Letters," both edited by Saskia Hamilton, have recently been published and reviewed by Michael Hofmann in *The Times Literary Supplement*.) Is this confessional poetry in the extreme? Or is it the failure of metaphorical transformation? These questions are left open in the book, but Jamison's account of different opinions will help all readers to form their own views.

Lowell's illness partly explains why his life work is particularly open to readings that view it as an organic whole. Jamison quotes the critic A. O. Scott: "[Lowell's *Collected Poems*] is a big, sprawling novel, the narrative of a career, an epic story of literary ambition" (310). This is true, but reading it as a grand narrative also shows the reader's desire both to see it as a reassuring sign of continuity and as a mirror of the poet's life. A perfectly legitimate reading, but we should keep in mind the possibility of other readings. Jamison's book, which is both passionately enthusiastic and admirably accurate, will be available on our bookshelves if we need assistance.

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