The Wound of Beauty Operates in Otherwise Ways: But For Maud, 18 Ways

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This kaleidoscopic creative essay presents eighteen short sections exploring aspects of mental health with my experience of reading L.M. Montgomery's fiction. With a focus on the *Emily* series, these pieces move toward the idea that Montgomery affords a life-giving amount of shadow, longing, and hunger in her vision of a protagonist's well-being.

In My Mind, the Shelf Is Blue

For optimism, cheer, and resilience, let me run to Jo March. But to drop down into the shadowy affects—melancholy, longing, wistfulness—let me break onto a fern-edged path beside L.M. Montgomery. As a young reader I didn't understand when others talked only about Montgomery's brightness, lightness, happiness; of course

there is a bright gleam of spiritedness throughout her fiction, but I found in her books (arranged with such love on the bottom right shelf above my adolescent desk)—even before encountering Montgomery's troubled short stories and journal entries—an undercurrent, a tug, of emotions I didn't know how to name, but that I could feel out as a reader, and that gave me a connection to affects within me that I would not have been able to connect to (to feel) without Maud's help.

Supernal

There is a young girl on the other side that knows when the curtain lifts, we whisper to one another, avidly and thrilled. A young girl on an island, which is a strip of terra on the waters, a girl who holds a funny thing in her hand which makes black marks upon a blankness, a bunch of blanknesses that are bound and which she keeps behind a vertical strip of wood that opens, opens the way the curtain pulls back, when the solar wind blows and photons gather to such a greatness of force that the filmy lines between finite-infinite become a hyphenated thing: in-finite, where the hyphen is also a strip of terra, a strip of wood, a slide or a bridge, a handshake or a kiss, a flash of being both things on either side of the hyphen. Have you seen her eyes, we whisper back and forth, when she's beside the curtain lift?

Reading Cart = Grace

Godsend, God-sent help: an eleven-year-old girl in Ms. Crissmon's Reading Class was looking through the book cart at the front of the classroom, and on that day, the Bantam edition's Anne came smiling out at her, and the girl took it home and started reading, and it didn't just build an inner world, it gave lines to the inner world that was there but that had been too frightening to go to alone. Lines of religious expectation were internalized like barbed wire, and perhaps no one but that imitable redhead could have smuggled me past them and into the sand dunes, where the moaning of the sea echoed back some moaning in me.

Porous

I need not be so afraid of shadows, or longings. Those who have hearts to feel, feel. Did you ever hear of someone crying over a cut-down tree? Someone rapt, gazing at a picture? Who gets heart-thumps simply by looking at a pond? Marilla's words to Anne, and Elizabeth's to Emily, we know them don't we, we fly too high and sink too low: shamed. Funny how in this hard, fast world sensitivity can be configured, confused, with weakness. Or funny how weakness is a thing at all costs to avoid. But for Maud, who positions in her heroines this very sensitivity, this very—can I call it this without you, the reader, spiking back?—fragility (for without acrobatically defending the word, next to Marilla's humour-shaped resilience, there is a fragileness around Anne that is from more than the loss of childhood). Another word, maybe: vulnerability. Is this fragile shielding rather a vulnerable openness, a range of sensoria that is very tender to the world, to the Earth and its trees? Or yet another word: permeability. Sensitively wrought aching permeability. Those who have hearts to feel, feel.

Radar Attuned

I think of Maud's Big Feelers: Anne, Emily, Pat, Sara, Valancy, Jane. They have a kind of throbbing receptivity to them, don't they? Flesh and nerves, secreting brain kinks—as orbs of throbbing, these protagonists go around with huge receptors for beauty and for pain. How many times would I have dismantled my large antenna, which was circling slowly for those moments of beauty (sunset marks on the sky, or a friend's face wistfully seen across the gym floor), shamed by the largesse of its disk-shaped hunger, but for Maud?

In My Backpack, the Sky

Fifteen years old. I slip my worn copy of *Emily of New Moon* into my backpack to read during those scraps of time, waiting for the first bell, or at the end of Algebra. Just the sight of the book seems to open a window, and the window opens out into Prince Edward Island, onto Blair Water. Here I am sitting in math class in Texas, and then a window opens and out beyond it I smell the spicy fir trees, and all around the window are the lavender, lilac shadows that fill the grounds of New Moon as twilight comes. For it was not brightness I needed; I needed an affordance for the shadowy side. No church-seated emotion: Ellen Greene's God doesn't like shadows but Father's God seeps in from the corners of the heart, like melancholy, or a kind of homesickness, and these depths might not have been allowed in, but for Maud. But for the book found on the cart in the reading class, the book that was the trailhead to all the other books.

Her Breath Caught Again at the Sight

Alongside, or perhaps within, these huge receptors for beauty is also a kind of capacity to be wounded by beauty. Oh, how we avoid woundedness. But I think of Jacob's wrestling with God, and the wound (the limping) afterward that witnessed to the night when the divine was opposite of aloof, grappling about with human frame and form and *desire.* The piercing and aching and longing and throbbing that Maud's protagonists experience also witness to this: the eternal in ephemeral, the universal expanse in a little dewdrop on mayflowers. But for Maud, I do not know how deeply I could accept how thoroughly a healthy mind has weird, wounded, slanted, limping, shadowy, poignant, sad, wistful, longing sides. I guess in one way, this is mature and realistic integration; in another, a roguish take on flourishing. How could anyone really flourish without being hurt by the beauty of spruce trees?

Throb

Am I idealizing, idolizing, a form of woundedness, of weakness? How many of us would choose resilience over fragility? This is too black and white, I know. These are

not opposite ends, or if they are, they can function in the same protagonist, the same personhood, in interweaving ways. But from a place of honesty: before any integration, the throbbing. We pay in throbs—and how things burn, when what we have longed for hurts us, in lack or in sharpness—when we receive this way.

Measures of Responsiveness

While capacities for resilience and humour are desirable—I mean, they are interwoven into all the Big Feelers as attitudes for growing up, maturing, navigating vicissitudes, and repairing the sting of how we can hurt one another—there is a poignant welcome for other versions of mental strength. Can it be that in Montgomery's fiction the seeming opposite of strength—the fragile, the sensitive, and the easily hurt and saddened—are actually reintegrated into a vision of aptitude for being, even well-being? Can the sensitive imagination, formed by the wound of beauty, become a capacious sensibility, which instead of undergoing shame and imposed mutation is rather invited and recognized as invaluable to living life well? If not for Maud, I would have cast away, in fear and shame, that huge aching shadowy hunger—which, if we're honest, is just big enough to match the material that being thrown into life means we must learn to grapple with. I think I would have pieced it up, my hunger, into tiny, tidy, ordered squares—it would have astonished me, but for Maud, that this hunger should be afforded light, berth, or movement. It would have astounded me that this hunger could be fed with daydreams—big passionate dreams (thank you, Emily)—lines of poetry—and a kind of allowance of feeling that is so large that it becomes a peer to the large oak trees, and the pecan orchard, and the fog in the morning on the way to school, and the kinship of beloved friends.

Me-Tree

"The world as experience belongs to the basic word I-It. The basic word I-You established the world of relation … I contemplate a tree."
—Martin Buber, *I and Thou*[1]

That’s it: The Big Feelers, in their aching ability to respond to beauty (the tang of friendship, the warm benevolence of love, the Earth’s endless gifting) and pain (loss of self, regret, fear, horror, compulsion, longing, anger, time’s passage) compose a fictional (oh, but is it so fictional when they live and breathe in us like they do?), operative, narrative configuration of I-Thou. How many young readers around the globe, for more than a century now, have been bestowed L.M.Montgomery’s marvellous iteration of Martin Buber’s great theological and philosophical posit, that the move from I-It to I-Thou is utterly crucial. The ability to grant to the other this Thou-ness, to acknowledge the living radiance of fulsome being in another: This is a kind of being-in-the-world that lends itself to a wellness that I wonder is better said as a blessedness. Maud’s protagonists are doing it all the time, with their Big Feeler ways. But in terms of mental health: they are not always stable, are they? To move through the world in this way costs some stability, some steadiness of gait. And according to Maud, *that’s okay.*

Sanctuary

In the waving candlelight the words on the page are living things, dimensional, moving. In the Lookout an expanse of solitude yields what nocturnal creatures teach us: Nighttime holds things daytime cannot. Characters in the novels, lines in the poem, these unstring themselves from the sticky black matter of the deep imagination, come out of the depths like shapes coming out from the oily ponds. She lights her candles and the creamy pages of Jimmy-books become an iridescence.

Health and Woods

In an odd, beautiful little book *The Enigma of Health,* the hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer writes,

> Plato says … it is impossible to heal the body without knowing something about the soul, indeed without knowing something about the nature of the "whole." The term "whole" here is not intended as a methodological catchword … It is the "whole" in the sense of the movement of the stars above and the changes of weather below, the rise and fall of the oceans and the living nature of the woods and fields.[2]

This wholeness connects to the I-Thou vision of flourishing: Wholeness from a holeness that creates a permeability that might be synonymous with vulnerability that might be synonymous with fragility—but, all in all, is synonymous with blessedness (which, really, is an interactive kind of health) that comes to the thirsty so that the presence of another is an inimitable part of the flourishing equation, and casements we might try to nail closed when in the mood for hunkering down refuse to shut. This feels weak (how we need and need) but oh, if we can need enough, what we receive.

Whole, in the sense of the woods and fields. Wholeness as connected, webbed.

Webbed, my mental health is webbed with gossamer strings. But for Maud I would have dusted them away, binned them, years ago.

Hardscrabble

Emily's night on the haystack shows what we're capable of, our souls, when permeated by the existence of beauty. Light, sorrow, ocean-depths, star-flung traversing, gazing that gazes back into us, swaths of joy that far surpass happiness: a kind of music and also joining the music. This picture of mental health clearly surpasses survival, but it even circumvents that beauteous, enviable rendition of mental health that equals robustness or strength. There is a hunger here, an openness, a need and desire, a hole not a whole, a hole that longs and in the longing

has a chance to receive so much more than robustness would ever allow. But for Maud I would pursue robustness (it reflects back such strength); but with Maud I realize the goodness of gaps and pinings. It is okay to need, to want, to taste, and to cry for more.

Emily's Diary Entries Echo Back

"The shadow backed me but did not overwhelm me," writes Robert A. Johnson in *Owning Your Own Shadow*,[3] and later in the book come the words that this essay attests to: "To reconcile so great a span as heaven and earth is beyond our ordinary way of seeing: generally, two irreconcilable opposites (guilt and need) make neurotic structures in us. It takes a poet—or the poet in us—to overlap such a pair and make a sublime whole of them."[4] L.M. Montgomery, Maritime poet and one of Canada's greatest novelists, did this for me, and she showed me how to do it, too, so that I could access that poet in me, and—slowly slowly, with a good deal of fear—move toward a kind of recognition that the "sublime whole" infuses the notion of mental health with such *beauty*, such hunger for beauty and the zest to enter it, that for mental health to remain in those words, they must be almost completely reconfigured. They can and do include the temperamental experiences of a human's throbbing, hungry, wobbling, open-reaching, frightened, impish, shadowed modes. Ah, shadow: welcome. What would the coming evening be without you?

Snow Across the Garden *by E. Byrd Starr*

The winters were very long those years. They hurt, but who is not familiar with them? Her eighth novel, written in Montreal and published just after Cousin Jimmy's funeral, was about a long winter for a young teacher. The figure had at first terrified her: Could she really be so honest, draw from her own well so deeply? Could she really extend such mercy to that which was shameful—pitiable? And yet, was there any other character in all of her novels that inspired so many people to write back—with letters so honest in their heartbreaking bravery that she was humble in

the face of them?

The vocation of writing gave people the courage to come out of hiding.

Treadles Overhead

One of the great psychoanalysts, Karen Horney, writes in her chapter entitled “The Tyranny of the Should”:

> The inner dictates comprise all that the neurotic should be able to do, to be, to feel, to know—and taboos on how and what he should not be … He should be the utmost of honesty, generosity, considerateness, justice, dignity, courage, unselfishness. He should be the perfect love, husband, teacher. He should be able to endure everything … He should be able to solve every problem of his own … He should be able to overcome every difficulty of his as soon as he sees it. He should never be tired or fall ill. He should always be able to find a job. He should be able to do things in one hour which can only be done in two or three hours.[5]

This list! It is so familiar to my own understanding, when I was a child and thought like a child, of what it means to be an adult. Is it familiar to you? I am deeply glad that as I was stepping through the teenage years, I had Emily, weaving like Aunt Laura in the garret loom, a counter-narrative so that all the *shoulds* were a tiny bit less tyrannical, and, narratively if nothing else, made room for, indeed made welcome, the dips and gaps and wobbles and out-of-joints—the waves and cliffs and angers and hungers—and the sadnesses.

Blessed Are the Those Who Hunger

The lane through Texas pastures home. My bedroom, with its glowing nightlight I pretended was a candle. The mirror. My own pen and paper. These things were hued by the words of L.M. Montgomery, and I saw them differently because of her. If I were to try to put into words the difference, it would be with more love. It isn't just that I saw these things with more love, it is that I received them, and was connected to them, with more love. This is health of the brain that is interactive, outward-going—that sounds out like sonar waves, a way through the ocean.

And there was no need to be, in any way, close, or stingy, or ashamed, of this affection. Hermeneutics can be for living, and as a reader I saw clearly that this capacity for affection is what made these protagonists who they are; in Maud-currency, they have a special aptitude for living that outdoes those around them. This aptitude doesn't really lend sturdiness, or self-reliance, or even I think health as we might prescribe it. But it does yield a kind of joy, a blessedness, that comes from being able to receive.

Night Air Is Not Unhealthy

She put her pen down and walked to the open window, and looked out. All that she saw spoke to her, and she could hear each part.

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Banner Image: A Rainy L.M. Montgomery Tour from Bus Window. Photo by Jessica Brown, 2012.

- 1 Buber, *I and Thou* 56—57.
- 2 Gadamer, *Enigma* 115.
- 3 Johnson, *Owning* 47.
- 4 Johnson 108.
- 5 Horney, *Neurosis* 65.

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