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Source: *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 2015, Vol. 60, No. 2/3 (2015), pp. 201-213

Published by: Universitätsverlag WINTER GmbH

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44071905>

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The Implied Reader and Depressive Experience in Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris*

BRIAN GLASER

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the role of mental illness in contemporary poetics, arguing that it is often overlooked through denial or repressed through misunderstanding. Specifically, it argues that what Wolfgang Iser called the “implied reader” is, in the case of Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris*, constructed as depressed. The essay offers close readings of her poems, which demonstrate the way a depressed implied reader leads the speaker of the poems to a moment of transformation. The second half of the essay looks at how most contemporary theories of reader-response inadequately describe the disability Glück's work references. It offers a critique of the phobia of mental illness in contemporary apologies for literary reading and argues that even work that acknowledges readers as potentially mentally disabled might benefit from the concept of the “implied reader” in overcoming ableism.

“Louise Glück,” Marjorie Perloff opines *obiter dicta* in a recent article on John Ashbery, “would be a quintessential ‘School of Quietude’ poet” (28). To specify what she means by this term, she sends the reader to the blog of Ron Silliman, who suggests that “The School of Quietude is poetry's unmarked case, and its most characteristic – even defining – feature is the denial of its own existence [...]. If being the marked case has consequences, in poetry as elsewhere in life, so does being the unmarked one, and they're not entirely positive” (Silliman). His critique of the “School of Quietude” is that the authors of this school have not experienced themselves as marked by difference and that they are consequently complacent and unimaginative concerning the political or socially liberating, oppositional potential of poetry.

This understanding of Glück offers a striking contrast to the one posited by Stephen Burt, who compares her poetry to the inner lives of “depressed people” and argues that her writing is marked by a “distance” that is a characteristic of depression—which he presents as an asset:

Depressive realism is a secret strength of Louise Glück's work: it connects Glück's stark and straitened tones to the insights her poems contain. Her distance from those she describes (herself included) lets her see them with cold acuteness; coming to love a Glück poem means coming to empathize with the bitter self-consciousness her skeletal arrangements reflect. (74)

As Burt notices, Calvin Bedient has also described Glück's work as “articulated depression” (qtd. in Burt, 81). Burt's argument is that there is a relationship between this depressive realism and the structure of individual poems, which he

reads as comprised of a sequence of sentences and lines, any of which could be the ending of the poem.

Burt primarily discusses *Meadowlands*, while Bedient deals with *Ararat*. Consequently, in my this paper, I turn to Glück's *The Wild Iris*, offering it as a challenge to Perloff's dismissive rhetoric by arguing that Glück is not a poet who identifies herself with the unmarked case of class or race, but rather one who exhibits the characteristic she calls "courage" as she writes about a mental illness that is not only artistically fascinating but also debilitating ("The Idea of Courage" 25). She is not a poet of the unmarked case, however close she may be to it—she is a poet of a marginalized experience that often goes unacknowledged. What critic Tobin Siebers calls the "ideology of ability" makes the experience of depression invisible to many (12). Perloff's claim exemplifies a failure to register the struggle of depressive poetics to articulate experiences of difference not unlike the arguably still unmarked cases of race, gender, and social class.

Dealing with Glück's poetry in these terms threatens to produce naive readings of her work. Glück herself wrote of the beguiling and unreliable effects of authenticity in "Against Sincerity":

[...] the success of such a poetry creates in its readers a firm belief in the reality of that speaker, which is expressed as the identification of the speaker with the poet. This belief is what the poet means to engender: difficulty comes when he begins to participate in the audience's mistake. (42)

Ann Townsend discusses the effect of sincerity in Glück's *The Wild Iris* as a rhetorical accomplishment that puts her in the tradition of George Herbert; she reflects on the above passage, concluding that "to see them at work together links a tradition of hieratic seriousness with self-aware artifice in the history of lyric" (61). One should not innocently assume that the experiences Glück writes of are dimensions of her lived—as opposed to imagined—experiences; the effect of sincerity is also real. Glück's poetry of depression makes available a subject position not in spite of its skilled artifice, but precisely because it.

This becomes more evident when *The Wild Iris* is considered in its cultural context. The book was published in 1992, two years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act made mental illness a matter of public concern and mandated that those suffering from mental illnesses, such as depression, would be protected under anti-discrimination laws. This legislative shift signaled that some of the stigma attached to depression was beginning to erode—but in a way it simply reinforced the ways in which persons suffering from mental illnesses have been obscured, a scotoma in the vision of the well. Concurrently, the new pharmaceutical Prozac became available and revolutionized the medical treatment of depression. "The Food and Drug Administration," writes Bradley Lewis, "first gave Eli Lilly the marketing go-ahead for Prozac in 1987. By 1993, new U.S. prescriptions had climbed to 7.6 million" (122). While Glück was writing *The Wild Iris*, depression entered public discourse in an increasingly destigmatized fashion. It became a social category and a newly treatable condition, both forms of abstraction that call for the emotional substance of poetry to make them feel real to the imagination and the sentiments.

This she does in the early poems of *The Wild Iris*, which is a set of lyrics spoken by various flowers, a human voice that often prays, and the voice of a god. The book begins in a demanding address to the reader:

At the end of my suffering
there was a door.
Hear me out: that which you call death
I remember.
Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting.
Then nothing. The weak sun
flickered over the dry surface.
It is terrible to survive
as consciousness
buried in the dark earth. (245)

It is very clearly a poem that articulates a terrible sense of despair. The speaker has known death in life, and this gives urgency not only to what she has to say but also to her awareness of her reliance on or need for a listener.¹ What Glück says in “Education of the Poet” about her way of reading is relevant to her mode of writing in this poem as well: “My preference, from the beginning, has been the poetry that requests or craves a listener” (9).

The poem exhibits what Wolfgang Iser calls an “implied reader” (34). Iser claims that this role is present in most, if not all, works of literature. But one need not commit to a totalizing theory to have a sense of its applicability here. The speaker of this poem needs an empathic listener whose experience of despair she can rely on as an understanding that makes further reflection, a metaphoric searching, possible. The poem concludes:

Then it was over: that which you fear, being
a soul and unable
to speak, ending abruptly, the stiff earth
bending a little. And what I took to be
birds darting in low shrubs.
You who do not remember
passage from the other world
I tell you I could speak again: whatever
returns from oblivion returns
to find a voice:
from the center of my life came
a great fountain, deep blue
shadows on azure seawater. (245)

The end of this poem depends on the speaker’s assumption of a listener whose emotions the speaker knows. The wild iris knows what the reader has and hasn’t experienced, what she remembers, and most importantly what she fears—these

¹ I refer to the speakers of these poems as “she” because they are spoken both as flowers and as utterances of the poet. This is the only way I can see to respect the metaphor of speaking as a flower without rendering it in an absurdly reductive way as an impossibly voluble flower. I understand the speaker of these poems to be the poet, behind the persona or mask of the flowers.

are present to the speaker as she narrates her own similar process of suffering. In this sense, the empathy of the reader is essential to discovering the voice of—a coming to speak for—the wild iris. The implied reader's fear of suffocating silence and her ability to imagine the death-in-life that the flower speaks of—"I tell you"—make possible the speaker's movement to the image at the end of the poem of a sea surface mottled by clouds. The relation between speaker and a very specifically constructed implied reader, as well as that reader's presence to hear the speaker out, facilitates a self-state image at the end of the poem in which death-in-life is understood not as being consciously buried—a terrible, suffocating form of death—but rather as a picturesque, if not beautiful, contrast between lighter shades of water and darker shadows.

At the end of "The Wild Iris" a transformed self-understanding emerges, and this articulation is made possible by the speaker's understanding of the reader as haunted by the same experience of inner deadness. In the second poem of the book, the speaker describes herself as "depressed" (246). But it is clear—and this is an essential dimension of the implied reader as Glück constructs her—that not all of the speakers in the book, the parts of the self that the author is giving imaginative life to, hear her or acknowledge this. The flora do not hear each other, the speaker of the prayers does not hear the god who responds to them—only the implied reader has both the necessary experience of despair and the knowledge of the various speakers of this despair that can allow her to understand fully the state of depression that gives shape to the book. In "Snowdrops," Glück writes,

Do you know what I was, how I lived? You know
 what despair is; then
 winter should have meaning for you.
 I did not expect to survive,
 earth suppressing me. I didn't expect
 to waken again, remembering
 after so long how to open again
 in the cold light
 of earliest spring—
 afraid, yes, but among you again
 crying yes risk joy
 in the raw wind of the new world. (250)

How might the first three lines of the poem, in which a depressive reader is imagined and addressed directly, contribute to its overall meaning? The answer might be found in an appreciation of how a term as fraught with sad irony as "the new world" can be a kind of transformation. The invocation of a reader who understands the speaker's sense of despair at the beginning of the poem allows the speaker to move through a process in which the burden of despair is projected fully onto that reader so that the thrill and vulnerability of being alive in spring-time can be experienced without depressive irony.

The two yesses in the poem can be understood as an index of how this happens. The first "yes" is the speaker's acknowledgement of the fear of exposure and an ominous sense of the inevitability of death or pain—it is the yes that expresses

knowledge of the presence of despair in the relationship between the implied reader and the speaker. But the second yes is no longer aware of its audience in this way. It is not an anticipation of a depressive perspective, but rather it is fully present, fully experiencing the “risk” of life, without an oppressive sense of the cyclical nature of birth, life, and death that the implied reader is abandoned with. The second yes, by celebrating the ever-present risk of living rather than dwelling on the inevitability of death, in effect, neutralizes the irony with which one might read “the new world.” By means of a kind of splitting, the speaker leaves grim irony behind. The presence of an implied reader who knows despair has allowed the speaker of the poem, through a kind of projective selection, to experience herself as enlivened by risk rather than burdened with despair.

Thus far I have been talking about the persona poems spoken as flora. The inclusion in the sequence of prayers and visitations by a god make the whole of the book more complex. The human voice who prays is haunted by the silence of god, and so cannot apparently hear the god’s messages, which are spoken as times of day and sometimes as places. These messages function quite differently than those of the flora, which allow for passages out of depressive realism. But they nevertheless rely on an implied reader who understands despair. “Sunset” is one of the more piercing of these:

My great happiness
 is the sound your voice makes
 calling to me even in despair: my sorrow
 that I cannot answer you
 in speech you accept as mine.
 You have no faith in your own language.
 So you invest
 authority in signs
 you cannot read with any accuracy.
 And yet your voice reaches me always.
 And I answer constantly,
 my anger passing
 as winter passes. My tenderness
 should be apparent to you
 in the breeze of the summer evening
 and in the words that become
 your own response. (298)

If “Snowdrops” worked by a kind of projective solution to the problem of depressive irony, this poem seems to solve the same problem by multiplying ironies. There are at least three subject positions here—the author, who writes as a god; the addressee, who is spiritually cut off from that god and fails to hear her messages of consolation or anger; and the implied reader, who can hear this discourse but to whom it cannot be addressed. The question that the poem poses to the implied reader is one that could only be answered by the poet who speaks as god—why can’t the addressee hear this utterance? What does it mean to tell her that she has “no faith in” her “own language”?

The redundancy of the word “own” in the phrase “your own,” which appears twice in the poem, is significant in this respect. “Your own language” is different than “your language”—your own language is a private language, one expressing incomprehensible meanings. But this language *is* understood by the god—the voice of the addressee “reaches” that god “always.” So the phrase “your own” has a critical dimension to it, suggesting that perhaps the addressee is unable to hear the presence of this god because she is so absorbed in the making of her “own response,” in her own language. She can only hear herself because she is absorbed in her own expression. But if the message of criticism is not available to the addressee, neither is the message of comfort that her communications “even in despair” are audible to this god. And that message is audible to the implied reader, and so to the consciousness creating the poem. This is a scenario in which the authenticity of despair is registered by the poet’s opportunity to speak to herself via the fiction of an implied reader. What the addressee cannot know, the poet overhears herself tell to the implied reader. “Your own response” to “Sunset” is despairing but not isolated, not meaningless—a poetic imagination has managed to know itself by using the fiction of a despairing implied reader to imagine an alternative to its own inability to hear from the god it implores.

More could be said about the necessity of a despairing or depressed implied reader in *The Wild Iris*. I have not discussed, for instance, the poems spoken in the persona of the poet, which do not seem to me to construct an implied reader in the way the flora and god poems do. But my aim is not to be programmatic about this interpretation so much as it is to demonstrate the resonance of depression or despair, which I use interchangeably in this essay.² In the second half of this essay, I’ll argue that an awareness of this resonance can have implications for the way we determine the value of literary readings. But before I do this, there are a couple of theoretical considerations necessary to frame my argument.

I have so far used the term “implied reader” in a consistent but incompletely articulated way. One important clarification can be offered at this point. An understanding of how the author constructs the implied reader renders it a flexible and fluxuating subject position. As Iser puts it, the “concept of the implied reader as an expression of the role offered by the text is in no way an abstraction derived from a real reader, but is rather the conditioning force behind a particular kind of tension produced by the real reader when he accepts the role” (36). If the role

² There is of course not a complete semantic overlap between the terms “depression” and “despair.” I consider despair to signify depression for three reasons. The first is that there is already, as my review of the field of studies of Glück indicates, a tradition of considering her as a poet of “depressive realism.” The second is that Glück uses the term “depressed” to describe the speaker of one of her poems (246), and this suggests that there is a degree of poetic license in her references elsewhere to “despair,” a term that intensifies the affective dimensions of depression. The third reason is that there is even within the field of psychology a precedent for using the terms interchangeably: Willard Gaylin’s “The Meaning of Despair” is a psychoanalytic study of depression, and he uses the term “despair” for reasons that could be similar to Glück’s—it highlights the affective dimensions of depression. Such a choice of words also diminishes the chances that a clinical approach to depression as simply a matter of neurochemistry would expunge from discussion of the subject attention to its emotional character.

of the implied reader is somewhat prescriptive, it is not exclusively so. Each real reader, when aware of the presence of an implied reader, in the dynamic of reading, is in a position not only to accept or refuse that position, but more importantly to have imaginative mobility and modulation with respect to it, to adopt the construction as offered sometimes and refuse it at others, and above all to be aware, with inevitably varying degrees of consciousness, of his or her relationship to the evolving role that is offered by the text. "The concept of the implied reader," Iser says, "offers a means of describing the process whereby textual structures are transmuted through ideational activities into personal experiences" (38). One need not be depressed in order to imagine the experience of being so.

True as this may be, many critics writing in the contemporary tradition of reader response—a genre which has become the domain primarily of books defending or celebrating literary reading—overlook the importance of the depressed implied reader that Glück invokes. Tobin Siebers' "ideology of ability" may help explain this oversight among critics, who have failed to recognize the value in Glück's depressive poetics:

The ideology of ability makes able-bodiedness compulsory, enforcing it as the baseline of almost every perception of human intention, action, and condition and tolerating exceptions only with difficulty. Ability appears unmarked and invisible because it is the norm, while disability, as an affront to ability, feels the full and persistent force of an ideological impulse to erase from view any exception to ability. (102-3)

Though he puts his critique here and elsewhere as primarily a matter of embodiment, Siebers takes pains at other points to include mental illness among the disabilities he discusses. He speculates that this ideological pressure is in part caused by the threat that disability poses to identity—as he says, one cannot change racial or gender identity very easily, but any of us can become disabled at any time. This makes disability more uncomfortable to confront and, therefore, tempting to ignore or deny. And this is a significant loss, as Siebers says, because there are various ways in which disabled perspectives have invaluable contributions to make to culture at large: "people with disabilities insist on the pertinence of disability to the human condition, on the value of disability as a form of diversity, and on the power of disability as a critical concept for thinking about human identity in general" (3).

I want now to put to use Siebers's suggestion that disability can creatively challenge the status quo by looking at how readers are constructed under the ideology of ability in contemporary works of reader response theory, arguing that Glück's book is a challenge to critics who—often compelled by ambitious claims, but other times by blunt prejudice—construct the reader in ableist ways. Perloff's ableism is representative, not exceptional.

Disability and Reader Response

The field that was known in the 1970s as reader response criticism has withered away in name only; it has found new life in arguments that value literary readings. I offer here a taxonomy of how some of these arguments approach mental illness

as a reader's subject position, an assessment which is admittedly not based on an exhaustive survey of the field. So far, disability studies has offered a number of readings of poetry, including a volume of essays and an article in *PLMA*.³ But for the most part these treatments have had to do with physical disabilities. Mental illness as a disability has received less attention. This may be because, as Catherine Prendergast explains, "disability studies, with its emphasis on the body and not the mind, creates fissures through which attention to the mentally disabled easily falls" (46). Among treatments of disability and poetry, this article makes an original contribution by considering the relation between the author and the implied reader as one in which mental disability is a salient factor.

Only one writer in the literary apology genre acknowledges depression as a valid subject position for readers: Daniel R. Schwarz. He does not say much on the subject, but I will give him the last word. Those who discuss the process of literary reading have a tendency to falsify and deny the depressed, specifically, and the mentally ill, generally, as legitimate subject positions. There are three forms that this manifestation of the ideology of ability takes. I am not sure that one can identify degrees of ableism; however, these strategies seem to fall into something of a hierarchy of offensiveness. The most egregious is the assumption that mental illness—usually but not always only psychosis—takes one beyond the pale of literary experience and representation. This conception of disability stems from a caricatured understanding of psychosis. In this group one finds writers in the psychoanalytic tradition who should know better. Others make arguments for the value of reading by imagining a kind of composite reader to whom mental illness is irrelevant. However, these writers simply ignore the phenomenon and the possibility of a reader who suffers from the disability of mental illness and make their claims through an implicit normalizing which denies the possibility of insanity. Finally, there are those who acknowledge the possibility of a mentally ill reader but present literature as offering a cure, a way to get better. The reality of mental illness for many is that it goes into remission but does not disappear; these arguments operate under a kind of misunderstanding of the nature of many instances of depression as cyclical or wavering in intensity.

Beginning with the first category, one finds the Lacanian critic Shoshana Felman treating madness as beyond the capacities of literary phenomena: "It is somewhere *between* their affirmation and their denial of madness that these texts about madness *act*, and that they act themselves out as madness, i. e., as *unrepresentable*" (252). Madness and rhetoric can express each other, but in Felman's view this happens as a kind of paradox, in which madness is derealized in the act of expression. So, she says, "*To talk about madness* is always, in fact, *to deny it*" (252). This description is simply pernicious. Depression can even become psychotic in its intensity and produce a state of delusion and still be talked about, even by the person suffering from it. But in pursuit of a kind of de Manian paradox to make sense of the threatening reality of insanity, Felman calls on the cliché of psychosis as signifying incoherent ravings, as falling outside the purview of literature.

³ See *Beauty is a Verb* (2011) edited by Sheila Black, Jennifer Barlett and Michael Northen and "Lyric Bodies: Poets on Disability and Masculinity" by Susannah B. Mintz in *PMLA* 127.2 (2012).

She is not alone in her assessment. Using the theories of communication offered by Gregory Bateson, Alan Thiher treats psychosis as the other of a remarkably rigid binary opposition:

Psychosis is primarily a question of not having access to the proper circuits, or of being excluded from a culture's symbolic system, since sanity demands that the self be integrated into an information-flow system. Like tragedians with computers, Bateson and Lacan have refurbished, then, a doctrine of logos for the information era. (284)

His description of psychosis is misguided because it need not necessarily involve being "excluded from a culture's symbolic system." Depressive, suicidal ideation does not entirely signify one's exclusion from culture. Even paranoia can involve participation in a culture and manipulation of its symbolic system. Thiher attempts an ingenious synthesis of Lacan and Bateson, but in this case what emerges is a composite that fundamentally misunderstands the meaning of Lacan's terms and probably Bateson's as well. The figure of a madness that falls outside of the boundaries of literacy is not specifically invoked, but such a figure pervades this text in the assumptions it makes about insanity.

In *Reading Psychosis*, Evelyne Keitel coins the term "psychopathographies" to describe texts that represent psychosis. Her denial of the reality of literary experience for psychotics takes a different form than Felman's or Thiher's. She theorizes how "arrhythmic oscillations" in literary representations evoke psychosis in that they "*structurally* resemble psychotic processes" (118). So representation of madness is not impossible. But being mad makes one unfit for the subject position she imagines: "Reading about psychoses becomes a reading psychosis. Thus, the reading of psychopathographies allows the reader a dimension of experience in literature which remains closed to him in life" (118). Here, Keitel assumes that psychosis precludes literary experience. Not only is the imagined reader normalized, but an imagined psychotic reader is overlooked. Keitel's assumptions are blatantly discriminatory and prevent her from recognizing how psychotic individuals might have a greater authority in the reception and interpretation of the texts than she considers.

The second set of literary apologists are those who simply ignore depression or mental illness altogether. Again, one finds a writer in the psychoanalytic tradition who should know better—Norman Holland's attempt to rewrite New Critical values through a set of psychological concepts in *Poems in Persons* makes the claim, supported by ego psychology, that each reader develops an "identity theme" through which he or she mediates literary experience and creates meaning (112). It also represents a composite of one's values and defenses. Though he treats sanity and insanity as stereotypically as the critics above, he makes no mention of one's mental state as disabling at any point. Disability vanishes from the discourse when critics offer a totalizing theory of literary response.

Christina Vischer Bruns develops such a theory as she uses D. W. Winnicott's idea of transitional phenomena and potential space to discuss how reading should be taught not only as a reflective practice but also as an immersive experience. The "self" in her argument can be changed through reading: the "mediated tangibility of literary experience is what enables it to make hidden or formless self-

states accessible or available—experience-able—to the self through transitional space” (32). For Bruns, reading in this way is a matter of growth, and she is writing primarily to discuss how literature should be taught to undergraduates. But this makes her oversight of mental illness somewhat more pressing—a teacher adopting her method of immersive reading should give thought to how this process may be impeded, or may be threatening or even dangerous, for depressed or otherwise psychologically disabled readers.

Rita Felski’s *Uses of Literature* begins with the assumption that “as teachers and scholars charged with advancing our discipline, we are sorely in need of more cogent and compelling justifications for what we do” (3). As justification, she offers recognition, knowledge, shock, and enchantment. She focuses on the relationship between reader and text and the varieties of responses that it can give rise to. But her concept of reading remains normatively reifying. Readers’ potential attitudes are deduced from the way particular texts imply or imagine them. Similarly, Gregory Jusdanis’s concept of the “parabolic” function of literature, in which imaginative spaces make critical perspectives possible in the worlds they represent (5), and Glenn C. Arbery’s more conservative credo that “the meaning of a work of literature is its form” (19) work backwards from how texts position their readers rather than asking about the spectrum of readers’ psyches in relation to texts. Each of these works deduces the role of the reader from the authorial imagination or invocation of a spectator, and they do not find texts to address themselves to readers with disability of any kind.

There is something moving but quaint to me about the books of the third category, those that acknowledge the possibility of a reader disabled by depression in order to offer him or her imaginative healing. Such repair is accomplished in different ways: Mark William Roche, in *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century*, imagines a reader who has been offered only works from what Adorno calls the “culture industry,” and sees him or her to be in need of a kind of spiritual overhaul:

The more one works and the more one is entertained by the colorful but vacuous, the sadder one becomes. Quantity does not transform itself into quality. Literature gives greater rewards than work characterized by overextension and instrumentality or leisure characterized by expense and entertainment. Literature enriches us partly through its intrinsic value, partly as a result of its ability to address neglected values, partly through its simple vitality. (207)

This is perhaps a bit idealistic in its conception of the sorts of vitality that literature can offer—to think of Ginsberg’s rage or Nabokov’s version of desire as vitalizing honors their intensity but misses how such authors intend to make readers looking for “greater rewards” uncomfortable with their experiences of the author’s imagination. But just as innocent is the idea that literature “enriches us” and redresses sadness as reliably as Roche supposes. For a depressed reader, such repair is in many cases not as easy to come by as he supposes. In a similar way, Frank B. Farrell presents “grief” as the limit of despair that a reader can bring to a text, a position which allows him to imagine the availability of healing as that grief is “gradually internalized and accepted” through “ritual sequences designed by the author” (14). Mark Edmundson offers the most rhapsodic version of this

position. His reading of Wordsworth's confrontation with melancholy in "Tintern Abbey" is indefatigably upbeat:

In "Tintern Abbey," one also encounters the bracing hypothesis that depression or melancholia or what-have-you is a great force, to be sure, but that it is a force we may combat through individual resourcefulness and faith [...] We are creatures who have the capacity to make ourselves sick, collectively and individually, but we often have the power to heal ourselves as well. (59)

For Edmundson, only great literature can offer the resources for this kind of self-healing. And we need great literature instead of medical interventions when treating mental illness. In his view, "antidepressant drugs have become unbearably common" (74).

It is against this backdrop that I find there to be both admirable sensitivity and restraint in Daniel R. Schwarz's discussion of depression and reader response in *In Defense of Reading*. "We [...] read to confirm who we are," he says, and then in a catalogue of the possible identities to be confirmed, he says simply, "Depressives can find reinforcement in reading about other depressives" (5). Of course his choice of words suggests that this might be as much of a negative reinforcement as a positive one. But it is a remarkable thing noteworthy that Schwarz acknowledges depression in this text without immediately dismissing it from the field of literature or resigning it to corrective medical or therapeutic treatments. None of the ableism that has led other critics to deny or minimize mental illness exists with Schwarz, whose vision of the possible diversity of readers is to be applauded for being much more inclusive than that of many others in the field. But the foregoing discussion of Glück's implied reader has something to contribute to Schwarz's defense of literary reading.

Schwarz compellingly situates his discussion of the relationship between writer and reader in the context of a change that has been brought to literary studies over the course of his own career:

I grew up in a world where we pretended that if we as a seminar or a group of colleagues talked about a book enough our readings would be close to the same, but we now know that each of us brings our own prior experience—reading and otherwise—and our own psyche and values to our odyssey of reading. (3)

This acknowledgement leads him to discuss the life of literature as a "dialogue between reader and writer" (7). So the writer speaks to his or her imagined readers through his or her work in Schwarz's estimation. He describes the writer's creative process this way: "I think most imaginative writers write primarily when they need to delve into their psyches and discover who they are, secondarily but still more importantly, when they need to share the results of that process with others" (9). This picture of the act of creative writing makes the dialogue between reader and writer something that happens after the activity of writing—reaching an audience compels the writer forward and promises him or her a reward.

But Iser's concept adds an important dimension to this schema, and it is one that has particular force in the case of a depressed implied reader. The implied reader is not always someone who waits for the completion and publication of a text to accept it. In the case of Glück's poetry, for instance, the implied reader

understands and even identifies with the difficult emotional state that the writer is making sense out of in the book. The implied reader must be present to the writer even as the poem is in the process of becoming. Schwarz's acknowledgement of the disabled reader is refreshingly open-minded, but still incomplete. "Reading can do damage by pushing psychopaths, sociopaths, and even severely depressed people over the edge [...] Perhaps we all need to be wary of such overly empathetic reading," he writes (5). But the presence of mental illness is not so easy to ward off, at least in the case of Glück. Depression is written into the text in such a way that it is impossible to imagine the text without it. This is a record of emotional experience that reader-response criticism and defenders of reading alike still need to grapple with if they are to shed the oversights of a reductive ableism.

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