

THREE HOSPITAL POEMS: EMPOWERED CONFSSIONAL SELVES IN ROBERT LOWELL'S „WAKING IN THE BLUE”, ANNE SEXTON'S „YOU, DOCTOR MARTIN” AND SYLVIA PLATH'S „NEVER TRY TO TRICK ME WITH A KISS”¹

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ТРИ БОЛНИЧНИ СТИХОТВОРЕНИЯ: СИЛАТА НА ИЗПОВЕДНАТА
ПОЕЗИЯ ПРИ РОБЪРТ ЛОУЕЛ „ДА СЕ СЪБУДИШ В СИНЕВАТА”,
АН СЕКСТЪН „ТИ, ДОКТОР МАРТИН”
И СИЛВИЯ ПЛАТ „НИКОГА НЕ СЕ ОПИТВАЙ ДА МЕ ПОДЛЪЖЕШ С
ЦЕЛУВКА ТИ”
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***Abstract:** This article examines three hospital poems by the American confessionalists Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Writing in the mid-1950s, they opted for „unacceptable” topics which were related to their personal experiences. Typically, the poetry of these poets remains as challenging for the modern reader as it was for their contemporaries. In introducing shocking events and intimate details to their work, they made an important development to portraying lived experience in fiction, which did not come without attacks for their perceived „narcissism”. In this article I argue that their bold writing about difficult subjects has created empowered poetic selves which rather than reflect any narcissism on part of the authors, predate and invite interpretations of the „other”. Their reproduction of illness (depression) is, consequently, devoid of the standard metaphors associated with the respective disease.*

***Key words:** confessional, lived experience, 1950s, other, phenomenological*
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***Резюме:** Текстът коментира три стихотворения, писани по време на болничен престой на американските изповедни поети Робърт Лоуел, Ан Секстън и Силвия Плат. Пишейки в средата на 50-те на миналия век, те избират „неприемливи“ теми, свързани с лични преживявания. Типично, тяхната поезия е толкова предизвикателна за съвременния читател, колкото е била и за техните съвременници. С въвеждането на шокиращи събития и интимни детайли, те осъществяват важно развитие в изобразяването на действително преживяното в литературата, което не минава без атаки и се смята за „нарцисизъм“. Тезата на тази статия е, че смелото им писане върху*

¹ This article is part of its author's monograph entitled „Feminine Selves in Sylvia Plath's Prose and Poetry: The Perspective of Compared Lived Experience in Fiction“ – а. н.

трудни теми е създадо овластени „азове“ и това писане вместо да отразява някакъв авторов нарцисизъм, предшества и приканва към интерпретации на другостта. Следователно поетическото възпроизвеждане на болестта (депресия) е лишено от стандартните метафори, свързани със съответната болест.

Ключови думи: изповед, житейски опит, 1950-те години на XX век, другост, феноменологичен

In her influential *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* Susan Sontag accentuates on a self each one of us has: „Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place” (Sontag 1990: 8). Sontag immediately proceeds to clarify that she is not about to describe the „lived experience” in that kingdom where we so reluctantly dwell, but the „punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about that situation” (Sontag 1990: 8) presumably by writers who have not experienced it personally. She also specifies that „illness is *not* a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness – and the healthiest way of being ill – is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking” (Sontag 1990: 8). In fiction, however, due to its role to entertain among others, certain metaphors do appear, and they are quite steady, although they might also be nation-based, and modifications may occur. Since this paper is about „lived experience” in fiction, which is also known as autofiction, we are interested to know if these metaphors also appear in the autofictions under consideration and how the hospitalized poetic selves present this experience as a reinvention of the lyrical ‘I’.

What the three poems present is hospitalization for treating depression. Both Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell were diagnosed with a bipolar disorder, which, in those times (the mid-1950s) came under the common name of *hysteria* and comprised several other disorders. Sylvia Plath was diagnosed with severe clinical depression. Both Sexton and Plath committed suicide. The way Sontag describes the general literary representation of depression is the following: „unromantic depression has supplanted the romantic notion of melancholy” (Sontag 1990: 43). She also quotes Poe who sees melancholy as *inseparable* from perfect beauty (Sontag 1990: 43). But, of course, we must also admit that melancholy is not always identical with depression, as well as the fact that such metaphors can be nation and genre modified. For example,

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the most romantic representation of tuberculosis as a disease of the „spiritual” since it was related to an inflammation of the respiratory tracts and the resulting extreme pallor on the faces of the afflicted with dramatic red flushing which suddenly made women appear even more frail, beautiful, spiritual and melancholic can be found in its representations of the 19th century such as Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* – Sonia or Dumas-fils’s *La Dame aux Camélias* – Marguerite or Emily Brontë’s Catherine from *Wuthering Heights*. These manifestations suggest a divorce from everything material, opting for the heavenly, unearthly. It should be noted that Brontë’s depiction is arguably the least romantic of the three because its writer suffered from the disease, and it did kill her. The ones who were not suffering, such as Byron, for instance, yearned for the pale tubercular look and he is known to have expressed a satisfaction with his temporary pallor resulting from an illness which made him look tubercularly spiritual for a spell. A novel from the 1930s, when tuberculosis was still an incurable disease, shows a modernist irony of this representation as in Anton Holban’s *Ioana* where the Bulgarian Dr Abramov is comically trying to look spiritual, being fat (full of air), while probably suffering from tuberculosis (Boev 2020: 182). Again, from the 19th century, we have numerous representations of melancholy related to depression (absence of the tubercular symptoms) as in Poe’s „The Fall of the House of Usher” where the main protagonist is pale, apathetic, sedentary, and suffering from an unknown undiagnosed disease. Not only is depression „melancholy minus its charms – the animations, the fits” (Sontag 1990: 43), but also, as mentioned, both depression and melancholy may be the result of a totally different condition, state or in the case of the latter – a temperament. For instance, melancholy in Keats’s „La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and Dimcho Debelyanov’s „I Want to Remember You Like That” („Az iskam da te pomnya vse taka“) where we have the beautiful melancholic aesthetics of represented sadness arising from terminal tuberculosis. Clinical depression could be the byproduct of a different disease, as Sontag also indicates, including tuberculosis, cancer, or AIDS (Sontag 1990: 100). In the case of the three poets under scrutiny, it was related to another condition and probably its manifestation as the condition of depression without any related conditions although in Plath’s case, schizophrenia has been suggested but never diagnosed.

The confessional mode of writing poetry and its „unacceptable” themes by Lowell, Plath, and Sexton together with the liberated writings of „beats” such as Kerouac, Kesey, Ginsberg and Burrows had prompted criticism accusing the poets of being narcissistic: „The poets in this book [Plath,

Ginsberg and Lowell] created art out of the confusion of their lives. [...] There is hardly any need for mirror images of life. The poets, however, were not always selective, and at times they lapsed into merely stating what they had seen and felt” (Simpson 1978: xiv). Harold Bloom wrote one of his most unusual „Introductions” to his series on modern critical views concerning Plath. In it he declares himself unable to „describe and analyze a power of *transformation*”² (Bloom 2007: 4) which he associates with hers and Adrienne Rich’s poetry. He questions Plath’s greatness and originality and announces the call for „a new aesthetic”, which should „come down upon us” (Bloom 2007: 5). Bruce Bawer criticizes Plath’s *Ariel* for the same reasons as Simpson, so the criticism is certainly applicable to Sexton and Lowell as well because of the following claim: „morbid absorption in and superficial celebration of the poet’s own sensitivity and imagined victimhood” (Bawer 2007: 17). Like another, more recent critic, Jacqueline Rose who strongly suggests that we focus on what Plath has done rather than find fault with certain perceived inappropriacies, in what she terms „fixing the meaning” (Rose 2007: 23), I propose a close reading of three hospital poems which is based on a phenomenological analysis: a description of the perceptions and sensations the texts provoke in the analyst, thus constituting, in their turn, a „lived experience” of the second order with the aim to be as close as possible to the „center of things” (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 466) and the ideas these poems express.

In order to see the differences in the style and approach of the three poets, I shall compare three representative of their opera pieces, in this case all based on hospital experience. I start with Lowell’s „Waking in the Blue” from *Life Studies* (1959). The poem is part of the celebrated collection by Lowell and presents, in this case, a study of insanity.

The first stanza presents the lyrical speaker who is the confessional ‘I’. He is the patient in an establishment which is not mentioned directly. We are aware of this fact because of the presence of „the night attendant”. He is „a B. U. sophomore, [that]/ rouses from the mare’s-nest of his drowsy head” (Lowell 1977: 81). The sensation is of a caretaker or perhaps a nurse who is a man and who is there just for the job. He looks *drowsy* and his hair is a mess, unruly and long, called a *mare’s nest*. The metaphor is quite unusual, and we also have the perception of his body parts not making one whole – they are described

² Emphasis added – a. n.

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separately, being there as if just for an automaton who is to do his daily rounds. The nurse has had his head *propped on The Meaning of Meaning*. The reference is to a study of the influence of language upon thought and of the study of symbolism by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards from 1923. We are left with the sensation that the attendant needs to find a meaning for himself, working in the hospital, but his efforts are in vain as the book seems to have been used as a propping tool – a pillow since we get no other information from the text. On the other hand, the body naturally supporting the head, by analogy, gets this denomination itself, and by extension this also refers to the body of the lyrical ‘I’. The next lines create a sensation of the speaker complaining about being kept in a cage: „Azure day/ makes my agonized blue window bleaker” (Lowell 1977: 81). The day being blue is *bleaker*, becomes more desolate, because he cannot benefit from the nice weather outside and the naturally *blue window* containing the natural color of the sky creates a permanent sensation of just a blue stain in the wall which the mind registers as window, but the world outside is unattainable for the lyrical ‘I’ and that makes the *blue window agonized* – a result of the many empty stares on part of the speaker addressed to the blue spot in the wall. The next two lines allow us to see the lyrical ‘I’ imagining what he cannot see, based on his hearing: „Crows maunder on the petrified fairway./ Absence ! My heart grows tense” (Lowell 1977: 81). He can hear the chatter of the crows, but the *fairway* which should contain short grass is suddenly deprived of life – *petrified*, indicating that suddenly it has been covered by stones or turned to stone. The sensation is of intense listening on part of the speaker, as if trying to make out audible sounds, possibly of footsteps on the stones, which could only be heard under these conditions. This intensified listening renders the *fairway* stony – if there are footsteps, they will be heard. They are not there – the word *absence*, which constitutes an entire sentence, is given an exclamation mark and it works like a drumroll by an internal rhyme within the line which indicates the highest possible tension. The images suddenly become wild, while still remaining concrete: „as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill./ (This is the house for the „mentally ill” (Lowell 1977: 81). The person throwing the *harpoon* is completely absent, but because the attendant seems to be the only human being there apart from the lyrical ‘I’, and who is already on duty, he must be the one throwing it. *Kill* rhymes with *ill*, hence the *harpoon* is aiming for the *kill* of the *mentally ill*. The perceptions from the first stanza suggest a recognition of the presence of a helpless human being whose body is hitherto unseen, but who is confined to a cage and who is about to be executed because of his illness.

The next stanza reveals the fact that there are other inmates as well (*the mentally ill*) and the reproduced picture suddenly is not very different from any description of human decay found in Ken Kesey's 1962 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The speaker becomes completely aware of his limitations and the hopelessness of the situation, grimly reflecting: „What use is my sense of humor?/ I grin at Stanley, now sunk in his sixties,/ once a Harvard all-American fullback,/ (if such were possible !)” (Lowell 1977: 81). The tragedy of the decaying body – life in death – is revealed in the comments made by the poetically sane speaker about his roommate who believes, having lost all vestige of sense, „in slimming on sherbet and ginger ale” (Lowell 1977: 81). The poem goes back in history to the Voyage of the Mayflower while the inmates are likened to *whales* for the spear.

The last stanza returns to bodily awareness and measuring up to the others in terms of age and weight. The attempt to look presentable is viewed as ludicrous: „I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey/ before the metal shaving mirrors” (Lowell 1977: 82). The last couplet is unrhymed and contains an ominous threat: „We are all old-timers,/ each of us holds a locked razor” (Lowell 1977: 82). The effect is of an even stronger mnemonic effect between *old-timers* and *locked razor* – just because the two phrases are positioned symmetrically but contain no rhyme where the analyst should expect one, we are forced to repeat them until a mnemonic link is established. The effect is clear – a return to the first stanza and the spear hurtling towards the *mentally ill* (*the thoroughbred whales*) who/which have lost their humanity, a modern incarnation of the zoomorphic characters from H. G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. The ending of the last stanza reads as an inversed metamorphosis – resurgent humanity reacting to the armed threat of the *harpoon*, evoking the revolt of the humans-animals returning to their animality. In this, they anticipate Randle McMurphy from Kesey's novel and stand ready for a revenge on a Nurse Ratched prototype – the nameless night attendant.

Another major confessional poet from the epoch was Anne Sexton. The poem to be analyzed is entitled „You, Doctor Martin” from her acclaimed collection about the time spend in hospital *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) and has her own therapist, Dr. Martin T. Orne as one of the protagonists, the other protagonist, just like in Lowell's poem, is the lyrical 'I' (the speaker) who talks about herself and the way she feels, rendering her perceptions of the therapist and of the other inmates in a mental hospital.

The speaker begins by addressing the doctor: „You, Doctor Martin, walk/ from breakfast to madness” (Sexton 1999: 3). The beginning is quite

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unusual and suggests that only the morning may retain some sense of recognizable normality. The speaker's activity is given in a parallel line: „I speed through the antiseptic tunnel/ where the moving dead still talk” (Sexton 1999: 3). The *antiseptic tunnel* or disinfectant tunnel is a place designated for the sick – it is a different kind of space – the doctor can move everywhere, but eventually ends in *madness* while the sick speaker is prosaically obliged to walk through a narrow space where chemical substances are applied to the body. The other patients are devoid of life – they are *the moving dead* who do not even know it, by still talking. The end of the first line is in the strong masculine rhyme – *walk*, dominating the poem's irregular meter, which, two lines down, rhymes with *talk*, the irregularity of the meter signaling meaningful changes of scene. This rhyming connection creates a strong sensation of the doctor walking to *madness* contrasted to the living dead *talking* away. The doctor is also confined to a mechanical movement, while the patients can only talk in their failure to realize that they no longer belong to the living. On the other hand, and by extension, through his senseless mechanical action, the doctor himself is already dead, but unlike Lowell's night attendant, the patient, in the beginning, can look on him with a loving eye, addressing him by his name, which still means something, everything, to the ones who are dead, but do not know it. In the next line, we have the physical sensation of anatomic parts reacting to the *cure* which is depicted as an abrasive action of a foreign body: „of pushing their bones against the thrust/ of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel/ or the laughing bee on a stalk” (Sexton 1999: 3). The introduction to the next line is effectuated through the natural interval between the lines and we have: „of death. We stand in broken/ lines and wait while they unlock/ the door and count us at the frozen gates/ of dinner. The shibboleth is spoken/ and we move to gravy in our smock/ of smiles. We chew in rows, our plates/ scratch and whine like chalk” (Sexton 1999: 3). Eating in the hospital for the mentally ill is also very mechanical, the mouths move and smile, but the smiles are given in the surprising collective noun – *smock/ of smiles* being separated by a line interval, the usual for this poem carefully constructed structure of word combinations which astonish.

In the next lines we learn that: „there are no knives/ for cutting your throat” (Sexton 1999: 3), which sounds sinister enough, being an abrupt change of tone. We should probably understand that this is just a precaution, but the speaker never clarifies that because while she mingles with the other inmates, she can no longer be responsible for any of the actions on part of the *mentally ill*. The speaker then proceeds by saying that she is given an occupation – *making moccasins* as a kind of work to keep her busy, but she is unable to do

it properly (not that it matters) as her movements are uncoordinated. The next stanza portrays the doctor as a „god of our block, prince of all the foxes” (Sexton 1999: 3). The doctor also „lean[s] above the plastic sky” (Sexton 1999: 3) controlling everything in a synthetic world with a *third eye*, but this is just his mechanical evolution into an advanced automaton, the one from Lowell’s poem, because his eyesight is improved through an augmented reality enhancement, and he scans with it „the separate boxes/ where we [they] sleep or cry” (Sexton 1999: 4). Sexton strongly suggests that it makes no difference to the doctor if they do one or the other possibly because he does not think that mad persons can feel pain or perhaps because they do not even know why they are crying.

In the next stanza Sexton develops further Lowell’s idea of the *people-whales* having lost their ability to reason. In her poem she exclaims: „what large children we are” (Sexton 1999: 4). The doctor has „an oracular/ eye in our nest” (Sexton 1999: 4) – yet another precursor of Kesey’s famous title. As the poem progresses, we may even forget that the speaker addressed the doctor by his name in the very first line. To the reader he has become a sort of a robot performing mechanical actions with Robocop abilities including a Foucauldian panoptical eye for total control. The speaker gives further details about the doctor’s inhumanity by evoking a scene from Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936): „Out in the hall/ the intercom pages you/ you twist in the pull/ of the foxy children who fall” (Sexton 1999: 4). The inmates turn into some cartoon characters who look grotesque while the doctor is still in control and, insensitive to their plight – since he does not see them as human beings with a heart and a soul – he can dispense with their lives at will, his only purpose becoming his ultimate goal, to stay, at all cost, in control.

In the last stanza, the inmates, with whom the speaker has identified herself, already see themselves, not through the doctor’s all-seeing, but through their own, equally powerful eye, as pure magic: „And we are magic talking to itself/ noisy and alone” (Sexton 1999: 4). All the voices have lost their meanings, uttering some sort of gibberish or glib talk whose semantics are immaterial. So, the speaker proceeds: „I am queen of all my sins/ forgotten/ Am I still lost?” (Sexton 1999: 4). The doctor’s management has created an order of *confusion*. The survivors appear to be orderly but are lost on the inside. The speaker is still the mistress of her personal self, she is able to acknowledge her femininity, but all links to its functionality are missing – the sins connecting her to her human feminine self. The ending is powerful and brilliant: „Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself,/ counting this row and that row of moccasins/ waiting on the silent shelf” (Sexton 1999: 4).

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In this daily routine of survival and effort to stay sane when she is considered mad, the speaker is stripped of everything that once made her a fully functional beautiful woman. The imagery used creates an acute perception of similarity to Emily Dickinson's „I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed”. „The inebriate of air and debauchee of dew” (Dickinson 2012: 72) from Dickinson's poem is completely free and rejoicing out in the open. In Sexton's poem we have the captive „queen” daydreaming, comparing herself to a bee, related to Dickinson's „drunken bee” (Dickinson 2012: 72). The frolicsome sensitive feminine self can still be seen through the descending veil of stupor. Having turned herself into the defective cog in a machine, she is already probably no different from all the other inmates with more imagery of organic matter identifying with the inorganic – *herself* (her true self) and the *silent shelf*. If we return to the beginning of the poem, it is only in the morning that the doctor has his name. By the end of the day *madness* reigns supreme for everyone and he is no less dead or mad than the inmates.

The last of the three poems under consideration is Sylvia Plath's „Never Try to Trick Me with a Kiss”, *The Collected Poems* (1981). Part of the labeled by Ted Hughes *Juvenilia*, this popular poem shows Plath's preoccupation with form, being written in the rima terza fashion. Hughes dates all poems from this section to 3 or 4 years preceding the fateful 1956 – the year of their marriage. While the poem may have been influenced by the instructions given at the Smith College by her English professor, Alfred Young Fisher, it bears the burgeoning bud of originality in the *Ariel* poems as well as some playful but surprisingly poignant observations on part of Plath while in hospital.

The poem begins simply with the warning which sounds half serious, half in jest: „Never try to trick me with a kiss/ Pretending that the birds are here to stay/ The dying man will scoff in scorn at this” (Plath 1981: 319). The opening admonishes against trying to trick the speaker with a kiss, obviously referring to manipulative action on part of the others who may want to take advantage of the seeming gullibility of the visibly young lyrical ‘I’. The speaker insists that she be treated with dignity and honesty and not with false promises about some rosy pictures which will never come true. The dying man from the next line identifies with the speaker. And, suddenly, to our surprise, the speaker, while so very young, will not disarm with her naiveté, but rather with this striking identification – her documented encounter with death. While this sensation persists, the speaker remains young and imposingly precocious, refusing to be treated lightly.

The next stanza builds up on the first by reminding the reader that it is not always easy to recognize it when someone has no heart, hence has lost his

or her capacity to feel – he or she may have metaphorically a stone there instead, a possible allusion to the fairy tale „A Heart of Stone” by Wilhelm Hauff: „A stone can masquerade where no heart is/ And virgins rise where lustful Venus lay:/ Never try to trick me with a kiss” (Plath 1981: 319). The next line quickly changes the philosophical reflections and refers the reader to Roman mythology. The allusion suggests that in our modern world things not uncommonly lose or change their heterotopia³ and acquire new functions. Therefore, where lust has thrived, virgins may blossom or vice versa, or, as existentially accentuated in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18, „by chance, or nature’s changing course untrimm’d” (Shakespeare 1998: 147).

The next lines make a direct reference to the relationship patient – doctor, which was to escalate to the Nazi „Herr Doktor” (Plath 1981: 246) from „Lady Lazarus”: „Our noble doctor claims the pain is his,/ While stricken patients let him have his say;/ The dying man will scoff in scorn at this” (Plath 1981: 320). In this tercet, similarly to Sexton’s and Plath’s own late poem, the doctor in a way takes the law into his own hands and has the arrogance to tell the patients that he is a victim of the system, possibly also an unrecognized patient himself. But Plath reminds us yet again about the honesty with which we should be treating the dying. They deserve to be told the truth, and so do young girls who have experienced death.

The next stanza takes a humorous turn while still appearing very serious: „Each virile bachelor dreads paralysis,/ The old maid in the gable cries all day:/ Never try to trick me with a kiss” (Plath 1981: 320). The speaker enlarges the scope of the comparisons she makes, this time around giving solid proof of her worldly knowledge relegated to the other sex. And while she does so, the next line deals with everyday matters in a plummeting fall from the lofty preoccupations with the cowardly *bachelor* to the insignificant and inconsolable *old maid*, who, unlike the *bachelor cries* for no obvious reason, perhaps foreseeing her own possible, but unacceptable future. Clearly a fact of life, it could be argued women may have serious reasons to be hysterical and they are people that should be reckoned with – unfortunately, Plath was to experience that herself through her *(in)significant other* after having been abandoned by Hughes and even more so during her bouts of jealousy while he

³ See Boev, H. Modern(ist) Portrayals of the City in Dickens and Dos Passos: Similarities, Differences, Continuities (238-363); The Different Dobruja in the Literature between the Wars (113, 166, 167) – a. n.

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was still there. Being a smart versifier does not mean that this should be taken lightly, and Plath does not do it.

In the penultimate stanza Plath makes another allusion to mythology, to the Biblical snake that gave Adam the poisoned apple of knowledge since Adam and Eve may be *the mortal children* who want to lead a carefree existence: „The suave eternal serpents promise bliss/ To mortal children longing to be gay;/ The dying man will scoff in scorn at this” (Plath 1981: 320). The last stanza is a quatrain containing, in the last two lines, the alternating refrains from the stanzas in a reversed order: „Sooner or later something goes amiss;/ The singing birds pack up and fly away;/ So never try to trick me with a kiss;/ The dying man will scoff in scorn at this” (Plath 1981: 320). By way of conclusion, the speaker warns again that however well-constructed a hoax or an untruth, its tenability is eventually compromised, and the counterfeit is exposed. Plath also manages to make a neat loop with the recurrent image of the birds from the first stanza.

All three hospital poems show that there can be no taboos in poetry. Lowell’s and Sexton’s attest to a greater maturity, having been written by people in their 40s and 30s respectively whereas Plath’s work demonstrates its author’s control over form, Plath being in her very early 20s. Lowell and Sexton also reveal a much more profound psychological experience and lexical variety, arising from the hospital stay with attention to detail, vivid hallucinatory imagery, and powerful messages. Plath wags a warning finger that she should not be trifled with, exactly as Lowell came to realize, writing his „Forward” to the English edition of *Ariel*. Even though almost everyone has come to appreciate the *Ariel* poems, Bloom notably excluded, it is little gems like this one, which in their ambitious neatness, aiming for perfection, make one smile at the imperfection of the naïve attempt made by a young person who never truly believed she would grow old.

The actual lived experience in the three poems in retrospect, since while the poets were being treated in the hospital, they were unable to write, has shown some interesting transformations and a rather scientific approach to depression, refusing to liken it to melancholy. The comparative analysis came to the conclusions that in the poems by different poets under scrutiny: „Never Try to Trick Me with a Kiss”, „You, Doctor Martin”, and „Waking in the Blue”, Plath demonstrates a meticulous attention to compositional detail. Her rhythm, meter and rhyme are impeccable, which makes her poem somewhat stilted, sounding like something recited. She shows ambition and audacity, creating a poem with details that are surprisingly true to life for the capture of such a young poet as herself. Sexton shows exquisite technique in rendering

life in a psychiatric hospital – with many sinister details containing unspeakable horror. Yet, throughout, her poem remains highly melodious with haunting rhythms and rhymes, which adds an additional sense of terror, especially with the thickening of the lugubrious tones as the day in the poem progresses. Lowell's poem is perhaps overly ambitious – with an excellent first stanza of first-class psychiatric hospital experience, we are plunged into history, which could be the deranged mind of the speaker, but still, it is unnecessarily distracting from the intensity of the opening scene. We observe fragmentary sequences in Lowell and Plath and to a point in Sexton, but the brilliant technique of the latter makes the whole poem seem like a seamless smooth experience of transition, transformation, and madness. Plath made a difference between writing poetry and writing prose and she would not freely transfer extreme naturalistic details into her poetry although her poems are far from lacking it. It should be noted that all three poems show a remarkable concern with transgressive knowledge: with Plath – seemingly innocent girls may have crystal clear ideas of gender-related problems; with Sexton – in the house of the mentally ill, this works like a virus, no one is safe, including the doctors; with Lowell – being confined to a mental hospital turns one into an animal, aggravating the problem, not resolving it. The cultural references in the examined poems should also be considered as fascinating insights into the life of the 1950s, and there are many – the interiors of the mental hospitals in Lowell and Sexton, hospital practices, etc.

Not showing any relation to melancholy or any other of Sontag's depression related metaphors, the three poems weave their own mythology and symbolism revealed in the Kafkaesque transformation of the adult into a child or a huge animal – „the large children” in Sexton and „whales” in Lowell with the eerie preservation of sanity in the lyrical speaker who is able to observe how their status is lowered to subhuman with the realization that the rendition of the actual experience to paper was done post-factum. The absolute insistence of the lyrical speaker in Plath on truth is almost autistic and shows the perceived by the others descent into madness as a drastic intolerance of hypocrisy and lies. Plath's tone is solemn and detached, creating a panoramic picture, while Lowell and Sexton create surrealist worlds of high intimate detail with significant attention to the actual hospital interior. Being reduced to this subhuman status in the hospital in all three poems the confessional poets acquire authority by voicing the concerns of the patients and by presenting the hospital world from their point of view. In this presentation, the doctor is revealed as their enemy for enforcing the treatment they receive which denies them humanity and intelligence. This tendency can be observed with a much

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higher poignance in a late poem by Plath „Lady Lazarus” where the doctor identifies with the fascist and becomes the „Herr Doktor” or in her novel, *The Bell Jar* (Dr Nolan based on Plath’s own psychiatrist, Ruth Barnhouse). All three poems, together with others by these poets and poems by Ginsberg, contribute to the palpable sensation of life in the 1950s, and of life in mental institutions. Writing about „unacceptable” topics such as sexuality, suicide, and mental health, Plath, Sexton and Lowell have shown the importance and potential of autofiction, which in the 1950s and 1960s dealt with extreme rather than everyday events, or if it dealt with the everyday, it was to reveal it as often unbearable.

Autofictive writers walking in the footsteps of Plath, Sexton, Lowell, Ginsberg and Kesey were Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, Max Blecher, Hervé Ghibert, Pascal du Duve and Cyril Collard who managed to write with equal poignance, honesty and humor about their own terminal conditions. Removing the extreme event from the poetically rendered lived experience has resulted in the modern-day confessionalists, who, like their famous predecessors, are not afraid to reveal their selves to the world not in the „narcissistic display” of which the three Americans were unjustly accused, but in the poetic self as a recognized legitimate subject for poetry. Far from glorifying themselves, Plath, Sexton and Lowell, together with their contemporary followers, have established a direct connection to the reader by sharing with him or her intimacies which could as well have been the reader’s own lived experience.

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