»Depression was the loneliest fucking thing on earth.« (Elisabeth Wurtzel)

Depression memoirs as acts of lamentation?

Jochen Schmidt

1. Introduction

Medical research, sociology and theology have paid a lot of attention to the genre that can be called autopathography, i.e., self-narrations of authors who account for their struggle with illnesses.[1] The focus of the vast majority of this research lies on physical illnesses. Even though depression memoirs, i.e., biographical self-narrations by authors who are suffering from mood disorders, form an important – and distinct, as I will argue – group within the category of autopathographies, this particular kind of writing has received little attention as yet.[2] The following paper will be asking what authors of depression memoirs actually do. The leitmotif of this inquiry will be the question: to what extent can the meaning of these self-expressions be linked to the self-expression of pain in lament? There are essentially two alternative models that account for the function of lament in the process of working through one's pain: One model, let us call it »the strong model,« operates dialectically, it rests on the assumption that the more suffering there is, the more meaning will potentially come along in the process of suffering. Lamenting is therefore linked to meaning as the suffering individual expresses the meaning that is found in deep suffering. The

[1] Cf. J. K. Aronson, 'Autopathography: The Patient's Tale', *BMJ*, 321/7276 (2000), 1599–602; Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013); Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography* (West Lafayette, Ind: Purdue University Press, 1993) <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0630/92049892-d.html>; Thorsten Moos, *Krankheitserfahrung und Religion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 121–169; G. Thomas Couser, *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life-Writing* (Wisconsin studies in American autobiography, Madison, Wis.: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1997) <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0666/97011952-b.html>; Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1988).

[2] Cf. Hilary Anne Clark (ed.), *Depression and Narrative: Telling the Dark* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008); Aronson, 'Autopathography: The Patient's Tale' (above, n. 1), 1602.

other model, let us call it »the weak model,« assumes that the expression of suffering is not about bestowing meaning to suffering and making claims about suffering, but about generating individual meaning within suffering and in the very act of self-expression.[3] The following paper has been written with the expectation that melancholy autobiographies might accord with this weak model. At first sight, there is little evidence for that. While the melancholy autobiographies that I considered mainly – with some notable exceptions – keep a sound distance to the strong model, there is almost no evidence at all for what I described as the weak model. In what follows, I will explore the relationships between melancholy autobiographies and (biblical) lament by looking first at explicit traces of both, then at passages that pertain to what I call the strong model, before following my sources in a quite different direction, i.e. the creation of a community by means of writing. This will motivate a reframing of my original thesis.

2. FAITH, LAMENT, AND THE MEANING OF SUFFERING

To begin with, I am looking at explicit religious elements in my sources, particularly references to lament. Martha Manning is the only author (to my knowledge) in whose autopathography lamentation to God and apostrophe appear at length. Writing about her grandmother, who also suffered from depression, Manning describes her grandmother's lamentation as a ritual in the strictest sense of the word:

> The memory is so clear because it happened so many times:
>
> My grandmother sits at the kitchen table. [...] I watch the objects [on the table] as I circle my grandmother's depression. [...] I sit and I feel the backs of my thighs digging into the chair. I bear down so hard I can feel the ridges in the seat making indentations in my ass. [...] And she sighs. She exhales in a way that screams, »I give up. I am already dead.« And I worry that she somehow has the power to take me with her. »It's only a sigh,« Brian says to me. But then she leans over and says, »Oh Maaaaaaaaaarthaaaaa.« It's never more than that. It doesn't have to be. In the lament is the absolute and total conveyance of sorrow. And I know it is my cue to urge her on in her litany of pain. Back and forth, like a priest and an acolyte.[4]

This account for ritualistic lamentation remains uncommented. All we learn is that it takes place, and that lament has infectious power – Martha Manning

[3] Cf. Jochen Schmidt, 'Art. Lament, Lamentation. III. Christianity. D. Modern Europe and America', *EBR*, 5 (2017), 702–4, 4; Jochen Schmidt, *Klage: Überlegungen zur Linderung reflexiven Leidens* (RPT, 58, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 112–63.

[4] Martha Manning, *Undercurrents: A Life Beneath the Surface* (New York, N.Y.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 27.

worries that her grandmother's lament somehow has the power to take her along. Manning herself laments at other occasions, and she quotes a lamentation psalm and a psalm of penitence, though she does not draw a connection between the different instances of lament.[5]

The quest for the meaning of suffering is treated in different way. The psychiatrist Kay Redfield Jamison, who has written extensively about (her own) depression, the artistic temperament, and suicide, makes strong claims about the meaning of suffering.[6] She appears in Martha Manning's autobiography as Manning's therapist, and we hear Jamison say to Manning that many great artists were severely mentally ill and that psychotherapists who themselves suffer from depression are able to empathize with their patients in an especially intensive way. Martha accepts this interpretation, albeit hesitantly.

> [Kay] encourages me to articulate the good things that have come from the experience. I refuse to consider the fact that this cloud had anything approaching a silver lining. She seizes on the fact that I finally stopped pretending to be fine when I wasn't. I let people help me, really take care of me. She's right. It is especially true with my family, in it's bringing me closer to my parents, from whom I've always asserted such strong independence.[7]

In her own writing, Jamison makes it clear that she was enriched by her own depression.[8] Manning, on the other hand, is ambivalent towards the claim that depression has a positive value. In a moment of particular clarity, she describes her depression's value in the same language that Romano Guardini and many others use:[9]

> In these flashes of insights, I understand for a moment that one of the great dividends of darkness is an increased sensitivity for the light. And in these rare and expansive moments, I am called to delight.[10]

---

[5] Ibid., 105: »And every morning I utter the same lament, 'Oh God, I'm still alive.'« Manning reports herself listening to a reading of Psalm 56 during a retreat a monastery and she gives a full quotation of Psalm 38 (ibid, 50).

[6] Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1994); Kay R. Jamison, *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000); Kay R. Jamison, *Nothing Was the Same: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).

[7] Manning, *Undercurrents* (above, n. 4), 146.

[8] Kay R. Jamison, *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* (London: Picador, 2015), 218.

[9] Cf. Romano Guardini, *The Human Experience: Essays on Providence, Melancholy, Community, & Freedom* (Providence: Cluny Media LLC, 2018).

[10] Manning, *Undercurrents* (above, n. 4), 161.

But only a few days later, upon going through a renewed spell of depression, she recounts this »bullshit« and says it is only true for the bright phases in life.

> All the romantic nonsense about depression somehow making one into a creature of unique sensibilities is easy to agree with when I feel good. Then I'm sharper, superior for having weathered something terribly difficult, or just plain pleased at having narrowly gotten away with something once again – like the snow day after the night's homework I didn't do. All of it stands up to the light, but it's bullshit in the shadows. I don't care about unique sensibilities. All I care about is surviving. My goal in life is just to get through the days.[11]

The work of David Karp, who has written a monograph based on interviews with and letters from people who suffer from depression, leaves the reader with a similar impression. Some voices that he quotes confirm that depression can be a gift or a friend, but the overwhelming impression is that the world would be a better place without it.[12] And it seems to me that this is about all that can be said about the attribution of meaning to depressive suffering.

So, the popular idea that the depth of suffering promises some height of insight is not reflected in the accounts of suffering I read. The famous position according to which lament turns to praise in the lamentation psalms when the suffering individual has encountered the true meaning of their suffering is in itself a dubious interpretation of the lamentation psalms,[13] as the lamentation psalms are written in retrospect from the perspective of authors who give witness to the overcoming of their suffering.

3. »WRITING« AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

My initial assumption, again, was that autopathographies themselves have an alleviating function; that the act of writing contributes to the solution of the conflicts expressed. This assumption is echoed in research, but not – with very few exceptions – in the sources that I have been looking at so far. An obvious function of autopathographies can lie in finding a thread of meaning in the disruptive experiences of depressive passages in life, as Hilary Clark, for example, points out. She says that writing makes sense of the vast discontinuity between

---

[11] Ibid., 173.

[12] David A. Karp, *Speaking of Sadness: Depression, Disconnection, and the Meanings of Illness* (Updated and expanded edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), e.g. 207, 218.

[13] Williamson, 'Reading the Lament Psalms Backwards' (above, n. 13); Schmidt, *Klage* (above, n. 3), 156ff. Eric Wilson rehearses these traditions at length in his *Against happiness* (Eric G. Wilson, *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy* (New York, NY: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2008)) and also in his autobiography (see below).

spells of depression and spells of relief.[14] From a feminist perspective, Sophia Blanch claims that life-writing can have an empowering function.[15] Both of these claims make sense to me, but I find little evidence that the particular autopathographies that I looked at indeed call for interpretations along these lines. Martha Manning takes up the theme of writing, as she is presenting her autopathography in the form of a diary, which means that she does not write her story in retrospect, but during her depression. Yet surprisingly, the only passage that suggests a productive meaning of writing is a comment that she quotes her mother making as Martha Manning is admitted to a mental hospital:

> [My mother] hands me several pads of paper and a package of pens, reminding me that it was at the lowest point in her life that she began to paint. »No matter how bad you feel,« she tells me, »you must keep writing.«[16]

There is no further discussion about the implicit assumption that writing has an important function in the text. Also, Manning uses the act of writing as a metaphor for how meaning is sought in depression, yet the metaphor does not describe the act of meaning, but rather the way she comes to interpret her life-story.[17]

Tracy Thompson describes her writing as a way of controlling her irrational thoughts. I will quote a couple of passages from the beginning of her autobiography:

> I feel as if my brain were a lump of protoplasm with tiny circuits embedded in it, and some of the wires keep shorting out. There are tiny little electrical fires up there, leaving crispy sections of neurons smoking and ruined.
>
> At least that's how it seems. Sitting in the subway station, waiting for the train, I realize I am not thinking straight, so I do what I've done before in this situation: I get out a pen and paper and start writing down what I call my »dysfunctional thoughts.«[18]
>
> I was beginning a private journal and, I wrote, I had two reasons for trying this experiment. One was to practice my writing. The other purpose was »to put down the cause of my depression and to see if I can help myself that way [...]. It sounds

[14] Hilary Clark, 'Introduction', in Hilary Anne Clark (ed.), *Depression and Narrative. Telling the Dark* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), 1-12, 2.
[15] Sophie Blanch, 'Writing Self/Delusion. Subjective and Scriptotherapy in Emily Holmes Coleman's The Shutter of Snow', in Hilary Anne Clark (ed.), *Depression and Narrative. Telling the Dark* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), 213-27, 219.
[16] Manning, *Undercurrents* (above, n. 4), 115.
[17] Ibid., 186.
[18] Tracy Thompson, *The Beast: A Reckoning with Depression* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 3.

> horrible, and it is, but a couple of times I have thought how nice it would be to kill myself!!!«[19]

Later in her book, she gives a complex analysis of what writing meant:

> The journal entries were one form of something I was doing a lot of: compulsive note taking. My emotions were so jumbled and intense that, at some level, I knew they didn't make sense. But it was inconceivable that my moods might be dictating my perceptions, instead of the other way around. I turned to the other alternative: my perceptions had to match my moods, and that required note taking – because keeping track of the »real« perceptions was difficult: I tended to forget what they were, and because they didn't actually match reality, I kept having to fix them in my mind, to remind myself of what the »truth« was.[20]

So, on a basic level, note taking acts as a kind of reality-check for Thompson, but she does not record whether this helped her to alleviate her suffering. I will come back to Thompson at the end of this paper.

Katie Millet, author of *The Looney Bin Trip*, says to herself »You have to write yourself out [of the depression],« but being a professional writer, she initially does not refer to writing about her depression but writing in the sense of working.[21] This writing/work therapy almost fails her, writing would not come for long time, as she is caught in her depression. It turns out that Millet is unable to write about anything other than her depression[22] – which eventually means that she writes her autopathography, »understanding that it was this book or none, *The Loony-Bin Trip* or nothing. For it stood like a boulder in the middle of the room, demanding to be attended to – it could no longer be ignored.«[23] The decision to write the book evolved after she was visited by a friend who shares the same struggle as she does; at first, Millet writes a short story of that visit, accounting for »[w]hat had been broken in her, in me, struggling to heal or hide the fractures. And the next day,« she continues, »I began *The Loony-Bin Trip*.«[24] It is remarkable that Millet seems to write her melancholy autobiography simply in order to keep writing. The book that she then does write, *The Loony-Bin Trip*, is all about the social dimension of depression, and I suspect that this, the social dimension of depression, is actually what drives melancholy autobiographies.

---

[19] Ibid., 5.
[20] Ibid., 131.
[21] Kate Millett, *The Loony-Bin Trip* (New York NY u.a.: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 256.
[22] Ibid., 256, 276.
[23] Ibid., 308.
[24] Ibid., 308.

Elisabeth Wurtzel's work strikes a very similar note. She points out that what intensified her suffering in particular was the lack of solidarity or the lack of a group of people she could identify with.

> I'm figuring, if I can just become poor white trash, if I can just get in touch with the blue collar blues, then there'll be a reason why I feel this way. I will be a fucked-up Marxian worker person, alienated from the fruits of my labor. My misery will begin to make sense.[25]

> Depression was the loneliest fucking thing on earth. There were no halfway houses for depressives, no Depression Anonymous meetings that I knew of.[26]

Wurtzel explains at some length why depression is so horribly lonely: It is because those who share this fate are too ashamed to talk about it and more often than not do not even become aware of one another. She reports that her cousin Pamela, who also suffered from depression, and her attended a summer camp together, but are utterly unaware of their common struggle.

> If only I had known the truth about Pamela, if only I'd known we really did have some things in common. It was years later when I found out that Pamela had repeated episodes of depression, of falling into an almost catatonic blankness that made my aunt and uncle so frustrated and clumsy in her presence that they would just scream and prod in their efforts to get her to respond to them. She'd effectively been driven to silence by all that noise, and had an adolescence marked by suicidal behavior. But, of course, we never talked about any of that stuff because who on earth would have thought to bring it up? I didn't know about her, she didn't know about me, and in the cabal silence and shame that seems so integral to depression, no one had bothered to tell us.[27]

Also, Wurtzel does not at all claim that love will save her: she does not imply that depression is only about sociality, but its hazardous effect and the desires it creates are all about relationships.[28] Wurtzel also rejects the idea that the pain has some obscure meaning: »The only lesson I will ever derive from this pain is how bad pain can be.«[29] The abyss of suffering is precisely that, which cannot be put into words, which resists any transition into art. The meaning of writing is to be found completely elsewhere. It is to be found in being less lonely.

---

[25] Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Prozac Nation* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 50.
[26] Ibid., 70.
[27] Ibid., 89f.
[28] Ibid., 246.
[29] Ibid., 251.

> When I finally have to explain my motives for writing this book, it really does come down to wanting to feel less lonely in this lonely feeling, wanting to shed depression's thick, tender, suffocating skin, I wanted to open and say, This may not matter to anyone else, but as far as I'm concerned at times it has felt like I've had Vietnam going on in my own brain. And I really hoped to reach other people and touch a little bit of their loneliness.[30]

The social dimension, I argue, is the key to understanding what writing means to the suffering writer. Victor Frankl writes in *Man's Search for Meaning* that what saved his life in Auschwitz was to think that someday, he will account for his suffering and his observations in the concentration camp in front of an audience – which he later did at length.[31] The meaning he found lies, at least to some degree, in the social dimension of his reflections, in anticipated sociality, and this I think is also the key to understanding melancholy autobiographies.

4. »THANK GOD I'M NOT ALONE.« DEPRESSION AND SOLIDARITY

Much of what people have brought forward by way of explaining the causes of depression and defending therapies is in dispute. If there is one thing that might be undisputed, it is the need for solidarity. This may be a somewhat modest und underwhelming outcome. Depression can hardly be cured by mere solidarity, and to some extent the person suffering from depression is alone in that others, who do not share this illness, do not inhabit the same world. Despite this being so, establishing communication about depression and solidarity with and among those who suffer from depression is the key social task.

This point is made in a letter that Karp, author *of Speaking of Sadness*, received from one of his readers:

> I have just finished reading your new book, *Speaking of Sadness*, and I want to tell you that it has had a transformative effect on me. [...] Although there are many parts of the book that have been powerful reading, I think the most significant thing I take away is something to live with, learn from, and use as a grounding for a form of community.[32]

This is also a key point that Sally Brampton makes in her memoir, *Shoot the Damn Dog*. Brampton makes it clear that there is hardly meaning to be found

---

[30] Ibid., 359.

[31] Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: The Classic Tribute to Hope from the Holocaust* (London: Rider, 2008).

[32] Karp, *Speaking of Sadness* (above, n. 12), 11.

within her depression. There is no point, she concludes, and the task is to accommodate with the fact, and to work oneself out of the depression in little steps if one can.[33] When approaching, though not yet having arrived at, recovery from her severe depression – a recovery that she sadly never reached in the end –, she writes an article in the Daily Telegraph about her depression, and comments:

> So I wrote, trying to inject as much hope (as much for myself as anyone else) as I could. It was incredibly painful but, curiously, the actual writing of it came easily perhaps because I didn't see it as a piece of journalism but as a way of connecting.[34]

She reports that she received 2000 letters in response, and each said:

> »Thank God I'm not alone.«[35]

Tracy Thompson also received strong reactions after writing about her depression in the newspaper.

To write an autobiographical piece may seem a most solipsistic endeavour, but from what we find in the sources, the opposite is true. Writing is transcending oneself, stretching out towards someone who will or at least may someday read what one writes. Melancholy autobiographies are largely about how depression affects the connections between people, and they are written for those who are affected by depression either personally or socially. Tracy Thompson at some stage begins to draw and mix written words into her drawings, and she comments that this is done precisely in order to foster her connection to the outer world:

> Depression, as I well knew, did not consist merely in feeling sad; it was often heralded by the absence of feeling. My sketchbooks became a kind of diary, a daily self-monitoring device which helped me guard against sliding into that numbness. It was also a guard against self-absorption. Drawing required seeing, which required focusing on the outside world – even if it was on some trivial object, even if it was only for a few minutes at a time. It offered a middle ground between Plato's ancient admonition – »The life which is unexamined is not worth living« – and its corollary: »The unlived life is not worth examining.«[36]

---

[33] Sally Brampton, *Shoot the Damn Dog: A Memoir of Depression* (New York: W.W. Nortoni, 2008), 198; 249 (»Finally, I accepted that essentially there is no point«).

[34] Ibid. 261; Sally Brampton, 'I told myself - 'Get over yourself. Stop snivelling. Stop whining...", *The Daily Telegraph*, 5 Mar 2003 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/sally-brampton-i-told-myself—get-over-yourself-stop-snivelling/>.

[35] Brampton, *Shoot the Damn Dog* (above, n. 33), 7.

[36] Thompson, *The Beast* (above, n. 18), 260.

Maybe people don't write themselves out of depression; but at least to some extent, they write themselves out of the isolation that typically comes along with depression. I will draw towards a close with a short interaction between Tracy Thompson and a colleague of hers:

> »Tracy, what's the matter?« she said. What's really bothering you?« [...]
>
> I looked at her and could not answer. And in that silence I found the worst fear of all.[37]

This is indeed the main thread of Thompson's book: she struggles with her feeling of isolation, disconnection, disinterest, being trapped behind a glass wall, and says repeatedly that the one thing she craved was connection, and that her life story was her failure to connect.[38] If there is a consistent theme in the melancholy autobiographies that I looked at, it is this: the lament for the loss of connection, the desire to connect; writing autobiographies is anything but solitary expressivism, it is reaching out to an audience, whether it be a concrete anticipated audience or a potential audience. Even Eric Wilson, who dwells on negative-theological and existentialist perspectives on depressive suffering at some length, and who claims that »[h]umanity only blooms on the ground of gloom,«[39] does not leave the reader with the impression that these are crucial for his own journey through depression; indeed his personal turning point appears to a be an existential break-down and breakthrough that occurs during a group therapy.

5. »I TOOK NOTES; IT WAS THE ONLY THING I COULD DO.« LAMENT WITHOUT MEANING

In conclusion, the working hypothesis of this paper has been proved wrong. Lament does not produce a lot of meaning in depression memoirs. There is some evidence to the fact that this is true for depression memoirs but not true for the majority of those autopathographies that narrate physical illnesses, as Thorsten Moos' recent study demonstrates.[40] Perhaps the creative potential of lament, its potential to generate meaning in the abyss fails when the abyss *consists* of meaninglessness in the first place (rather than »merely« destructing meaning),

---

[37] Ibid., 83.
[38] Ibid., 201f., 247, 268.
[39] Eric Wilson, *The Mercy of Eternity: A Memoir of Depression and Grace* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 81.
[40] Moos, *Krankheitserfahrung und Religion* (above, n. 1), 202ff. While the majority of autopathographies that narrate physical illnesses account for restitution, there are also »chaotic« narratives that account for the utter contingency of illness. Cf. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller* (above, n. 1), 97ff.

as is the case with depression, where the »unmaking of the world« (Elaine Scarry) is total and beyond the possibility of narrative repair.[41] In spite of their stylistic grandeur, melancholy autobiographies typically contain a very obvious and simple message, i.e. a call for solidarity with and among those who are afflicted by the beast of depression.

Looking back at my initial hypothesis, it seems that the material I examined forces me to extend the scale that I offered when I distinguished between a strong model and a weak model. The depression memoirs that I looked at give an account for the act of writing that is, as it were, weaker than weak. When authors of depression memoirs reflect on what they have achieved by their writing, they typically emphasise the social dimension of writing, and this can be related to biblical lament insofar as biblical lament is also an act of communicating with others.[42] But the depression itself that the authors of depression memoirs write about deprives social interactions of all meaning. It is only in retrospect that their writing has gained meaning. Writing from within a depressive episode, Tracy Thompson accounts for the meaning of her writing in a very arid kind of way:

> I found myself a character in an Ionesco play, surrounded by people with no discernible connection to each other, a dozen plot lines arbitrarily twisted into a motley strand. I took notes; it was the only thing I could do.[43]

The weak model of lament that I proposed assumes that the self-expression of the suffering individual can create meaning. Again, there are strong indications that this is true in many situations, but hardly with respect to depressive suffering. Here, writing is reduced to just writing, taking notes, rather than continuing to do nothing. So even though depression memoirs can contribute to building a community, the experience or indeed the non-experience they account for is 'incommunicado,' it is a rift that the community must accept like Job's friends did, who sat with Job for seven days and seven nights in silence, thereby embedding silence in community.[44] And therein, perhaps, depression memoirs account for lament in the strongest sense of word, i.e., a liminal lament that rests firmly just at the edge of complete silence in the face of the unspeakable.[45]

---

[41] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
[42] Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Pr), 169.
[43] Thompson, *The Beast* (above, n. 18), 158.
[44] Job 2:13.
[45] Gershom Scholem, 'On Lament and Lamentation', in Ilit Ferber and Paula Schwebel (eds.), *Lament in Jewish Thought. Philosophical, Theological, and Literary Perspectives* (Perspectives on Jewish texts and contexts, Volume 2, Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2014), 237–54.