

Starting to Speak: Madness and the Narration of Identity

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Summary of thesis

In this thesis I study the relationship between narrative and identity in the context of narrative representations of 'mental illness' or 'madness'. Through readings of autobiographical and fictional narrative texts, I consider how identity is textually figured, and how the disruptive effects of madness shape these figurations. I argue here for a view of psychological life as underpinned by textual and linguistic elements, and suggest that theoretical conceptions of 'narrative identity' should be reworked to account for the experience of vulnerable, marginalized subjects.

In Chapter One I discuss the disruption of the sense of selfhood produced by madness; the difficulties of representing madness within a narrative form; and the ramifications of madness for 'narrative identity' as a theoretical position.

In Chapter Two I discuss Lauren Slater's *Spasm: A Memoir with Lies* and Margiad Evans's *A Ray of Darkness*. Both texts relate experiences of epilepsy and depression, and, despite their very different style and tone, both propose dialogic and diffuse paradigms for autobiography.

In Chapter Three I discuss Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation*. I suggest that narration in this text is insinuated as a perilous venture, and that mapped within narrative form are the reverberations of unresolved distress.

Chapter Four considers difficulties inherent in the narrative and linguistic representation of madness. I discuss Foucault and Derrida's debate on this subject, Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*, and Ross Burke's *The Truth Effect*.

Chapter Five considers Alasdair Gray's novel *1982, Janine*. I argue that this text dramatizes a particular type of story-telling, and demonstrates its importance for the well-being of the self.

In Chapter Six I discuss two diaries. With reference to theory by Ricoeur and Foucault, I suggest that these apparently mundane narratives of everyday life represent profound refashionings of the self.

Chapter Seven summarizes my conclusions and suggests directions for future work.

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Part of our existence lies in the feelings of those near to us.
Primo Levi

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1. Madness and the Narration of Identity

A good doctor does not carry a remedy to his patient,
he lets the patient teach him what the remedy is.

Lanark, Alasdair Gray

1.1 Introduction

Writing of his experience of ‘mental illness’¹ in a brief essay, Jerod Poore notes that “with bipolar disorder, you won’t be you for very much longer. [...] You’ll change drastically and suddenly”.² Going on to emphasize that this change affects not just “mood and outlook”, but “core identity”,³ he describes how in periods of sickness he became convinced that he “wasn’t human”, how his ability to process verbal or numerical information has been attenuated, and how his memories of himself are radically dissonant with his experience of self in the present. Yet he notes that the process of writing of his illness has also affected his sense of selfhood. Despite his heavily medicated state, writing revives “the old manic me”, a ‘revival’ which is not entirely deleterious. Poore notes that while writing his account he has been able to “[taste] food the way it used to taste”, and ends by reiterating how the process of telling his story has altered his experience of selfhood: “It was exhilarating and scary to be like the old me these past few days writing this piece, a vacation into some of the better parts of those 15 years”.⁴

Poore’s account engages with many of the concerns motivating this inquiry. In this thesis I study the relationship between narrative and identity in the specific context of the narrative representation of chronic psychological disturbance – that is to say, ‘mental illness’ or ‘madness’. Through readings of autobiographical and fictional narrative texts which focus on madness and its representation, I consider the ways in which identity is figured, and how the disruptive effects of madness shape these figurations, as well as influence the very form and structure of narrative. I argue here for a view of psychological life, and indeed personhood, as intimately implicated with,

¹ Both ‘mental illness’ and ‘madness’ can, for different reasons, be problematic terms for those who live with chronic mental distress. In this study I use both, but generally I prefer ‘madness’; for me, the term does not so overtly tie distress to a biomedical model.

² Jerod Poore, ‘A first-person account of bipolar disorder’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7th July 2002 <<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2002/07/07/LV44762.DTL>> [accessed 12 March 2004], (para. 1 of 29).

³ *Ibid* (para. 2 of 29).

⁴ *Ibid* (para. 29 of 29).

and underpinned by, discursive, textual, and linguistic elements. This, together with the way in which madness is often characterized by a disordering in the textual nature of selfhood – of the individual's relationship with language – means that a study of conjunctions between narrative and madness throws the processes of identity formation and their complex relationship with language and narrative into sharp relief.

Through this focus I hope to add something new to the considerable weight of academic work undertaken in recent years on the concept of 'narrative identity', or, more broadly, the way in which our sense of selfhood is bound up with, and dependent upon, stories. This interest has been evident in the humanities, but perhaps is even more visible in the human sciences: with the so-called linguistic or interpretive turn, there has been a burgeoning of studies which have considered the role of narrative in social and psychological life.⁵ Even in medicine – and not solely confined to the 'medical humanities' – there is a growing impetus to study the ways in which illness and the clinical encounter are mediated through a variety of narratives, both 'personal' and socio-cultural.⁶

These parallel developments have led to an increasing interanimation of what had previously been considered fairly discrete disciplines. Here I contribute a specialised intervention to these discussions, from a literary perspective, on the ways in which the disruptions of chronic distress affect and are affected by the production of identity narratives. Madness, as we shall see, seems to challenge some of the very underpinnings of what makes narrative, and therefore identity itself, possible; and

⁵ See for instance: Martin Kreisworth, 'Trusting the Tale: The Narrativist turn in the Human Sciences', *New Literary History*, 23.3 (1992), 629-57; Kip Jones, 'The turn to a narrative knowing of persons', in *New Qualitative Methodologies in Health and Social Care*, ed. by F. L. Rapport (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2004) [draft chapter]; G. C. Rosenwald and R. L. Ochberg (eds.), *Storied lives: The cultural politics of self-understanding* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); J. Shorter and K. Gergen (eds.), *Texts of Identity* (London: Sage, 1989); D. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988); J. Holstein and J. F. Gubrium, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); M. Freeman, *Rewriting the self: History, memory, narrative* (New York: Routledge, 1993); J. Brockmeier, and D. Carbaugh (eds.), *Narrative And Identity: Studies In Autobiography, Self And Culture* (John Benjamins, 2001). This quote from Lars Iyer is apposite: "The 'narrative turn' [...] is born of an insistence that there are modes of experience that cannot be captured by a theory that would transcend the historicity of experience." 'Blanchot, Narration, and the Event', *Postmodern Culture*, 12.3 (Sept. 2002), para 1 of 46 <<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.502/12.3contents.html>> [Accessed 12 Feb. 2004].

⁶ See for instance the collection of essays edited by Trisha Greenhalgh and Brian Hurwitz entitled *Narrative Based Medicine: Dialogue and discourse in clinical practice* (London: BMJ books, 1998). Also of interest are *Healing Stories: Narrative in Psychiatry and Psychotherapy* edited by Glenn Roberts and Jeremy Holmes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); M. K. Hunter, *Doctors' Stories: The Narrative Structure of Medical Knowledge* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991); J. W. Pennebaker, 'Telling Stories: The Health Benefits of Narrative', *Lit Med*, 19.1 (2000), 3-18; J.A. Sakalys, 'The Political role of Illness Narratives', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 31.6 (June 2000), 1469-1475; Jane Harden, 'Language, Discourse and the Chronotope: Applying Literary Theory to the Narratives in Health Care', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 31.3 (March 2000), 506-512.

attempts to narrate madness and the mad self bring to the fore specific issues and problems which illumine the mechanisms and efficacy of narrative identity generally – which are relevant, that is to say, outside what often appears as the ghetto of madness and its signification.

My study here is primarily focussed on autobiographical accounts of the experience of madness. My concern, however, is with the mechanisms of narrative rather than ‘experience’ per se, and, partly in order to emphasize this, I also consider a first person novel. In addition, an engagement with the economies of the fictional is necessary in my discussions of what are ostensibly autobiographical accounts. As part of their strategic engagement with madness, several of the memoirists I study interrogate the border between the invented and the factual, positioning their texts in an ambivalent space between fiction and autobiography – and in at least two instances refusing to specify which side of this generic divide they occupy.

My focus here is on contemporary literature: all of the texts I consider were published after 1945, and most of them within the last twenty years. The vast number of texts produced by those suffering the depredations of chronic distress means that a study which engaged with a much wider historical period would be a fascinating but colossal undertaking. My ambitions here are, necessarily, more modest.

1.2 Madness and identity

The very nature of madness seems to put under question the foundations of human identity, forcing a reconsideration of the nature of selfhood as well as invoking challenges to taken-for-granted notions of knowledge and understanding. For if madness is an illness, then it is a strange kind of malady: in its grip the very foundations of personality seem to shift, mutate, even disaggregate entirely. If madness is an illness, then it would seem as if the object of its corruption is subjectivity itself. For the individual going through insanity, for the author describing its effects, for the academic studying the texts of madness, and for the general reader, the question arises as to whether selfhood is a much more fragile entity, at any moment liable to collapse or metamorphose, than we may be accustomed to think: even those who believe themselves to be untouched by madness may feel obliged, unless they are to cast the mad as utterly removed from their own particular strain of humanness, to confront the questions it raises about the nature of personal identity.

As we shall see, many of the texts I read here emphasize how a settled sense of identity is disrupted within madness, and such observations accord with a wide variety of opinion, medical and otherwise. Indeed, the view that such disruption is a common effect of chronic mental distress is so widely shared that it is virtually a truism. In the mainstream of psychiatric opinion it is axiomatic, for instance, that the psychological process known as ‘dissociation’, which involves often troubling alterations in the sense of self, is common to many different psychological disorders;⁷ and physicians such as Bleuler, Jaspers, Federn, Freeman, and, more recently, Spitzer, Helmsley, Fischman, and Fabrega, have contended that, specifically in the case of psychosis, this disruption is particularly acute.⁸ In addition, clinicians such as Richard Grossman have tracked the disintegration of self in depression, and even in narcissistic personality disorders.⁹

Moreover, many commentators from the more critical fringes of psychiatry, theory, psychology, and social science largely agree – notwithstanding disagreements concerning the cause of both illness and disruption of self. (Arguments from this critical perspective are generally far more attuned than are traditional biomedical approaches to madness to the role narrative, and more broadly language, play in both the experience of madness and selfhood.) For example, David Mann insists that “what is most important about psychiatric ailments [...] is that they can be understood as losses of self”,¹⁰ while Robert Young, despite noting that “some of the most sensitive students of psychosis are able to find the meaning in the utterances of schizophrenics and the appropriateness of them to the patients’ experiences”, comments that, for the psychotic, “fragmentation of self becomes the norm”.

⁷ See for instance: G. Saxe, B. van der Kolk, R. Berkowitz, K. Hall, G. Lieberg, and J. Scharz, ‘Dissociative Disorders in Psychiatric Inpatients’, *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 150 (1993), 1037-42; Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, ‘The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma’, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 158-182 (p. 164).

⁸ See for instance: Eugen Bleuler, *Dementia Praecox or the group of schizophrenias*, trans. by Joseph Zinkin (New York: International Universities Press, 1966); Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, trans. by J. Hoenig and Marian W. Hamilton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962); T. Freeman, J. Cameron and A. McGhie, *Chronic Schizophrenia* (New York: International Universities Press, 1958); P. Federn, *Ego Psychology and the Psychoses* (New York: Basic Books, 1952); M. Spitzer, ‘Ichstorung. In Search of a Theory’, in Manfred Spitzer and Brendan A. Maher (eds.), *Philosophy and Psychopathology* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1990), pp. 167-183; H. Fabrega, ‘The Self and Schizophrenia: A Cultural Perspective’, *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 15, 277-290; David R. Hemsley, ‘The Disruption of the “sense of self” in Schizophrenia: Potential Links with Disturbances of Information Processing’, *British Journal of Medical Psychology* (1998), 71, 115-124.

⁹ Richard Grossman, ‘Voicelessness: Roots, Consequences, and Cure’, Address to the International Moebius Syndrome Conference, July, 23rd, 2000. See Grossman’s website at <<http://www.voicelessness.com>> for a collection of his essays.

¹⁰ David W. Mann, ‘Ownership: A Pathography of the Self’, *British Journal of Medical Psychology* (1991) 64, pp. 211-223 (p. 216).

People are said to 'break down', fall apart, disintegrate, to be 'in pieces', to experience 'nameless dread' and feel that they are falling through empty space. These are certainly the characteristic subjective experiences of psychotics much of the time (and of all of us from time to time), and those around them certainly testify to the striking incoherence and inappropriateness of their utterances and behaviour.¹¹

From not dissimilar perspectives, James Glass notes that psychotics may "experience themselves as inhuman, as things or objects, as pieces of dead matter",¹² and writes of the shattering of a "core sense of self";¹³ David Levin, acknowledging that "the suffering of the schizophrenic contains within its speech a truth", also recognizes that a concomitant dissociation "divides the Self [...] and threatens to destroy [...] whatever healthy sense of integration and wholeness might still hold out";¹⁴ while Marta Caminero-Santangelo, describing the fragmented being-state of Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD), asserts that this condition demonstrates "the absolute powerlessness of one who cannot completely claim the 'I' for herself".¹⁵ R.D. Laing writes of the psychotic self as "desiccated and dead",¹⁶ a description which bears

¹¹ Robert Young, 'Whatever Happened To Human Nature?', in idem, *Whatever Happened To Human Nature?* <<http://www.shef.ac.uk/~psysc/human/chap1.html>> [accessed 9 September 2003] (para. 28 of 39). It is worth noting that Young is at pains to allow for a continuum linking mad and normal experience; particularly important is his denial that during psychosis the self completely disappears: "Anyone who has worked with catatonics in a mental hospital will have a story to tell about one who improves after prolonged immobility and silence and tells you something you said to them months or even years earlier when he or she was apparently completely out of contact. There are debates in psychoanalysis about this matter, but, as I said in chapter one, there is common ground that there cannot be no object. The self is not completely fragmented; there is always an ego; there is the coherence of a process. Otherwise the therapeutic work that has been done so successfully with psychotics simply could not get off the ground. It would be heartbreaking (instead of just very, very hard) and always a loser's game." From: 'Postmodernism And The Subject; Pessimism Of The Will', in *Whatever Happened To Human Nature?* <<http://human-nature.com/rmyoung/papers/pap115h.html>> [accessed 9 September 2003] (para. 15 of 42). Text also published in hard copy as: *Whatever Happened To Human Nature?: Lectures and Essays* (London: Process Press Ltd., 1995).

¹² James M. Glass, *Private Terror/ Public Life: Psychosis and the Politics of Community* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 2

¹³ James M. Glass, *Shattered Selves: Multiple Personality in a Postmodern World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 27.

¹⁴ David Levin, 'Clinical Stories: A Modern Self in the Fury of Being,' in *Pathologies of the Modern Self: Postmodern Studies on Narcissism, Schizophrenia, and Depression*, ed. by D. Levin (New York: New York University Press, 1987), pp. 479-538 (pp. 525 & 522-3).

¹⁵ Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or, Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 103.

¹⁶ R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 141. Laing, as is well known, also insists on the defensive role of psychosis, protecting, he claims, the sufferer from intolerable (usually social) strains. It is worth noting in this context David Mann's insistence that such a defensive posturing also results in a loss of self. "If I wish to own it [self], I must defend it, and defence is costly. The means that I employ, themselves compromise the aim of ownership. They distort or even altogether sever my relationships to the outside world, to other persons and to myself. To the extent that we can understand any neurosis, character disorder or mental illness as the product of defensive manoeuvres, we can see the structural and topographic results quite simply as quantitative and qualitative alterations in the reflexive function of the self, and thus as disturbances in

some comparison with Nathan Schwartz-Salant's extraordinary analysis of the 'dead self' in borderline personality disorders.¹⁷ Writing from a sociological perspective on the 'social self', Richard Jenkins has pointed out that "cognitive or emotional disorder" can lead to individual difficulty in understanding and using the first-person singular.¹⁸ Julia Kristeva records that in clinical depression, "existence is on the verge of collapsing" and selfhood experienced as disintegrating,¹⁹ and writes that the depressive "appears to stop cognizing as well as uttering, sinking into the blankness of asymbolia or the excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos";²⁰ Sidney Blatt attests to the ubiquity of "a distorted or depreciated sense of self" in depressive disorders;²¹ and Freud famously remarks that in "the crushed state of melancholia" the ego becomes "poor and empty".²²

Even contemporary thinkers evincing greater or lesser degrees of scepticism about the very concept of 'self' speak of madness as a moment in which the smooth illusion of selfhood crumbles away and the individual confronts a multiple, disseminated, decentred, being-state, one which is, as Mark Poster puts it, "continuously interpolated as [...] unstable".²³ Thus, following Lacan, and foregrounding the part played by the narrative function in individuation, Fredric Jameson writes that "the schizophrenic [...] does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the "I" and the "me" over time",²⁴ while Jean Baudrillard contends that for the "schizo",

ownership of the self'. 'Ownership', pp. 216-7. Mann's observations here evoke the tenor and drift of James Glass's arguments.

¹⁷ Nathan Schwartz-Salant, 'The Dead Self in Borderline Personality Disorders,' in *Pathologies of the Modern Self*, pp. 114-162.

¹⁸ *Social Identity* (London, Routledge, 1996), p. 40. Jenkins refers to E. H. Erikson's study *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (London: Faber, 1968) as support for this contention.

¹⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. by Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 3 & 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²¹ Sidney J. Blatt, *Experiences of Depression: Theoretical, Clinical, and Research Perspectives* (Washington: APA, 2004), p. 8.

²² Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 14, ed. by J. Strachey, A. Freud, A. Strachey, and A. Tyson (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), pp. 239-58 (pp. 248 & 246).

²³ Mark Poster, *The Second Media Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press, 1995), p. 57.

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) p. 119. On Lacan, Jameson asserts: "For Lacan, the experience of temporality, human time, past, present, memory, the persistence of personal identity over months and years – the existential or experiential feeling of time itself – is also an effect of language. It is because language has a past and a future, because the sentence moves in time, that we can have what seems to us a concrete or lived experience of time. But since the schizophrenic does not know language articulation in that way, he or she does not have our experience of temporal continuity either, but is condemned to live a perpetual present with which the various movements of his or her past have little connection and for which there is no conceivable future on the horizon. In other words, schizophrenic experience is an experience of

“interiority” comes to an “end”.²⁵ Such views are also broadly in accord with the influential polemics of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.²⁶

The experience of madness, then, seems to throw the stability of human identity into question. In the event of acute psychic crisis what may have been previously assumed or taken for granted is thrown open to challenge and uncertainty, and the whole basis of what makes selfhood feasible may need to be urgently reformulated. This renders the study of madness and its representations potentially fruitful, for at such unsettling junctures of crisis the fragile underpinnings of psychic life become more visible, while attempts to reconstruct a viable sense of selfhood may have to trace out a set of new parameters in order to define a different – perhaps more flexible – basis for subjectivity.

1.3 On the narration of madness

In addition to problematizing taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of identity, the experience of madness raises unsettling questions about the possibility and limits of linguistic representation. Madness seems to challenge some of the very underpinnings of what makes narrative possible – defined (one might say constructed) as it is, not only by its difference from reason, but, to some extent at least, by its variance from the readable forms of narrative: to generalize, madness is characterized variously by fragmentation, amorphousness, entropy, chaos, silence, senselessness. Inhabiting the sufferer’s mind is not a singular internal voice of thought – a voice that might be compared to a narrator’s accent imposing coherence on the disparate fragments of ‘story’; on the contrary, consciousness is filled with wreckage, dispersion, obsessional repetition, or, inversely, characterized by stasis, aphony, catatonia. Such states would not appear to fit well with narrative’s drive to organize and arrange experience, its orientation towards linearity, cause and effect, and the progressive accumulation of insight and meaning. Whether the author is ostensibly describing his or her experience from within madness, or from a position situated outside it, there would seem, then, to be a disjunction between the content to be narrated and the

²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Ecstasy of Communication,’ in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* ed. by Hal Foster, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 126-134 (p. 133).

²⁶ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Athlone, 1984); *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Athlone, 1988). For an overview see Mark Currie’s discussion ‘Culture and Schizophrenia’, in his *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 96-113.

possibilities inhering in conventional narrative forms. From this point of view the writer attempting to capture madness in narrative form may well have to consider the question Sarah Kofman poses with regard to the representation of traumatic experience: “*How can one speak of that before which all possibility of speech ceases?*”²⁷

The apparently oppositional relation between conventional narrative form and madness summons various questions to mind. For example, is what neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists such as Daniel Dennett and Antonio Damasio call the ‘narrative function’ salutary or inimical in negotiating the vicissitudes of madness?²⁸ Perhaps there is a redemptive quality inherent in the narrative act which may aid those suffering an abiding distress; perhaps the act of constructing a coherent story is helpful, a counterweight to the anarchic energies of lunacy. If, as Jacques Derrida put it, writing of madness, “by its essence, the sentence is normal. It carries normality within it”,²⁹ if, that is to say, in constructing sense-making sentences the essence of madness *must* evaporate, swallowed up by reason, then might this not be beneficial to the one narrating? One might, in this view, picture the reasonable discourses of sanity as an island reached by the exhausted swimmer adrift in the turbulent tides of psychic chaos, and the structured, comprehensible narrative of self as a sensible refuge from the tribulations of lunacy. On the other hand, however, one might legitimately question just how helpful the structure of conventional narrative form with its tendency toward linearity, resolution, and *sense* is for the narration of being-states which would appear to be governed by precisely the inverse of these characteristics. As I have already

²⁷ Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, trans. by Madeleine Dobie (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 9.

²⁸ See Damasio’s *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), where he compares the structuring of consciousness to the dynamics of an “epic novel”, and describes an “autobiographical self” which depends on: “systematized memories of situations in which core consciousness was involved in the knowing of the most invariant characteristics of an organism’s life – who you were born to, where, when, your likes and dislikes, the way you usually react to a problem or a conflict, your name, and so on. I use the term autobiographical memory to denote the organized record of the main aspects of an organism’s biography” (pp. 17-18). Dennett is Professor of Philosophy, and Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University. His work focuses on the philosophy of mind and the philosophical ramifications of neuroscientific research. His interest in the narrative basis of identity is explained in his widely quoted essay ‘The Self as the Center of Narrative Gravity,’ in *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, ed. by Frank S. Kessel, Pamela M. Cole and Dale L. Johnson (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1992), pp. 103-115; also available at: <<http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/selfctr.htm>>. Also of interest are: ‘The Origins of Selves,’ *Cogito* (Autumn 1989), 3:163-173; ‘The Interpretation of Texts, People and Other Artifacts,’ *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (Fall 1990), 50(Supplement):177-194; ‘Making Sense of Ourselves,’ in *Mind and Cognition: A Reader*, ed. by William G. Lycan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 184-198; *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Brown, 1991). Many of Dennett’s publications are available online (see: <<http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/pubpage.htm>>). For a useful overview of this field see Owen Flanagan’s *The Science of Mind* (2nd Edition) (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 352-361.

²⁹ ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978 [first published in French 1967]), pp. 54-5.

suggested, if madness is defined by its difference from reason then it is, surely, an a priori proposition that to faithfully describe or express the manifestations of madness within a discourse governed by reason represents an undertaking, which, at the least, will be fraught with difficulty. And even if the writer manages to produce a coherent text, one might also question what value such a structured and comprehensible narrative would realistically hold if its very framing and dynamics were so absolutely dissonant with the experience intended by its account. Would not such a document, governed by the reasonableness of linearity, cause and effect, and the gradual accumulation of insight and meaning, completely subsume the alterity of madness within the parameters of reasoned discourse? And is there not a sense in which this would represent a kind of violence inflicted on the life narrated? It is, indeed, precisely the imposition of such supposedly stable stories on the anarchic energies of madness which motivated the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s and 1970s to reject biomedicine as the tool of an oppressive culture bent on taming threats to its hegemony and unconcerned with the rights and well-being of the individual. Moreover, the imposition of such ill-fitting, but 'stable', stories may actually catalyze madness by ignoring or trampling upon those aspects of the person which do not conform to a desired paradigm.

As I shall elaborate, many authors writing of madness do in effect pose themselves Kofman's question concerning speaking the unspeakable, and crucially their texts bear witness to their various attempts to manage and stretch the constraints inherent in conventional narrative forms. Moreover, insinuated in this process of working with form, I suggest, are particular *narrative modes of existence* which have implications for the psychodynamics of living with mental distress and which also bridge the poles of text and life. That is to say, narrative constructions are linked to cognitive process: in struggling with and interrogating the limits of form, texts and authors are proposing new ways in which the world may be related to, constructed, and known.

In part the bridging effect between text and life I have alluded to is necessitated by the very nature of madness. For if madness is a condition centring on and evoked within various aspects of cognition, and the narrative function is a component of the cognitive mechanism, then part of the 'story' of madness must include an account of the disordering of the same narrative function which is being used to produce the story. The very process by which narrative is formulated, then, must be a critical part of the

story to be told. In stories of madness (including fictional first person accounts of breakdown) the story-telling function must regard itself and tell the tale of its own fragmentation and (possibly) repair.

1.4 On narrative identity

It is in part, as I shall elaborate, because of this bridging effect in which story and life, text and cognition are brought together, that the theoretical paradigm of 'narrative identity' is a particularly useful one with which to frame this study. Before explaining some of the reasons why this is so, I will first outline something of this conceptual framework.

Theories of narrative identity have been elucidated in varying forms by Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair Macintyre, Charles Taylor, and Seyla Benhabib, amongst others.³⁰ My discussion here does not rigidly adhere to any one particular position; the radical disturbances of insanity present a challenge to normative and generalized paradigms and demand that they are, to some extent, rethought. In addition, I aim to add a specific focus to what have been rather general formulations by considering the ramifications of the disruptions of madness. Notwithstanding that, however, and despite different emphases, all of the various elaborations of narrative identity contend that what we recognize as human identity depends to a large extent on an interaction with, and the formulation of, narratives. Margaret Somers defines this focus on narrative and narrativity as centring around an interrogation of "*social epistemology and social ontology*", and succinctly summarizes its theoretical orientation thus: "it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and

³⁰ For Benhabib see: *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992). For Taylor see: *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). For Macintyre see: *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981). Ricoeur's work on narrative identity is most fully detailed in *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Katherine Blamney (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); see also his *Time and Narrative* (Volume 3) trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), and a short but useful essay 'Life in Quest of Narrative', in *On Paul Ricoeur*, ed. by David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 20-33. Ricoeur's first important treatment of narrative is in his essay 'The Narrative Function', in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 274-296. Other important contributions include: Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Kim L. Worthington, *Self as Narrative: Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities”.³¹ Kim Worthington’s explanation of the interanimation of identity and narrative is also helpful: “the construction of a subject’s sense of selfhood should be understood as a creative narrative process achieved within a plurality of intersubjective communicative protocols” (13); while Ricoeur puts it this way: “To answer the question ‘Who?’ [...] is to tell the story of a life. The story told tells about the action of the ‘who’. And the identity of this ‘who’ therefore itself must be a narrative identity”.³²

While this study’s theoretical orientation is not directly aligned with the work of any one particular theorist, Paul Ricoeur’s seminal work on narrative and identity has influenced and informed my thinking; it will be helpful, therefore, to briefly outline some of the salient aspects of his thought – forming, as it does, a significant part of the intellectual backdrop to this study. For the literary scholar, Ricoeur’s work is particularly interesting in that it takes seriously and accounts for the role literary narratives, fictional as well as non-fictional, play in the constitution of identity. This emphasis on the way in which fiction is a practical existential tool, rather than merely a mode of entertainment, is germane for my project in that several of the authors I study employ hybridized narrative forms which occupy an ambiguous space between novel and memoir. Moreover, this is a strategic move by which they attempt to come to terms with the elusiveness of both madness and identity itself. (This strategy is most evident in Lauren Slater’s *Spasm: A Memoir with Lies* which I discuss in the following chapter.) For Ricoeur, fiction is not removed from the business of living, but rather, as he puts it, “contributes to making life, in the biological sense of the word, a human life”, suggesting that “it is the function of poetry in its narrative and dramatic form, to propose to the imagination and to its mediation various figures that constitute so many *thought experiments* by which we learn to link together the ethical aspects of human conduct and happiness and misfortune”.³³ Leaving aside for the moment his emphasis on ethics, Ricoeur proposes, then, that narrative texts present to the imagination a series of possible worlds – a “horizon of possible experience, a world in which it would be possible to live”;³⁴ fiction, moreover represents an “irreducible dimension of *self-understanding*”.³⁵ This is so, and the resonance and importance of narrative form

³¹ Margaret R. Somers, ‘The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach’, *Theory and Society*, 23.5 (October 1994), 605-649 (p. 606).

³² *Time and Narrative* (Volume 3), p. 246.

³³ Ricoeur, ‘Life in Quest of Narrative’, p. 23.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 26.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 30.

originates, because of the inextricability of stories and selves. For Ricoeur, human life presents “a genuine demand for narrative”, indeed: “*Life is an activity and a passion in search of a narrative*”.³⁶ In other words, we are drawn towards narratives, including – even especially – fictions, because some of what defines humanness is, firstly, the attempt to understand the rawness of ‘events’ by placing it into narrative forms, and, secondly, the imaginative projection of the self forward into possible ‘future histories’: the envisaging of change, that is, in the form of new potential stories of the self. Fictions contain within their fabrics possible stories, potential modes of being – and literary narratives are not just recounted but also “*lived in the mode of the imaginary*”.³⁷

As I have said, Ricoeur’s blurring of the divide between ‘text’ and ‘life’ is germane to my project here. While my concern is principally with textual, narrative, literary, forms, these are often of interest because they represent the outworking and evidence of a way of knowing and thinking about the world (madness and its inverse might of course be defined as particular ways of knowing and thinking about the world), while also signifying a kind of narrative proposition, a model through and by which one might encounter the world. Indeed, something very close to the model of interaction with narrative which Ricoeur outlines is startlingly evident in some of the texts I consider here. Authors such as Slater and Susanna Kaysen (whose *Girl, Interrupted* I discuss in chapter four), in telling the stories of their damaged identities, play with fictional or poetic possibility in order to envisage different (psychical and material) worlds. Moreover, and broadly consonant with Ricoeur’s assertion that “the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself”,³⁸ the narrative process enacted within such texts heralds a reworking of self-conception, and is also denoted as tracing out a kind of possible map for a future life-course. In this, most of the authors in this study should be conceived as both writers and readers of their texts and lives. As readers of their own stories, they often fuse together imaginative possibility and ‘history’, belonging simultaneously “to the work’s horizon of experience in imagination and to that of [their] own real action”, as Ricoeur puts it.³⁹ Moreover, and broadly in line with Ricoeur’s insistence that the “reconfiguration of life by narrative” is catalyzed by and completed in the reading consciousness, these texts often seem to be mapping out a

³⁶ Ibid, p. 29.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 27.

³⁸ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Volume 3), p. 246

³⁹ Ibid.

kind of dialogue between aspects of the self, in which the author reads his or her own words and then responds to what s/he has taken in, modifying subsequent writing to take account of new or revitalized knowledges or imagined constructions.⁴⁰ This process can itself, I think, be construed as a reconfiguration (of 'life') catalyzed by reading. Looked at in this way, writing is a potentially dynamic process: rather than presenting finished and discrete textual images of the autobiographical self, one of the most common features of the works I study here is that they map subjects-in-process⁴¹ – that is, they trace out a subjectivity which evolves within and because of the text and its 'reading'.

However, while these texts do, by and large, offer a dynamic model of writing in which a negotiation between the horizons of action and possibility is enacted, and an evolving subjectivity manifest, the outcome of these processes varies considerably. In some a more favourable mode of being is worked out, with the author or narrator apparently achieving a tentative resolution to, or accommodation with, suffering; but in others the attempt to reconfigure life via narrative fails painfully. Such painful failures suggest that universalizing models of narrative identity may be overly-idealistic and need to be reworked and qualified in order to account for the exigencies of limit-experiences such as madness.

Ricoeur's philosophical position on identity represents an attempt to navigate between two poles: what he calls the "apparent choice between sheer change and absolute identity", elucidating this antinomy as a middle path between the extremes of the Cartesian cogito and the Humean or Nietzschean anticogito.⁴² Lying between the notion of self as substance or sheer becoming is the paradigm of narrative identity, of which Ricoeur writes:

I am stressing the expression 'narrative identity', for what we call subjectivity is neither an incoherent series of events nor an immutable substantiality, impervious to evolution. This is precisely the sort of identity which narrative composition alone can create through its dynamism.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ricoeur, 'Life in Quest of Narrative', p. 26.

⁴¹ While Julia Kristeva is often associated with this term, I invoke it here in a more general sense to imply the subject as an unfinished, ongoing project. Kristeva's notion of the subject-in-process is introduced in the early *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). See also her *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. by T. Gora, A. Jardine, and L. Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), particularly pp. 124-147.

⁴² "[T]he hermeneutics of the self is placed at an equal distance from the apology of the cogito and from its overthrow". Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Katherine Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 4.

⁴³ Ricoeur, 'Life in Quest of Narrative', p. 32.

Narrative identity, therefore, is an organic process dependent on the imagination: “It is therefore by means of the imaginative variations of our own ego that we attempt to obtain a narrative understanding of ourselves, the only kind that escapes the apparent choice between sheer change and absolute identity. Between the two lies narrative identity [...]”.⁴⁴ In Lois McNay’s summary of Ricoeur’s model, it represents the “dynamic unity of change through time”.⁴⁵

In resisting a conception of the subject as an ‘incoherent series of events’, Ricoeur is of course in disagreement with some contemporary theorizing on the constitution of human identity, in which the dissolution of the subject and the deconstruction of self-reflexive consciousness often appear to render subjectivity as no more than the “fragmented product of dispersed discourses”.⁴⁶ In this, his work has been taken up by critics unconvinced by ‘strong’ versions of ‘postmodernism’⁴⁷ and notions of the subject as wholly subjected within and to hegemonic discourses. I will say more on this shortly, for the backlash against varieties of postmodern, or post-structuralist, identity theory has included objections from some of those studying the transformation of identity within madness, but Kim Worthington and Lois McNay encapsulate something of the general drift of such criticisms. Worthington’s assertion that “the deterministic ethos of constructivist conceptions of textual subjectivity evacuates agency”⁴⁸ and McNay’s indictment of an “attenuated account of agency which leaves unexplored how individuals are endowed with the capabilities for independent reflection and action”⁴⁹ highlight what have been perceived by many as fundamental gaps in some deconstructions of the subject.

Ricoeur, then, resists the idea that the “identical subject is nothing more than a substantialist illusion”,⁵⁰ but he also argues that a conception of the self as self-identical is unconvincing and fails to account for both the possibility of dynamic change in time and the historicity of personhood. Part of his solution is to rethink the notion of

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 33.

⁴⁵ Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 74.

⁴⁶ H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutic* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), p. 54.

⁴⁷ See my discussion later in this chapter for my reservations concerning the vagueness of this term. See also footnote 83. For elucidations of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ versions of postmodernism with specific reference to theories of the subject see: Seyla Benhabib, ‘Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance’, in Seyla Benhabib; Judith Butler; Drucilla Cornell; Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 17-34.

⁴⁸ Worthington, *Self as Narrative*, p. 9.

⁴⁹ McNay, *Gender and Agency*, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Volume 3), p. 246.

'identity' as sameness, distinguishing between "identity understood in the sense of being the same (*idem*)", and "identity understood in the sense of oneself as self-same (*ipse*)". *Idem* identity is a substantial and formal entity, whereas *ipse* is a narrative mode of being which rests on "a temporal structure that conforms to the model of dynamic identity arising from the poetic composition of a narrative text".⁵¹ Ricoeur elaborates on the very literary nature of this model of selfhood:

The self characterized by self-sameness may then be said to be refigured by the reflective application of such narrative configurations. Unlike the abstract identity of the Same, this narrative identity, constitutive of self-constancy, can include change, mutability, within the cohesion of one lifetime. The subject then appears both as a reader and the writer of its own life, as Proust would have it. As the literary analysis of autobiography confirms, the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told.⁵²

Ricoeur's model does not fall into the trap of jettisoning legitimate critiques of the notion of the self as autonomous and free; narrative identity is not a voluntaristic paradigm in which the subject is free to 'write' themselves in any form they choose. Rather, narrative potential is constrained to a considerable extent by the available possibilities extant in culture, while still retaining an ability to interpose its own variations on the weight of accumulated discourse. The dialectic underlying narrative selfhood moves between the twin poles of what Ricoeur calls 'sedimentation' and 'innovation'; and again, this model is germane to the textual reformulations of identity which I consider here. 'Sedimentation' represents the horizon of current narrative possibilities open to the subject, that is, the variety of extant models which constitute a "typology of emplotment".⁵³ These models, however, "do not constitute eternal essences", but are contingent and the product of "a sedimented history whose genesis has been obliterated".⁵⁴ 'Innovation', on the other hand, is the process by which these sedimented models may be varied and altered, but also is the means by which sedimentation itself has arisen: narrative tradition, says Ricoeur, is "the living transmission of an innovation which can always be reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic composition".⁵⁵ The sedimented typologies of narrative

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ricoeur, 'Life in Quest of Narrative', p. 24.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

possibility, therefore, themselves stem from earlier innovations and consequently provide “a guide for [...] later experimentation” (25). In short, the possibilities proffered to us by extant discourse are not absolutely fixed; this accrual of narrative paradigms has itself sprung from earlier innovatory actions. There is, therefore, “always room for innovation” (25), with the “possibility of deviance” latent in the labile relationship between sedimentation and innovation, yet this potential is not unlimited but contingent on its context:

The rules change under the pressure of innovation, but they change slowly and even resist change by reason of this process of sedimentation [...] Innovation remains a rule-governed behaviour; the work of imagination does not come out of nowhere. It is tied in one way or another to the models handed down by tradition. But it can enter into a variable relation to these models. (25)

The dialectical model of innovation and sedimentation is applicable to several of the texts I consider here. The sedimented narratives which surround and help constitute the mental patient’s identity include the diagnostic story and popular conceptions about mental illness, not to mention those more encompassing narratives concerning gender mores, class, and economic status. All of these may be, and often are, perceived by the authors here as deleterious, and their texts frequently attempt to rework destructive paradigms in favour of more beneficial stories. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is Susanna Kaysen’s “annotated diagnosis” in *Girl, Interrupted*, in which she reworks the simplistic narrative certainties of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, thus highlighting their inapposite fit with her being-state and sense of identity.⁵⁶ Rather than rejecting the *Manual* out of hand, she interrogates its assumptions, changing negative assessments of personality traits into positives, and annotating its sedimented logics with her own innovatory interventions. Indeed, simply by intercalating reproductions of medical documents relating to her illness into her poetic and impressionistic memoir, these definitive, positivistic narratives are overshadowed by less certain stories, and their import subtly altered. Indicative of innovation rather than transcendent creation from a *tabula rasa*, Kaysen’s favoured model of identity appears to emerge from inimical material, subverting, in the process, what might at first have appeared as the ineluctable given.

⁵⁶ Suzanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted* (London: Virago, 1995), p. 150.

1.5 Narrative and the shattered self

As I have said, the paradigm of narrative identity, in which the self is conceived neither as illusory effect nor wholly self-identical and substantial object, is well suited to a discussion of madness. In particular, the many criticisms raised over the last twenty years or so from theorists working on race and gender issues about theory's dismantling of the coherent self are also often applicable to discussions of chronic distress. Broadly, objections to the dismantling of the self are summed up in Nicole Ward Jouve's acerbic comment that "you must have a self before you can afford to deconstruct it".⁵⁷ The orienting drift of such arguments has been that cruder deconstructions of the subject have worked to foreclose the possibility of forging a distinctive voice and identity for "subjugated peoples", while also, as we have seen in the quotations from McNay and Worthington, failing to account convincingly for human agency and resistance.

However, in rejecting the notion of the person as wholly subjected to/by discourse, scholars have, like Ricoeur, generally resisted returning to earlier conceptions of selfhood as either a disembodied cogito or a substantive 'identical' entity. Neither paradigm (and in practice the two are often conflated) proffers an escape from a humanistic and essentializing thinking which construes ineluctable characteristics on the person and thereby legitimizes existing order as natural or inevitable. Kathi Weeks summarises movements in feminist thought as attempts to move beyond "the opposition between voluntarism and determinism, beyond these mutually exclusive alternatives and an all-or-nothing choice".⁵⁸ Her identification of two opposed 'essentialisms' – "those that pose the subject as a pre-existing, self-

⁵⁷ Nicole Ward Jouve, *White Woman speaks with Forked Tongue* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 7.

See also: Margaret Whitford's argument that the deconstruction of the subject "continues to leave women in a state of fragmentation and dissemination which reproduces and perpetuates the patriarchal violence against women" (*Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* [London and New York: Routledge, 1991], p. 123); Nancy Hartsock: "Somehow it seems highly suspicious that it is at the precise moment when so many groups have been engaged in [...] redefinitions of marginalized Others that suspicions emerge about the nature of the 'subject'. [...] Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right [...] to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?" ('Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?', in *Feminism/ Postmodernism*, ed. by Linda J. Nicholson [New York: Routledge, 1990], p. 163); bell hooks, who observes that the postmodern critique of the agential subject surfaced "at a historical moment when many subjugated people [felt] themselves coming to voice for the first time" ('Postmodern Blackness', in *A Postmodern Reader*, ed. by Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, [Albany: SUNY Press, 1993], p. 515); Rosi Braidotti: "one cannot deconstruct a subjectivity one has never been fully granted [...] In order to announce the death of the subject one must first have gained the right to speak as one" (*Nomadic Subjects* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1994], p. 141).

⁵⁸ Kathi Weeks, *Constituting Feminist Subjects* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 121.

constituting agent, and those that conceive the subject as a passively constituted effect of so-called social forces” – chimes with Ricoeur’s invocation of the cogito and its opposite. Indeed, Ricoeur’s work on narrative and identity, together with that of Taylor and MacIntyre, has been taken up by critics such as McNay and Worthington as a way through this apparent impasse.

Criticisms aimed at deconstructions of the subject have been echoed by some of those scholars who have applied themselves to thinking through the effects of madness on identity. A notable example, and an influence on my work here, is the ongoing work of James Glass on the politics of the self and mental illness. Glass, a professor of government at the University of Maryland, has worked extensively with residents receiving medical treatment in the Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Mental Hospital. In several books he records patients’ ‘narratives’ as produced in interviews and discussions. In *Shattered Selves: Multiple Personality in a Postmodern World* Glass argues that the critical dismantling of the coherent subject represents a “dangerous advocacy” as it negates the possibility of agency, indeed replaces the notion of self-as-agent with a multiple, shifting, and often wholly subjected entity. Glass contrasts critical valorizations of multiplicity with the narratives of the patients he interviews, concluding that the experience of plurality and dispersion is usually agonizing and terrifying, and that its ongoing invocation may be unhelpful for those who experience fragmentation and fracture as daily realities.⁵⁹

It is one thing to speak of multiple moods and interests or an infinite variety of ethical and moral choices. It is an entirely different matter to live as if the universe, the world, existence were fragments, without connection. Some linear connection to one's own history and to the existent world is necessary even to organize the simplest of tasks. (6)

Others have also pointed out the disparity between some critical discourses and the realities of psychological suffering. Mick Cooper and John Rowan, for instance, observe that deconstructing subjectivity “from the rarefied atmosphere of an academic institution” is a very different thing to the experience of the suffering person who is unable to “trivialize or annihilate them-selves however much they may wish for a submergence into a me-free world”.⁶⁰ (Their assertion resonates with a comment by Lara Jefferson – a psychiatric patient whose journal I study in my final chapter – who, in a wry aside to an imagined reader fascinated by the spectacle of madness, comments:

⁵⁹ Glass, *Shattered Selves*, p. xii.

⁶⁰ Mick Cooper and John Rowan, ‘Introduction: Self-Plurality – the One and the Many’, in *The Plural Self: Multiplicity in Everyday Life*, ed. by Mick Cooper and John Rowan (London: Sage, 1999), p. 2.

“And offering no disrespect to your very great genius – I am willing to wager that you will not find madness so intriguing when you have to be a mad person yourself – and have only those of your like to live with”.⁶¹) In addition, Marta Caminero-Santangelo in her *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or, Why Insanity is Not Subversive* argues with interpretations of madness as a form of resistance to patriarchal oppression, taking issue both with valorizations of silence and notions that madness effects a private and subversive language which somehow escapes or subverts the strictures of logocentrism.

Reiterating points made by McNay and Worthington, integral to the arguments of both Glass and Caminero-Santangelo is an insistence on the necessity of a reasonably coherent sense of selfhood for agency to be a feasible option, and the assertion that the experience of madness deprives the sufferer of this sense. Thus, discussing the disempowerment inherent in the fragmented being-state of Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD), Caminero-Santangelo argues that this condition, “ultimately demonstrates the absolute powerlessness of one who cannot completely claim the ‘I’ for herself”,⁶² and asks: “[H]ow is any agency possible without a sense of subjectivity – without, that is, being able to identify oneself as an ‘I’ rather than a ‘she’?”.⁶³ Similarly, Glass contends that ‘narrative agency’ is vital in recovering from madness. For Glass, the willed engagement with language that his subjects begin when they separate themselves from the disconcerting echolalia of the psychotic psyche and produce stories of their experience is itself an existentially significant *act*: “Language is a form of action. [...] To speak was to find oneself literally engaged with the *action* of speech. [...] Language, being and metaphor became totally bound up in one another, and the speech act itself took on a lived, vital quality”.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Lara Jefferson, *These are my Sisters: A Journal from the Inside of Insanity* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975), p. 26.

⁶² Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, p. 103.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 102.

⁶⁴ Glass, *Private Terror/ Public Life*, p. 12. See James V. Wertsch’s *Mind as Action* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): “language is a cultural tool and speech is a form of mediated action, and for this reason the general claims I have made about mediated action apply to speech” (p. 73). Also of interest is Brendan McCormack’s work on the concept of narrative identity which he argues is “grounded in language and manifested in discourse (speech acts). This grounding of narrative identity in language and discourse interconnects the person’s mind and body through the importance of speech and action, i.e. my speech is action in itself and not separate from any action I take.” In ‘The Person of the Voice: Narrative Identities in Informed Consent’, *Nursing Philosophy*, 2002 (3), 114–119 (p. 117).

1.6 Selves, subjects, voices, texts

None of those critics I have listed who have pointed to the shortcomings of aspects of deconstructions of the self argue for a substantial or essential self, nor do they jettison contemporary theory *en tout*. Even Glass, who is probably the most outspoken, is certainly not antithetical to ‘postmodernism’⁶⁵ per se; he is sympathetic towards, as he puts it, the “postmodernist criticism of truth and the role illusion plays in social life”.⁶⁶ Moreover, as I will explain in more detail below, his own work is informed by an acute sensitivity to the embroilment of power in the creation of mental distress: the multiple selves of MPD, for instance, are, he argues, “graphic representations of a multiplicity produced by powerful political and psychological currents, specifically patriarchy and domination” (*Shattered Selves*, p. 98). The psyche he describes, then, is not a privatized realm of dysfunction; he sees identity as intrinsically linked to the social and intersubjective. Although he writes in *Shattered Selves* of the need for a sense of what he sometimes calls a “core self”, when he describes aspects of what this involves it is consonant with a narrative rather than an essential model of identity. Thus, for instance, he argues that those “driven crazy” by the radical contingency, “disconnectedness” (p. 96), and “randomness” of madness “require some sort of meaning, a *telos* that allows consciousness to discover a continuity, a history” (p. 77); he writes of the necessity for a “historical relation to experience”; and that identity is rooted in both “identifiable pasts and histories” (p. 57) and the “interconnectedness” of “human desire” and interdependence (p. 29).

My own standpoint in this study, which has been significantly influenced by my readings both of the texts I consider here and those which have been omitted for reasons of space, is broadly in line with the work of Glass and Caminero-Santangelo; thus, I argue that ‘coherent’ selfhood is a desirable and achievable aim, but that the self and its coherence should be conceived as narrative (and mobile) rather than substantive (and fixed) entities. While Glass is concerned with the spoken utterances of patients which he records and transcribes, rather than texts per se, his work is, as I have said, acutely aware of the narrative dynamics at work in these accounts. Caminero-Santangelo’s study deals with (mainly fictional) texts; and while she is perhaps most preoccupied with refuting previous theoretical work on women and madness and

⁶⁵ See my reservations about the usefulness of this term later in this chapter. See also footnote 83.

⁶⁶ *Shattered Selves*, p. 77.

calling for a reworked approach than actually proposing a coherent alternative, she does, nevertheless, lay out a series of imperatives which chime with some of those I advance here. The most important of these is her insistence that “forms of agency” and “active creative transformation” should be privileged within critical discourse, and that the valorizations of a “retreat into madness” which she identifies as characterizing previous theoretical work are potentially harmful for the mad subject.⁶⁷ Moreover, her call for critical thought to “open an imaginative space for women to be able to escape from madness by envisioning themselves as agents”⁶⁸ evokes the possibilities inhering in the narrative imagination which, as we have seen, is a central factor in Ricoeur’s model of narrative identity.

The role of narrative and language in the formulation of identity emerges as crucial in the texts I study here; it is also centrally implicated in the irruptions of, and protagonists’ subsequent negotiations with, madness. But this latter point is not to imply that madness is a fictive construct. While it is true that a few memoirists of madness have re-constructed their condition as beneficial rather than inherently painful,⁶⁹ the works I study here all stress that madness is at root an experience of suffering. Broadly, in my discussions, I take up Dwight Fee’s call to consider mental disorder both as “entangled with social life and language” *and* as a “palpable, felt condition which damages mental functioning, interpersonal relationships, and other aspects of thought and behaviour”.⁷⁰ That is to say, while many of my contentions are formulated within a constructivist paradigm, and pay close attention to the linguistic, discursive, textual basis of identity, I also address madness as a “‘true’ debilitating condition”,⁷¹ in other words, a being-state characterized by psychic pain. My arguments here, predicated on a concern both with narrative form and the lived condition of distress, have as a subtext the etymological roots of the word *psychopathology*; or, as David Levin puts it, this term’s invocation of “the ‘speech’ or logos of the psyche”: “all the psyche’s ways of hiding, manifesting, expressing, communicating, sharing and, in brief, living out its experience of worldly suffering (*pathein*)”.⁷²

⁶⁷ Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, p. 181.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ See for instance the writings collected in: Jeanine Grobe (ed.), *Beyond Bedlam: Contemporary Women Psychiatric Survivors Speak Out* (Chicago: Third Side Press, 1995); and also Aidan Shingler’s memoir of schizophrenia, *Beyond Reason* (Glossop: A. Shingler, 1999).

⁷⁰ Dwight Fee, ‘The Broken Dialogue: Mental Illness as Discourse and Experience’, in *Pathology and the Post-Modern: Mental Illness, Discourse, and Experience*, ed. by Dwight Fee (London: Sage, 1999), p. 3.

⁷¹ Fee, ‘The Broken Dialogue’, p. 2.

⁷² D. Levin, ‘Introduction’, in *Pathologies of the Modern Self*, p. 2.

My arguments here are generally antipathetic to what one might broadly characterize as prototypically Western conceptions of personhood, that is to say, in Judith Butler's terms, "pristine" notions of the subject "derived from some classical liberal-humanist formulation";⁷³ or as Clifford Geertz puts it, "a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment and action, organized into a distinctive whole".⁷⁴ Many of the texts I discuss, while asserting a human need for a sense of continuity and cohesion, take issue with a model of the self as essence; this is manifest, for instance, in attempts to subvert finalized and irrevocable diagnoses in which the self is construed as equating to one thing rather than occupying multiple positions. Just as feminist and post-colonial theory has pointed to the oppressive implications of liberal-humanist thought, so a paradigm of the self as substance or unchanging essence is potentially deleterious for the mad subject. Such models of identity, with their concomitant implication that somewhere underneath madness lies a pristine self waiting to be liberated, imposes a tremendous burden on the sufferer who must undertake an arduous archaeology to attempt to 'rediscover' what may in any case be a chimera. Or, if madness is construed as a 'condition', then it is a short leap to imagine the 'essential' self as also inherently flawed – a fault-line forever splitting the foundational self, about which nothing can be done. Such a view informed aspects of the treatment of 'hysterical' women a century ago,⁷⁵ for instance, and may help to account for the over-diagnosing of young black males as schizophrenic more recently.⁷⁶

In this study I use both the terms 'self' and 'subject'. I realise that each comes burdened with its own set of assumptions about the nature of identity – indeed, that is in part why I have not settled on one or the other. Maurice Blanchot, in an essay on the "limit-experience" of the Holocaust which has been influential on my thinking, writes of what he calls the "Self-Subject", invoking as I understand it, an emphasis on identity

⁷³ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 17.

⁷⁴ Clifford Geertz, 'From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding', in *Interpretive Social Science*, ed. by P. Rabinow and W. M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 229, quoted in Edward Sampson, 'The Deconstruction of the Self', in *Texts of Identity*, ed. by John Shotter and Kenneth Gergen (London: Sage, 1989), p. 1.

⁷⁵ See Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987).

⁷⁶ See J. Boydell, J. van Os, K. McKenzie, J. Allardyce, R. Goel, R.G. McCreadie, R. M. Murray, 'Incidence of Schizophrenia in Ethnic Minorities in London', *British Medical Journal*, 323 (2001), 1336-8.

as neither fully determined or subjected nor entirely autonomous or sovereign.⁷⁷ I briefly considered using ‘self-subject’ here, but rejected this as being rather unwieldy and possibly confusing to the reader. Suffice to say, that my stance on identity, as will hopefully emerge, is that identity emerges in the dialectic between, as Ricoeur puts it, ‘sedimentation’ and ‘innovation’.

In addition, I also write here of narrative ‘voice’, and of ‘speaking’. Again I realise, after Derrida’s critique of voice as exemplifying logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence, that voice and speech are not neutral terms.⁷⁸ But I am not intending to appeal to metaphysics here; rather, I want to maintain a link (albeit, perhaps, a fragile one) between texts or discourses and the ‘individuals’ who produce or speak within them – or indeed who are ‘produced’ by them. This linking invokes Ricoeur’s work on the centrality of narrative – and *narratives* – to human identity, but my thinking has also been influenced by the work of Maurice Blanchot and Sarah Kofman on witnessing, and ‘just speech’ in the face of extreme suffering. In their conceptions, the voice can be plural and fallibilistic, exemplifying vulnerability rather than strength; and speech is not invoked as a foundational concept which escapes from the play of difference. Moreover, Kofman’s *Smothered Words* is itself an attempt to formulate a theoretical style of writing which she names a ‘speaking’ without power. Similarly, in ‘Plural Speech’, a section of *The Infinite Conversation* which is subtitled ‘the speech of writing’, Blanchot makes it plain that he includes writing as a form of this particular conception of ‘speech’.⁷⁹ Thus, when he refers in his essay ‘Being Jewish’, to the restorative process of a “true *speech*”⁸⁰ into which the Self-Subject emerges following the limit-experience of acute crisis, this ‘speech’ is manifest in textual form: in this instance, Robert Antelme’s memoir of the Holocaust *The Human Race*. For Blanchot, Antelme’s book is not simply an example “of telling one’s story [...] but essentially of *speaking*”.⁸¹ His speech is deemed ‘true’ or ‘just’ in part because it is the inverse of Nazism’s narratives which attempted to obliterate difference and disjunction in favour of order and totality. Antelme’s speaking is not “a dominating and oppressing power drawn up against the ‘other’”⁸² but is open to the interruptions and dissonances of alterity; it represents, then, a tentative and hesitant re-

⁷⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 134.

⁷⁸ See *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

⁷⁹ E.g. p. 29: “Speech (at least the one we are attempting to approach: writing) [...]”.

⁸⁰ Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 134.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

assertion of humanness, a reformulation of what it is to be human following the deprivation in the camps “of the power to say ‘I’”.⁸³ I discuss Blanchot’s and Kofman’s work on ‘speaking’ and the limit-experience in chapters 4, 5, and 6. The paradigm of ‘speech’ which they outline is valuable, it seems to me, in a consideration of the often fragile assertions of narrative ‘voice’ in the face of the vocal energies of psychosis or the stasis and aphony of depression.

1.7 Agency and Judith Butler

The theoretical direction of my arguments here differs somewhat from that underpinning Glass’s *Shattered Selves* in that I am rather more sympathetic to what might broadly be characterized as ‘postmodern’ theories of the subject. While I greatly admire Glass’s project overall, in *Shattered Selves*, as opposed to his other work, he has a tendency at times to assume a rather overly homogeneous view of contemporary theory, overstating, perhaps, its celebration of multiplicity and fragmentation – or heaping postmodernism into “one insouciant movement” as Dwight Fee puts it.⁸⁴ With Fee I would want to argue that ‘postmodern’, or ‘post-structuralist’, theory is rather more nuanced than Glass allows; indeed, because these categories encompass such a wide range of critical work, I am not sure how useful labels such as ‘postmodern’ are.⁸⁵ Against Glass, I would want to argue that theories of the subject such as those advanced by Blanchot and Kofman, for instance, do not preclude the possibility of agency, that is, of intervening in one’s own existence.⁸⁶

In order to understand more clearly how a ‘postmodern’ or constructivist notion of subjectivity need not be antithetical to a concept of the subject-as-agent, the work of Judith Butler is particularly useful, and goes some way, I think, to meeting Glass’s objections. The importance of Butler’s work over the last 15 years or so to debates around identity is that she forcefully outlines a theory of human action while remaining

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Fee, ‘The Broken Dialogue’, p. 14.

⁸⁵ On this see Judith Butler’s essay ‘Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism’ in which she forcefully points out that ‘postmodernism’ is not a unified field, and argues that homogenizing the variety of contemporary theory under this general rubric is a tactic used by those who do not wish to engage with theory’s various interrogations of the ‘given’. In Seyla Benhabib; Judith Butler; Drucilla Cornell; Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 35-57.

⁸⁶ As if to answer critiques such as Glass’s, in *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot posits a nuanced theoretical stance, averring: “we will go forward with caution; not forgetting [...] that it is not from coherent thought that we would seek to break away, and that we do not seek to rid ourselves all at once of unity – what a joke that would be” (p. 67).

faithful to a constructivist notion of the subject. Admittedly, Butler has not always been successful in convincing her opponents that her account is a cogent one; Seyla Benhabib, for instance, has been a persistent critic.⁸⁷ Notwithstanding this, in a discussion of the sort I intend and have already begun to outline, it would, I think, be a mistake to ignore her highly influential work, not least because of the ways in which it often seems to echo (or ‘reiterate’ perhaps, to use a term she favours⁸⁸) themes taken up by Ricoeur, albeit from a quite different philosophical grounding. Moreover, my discussion in this thesis is often strongly inflected by concerns which both Ricoeur and Butler address from their differing perspectives. Their work on identity centres around a similar problematic; and their accounts of subjectivity often appear at unexpected moments to mirror each other.

Butler attempts to think through a conception of identity and action without restoring “classical liberal-humanist” notions of an inviolable and stable subject;⁸⁹ but equally she insists that her account does not construe the subject as “fatally determined” or “fully [...] arbitrary”.⁹⁰ Yet this latter assertion, and her concomitant claim that ‘construction’ is the “scene of agency”,⁹¹ is set against a view of the ‘subject’ as, variously, a fiction, a contingent construct, an *effect* of power and discourse, an illusion of substance produced by grammatical habit. Butler claims, then, that her conception of subjectivity escapes from the familiar “binarism of free will and determinism”;⁹² and while it may seem rather fanciful to place her account of subjectivity alongside Ricoeur’s, the invocation of these twin opposed poles does recall Ricoeur’s negotiation between the self as either substance or sheer becoming. Moreover, Butler’s contention, in a debate with Benhabib, that words “engage actions or constitute themselves a kind of action” because they “draw upon and re-engage conventions which have gained their power precisely through a “*sedimented iterability*”⁹³ while probably closer to the social constructionism of Berger and

⁸⁷ See Benhabib’s *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 214-8; and also her essay, ‘Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance’, in Benhabib et. al, *Feminist Contentions*, pp. 17-34.

⁸⁸ Borrowing from Austin’s speech act theory, “by way of Jacques Derrida”, as Disch puts it. ‘Judith Butler and the Politics of the Performative,’ p. 559.

⁸⁹ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 17.

⁹⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 147.

⁹¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 147; Butler uses a similar phrase in *The Psychic Life of Power* where she refers to “the ambivalent scene of agency, constrained by no teleological necessity” (p. 15).

⁹² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 147.

⁹³ Butler, ‘For a Careful Reading’, in Benhabib et al., *Feminist Contentions*, pp. 127-143 (pp. 134-35).

Luckmann,⁹⁴ also brings to mind the Ricoeurian dialectic between innovation and sedimentation. Butler insists that what she calls ‘reiteration’ is not merely a ventriloquizing of convention and extant discourse, but instead, by its very nature, allows for variation. Indeed, as early as 1990 in *Gender Trouble* she was claiming that “The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition*”,⁹⁵ and that “‘agency’ [...] is to be located within the possibility of variation on that repetition”.⁹⁶ Her contention in that work that, “paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of ‘agency’ that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed”,⁹⁷ is in tune with some of my reflections in chapter 6. There, leaning on the work of Emile Benveniste and Anthony Kerby concerning the linguistic constitution of subjectivity, or in Kerby’s terms the way in which “the speaking subject [...] attains selfhood via its expressions”,⁹⁸ I argue that inhering in this paradigm is the possibility of change. Benveniste’s assertion that it “is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of ‘ego’ in reality, in its reality”,⁹⁹ allows, I suggest, for the possibility that the subject may be able to work within, and shift, linguistic and narrative constitutive grids. This process looks broadly similar to what Butler refers to when, addressing the ways in which feminism had become “trapped” within the “unnecessary binarism” of determinism versus free will, she claims that “for an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary”.¹⁰⁰ “Construction”, Butler adds, “is not opposed to agency”; rather, “it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible”.¹⁰¹ The *constructed* nature of the subject, that is, allows for “strategies of subversive

⁹⁴ See P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London: Allen Lane, 1967), pp. 65-89, where they describe how the processes of ‘habitualization’, ‘institutionalization’ and ‘sedimentation’ are instrumental in the formation of social constructions.

⁹⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 145.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁹⁸ Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 69

⁹⁹ Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. by Mary Elizabeth Meek (Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971), p. 224.

¹⁰⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 147.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

repetition”:¹⁰² what is constructed rather than fixed as essence might also – perhaps agonistically – be varied, subverted, shifted.¹⁰³

In subsequent work Butler returns to the problem of agency, elucidating it as neither beginning nor ending with the subject, but rather, as Lisa Disch summarises arguments in *The Psychic Life of Power*, contending that it is “complicit with the forces it opposes, and that it is citational rather than original”.¹⁰⁴ Thus, she argues that although the subject is “the modality of power that turns on itself [...] the effect of power in recoil” (*Psychic Life of Power*, p. 6), and that even in action the subject retains “the conditions of its emergence”, this does not also entail “that all of its agency remains tethered to those conditions and that those conditions remain the same in every operation of agency” (p. 13). The power which makes the subject possible, which then is “taken up and reiterated in the subject’s ‘own’ acting” (p. 14) – and which process is then obscured as causes are taken to be effects in power’s dissimulation of itself – does not entirely constrain subjective possibility. Rather, “agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled. One might say that the purposes of power are not always the purposes of agency” (p. 15). Yet, importantly, for Butler this cannot be construed as a ‘transcending’ of power, for the subject *and its agency* remain defined as effects of power: “Exceeding is not escaping, and the subject exceeds precisely that to which it is bound” (p. 17). Agency occurs, then, within an “ambivalent scene” unconstrained by “teleological necessity”; it represents the “assumption of a purpose *unintended* by power, one that could not have been derived logically or historically, that operates in a relation of contingency and reversal to the power that makes it possible, to which it nevertheless belongs” (p. 15).

Butler’s work is important in that it is unambiguously politically situated and directly engages with issues surrounding resistance and the oppressive effects of power. Her discussions of these issues often resonate with the concerns and struggles enacted in the texts I study here. For instance, the critical ‘exceeding’ which she invokes as a

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ On the various ‘*hows*’ of subversion, see Butler’s *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997). Terry Lovell provides a useful summary of Butler’s elaboration: “It is in the margins, between what is said in words and the eloquence of the body, that resistance, even subversion, may be nourished. And, second, because social norms and institutions depend for their reproduction on iteration and re-iteration in performance, there is a ‘logic of iterability’ [*Excitable Speech*, p. 147] that makes even the most entrenched institutionalised norms vulnerable to subversion and transformation through transgressive performances”. Terry Lovell, ‘Resisting with Authority: Historical Specificity, Agency and the Performative Self’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 20.1 (2003), 1–17 (p. 4).

¹⁰⁴ Lisa Disch, ‘Judith Butler and the Politics of the Performative,’ *Political Theory*, Vol. 27 No. 4, August 1999, 545-559 (p. 556).

locus of agency is consonant with strategies to resist or rework the powerful discourses of biomedicine and psychopathology. In the following chapter I show how Lauren Slater reworks the inscriptive strategies of biomedicine, mimicking its tactics within her text, and by so doing highlighting the anomalies in what was intended to be a seamless – and self-identical – discourse. Moreover, Butler’s acute awareness of the political and ethical ramifications of her theorizing, together with her clear-eyed determination to steer clear of both “politically sanctimonious forms of fatalism” and “naïve forms of political optimism”¹⁰⁵ and her sensitivity to the struggles and fragility of the marginalized subject,¹⁰⁶ suggests that her work is far from antithetical either in its critical impetus or its practical import to the arguments and concerns of critics such as Glass.

1.8 The politics of narrative identity

Notwithstanding my reservations concerning aspects of Glass’s engagement with theory in *Shattered Selves*, my position here is, as I have said, sympathetic to his and Caminero-Santangelo’s arguments on the importance of agency, and particularly narrative agency, for the mad subject. I need to stress, however, that such an emphasis on the processes of selfhood does not have to entail a concomitant blindness to the socio-political forces implicated in madness. It would be easy to assume that a focus on the *self* and its ‘own’ production of narrative could necessitate a turning away from history and the role of wider cultural forces and pressures towards a quietist and solipsistic contemplation. However, the theses of both Glass and Caminero-Santangelo are underpinned by political concerns; indeed, three of Glass’s books take as their themes various aspects of the nexus between madness and the polity.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁶ See e.g. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 27. And also Lovell: “Butler pins her hopes for effective agency not only upon the dissonances and fractures of language and of the socially constituted self, but also upon certain categories of social actor. She is particularly interested in those that occupy positions that are not interpellated (in Althusser’s Lacanian vocabulary), not recognized other than as scandalous, positions that are not liveable yet are nevertheless occupied: the position of sexual dissidents and of others who suffer abjection (Kristeva, 1982), nonrecognition, mis-recognition. It is from these marginal spaces that she looks for movements of radical contestation and transformation.” ‘Resisting with Authority’, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰⁷ See: *Delusion: Internal Dimensions of Political Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); *Private Terror/ Public Life: Psychosis and the Politics of Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); *Psychosis and Power: Threats to Democracy in the Self and the Group* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

For Caminero-Santangelo and Glass, the subject whose voice is swamped in the disconcerting echolalia of psychosis or muted in the deathly silences of depression will find it difficult, if not impossible, to challenge or rework hegemonic discourse, or even to participate in the polity in any significant way. The potential for engagement with, and concerted action in, the consensual world is in large part lost, they argue, because madness characteristically attenuates or vitiates the sufferer's voice; and without a coherent and 'singular' voice the sufferer cannot effectively engage with others. This effect is evident in several of the texts I study here. For instance, Linda Hart graphically describes this process when she writes of her own psychosis – manifested in terrifying hallucinations of a hostile internalized father bent on destroying her:

Today my father has attempted to get control of my mind. He does it by subtle means. Taking away my speech, closing me down and taking me away from the world.¹⁰⁸

A similar effect is noted by William Styron, in a memoir of his clinical depression, where he notes how his speech "slowed to the vocal equivalent of a shuffle".¹⁰⁹ Moreover, Styron illustrates how the overriding preoccupation of the mad subject is understandably with his/her own distress rather than with the wider social and cultural realm, noting that "my brain, in thrall to its outlaw hormones, had become less an organ of thought than an instrument registering, minute by minute, varying degrees of its own suffering".¹¹⁰

In line with Hart's account, Glass and Caminero-Santangelo contend that madness takes its sufferers 'away from the world'. It is only through coherent speech which engages with the world, through narrative agency, they argue, that resistance to dominant cultural discourses and representations is possible. Madness does not challenge oppression, neither is it an escape via a language of "non-reason" which short-circuits the hegemony of patriarchy. Rather it represents a speechlessness or an incoherence, neither of which can confront "constraining representations" but are "a complete capitulation to them".¹¹¹ Only by entering into the consensual linguistic arena, by formulating their own representations, are subjects able to "strategically [occupy] the space of existing literary, medical, and popular models of madness".¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Linda Hart, *Phone At Nine Just to Say You're Alive* (London: Pan, 1997), p. 14.

¹⁰⁹ William Styron, *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (London: Picador, 1992), p. 56.

¹¹⁰ Styron, *Darkness Visible*, p. 58.

¹¹¹ Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, p. 17.

¹¹² *Ibid*, p. 9. These reflections are consonant with Kim Worthington's arguments in her *Self as Narrative*, where, contesting a poststructuralist poetics in which subjectivity is "unlimited by

Glass and Caminero-Santangelo highlight the abusive situations and structural conditions which have precipitated their subjects into breakdown, and they share the conviction that to celebrate either madness or the dispersed, multiple self is politically deleterious for the mad themselves. Critical discourse which encourages a capitulation to madness effectively works to absent the mad from the polity and prevents them from engaging in public debate, indeed from critiquing the societal conditions which may have precipitated them into, or at least exacerbated, suffering. In Caminero-Santangelo's terms, madness forecloses the possibility of agential intervention, thereby rendering it "not simply personally disabling", but "absolutely antithetical [...] to feminism".¹¹³ She urges that, instead of lauding the submersion in madness, the critic should privilege agency and "active creative transformation" by means of which the mad subject may open an "imaginative space" in which to envision herself as, and subsequently become, an actor in her own life and the social realm.¹¹⁴ Her focus reiterates Glass's contentions that a "compelling desire" of his subjects is to find a "way back to a communal attachment",¹¹⁵ and that the self is essentially "political – more accurately, communal or social".¹¹⁶ In Glass's analysis, madness removes the sufferer from the political and social realm and represents a "retreat to private worlds whose meaning remains obscure",¹¹⁷ with the internal images of delusion enforcing "hermetic withdrawal".¹¹⁸ The production of comprehensible narrative and speech, on the other hand, restores the self to both a sense of community and its own agency; indeed, narration is itself the very condition of agency. Moreover, the narrative act is intrinsically "political", because it returns the speaker to "history, time, continuity and action [...] to feel tied to the Other [sic] through a dialectical and shared symbolism",¹¹⁹ and because "the shared, the public, the dramatic as artistic *form* moves outward in contrast to the solipsistic, isolated, realm of the interior monologue, the delusion without any shared component or audience".¹²⁰

expectations of narrative continuity", she emphasises the importance of resistance and creativity within a framework of "shared signification" and asserts that "Silent, we are subjected by language, remaining victims of a colonizing tongue. Without voice, we remain mute subjects of other speakers' interpretative will-to-power: we must speak (for) ourselves" (pp. 236 & 275).

¹¹³ Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, p. 179.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹¹⁵ James M. Glass, *Private Terror/ Public Life: Psychosis and the Politics of Community* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p.1.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.16.

Glass's stress on the situated nature of narrative and identity is an important one in that it emphasizes that a discourse resistant to the multiple fragmented postmodern subject need not posit an atomistic, ahistorical, autonomous, sovereign self in its stead. Thus, Glass proposes a model of the self as intrinsically bound up with relationships and the role of the other, and as historically affected, if not entirely determined. Narrative is not construed as a solitary activity removed from the social realm, but is sited in an interpersonal space; neither is agency absolute, but rather is set within and radically affected by the social and interpersonal, and takes place in the context of a specific historical setting. Consonant with this emphasis, most, if not all, of the texts I examine here construct identity, illness, and health as bound up with, and to some extent dependent upon, a complex network of other discourses, others' histories, other people. In this, they and Glass evoke something of Ricoeur's dialectic between innovation and sedimentation.

The broad paradigm of narrative identity, then, does not preclude a recognition that the self may be plural rather than atomistic and singular. Cooper and Rowan's observation about the deconstruction of the self as being difficult to contemplate in the midst of psychic fragmentation comes in the context of their introduction to a collection of essays entitled *The Plural Self: Multiplicity in Everyday Life* in which a variety of authors think through issues of identity from a variety of pluralistic positions. Many of these essays are informed by the writings of Bakhtin, Volosinov and Vygotsky (whose work I also reference here), but they are far removed from the kind of theorising that Glass takes issue with in *Shattered Selves*. Indeed in that volume Glass himself contemplates with equanimity the possibility of the plural self – an “intrapersonal community”, as he calls it, with consciousness not “monolithic” but rather “a unity representing a plurality”.¹²¹ The various pieces in *The Plural Self* again generally attempt to chart a middle course between the notion of a unified, singular self and a blunt proclamation of the death of Man: the argument is that aspects of contemporary thinking can be embraced, but without losing the human being in the process. Thus, the individual is conceived as both a plurality of selves *and* a one: the self retains a meaningful coherence; one's various personhoods form a meaningful totality. Mary Watkins's contribution on the development of ‘dialogical capacities’ exemplifies the drift of this collection as a whole. While she considers the dialogic character of selfhood as akin to an intrapersonal relationship amongst varying ‘voices’, her

¹²¹ Glass, *Shattered Selves*, p. 85.

argument is tempered by an assertion that “for authentic dialogue to occur [one must] be able to maintain one’s own voice amid the fray of relationship”.¹²² A similar interpretive framework is also described by Kim Worthington:

[T]he construction of a subject's sense of selfhood should be understood as a creative narrative process achieved within a plurality of intersubjective communicative protocols. In the act of conceptualizing one's selfhood, one writes a narrative of personal continuity through time. That is, in thinking myself, I remember myself: I draw together my multiple members - past and other subject positions - into a coherent narrative of selfhood which is more or less readable by myself and others.¹²³

1.9 Narrative identity: broadening the scope

While the broad idea of narrative identity informs my theoretical outlook here, I look to extend its intellectual grounding by considering several critical perspectives which have not generally been included in discussions of this paradigm. These include the work of Glass and Caminero-Santangelo, and selected pieces by Blanchot and Kofman; I also consider some of Michel Foucault’s late essays on ethics and the care of the self, and the debate between Foucault and Derrida on the rift between madness and reason.

Blanchot and Kofman, as I have already noted, have addressed the ways in which the shocks of extreme experience impact upon the sense of selfhood; specifically they have focussed on the effect of the Holocaust on language and representation, but aspects of their work are also valuable for my discussion here. In particular, some of Blanchot’s dense theoretical writing in *The Infinite Conversation* and Kofman’s slim volume *Smothered Words* contain remarkable and moving meditations on the epistemological and ethical ramifications of acute suffering and seem to me to shed light on the painful encounter with alterity embodied in madness. *Smothered Words* is predicated on the question of how to speak of the unspeakable – on the conflicting imperatives to speak and be silent, or as Kofman puts it: “How can it be not be said? And how can it be said?”.¹²⁴ She attempts to move beyond this impasse performatively as much as constatively; as with several of the texts I study here, in *Smothered Words* form is as important as content, and connotes a philosophical stance, even a mode of being. Taking the form of a concise intertext woven from several strands, including

¹²² Mary Watkins, ‘Pathways between the Multiplicities of the Psyche and Culture: The Development of Dialogical Capacities’, in *The Plural Self: Multiplicity in Everyday Life*, ed. by John Rowan and Mick Cooper (London: Sage, 1999), p. 259.

¹²³ Worthington, *Self as Narrative*, p. 13.

¹²⁴ Kofman, *Smothered Words*, p. 9.

texts by Blanchot and Adorno, Antelme's Holocaust writing, and Kofman's own autobiographical narrative in which she recalls the death of her father in Auschwitz, this work attempts to remain open to multiplicity and otherness while maintaining a coherent 'narrative' form. Kofman's aim here is ethical; she is searching for, as Vivian Liska puts it, "a mode of thinking and writing capable of undoing the repressive authority and exclusionary mastery in a philosophical tradition that pretends to have conclusive truths, to own the 'last word'".¹²⁵ By including extensive quotations from other writers, Kofman literally does not have the last word in this text, and she opens her discourse up to acknowledge her own vulnerability, uncertainty, and dependence on the other. This preparedness to allow discourse to be shaken by reverberations which one cannot control has a resonance in the context of madness. While the biomedical narrative may wish to pierce the shadows of madness with the bright light of science, and to subsume alterity within the parameters of reason, memoirists frequently point to an unknowability and mystery intrinsic to their experience, and cite the desire for ordered narratives as exacerbating their distress.

More generally, my work here is in debt to, and often informed by, theoretical work on the effects of trauma, in particular analyses of how traumatic experience can be represented, and the implications of this for theories of knowledge and understanding.¹²⁶ As with Kofman's late work,¹²⁷ such studies frequently grapple with the supposedly unspeakable nature of trauma, an aporetic state engendered by at least two factors. To briefly summarize: firstly, because severe shock is not fully cognitively processed, it is both known (in the body, and occurring as nightmares, symptoms and flashbacks), and simultaneously unknown – because unavailable to the ordinary mechanisms of memory and narrative. Secondly, and more prosaically, the problematic of the unspeakable arises in the question of whether it is *possible* to fit the limit-experience of shock, psychical chaos, crisis, or acute suffering into a narrative, when such experiences are in themselves profoundly anti-narrational in character.

¹²⁵ Vivian Liska, 'Parricidal Autobiographies: Sarah Kofman between Theory and Memory,' *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 7.1 (2000), p. 91.

¹²⁶ See, in particular: Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996); Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995); Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001).

¹²⁷ In addition to *Smothered Words*, see also Kofman's 'Writing without Power', *Women's Philosophy Review*, 13 (1995), 5-8; and also her memoir of life during the Nazi occupation of France, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

Moreover, the question arises, as I have already highlighted with specific reference to the representation of madness, if the limit-experience is placed within narrative, will not narration transform trauma into something which it was, and is, not – something governed by order, sense, reason and progression? And would not such a narrative be a false story, one which is dissonant with the self's distress?

It was the problematic of unspeakability – but of madness, rather than trauma in its broader sense – around which the famous debate between Foucault and Derrida centred, a debate initiated by the publication of Foucault's *Folie et Deraison*.¹²⁸ In particular, both writers addressed whether it is possible to represent madness in the language of reason, and, despite their many disagreements, concur that madness is characterized by a radical unsayability. I return to this debate at several points in this thesis where I will explain some of the implications of the issues raised for my study here; moreover, it is with an eye to Derrida's critique that I have used the phrase 'starting to speak' in my title. I detail my reasoning for this in chapter 6.

Foucault's late work on the 'aesthetics of the self' has not always been well-received, even by formerly admiring readers; it has been seen by some critics as a retreat to a kind of bourgeois quietism¹²⁹ – and to a notion of the self as essence rather than a contingent and temporally situated construction. I would argue against this position, and with Jana Sawicki and David Halperin contend that Foucault remains committed to the broad principle of a thoroughly historicized subjectivity, one which is by no means "monolithic and private", but which is *constructed* through "multiple ways of knowing and governing ourselves that are inherited from historical traditions".¹³⁰ However, for me, the undoubted shift in Foucault's late thought does represent an attempt on his part to meet some of those objections to his work (and to poststructuralism's deconstruction of the subject more generally) which claimed that he had failed to provide an account for the human potential for action and resistance.

¹²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Folie et deraison: Histoire de la folie a l'age classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961). The much abridged translation, from which I quote here, was published as: *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 1999). Jacques Derrida, 'Cogito and the History of Madness', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978; first published in French 1967), pp. 31-63.

¹²⁹ See for instance: Mas'ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton, *Theory as Resistance: Politics and Culture after (Post)structuralism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), pp. 5& 84; Lois McNay *Gender and Agency*, p. 9; Janice McLaughlin, *Feminist Debates and Social Theory: Contemporary Debates and Dialogues* (London: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 115-136; A. Thacker, 'Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence', *Radical Philosophy*, 63 (Spring 1993), 13-21.

¹³⁰ Jana Sawicki, 'Foucault, Feminism and Questions of Identity,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. by Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 288. For a sterling defence of Foucault see David Halperin's wonderful *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Surprisingly – in the light of his Nietzschean credentials – I suggest that there is some consonance between Foucault’s arguments concerning the constitution of the self through techniques and practices and the work of Ricoeur on the dialectic between sedimentation and innovation and its role in narrative selfhood. I do not, however, attempt to formulate any kind of grand synthesis of these two thinkers, although in the light of Ricoeur’s (albeit complex) philosophical relationship with structuralism the parallels are perhaps less startling than they might first appear.¹³¹ My comparison of aspects of Ricoeur’s and Foucault’s thought highlights that in my readings of Foucault – and also of Derrida – I occasionally work against the grain of what I take to be their intentions. For instance, I do not share without reservation the assumptions concerning the *incarceration* of madness by reason which informed the 1960’s debate – which now appear rather dated and the (probably then necessary) philosophical corollary of the anti-psychiatry movement.¹³²

Foucault has been, of course, a major influence on the work of Judith Butler, and it is worth emphasizing that he, like Butler, allows for a radical ambivalence inherent in power’s effects. For instance, in *The History of Sexuality* he notes that the “action of power relations” is “modified by their very exercise”, a modification which entails “a strengthening of some terms and a weakening of others, with effects of resistance and counterinvestments, so that there never existed one type of stable subjugation, given once and for all”.¹³³ On discourse too, he contends that it should not be construed as monolithic; and that we must not imagine “a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one” but rather conceive of it “as a multiplicity of discursive

¹³¹ Lois McNay has argued that Ricoeur’s temporal situating of the subject goes some way to overcoming the shortcomings in constructionist accounts of subjectification and agency (including Foucault’s), in which, as she puts it, “the coherence of the self is not really explained beyond vague and top-heavy ideas of ideological fixation” (*Gender and Agency*, p. 27). A short essay which summarises both Ricoeur’s acknowledgment of and challenge to structuralism is his ‘Structure, Word, Event,’ in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. by Charles Reagan and David Stewart (Boston, Mass.: Beacon, 1978), pp. 109-119. See also: *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. by Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970); *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, trans. By Willis Domingo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974); and ‘The Narrative Function’, in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 274-296. Thompson’s introduction to the latter collection is useful in elucidating Ricoeur’s debt to the structural linguistics of Benveniste (pp.1-26).

¹³² Although see David Pilgrim and Anne Rogers’s essay ‘Mental Health, critical realism and lay knowledge’ in which they argue that Foucault’s early work on madness represents “an epistemological break” with what they describe as “the humanistic protest of the ‘anti-psychiatrists’”. In: *Body Talk: The Material and Discursive Regulation of Sexuality, Madness and Reproduction*, ed. by Jane Ussher (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 33-49 (p. 35).

¹³³ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality* (Volume 1), trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 97.

elements that can come into play in various strategies".¹³⁴ He goes on to claim that "discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it":

Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.¹³⁵

While such passages have not been sufficient to convince all of Foucault's critics that his theories of the subject are coherent,¹³⁶ they do demonstrate a more nuanced theory of agency than perhaps some have allowed.¹³⁷

1.10 Narrative, identity, madness

Finally, I turn now to review the chief texts I consider in this inquiry. I have tried to pick a selection of work which is broadly representative of this genre of narrative; the range is wide and includes some well-known works, as well as others that are obscure or have largely been forgotten. In terms of the illnesses written of, these include depression – both 'clinical' and 'manic'; borderline personality disorder; and schizophrenia. Texts include memoirs which have been ostensibly written 'after the fact' of madness and those apparently produced in the midst of suffering. Concerning this latter category, I share James Glass's assumption that these documents will invariably contain important insights and critiques.¹³⁸ While 'sanity' may be their aim and desire, the authors I study here demonstrate that even within lunacy they have important things to say.

In the following chapter I study two memoirs which both discuss experiences of epilepsy and mental illness. Despite striking differences in their narrative tone and

¹³⁴ Ibid, p. 100.

¹³⁵ Ibid, pp. 100-101.

¹³⁶ Seyla Benhabib, for instance, suggests that there is a "social-scientific" deficit in his work which renders his conceptions of "social action and social movements" "inadequate"; moreover she remains unconvinced by his elaborations of identity formation which she calls "thin". She claims that there has been a largely uncritical reception of Foucault's explanatory framework in the US because he "has been read less as a social and cultural historian and social theorist [and] more as a philosopher and literary critic". See *Situating the Self*, p. 237 n. 41.

¹³⁷ For a wide variety of opinion on the complex relationship between Foucaultian thought, feminism and agency see the essays collected in *Feminism & Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, ed. by I. Diamond & L. Quinby, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988); also see various essays collected in *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, ed. by Susan Hekman (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997). Of special interest in the latter is Sawicki's 'Feminism, Foucault, and 'Subjects' of Power and Freedom', pp. 159-178.

¹³⁸ See Glass, *Shattered Selves*, pp. xii-xiv.

construction, Lauren Slater's *Spasm: A Memoir with Lies* and *A Ray of Darkness* by Margiad Evans, I argue, present similar models of narrating the self which are quite radical in their various implications. Evans's memoir is explicitly presented as a work-in-progress (or process), with the autobiographical subject also adumbrated as 'unfinished', ongoing, and therefore diffuse rather than defined. To a similar end, and in part as a strategic move designed to highlight the shifting nature of psychiatric diagnoses, Slater foregrounds metaphor as a narrative mode, specifically arguing that allusions and tropes must be employed to figure the self. In addition, in both texts notions of atomistic or autonomous selfhood are undermined, and the importance of relationship in the formation of identity is emphasized; and in *Spasm* particularly, the role of the reader is denoted as crucial to the model of narrative identity outlined.

Chapter three is devoted to an in-depth study of Elizabeth Wurtzel's well-known memoir of depression, *Prozac Nation*, and a briefer discussion of Tracy Thompson's treatment of the same subject in her *The Beast: A Journey through Depression*. *Prozac Nation* is a remarkable, complex (and much maligned) 'narrative interminable' which frequently evokes the endless, repetitive grieving named by Freud as characterizing melancholia.¹³⁹ Moreover, like *A Ray of Darkness*, it often appears to map a subject in process: in Wurtzel's text the recovery of the past is delineated as intrinsic to constructing identity in the present. Both these texts effectively blur demarcations both between past and present selves, and discrete regions of health and illness; to use Peter Brooks's succinct formula as he describes the narrative dynamics at work in Freud's case history of the 'Wolf Man', one might legitimately claim, I think, that they exemplify restagings of a "complex and buried past history [...] as it covertly reconstitutes itself in the present language".¹⁴⁰ This covert reconstitution is, as we shall see, far from being a comfortable or unproblematic process.

In chapter four I begin by considering in more detail the difficulties intrinsic to signifying madness, and in that context discuss some of the theoretical implications arising from the debate between Foucault and Derrida. I then turn to two very different texts, each of which in its narrative treatment makes both madness and the self

¹³⁹ See: Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Volume XII), ed. by James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), pp. 147-156; 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *The Standard Edition* (Volume XIV) (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 239-258.

¹⁴⁰ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge & London, Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 283.

‘metaphorically present’, to use Derrida’s description of Foucault’s writing strategy.¹⁴¹ My discussion of Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* returns to and develops some of the ideas I began to explore in chapter 2 concerning the representation of the self and its suffering. As with *Spasm*, in Kaysen’s text the self, its distress, and incipient redemption are made present by a poetic or literary – rather than a documentary – mode of discourse; here, however, this strategy is much more explicitly aimed at ‘rewriting’ the fixed self ossified in, and defined by, the static narratives of psychiatry. In a complex and beautifully orchestrated negotiation with various selves dispersed through time, *Girl, Interrupted* works to undermine medicine’s starkly reductionist account, overshadowing its one-dimensional logics with a rendition of an aleatory, evolving identity.

Ross Burke’s *The Truth Effect* also makes a self ‘metaphorically present’, but this text – and presentation – is in stark contrast to Kaysen’s poetic and stylish narrative. *The Truth Effect* is a powerful and disturbing work in which a subjectivity in awful disarray is manifest despite the author’s apparent intentions. Burke attempts to fictionalize his life, but in the face of a coruscating suffering the divide between fiction and fact collapses; reading this extraordinary work one follows in appalled recognition as a terrible distress breaks apart the weft of narrative form. In dramatizing the failure of Burke’s attempt to mediate his life by means of a narrative fiction, *The Truth Effect* presents, perhaps, a necessary counterweight to over-optimistic assessments of the efficacy of narrative identity. Abruptly ending with a psychical and narrative collapse, the tragedy of *The Truth Effect* is that it ends when it ends.

In chapter 5 I go on to study Alasdair Gray’s novel *1982, Janine* which in its first half traces a trajectory remarkably similar to that of *The Truth Effect*. However, *1982, Janine* continues past collapse – with its narrator surviving and emerging on the far side of psychic catastrophe to refashion story and identity. Exemplifying a salutary negotiation with language, the dramatic import of *1982, Janine* emerges from the transformation that narrativising a life can effect. Moreover, this re-telling, far from a solipsistic preoccupation with the self, returns the protagonist to an engagement with the social realm and issues of social justice and ethics.

In part because it is a fiction, *1982, Janine* exemplifies in its intricate narrative dynamics many of the theoretical ideas that emerge from my discussions. Indeed, its dramatic themes centre around very similar concerns and ideas to those motivating my

¹⁴¹ See ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’, p. 37.

project: one might say that Gray's novel is precisely 'about' an encounter between narrative identity and madness, and that it draws clear conclusions itself about individuation (or, possibly, subjectification) and the ways in which language and narrative may be employed to salutary or harmful effect in the context of acute distress. As such, this is a paradigmatic work for this study and could even be construed as an artistic variety of 'theory', a notion calling to mind Fredric Jameson's claim that "poets and the theoreticians are both at work desperately in an increasingly constricted network of reifying processes, and both violently have recourse to invented speech and private languages in order to reopen a space in which to breathe".¹⁴²

My discussion of *1982, Janine* serves as a bridge between the raw and reader-alienating delirium of *The Truth Effect* and the far more cogent tones of the two texts I study in my final chapter. Both Linda Hart's *Phone at Nine Just to Say You're Alive* and Lara Jefferson's *These are my Sisters* exemplify in their narrative dynamics a willed embarkation into language similar to that dramatized in the second half of Gray's novel. These narrative acts take place against the background of their authors' psychoses, and are formulated within the context of hospital journals which were subsequently published. Although both texts are largely focussed on the mundanities of hospital life, I argue that a remarkable series of technologies are at work in these documents, the most significant of which is the fashioning of a coherent sense of selfhood in the midst of the troubling emanations of psychosis. Writing, for Hart and Jefferson, is a technique of the self which facilitates and embodies an intervention in one's own existence: through narrative, through 'starting to speak', both, like Gray's narrator, begin to direct and regulate their lives. Again, as in *1982, Janine*, the identities formulated here are bound up with, indeed dependent for their very emergence on, sociality. These texts, like Slater's *Spasm*, often seem to hover between 'outside' and 'inside' – between a conversation with the self and an engagement with the others and the structures around their authors.

The concerns embodied in Hart's and Jefferson's deeply personal accounts elucidate, to a considerable extent, themes which recur throughout this study; moreover, both texts urgently address the psychological basis of narrative and narration – their implication, that is to say, in, or as, the most intimate reaches of the self.

¹⁴² Fredric Jameson, 'On Jargon', *Minnesota Review*, 9 (1977), p. 31.

Pointing as they do to the critical importance of narrative to any meaningful sense of human identity, they are fitting texts with which to conclude my discussion.

2. “My solitary, not my company face”: Solipsism and the Other

Sometimes we must face the crossroads of our own life history and recognize that something new [is] emerging that could not be seen in the existing alternatives.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I examine two memoirs separated by almost fifty years and ostensibly very different in style and tone. Lauren Slater’s *Spasm: A Memoir with Lies* (2000) and *A Ray of Darkness* by Margiad Evans (1952) apparently have little in common other than that they both relate experiences of epilepsy and depression. Yet, despite obvious differences, both fashion radical and similar paradigms for autopathography;² indeed, these works address wider questions concerning the mechanisms of autobiography as genre, while also destabilising notions of the autobiographical self as a discrete entity contained within history and the text. In addition, both texts map out, in very different ways, how sickness has isolated their authors; yet woven into this theme, within the very fabric and structures of their narratives, is a tentative recognition that writing, and the text itself, through their inherent dialogism, offer the possibility of a kind of redemption. Thus, autobiography is figured not as an atomistic rendition of a self to be consumed by other disparate atomistic selves, but rather as a meeting, even, in the case of *Spasm*, a collision, between consciousnesses.

2.2.1 Narrative strategy and identity in *Spasm: A Memoir with Lies*

In *Spasm: A Memoir with Lies*, Lauren Slater returns to the story of an often precarious psychic state that she documented in two previous autobiographical texts. *Welcome to my Country* details Slater’s work as a psychologist dealing with severely disturbed individuals suffering from schizophrenia, but also addresses her own history of mental

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. and ed. by Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM, 1971), p. 4.

² Autopathography: an autobiographical account of illness.

illness; *Prozac Diary* concentrates on this period of prolonged disturbance.³ Distinct from its predecessors, in *Spasm* Slater self-consciously experiments with the formal properties of memoir in order to better convey the paradoxes and complexities of mental illness and selfhood. Her narrative sets out to unsettle and interrogate traditional notions of transparency in which, dissimulating its own structures and devices, the autobiographical text effects to be little more than a clear window onto a given and discrete identity. Her intention and her strategy are foregrounded by the memoir's subtitle – Slater uses falsehood and fiction as key elements in her account – and are emphasized again in the exergual summary on the back of the paperback edition which declares: “*Spasm* is an autobiography with an unreliable narrator”. The monitory two words which make up the entirety of the opening chapter – “I exaggerate”⁴ – reiterate that Slater does not intend this to resemble a conventional autobiographical text; rather, she wishes to write a “slippery, playful, impish, exasperating text, shaped, if it could be, like a question mark” (223).

The central uncertainty or ‘unreliability’ of *Spasm* is effected by Slater’s description of the onset and progression of her ‘epilepsy’, in that she refuses to disclose whether this illness is ‘real’, or an aspect of a pathology which she claims includes Munchausen’s, or a metaphor invented to convey the self: “I have epilepsy. Or I feel I have epilepsy. Or I wish I had epilepsy, so I could find a way of explaining the dirty, spastic glittering place I had in my mother’s heart” (5-6). A key element in Slater’s narrative strategy, this equivocation and refusal to “come clean” is maintained almost throughout the entire narrative. Central to, perhaps driving, the story is an (often reluctant) recognition that ‘reality’ is not fixed but mutable and dependent on desire: “From my mother I learned that truth is bendable, that what you wish is every bit as real as what you are” (5). Yet, despite this lesson concerning the mutability of truth, and despite her apparently postmodern aspirations to write a slippery, playful, questioning text, Slater also declares herself “passionately dedicated to the truth” (160); moreover, she claims that she wishes to remain faithful at some level to a notion of memoir as indicative of an essential self: the purpose of the memoirist, she writes, is to “capture the *essence* of the narrator” (160: Slater’s emphasis). An intriguing opposition is therefore posited: in order to resist a simple inscription of self within a linear

³ *Welcome to my Country: A Therapist’s Memoir of Madness* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996); *Prozac Diary* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1999).

⁴ Lauren Slater, *Spasm: A Memoir with Lies* (London: Methuen, 2000) p. 3. Subsequent page references are given parenthetically in the text.

narrative, Slater fashions a memoir told by an unreliable narrator who lies, yet there is also an 'essence' of the narrating self which she wishes to convey. *Spasm* represents an attempt to reconcile the ostensibly conflicting aims of conveying essence and truth within a text which sets out to interrogate assumptions about reference and meaning.

For Slater, the limitations of language and of narrative form render a traditional autobiographical treatment of the self inadequate. Part of her strategy to overcome this is an exploration of what is ostensibly a non-coincidence – between fiction and factual writing – but which she here insinuates as less than clear-cut when she writes of “the blurry line between novels and memoirs”. In order to convey “the silence behind every story” (196), she insists on the necessity of what she calls ‘metaphor’ – but which in practice encompasses a wide variety of tropes and literary devices as well as the narration of fictional episodes. ‘Metaphor’, she claims, is the “greatest gift of language” because, through its use, she “can propel silence into sound” (220) and is thereby enabled to approach, “the subtleties and horrors and gaps in my past for which I have never been able to find the words” (219). The intriguing logic behind Slater’s text, therefore, dictates that as the ‘essence’ of self is unspeakable – or un-writeable – that is, in some way existing outside the parameters of discourse and the signifier, then, in order to ‘capture’ this core element, an elliptical ‘metaphorical’ approach must be adopted to gesture ‘beyond’ the word, and “invention” used to reach toward “the heart of things” (219).⁵ Thus the subjective space is approached by means of the signifier, but is ultimately beyond its reach. Construing the most vital space of subjectivity as ‘silent’ is also significant in that, connoted as lying beyond the scrambled ‘text’ of disturbed thought, it functions as a refuge from what Slater calls the “feverish scrim” (222) of illness – the sick perturbations of interiority that render such a ‘text’, in which the self is confined and defined by its words alone, an intolerable habitation.⁶

⁵ See Terence Hawkes’s definition of metaphor as that which “aid[s] language to achieve what is seen as its major goal, the revelation of a ‘reality’ of a world that lies unchanged beyond it.” T. Hawkes, *Metaphor* (London: Methuen, 1972) p. 92. Also George Aichele: “Metaphor: In a broad sense, any figure (or trope) of language, in which language resists our desire to possess it through a single, identical framing of sense and reference; the fundamental incompleteness of language.” From *The Limits of Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 143. Dominick LaCapra, in a discussion of historiography and the representation of trauma, touches on the complex relation of metaphor and truth. “[T]he complex relation of narrative structures to truth claims might provide a different understanding of modern and postmodern realism (including what has been termed *traumatic realism*) wherein correspondence itself is not to be understood in terms of positivism or essentialism but as a metaphor that signifies a referential relation (or truth claim) that is more or less direct or indirect [...]”. *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 14.

⁶ For an early example of the notion of thought as text see Freud’s footnote to *The Interpretation of Dreams* (added to the 1909 edition) in which he describes the dreams of a patient suffering from

Also less straightforward than might at first be apparent, Slater's desideratum of capturing "the *essence* of the narrator" does not, in practice, invoke a transcending of political, social, and linguistic constraints to arrive at a pristine unmediated core of selfhood. As will become evident, *Spasm* works in part precisely by foregrounding its form or textual *surface*, rather than the *depths* of a transcendent signified; I shall return to this point shortly. Moreover, even this aspiration itself – to ensnare the *narrator's* essence – implies the non-uniformity of author and narrator, thereby insinuating that the selfhood signified in *Spasm* might not resemble a singular discrete entity. More significantly, and on a similar theme, this impression of potential plurality is confirmed in the text's almost continual 'awareness' of its own possible reception, and of the others which haunt the fringes of the self-story. As we shall see, the core space or essential self of *Spasm* is not constructed as an autonomous monad, but rather, despite the often solipsistic preoccupations of the narrative, is denoted as constituted in an intersubjective, relational realm – a realm evoked through narrative strategies, and specifically the text's invocation of, and engagement with, an imagined reader.

2.2.2 The 'story' of *Spasm*

Spasm begins with the story of Slater's childhood, her Jewish family, and, particularly, of her mother – the determining influence in her daughter's life, and a woman of "grand gestures and high standards" (5). As an inveterate fantasist, who "rarely spoke the truth" (5), her mother is hemmed in by frustrated desires and aspirations – "to free the Russian Jews, educate the Falsachias, fly on the Concorde, drink daily at the Ritz" (5); and disappointment has precipitated a decline into alcohol-dependence and misery. She regards her sickly and unassertive daughter as "doomed" – predicting Lauren will be "shipped to a filthy brothel crawling with hairy bugs in Buenos Aires" (10) – and believes that "will, not love, was what made the world go round" (27). Her father, a teacher in a Hebrew School, barely figures in the story, apart from as an adjunct to his wife's powerful presence, with Lauren noting that, "I think he loved her, or, like me, her unhappiness was his" (11).

obsessions: "the spoken words which occurred in his dreams were not derived from remarks which he had heard or made himself. They contained the undistorted text of his obsessional thoughts [...]". See extract from *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (London: Blackwell, 2000), p. 150.

Lauren has her first 'seizure' immediately after a humiliating incident in which her mother is publicly exposed as a fantasist and a liar. Subsequently diagnosed as epileptic, Lauren realises that her bizarre symptoms have rendered her extraordinary in her mother's eyes, that her mother's desire for the fantastic – predicated on a hatred of the "mediocre" (10) – can finally be met: "I realised how, through illness, I might be able to give her food" (22). She begins to see a therapist at the "Center of Voluntary Control over Internal Processes" (33), then is sent to St. Christopher's, a 'special school' run by nuns and funded by the Epilepsy Society, to learn how to deal with the disease, and in particular to learn how to fall 'safely'. Meanwhile, her behaviour becomes increasingly eccentric as she spies on other families and even enters a neighbour's house in order to steal photographs. A new therapist, Doctor Neu, performs a corpus callostomy – effectively a severing of the brain – which reduces the number of her seizures, but leaves Lauren with her 'auras', the preternatural sensations that precede a fit. During one of these she is overcome by a need to write which she describes as an intense, almost sexual, experience: "the words were pure pleasure, physical rhythmic objects that released dreams like birds from a magician's fist" (111). Submitting a manuscript under a false name, she is accepted as a participant at a writing conference where she begins a sexual relationship with the famous author 'Christopher Marin', a married but predatory fifty year-old. Writing and sex become entwined in their increasingly destructive relationship, which ends when Marin discovers Lauren is epileptic after she fits in front of him. The narrative concludes with a darkly funny series of accounts of Lauren's involvement with Alcoholics Anonymous. Happening upon a meeting by chance in a church, she does not disabuse the participants of their assumption that she too is alcoholic. Swept up in this 'community' Lauren struggles to justify herself to herself by constructing alcoholism as a metaphor for her own pain. In a farcical scene where she attempts to 'come out' and admit the truth, the ambivalence and ambiguity inherent in her declarations allow the AA members to read her statement as a confirmation of their own desires – with Lauren acclaimed for her 'honesty'. Unable to shake off guilt at her ongoing deception, however, she again attempts to tell the truth at a retreat, this time in an apparently unambiguous way, only to have her confession read by the group as symptomatic, as a pathological instance of 'denial'. These concluding episodes emphasize a central concern in *Spasm* – that storytelling and the transmission of 'truth' are dependent on factors outside the control of the teller, and that, refracted through an audience's

preoccupations, an ostensibly straightforward approach to narrative and form may well produce a story which does not resemble the one intended.

2.2.3 Disnarration and diagnosis

The larger narrative of *Spasm* tracks Slater's emotional disintegration and descent into clinical depression, which throughout she relates to her 'epilepsy'. The manner in which she describes her illness is consonant with the effects produced by her narrative techniques. Thus, she refuses to disclose whether 'epilepsy' is a metaphor or an actual condition, and leaves her own question, "Is epilepsy mental or is it physical?" (80), unanswered, although her description of the disease as "so existential, so oddly spiritual, you are stuck out in the stratosphere with Sartre and Kierkegaard" (34), implies that, whatever its status, she wishes to emphasize its inherent mysteriousness rather than confine it within a positivistic aetiology.

Slater's refusal to connect 'epilepsy' to a given and medically certified signified is congruent with the techniques she uses to break up the surfaces of her memoir. The disruptions of the linearity of the story by narratological anacolutha⁷ dis-illusion the reader within the very patterns of the text. Imbricated by non-sequiturs, metanarration, and fantasy, the fractured style of the narrative disperses any apprehension that the autobiographical signifier issues seamlessly into the signified of a unitary 'self' traversing a linear course through time.

An example of this narrative disturbance is the way that the 'end' of *Spasm* occurs about a quarter of the way through the text, intriguingly just as Slater crosses the threshold of adolescence. This premature conclusion ("I felt a strange, tender pain in my chest, what I didn't know then – the beginning of breasts" [58]) is then used to instantiate a further device: the mechanism of 'disnarration', or as Jeremy Hawthorn explains it, "the narration of events which never happened but which are narrated, normally as if they did happen".⁸ For, while the tableau finishes with a realistic description of Slater falling into an open grave at a neighbour's funeral, she then suffixes this admission:

⁷ Plural of anacoluthon: 'An abrupt change within a sentence to a second construction inconsistent with the first' (*OED*).

⁸ Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* (London: Arnold, 1998), p. 58.

I didn't really fall into the grave. I was just using a metaphor to try to explain my mental state. The real truth is [...] I looked into the grave, and I thought about falling in. I imagined myself falling in. (59)

More unsettling than the fact of disnarration is that any suggestion in this passage that Slater is 'coming clean' and telling the truth is undercut by the narrative frame in which it is set. Her acknowledgment here that parts of *Spasm* are fictionalized, indeed her prefacing of the text with the warning "I exaggerate", means that the assertion of "the real truth" – that she only "thought about falling in" – must also be overshadowed by uncertainty. That is to say, a narrative frame of exaggeration, fantasy, and mendacity encloses even those moments when the author seems to assert fact; therefore what may seem to be a ground of truth is much less solid than it may at first appear.

That Slater 'ends' her narrative with this tableau, particularly in the context of a nascent awareness of puberty and adulthood, suggests that the ending of childhood also heralds the disintegration of such comforting illusions as a teleologically oriented view of her history: the story attempts to end but then stutters back into untidy life in the following chapter. Moreover, the effect of this premature and funereal conclusion is to insinuate that the only ending a self-narrative could logically admit would be the physical death of the subject: because Slater is still physically alive so her story, no matter how uncomfortable, must continue. That she resurrects herself from the figurative grave also implies a relinquishing of fantasies of discrete, settled stories and selves contained within the defined frames of beginnings and endings. Such certainties remain in the ground with the mute dead while organic and unnerving existence continues. This figure of unsettling persistence is repeated when the young Slater's embryonic consciousness of herself as a subject-in-process⁹ is linked to a break with the maternal, and, implicitly, the first flow of menstrual blood ("I missed my mother, but there are many places other than home [...] And the red doors opened and I saw I was strong" [59]). Meanwhile the revelation that fantasy or metaphor commingles with autobiographical 'fact' serves to highlight the status of *Spasm*, and of autobiography in general, as texts which must always weave plots – imaginative and contingent versions of 'events' and life-worlds – rather than presenting positivistic records of discrete lives.

However, this relinquishing of certainty and the drive toward a *telos* is not an unproblematic course. Slater's reluctance is signalled right at the start of the narrative, for when her mother demonstrates that "truth is bendable" she does not embrace this

⁹ On my usage of this term see chapter 1, footnote 42.

relativistic paradigm but instead longs for ‘something solid’. The moment occurs when Slater suddenly goes blind (“My sight shut down it was black; I could not see” [7]) and her mother refuses to accept this as fact.

“Mom,” I said. “I can’t see.”

She stopped. “Of course you can see,” she said. “You have two eyes. You can see.”

“It’s dark,” I shouted.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” she asked.

“I can’t see your fingers,” I said.

“Of course you can see my fingers,” she said. “You have two eyes. Now look.”

I felt her grip my chin, force my face toward her. “How many fingers? *Think.*” I heard some panic in her voice now, but not a lot, because my mother believed you could conquer anything through will.

“Two,” I said, a total guess.

“Exactly,” she said, triumphant.

And just like that, I started to see again, She said *exactly* and the angles came back, as though her words determined the truth and not the other way around, the way it should be: something solid. (8)

This episode highlights Slater’s ambivalence toward a less defined conception of truth and ‘story’: here, by speaking material reality into being, her mother posits a kind of unsettling idealism¹⁰ in which ‘reliable’ solidity, the permanence that represents ‘the way it should be’, dissolves. Slater’s need for ‘something solid’ is the antithesis to the anti-teleological drift of the narrative, and this tension between the fixed and the contingent characterizes *Spasm* throughout. As I shall go on to elaborate, Slater’s text is riven by conflicting and unresolved desires for stability and latitude.

Some of Slater’s ambivalence in this episode may emerge from her post facto recognition as narrator that the determining of ‘the truth’ by her mother’s words anticipates the manner in which her subjectivity will be subsequently inscribed by alien medical narratives that do not match her experience. In speaking Lauren’s reality into being, her mother rehearses a rendition of the signifier determining the self, the fixing of the life to the word. Although Slater adopts and subverts this tactic herself in *Spasm*, she also highlights how it may be deleterious to the subject inscribed if the story told is unwelcome and imposed by a more powerful other.

¹⁰ I use ‘idealism’ here in its philosophical sense, that is, of signifying those attributes or entities suggested by ‘idea’. The term is inflected by connotations of both unattainability and unreality (in that the ideal depends solely on the mind rather than on the material realm). However ideal also carries an intrinsic sense of perfection – that is, a freedom from the limitations and restrictions of the material world.

While the story (of being able to see) may be a propitious one for the young Lauren in awe of her mother, this is not the case in the biomedical story told about her, a story backed by supposed scientific evidence and fact. Her grasp of the nature of the medical story is revealed at the end of *Spasm* when she makes the important claim that “diagnosis itself is a narrative phenomenon” (222) – and then enumerates how her diagnoses by various doctors at various periods in her life have differed and evolved. Slater points out that the diagnosis of mental illness is an imprecise science, and that it alters with knowledge and fashion (“Illness, medicine itself is the ultimate narrative; there is no truth there, as diagnoses come in and out of vogue as fast as yearly fashions” [222]). But her analysis also highlights the confusing way that her self has been repeatedly re-inscribed and re-constructed by the inconstant stories of health professionals. Indeed, this may well account for her rendition of the self within a text “shaped, if it could be, like a question mark” (223). By refusing to tie the autobiographical self down to a singular and clear-cut entity she not only resists a medical strategy which over-simplifies the complexities of illness and selfhood and attempts to define the self as a discrete set of symptoms; in addition, this narrative tactic dramatizes and thereby subverts the logical effect of the accumulation of her shifting diagnoses. That is, the text mirrors in its shifting form the unstable medical narrative of Lauren’s illness; and just as *Spasm* is predicated on uncertainty and allusion rather than reference and definition, so the accumulated inconstant and often contradictory diagnoses ultimately fail to resolve definitively who or what Lauren ‘actually is’. The ‘slippery’ form of *Spasm* dramatizes an existential uncertainty in which the concatenation of competing and conflicting ‘truths’ have cancelled each other out, or, perhaps, remain dimly visible ‘underneath’ the latest diagnosis, with the self envisaged as a kind of palimpsest.

The speaking of ‘truth’ into being by Slater’s mother evokes a crucial element of the narrative strategy and purpose of *Spasm* – which re-signifies a self by retelling it, thereby reworking the way in which Slater’s selfhood has been inscribed by others. Her mother goes on to impose a series of bizarre possible stories onto the young Lauren, for instance, these predictions of a decline into debauchery:

My mother thought I was doomed, which in her scheme of things was much better than being mediocre [...] I would surely become a street girl, and wind up being shipped to a filthy brothel crawling with hairy tropical bugs in Buenos Aires. (10)

These projections perplex Slater, “because they didn’t seem to match the facts of my mundane life”, but despite this she does not retreat into an empirical view of the self reliant on incontestable ‘facts’, nor does she construct autobiographical ‘truth’ as an unproblematic, given, realm. Instead she remains ambivalent about the precise status of fact in the context of human experience, asserting that “the facts, the facts, they probe at me like the problem they are” (10). Some of this ambivalence towards ‘evidence’ is undoubtedly produced by the very process of relating such episodes – wherein the adult narrator reads a childhood through the lens of experience. The pristine, unmediated events of childhood, she implies, remain unreachable, chimeric, problematic. Moreover, in assessing her mother’s stories, Slater realizes that these fantastic constructions are designed for the benefit of the teller rather than the told of (“her predictions seemed to excite her”); she grasps, that is, that concealed investments in the signifier render her mother’s fantasies of Lauren a touchstone for her own repressed desire:

Her words had a certain slinky sound, a lush quality to the consonants, *filthy* she would say like a hungry person pronounces *chocolate*, brothel she would say, like, well, like someone longing for and scared of sex. (10)

The telling of stories, therefore, even when those stories are ostensibly about another person, is denoted as intimately implicated in the process of self-formation or self-gratification. Foretokening the narrative techniques employed in *Spasm*, her mother’s storytelling connotes ‘plot’ as a far more complex entity and process than the simple translation and transmission of a raw ‘story’,¹¹ while narration is insinuated as a dynamic act of self-creation in which signifiers may be wrenched from their ordained significations to produce new meanings.

As with these fabulations by Slater’s mother, *Spasm* replicates the repudiation of a given and discrete self in favour of a subjectivity produced in the act of telling. But an important difference is that while Slater’s mother reifies the individual will (“my mother believed you could conquer anything through the will”), Slater herself alludes to the self rather than posits it definitively. Something of this is apparent even immediately after the miraculous ‘healing’ of her blindness – when her mother has insisted on the ‘fact’ of sight in her peremptory “exactly”. Restored to vision, Slater

¹¹ In ‘story’ and ‘plot’ I am invoking *fabula* and *sjuzhet* and broadly adhering to Jeremy Hawthorn’s definitions: Fabula is “a series of real or fictional events, connected by certain logic or chronology, and involving certain actors”. *Sjuzhet* is “the narration of this series of events”. Hawthorn, *Glossary*, p. 227.

does not speak of an 'exact' reality but invokes a world existing 'beyond' the material, informed by her own perception, with the object infused by the subjective:

I had not known, until then, that beauty lived beneath the supposedly solid surface of things, how every line was really a curve uncurved, how every hill was smoke [...] I thought of the vision the same way I thought of the smells, as a secret world. (9)

The description here of the secret world 'beneath' solidity evokes Slater's claim that in *Spasm* she aims to imply selfhood in a 'silence' behind the text. I need to reiterate, however, that in practice the textual strategies at work in this memoir are more complex than such statements might suggest. If this was not so, one might be justified in suggesting that, far from being the product of a 'postmodern' sensibility, *Spasm* actually aspires to produce the humanist ideal of a "contradiction free moment of lucidity, transparency and presence",¹² in which the messy uncertainties of language, form, and history are transcended. But such invocations of secrecy and silence need to be set within the context in which they appear – a narrative which foregrounds its own incoherence, labels itself as unreliable and tricky, and often takes the shape of a kind of fragmented *bricolage* composed of the fragments of others' narratives and other texts such as extracts from medical textbooks and letters. As I have said, such devices foreground not the unchanging depths of silent, secret spaces, but instead draw attention to the textual surface, to the constructed nature of the text. As opposed to the traditional view of the memoir as a transparent medium through which the extra-linguistic referent (i.e. the 'author') is 'reached', access to the subjectivity intended by *Spasm* is at least in part via the surfaces of the narrative – its very textuality becomes the object to be viewed.¹³ This emphasis is obviously opposed to the notion of a naturalistic quest undertaken for abiding essences buried underneath phenomenal existence. This will become clearer as I read more closely some of the key moments in *Spasm*, but I re-emphasize now that if this text signifies a self it does not do so by (only) attempting to invoke a "transdiscursive space" of "absolute plenitude"¹⁴ but rather by dramatizing through its narrative strategies the autobiographical subject. In a sense, it seems to me that the self here *is* its narrative – a thought articulated by Slater

¹² Mas'ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton, *Theory as Resistance: Politics and Culture after (Post)structuralism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), p. 58.

¹³ For a discussion of similar ideas, see Louis A. Sass, *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature and Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 198-205. Sass writes here about Derridean notions of the sign with reference to the schizophrenic experience.

¹⁴ Zavarzadeh and Morton, *Theory as Resistance*, pp. 93 & 94.

when she writes “perhaps I was a higher life-form, the art of story raised to a new level of living in me, maybe” (133) – and if there is an other, secret, silent, realm intended in *Spasm* it must be reached by a consideration of its textual, narrative forms.¹⁵

Something of this collision – between transcendence and the contingencies of language – is evident in the scene where Slater discovers that “beauty lived beneath the supposedly solid surface of things”. On holiday in Barbados, her mother writes postcards to fictional recipients which she never sends, texts which describe a fantasy life and self. It is Slater’s consideration of the “careful curves” of her handwriting which prompts the revelation that every line is “a curve uncreased” (14). Her mother’s accounts conjure a world into being, and Slater grasps that writing need not be referential and exact but that even apparently straight ‘lines’ were once elliptical, and therefore have the potential to revert back. Writing and narrative, therefore, even the most *straightforward* types, contain with them disconcerting and fabulous possibilities. There would seem to be a nexus between this intrinsic otherness of writing and the ‘secret world’ of *Spasm*: considering her mother’s texts, for Slater mundane ‘reality’ suddenly appears mutable, and the obvious potentially abstruse. When the young Lauren repeats the cards’ inscriptions – “over and over to myself like a song. Like words might make it real” (14) – one has the sense that in attempting to speak fantasy into being she is less concerned to make something unreal ‘real’, than she is in inflecting an unforgiving reality with the uncertain and fabulous.

2.2.4 Exaggeration, repetition, and resistance

The frame of exaggeration and lying in which Slater’s memoir is set presents the reader with a series of hermeneutic dilemmas. The implications – the potential doublings and inversions – of the declaration of unreliability which opens *Spasm* (“I exaggerate”) and also of the text’s position on the margins of fiction and memoir become both clearer and more complicated as the narrative progresses. Thus, halfway through her narrative, Slater claims that when she was thirteen she developed Munchausen’s, a mental

¹⁵ A similar point is made by Kelly and Dickinson in their consideration of the ‘sociological self’. Examining the accounts that colitis sufferers give of their experiences, their central argument is that “the sociological self *is*, rather than merely expresses, the narratives which people use to present their autobiographies”. Michael P. Kelly and Hilary Dickinson, ‘The narrative self in autobiographical accounts of illness,’ *The Sociological Review*, 45(2), May 1997, p. 275. For a related idea see Slavoj Žižek’s discussion of dreams: the only place of unconscious desire is in “the *form* of the dream: the real subject of the dream (the unconscious desire) articulates itself in the dream-work, in the elaboration of its latent content”. From *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, extract in Rivkin and Ryan, pp. 312-3.

disorder whose sufferers feign symptoms of illness, or who are, as Slater describes them, “makers of myths that are still somehow true”. She then pleads with the reader to “please [...] consider this”:

perhaps Munchausen’s is all I ever had. Perhaps I was, still am, a pretender, a person who creates illnesses because she needs time, attention, touch, because she knows no other way of telling her life’s tale. (87)

The problem for the reader, however, is that, as with the invocation of truth in the memoir’s premature conclusion, Slater’s description of her ‘Munchausen’s’ is itself set within a narrative frame of exaggeration and mendacity. When this passage appears it is unclear, that is, whether the “I exaggerate” with which *Spasm* opened was, on the one hand, Slater hinting at her condition, or, on the other, whether the claim about ‘Munchausen’s’ is to be read in the same way as her portrayal of her ‘epilepsy’ – as quite possibly itself a fiction, or in Slater’s terms, a ‘metaphor’. One is again left uncertain whether this illness is a fact, an exaggeration, or an invention.

Similar interpretive quandaries confront the reader throughout *Spasm*. Even the ostensibly solid ground of the Preface falls away when its supposed author, a professor of philosophy called ‘Hayward Krieger’, is denoted within the body of the memoir as one of Slater’s illusions. This apparent ‘revelation’ is contained within a sub-narrative inserted in the text. Written by “Dr Carlos Neu” and “Patricia Robinson”, it takes the form of a transcribed medical case-study entitled “The biophysical consequences of a corpus callostomy in the pediatric patient” (100) and details aspects of Slater’s medical history. In it, Neu and Robinson attest that they “have been unable to locate or confirm the existence of any Hayward Krieger”, and attribute Slater’s references to her correspondence with him as symptomatic of her ‘mythomania’. Yet, if the reader thinks that in this document they have at last found a reliable ground from which to interpret Slater, they will be disappointed. The efficacy of the case-study is also called into question when, in an interview with an anonymous psychologist, Slater reports that he dismisses Dr. Neu’s paper as “not real [...] there is no Dr. Neu” (175). Finally, even this bald statement is complicated by a subsequent qualification, which reveals that ‘truth’, in this case the truth about both Dr. Neu’s existence and Slater’s condition, is determined by a singular *opinion* of medical *possibility* rather than by the assertions of the patient:

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but there is no Dr. Neu. What I mean by that,” he said, “is that there is no Dr. Neu anywhere in the world who would perform a corpus callostomy on a patient with TLE. It’s just not done.” (176)

The continual unfolding of such uncertainties and contradictions in *Spasm*, in which points of reference that readers may have initially assumed were indicators of reliable information are then subsequently revealed as adumbrated by ambiguity and connotations of falsehood, dramatizes the effect produced by the unreliable narratives of diagnosis. Readers must repeatedly reassess their judgement of where truth lies in this text. They may be seduced by the setting of disclosures within apparently official documents and paratextual¹⁶ material and assume that these, at least, are true, only to have this truth negated by another expert or another text. This narrative strategy might engender confusion or irritation for the reader, but, more seriously, it implies a critique of the effect produced by shifting, 'unreliable', diagnoses. Diagnosis is a narrative with fundamental implications for the subject diagnosed; in the case of mental illness, it is, in a sense, a description – and inscription – of his or her very selfhood, and this is evident in the dramatic effects on Slater's sense of self produced by the various diagnoses recorded in *Spasm*. If such inscriptions are posited as definitive and reliable, only then later to be crossed out and rewritten, the patient may be precipitated into a confusion of existential proportions.

By shaping her text as a "question mark", Slater not only mimics the effect and the strategy of medicine. This narrative technique also enacts a resistance to the determination of each *single* diagnosis to impose a definition on the patient; that is, it serves to repudiate a medicalized essentialism – the simplistic and oppressive rendition of the person *as* a particular pathology. Slater resists the effect of such inscriptions simply by means of narrating the story of her diagnoses: for, despite their claims to truth, when juxtaposed within her retelling, these supposedly scientific judgements are revealed as contingent, changeable, contradictory, equivocal. There is some sense produced here, I think, of an intrinsic aporia in the psychiatric narrative: the self is repeatedly re-inscribed by varying and contradictory diagnoses but is also essentialised as 'mentally ill' – as *one* thing.¹⁷ Indeed, the catch-all designation of 'mental illness' could be read in part as psychiatry's attempt to transcend its own limitations; but, while

¹⁶ Paratext: the messages that accompany and help explain the 'body' of a given text – e.g. advertisements, jacket copy, title, subtitles, introduction, reviews. See Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and also his 'Introduction to the Paratext,' trans. by Marie Maclean, *New Literary History*, 22 (1991), 261-272.

¹⁷ The rendition of selfhood in *Spasm* seems to be close to Homi Bhabha's notion of 'migratory subjectivity': recasting her identity as mobile, fluid, unsettled, Slater appears as a 'migrant subject', constituted in part by the indeterminacies of the diagnoses which attempt to inscribe her as 'essentially' one thing. See: *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

powerful, the vagueness of the term, especially when set against the catalogue of diagnoses, renders it, at least in *Spasm*, meaningless. Finally, by recording the various diagnostic definitions and highlighting their inconstancy, an impression is produced that Slater's self cannot successfully be described and therefore remains elusive, that an excess remains which cannot be pinned down by medicine.

The notion of mimicry as resistance has been addressed from various critical perspectives: two pertinent examples in this context are reflections by Luce Irigaray and Thomas Yingling. With reference to the oppression of women within a "masculine logic", Irigaray writes:

To play with mimesis is [...], for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself [...] to 'ideas' [...] that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible', by an act of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible.¹⁸

This description fits well with Slater's strategy of making visible – by repeating – what was not intended to be seen: the contingent nature of psychiatric discourse. So too, by highlighting this contingency Slater draws out psychiatry's inability to irretrievably define her, a failure which therefore leaves the question of her identity open. This impression of elusiveness and excess invokes something akin to what Irigaray describes as the recovery of the place of exploitation: that is, in the case of the psychiatric patient whose very identity has been inscribed by the medical narrative, her selfhood. Similarly, to borrow from Yingling's incisive description of Sylvia Plath's strategy in *Ariel*, Slater may here be "staging" the "patriarchal control of subjectivity".¹⁹ In the same way that Plath, in 'Daddy', 'stutters her excess' in the form of competing and various 'I's' ("Ich, Ich, Ich, Ich"), so Slater's various diagnoses, in being retold or re-enacted, cancel each other out as sole versions of truth. Again an excess is implied: someone/thing 'beyond', and not captured within, the diagnostic narrative. This 'exceeding' of diagnosis is inferred when Slater refers to a 'silence' behind the story; but she seems, in addition, to imply that a 'silence' lies not just behind the diagnostic story, but also behind her own memoir. This wider reservation about the limitations of

¹⁸ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 76.

¹⁹ Thomas E. Yingling, 'The Stuttering I: Lyric Subjectivity and Excess,' in *AIDS and the National Body* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 155.

story invokes selfhood as necessarily eluding *all* attempts to definitively ensnare it the nets of language.²⁰

2.2.5 Unreliability and relational identity

It would be inaccurate, however, to characterize *Spasm* as an unambiguously 'postmodern' text in its apparent embrace of uncertainty. While the premature 'ending' of her narrative signals a relinquishing of the drive toward a defined *telos* and initiates Slater's reconciliation with an 'unreliable' or 'poetic' telling of the self, she still refuses, or is unable, to excise those elements of the self from her self-telling which long for solidity ("the way it should be"). For instance, after a revelation that the world was "a place where the real turned to waves and washed away" (67), she yearns for "something safe and solid and absolutely absolute" (68), and then, stealing a photo from a neighbour's house ("I looked at aunt Henrietta, happy in her garden, her whole body sepia soft, and I thought how good it would be to have her. So I took her" [69]), denotes the act as a satiation of an appetite for plenitude and meaning through a figurative consumption of the representations of others: "I saw the small space I had made on the Slotnick's wall, a gap in the middle of human history where Henrietta used to be, and for a minute I felt full, the emptiness now outside of me" (69). Dramatized, then, in *Spasm*, is a tension between an awareness and reluctant embrace of the real as shifting and unfixed, and a contrary longing for the absolute. Indeed even within the encomium to poetic uncertainty which ends the first part of *Spasm*, the rupture with the solid is not presented without ambivalence but is denoted as "a shame, a blessing both" (59).

²⁰ Considering the 'Fort-Da' game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud explores the notion of mimesis as resignification. By re-enacting loss - here the loss of the mother - through casting away his toy, the child achieves a degree of mastery: "At the outset he was in a *passive* situation - he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part". *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *The Essentials of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Anna Freud, trans. by James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 226 (pp. 218-268). See also work by Judith Butler and Homi Bhabha. In her *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), Butler discusses 'insurrectionary speech' which Lisa Disch summarises as: "the power of calling for justice in the very terms in which one has been disenfranchised" ('Judith Butler and the politics of the performative,' *Political Theory*, Vol. 27 No. 4, August 1999, p. 554). In Butler's words, this process "reterritorializes the term from its operation within dominant discourse precisely in order to counter the effects of marginalization" (*Excitable Speech*, p. 158). Bhabha points out, talking about the way that colonial discourses attempt to mimic the other for the purposes of subjugation, that there is an *ambivalence* intrinsic to mimicry which inevitably produces an excess, a slippage. 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October*, (28), Spring 1984, pp. 125-133.

What also emerges subsequent to this premature ‘ending’ is Slater’s increasing understanding that autobiographical identity is produced within ongoing and present ‘dialogues’ or relationships, rather than simply retrieved by an isolated autonomous consciousness from a pristine and accessible history. Moreover, this conception of identity as relational rather than atomistic will, as it is developed in the narrative, shed light on the tension between certainty and unreliability which characterizes *Spasm*.

Slater’s emphasis on relational identity is signalled in the succeeding chapter, entitled ‘Sincerely yours’, which begins by acknowledging the present fact of the text’s writing in its dating – “January 18, 1998” (60), and opens and closes with a foregrounding of the imagined audience (“Dear reader”/ “Love, Lauren”). Slater begins here to outline a conception of identity as radically dependent on the other. At the outset, some of this emphasis on dependence might be dismissed as an aspect of a pathology in which self-regard is dangerously low. For instance, invoking the self as mutable and evanescent (“I had no idea how the body changes as it ages, how at ten there is a certain stability to the skin that hormones, and longing, eventually leach away, until you forget the self you once were. I forgot” [61]), Slater highlights the importance of others’ regard to her sense of existence: “If others did not admire me, I thought I would disappear”. However, as we shall see, such a ‘diagnosis’ does not do justice to the sophisticated elaborations of relational identity which are subsequently advanced. Moreover, these elaborations grow out of precisely such ‘pathological’ recognitions. As she tracks her movement through illness toward a more healthful state of being, Slater refuses to jettison the impetus behind such moments, implying that kernels of valuable insight concerning the nature of identity have been retrieved from her anxieties. Throughout the remainder of *Spasm*, despite the intense loneliness of the narrative content (“living in the chasm that cuts through thought [...] is lonely” [163]), in which the self appears cut off and isolated, Slater demonstrates a keen awareness of an audience, an awareness which is exemplified in her frequent direct addresses to readers. Thus, even in its apparent isolation, the writing consciousness recognizes its own implication with, and dependence on, imagined and actual others. This recognition is grounded in twin ‘presents’ – the two contexts of Slater writing and the reader reading. From ‘plot’ as a translation of a retrievable, fixed past, textual strategy enacts a series of negotiations with readers in which the act and method of telling is foregrounded.

Slater emphasizes that the choice of narrative strategy in *Spasm* is connected to her awareness of its potential readers. After asserting that "to come clean in this memoir would be dishonest" and that 'truth' "is not necessarily the same thing as fact" (160), she addresses both her reader and her editor ('Kate'):

I have decided not to tell you what is fact versus what is unifact primarily because a) I am giving you a portrait of me, and b) because, living where I do, living in the chasm that cuts through thought, it is lonely. Come with me, Kate. Come with me, reader. I am toying with you, yes, but for a real reason. I am asking you to enter the confusion with me, to give up the ground with me [...] Enter that lostness with me. Live in the place where I am, where the view is murky, where the connecting bridges and orienting maps have been surgically stripped away. (163)

The act of reading, and also perhaps of writing, is posited here as an entering into relationship with a (textual) other in which alterity is not effaced.²¹ When Slater invokes 'giving up the ground' she implies that a meaningful encounter with the text and the subjectivity 'within' it can only be activated if the reader does not attempt to shelter behind a notion of autobiography as a transparent window onto that subjectivity, nor maintain a separation of author and reader, with subject and object thereby mutually excluding each other. *Spasm*, of course, is far from a transparent text in which the figure of the author could be taken as clearly delineated; in struggling with narrative construction and the location of truth, the reader, therefore, not only understands something of the disorientating nature of Slater's psychological life, but also must self-consciously confront his/her own insecurities concerning the desire for points of reference and certainty. Such confrontations foreground what is usually not so apparent – the fact that readers 'read' themselves, not just the text. Moreover, in becoming psychologically entangled with the unreliable textual surfaces of the memoir, readers in some sense 'encounter' the autobiographical subject dramatized in the text's

²¹ There are echoes here (perhaps especially in the light of the semi-fictional status of *Spasm*) which call to mind Bakhtin's theories on the dialogism of the novel: in particular, his aversion to a notion of dialogue as an interaction between two bounded monads and his writings on active double-voiced discourse. For instance, in his discussion of Dostoevsky's *Notes From the Underground* Bakhtin describes the underground man's complex negotiations with, and anticipations of, not one, but two imagined audiences: the apparent 'monologue' of the text is in fact adumbrated by dialogues, with these discourses interacting and 'interanimating' each other. See: M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 233. See also his 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), p. 365: "What is realized in the novel is the process of coming to know one's language as it is perceived in someone else's language, coming to know one's own conceptual horizon in someone else's horizon".

form. Thus, in Slater's terms, reading – and writing – represent a “journey” undertaken “together” (163).

Spasm ends with a final reference to the ‘journey’ and ‘encounter’ inhering in the text and its reading:

Lauren.
My name is Lauren.
And you are?
Here, in this strange space, is where we meet. (223)

The “strange space” is, perhaps, the text itself; text, that is, in the sense of the hypothetical site of encounter ‘where’ not only reader and author but the various ‘persons’ of the empirical reader, the reader inscribed into *Spasm* as a textual position, the narrator(s), author(s), and subject(s) of the text ‘meet’. As such, this locus is inflected by connotations of difference and a salutary incongruence; the text, in Slater's model, could be said, indeed, to *be* precisely that very difference. And in this paradoxical entity, ‘meeting’ occurs ‘elsewhere’ – somewhere other than where Slater as author is, ‘within’ a separate imagination: “I am so happy you are holding me in your hands. I am sitting far away from you, but when you turn the pages, I feel a flutter in me, and wings rise up” (163).

The encounter generated by reading invoked in this memoir suggests a paradigm for relation not dissimilar to that proposed in some critical interventions on subjectivity and ‘ethical’, intersubjective dialogue. For instance, Jurgen Habermas's assertion that “the dialogical encounter with the addressed other, whose response eludes one's control, first opens to the individual the intersubjective space or his or her authentic selfhood”²² is a curiously apposite description of the process of identity formation implied in *Spasm*. From a feminist perspective, Patrocinio Schweickart and Elspeth Probyn have considered similar themes. Schweickart's “dialectic of communication” denotes the “feminist story of reading” as ideally an encounter with “not simply a text, but a ‘subjectified object’ [...] an interiority [...] that is not identical with [the reader's] own”.²³ Probyn responds to Gayatri Spivak's request that “the holders of hegemonic discourse should dehegemonize their positions and themselves

²² Jurgen Habermas, ‘Communicative Freedom and Negative Theology’, in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. by Martin J. Matustik and Merold Westphal (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 182.

²³ Patrocinio P. Schweickart, ‘Reading ourselves: Toward a feminist theory of reading’, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (2nd edition), ed. by David Lodge and Nigel Wood (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 438 - 439.

learn how to occupy the subject position of the other”²⁴ by positing an “anaclitic”²⁵ model of identity “outside of a logic of binary opposition”, in which “expressions of difference” are folded upon themselves “so that like acetate transparencies one can no longer tell which one was first”.²⁶ These nuanced formulas of identity, which attempt to account for the role of dialogue and relationship in the construction and reconstruction of selfhood, help to illumine something of what is intended in *Spasm*. Moreover, Slater’s invocation and awareness of others haunting her text adumbrates her stated intention to convey an ‘essential’ self. ‘Essence’ here does not in practice resemble an atomistic or inviolable core of the self. Rather, in *Spasm* the nucleus of selfhood is implied as constituted in, and possibly by, an intersubjective, relational realm. This memoir is inhabited by the imagined responses of the other, with narrative strategy insinuating itself as a game – both in Slater’s teasing of her audience through her refusal to settle on a fixed meaning, and as a dramatic performance of the self imbricated by the imagined presence and engagement of the reader.²⁷

2.2.6 Equivocation and tension

The anaclitic version of identity insinuated in *Spasm* is in stark opposition to the way that Slater’s subjectivity is inscribed, or effaced, by the various ‘narratives’ – versions of ‘Lauren Slater’ – which her mother, her doctors, and her bullying lover, Marin, try to impose on her. Yet, despite Slater’s often rather romantic invocations of this model of identity, in the praxis of the text an unresolved split between twin desires for ‘authenticity’ – that is a mode of being and relating with which she is comfortable – and the approval of others imbricates the narrative with tension. Indeed, this tension is possibly the definitive motif of *Spasm*. It is exemplified in Slater’s relationship with Marin, where she finds herself torn between being truthful about her illnesses, and her

²⁴ Quoted in Elspeth Probyn, *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 139.

²⁵ Originally used in the phrase *anaclitic type* (literally a ‘leaning-on type’). A person characterized by dependence on another or others (*OED*).

²⁶ Probyn, *Sexing the Self*, p. 139. See also Mary Mason, ‘The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers’, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 207-235. Mason posits (perhaps rather contentiously) that an anaclitic model is a characteristic of *women’s* formation of identity, asserting that, “the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some ‘other’” (210).

²⁷ For a very useful discussion on the concept of ‘relational identity’ in autobiography see Paul John Eakin’s *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), particularly pages 43-98.

fear that, if she is, he will reject her. Yet disquietingly, in this her first sexual relationship, she experiences orgasm as a disaggregation of self and akin to an epileptic fit. Thus she describes sex as like “coming unnailed. I was slipping piece by piece” (129); and on an occasion when Marin has ‘persuaded’ a reluctant Lauren to allow him to anally penetrate her, she declares afterwards that: “I was gone, girl gone, for good, kiss yourself goodbye [...] Nothing was left of me except for smoking skin, liquefying bone” (130). Yet, despite him hearing the “terrible sounds” she makes (“I might as well have had a seizure in front of him”), she calculates that revealing the secrets of her turbulent interiority and the chaos of epilepsy would exacerbate his antagonism towards her: “if he ever, ever, knew how not only my body but my brain too, my whole damn being, could turn into froth and spasm, I think he would have hated me”.

The tensions which underpin Slater’s relationship with Marin are reflected in the narrative techniques of *Spasm*. The ‘slippery’ nature of the text she sets out to produce is an analogue of the froth, spasm, and disaggregation of self which characterize her experience of sickness; and evident in this intention is a drive toward authentic representation. Yet, in practice, she is unable to maintain this intended narrative stance. It often appears as if she is unable to free herself from the fear that, like Marin, her reader will hate her if, within her narrative strategy, she only maps the uncertainty and fluidity that she suspects is herself.²⁸ Ultimately the desire for the approval of the other – both the others who inhabit the story-world of *Spasm* and also the reader – unsteady Slater’s attempt to fashion a place from which to indicate her subjectivity unconfined by linear, transparent narratives. This is evident in several moments when, retreating from her strategy, she steps out of the frame of unreliability. The most obvious example is in the Afterword where, paradoxically in her attempt to posit the virtues of narrative ‘truth’ (“which is delightfully bendable and politically powerful” [219]) over an objective historical version of the self, Slater constructs a determining voice, an absolute subject who gazes back over the shifting narrative ground of *Spasm* and makes a finalizing pronouncement: “All I know for sure is this. I have been ill most of my life” (222).²⁹ That this is a concession to the sensibilities of

²⁸ Denise Riley makes the wry observation that, “Naturally a great deal of self-presentation is asking, somewhat hopelessly, ‘Love me’”. *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 2.

²⁹ ‘Finalization’ is a Bakhtinian concept. In the context of this closed statement in *Spasm*, Bakhtin’s assertion that “If an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself, it falls out of the dialogue” may be apposite. M.M. Bakhtin, ‘Towards a Methodology for the Human Sciences’, in *Speech Genres*

her audience is apparent in the attempt to explain and provide a perspective on a narrative strategy she clearly fears will bewilder or antagonise, in her consequent ‘apology’ for her illness’s relative unimportance (“the small miseries of the middle-class girl” [221]), and also in her justification of experimentation because the requirement for accuracy in such a “relatively inconsequential life story” is less than in a Holocaust memoir. Paradoxically, then, despite, or because of, this recourse to an author/itative voice the moment is marked by vulnerability; and in responding to an imagined audience demanding an answer, Slater as autobiographical subject comes into the ‘clear view’ which she had intended to repudiate.

Enacted in the Afterword, then, which presents itself as an uncertain and ill-defined site between text and paratext, is a movement within writing and self toward justification, adumbrated by a spectral and unheard, but nevertheless insistent, demand of her imagined audience to *know*. After a lengthy explication of her strategy, Slater is pulled back by the curiosity and unspoken demand which inhabits the borders of her text, by the drive toward *telos*, by the gaze of the reader: “And still. You want to know. What are the real facts about the condition I call epilepsy in this story, just so you can put the book down” (221). Thus, while the story content of *Spasm* maps the forces and discourses which proscribe the particular expression of subjectivity to which Slater aspires, inconsistencies in narrative strategy dramatize within the textual fabric itself an internal struggle – insinuating that ‘interiority’ is constituted, or occupied, by these same forces.

2.2.7 A bleaker pluralism

Such an interpretation inflects the notion of a pluralistic relational model of identity with bleaker connotations; in *Spasm* authenticity and the need for approval often appear to be incompatible. Such impasses may be instrumental in precipitating crises of the self. The structure and hidden implications of Slater’s narrative suggest a doomed attempt to negotiate contradictory discourses, or, as Catherine Belsey puts it, writing about the subject within ideology, “to locate a single and coherent subject-position”.³⁰ Going on to describe the ways in which women in particular participate in both the “discourse of freedom, self-determination, and rationality and at the same time in the

and Other Late Essays, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. by Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 168.

³⁰ Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 65.

specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition”, Belsey concludes that it is precisely the impossibility of reconciling such competing demands which may eventually lead individuals to “retreat from the contradictions and from discourse itself, to become ‘sick’ – “more women than men are treated for mental illness”.³¹ In the context of Slater’s exploration of her own fragmented subjectivity this has an obvious resonance. However, the existential impasse in *Spasm* is rendered particularly complex in that, rather than being characterized by markers of privacy and autonomy, the essential self is envisaged in an intersubjective space of encounter and dependence, which for Slater also necessarily involves an emphasis on contingency, openness, and allusion; yet at the same time what she perceives as the demands of that very same intersubjective realm for a settled, ‘correct’ and ‘complete’ version of her subjectivity hold her back from fully embracing what she deems an ‘authentic’ (unreliable) self-narrative. Something of this quandary is invoked in Slater’s several allusions to the “confusions [which] tire and depress me so much” (162).

2.2.8 ‘Epilepsy’ as metaphor

Although there are moments when Slater seems to retreat from her strategy of ‘slipperiness’, she never ‘comes clean’ about whether she is, or is not, epileptic. Thus, while presenting challenges to conventional notions of autobiography, her narrative strategies also raise questions about the ethical implications of using epilepsy as a metaphor – and, indeed, of fashioning epilepsy as a ‘mental illness’.³² Firstly, the use of epilepsy as metaphor in *Spasm* implicitly interrogates the idea that particular experiences can be ‘owned’: which is to say, it throws up the question of who, if anyone, ‘possesses’ epilepsy, and who has the ‘right’ to (re)figure it. If one is of the opinion that only the sufferer of an illness should be free to employ their condition in any way they wish to, in a similar way to the re-owning of pejorative terms by

³¹ Ibid. p. 66. On the pressures effected by contradictory discourses, Lacan’s reflections on madness, “of whatever nature”, are interesting. He writes: “[It] would be worthwhile mapping the places in social space that our culture has assigned to these subjects [those who are ‘mad’], especially as regards their assignment to the social services relating to language, for it is not unlikely that there is at work here one of the factors that consign such subjects to the effects of breakdown produced by the symbolic discordances that characterize the complex structures of civilisation.” Jacques Lacan, ‘The Symbolic Order’ (from ‘The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis’), in Rivkin and Ryan, p. 187.

³² See Julia Kristeva’s discussion of epilepsy and its relation to ‘melancholia’ in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. by Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 175-217.

minorities, then the first of these questions is made difficult to address by Slater's refusal to disclose whether she 'really' does have epilepsy. This equivocation, of course, once again directs attention to the problematic 'who is?' of autobiography. That Slater evades providing the reader with 'proof', or confirmation in the form of an unambiguous assertion, of whether or not she has epilepsy not only makes such judgements virtually impossible, but also adumbrates a hidden assumption at the heart of the traditional autobiographical contract: that the author is telling *the* truth within a referential, informational discourse. A reading of Slater's text catalyzes a reconsideration of the status of singular authorial 'truth' in autobiography per se; for, after all, the reader only ever has the word of the author that what s/he writes *is* true.

There may be other factors at work in the particular choice of epilepsy as 'metaphor'. In order to understand this, I will draw a parallel with the controversial Holocaust poetry of Sylvia Plath. If we imagine for a moment, that Slater does not 'have' epilepsy in reality, that this specific illness does not 'belong' to her, then the implications springing from this recall controversies generated by Plath's troping of the Holocaust in poems such as 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus'. Slater's assertion that "I have epilepsy. Or I feel I have epilepsy. Or I wish I had epilepsy, so I could find a way of explaining the dirty, spastic glittering place I had in my mother's heart" (5-6) evokes Plath's "infamous metaphor"³³ where the speaker in 'Daddy' plays with an imagined Jewish identity: "I began to talk like a Jew./ I think I may well be a Jew".³⁴ Amongst the critical justifications for Plath's use of such imagery has been the contention that her poetry addresses the way that public and private, inner and outer, cannot easily be separated.³⁵ In the context of a historical period (the late 1950s and early 60s) in which discourse surrounding the Holocaust was increasingly emerging into the public realm – for instance, in survivor memoirs and the reporting of the Eichmann trial – Plath, one prevalent argument goes, was here constructing the supposedly private realm of subjectivity as affected and moulded by political and cultural elements.

³³ Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 188.

³⁴ Sylvia Plath, 'Daddy', in *Ariel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971 [1965]), p. 36.

³⁵ On interpretations of Plath's poetry as profoundly affected by, and engaged with, cultural and political context, rather than as simply 'confessional', see, particularly, Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, and also Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1996).

Similarly evoking such an imbrication of the personal with the political, it is feasible that Slater is intimating that, rather than existing in a personal and discrete space, illness inhabits, and is affected by, its political and cultural contexts. This may be particularly germane in the context of mental illness as a stigmatized condition. In particular, negative attitudes to 'purely' mental illnesses may mean that sufferers will be more readily accepted if their symptoms can be 'demonstrated' – if there is some biological basis to their condition.³⁶ In a potent evocation of Christ and Thomas, a symbolically charged episode in *Spasm* plays on this notion, when one of Slater's doctors demands to see the scars from her corpus callostomy before he will accept her story of illness.³⁷ Thus, in blurring boundaries between the biological and the psychological Slater, in effect, interrogates the dichotomy between the seen and the unseen; and her refusal to settle on a fixed 'diagnosis' for her memoir's subject presents a challenge to her readers to examine their own attitudes towards the mentally ill. For, should the text be read from a position of requiring illness to be founded on a biological basis for it to be accepted as real, then the reader will probably be unable to resolve whether or not to sympathise with Slater. Such a reading must remain in an unsettling hinterland, unable to settle on 'evidence'.

Even if the reader attempts to move beyond this impasse by searching for the 'truth' about Slater's illness, s/he may have to self-consciously confront the motives behind their need to know. In order to facilitate a simplistic and reductive reading of Plath it is relatively easy to discover the truth about her Jewishness, or lack of it; however, it is not so simple to discover whether Slater is really epileptic. But should readers be driven, say, to enter 'Lauren Slater' into an internet search engine in the hope of discovering a definitive source of fact in which ambiguity is dissipated, they might also experience a moment of self-consciousness in which they become painfully aware of a previously unacknowledged need-to-know; in addition they may then question precisely which information resource can be construed as 'reliable'.³⁸ The

³⁶ See Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (London: Picador, 1997). I discuss this text shortly.

³⁷ The demand for proof of disability was thrown into relief after the 2000 paralympics in Sydney, when concern was raised from Spanish representatives about the status of athletes with learning disabilities. The argument was made that, unlike those with physical disabilities, these athletes' disabilities could not be *seen*, and remained in doubt *until the individual demonstrated proof*, such as difficulty in speaking. Discussion on BBC Radio 5 Live, 'Euronews', 10.40 a.m., 4th December 2000.

³⁸ Some reviewers have indeed used the internet in an attempt to track down the truth about Slater and *Spasm*. See, for instance: Richard A Ingram, 'Life Plagiarizing Illness: Lauren Slater's Lying', *Nasty* 13 (September 2001) <<http://nasty.cx/index.php>> [accessed 1st may 2003].

covert desire on the part of the reader of autobiography to *know* is thus foregrounded, even implicated as a part of the plot: the reader who refuses to accept the impossibility of knowing, or who rejects Slater's story because she will not provide a definitive statement as to the nature of her illness, will effectively re-enact the scene where Slater's doctor demands proof. More broadly, the demand for the 'correct' version of the autobiographical subject replicates the desire on the part of the medical establishment for categorical diagnoses. Slater's (only partially successful) resistance to the demands of both psychiatry and her readers may well be predicated on an intuition that interpretative strategies aimed at the production of clarity or completeness subsume the froth and spasm which she experiences as self.

The narratological fabric of *Spasm*, therefore, may – in practice – produce effects which confront and deconstruct an implicit voyeurism and moral judgement underpinning some readings of illness memoirs. Moreover, in mirroring the body and self of the psychiatric patient, the possible readings of Slater's text dramatize the diagnostic process; just as the body of the sick person does not always manifest signs of illness which can be read by the physician, so *Spasm* presents a shifting narrative ground, with the reader who wishes to understand having to abandon the search for 'facts', and instead accept that uncertainty and obscurity are intrinsic to Slater's tale and her experience.

Closely related to the interrogation of the status of mental illness in *Spasm* is Slater's equation of mental illness with epilepsy. This is a potentially controversial move. Graham Scambler has pointed out that it is this connection which historically has helped to stigmatize epilepsy in both 'lay thinking' and amongst physicians.³⁹ In response to such assertions, one might surely ask, however, whether the issue most urgently in need of addressing is not residual prejudices toward the person living with epilepsy, which, as Scambler points out, are gradually dissipating as public levels of scientific knowledge improves and it is recognized that epilepsy can be differentiated from mental illnesses, but rather that this enlightenment as to epilepsy's 'true' status is, as Scambler implies, a *prerequisite* of achieving more tolerant attitudes. Implied in this logic is the unstated assumption that prejudicial attitudes towards those living with mental illnesses will continue, and, further, that it is the association of mental illness

³⁹ See Graham Scambler, *Epilepsy* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 40-54.

with, “a series of negative personality characteristics”,⁴⁰ as Scambler puts it, which produces prejudice. Thus, Slater’s equation of epilepsy and mental illness may work to highlight the covert prejudices of those who protest too much that their condition is ‘physical not mental’.

It was a similarly vexed area of debate which Elaine Showalter unsuspectingly entered when she wrote on chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) (also known as myalgic encephalomyelitis [ME]), in her book *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture*. Showalter’s reading of published evidence led her to map out the medical uncertainty as to the causation of the disease, and to oppose a purely physical explanation. Many sufferers of CFS, however, aggressively assert that theirs is a physical illness, and are concerned to distance the condition from categorization as a psychological disorder. In the preface to the paperback edition Showalter describes the hateful and violent reactions provoked by the initial publication of *Hystories*; these included “being attacked as a ‘fascist’” and receiving death threats, while her editors were branded “cunt-sucking maggots”.⁴¹ While the virulence of such responses was unforeseeable, Showalter’s original chapter uncannily denotes the forces which motivated this rage. Thus, she observes that:

[P]atients with chronic fatigue live in a culture that still looks down on psychogenic illness, that does not recognize or respect its reality. The self-esteem of the patient depends on having the physiological nature of the illness accepted. The culture forces people to deny the psychological, circumstantial, or emotional sources of their symptoms and to insist that they must be biological and beyond their control in order for them to view themselves as legitimately ill and entitled to the privileges of the sick role.⁴²

Indeed, even a medically qualified advisor to the ME association is quoted as constructing psychological illness as “imaginary”⁴³ with Showalter concluding that: “Clearly what is at stake is an unwillingness to accept a psychological disorder as ‘real’, and a view of the disorders of psychiatry as unreal forms of malingering or deceit”.⁴⁴ While the differing physical characteristics (or lack of them) of CFS and epilepsy obviously distinguish them as conditions, the issues at stake in discussing either of these diseases as a ‘mental’ illness are perhaps similar. In the narrative

⁴⁰ Scambler, *Epilepsy*, p. 43.

⁴¹ Showalter, *Hystories*, p. x.

⁴² Ibid, p. 117.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 129.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 130.

strategy of *Spasm*, Slater appears to be sympathetic to the hope expressed by another clinician Showalter quotes, who suggests that CFS “may become a paradigmatic illness that leads us away from being trapped by the rigidity of the conventional biomedical model and leads us toward a fuller understanding of suffering”.⁴⁵

2.3.1 *A Ray of Darkness: the subject-in-process*

I turn now to a memoir produced by a ‘genuine’ epileptic (that is, by an author apparently less concerned to obfuscate than Slater), in order, particularly in the light of the debates about the ‘status’ of illness I have discussed above, to contextualize my reading of *Spasm*. However this will certainly not be an attempt to ‘diagnose’ Slater by comparing symptoms, but rather, in an examination of Margiad Evans’s account of living with epilepsy, *A Ray of Darkness*, first published in 1952, I will map out the remarkable similarities that unite these ostensibly very different texts.⁴⁶ For, despite the fact that almost half a century separates these two works, and despite their obvious differences in tone and construction, both fashion radical paradigms for autopathography. And while Evans’s book is superficially a far more conventional rendition of the self compared to the self-conscious toying with narrative and genre which mark *Spasm* as the product of a ‘postmodern’ sensibility, *A Ray of Darkness* also challenges simplistic models of the autobiographical self as a discrete historical entity.

These texts are comparable in several respects. Most obviously, Evans, like Slater, is reluctant to posit categorical definitions of the autobiographical subject and avoids straightforward categorizations of self and sickness. Thus, she declares: “One must be careful, therefore, before naming oneself or anyone else an epileptic”; and goes on to make the surprising assertion that, despite her own “major” symptoms, “I cannot call myself *an epileptic*” (13; original emphasis). Secondly, and linked to this reluctance, *A Ray of Darkness*, like *Spasm*, is imbricated with metaphoricity. Rather than attempting to define her condition, Evans often constructs metaphors around it. Moreover, one of the chief ways she does this is by drawing close links between epilepsy and mental illness, thereby inverting Slater’s schema in *Spasm*. As if to emphasize how central madness is to her self-understanding, right at the outset of her

⁴⁵ Anthony Komaroff quoted by Showalter, p. 117.

⁴⁶ Margiad Evans, *A Ray of Darkness* (London: John Calder, 1978, orig. publ. 1952). Subsequent page references are given parenthetically in the text.

account she cites a contemporary memoir of mental illness, John Custance's *Wisdom, Madness and Folly*: "in reading Mr Custance's descriptions of manic depression I have found affinities with the epileptic character" (14).⁴⁷ Throughout *A Ray of Darkness* Evans returns to draw comparisons between her experience and Custance's. Thus, by using madness to understand and position epilepsy, *A Ray of Darkness* offers a mirror-image of the strategy in *Spasm*, in which 'epilepsy' more often appears as a tropological substitution than a material fact.

A further parallel with *Spasm* is evident in Evans's acute awareness of her reading audience and her memoir's position in an intersubjective realm. She is preoccupied with the communicative aspects of writing. When she observes that "all people afflicted with neurosis, neurotic tendencies, diseases or threats of diseases of the brain or mind seem to write a great many letters" (9), such 'letters' might encompass her memoir; for in Evans's attempts to anticipate the response of her readers, *A Ray of Darkness* often itself resembles a form of 'correspondence'. But this awareness of those who will read her text provokes another comparison with *Spasm*: as with Slater, the twin and often conflicting desires for acceptance and authenticity are also concerns for Evans. In a meditation on the desire of the sick to communicate, she writes that "the possession of a serious illness" leads to a "passionate yearning [...] to be understood by ordinary and well people" (10); yet as the sufferer "retreats further and further from their understanding", she, like Slater, discovers that the wish to speak is not always matched by a desire on the part of the well to listen.

2.3.2 Relational identity in *A Ray of Darkness*

Evans denotes, then, that her memoir is in part predicated on a "passionate yearning" to be understood by others. Yet, while *A Ray of Darkness* follows a far more conventional narrative course than Slater's, Evans is more able to face the possibility of unexpected interpretations with equanimity, even if these are 'insubordinate' to authorial intentions. Whereas Slater feels compelled to make narrative excursions into an authoritative voice in order to explain and justify her opaque strategies, thereby obliquely attempting to 'fix' reception, Evans, recognizing that it may be difficult to retain control of her memoir, allows that the subtext produced through lacunae and

⁴⁷ John Custance, *Wisdom, Madness and Folly: The Philosophy of a Lunatic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951).

contradictions may be revelatory, even salutary, for the reader. Moreover, by embracing the possibility of 'dissident' readings, Evans insinuates that she contemplates an autobiographical self which may exceed its overt or intended limits. Thus, she writes: "if I unintentionally reveal more than I know I am revealing, it is so much more valuable to the reader who understands" (55).

While aspiring to facilitate a kind of dialogue with the imagined reader, in practice, however, *A Ray of Darkness* oscillates between this outward looking stance and a claustrophobic sense of being trapped within a single subjectivity, or – intradiegetically – deserted even by those closest to her. Evans's isolation is evident in the way that her husband and child, even to some extent her helpful friend Mrs B., are written as one-dimensional, unreal, and not fully realized. The effect of this is to reproduce within the fabric of the text the sense of existential separation induced by Evans's epileptic fits, while also invoking the physical fact of her long periods of solitude in her isolated cottage.⁴⁸ Her longing for companionship is manifest in the symbolism of a recurring dream she records. Writing that, "I dreamed often of a cottage my husband and I were going to live in – a cottage I had never seen and of which there was no hope" (33), the dream imagery is lent added significance by the almost total absence of Evans's husband from both house and text.⁴⁹

It may be partly in an attempt to counteract this sense of isolation that Evans consistently invokes the presence of an imagined reader. For instance, when, in a meditation on literary inspiration, she writes that "*Inspiration is longing*" (45), the desire she invokes is implicitly connected to a quality of intersubjective understanding (her literary 'inspiration' is predicated on a longing to reach an other), which is so obviously lacking in the interview with a doctor which she then describes. *A Ray of Darkness*, like *Spasm*, reads throughout as if it is self-consciously 'aware' of its possible reception, or, often, as having been produced precisely in order to be received. Evans's description of how on one of his rare visits home, she startles her husband by looking in through a window at him "with my solitary, not my company face" (110), might serve as a poignant analogue for the overall effect of the text. Although the

⁴⁸ Adding a poignant footnote, which produces the effect of an afterthought carelessly thrown in to the text, Evans writes: "I was quite alone in the cottage during all those weeks except at week-ends before I saw Professor T. There was only my dog with me" (93).

⁴⁹ A broadly similar point might be made about *Spasm*. Paradoxically, in her preoccupation with how to present the self to others, Slater constructs a universe hemmed in by the self. Her often painful self-consciousness often overwhelms her representations of others, who again seem vague, poorly realized characters, adjuncts to a solitary solipsistic drama.

autobiographical subject delineated in the pages of *A Ray of Darkness* is isolated, it is also narratively positioned to 'face outward' towards the reader, anticipating reception. Yet, as a reader one cannot fail to note that the face one perceives in the text is a solitary one, and moreover, that, as much as peering out from the text, Evans's face also peers *in*, to the comforting world of "ordinary and well people", and with a "passionate yearning" to be known and understood.

In this interpretation, then, the making of narrative is adumbrated with connotations of possible redemption from isolation; narration for Evans is intrinsically structured around a relation with an other: to inscribe the self is also to tell the self. An imagined other is, indeed written into the text by Evans: in *A Ray of Darkness* the very act of narration is constructed as a kind of dialogue. Yet the subtexts of this memoir sometimes also work against such optimistic assessments; in its uncertain oscillation between dialogue and isolation, the overall effect remains ambiguous and unresolved.

Some of this ambiguity might be explained in Evans's observations concerning the ways in which others' negative reactions to her epilepsy insidiously affect her own self-conception. She describes how her shocked family refuse to accept her own account of illness and instead interpret it in a way which accords with their own desires: "They [...] protest against the idea of it, and [...] offer every solution of their own, however incredible, rather than accept the simple one" (98); then maps out a strategy to avoid further confrontations:

To other people I told myself, I must not continue to write, and if I could not convince them I had not just had a faint or some vague 'neurotic attack' – the word was theirs, not mine, I must leave it so. (100)

Yet, despite robust assertions such as this, Evans also notes how she incorporates into her own identity others' desire to pass over the awkward facts of her illness, describing how her memories of the crises of the self have been effaced through internal acts of repression which mime others' desire to forget. Thus, assenting to Custance's lament that, "gradually the vividness of my memory fades; like my relatives, I try to put the whole experience out of my mind, and in fact it does to a certain extent disappear into the lower levels of my Unconscious",⁵⁰ she adds:

this is exactly what I as a sufferer from epilepsy have experienced, including both the outside treatment and the *inner forgetfulness*, providing the interval between the fits is long enough to forget in. (9)

⁵⁰ Custance quoted in *A Ray of Darkness*, p. 9

In addition to her family's attempts to overwrite her subjectivity, Evans, like Slater, is also subjected to the judgement and censorship of the medical establishment; moreover, in *A Ray of Darkness* medical discourse constructs Evans as an often indecipherable text. In one consultation, after telling her that her dreams "aren't right. A girl of your age shouldn't have them", the doctor "impatiently" refuses to decode her recurrent nightmares, and instead proposes to close down her troublesome consciousness: "Well, I can't help you to understand that or interpret your horrors for you, but I'm giving you a sleeping draught" (50). Another clinician, Professor T., who is more willing to 'read' the hermeneutic mystery of Evans's pathology, or as she describes it, "this darkness which is so hard to read" (48), is described in a narratological, textual lexis: "this great detective of neurotic diseases, looked like a detective of fiction" (104). Yet, while she responds more positively to him, her description of his diagnosis also hints at the power imbalance which structures their encounter: "He spoke outright, as all strong people do, free of death and life and the body. He said he had no doubt whatever that it was epilepsy" (106). His 'reading' of Evans is also a re-inscription; she leaves his office feeling "quite clearly defined as myself by another person's firmness, directness, courage and knowledge" (106).⁵¹ While more benevolent than some of her doctors, Professor T. does not attend to Evans's story, and is portrayed as condescending and high-handed; and because she has contributed little to her renewed sense of 'definition', she is immediately vulnerable to a further 'rewriting' of self: "Once away from his direct words, the belief he has conveyed is attacked by the world in its ignorance and hatred of the sick" (107).

Such scenes help to account for the self-effacing character of much of Evans's narration; the devaluing of her own story by more powerful others appears to impact on the writing of that same story. As with her 'forgetfulness', an impression is produced that such encounters have induced the feelings of inadequacy and dependence so often displayed in her writing; indeed, Evan's tendencies to accept and acquiesce may be precisely the effect intended by a patrician medical establishment.⁵² On one occasion,

⁵¹ See Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or, Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 110-11. Discussing Shirley Jackson's novel, *The Bird's Nest* (published two years after *A Ray of Darkness* in 1954), Caminero-Santangelo observes how the protagonist's psychiatrist, Dr. Wright, fashions himself as an 'Author', who "longs to write, to create his female heroine from the materials of his own desire [...] The capitalized 'Author' suggests, of course, that Wright is God as well as Adam: he is a God who wishes to create the essential Eve for *himself*".

⁵² Of the *modus operandi* of English psychiatry in the 19th century, Elaine Showalter writes: "the traditions of English psychiatric medicine [...] tended to silence the female patient [...] psychiatrists

symbolically evoking a desire to efface the textual manifestations of the self, she even laments that in writing her story she must continually use the first-person pronoun 'I': "I am aware that the incessant 'I' exists in this MS almost as frequently as if I were a madwoman. It could be cut down by half at least" (65).⁵³

As with the attempt to counteract isolation by invoking an audience, so the act of self-narration in *A Ray of Darkness* is in part Evans's response to both her 'inner forgetfulness' and the over-writings of her selfhood by medical discourse. Evans denotes her self-telling as an attempt to recover experience and a mode of resisting acquiescent self-censorship. Thus she writes: "I no longer desire to put out of my mind what my mind has received. My mood, after rather more than a year of major epilepsy, is to accept and not to reject the experience" (9). Moreover, after expressing regret at what she sees as over-use of the first person, she suggests that it would only be possible to reduce the number of 'I's' in her text, "by writing roundabout sentences and by using the forced and unconvincing 'one'"; and therefore leaves these evidences of the self in place – "though it is as unpleasant to write as to read". So, despite her apologetic tone, the 'I's' of the text are left untouched; although maintaining a self-effacing stance and superficially unconvinced by the merits of self-expression, in practice *A Ray of Darkness* is a sustained meditation on, and assertion of, selfhood.⁵⁴

Emerging from the process of resignification, and as with Slater's 'mining' of her illness for "stars" (*Spasm*, 127), Evans discovers that valuable insights and understandings may be recovered from the experience and story of sickness. She declares that, "like Mr Custance's insanity", her condition is "to be treasured, and, if the cure should ever come, to be remembered", and speculates that in anticipating "the probable darkness of death", the "unconsciousness" of epilepsy might "remove our fear of that descent" (11). Despite such claims, Evans's overall ambitions for her text remain modest; and she holds back from proposing that universal lessons can be learnt

believed that their therapeutic authority depended on domination over the patient's language". The accounts of Evans's treatment in *A Ray of Darkness* suggest that this drive to dominate language (and, specifically, representation) persisted well into the 20th century. Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 154. See also Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or, Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 76.

⁵³ This recalls a moment in *Spasm* in which Slater depicts her first seizure as an attempt to consume herself: "my whole self jammed into my jaw" (*Spasm*, 19). The trope reiterates her mother's attempts to efface Lauren's problematic subjectivity within alien narratives.

⁵⁴ Starobinski's observation on Beckett's writings, that "the constantly repeated 'first person' comes to be the equivalent of a non-person", is intriguing when read against Evans's lament. Jean Starobinski, 'The Style of Autobiography,' in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 77.

from her singular experience: “I could not pretend there was any moral or philosophical value in this book. I have had nothing to teach from my epilepsy” (10). Yet, notwithstanding this reservation, in its refusal to excise the aspects of self and experience that cannot be easily spoken of in a public sphere, I would suggest that *A Ray of Darkness* is potentially a paradigmatic text in that it exemplifies a gesture of resistance to, and negotiation with, cultural discourses concerning illness and stigma.

2.3.3 The unfinished text

This gesture is actively worked out within the text and the process of its writing; which is to say, *A Ray of Darkness* resembles a work-in-progress, as opposed to a discrete, finished invocation of the self. Evans obviously struggles within the text and as she writes to come to terms with epilepsy and its possible meanings and significance: as with Slater, the facts seem to probe at her “like a problem” (*Spasm*, 10). Rather than denoting a discrete identity, the text maps the self as an ongoing process; indeed, this impression of ongoingness is perhaps its most compelling quality. For, although Evans’s claim that her account is “the truth, most of it exactly as it was written down at the time” (12) appears on the surface to be the antithesis to Slater’s self-conscious obscurantism, this belies the unfinished, untidy, often gauche quality to this work. Her claim may well be justified, but ‘truth’ here does not represent a consistent or discrete knowledge; her particular understanding of the concept is thrown into relief by a later assertion that “the incredulity [...] of a truthful mind [...] should surely not be repressed in order to make soul’s history outwardly perfect and all of a pattern” (103). The suggestion here and in her claim concerning the writing of ‘truth’ that editing for the purposes of internal consistency and coherence has been eschewed helps to explain why the text takes the form it does. Moreover, this resistance to making her history “perfect and all of a pattern” calls to mind Slater’s declaration that to “come clean” within her memoir “would be dishonest”. Evans, like Slater, seems to be wary of the autobiography’s demands for transparency, fact, linearity, and progress to a *telos*. Such marks of traditional autobiographical technique will, it is implied, obscure, rather than reveal, her ‘truth’. Recalling Jean Starobinski’s analysis of Rousseau’s autobiographical method in *The Confessions*, Evans’s autobiographical ethos would seem to be informed by a desire for ‘authenticity’ rather than strict historical veracity:

What is of primary importance here is not historical veracity but the emotion experienced as the past emerges and is represented in consciousness. The

image of the past may be false but the present emotion is not. The truth that Rousseau wishes to communicate is not exactitude of biographical fact but accuracy in depicting his relation to the past [...] We have moved from the realm of (historical) *truth* to that of *authenticity* (the authenticity of *discourse*).⁵⁵

An analogue of the processes by which *A Ray of Darkness* has come to be written is suggested when Evans describes how she re-reads her old diary entries and, brought up short by “incomprehensible mental ejaculations” (110), fails to fully understand them. Rather than reproducing extracts from such prior writings without comment, she interrogates and attempts to interpret them, producing an impression of an inchoate and ongoing dialogue between different temporal manifestations of the self. Both the old diary entries and her subsequent attempt to understand them are presented to the reader, with no definitive interpretation highlighted. The result is that an impression of openness and contingency is produced: “the reader who understands” (55), therefore, may feel free to add to the dialogue Evans is engaged in by contributing his/her own interpretation. In the image of Evans reading old texts and attempting to comprehend them in the (writing) present there is a sense that writing and reading form parts of the same whole; thus, as readers follow the development of Evans’s narrative they mime the processes which have underpinned its writing.

2.3.4 Imagining an elsewhere: the salutary text

In Evans’s text, the redemptive potential of autobiography is not limited to the combating of solitariness by the invocation of an imagined reader, or the offsetting of a learnt self-forgetfulness. In addition, there is a sense in *A Ray of Darkness* that the mechanics of writing the self work to mitigate some of the most intimate and painful experiences of her illness, specifically the sense of existential discontinuity generated by epileptic schism. Some of the most remarkable passages in this work describe how during her fits Evans perceives herself as split, divided in time, and lacking a sense of continuing presence: to be an epileptic she claims is “to have to accustom yourself to losing yourself” (36). This constitutive alienism is provoked by a sense that a “stranger” lurks “in the brain” (37). Even before the onset of her seizures Evans is

⁵⁵ Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 198. Lejeune’s point that “autobiography is not an act of analysis but a lived activity of synthesis” also seems apposite here. Philippe Lejeune, *L’autobiographie en France* (Paris: Colin, 1971), p. 104, quoted in Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 214.

haunted by a sense of disjunction, apparently unable to project herself imaginatively forward in time:

I was hardly middle aged (39) and very strong and young-looking; and yet there seemed in some mysterious way to be no future. In a dream it might exist but not in truth. There was an end coming, and I mistook that end for death. (34)

However, in an assertion which follows this gloomy observation, Evans implies that a possible corrective to her truncated existential vision might be through the creation of an imaginative work. Claiming that “it is as difficult and as particular a work to build a view of the universe that one can BE as to build a child’s flesh”, she does not glibly minimize the difficulties of such a task; but even though the force of this lament is directed toward its arduous nature, it does seem to outline significant aspects of the project of *A Ray of Darkness*. Amongst the implications of this intriguing statement is a sense that the ability to envisage futurity is intrinsic to selfhood, that what Evans designates a ‘view of the universe’ is a space to psychically inhabit. Moreover, in its inclusion of terms such as ‘work’ and ‘build’, the statement is inflected by connotations of creation, construction, and action; thus, the habitation, or rather the very being and ‘centre’, of the self is the self-fashioned ‘view of the universe’, or, in this instance, the text. As we shall see, in its imagining of possible futures, rather than the simple reiteration of a discrete past, *A Ray of Darkness* does represent just such a ‘work’ or ‘view of the universe’. Comparisons with *Spasm* can again be made here; for just as Slater’s text often appears to perform rather than describe identity, so Evans associates the very core of the self with the self-built imaginative work. This ‘core’, however, (again as in *Spasm*) is not implied as discrete or inviolable: the unfinished nature of *A Ray of Darkness* suggests that this work, and therefore the self, is not, probably cannot, ever be ‘complete’, but is intrinsically ongoing: an event or process rather than an entity.

Instances of Evans actively contemplating, and therefore building, futurity and possibility, include a passage at the end of her memoir when she projects herself into an imagined future space: “When I shut my eyes, in the voluntary darkness of my eyelids, I see the place I would wish to be in with my child, and yet I do not know whether it exists or whether I have made it.” (190). To answer her uncertainty concerning the status of this ‘place’, my assessment is that she has indeed ‘made it’, in part precisely by recording her vision in the text, and that it is in this textual record of her often hesitant imaginings that it ‘exists’. Evans’s subsequent comments confirm something

of this impression. After having recorded her memory of the imagined place, her excitement mounts, as if, by verbalizing it, she has spoken it into more tangible 'existence':

But suddenly the other morning, early awake in the dark, I saw it again and this time a fantastic certainty filled me that now I could inhabit it. And that is what I should do. And that that is what I should do. And that if this is the only thing I can find in me to want to do, it is the right thing. The only thing. (190)

Clues as to the nature of this locus are evident in this last passage. Evans's gathering excitement is here inflected by repeated urgings and projections of the self forward towards possibility and change. Perhaps, then, the space embodies a mental capacity which is in direct opposition to her sense of the absence of a future invoked at the start of the memoir – a faculty, that is, of belief in the possibility of a future self. That at the end of the text she is still urging herself towards this faculty suggests that her struggle to believe is ongoing rather than finished. But that such invocations so dominate the conclusion also insinuates that the act of writing may have been instrumental in helping her arrive at this more optimistic cast of mind. *A Ray of Darkness* foregrounds and highlights the narrative negotiations, intrinsic to autobiography, between different temporal manifestations of the self: such negotiations invoke a continuing self, the sense, that is, of a self caught up in an ongoing story in which Evans figures herself moving from pasts through presents and into futures.

In the context of acute psychological distress, beset by the "feverish scrim" (*Spasm*, 222) of thought, the notion of a mental space in which to imagine and project, to remember and reinscribe, may be vital for survival and difficult to achieve. For Evans, and for Slater too, the autobiographical act and text facilitate the creation of, or even function as, such a space. In addition to this, rather than combating a solely 'personal' anguish, there may be wider connotations implied in Evans's envisioning of "the place I would wish to be in". She does not explicitly link her inability to imagine a future to the ways in which her imagination has effectively been closed down by some of her doctors' interventions, but her observation that "there seemed in some mysterious way to be no future" calls to mind Ian Parker's assessment that the "ubiquity of particular types of [psychiatric] discourse makes it impossible for their subjects to 'think or even imagine an elsewhere'".⁵⁶ Parker's comment reworks a more

⁵⁶ Ian Parker et al., *Deconstructing Psychopathology* (London: Sage, 1995), p. 75.

general statement by Helene Cixous on the way that discursive structures entrap the subject and delimit imaginative vision:

there are living structures that are caught up and sometimes rigidly set within historico-cultural limits so mixed up with the scene of History that for a long time it has been impossible [...] to think or even imagine an 'elsewhere'.⁵⁷

It is hard to ignore the resonance here with Evans's account; indeed, an apposite summation of a key mechanism at work in *A Ray of Darkness* might be precisely that it is Evans's attempt to "imagine an elsewhere".

Finally, it is not just Evans's sense of futurity which is affected by her illness. She also describes a block in the workings of her memory; and again the temporal processes of narrative appear to help her move beyond this impasse. At several moments in the text she notes how, when revisiting locations from her childhood, their physical characteristics do not match her memories.⁵⁸ While such observations highlight, as Slater does in *Spasm*, the partiality of autobiographical recall, Evans also specifically delineates her memory as dysfunctional, describing her inability to concatenate individual remembrances into a coherent whole:

Of memory in sequence I have none. Remembrance with me is a matter of the emotion I spent. It appears to me that unless I have been 'blown up' either by ecstasy or grief, I cannot remember anything at all except faces, hands, furniture, places etc., detached from any particular event or spoken words. (38)

This dysfunction is linked by Evans to her pre-seizure sense of discontinuity – a separation from consciousness in which she is "quite literally conscious and unconscious at the same time" (38). She notes how at such moments her awareness of temporal progression is lost, with self-consciousness dramatically ceasing then picking up again: "I was then aware of there being at the heart of a second, oblivion of mind and cessation of sight" (39). Crossing a room, she describes leaving herself "on one side", then "com[ing] to myself on the other, while feeling an atom of time divided the

⁵⁷ Helene Cixous, 'Sorties', in *New French Feminisms*, ed. by E. Marks & I. De Courtivon (London: Harvester, 1975), p.83, quoted in Parker et al., *Deconstructing Psychopathology*, p. 75.

⁵⁸ Meditating on a "place I would wish to be" she writes: "I remembered the village, the fields, the unusually long wood I passed through on the way; but although I have been all over that part of the country where it should be, it has vanished. It has simply disappeared." (190). Similarly, suggesting that the subjective mood enlarges the significance of the object of perception, the epileptics' therapeutic community she knew as a girl is not as she remembers it, "it seemed, contrary to the rest of the neighbourhood, to have grown since the memory" (35), while, in the course of an expedition to the cathedral-like beech-wood of her childhood, the very landscape appears altered: "And there inexplicably was a farmhouse, a very old farmhouse where none had been" (41).

two selves, as the room might divide the figures of myself, supposing anyone could create two figures of me” (40).

Such descriptions and Evans’s invocation of the block to “memory in sequence” denote a dysfunction that is narrative in nature.⁵⁹ For Evans, autobiographical memory has been disrupted and the possibility of fashioning a coherent temporally positioned story from the congeries of memory fragments has disappeared. While this might explain some of the disjunctive nature of the memoir, it also seems likely that the autobiographical narrative act, in which memories are concatenated, serves as a counterweight to existential fragmentation, might indeed be Evans’s attempt to rectify lack.

2.3.5 Reconstructing pathology

While Evans is clear about the suffering attendant in her illness, she does not simply dismiss symptoms as aspects of a pathology which she needs to discard; rather, she reflects on her experiences of sickness and from such meditations often draws significant conclusions. One of the most notable instances of this is when she considers her pre-seizure sense of splitting apart, and then goes on to assess the wider ramifications of the divided self. She describes a shadow self which she deems common to non-pathological experience, and asks rhetorically: “Has not every one of us a mental image of himself which he watches ceaselessly [...]?” (40). The statement has a curious resonance in the context of the text in which it is set, in which Evans precisely watches and tracks the movement of her own restless being; indeed, self-narration per se could be described as a kind of watching of one’s own ‘mental image’. Taken with her insinuations concerning the salutary effects of narrating the self, the implications of her question evoke a creative potential inherent in the (autobiographical) splitting of the self. I deal with this in more detail in my final chapter, but my point is that, in self-narration, the narrating ‘I’ must separate off from the subject which it narrates, splitting the self into at least two entities, and thus perhaps a kind of clearing is made in the oppressive continuum of experience in which a work of the self on the self is more feasible. The multiplication of selfhood produced by the

⁵⁹ On neurologically based dysfunctions in narrative capacity see: Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat* (London: Duckworth, 1986).

‘autobiographical’ act of reflexive thought, therefore, fashions an agent – the reflecting ‘I’ which is not subsumed by the immediacy of suffering.⁶⁰

When, in the second half of her rhetorical question Evans suggests that for the sake of ‘health’ and ‘sanity’ one “must not deviate from the self seen by everybody else”; it is difficult not to pick up on this construction’s ironic subtext. For, as we have already seen, the writing of *A Ray of Darkness* is predicated on something very close to just such a ‘deviation’. Rather than politely suppress her experience in order to spare her family’s embarrassment, or acquiesce to others’ stories of what and who she is, at the opening of her text Evans declares: “I no longer desire to put out of my mind what my mind has received. My mood [...] is to accept and not to reject the experience” (9). *A Ray of Darkness*, in its mapping of Evans’s epilepsy and its psychological affects, is exactly a deviation or resignification, and brings into public view a self which others have consistently rejected.

At the same time, however, Evans’s emphasis in this quotation on the role of others in the constitution of identity evokes the narrative strategy of *A Ray of Darkness*, in which she constructs an autobiographical subject in ‘dialogue’ with, and ‘seen’ by her imagined readers. Therefore, Evans is not rejecting out of hand the notion that selfhood is ‘held in place’ or constituted by communion. Indeed, when she writes that “this mental image and exact reproduction [...] may have been the birth of the forever unconfirmed, forever believed in idea of a soul” (40), she construes selfhood as in some sense emerging from consensus, founded in a congruence between one’s own view of oneself and that held by others. Psychological health is envisaged here as to some degree dependent on such a congruence. What is enacted in the course of *A Ray of Darkness* is a process in which Evans rejects those mental images imposed on her which she deems inimical, or ‘inauthentic’, and instates more salutary possibilities. In this, selfhood remains bound to and dependent on others, but its ‘character’ shifts according to the nature of which ‘dialogues’ it is engaged in. Agency is not, then,

⁶⁰ Kim Worthington discusses the potential for agency inherent in the splitting of the self when she interrogates poststructuralist accounts of the self as text. With reference to Ihab Hassan’s *The Literature of Silence*, she concurs with him that “the power of human consciousness” exists in the “intuition of our fundamental psychic split [...] The gap between a pre-linguistic experiential self and its entry into conceptual textuality always leaves open a space for revision or change”. *Self as Narrative: Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 179. Also of interest is Richard Kearney’s discussion of narrative identity, where, quoting Paul Ricoeur, he suggests that the “projective function of narrative actually *generates* action by furnishing us with a clearing in which ‘motives may be compared and measured, even if they are as heterogeneous as desires and ethical commands’”. ‘Ethics of the narrative self,’ in *Between Philosophy and Poetry: Writing, Rhythm, History*, ed. by Massimo Verdicchio and Robert Burch (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 91-8 (p. 96).

unlimited; yet neither is the role of the individual will in negotiating one's identity wholly precluded.

It has to be said that the vision of subjectivity mapped out in *A Ray of Darkness* is not entirely consistent; and on several occasions Evans contradicts an earlier appraisal within a few pages. For instance, her observations concerning the twin self are not unambiguous; in addition to invoking connotations of potential agency, she also implies that a possible danger inheres in this duality, interpreting the "minute attacks" before seizure as "the first sign of a difference [...] between my conscious body and what I have called its mental image, its twin in action" (41). Here, rather than exemplifying a salutary effect, the splitting of the self warns of impending suffering, indeed, embodies that suffering; such descriptions chime with notions of the fragmented self misrecognized as whole, of the fragmentation intrinsic to subjectivity mapped in Jacques Lacan's conception of the mirror-stage.⁶¹ Discrepancies such as this are testament to the way in which this text represents an inchoate process rather than presenting a discrete knowledge. Readers must follow the evolution of Evans's often agonistic thought, an evolution which is by no means linear but which frequently folds back on itself to restate or rework ideas previously abandoned. Enacted in *A Ray of Darkness* is an ongoing struggle with identity, in which Evans attempts to concatenate disparate images of her self.

2.4 Conclusion

As with *Spasm*, the subjectivity presented in *A Ray of Darkness* is unrecognizable in terms of an autonomous, private ego; the overall impression from this remarkable text is of a self being constructed in the act of writing, of a mapping of process in which the reader is a part. At moments when Evans's anxiety and self-effacement are less consuming she celebrates this organic vision of subjectivity. Thus, she writes, "I seem diffuse. Nor is it possible for me to doubt that I am" (55), and goes on specifically to dissociate this dispersal of the coherent self from pathology: "But such a diffusion of mental activity is probably incidental to the illness which was now rapidly approaching". And in this single sentence, in the resonances effected by mixing present and past tenses, Evans conveys both the complexity of the autobiographical act

⁶¹ See Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I', in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), pp. 1-7.

and her recognition of its potential to restate the self now. For while the statement comes in the context of a discussion of the onset of illness for a past self, Evans constructs herself as diffuse in the present, that is to say, as she writes. When she adds, “if I unintentionally reveal more than I know I am revealing, it is so much the more valuable to the reader who understands”, this diffusion, and the concomitant inability to control and limit the revelations of autobiography become enmeshed. Diffusion spreads out from the past self into the present moment, and into communion with the reader.

Indeed, it may be in the relations of Slater and Evans to this narrative and existential ‘diffusion’ that the most striking consonance between their respective memoirs appears. Both authors, in very different ways, insinuate that it is through diffusion rather than definition that the autobiographical self is indicated. Thus, in *Spasm*, effecting a narratological diffusion, Slater refuses to pin down the narrated self to a discrete entity or to circumscribe the limits of the self – claiming that such classical autobiographical strategies would operate to obscure a metaphorical version of her ‘truth’. On the other hand, Evans, in *A Ray of Darkness*, celebrates her own diffusion as an overflowing of the self that cannot be controlled. The poignant effect of this powerful image set against the self-abnegations which litter the text is to posit her autobiographical act as a reclamation or a reformulation of subjectivity through the process of narrating the very circumscriptions which have delimited it.

3. Narrative as event: Elizabeth Wurtzel and *Prozac Nation*

The madman is delivered to the river with its thousand arms, the sea with
its thousand roads, to that great uncertainty external to everything.
Michel Foucault¹

I feel all over the map, strange and wandering in some emotional
diaspora that no previous experience has ever prepared me for.
Elizabeth Wurtzel²

3.1.1 Introduction

In contrast to its conception in *A Ray of Darkness*, in this chapter I study a memoir in which ‘diffusion’ appears to embody pathology more than a salutary mode of (narrative) being. Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation* is characterized by a radical fragmentation both of identity and the narrative structures which construct and support it, and this narrative fracturing dramatizes the symptoms of her illness. Partly because of this, the subjectivity outlined, as in Evans’s text, is insinuated as ongoing and in process, rather than discrete or finished, although there are important differences too: in *Prozac Nation* the ‘process’ of narration is shadowed by darker potentialities.

Much more preoccupied with the mapping of illness than are *Spasm* or *A Ray of Darkness*, Wurtzel’s text does also, however, move towards describing a paradigm for identity in which relational factors are key. In addition, there is a hint here that, as with Slater and Evans, Wurtzel’s readership is implicated in this relational conception. Thus, in an interrogation of her motivation, Wurtzel insinuates that writing itself embodies a gesture towards an other:

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. (318)

In its implications, this passage is consonant with Slater’s pleas to her readers to “live in the place where I am,” because “living where I do, living in the chasm that cuts

¹ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 11.

² Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America: a memoir* (London: Quartet, 1999; orig. publ. 1994), p.285. Subsequent quotations from this text are given in parentheses.

through thought, it is lonely”.³ On the other hand, however, while Slater holds back from carrying through her narrative strategy of unreliability out of deference to the sensibilities of her imagined readers, Wurtzel has succeeded in alienating many reviewers, even provoking, as I will discuss, hostility and personal abuse.

I will begin by considering the potential perils of narrating madness. It is a theme I explore with reference both to *Prozac Nation* and to another memoir of depression, Tracy Thompson’s *The Beast*. Thompson tells a comparable story to Wurtzel but in a markedly different style, yet the subtexts of these works are similar. In a substantial proportion of this chapter my focus is on *form*, so this similarity is, I think, significant and illuminating. As a way into this discussion, I will first briefly consider the ‘perilous narration’ invoked in that most famous of narrative voyages into suffering, *The Inferno*.

3.1.2 To tell about those woods is hard

*Midway on our life’s journey, I found myself
In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell
About those woods is hard – so tangled and rough
And savage that thinking of it now, I feel
The old fear stirring
Dante Alighieri⁴*

The famous narrative statement which opens Dante’s *Inferno* is a powerful but fairly straightforward invocation of a moment of crisis: “Midway on our life’s journey, I found myself/ In dark woods, the right road lost”. Yet Dante at once follows this by signifying that the narration of the sojourn in the nightmare forest must itself be a perilous journey; that the act of telling of crisis is far from unproblematic: “To tell/ about those woods is hard – so tangled and rough/ And savage that thinking of it now, I feel/ the old fear stirring: death is hardly more bitter”.⁵ The text thus signals that it cannot be a rendition of a discrete series of events sectioned off in the narrative past, but that the very act of narrating stirs up the ‘old fear’ again: narration is itself a potentially dangerous excursion in which the narrator may once again “blunder off the true path”. Present and past are thus not cordoned off but instead confront and mirror each other. Just as the pilgrim-protagonist must prepare “as though for war/ To

³ Lauren Slater, *Spasm: A Memoir with Lies* (London: Methuen, 2000) p. 163.

⁴ Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. by Robert Pinsky (London: Dent, 1997). First canto.

⁵ C.f. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. by J.M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975 [1781]), p. 30: “I feel my pulse beat faster once more as I write”.

struggle with my journey”, so too the narrator must determine to revisit the treacherous past, to re-encounter it in the moment of writing. Thus *The Inferno* describes two journeys: both pilgrim and narrator set out in the “darkening air” into unknown realms.

That Dante's warning is foregrounded at the start – or, figuratively, the ‘outset’ – of the text, emphasizes this sense of narrating as an uncertain journey: in beginning to narrate, the narrator is ‘embarking’ on a narrative voyage unsure of destination or outcome. This is a more solitary journey than the one narrated, for whereas the intradiegetic pilgrim has Virgil to guide him “on that deep and savage road”, the narrator is alone. He despairs even of taking solace by communing with his imagined reader, for the limits of verbal expression are overwhelmed by what he will tell: “For my demanding theme so pulls my story,/ To multiply the telling would be too little/ For the multitude of fact that filled my journey”.⁶ Narration, then, cannot even fully translate horror into words; rather, the phantasmagoric visions awoken by the effort of remembering remain unspoken, haunting consciousness.

The Inferno is narrated in the past tense, but this sense of a parallel journey unfolding in its very telling works to create an immediacy to the narrative, in which the perils of hell cannot be comfortably sectioned off as a discrete ‘history’ but infect the present moment of telling. This moment thus becomes another scene where another drama is played out; the text, as the trace of telling, can no longer be passed over as a transparency through which an intradiegetic hell may be viewed. Instead its form maps out, and is the location of, another story, the ‘story of story’, in which the effect of narrating on the one who narrates is the focus of dramatic action.

⁶ Canto IV, ll. 130-2, *The Inferno*. A similar sentiment is also voiced in the *Paradiso*: “From that time forward what I saw was greater/ Than our discourse, that to such vision yields,/ And yields the memory unto such excess.” (Canto xxxiii. Source: The Project Gutenberg E-text of Dante's *Paradise [Divine Comedy]*, trans. by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow). Dante's inarticulacy is here, of course, due to his proximity to the divine. George Steiner calls the *Paradiso* an exercise “in the calculus of linguistic possibility [...] As the poet draws nearer to the Divine presence [...] the labour of translation into speech grows ever more exacting. Words grow less and less adequate to the task of translating immediate revelation”. George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1982), pp. 40-1.

3.2.1 *Prozac Nation*: “I may just start to show through”

Where could my heart find refuge from itself? Where could I go, yet leave myself behind?
Was there any place where I should not be a prey to myself? None.
St. Augustine.⁷

The idea that narration’s imaginative revisiting of historical scenes of crisis might itself involve an encounter with crisis is particularly apposite in the context of narrating madness. Whatever the arguments surrounding its originating ‘cause’, if madness is a condition centring on and evoked within various aspects of cognition, then the autopathographical venture will involve a re-negotiating of the spaces of the self in which suffering is, or was, experienced. That is to say: to formulate a narrative will necessitate a willed passage into and through the same spaces of the self – thought, memory and emotion – in which illness has been, and possibly still is, manifest. The autopathographer must will him/herself back into, and spend sustained periods within, an interiority which has been experienced as hostile or dangerous. Because madness is intermeshed with the very processes with which we tell stories and make meaning, the autopathographer needs to employ in a *systematic and sustained fashion* cognitive tools which are overshadowed, inflected, even altered, by the remembrance and reverberations through time of their own disruption. Thus, the very tools with which autopathographers construct their stories, those mechanisms without which story would be impossible, are no longer innocent and can no longer be taken for granted. Indeed, the manner in which they tell their stories, the tools employed to tell the story, are themselves a significant part of the story-content. All of this means that the narrative journey may be a perilous one, and that the form of narrative might map more than a discrete history, but rather dramatize the very echoes and reverberations of distress.

Inhering in Elizabeth’s Wurtzel’s memoir of depression, *Prozac Nation*, is precisely a sense that her historical past cannot easily be cordoned off from the moment of writing. On occasion she herself seems to intuit this, in that she alludes to the impossibility of extricating her (autobiographical) self from her (narrating) self. Thus, memorizing a quote by Heraclitus which encapsulates the sense of inevitable encounter – “How can you hide from what never goes away?” – she concludes: “you can never get away from yourself because you never go away” (10). Later she asks rhetorically: “What does getting help with depression mean? Learning to keep away from your own

⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 78.

mind?"; and then, comparing her experience to that of an alcoholic, laments: "Wouldn't it be a whole load easier to get rid of Jack Daniel's than Elizabeth Wurtzel?" (60).

At other moments in the memoir traces of Dante-esque motifs are evident. Thus, like Dante's narrator, she signals at the start of her text that she has blundered off 'the right road', and that the narrative of *Prozac Nation* represents an attempt to come to terms with that error: "I try to understand where I made a bad turn, how I stupidly meandered down the wrong road in the fork of life" (20). Elsewhere, in a passage which echoes Dante's lament that to "tell about those woods is hard", she alludes to the pain of remembering (and, therefore, narrating) when, recalling her pre-depression self, she is struck by grief at how early promise has not been consummated: "It is hard for me to remember a life that was so cocksure, so free of self-doubt, so pure in its certainty. How did all that life-force energy turn so completely into a death wish?" (36).

In line with her allusions to the inextricability of the self from the self, Wurtzel conveys a sense that her autobiographical encounter with illness has been an inevitability. Determined to be an author, her earlier attempts at writing have been stymied because her traumatic memories of depression have operated as a distracting and insistent background drone to her thinking and her creative endeavours, a drone which she has been unable to silence:

I had tried to write other books about very different topics [...] I had tried to be a regular journalist [...] to be an arts critic [...] to get away from thinking or feeling depression in all my professional endeavours, but it just kept creeping up, over and over again, like a palimpsest, a text hidden beneath whatever else I was working on that refused to remain submerged. (315)⁸

The impression here and elsewhere is that by choosing a profession in which creative and sustained thought is central, Wurtzel has been unable to avoid a story which insists on being told. *Prozac Nation* is her return to, and confrontation of, this depressive ur-text: "Finally, and I guess, inevitably, I gave in to the obsessive hold that my experiences with depression seemed to have on me, and decided just to write a whole book, all by itself, about that very subject and nothing else" (315).

In addition, rather than just telling of her depression, Wurtzel claims in an Afterword that she determined to allow the depressive experience to irrupt through and

⁸ See Freud's essay 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-through,' where, concerning the repetition compulsion, he writes: "Repeating [...] implies conjuring up a piece of real life; and for that reason it cannot always be harmless and unobjectionable". In: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 12, trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1958 [1914]), pp. 147-156 (p. 152).

in the very fabric of her text; her narrative, she claims, does not just retell experience, it re-enacts it:

I wanted this book to dare to be completely self-indulgent, unhesitant, and forthright in its telling of what clinical depression feels like: I wanted so very badly to write a book that felt as bad as it feels to feel *this* bad, to feel depressed. I wanted to be completely true to the experience of depression – to the thing itself, and not to the mitigations of translating it. I wanted to portray myself in the midst of this mental crisis precisely as I was: difficult, demanding, impossible, unsatisfiable, selfcentered, self-involved, and above all, self-indulgent. (316)

The implication here is that Wurtzel has chosen a particular narrative stance in order to convey the truth of her experience, that the complex and tortuous prose style of *Prozac Nation* is a strategic literary re-creation of the experience of depression. However, such wholly voluntaristic notions belie the subtext signified in the formal aspects of this narrative. The fractured form and jumbled, panicky style of *Prozac Nation* often produce an impression that the narrator has been overwhelmed by her material. In the same way that William Burroughs, in the preface to his autobiographical novella *Queer*, declares, “My past was a poisoned river from which one was fortunate to escape, and by which one feels immediately threatened, years after the events recorded. Painful to an extent I find it difficult to read, let alone to write about. Every word and gesture sets the teeth on edge”,⁹ so one frequently has the sense in the dissilient turbulence of *Prozac Nation* that Wurtzel as writer-narrator is threatened by the material she relates.¹⁰ I am not suggesting that no intention at all lies behind the literary effect of this work, for, unlike Ross Burke’s memoir/novel which I discuss in the following chapter, the sense of authorial control and strategy certainly does not entirely dissipate here. However, in the light of the positioning of Wurtzel’s explanation in an Afterword, it is difficult not to suspect that in some part at least it represents a post-facto justification. In contrast, Wurtzel’s assertion on the very first page of the memoir, “I start to feel like I can’t maintain the façade any longer, that I may just start to show through” (1), insinuates a sense that, reminiscent of the palimpsest of depression ‘showing through’ other texts, the self irrupts through the text, and form dramatizes identity, despite, rather than because of, her efforts.

⁹ William Burroughs, *Queer* (London: Picador, 1986), p. 14.

¹⁰ See James Glass: “it is [...] testimony to the power of language, both to embody the experience in feeling and image and to provide bridges back to memories that haunt the self as pain and torture”. James M. Glass, *Shattered Selves: Multiple Personality in a Postmodern World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 125.

As I have said, this ‘showing through’ is most apparent in the formal aspects of the narrative: the result is that *Prozac Nation* often reads as radically incoherent. I shall discuss the form of the memoir in detail presently, but the various factors which destabilize its cohesion include the inconsistent use of tenses; apparent plot repetitions to the point of tedium; continual displacements of the autobiographical self into other fictional selves; the fragility of both tentative narrative schemas and of the narrator’s detachment from the events recalled; and no cohesive sense of plot or character development. This last point is particularly arresting: *Prozac Nation* does not convey the impression of a life analysed and then re-imagined from an external narrative position of certainty; rather both protagonist and narrator frequently seem to coalesce in their inability to hold to an overview of either the experience of distress or its narration. There is little suggestion in the book’s narrative economies of an external position of certainty from which the narrator may gaze back and formulate a structured *sjuzhet*¹¹ (or, indeed, a coherent ‘subject’) which is somehow removed from the uncertainties of events. The effect of this, together with the various other destabilizing narrative devices, is to produce a startling, virtually text-book, representation of that endless, repetitive grieving named by Freud as characterizing melancholia.¹²

3.2.2 Prologue and prolepsis

One of the most striking aspects of *Prozac Nation* is its tortuous, complex negotiation of tense and time. Ambiguous and confusing chronotopes¹³ exemplify the way that Wurtzel ‘shows through’ her text, for they strikingly parallel and reflect her description of the way in which a balanced sense of past, present, and future are painfully disrupted in her depression. Hints at this distinctive characteristic are evident right from the outset of the text. For instance, heralding and foregrounding the blurring of temporal boundaries, the memoir’s epigraph from Marguerite Duras (“Very early in my life it was too late”) invokes a clash of temporalities in which a speaker in the present looks

¹¹ See chapter one, footnote 11.

¹² See: Sigmund Freud, ‘Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XII, trans. by James Strachey, ed. by James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), pp. 147-156; ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, in *The Standard Edition*, Volume XIV, trans. by James Strachey, ed. by James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 239-258.

¹³ The sense of space and time in an artistic work. See Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 234.

back to her past and pronounces that possibility – the future – ‘had’ already passed. Similarly, Wurtzel’s opening declaration of doubt that she will be able to ‘maintain the façade’ and may “show through” also highlights an ambiguous sense of temporality. For while this statement ostensibly refers to the gathering emotional crisis with which she begins her memoir, a crisis apparently rooted in history and accessed through autobiographical memory, its enunciation in the present tense anticipates the way in which later narrations frequently split apart in apparently random moves from past to present tense and back. Furthermore, the positioning of the statement at the opening of a ‘Prologue’ – provocatively subtitled (again in the present tense) ‘I Hate Myself and I Want to Die’¹⁴ – in a short italicised subsection which suggests itself as a kind of prolegomenon to the prologue, strengthens the sense that a dramatic performance of the sentiments expressed here is about to be enacted in the body of the text: that Wurtzel may indeed be about to “show through”, and that this section is a ‘curtain-raiser’, preparing the reader for what is to come. The typographical separation of this italicised opening, together with the bleak, yet almost histrionic¹⁵ declarations it contains, create an impression of an epideictic preamble. Together with the present tense narration and the stark, confrontational sub-title, the whole suggests itself as introducing a ‘crisis-text’ – in which the narrative will not simply reiterate the past or restate historical truth, but rather negotiate identity in the present.¹⁶

This becomes clearer at the end of the book when the reader realizes that the ‘prologue’ is actually a kind of proleptic insert into Wurtzel’s account of her depression. And while the memoir eventually ends with Wurtzel being prescribed Prozac and overcoming the power of her illness to frustrate her attempts to construct a meaningful life, the prologue opens with Wurtzel taking Prozac and enmired in a suicidal despair, thus seemingly undermining these later claims to stability and ‘cure’:

¹⁴ This is also the title of a song by the rock group Nirvana. Wurtzel ends the original version of *Prozac Nation* with an extended meditation on the group – particularly the suicide of lead singer and guitarist, Kurt Cobain.

¹⁵ The *OED* defines histrionic as meaning: “1. of or relating to stage-players, or play-acting; theatrical. 2. ‘stagey’”. I use the term here because I want to invoke the performative, dramatic nature of Wurtzel’s opening.

¹⁶ See here Kathryn Woodward, ‘Concepts of Identity and Difference’, in *Identity and Difference*, ed. by K. Woodward (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 10-11. Addressing national identity in the former Yugoslavia Woodward shows that the “reproduction of the past” at a particular moment in time can suggest a “moment of crisis rather than something fixed and settled in the construction of Serbian identity”. Equally “what appears to be a point about the past and a restatement of a historical truth may tell us more about the new subject-position of the twentieth-century warrior who is trying to defend the separateness and distinctiveness of his national identity in the present. So this recovery of the past is part of the process of *constructing identity* which is taking place at this moment”. See also Susanna Egan, *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999), pp. 4-5.

I start to get the feeling that something is really wrong. Like all the drugs put together – the lithium, the Prozac, the desipramine, and Desryel that I take to sleep at night – can no longer combat whatever it is that was wrong with me in the first place. I feel like a defective model, like I came off the assembly line flat-out fucked and my parents should have taken me back for repairs before the warranty ran out. But that was so long ago. [...] And I want out of this life on drugs. (1-2)

The prologue, in terms of its chronological position within the story, probably actually takes place somewhere between the moment where Wurtzel first takes Prozac and her sudden realization of ‘cure’ (“And then something just kind of changed in me” [292]), but that this is never made explicit, and that the first reference to Prozac is in such a prominent section of the text, works to foreground this open-ended description of an episode of acute distress – which subsequently overshadows the rest of the text as a kind of leitmotif. Thus, the existential and narrative closure with which the text concludes is to some extent destabilized by its beginning; the outline of the depressive palimpsest is still visible – even behind the narrative of ‘recovery’.

The prologue, then, is a kind of projection, or prolepsis, in which Wurtzel the narrator precedes the history of Wurtzel the protagonist by glancing towards the story’s ‘ending’. Of course, it is also the simple narration of an episode from Wurtzel’s (recent) history: Wurtzel-narrator records Wurtzel-protagonist. However, the use of the present tense casts some doubt on any sense that the text is entirely ‘closed’, that is, narrated from a position of retrospective safety. Wurtzel does not enlighten the new reader as to the place of this episode in her story, and her declaration that “I start to get the feeling that something is really wrong” insinuates that this may be an ongoing state for the narrator now. In grammatical terms, the reader may wonder if she writes in the Present Perfect Progressive, thereby, from A. S. Hornby’s definition, indicating “that the activity or state referred to still continues and may continue in future”.¹⁷

This complex interweaving, or, more appositely, *collision*, of past, present and future, heralds the shifting and decentred treatment of time and tense that characterize Wurtzel’s text, and which I explore further shortly. However, the reason that all this is

¹⁷ A. S. Hornby, *A Guide to Patterns and Usage in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 97. On the ‘pathological’ use of the present tense see Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat* (London: Duckworth, 1986 [1985]), p. 108. Sacks describes a patient with severe Korsakov’s syndrome (a neurological disorder of the memory), who invariably speaks in the present tense even when describing his long dead brother. Also see A. R. Luria’s, *The Man with a Shattered World: The History of a Brain Wound*, trans. by Lynn Solotaroff (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), p. 11. Solotaroff comments that many of the patient Zazetsky’s journal entries – of which the book consists, together with Luria’s commentary – were written in the present tense, and that Luria “has scrupulously preserved” such stylistic characteristics, “which are symptoms of the patient’s condition”.

particularly intriguing and of immediate interest is that a disruption in temporal perception forms a central part of Wurtzel's depression.

3.2.3 Depression and time in *Prozac Nation*

Wurtzel heads one of her chapters with a quotation from Einstein which effectively serves to encapsulate a ruling aesthetic in her memoir: "People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion" (116). For Wurtzel, however, the blurring or erasure of temporal boundaries and distinctions is a way in which illness is manifest; the overwhelming sense in *Prozac Nation* is that an equanimous present existence will be radically disrupted if a balanced relationship with the sense of temporality cannot be maintained. Wurtzel delineates a present self paralysed by twin invasions of memory and anticipation, with her sense of selfhood threatened or overwhelmed by these influxes, or displaced away from the moment into other spaces. Both processes render her sense of self fragile and vulnerable to invasion. Thus, rather than history, present, and anticipated future being integrated into a cohesive narrative of subjectivity – that is, a sense of a continuing self – invasion and diffusion disperse subjectivity onto a shifting and uncertain ground.¹⁸ It is not hard to see how such disturbances might be described as essentially narratological, for it is the narrator's ability to construct a coherent plot – in which her history and imagined future assume a balance within the parameters of the present self – which has been disrupted.

Wurtzel extensively details this dysfunctional, painful relation to temporality, and, recalling Margiad Evans's invocation of an imagined 'elsewhere' in *A Ray of*

¹⁸ Dominick LaCapra's discussion of the way in which perceptions of temporality are disrupted for survivors of trauma is interesting in this context; in particular his contention that "In acting out, tenses implode" evokes various moments in *Prozac Nation*. "[I]n trauma and in post-traumatic acting out [...] one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes – scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop. In acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene. Any duality (or double inscription) of time (past and present or future) is experientially collapsed or productive only of aporias and double binds. In this sense, the aporia and the double bind might be seen as marking a trauma that has not been worked through." Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 21. Compare also Henry Greenspan's observations on the 'vicissitudes of recounting' in the context of Holocaust survivors who "speak both of having died during the Holocaust yet [continue] to live": "The death survivors know lives on, inhabiting the silence and pulling against whatever forms and meanings survivors may find to represent it. Indeed, recounting may begin to reactivate the experience of not-being itself [...]" 'Lives as Texts: Symptoms as Modes of Recounting in the Life Histories of Holocaust Survivors', in *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding*, ed. by George C. Rosenwald and Richard L. Ochberg (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 148.

Darkness, frequently connects a temporally balanced state of being to notions of place. Her ‘expulsion’ from these (temporal) sites of harmony and possibility is redolent with connotations of a Fall. For instance, early on in the text she describes how her ability to envisage a meaningful future has been dislocated: “I’d been expelled from that place where possibility still existed” (70). Immediately afterwards she notes that her relationship to memory, to her own history, is also out of balance:

It doesn’t matter how many years go by, how much therapy I embark on, how much I try to grasp that elusive thing known as perspective, which is supposed to put all past wrongs into their rightful and diminished place, that happy place where all the talk is of lessons learned and inner peace. No one will ever understand the potency of my memories, which are so solid and vivid that I don’t need a psychiatrist to tell me they are driving me crazy. My subconscious has not buried them, my superego has not restrained them. They are front and center, they are going on right now. (70-1)

While this passage evokes memory as unrestrained and invasive, summoning to mind Freud and Breuer’s famous observation about ‘hysterical’ reminiscence as suffering,¹⁹ Wurtzel’s dysfunctional relation to remembrance is more complex. Concluding this passage, and again summoning the trope of place, she declares: “homesickness is just a state of mind for me. I’m always missing someone or someplace or something. I’m always trying to get back to some imaginary somewhere. My life has been one long longing” (71). The connotations here of memory conjuring a lost but longed-for realm illustrate an inverse force which also decentres Wurtzel’s sense of self. Her depressive suffering causes her to reach back toward other imagined temporalities, to imagine the self elsewhere; and this overwhelming desire to enter spaces of memory and imagination disrupts the present as much as the assault by memory, in that Wurtzel’s sense of self is here dispersed into painful longing. Paradoxically, it is in part the assault by hostile and unpleasant memories which motivates the desire to reach back to an idealized past. Logically, however, such cravings are shot through with ambivalence. For while Wurtzel may wish to regress to the places of impossible memory, her desire is simultaneously and necessarily for a future outcome different to her painful present. Thus, as elsewhere in the memoir, her meditation on homesickness hovers uncertainly in a temporal hinterland, highlighting the conflicting and highly complex logics of her narrative’s relationship to time. But whether her longing is interpreted as for a past or a future, her present is unsatisfactory,

¹⁹ “*Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences*”. Breuer and Freud, ‘On the Psychological Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena: Preliminary Communication’, in *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. and ed. by James and Alix Strachey, The Penguin Freud Library Volume 3 (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 53-69 (p. 58).

and her grasp of a settled selfhood brittle and inchoate. Expulsion “from the place where possibility still existed” describes a present state: Wurtzel laments that she is unable, in the present, to imagine and project the self into desirable futures or possibilities.

Memory is not solely problematic because experienced as incursive. Wurtzel also records how the past is too present, subsuming her sense of presence. Oliver Sacks has famously detailed how loss of memory in neurological disorders can attenuate the sense of identity,²⁰ but in *Prozac Nation* it is too much, or too vivid, remembrance which eclipses the present self. Reflecting on her deeply unsatisfactory relationship with her father, Wurtzel declares: “The din of the anger I had for my father was even worse now that the actual problems were supposed to be receding into the past” (120); and then goes on:

Nothing in my life ever seemed to fade away or take its rightful place among the pantheon of experiences that constituted my eighteen years. It was all still with me, the storage space in my brain crammed with vivid memories, packed and piled like photographs and old dresses in my grandmother’s bureau. I wasn’t like the madwoman in the attic – I was the attic itself. The past was all over me, all under me, all inside me. (120-1)

Wurtzel evokes here a suffocation by memory: rather than slotting into and strengthening a sense of selfhood, she cannot distinguish the present self from past images, and self is problematically experienced as solely memory. Envisaged as an attic, the self resembles a receptacle – an emptiness or absence – filled only with the flotsam of history: in this space even the ‘madwoman’ is absent.

Similarly, Wurtzel’s lament that she has been expelled from the place “where possibility still existed” (70) encompasses a highly complex set of agonistic relationships with futurity. Repeatedly invoking the loss of ‘perspective’ intrinsic to depression, she describes how this disorientating state is manifest as both the inability to imagine a future, and, inversely, a too vivid imagination of negative, painful possibilities. Thus:

That’s the thing about depression: A human being can survive almost anything, as long as she sees the end in sight. But depression is so insidious, and it compounds daily, that it’s impossible to ever see the end. The fog is like a cage without a key. (168)

I need some protection. I don’t see a light at the end of the tunnel right now, and I’m having trouble visualizing world peace or inner peace or any of that shit [...]. (229)

²⁰ Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat* (London: Duckworth, 1986).

I am so wrecked already, so unstable, a piece of work who was never given the tools it takes to deal with what everyone else considers business as usual. I am not equipped with any emotional resilience, can't go with the flow, can't stand steady while the boat rocks and rolls. Once, so long ago, I had it in me, but now it's too late. Years of depression have robbed me of that – well, that give, that elasticity that everyone else calls perspective. (258)²¹

I spoke of the intolerable pain, though even I could see that I should have been happy to be so in love with somebody for the first time since high school. But I couldn't be. I kept imagining the end, the despair I would suffer when it came, and it made any happiness I had in the present seem not merely ephemeral, but doomed. Because the happier I allowed myself to be now, the more miserable I would be later. (193)

When I look ahead, all I can see is my final demise. And they say, But maybe not for seventy or eighty years. And I say, Maybe you, but me, I'm already gone. (42)

Such passages denote the future as either wholly blotted out by the miasma of depression, or as inescapably dark and insufferable; but in both constructions the implication for Wurtzel is that, in her evocative phrase, the present becomes “a cage without a key” and choice, possibility and autonomy are absent.²² She is either trapped within a seemingly endless painful moment, or forced back into unwilling preoccupation with that moment because her alternative imagined futures are so grim: to borrow from Dominick LaCapra, the “feedback loop”²³ of melancholia returns her to the intolerable present, with suicide the only prospect of ‘escape’. Wurtzel again

²¹ For Wurtzel, it is instability which robs her of elasticity, give, or, in Jacques Derrida's terms, ‘play’. Yet Derrida claims, in his famous essay ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, that elasticity is limited by the centre of a ‘structure’; indeed that is the centre's function: “the function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure – but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure”. Thus, for Derrida, it is *stability* which delimits play, while Wurtzel seems to posit that a core security is essential for successful engagement with existential flux. Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 278.

²² While (to appropriate Susanna Egan's description of the narrative economies of some autobiographical crisis-texts) *Prozac Nation* “[enjoys] minimal control over narrative teleology”, I feel that Egan's contention that those works which negotiate an ongoing, unresolved crisis recover agency via seeking to “affect the politics of [the writing] environment” is not applicable here. In response Egan might argue, that despite, as I claim, its *presentation* as a ‘crisis-text’, Wurtzel's memoir, in its denouement and epilogue, denotes itself as written ‘after the event’, that is, after the resolution of crisis (through Prozac). I would claim though, as I have argued, that lacunae in the narrative veit posit an uncertainty to Wurtzel's occasional claims for ‘cure’. Egan asserts that “The urgent present tense” of such writing “is particularly significant for its contestatory or resistant strategies that untrammel the subject from discursive helplessness”, and perhaps one might argue that, in her tortuous meditations on family, education, and sex, Wurtzel struggles against mutism and conformity. My reading, however, is that political ‘perspective’ does not really emerge until the epilogue and afterword, both of which are couched in the ‘normalised’ preterite and from the vantage point of an, albeit tentative, ‘cure’. See Egan, pp. 4-5.

²³ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 21.

invokes this painful incarceration in the moment when she tells her therapist: “Nothing is real to me unless it’s right in front of me” (203); and also when she protests: “*Rock bottom is feeling like the only thing that matters in all of life is one bad moment [...] Rock bottom is everything out of focus. It’s a failure of vision, a failure to see the world as it is*” (254).²⁴ In contrast to this, but again denoted as closely linked to her relationship with futurity, elsewhere the present is described as a kind of antechamber in which to wait until a chimerical future arrives:

Instead of thinking that there was *no* future, all I did was plan for the future, treating the present tense and all its tension like a lengthy, labored, preamble to a real life that awaited me somewhere, anywhere else but here. (85)

On the rare occasions when Wurtzel is able to imagine ‘possibility’, she is again thrown back to the painful present, both intradiegetically, within the narrated story world, and extradiegetically, in the moment of writing; in addition these imaginings necessarily involve often uncomfortable assessments of her history. In such moments Wurtzel’s awareness of missed opportunity constructs ‘possibility’ as *impossibility* and operates as a tormenting reflux which imbricates the moment with anguish. Thus, in a passage which involves a highly complex weaving of temporalities, she writes: “*I think of my own possibility. I think of the way it is wasted. The way it will always be wasted because I’m sitting here waiting for someone to love me as is*” (225). Intradiegetically, what is construed here is a past self who both thinks of (im)possible future selves and assesses an unsatisfactory present: both thinks of her ‘possibility’, and of the way it is ‘wasted’. To think of possibility, therefore, is also to confront the wasted moment. Moreover, such an imagining of possibility logically implies a traversing of past as well as future: to “think of my own possibility” the self must extrapolate from the potential of its past incarnations to construct a vision of what ‘could be’. Yet, in addition, the extradiegetic writing self is implicated in this statement. The passage occurs when the narrative voice suddenly switches from an agonized meditation on family (“I lie and creak and cry and drown myself and you in my misery” [225]) into what reads as a transcendent instance of ‘perspective’ (“*Sometimes I think part of the problem relates to ethnicity*”) and which includes Wurtzel’s reflections on ‘possibility’. The impression of a differentiation from the intradiegetic story-world is heightened by a sudden switch to italics. So while Wurtzel as author, as a present, supposedly extradiegetic, writing self, ostensibly describes a past self who is thinking of “*my own possibility*”, by

²⁴ Paradoxically, the ability to identify ‘rock bottom’ might itself be construed as implying a grasp of perspective.

employing the present tense, and in the light of the reflective, authorial connotations of this passage, the boundaries between the writing self and the historical self ‘thinking of possibility’ are blurred. There is, therefore, an ambiguity as to who speaks here – Wurtzel as protagonist, or writer, or narrator – and the effect of the passage is to imply that this past imagining self is also ‘present’. There is a sense, therefore, both intra- and extra-diegetically, that Wurtzel is drawn back to twin ‘presents’.

In Wurtzel’s meditations on her own lost possibilities some of the complexities of the relationship between the (narrative) self and time are evident. What specifically emerges in the passage I have been considering is that regret, the ‘could have been’, cannot be isolated from the moment in which it is remembered. Regret for a possible past self is an emotion experienced in the present; in addition, reflecting on what might have been is also to consider that the moment of reflection itself has been negatively shaped by events and choices. In this, and in the complex nature of futurity and possibility I outline above, the narrative self appears, then, as a present nexus from and to which different temporalities irradiate and converge; indeed, it may be precisely through this crossing of temporal dimensions that the ‘self’ is conceivable and can be located. Which is to say that, as a decussate²⁵ ‘present’ moment, the self is not eidetically ‘present’ to itself in an instance of transcendent plenitude, but is radically bound to and dependent on anticipation and remembrance.

Such observations are strengthened if we consider the section in which Wurtzel’s regretful reflections on “*my own possibility*” occur. They are expressed in the course of a narrative excursus on guilt – close cousin to regret – and which is also distinguished by a complex negotiation of temporalities.

Sometimes I think part of the problem relates to ethnicity. We Jews do not have a concept of unconditional love [...] Some say that the difference between Catholic guilt and Jewish guilt is that the former emanates from the knowledge that we are all born already fallen, that there is nothing we can ever do to overcome the original sin; the latter springs from a sense that every one of us was created in God's image and has the potential for perfection. So Catholic guilt is about impossibility, while Jewish guilt is about an abundance of possibility. (225)

In both its Jewish and Catholic incarnations guilt’s mechanism operates via a recourse to a primal ‘memory’ (of one’s creation as either fallen or perfect) to fashion a projected future as either hopeless, without the possibility of transformation (Catholicism), or as so boundless as to render the sinner continually aware of their

²⁵ ‘Decussate’ invokes the form of the letter X, a crossing or intersection.

shortcomings (Judaism). But of course in both instances it is the present which is inflected by guilt; indeed guilt's power operates solely in the moment, as a somatic enactment of the power of history or of imagination to affect the subject's present. Unlike sadness or happiness – which may be 'remembered' or anticipated – guilt supersedes recollection or imagining; it exemplifies history or futurity as effects in the moment. Guilt, and regret, have the effect of returning the subject to itself, even as it contemplates its history; in Anthony Kerby's words: "guilt is especially notable for bringing us, via its insistence on being interpreted, to a strong sense of our own being, our own deep-seated values. Guilt [...] seems to demand a narrative working out of itself".²⁶ In the context of narrative, however, in which the writer-narrator gazes back over her own 'sinful' story (in an anamorphosis of the "judgemental, jealous and vengeful [...] God of the Old Testament" [225]), guilt's potential to traverse temporalities is doubled. The god-narrator, in judging her past self, must also judge her present, writing self; the unfulfilled possibilities of history are manifest as the writing-present. Thus, the journey into historicity is indeed potentially challenging, for, in the intertwining of regret and guilt, the correlation of past and present selves cannot be ignored. All this and more is invoked in Wurtzel's plaintive, "*I think of my own possibility*" – for her lament also arcs out to encompass the 'not-yet', that is, the future of the writer. To borrow from Kerby's analysis of the relation between narrative time and the self, it insinuates that:

Experience comes to one not in discrete instances but as part of an ongoing life, *my* life. Experience gains its density and elusiveness precisely through a continuous contextualizing or meshing of part to changing whole [...] It is as though experience is disclosed in the manner of a set of Chinese boxes, one fitting perfectly inside or around another. Experience is in this sense overdetermined; it has an ever unfolding richness or expanse before our reflective gaze.²⁷

Broadly consonant with my conception of selfhood as a decussate 'moment' bound to time, Kerby makes the point that subjectivity is contingent on the unconscious assimilation of different temporal manifestations of the self. Invoking the Husserlian

²⁶ *Narrative and the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 58. However, Kerby also quotes Charles Taylor: "[R]emorse may dissipate altogether, if we come to see our sense of wrong-doing is unfounded; or it may alter in other ways, as we come to understand what is wrong; perhaps it will be more acute as we see how grave the offence was; perhaps it will be less as we see how hard it was to avoid". 'Self-Interpreting animals', *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 63, quoted in Kerby, 49-50.

²⁷ Kerby, *Narrative and the Self*, p. 16.

conception of temporal retentions and protentions, “which give a density and cohesion to the ongoing present”, he contends:

This view of lived time (or experience) emphasizes its interlocked nature. The present transcends itself in a continual and unbroken anticipation of the future and retention of the past – as in the often cited experience of a musical melody. The various moments of a melody can be cognized as part of an ongoing melody only if our present consciousness is not cut off from the immediate past but includes it as constitutive of its present significance. It is this continuity, this duration, that is presupposed and demonstrated by any of our present actions. We do not need constantly to reformulate or consciously remember our initial rationale or desires to continue meaningfully a present action to its conclusion, for the projected end is part and parcel of the present act. It is because of this linked aspect of time that the present is meaningful in a way that punctual moments could never be.²⁸

Accepting such a view, *Prozac Nation* might conceivably be read as a an exercise in (self) recovery. Particularly in the contexts of guilt, regret, and hope, Wurtzel’s invocation of the present through her use of tense, even as she considers the past, fashions a connection and continuity between past, present and future selves and re-emphasizes the self as a nexus between temporally situated identities. Such a ‘recovery’ is quite possibly enacted here without conscious intention on Wurtzel’s part, and may be inherent in the kind of engagement with history which she embarks upon.

When Wurtzel finally begins to move towards cure, her sense of the centrality and importance of time in relation to her fragile subjectivity remains. In the Afterword to the 1995 edition, for instance, she writes of how her encounters with readers of *Prozac Nation* “have enabled me to picture some grand possibilities of a world that is waiting to be born” (319). And in the body of the memoir, after a crux in the narrative where her mother acknowledges her depression, she is able to imagine the possibility of recovery (“it will be alright”) which in turn sets recovery in motion, but is also itself evidence of her nascent healing (275-6) – in that her depression has been manifest in an inability to hope. Finally, after taking an overdose, she is overcome by a desire to live, by a “sudden and nearly manic lust for life” (286), which while still somewhat equivocal, enables her to construct, and project herself into, an imagined future:

“[I] thought to myself that I’m supposed to go back to Dallas this summer, I’m supposed to hand in my junior essay, I’m supposed to have this future ahead of me that’s so – ” I had to stop myself because I was about to say *full of promise*, those unbearable words, those lying, cheating words that no one can ever live up to. But of course, they described exactly what was supposed to happen, what was supposed to be happening all along.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 18.

“And this may sound kind of stupid, but I kept thinking,” I continue, “that they can't lock me away because soon it will be summer and I don't think they have Steve's ice cream at McLean. You know, I started to think about all these little things, and I thought, damn it, I can't die yet. They weren't terribly grand thoughts, just mundane pleasures that I still had to look forward to. I guess this sounds so dumb.” (287-8)

3.2.4 Writing time in *Prozac Nation*

Time became palpable and viscous. Every minute, every second, every nanosecond, wrapped around my spine so that my nerves tightened and ached. I faded into abstraction.

(*Prozac Nation*, p.100)

Denoted as tangible and oppressive, time, then, plays a central part in Wurtzel's experience of depression; and, as I have begun to argue, this sense of palpability is mapped in the style and construction of her narrative. I will now explore this narrative mapping and negotiation a little further.

I have already noted some of the anomalous effects produced by Wurtzel's use of the present tense. This, in conjunction with the omission of overviews and synopses, invokes the lack of perspective which she describes as integral to her illness, and which she describes as “living in depression from moment to moment” (261). Andrew Solomon says something very similar in a memoir of his own depression, noting that “the present tense of [...] depression envisages no alleviation because it feels like knowledge”.²⁹ The continual recourse to the present tense in *Prozac Nation* fashions an impression of immediacy, of a claustrophobic imprisoning within the moment – not only for Wurtzel as autobiographical subject, but also for Wurtzel as narrator, and for the reader attempting to follow her narration. Yet, the sense of drama and urgency which characterize this text is produced not simply by the use of the present tense, but even more so because of the inconsistent and apparently random manner in which it is employed. Peter Brooks, writing of the way that, within novelistic narratives, the preterite tense may be decoded as a kind of present by the reader (“that of an action and a significance being forged before his eyes, in his hands so to speak”), suggests that, nevertheless, implicit in this process of reading is an “*anticipation of retrospection*” by which sense is made of the complexities of time, tense, and action.³⁰ By this means, both the immediate drama of the story, and also a sense of an unfolding plot, may be

²⁹ Andrew Solomon, *The Noonday Demon: An Anatomy of Depression* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 16.

³⁰ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge & London, Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 343.

simultaneously held within consciousness: disbelief is suspended so that the reader follows the story side by side with the protagonist, so to speak, yet at the same time s/he traces the way in which plot gathers disparate narrative strands into a *gestalt* – thus anticipating the closure and meaning revealed at the narrative’s finish. Brooks implies that these synchronous practices are necessary for meaning to emerge from narrative. Perhaps then, inversely, if the temporal structure of *Prozac Nation* followed a constant pattern, if it was written entirely in the present tense, the reader might supplement its overt immediacy with an implied preterite, that is, balance the uncertain drama and ‘happeningness’ of events with a sense of their pastness and completeness – decoding the narrative style as just that, an affectation or device. But *Prozac Nation* is not consistent, neither do its shifting patterns conform to an obvious schema; rather, Wurtzel seemingly arbitrarily switches from the present to the past, and in so doing heightens the impression that the act of narrating itself is rent by chaos. This confused arrangement – a kind of narratological synchysis – serves in turn to intensify the feeling of immediacy, in that the narration, even in its periodic attempts to grasp perspective, materializes as aleatory or haphazard. I shall return to the inconsistent use of tense shortly, but for its implications to be fully grasped I need first to consider two further aspects of the narrative weft of *Prozac Nation* which serve to contextualize and heighten the effects produced by tense use: plot, and structure.

Firstly, the distinctive narrative character of Wurtzel’s memoir can be better understood if we attend to the way in which its plot is structured, or more accurately is not structured. Again, Peter Brooks’s reflections are useful here. Brooks references Roland Barthes’s dissection of narrative into the proairetic and hermeneutic codes – that is, “the code of actions and the code of enigmas and answers” – the latter operating gradually to reveal meaning and cohesion.³¹ Plot, for Brooks, is an “‘overcoding’ of the proairetic by the hermeneutic: “the latter structuring the discrete elements of the former into larger interpretive wholes, working out their play of meaning and significance”.³² Yet, in *Prozac Nation*, this overcoding is largely absent, or, if present, occurs only through the accumulated effect of unstructured randomness; that is to say, the reader may notice that patterns of action and narrative are repeated, yet neither the narrator nor the implied author ever demonstrates a similar awareness, and thus is apparently as trapped in chronic, circular repetition as the protagonist; any overcoding

³¹ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 339.

³² *Ibid*, p. 340.

on the reader's part therefore must be imposed against the 'grain' of the text. The narrative, while not purely proairetic, nevertheless often appears as merely a chronicle of the disparate happenings in Wurtzel's depression, with the protagonist trapped within meaningless, nihilistic chains of 'happenings', and the text's narrative patterns appearing to exemplify Wurtzel's assertion that "in the world that we live in, randomness does rule" (301). There is little sense of development – either of character or of plot – or of a post-event narrator imposing understanding and meaning on a shifting unsettled history. Indeed the manner of narration prevents the creation of what Brooks calls 'a dilatory space' – a suspenseful interstice through which the reader approaches meaning – which he claims is effected by the "partial unveiling, temporary blockage, eventual resolution" inherent in this overcoding of the proairetic by the hermeneutic.³⁴ For despite the sense of immediacy, even of uncertainty of outcome, little impression of suspense is created; rather the brute stumbling of narrator and protagonist through distress effects an impression of hopelessness and nihilism. Indeed the creation of such a dilatory space would be contrary to the central 'aesthetic' of both Wurtzel's depression and narrative – in which deferral, delay, suspense, possibility is closed down to leave the subject trapped in an unbearable moment. The uncertainty effected by the claustrophobic entrapping narrative works to curtail 'the possibility of possibility' rather than – as in Brooks's paradigm of decoding the preterite into a pseudo-present – opening it up: narrative here dramatizes a bleak retreat of consciousness from anticipation.

Notwithstanding the above, there are, however, various attempts made to narratively order the story of *Prozac Nation*. Wurtzel's contention about the sovereignty of randomness is followed by an acknowledgement that absolute contingency is potentially deleterious: "this lack of order is a debilitating, destabilizing thing" (301), and this recognition may be what motivates her very definite attempts to impose a narrative structure. These attempts, however, invariably end in disintegration and confusion. Indeed, the breakdown of tentative narrative schemas is a key way in which the fragile consciousness of both protagonist and narrator is connoted. The implication is that the narrative consciousness at work endeavours to order the raw

³⁴ Ibid.

events of the *fabula* but is largely overwhelmed, unable to resist the depredations of depression or to stand back from the momentum of time, event, and telling.³⁴

The most noticeable way in which an ordering of the story is attempted is through the frequent use of italics. Purely by their visual, typographic separation from the rest of the text, these short inserts effect the impression of a reflective distancing from the concatenations of turbulent events. This effect is initially replicated in the content of the italicised text; for instance in the opening, in which the narrative voice separates itself from the chaotic scenes which follow in order to consider its own mental state. Thus, as Wurtzel subsequently describes the turmoil of a depressive episode set in her apartment, an impression is created that the narrative is dramatizing her consciousness – both her immersion in events, and her attempts to remove herself from them enough to grasp the totality of her situation. This pattern is repeated spasmodically throughout the book, but as the story unfolds, these italicised moments of reflection are increasingly invaded by descriptions of ‘events’. Reflection thus appears to be progressively subsumed in the chaos of the momentary and contingent, a process of degradation which occurs via dehiscence and coalescence: the isolated sanctuaries of thought (albeit still adumbrated by distress) which formerly appeared removed from the fray, are now fractured and interpenetrated by it. Equally, as the textual patterning breaks down, reflective moments begin to appear in non-italicised form in the body of the text. This breakdown of order, together with the increasingly random switching of tense, erodes the bold opening schema of the book, which is dispersed and absorbed into a congeries of disparate narrative fragments.

³⁴ Of course *Prozac Nation* is a construction; even in the opening chapter this is the case where one is reminded of Todorov’s observation that “in the plot, the author can present results before their causes, the end before the beginning”. Tsvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), p. 72. One might also reasonably argue that the very process of ‘narrativizing’ story involves, to some extent, an overcoding of the proairetic by the hermeneutic, in that *narrative*, by its nature, is organizational; that is to say, in Derrida’s terms, “one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganised structure” (Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, in idem, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 278). Concurring with this, I would nevertheless want to argue that Wurtzel’s narrative functions close to the ‘zero point’ of narration; her text often appears as little more than a *list* or catalogue with no attempt to posit meaning in organized *gestalten*. While a controlling consciousness is obviously at work here, its functions appear severely delimited. One of Peter Brooks’s observations neatly sums up the reader’s progress through this bleak, nihilistic, and seemingly directionless story: “We are frustrated by narrative interminable” (p. 343). I assume Brooks is here alluding to Freud’s ‘Analysis Terminable and Interminable’ (1937) (in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 23 [London: Hogarth Press, 1968], pp. 211-253). Also apposite is Forster’s claim that the only possible “fault” that ‘story’ (in his definition, “a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence”) can have is that of “making the audience not want to know what happens next”, as is Kerby’s poignant observation that “Life, with a minimum of explicit narrative, approaches a sheer undergoing, like a child who does not consciously link A to B as it lives through them.” See: E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 42, & Kerby, *Narrative and the Self*, p. 44.

An example of this erosion is when Wurtzel describes an acute moment of psychological crisis and her desperate flight to the University hospital. Mirroring the breakdown in the narrative ordering of the text, significantly the passage denotes a mental collapse in which Wurtzel's "foundation is crumbling". While evoking panic, and subsumption by that panic, the passage is set in the italic type of distance and reflection.

I walk toward the University Health Services building. Through the glass doors. Through revolving doors inside. Still breathing. In one door of the elevator. Out the other door at the third floor. Follow the arrows to MENTAL HEALTH. Into the west wing. Ask to see a psychiatrist. The receptionist says that only a psychologist is available. Minutes later, walk into Dr. King's office. Tell him I need help. Really badly. Tell him I am scared. Tell him that it feels as if the floor beneath my feet is crumbling, that the ceiling is about to land on my head. Tell him I feel like an art deco skyscraper, like the Chrysler Building, but my foundation is crumbling and shattered glass is falling all over the sidewalks, all over my feet. (101-2)

Similar effects are produced by the disordering and inconsistent use of tense. Often this inconsistency is strikingly apparent: even within passages narrating individual episodes the use of tense becomes increasingly erratic. Wurtzel switches from past to present and back to past as if she has an uncertain grasp on her temporal relation to narrative and is wrestling with her material, attempting to fit its amorphous bulk into an ordered pattern. Thus, the second chapter starts off in the present tense – "I go to Dr. Isaac's office twice a week" (37) – but then within a few lines reverts to a mode in which the narrator reflects on clearly past events from the position of the narrating present: "I mean I really do believe we might have gotten to the bottom of the root of the mess if such a place existed". That this sentence's final clause – "but my misery is just too random" – is then couched in the simple present, only strengthens the impression that the narrated melancholia also arcs out to encompass the writing present. And these disconcerting juxtapositions of temporality and tense continue: for instance, in this passage: "Dr. Isaac would occasionally make pronouncements that seemed sensible [...] Everything he says seems perfectly plausible, but it's all one big *so what?* as far as I'm concerned" (38). Complex temporal possibilities can adumbrate even a single sentence; for example, when Wurtzel writes "by the time I go off to camp Seneca for my fifth and final time, everything is pandemonium" (71), both 'present' and past co-exist. She *is* 'going off', yet she, and her reader, know that this is the last time she will – a knowledge only available to a narrator reflecting after-the-event: both protagonist and writer are thus invoked here.

The impression of narrative disaggregation, then, is produced by the twin and related effects of inconsistent use of tense and the gradual collapse of the text's ordering schemas; and as the narrative progresses these two factors increasingly converge to heighten the sense of mounting chaos. For instance, the chapter entitled 'Good Morning Heartache' is largely narrated in the preterite, apart from the intercalated, italicised sections which contain reflective discourse in the present tense, until, towards the end, action also strays into the present. This is heralded by a concomitant breakdown in the typographical schema and the italicised reflective sections of text are increasingly invaded by narrations of events and speech. The first indication of this is when Wurtzel's flat mate, Samantha, attempts to rouse her from a depressive episode:

Samantha got me out of bed by insisting that the sun was shining on the living room and I would feel much better on the couch than in my dark room [...] And she pattered away like Pollyanna until I finally screamed: *Samantha, goddamnit, don't you see I'm desperate! What the fuck do I care how this will seem in ten years, or ten months. I'm going out of my mind right here, right now, and I don't think I can bear another minute.* (228-9)

The italics here might be read as intended simply for the purposes of emphasis, but this passage presages a series of narrations of events and speech set in the italics previously reserved for reflection. This initial fraying of the narrative weft is also significant, however, in that the subject matter of the italicised speech – Wurtzel's inability to project herself forward, establish perspective, and also her iteration of the subsuming moment – is reflected in the subsequent dehiscence of the narrative schema. Equally, the omission of speech marks suggests a breaking down of textual and narratological boundaries. An ambiguity shadows Wurtzel's cry: couched in the present, it is not cordoned off by signifiers which designate it a 'past' utterance. Rather, its italicization, its use of tense, links it with the preceding, reflective, lexia in which, while using the present, Wurtzel has posited a detached overview of her distress. It appears as if a refuge – where previously the inner voice had removed itself from the turbulence of event – has been infected, as it were, by immediacy. Therefore, just as the urgency of distress disallows the possibility of deferral or perspective, rendering the present stringent, so retrospective narration is imbricated by a sense of exigency.

Confirming the sense of narrative disaggregation, the body of the chapter, in which up to this point events have been narrated in the preterite, suddenly shifts into the present tense:

Samantha says something about understanding how I feel, but I'm barely listening because all I want to do is come up with a way to get blasted off this planet until the pain goes away. I want another trip to California. Or maybe I want a trip to Neptune. (229)

The effect connoted by such abrupt incursions is again of a breakdown in Wurtzel's narrative distancing from the event she relates. Linked with the urgent refrain borne on despair ("I want it *right now*" [229]) which appears here, but also imbricates the text throughout, the present, momentary, and contingent haunt the fringes of even such 'clearly' retrospective passages.

In addition, the unexpected incursions of present tense narration evokes that dysfunction in memory intrinsic to Wurtzel's illness, in which as she describes it: "my memories [...] are so solid and vivid [...] they are driving me crazy. My subconscious has not buried them, my superego has not restrained them. They are front and center, they are going on right now" (70-1). The continual disturbance of the preterite by the present narratively performs this threatening immediacy. Moreover, the effect does not only adhere to the historical past, but also intimates that in Wurtzel-as-author's act of narrative remembering, the force of memory still has the power to perturb consciousness and invade the moment of writing. The passage concerning Wurtzel's anguished flight to hospital from which I quoted earlier, hints at this, describing the act of remembering as an invasive counterpart of breakdown:

[M]y foundation is crumbling and shattered glass is falling all over the sidewalks, all over my feet. I am walking barefoot on broken glass in a very dark night. I am collapsing and I am collapsing on myself. I am shards of glass, and I am the person being wounded by the glass. I am killing myself. I am remembering when my father disappeared. I am remembering when Zachary and I broke up in ninth grade. I am remembering being a little child and crying when my mother left me at nursery school. I am crying so hard, gasping for breath, I am incoherent and I know it. (101-2)

The cry here of "*I am remembering*", evoking as it does both the protagonist's experience of memory as invasion, but also, inevitably, the 'present' remembering consciousness of the narrator/writer – who is remembering herself remembering – may leave the reader uncertain who is remembering, who is incoherent: is it Wurtzel-as-protagonist, Wurtzel-as-narrator, or both? Is this an event which has happened, or is it in some sense still happening at the moment of writing?

Enacted within the narrative fabric of *Prozac Nation*, then, is a consummation of the Dante-esque dread that revisiting the scenes of horror in memory will stir the 'old fear'. The anguished cry of "*I am remembering*", evoking as it does both the protagonist's experience of memory as invasion, but also, inevitably, the remembering consciousness of the narrator/writer, brings to mind not only Burroughs's description of his past as a "poisoned river", but also the more mannered tones of the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, one of Henry James's several narrators, who declares, "to me at least, making my statement here with a deliberation with which I have never made it, the whole feeling of the moment returns".³⁶ To narrate is, amongst other things, to remember; Wurtzel's lament that a symptom of depression is the fragmentation and overwhelming of consciousness by memory is played out even as she narrates this fact to her reader.³⁷

3.3 Subtle fiend: the hidden immediacies of *The Beast*

Tracy Thompson's memoir of depression and redemption through Prozac, *The Beast: A Journey Through Depression* tells a very similar story to Wurtzel's but in a markedly different style.³⁸ However, and surprisingly perhaps, there is also a sense in this text that a supposedly vanquished pain still wields the power to threaten. Superficially Thompson plots her story in a considered, ordered narrative style, with this re-ordering of disparate events into coherent *gestalten* strengthening the sense of a retrospection distanced from the events and feelings recorded. However, covert subtexts manifest a Dante-esque sense of immediacy which connote an unexpected congruence between aspects of her memoir and Wurtzel's.

³⁶ Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (London: Penguin, 1994 [1898]), p. 27. Lori Schiller describes how the "dredging up old memories" while she wrote her memoir of psychosis precipitated a "relapse" [Lori Schiller & Amanda Bennett, *The Quiet Room: A Journey out of the Torment of Madness* (New York: Warner, 1997), p. 268]; and Meri Nana-Ama Danquah has spoken of the way that "revisiting my past and putting it down on paper" involved "raw pain". *Willow Weep for Me: A Black Woman's Journey Through Depression* (New York: Ballantine, 1998), p. 275.

³⁷ Compare Greenspan's description of a Holocaust survival narrative: "Paula's burst of discrete images, all immediately present ("there are... there are... there are"), is characteristic of survivors' recounting in a state of rising extremity. At such times narrative unfolding stops, and instead of a plot's trajectory through foreground and background, we hear a staccato of snapshot images, each present and surrounding [...] [I]t is *as though* memories start to retell themselves at these times. Crowding in at a faster pace than the recounter can speak them, it is as though these memories each make their own claim and, together, start to *reclaim* the recounter". 'Lives as Texts', p. 149.

³⁸ Tracy Thompson, *The Beast: A Journey Through Depression* (New York: Plume, 1996). Subsequent quotations from this text are given in parentheses.

Notwithstanding Thompson's claim in her introduction that the book is a 'bulletin' sent back from the "exile" of mental illness (an exile into "a foreign territory of the mind" [13]) – a claim which might seem to posit immediacy and contact – *The Beast* does not set out to be a despatch from the 'frontline' of depression.³⁹ As with *Prozac Nation*, immediacy and threat are primarily encoded into the narrative fabric of this memoir, forming a kind of subversive subtext. However, there is a symbolic moment towards the end of the text, where, as with Wurtzel's "*I am remembering*", something of this subtext is perhaps inadvertently encapsulated. Thompson notes how, even after 'recovery', dreams of her former depression awake a dread that such symbolic representations of the now supposedly vanquished 'beast' may in some way revivify it:

the dreams always alarm me, because the feelings in them seems so real [sic]. I am superstitious, afraid that merely dreaming about them will release them, like an evil genie escaping from a bottle. Anyway, as far as my brain is concerned, which is the more real – these dream feelings or the present waking moment? (277)

Strikingly, Thompson's fear in this passage is echoed in *Prozac Nation* when Wurtzel describes a dream of nervous collapse and paralysis:

One night, I even dream that I am in bed, stuck, congealed to the sheets, as if I were an insect that was squashed onto the bottom of someone's shoe. I simply can't get out of bed. I am having a nervous breakdown and I can't move. [...] I am petrified in my dream and I am petrified in reality because it is as if my dream is reality and I am having a nervous breakdown and I have nowhere to turn. Nowhere. (2)

The most obvious instances of narrative immediacy or threat in *The Beast* are not present in the body of the text proper, but instead can be found in the extracts from Thompson's diaries which she intercalates into her telling. The urgency of the sentiments presented in these textual fragments, the sense that there is no perspective other than the experience of the present, is in stark contrast to the narrative style of the bulk of the text. However, although the diary extracts are narratively cordoned off from Thompson's story, marked as 'over', 'then' rather than now, with their anguish thus implied as contained and discrete, in the light of the more insidious encoding of immediacy which I shall detail shortly, their tone and themes, as with Thompson's dream, have a symbolic resonance. In addition, they imbricate the astute but distanced

³⁹ Thompson, perhaps rather surprisingly, asserts that it is only with the advent of drugs like Prozac that the exile has had the ability to couch her report "in clear, everyday language, told with coherence, sophistication and detail" (13).

overview of depression with a more anxious, less assured voice, as if, in Wurtzel's terms, the palimpsest of Thompson's experience of depression haunts or 'shows through' the more polished surfaces of the memoir.

The voice in the journal extracts is often panicky and uncertain, its narrative tone invoking a manifestation – rather than an account – of illness, recalling Wurtzel's determination to write a book "that felt as bad as it feels to feel *this* bad". Something of this is exemplified in the following extract, the last Thompson writes before leaving hospital:

FEBRUARY 21: I wish I felt steadier. I wish I knew how to change things about my life...I think what I fear the most is that I'll get out and things will quickly become just as fucked up as they were before. (205)

Here the present tense and the absence of narrative overview denotes the contemporaneity of this text. But in another entry Thompson intimates her frustration at the inadequacy even of writing coeval with events to communicate the realities of distress, and thereby exposes the even greater gap between the fragmentation of lived experience and the cohesion of her 'bulletin':

We are at the hospital. I say goodbye to Thomas and the kids and jump out, and suddenly I want to cry... How to convey the isolation caused by this disease, the sense I felt the other night of wasted years, wasted opportunities? (198)

In this passage there are echoes of Dante's narrator bemoaning the inadequacy of his medium ("For my demanding theme so pulls my story,/ To multiply the telling would be too little/ For the multitude of fact that filled my journey"⁴⁰). Elsewhere, again evoking Dante's narrative quest, as well as Wurtzel's ("I try to understand where I made a bad turn, how I stupidly meandered down the wrong road in the fork of life." [20]), Thompson describes how she began her diary writing in, and as, an attempt at comprehending her distress:

And so, very early, I began to try to understand.

I trace the beginnings of that endeavor back to a winter afternoon when I was fourteen, sitting in my bedroom in a suburb of Atlanta. In my lap was a blank green stenographer's pad; in my hand was a pen. I know the precise date, because it's recorded there in my careful schoolgirl penmanship: December 29, 1969. 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 depressions and to see if I can help myself that way ... It sounds horrible, and it is, but a couple of times I have thought how nice it would be to kill myself!!!" (5)

⁴⁰ Canto IV, ll. 130-2, *The Inferno*.

Intimated here is that, despite its polished tone, *The Beast* as memoir is a continuation of the textually based attempt “to understand” which Thompson began in her journal at the age of fourteen. It is implied as not simply being a history – that is, a recording of events which have already been assimilated and ordered – but rather, represents an ongoing process of ordering, an ‘event’, rather than a static entity, encompassing a narrative ‘embarkation’ predicated on a quest for understanding.

To some extent, this quest might be taken to have been successful in that, if understanding is embodied in the relative coherence of plot, then, as I have already observed, in many respects this is an ordered account of illness. Yet despite its style, *The Beast* does subtly evoke a sense of claustrophobic immediacy comparable to that which characterizes *Prozac Nation*. In particular, despite her ostensibly assured narrative voice, Thompson tells her story, particularly the story of an abusive relationship, with very few narrative overviews. Relating her involvement with Thomas, a man who at first appears kind but is soon revealed as a manipulating bully intent on convincing her that she is responsible for his anger and her own suffering, narration, as in *Prozac Nation*, proceeds as if the events are still happening, and as if Thompson is unaware of the story’s outcome. Because of this, it is unclear for much of the text whether Thompson-narrator has managed to extricate herself from the destructive mindset in which Thompson-protagonist blamed herself for the abuse; indeed, reading *The Beast* can feel at times like attending to the groundless self-blame of a frightened, bullied woman.

By the end of the book it becomes apparent that Thompson has accepted, to some extent at least, that she is not responsible for Thomas’s malicious and manipulative behaviour. However, the predominant motif of *The Beast* is the claustrophobic sense of being caged in a suffering and oppressed consciousness which characterizes much of the story. The overall effect is that, as with *Prozac Nation*, *The Beast* occupies an uncertain narrative ground, with narration insinuated as not entirely distanced from the protagonist’s experience of distress.

The claustrophobic immediacy of *The Beast* is such that any hints of retrospection, or narrative distancing, stand out because of their relative scarcity. One such rare moment occurs when Thompson describes the beginning of her relationship with Thomas. Here romance is tempered by the narrator’s awareness of what will transpire:

He was in love with me; he told me so. It was almost frightening, this intensity of feeling – so different, he told me, from any love he had known before. He felt lost in it, intoxicated, disoriented. And so was I. For *despite what was to follow*, at the beginning I was intensely in love. (116: my emphasis)

In contrast, as “what was to follow” is subsequently narrated, narrative overviews are largely eschewed. An impression is created that, in revisiting the story of her depression and abuse, Thompson’s objective judgement and her overview of her own story are overwhelmed by the content of memory; and the frustration for readers is that what is plain to them, is apparently lost on *both* protagonist and narrator. Narration, that is, seems to retread the same unenlightened and painful road that the protagonist has already travelled. In the same way that Thompson’s relationship with Thomas rapidly deteriorates as he undermines her fragile self-esteem, so this attritional process is effectively re-enacted within the text: as the narrative of the relationship re-enters the dark spaces of her suffering, so her capacity as a narrator to detach herself from its effect is attenuated.

This formal sub-text – the immersion of the narratorial consciousness in the ‘old fear’ – chimes with the insistent theme in the memoir of depression’s invasive power. I have already quoted Thompson’s fear of dream-memory (“the dreams always alarm me, because the feelings in them seems so real”), but a similar sense of dread is intercalated throughout the text. Thus, and in opposition to the ostensibly conservative schema of *The Beast*, ‘reality’ is not denoted here a set of discrete specifics but, rather, hinting at the way in which narrated history appears to affect present narration, it is invoked as mutable, organic, and transgressive of limits: “facts have no boundaries; they unfolded like paper accordions in my head, offering vistas of a catastrophic future” (42). Recalling Lauren Slater’s assertion that “the facts, the facts, they probe at me like the problem they are” (*Spasm* 10), Thompson’s statement is a curiously apposite description of the way in which the ‘facts’ of her abuse appear to overstep their historical ‘boundaries’, reverberating and reproducing themselves within the narrating consciousness.

A final example in which the textual content appears to address inadvertently its own narrative subtext is when Thompson writes, towards the end of the book, on the remembrance of pain. Consonant with aspects of *Prozac Nation*, she denotes remembering not as a sterile archaeology of dead artefacts but a re-encounter with anguish:

Memory is a form of pain; even recollections of happiness contain particles of grief, which we call nostalgia [...] Mental pain is remembered in the way dreams are remembered – in fragments, unbidden realizations, like looking into a well and seeing the dim reflection of your face in that instant before the water shatters. (248-9)

In *The Beast* memory does indeed often appear to be painful or uncomfortable, overtaken, as it were, by the force of its own momentum; moreover, the eidetic force conjured by the phrase “unbidden realizations” is apt to sum up the way in which what is supposedly ‘past’ appears to become present again, both in this text and in *Prozac Nation*. In passages such as this the text seems to demonstrate a subliminal intuition that narrator and protagonist are not immiscible entities; that, within the synaptic mazes of recollection and ipseity, they merge and blur. One might even infer that Thompson chooses a controlled mannered style precisely in an attempt to keep the force of memory at bay, but that, despite this, the form of her memoir is insidiously and inevitably shaped by the subversive power of recall – as if the irresistible gravitational pull of a huge mass pulls her narrative into its sway.

3.4 *Prozac Nation*: The end of narration

Wurtzel is not under any illusions about the effectiveness of chemical intervention in her despair: “Prozac”, she writes, “is not the end but the beginning” (304). Yet, in terms of her narrative, Prozac *is*, more or less, the end: *Prozac Nation* is not about life on Prozac, largely it describes Wurtzel’s journey through depression before being prescribed this drug. Her discovery that this new pharmaceutical is alleviating her symptoms occurs right at the end of the text – 2 pages before the epilogue – with the connotation that ‘cure’ ends the need to narrate this particular story. And, matching her declaration that “something just kind of changed in me” (292), so too the narrative style suddenly alters: a threshold is crossed – with narration now set within clear temporal parameters and ambivalence dissipating.

And then something just kind of changed in me. Over the next few days, I became all right, safe in my own skin. It happened just like that. One morning I woke up, and I really did want to live, really looked forward to greeting the day, imagined errands to run, phone calls to return, and it was not with a feeling of great dread, not with the sense that the first person who stepped on my toe as I walked through the square may well have driven me to suicide. It was as if the miasma of depression had lifted off me, gone smoothly about its business, in the same way that the fog in San Francisco rises as the day wears on. Was it the Prozac? No doubt. Was it the cathartic nature of going through a suicide

attempt? Probably. Just as I always said that I went down gradually and then suddenly, I also got up that way. All the therapy, all the traveling, all the sleeping, all the drugs, all the crying, all the missed classes, all the lost time – all of that was part of some slow recovery process that came to the end of its tether at the same time that I reached mine. (292)

In contrast to the opening of the text, where the reader is left unclear as to whether the terse present tense narration is simply a literary device or a denotation via the Present Perfect Progressive that distress is ongoing, here Wurtzel makes clear the differentiation between past and present. Her declaration that “It took a long time for me to get used to my contentedness” (292) implies both a (past) process and its (present) completion. Narrative then switches to an unambiguous Present Perfect Progressive when she admits that “On Prozac, I often walk around so conscious of how not-terrible I feel that I am petrified I’m going to lose this new equilibrium” (292). Here Wurtzel acknowledges ongoing vulnerability, but this is spoken from a narratological position more distanced from the immediacy of emotion exemplified in earlier despairing pronouncements. This new sense of relative safety and distance is made explicit when, within this same narrative overview, she describes her ability to put things into a formerly elusive perspective:

Any time I am bothered about anything, whether it’s a line too long at the bank or a man who doesn’t return my love, I have to remind myself that these emotional experiences [...] are reasonable and discrete unto themselves. They don’t have to precipitate a depressive episode. (292-3)

In the two final pages that succeed the description of cure, and in which narration returns to orthodoxy, Wurtzel as narrator moves easily between past, present, and anticipated future, with an assurance which implies a groundedness in her position. The sense here is, in Freudian terms, of a measure of ‘working through’ having been accomplished. Dominick LaCapra’s description of this process in the context of traumatic experience is also an apt summary of the reworked identity that emerges at the close of Wurtzel’s memoir: “to the extent one works through trauma [...] one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one’s people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future”.⁴¹ Wurtzel’s new found control over the temporal is summarized in a passage which describes the new pragmatism and perspective in her

⁴¹ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 22. See Freud, ‘Remembering, repeating, and working through’.

outlook, and in which a realistic grasp of possibility, the discrete nature of the past, and the actuality of the present are balanced:

I will never not be on guard for depression, but the constancy, the obsessive and totalizing effect of that disease, the sense that life is something happening to other people I am watching through an opaque cloud, is gone.

The black wave, for the most part, is gone.

On a good day, I don't even think about it anymore. (293)

The relative psychological equanimity invoked in this quotation is also evident when Wurtzel goes on to describe the sense of relief concomitant with her liberation from the pull of extremes, and how she has rediscovered the joy of the commonplace.

In-between. There's a phrase that is far too underappreciated. What a great day it was, what a moment of pure triumph, to have discovered that there are in-betweens. What freedom it is to live in a spectral world that most people take for granted. Being somewhere in the middle is anathema in our culture, it connotes mediocrity, middlingness, an item that is so-so, okay, not bad, not good, not much of anything. So many people feel a need to go bungee jumping or to take vacations in Third World countries full of scorpions and armed dictators. So many people spend so much time in adventures meant only to take them out of that boring middle range, that placid emotional state where it feels, no doubt, like nothing ever happens. But me, all I want is that nice even keel. All I want is a life where the extremes are in check, where I am in check.

All I want is to live in between. (293)

One might conjecture, in the light of the equanimous temporal logic of this end section, plus those of the Epilogue and Afterword, that the 'in-between' of recovery is also a resting in the 'present', a salutary situating of subjectivity which is bound to and dependent on memory and anticipation, but not overwhelmed by these temporal dimensions. Indeed Wurtzel's 'in-betweenness' seems broadly consonant with the notion I have already proposed concerning the 'decussate' nature of the (narrative) self: that is, as a point of intersection or a crossing where disparate narrative temporalities converge. At the end of *Prozac Nation* there is a post facto bare hint that the impetus motivating Wurtzel's narration was the production of such a more propitious being-state,⁴² but whether this is a tenable interpretation or not, the 'in-between' or sense of 'presentness' of selfhood, is, I think, indelibly marked with narratological connotations. I have already cited Kerby's observations concerning the position of the narrative self in relation to an interlocked set of temporalities, and Martin McQuillan comes to a similar conclusion when he notes that narrative is able to

⁴² "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." (318)

provide a means by which the subject can construct a present as a distinct ontological region of reality [...] Once an imaginary horizon has been set within the narrative-matrix, the subject is then able to position itself within a teleologically determined past, present and future.⁴³

In the Afterword, Wurtzel elaborates on the in-between, asserting that happiness is dependent on a measure of subjective coherence, in contrast to the chronic disaggregation and invasion which have characterized her experiences in sickness. But she also, for the first time in the memoir, considers the political and social dimensions in which her depression has been incubated, and indicts consumerism and the rootlessness of modern American civilization as inimical to mental health.

But happiness is a difficult thing – as an activity, it is, as Aristotle posited in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, about good social behavior, about being a solid citizen. Happiness is about community, intimacy, relationships, rootedness, closeness, family, stability, a sense of place, a feeling of love. And in this country, where people move from state to state and city to city so much, where rootlessness is almost a virtue ("anywhere I hang my hat ... is someone else's home"), where family units regularly implode and leave behind the fragments of divorce, where the long loneliness of life finds its antidote not in a hardy, ancient culture (as it would in Europe), not in some blood-deep tribal rites (as it would in the few still-hale Third World nations) but in our vast repository of pop culture, of consumer goods, of cotton candy for all – in this America, happiness is hard. I don't feel that I'm in any position to make sweeping generalizations about what's wrong with this country, but at least from the small perspective that I've been able to look through in the past year it almost appears as if, around here, everybody wants their MTV, everybody's got their MTV, and everybody's also got a million other things, lots of other stuff my God, even kids who live in low-income housing projects can somehow piece together the cash to get their Air Jordans and their VCRs – but happiness just isn't about stuff. (318)

The stability, the rootedness, that Wurtzel writes of here is demonstrated not only in the ordered, considered, narrative style, but also by the very fact of there being an Afterword. Together with the Epilogue, these sections are themselves embodiments of 'perspective' and stability, in which Wurtzel widens her ambit, firstly to reflect on the 'Prozac nation', and then to consider her story and its effect a year after its first publication. In these overviews and synopses – of the sort that are so markedly absent from the body of her memoir – she removes herself from the former fray of memory to look both at her own story and beyond it to the wider political and cultural ramifications of depression. Indeed, along with Marta Caminero-Santangelo, whose work I discussed in the introduction and will return to in later chapters, I would contend

⁴³ Martin McQuillan, 'Aporias of Writing: Narrative and Subjectivity', in *The Narrative Reader*, ed. by Martin McQuillan (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 20.

that it is only from a narrative position of in-betweenness that such an engagement with culture is feasible.⁴⁴

However, despite this conclusive finale there is no sense in which meaning is conferred, retrospectively, on the text from the vantage point of the ending.⁴⁵ It is surely significant that the cohesive overviews are sectioned off from the body of the text as addenda, for the narrative of depression's turmoil remains curiously unaffected by their summaries. To use Brooks's terminology, if readers have been 'anticipating retrospection', expecting a sense of plot to emerge, or for loose ends to be tied up, then they will be disappointed. For while Wurtzel's new perspective enables her to reflect on the wider cultural significance of mental illness, she posits no resolution or meaning to depression. Indeed, in a concluding passage shot through with ambivalence which follows a long excursus on the suicide of Kurt Cobain, lead singer of the rock group Nirvana, she is only able to assert the solitariness of experience; connoted here is the dignity of the singular life but also its isolation, with survival insinuated as predicated on little more than chance:

But once someone is a clinical case, once someone is in a hospital bed or in a stretcher headed for the morgue, his story is absolutely and completely his own. Every person who has experienced a severe depression has his own sad, awful tale to tell, his own mess to live through. Sadly, Kurt Cobain will never get that far. Every day, I thank God that I did. (311)

⁴⁴ On the idea that only with some sort of 'cure' can the sufferer be released to engage with the wider political realm, see Caminero-Santangelo's, *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or, Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 37. Writing of Hannah Green's *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden*, an 'autobiographical novel' about schizophrenia, Caminero-Santangelo notes that "Freedom is, in this novel, not freedom from confining asylum walls or from the social stigma of being crazy (though the narrative acknowledges both), but freedom from a 'madness' that prevents one from challenging the larger 'madness' of the world". She also mentions Richard Ohmann's contention that the proliferation of illness narratives in America between 1960-75 displaced "social contradictions [...] into images of personal illness", and that such accounts were, therefore, fundamentally apolitical. My own response to Ohmann would be that an effect/affect of 'madness' can be the radical dislocation of the sufferer from his or her cultural and political milieu – as exemplified in the narrative structure and content of *Prozac Nation*. Richard Ohmann, 'The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-75', *Critical Inquiry* 10.1 (1983), p. 212, quoted in *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, p. 20.

⁴⁵ In its form, *Prozac Nation* seems to enact Caminero-Santangelo's observation that "those authors who write autobiographically of [...] madness make sharp distinctions between moments of madness and of meaning-making in their lives" (*The Madwoman Can't Speak*, p. 11). There is literally a 'sharp distinction' between the body and the conclusion of Wurtzel's text.

3.5 Conclusion: fragile bitch

As a self-interpreting being, I am able to reflect on my history and in this sense distance myself from it, but the distance is always precarious and provisional.

Michael Sandel⁴⁶

In conclusion, I want to pick up on the rather gloomy insinuations in Wurtzel's discussion of Cobain's depression in which, reading her own life through his death, she is unable to reach any understanding of recovery other than attributing it to the chemical efficacy of Prozac. *Prozac Nation*, she adds in her Afterword, is "a memoir with no particular thesis or point" (315). But although she does not highlight them, there are clues present in this text which suggest that, in addition to pharmacological intervention, her 'recovery' of a sense of narrative selfhood is catalyzed by other factors. Before doing this, however, I will first briefly reflect on the character of the depressed 'Elizabeth Wurtzel' as narratively constructed in the pages of *Prozac Nation*. I do this in part because so many interpretations of this now iconic text have, in my view, completely misread the depressive (narrative) identity portrayed here.

The most virulent misreadings of *Prozac Nation* occur in the many hostile reviews of the book, but even laudatory assessments repeat rather than challenge the assumptions which underpin such attacks. For instance, amongst the various celebratory review excerpts reproduced on the back of the British paperback edition of *Prozac Nation*, the one picked out in the largest font is from the *New York Times Book Review*; this baldly proclaims: "Sylvia Plath with the ego of Madonna". Paradoxically, this strap line succeeds in identifying a key narrative strategy in Wurtzel's writing while also misinterpreting it. I shall identify this strategy shortly, but should point out now that this supposedly admiring assessment plays on a view of Wurtzel and her text widely disseminated in hostile reviews – as self-obsessed, unbearably narcissistic. Here a negative judgement is simply inverted into a laudatory one.

Examples of the unsympathetic reviews received by *Prozac Nation* include this particularly vituperative appraisal from Scott Stossel:

Prozac Nation was a bad book: it was readable only because it was impossible to stop watching such self-indulgence, such an overbearing ego on voluntary public display. While I have no doubt that Wurtzel sincerely meant to convey the depth of her pain, what came across was only the arrogant preening of a world-class bitch.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and its Critics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 172.

⁴⁷ Scott Stossel, 'Bargaining with Prozac', *The Boston Phoenix* (21st September, 1998).

While other reviewers have not sunk to quite the same depths as Stossel, their tone often recalls his invective. Here, for instance, is an assessment from the *Socialist Review*:

Despite the attention and money which she has lavished on her she remains miserable. As a middle class college student and wannabe music journalist, Elizabeth would appear to have everything to be optimistic about but she is unable to rid herself of her depression. [...] It is not surprising to learn that Elizabeth Wurtzel is a music journalist. The book reads at times like a screwed up rock musician's egotistical ramblings and is peppered with references to bands she reviewed and musicians she got off with. Part of Elizabeth's problems surely stem from the fact that she actually quite likes this angst ridden persona of hers.⁴⁸

Another similar critique is made by Laura Miller who writes of Wurtzel's "surly, adolescent sarcasm", which is "intended to disguise the underlying melodrama of the whole enterprise", and designates her as "infuriating [...] an incorrigible exhibitionist".⁴⁹ Echoing Miller, Karen Schoemer calls *Prozac Nation* "the self-absorbed rantings of an adolescent", "rife with hyperbole", and "devoid of context", and concludes that:

Elizabeth Wurtzel's depression is of such mammoth proportions, she might as well be famous for it. Or at least that's what she seems to think. "I'm starting to wonder if I might not be one of those people like Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath," she writes in the prologue [...] "I might as well be Elizabeth Taylor in Cleopatra," she says on the following page. And later: "I felt like Audrey Hepburn [...]"⁵⁰

The common charge in these reviews is that Wurtzel possesses an over-inflated view of her own importance, and that her rendition of her experience of depression is self-indulgent and 'egotistical'.⁵¹ Wurtzel addresses the theme herself in the Afterword when she notes the reactions she encountered on book signing tours to promote her memoir, and characterizes a typical interrogation thus:

What on earth makes a woman in her mid-twenties, thus far of no particularly outstanding accomplishment, have the audacity to write a three-hundred-page volume about her own life and nothing more, as if anyone else would actually give a shit? (315)

⁴⁸ Judith Lyons, 'What the doctor ordered', *Socialist Review*, 189 (September 1995)
<<http://website.lineone.net/~socrev3text/pubs/sr189/books.htm#lyons>> [November 13th 2001].

⁴⁹ Laura Miller, 'My Syndrome, Myself', *Salon* (June, 1998)
<http://www.salon.com/books/feature/1998/06/cov_24feature.html> [November 13th 2001].

⁵⁰ *Newsweek*, August 29, 1994.

⁵¹ Intriguingly these criticisms almost exactly conform to the characteristics of the self-loathing Freud designates as typical of the depressive. He avers that the melancholic, "in his heightened self-criticism [...] describes himself as petty, egoistic, dishonest, lacking in independence, one whose sole aim has been to hide the weaknesses of his own nature". 'Mourning and melancholia', p. 246.

The extraordinarily hostile criticism, and Stossel's in particular, that Wurtzel received for *Prozac Nation* may help explain her entitling her subsequent book *Bitch* – and her pose for the cover photo 'giving the finger' (to her critics?).⁵² Yet, while one must obviously challenge the implicit assumption in the reviews I have quoted that a strong female voice speaking about her self is, ipso facto, arrogant, or, in Stossel's terms, a 'bitch' (such a questioning might begin by considering Ann Oakley's observation that "the starting point for women's studies" occurs when women "stumble on a point of rupture between the experience of being a woman and the forms in which experience is socially expressed"⁵³), it seems to me that the intrinsic problem with such assessments is that they are, simply, wrong.

The assessment "Sylvia Plath with the ego of Madonna" chimes with the way that Wurtzel herself repeatedly identifies in the pages of her text with famous iconic figures such as Plath, Anne Sexton and Elizabeth Taylor. This identificatory process is, of course, what Schoemer objects to so strongly. But this process is only part of a bigger picture in which, throughout the text, Wurtzel projects herself away from the locus of 'Elizabeth Wurtzel', not just into the personalities of iconic figures, who by virtue of their iconicity hover in a hinterland between fact and fiction, but also into popular songs, movies, novels. These displacements of the self – extraordinary because of their frequency and variety – can only be fully understood when read in conjunction with a repeated refrain in the text: Wurtzel's anguished insistence that 'she' has disappeared, that the self is either evanescent or has actually 'gone', and which in turn is intimately linked to her inability to structure or control her experience of temporality.

This felt absence at the heart of subjectivity is unequivocally linked by Wurtzel to depression, which, she writes,

involves a complete absence: absence of affect, absence of feeling, absence of response, absence of interest. The pain you feel in the course of a major clinical depression is an attempt on nature's part (nature, after all, abhors a vacuum) to

⁵² *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women* (London: Quartet, 1998). More opprobrium was heaped on Wurtzel for this cover – predicated largely on the fact that she is photographed topless (a shadow, however, hides her breasts). The spectre of a young woman choosing to reveal herself (both literally in the photo and metaphorically in the text) in an assertive or, for some, 'aggressive', pose was evidently too much to bear. Interestingly, that only a part of her body is visible suggests that she retains control over the degree of self-revelation – itself an assertive and significant act.

⁵³ Anne Oakley, *Essays on Women, Medicine and Health* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), p. 217. Oakley is here paraphrasing the sociologist Dorothy Smith, whose "central observation", in Oakley's words, is that "the starting point for all knowledge is personal everyday experience". See D. Smith, 'A sociology for women', in *The Prism of Sex: Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. by J. A. Sherman and E. T. Beck (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

fill up the empty space. But for all intents and purposes, the deeply depressed are just the walking, waking dead. (19)⁵⁴

Invocations of the liminal or empty self are, as I have said, commonplace in *Prozac Nation*, and the following quotations are only a selection.

I fade into abstraction [...] I'm already gone [...] my spirit seems to have already retreated to the netherworld. (42)

[T]heir kid is slipping away [...] I will drain them and drown them until they know how little there is of me left even after I've taken everything they've got to give me [...] I am unravelling in the slow, tedious manner of a knotted, tangled ball of yarn [...]. (45)

And I feel a numbness come over me [...] It is more like a deep freeze, in which the ice threatens to crack at any moment, but underneath there won't be any water, there won't be anything fluid at all, just more and more layers of ice and ice and ice – ice cubes and icebergs and ice floes and ice statues, where a girl used to be. (83)

At best, I can watch myself, sit alongside this vacant corpse of mine, and watch the roll of tears, but there is no sense of release because there's no one inside. I'm gone. Knock-knock? I've disappeared. (155)

I explain that the song is about a girl just like me who kills herself [...] about someone whose grip on life is so vague that to see her you have to look hard. (53)

This last quotation is particularly striking. Exemplifying Wurtzel's tenuous grip on a sense of selfhood and the way that, in order to visualize her self, she introjects cultural artefacts – here a song – it suggests that, even in order to express her sense of liminality, she must reach out to appropriate another representation. Paradoxically, there is so little 'within' her, that even narrating the fact of absence requires her to grasp an other image.

Seen in the light of this absence at the heart of subjectivity, Wurtzel's projections into other selves and stories appear less as presumptuous instances of hubris, and more as attempts to reconstruct some sense of selfhood through identification. By repeatedly re-imagining herself in a variety of identities and narratives, that is, she is reaching to externality for 'materials' with which to fashion a

⁵⁴ Compare Wurtzel's description with Allie Light's: "Depression is not about pain. Depression is about the absence of pain, the absence of feeling. Depression covers anxiety and fear like a fog. [...] *No feeling* is what depression is about, and the condition created a barrier between me and my children, my husband, my friends. Depression is not about pain: it's about everything gone away". Allie Light, 'Thorazine Shuffle', in *Out of Her Mind: Women Writing on Madness*, ed. by Rebecca Shannonhouse (New York: Random House, 2000), p. 174. Also Tracy Thompson: "Depression as I well knew, did not consist merely in feeling sad; it was often heralded by the absence of feeling". *The Beast*, p. 258.

subjectivity. The proliferations of selves which Wurtzel attempts to posit denote a self on the verge of annihilation trying to manifest substance: rather than exemplifying an “overbearing” or “monstrous” ego, the self of *Prozac Nation* is so diminished that it must obsessively tell itself in terms of others. The *New York Times*’s celebration of “Sylvia Plath with the ego of Madonna” adopts the same tactic Wurtzel uses, but misguidedly posits the supposed strength of her sense of selfhood, rather than its fragility. A close reading of *Prozac Nation* uncovers a self barely able to perceive itself at all.

The obsessive identificatory process in *Prozac Nation* calls to mind aspects of Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity, in which he argues that it is in part by means of imaginative projections into fictional identities that subjects construct a sense of selfhood. I discuss this notion in more detail in my opening chapter, but it is summarized in Ricoeur’s assertions that “it is the function of poetry in its narrative and dramatic form, to propose to the imagination and to its mediation various figures that constitute so many *thought experiments*”,⁵⁵ and that narratives represent horizons “of possible experience”, worlds “in which it would be possible to live”.⁵⁶ Given my reading of Wurtzel’s re-imagining of her identity, it seems plausible to link it to this facet of Ricoeur’s conception. However, a straightforward mapping of the theory onto the text does not do justice to the apparently obsessive and circular projections exemplified in *Prozac Nation*. What we seem to glimpse in this work is, to adapt Ricoeur, a series of ‘thought experiment’ failures, in which Wurtzel is unable to establish a successful identification, and, therefore, an identity. Or, in more Freudian terms, Wurtzel’s repeated projections may be in part attempts to ‘work through’ distress via “articulatory practice[s]”,⁵⁷ but the overall effect as mapped in the blocked subjectivity denoted in *Prozac Nation* is of the compulsive repetitions consonant with ‘acting out’. Indeed, what sometimes seems to occur in *Prozac Nation* is that identification is infected by energies akin to those which characterize Wurtzel’s dysfunctional relationship with remembering: the obsessive circularity of Wurtzel’s projections suggest a process careering out of control – which again evokes the notion that in melancholia a series of ‘feedback loops’ may obstruct imaginative and cognitive development. While confirming Ricoeur’s view of the centrality of identification to

⁵⁵ Paul Ricoeur, ‘Life in Quest of Narrative’, in *On Paul Ricoeur*, ed. by David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 23.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26

⁵⁷ See Freud, ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working-through’. The quotation is from LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 21.

identity, in that Wurtzel resorts to attempting this as if by an imperative ‘instinct’, *Prozac Nation* casts doubt on this process’s efficacy on its own to construct a narrative identity or to mitigate the radical disaggregation of identity inherent in the context of chronic psychological distress.

Rather, what seems to be implied via an epiphanic moment in Wurtzel’s text is that self-fashioning techniques, such as the identifications she attempts, need to be set within a context of dialogic narrative engagement, which itself is insinuated as being catalyzed by a loving encounter with an actual other. For, while Prozac may be instrumental in precipitating healing, the consummation of cure within the narrative of *Prozac Nation* follows an episode in which Wurtzel’s mother reflects back to her own suffering, thus validating not merely the fact of her depression but also Elizabeth’s own present presence – her substance as a self. In a curious echo of Slater’s experience, when Lauren’s mother speaks ‘reality’ – and selfhood – into being,⁵⁷ it is only after Wurtzel’s mother fully acknowledges the fact of Elizabeth’s illness when she tells her “You’re depressed. That’s a real problem. That’s not imaginary” (275) that the self and its suffering are experienced as real: “And it’s strange, but when she said those words to me, when she said, *You’re depressed*, it became a reality for me for the first time in a long, long time” (275). Thus, while Elizabeth has experienced depression as that which displaces her from a coherent sense of her own present selfhood, she is restored to an awareness of selfhood by grasping that melancholy’s enervating effects *are* her present reality, which in turn releases her into the possibility of cure.

This epiphany heralds and issues in the moment of cure when Wurtzel “became all right, safe in my own skin” (292). The implications of this are profound. It is not through the ‘stories’ Elizabeth has told herself, or projected herself into, that recovery is manifest, but rather through a ‘narrative’ told to her by a beloved other: her mother’s “You’re depressed”. The reason for the significance and efficacy of this particular narrative is twofold. Firstly, it originates ‘outside’ the fractured psyche trapped in the circularity of acting out; and, more specifically, it is voiced by a trusted intimate. The same story has been told to Elizabeth before, yet such tellings have not attenuated her self-blame, her feeling that, “Really if I wanted to, I could snap out of this” (276). No matter how authoritative the source of the diagnostic narrative, Wurtzel implies that the ability of story to mollify her self-loathing emerges from the bond of affection:

⁵⁷ “She said *exactly* and the angles came back, as though her words determined the truth and not the other way around, the way it should be: something solid”. Lauren Slater, *Spasm: A Memoir with Lies* (London: Methuen, 2000), p. 8.

[A]ll the tenured faculty at Harvard Medical school could get together and tell me in their collective opinion that I had a real live chronic illness on my hands, and none of it would have meant as much as my mother telling me. (276)

The second reason her mother's narrative is efficacious is because Elizabeth perceives it as congruent with her felt experience, and, moreover, she senses that this is a feasible, 'comfortable' story for her to live by. In contrast, her mother's previous 'narratives' have been experienced as dissonant. Thus she notes that her mother had previously "never talked about anything that was wrong with me without qualifying it with a bunch of remarks about all the terrible things my father did to me and how he had ruined me and it was all his fault" (275). While one might suggest that this rejected narrative may objectively encompass a valid indictment of Elizabeth's upbringing, the argument here is not about the aetiology of depression. The crucial point is that these other stories have not been accepted by Elizabeth herself as adequate to explain the facts of her suffering.

R.D. Laing's assertion that "*the sense of identity requires the existence of another by whom one is known*; and a conjunction of this other person's recognition of one's self with self-recognition" may well be apposite in this context.⁵⁸ In addition, the mirroring effect of Wurtzel's mother's narrative calls to mind the "mirror-role" as outlined by D. W. Winnicott, by which the child contemplates the mother's face and sees itself. This is so, because in the loving gaze, "*what [the mother] looks like is related to what she sees*".⁵⁹ Moreover, for Winnicott, a successful individuation "depends on [the child] being seen"⁶⁰ in this specific and loving context. Just as Winnicottian psychotherapy, envisaged as an extension of this process ("a complex derivative of the face that reflects what is there to be seen"), does not depend on "clever

⁵⁸ *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969 [1959]), p. 139 (original emphasis). More recently, Peter Hobson, Professor of Developmental Psychopathology at the Tavistock Clinic and the University of London, has written about the centrality of the 'other' in cognitive development in his *The Cradle of Thought* (London: Macmillan, 2002). Hobson contends that the very ability to think is triggered by interactions with others in the earliest stages of life (even within the first hour after birth), and that without such relationships cognitive development can be severely delimited. Further, the very *meaning* of objects and the world develops from our relationship to others in a process of interpersonal negotiation. See also Habermas: "The dialogical encounter with the addressed other, whose response eludes one's control, first opens to the individual the intersubjective space or his or her authentic selfhood". 'Communicative Freedom and Negative Theology', *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, eds. Martin J. Matustik & Merold Westphal (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995): p. 182.

⁵⁹ D. W. Winnicott, 'Mirror-role of mother and family in child development', in *Identity: A Reader*, ed. by Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans and Peter Redman (London: Sage, 2000), p. 145. This chapter was originally published in Winnicott's *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 130-8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 147.

and apt interpretations” but on “giving the patient back what the patient brings”,⁶¹ so when Wurtzel’s mother tells her “You’re depressed” she effectively reflects Elizabeth back to herself. But this particular ‘giving back’ is also inflected with connotations of a more primal significance, in that it comes not from a therapist but from the mother.

Thus, in her mother’s words Elizabeth sees herself; and by validating her experience of depression, her mother effectively donates a story for her to live by and imagine herself through. I have already noted Wurtzel’s post-cure vulnerability, so I do not wish to claim that the compulsive repetitions and uncertainties of melancholia are in this manner somehow fully transcended, but nevertheless this ‘gift’ of a narrative appears to enable Wurtzel in turn to begin to create some sense of a temporally ordered and ‘present’ subjective space which she had previously lacked. As she puts it herself, she is released into an ‘in-between’. In-betweenness, and Wurtzel’s reformulation of her identity are themselves bound up with the making of narratives, as exemplified in the post-cure sections of the text. Here story builds on story: from accepting that she is “depressed”, Wurtzel goes on to construct a world-view, and attempts to make sense not only of her self and her illness, but also of her family and her culture. In the interpretation I advance here, then, this post-cure ability to fashion story and Wurtzel’s more equanimous in-between sense of identity emerges from, and is dependent on, the possession of a ‘foundational’ story to inhabit. Intriguingly, and to immediately undermine any metaphysical connotations, it is through inhabiting the foundational story of her depression that Wurtzel is then able to leave it behind: to move, that is, towards another story – of *not* being “depressed”. To borrow from Judith Butler, the foundational narrative is also ‘contingent’.⁶²

Narrative identity in *Prozac Nation* thus appears akin to an ongoing process or consecution whereby the story of the self may move beyond (and negate) its own implications. Thus, what is common – ‘identical’ – is not the narrative content, but rather, simply, the fact of narrative. In order to catalyze this process into action an initial ‘foundational’ story must be adopted; and while this originary narrative may be jettisoned or eroded by subsequent retellings of the self, for this to happen in a non-compulsive manner, and if the initial story is produce a salutary effect, it cannot assume

⁶¹ Ibid, pp. 148-9.

⁶² See Butler’s ‘Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism’, in Seyla Benhabib; Judith Butler; Drucilla Cornell; Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 35-57.

any random form. Rather, what is insinuated in *Prozac Nation* is that in order to comfortably live within or through a story it must be perceived as sympathetic.

After this confirmation of the self via her mother's words, Wurtzel's healing is briefly mapped as a movement toward the possibility of various 'dialogues'. These include her engagement with, as opposed to swamping by, her own culture (demonstrated in her analysis of the U.S. as a 'Prozac nation'), and her contact with a community of readers. Thus, while the sense of stability manifest at the end of *Prozac Nation* emerges from Wurtzel's ability to separate the present self from the incursions of memory and anticipation in the context of a sympathetic narrative, this 'separation' is by no means a solipsistic retreat into a complacent inwardness. Rather, it is implied as facilitating an engagement with wider social and political milieus.

Yet, although this outward facing stance at the close of *Prozac Nation* is undoubtedly highly significant, the implications of Wurtzel's graphic depiction of the depressed identity and subsequent recovery are that 'dialogue' also encompasses an intra-, as well as an inter-, subjective 'conversation'. Indeed, as I have already suggested, intra-subjective dialogue seems to be a prerequisite of effective subsequent engagements. Mary Watkins, writing on dialogism and the self, contends that "for authentic dialogue to occur [one must] be able to maintain one's own voice amid the fray of relationship",⁶⁴ and insists that intrapsychic voices and feelings are included in any definition of the 'other' encountered in true dialogue. Fragmentation (of self) or total merger (with the other) (both of which evoke aspects of *Prozac Nation*), Watkins suggests, are inimical to authentic communion. Rather, dialogical space, that is the space in which dialogue may occur, is only available when "the ego's point of view" is not "swamped by the voice of the other".⁶⁵ In Wurtzel's narrative of her illness the autobiographical 'ego' is indeed 'swamped by the voice of the other', and the 'other' here invariably consists of inner voices – 'voices' which often take the form of revived memories or anticipated futures.

The 'in-between' of narrative selfhood which Wurtzel describes post-'cure' also resembles a 'dialogical space', not only because it facilitates her engagement with culture and her readership, but also in that she continues to consider the history of her illness, and still notes her *ongoing* vulnerabilities and uncertainties. This preparedness

⁶⁴ Mary Watkins, 'Pathways between the Multiplicities of the Psyche and Culture: The Development of Dialogical Capacities', in *The Plural Self: Multiplicity in Everyday Life*, ed. by Mick Cooper and John Rowan (London: Sage, 1999), p. 259.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 259.

to engage with vulnerability (as opposed to a stubborn refusal to countenance weakness) suggests a dialogue with the otherness of selfhood; it also evokes a propitious sense of narrative identity as a ‘conversational’, or at least an open, mode of being, in which negotiations between different aspects of the temporally situated self – in addition to its environs and culture – are feasible. We must, I think, read Wurtzel’s post facto invocation of writing as a gesture towards an other with which I began this chapter in the light of this more complete understanding of (narrative) identity. When she postulates that her motive for writing *Prozac Nation* has been a desire “to feel less lonely in this lonely feeling, wanting to shed depression’s thick, tender, suffocating skin” (318), loneliness does not solely represent here the separation from culture and others, but also encompasses the subjective sense of absence Wurtzel so extensively details in her memoir. She is lonely in part, that is to say, because in the “emotional diaspora” (285) of depression there has been no self to keep ‘her’ ‘company’.

4. “An abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief”: Speaking Madness, Metaphorically¹

The requirement [...] is for the text to testify to the madness of the day by simultaneously supplying a narrative and doing justice to what escapes narrative.²
Leslie Hill

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I draw together and advance arguments I have begun to outline in my discussions of Slater’s and Wurtzel’s memoirs. Under the general rubric of ‘metaphoricity’, or, more accurately, literary, figurative means of signification, I consider how madness, and the ‘mad’ self, might be ‘made present’ within narrative. The first memoir I discuss, Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl Interrupted*, parallels *Spasm* in its literary approach, but here this is a strategy specifically aimed at countering the positivism of psychiatry, offsetting the simplicities of the diagnostic narrative against an elliptical, quirky narrative style. In contrast, Ross Burke’s *The Truth Effect* attempts to refract suffering through the lens of ‘literature’ and thereby nullify it. As we shall see, this strategy fails, but in that failure something of the self behind the text is perceptible. Burke’s attempt at fictionalizing the self recalls Wurtzel’s repeated and ultimately ineffectual projections into a fictional elsewhere; in addition, also as in *Prozac Nation*, we again witness the irruptions of distress within the moment of telling – but here the outcome is far less optimistic than the equanimous narrative selfhood insinuated at the close of Wurtzel’s text.

I begin by outlining further a problematic I discussed in the first chapter: the difficulties intrinsic to the representation of madness within a narrative form. It is these difficulties which render the positivistic certainties of psychiatry untenable and inimical for many autopathographers, in that the story of the self presented in the reasoned medical narrative cannot, by definition, account for the experience of ‘unreason’.

4.2.1 How to speak of madness?

Many autopathographers have written of the difficulties inherent in expressing the experience of madness. In the last chapter, for instance, I noted how Tracy Thompson

¹ The quotation in the chapter title is from Julia Kristeva’s *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. by Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 3.

² Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 101.

includes in her memoir an excerpt from her hospital diary which records the impossibility of communicating her suffering: “How to convey the isolation caused by this disease, the sense I felt the other night of wasted years, wasted opportunities?”.³ Others who have expressed similar sentiments include Daniel Schreber: “I cannot of course count upon being *fully* understood because things are dealt with that cannot be expressed in human language; they exceed human understanding [...] To make myself [...] comprehensible I shall have to speak much in images and similes”;⁴ Andrew Solomon: “[depression] can be described only in metaphor and allegory”;⁵ Lauren Slater, who writes of “subtleties and horrors and gaps in my past for which I have never been able to find the words”;⁶ Sarah Ferguson (quoting Pasternak): “what is laid down, ordered, factual, is never enough to embrace the whole truth”;⁷ Ross Burke: “The truth cannot be expressed. It is the land of the id”;⁸ Lewis Wolpert: “Severe depression borders on being beyond description [...] It deserves some new and special word of its own”;⁹ and William Styron: “Depression is an order of mood, so painful and elusive in the way it becomes known to the self – to the mediating intellect – as to verge close to being beyond description [...] the horror of depression is so overwhelming as to be quite beyond expression”.¹⁰

While one might conceivably argue that such sentiments represent instances of a version of the rhetorical device of *recusatio*,¹¹ and that, in the light of the context in which they appear, that is, within memoirs of madness, exemplify only the topos of literary self-deprecation – confidently demonstrating literary ability in the very act of denying it – I want to suggest that, given their subject matter, such declarations merit more serious consideration. For it is, arguably, an a priori proposition that to describe or express faithfully the manifestations of madness within a discourse governed by reason will be an undertaking fraught with difficulty. After all, madness – as

³ Tracy Thompson, *The Beast: A Journey Through Depression* (New York: Plume, 1996), p. 198.

⁴ Daniel Paul Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, trans. & ed. by Ida Macalpine and Richard Hunter (London: Wm. Dawson, 1955), p. 41.

⁵ Andrew Solomon, *The Noonday Demon: An Anatomy of Depression* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 16.

⁶ Lauren Slater, *Spasm: A Memoir with Lies* (London: Methuen, 2000), pp 219-20.

⁷ Sarah Ferguson, *A Guard Within* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p. 19.

⁸ Ross David Burke, *When the Music's Over: My Journey into Schizophrenia*, ed. by Richard Gates and Robin Hammond (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p.193.

⁹ Lewis Wolpert, *Malignant Sadness: The Anatomy of Depression* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p.1

¹⁰ William Styron, *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (London: Picador, 1992), pp. 7 & 83.

¹¹ A rhetorical device in which a poet declines to write a certain type of poem or treat a particular theme in his poetry because, ostensibly, he lacks the necessary skill: a conviction of superiority usually lurks beneath these displays of mock-modesty. See for instance, Joan G. Haahr's essay 'Justifying Love: The Classical Recusatio in Medieval Love Literature', in *Desiring Discourse: The Literature of Love, Ovid through Chaucer*, ed. by James J. Paxson and Cynthia A. Gravlee (Cranbury: Associated University Press, 1998), pp. 44-61.

'unreason', or the other of reason – is defined, one might say constructed, by its very *difference* from reason, and also, to some extent at least, by its variance from the readable forms of narrative; it is, and I am obviously generalizing here, characterized by, variously, fragmentation, amorphousness, entropy, chaos, silence, senselessness. Inhabiting the sufferer's mind is not the singular internal voice of thought – a voice which might be compared to a narrator's accent imposing coherence on the disparate fragments of 'story'; on the contrary, consciousness is filled with wreckage, dispersion, obsessional repetition, or, inversely, characterized by stasis, aphony, catatonia: a powerlessness inimical to the willed production of meaning that is the narration of one's story.

The psychoanalyst and linguist Julia Kristeva addresses some of these issues in her book *Black Sun* – a meditation on depression and melancholia and their relationship to art and literature. She contends there that chronic depression is characterized by a "glaring and inescapable" "lack of meaning [...] compelling me to silence".¹² "For the speaking being", she goes on, "life is a meaningful life",¹³ but without the cogency of 'speech', however, meaning is lost: melancholics are "mute and steadfast devotees of their own inexpressible container [...] unbelieving in language".¹⁴ The depressed person "appears to stop cognizing as well as uttering, sinking into the blankness of asymbolia or the excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos".¹⁵ In Kristeva's analysis, then, the narrative rendition of melancholia is beset by what might first appear to be insuperable difficulties: madness is characterized either by a chaotic flux which is unorderable, or by a frozen and silent stasis.

To convey madness, then, without resorting to an indecipherable scrawl or a blank and empty text, to contain its wild energies or articulate its suffocating deathliness within a narrative which 'makes sense' to the reader, may be a problematic enterprise. And it was on the implications of just such a possible 'containment' or articulation that a famous debate between Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida centred. Initiated by the publication of Foucault's landmark work *Folie et deraison*,¹⁶

¹² Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 3

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.14.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 33.

¹⁶ The initial forays in this debate were, firstly, Michel Foucault's *Folie et deraison: Histoire de la folie a l'age classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961) (A much abridged version of the original French text, from which I quote here, was published as: *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. by Richard Howard [London: Routledge, 1999]); Derrida's initial critique of Foucault is in his essay 'Cogito and the History of Madness', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London:

this engagement was characterized by some acrimony;¹⁷ however, addressing the radical breach between madness and reason, both philosophers did agree that the essence of madness is its radical ‘unsayability’. Thus, in Derrida’s terms, “madness is what by essence cannot be said” (CH 43); while for Foucault, if madness assumes “an appearance in the order of reason”, it departs from its essence, “thus becoming the contrary of itself”. Discourse about madness, therefore, “is merely reason”, even though madness, “is itself the negation of reason” (MC 107). I will discuss this theoretical conversation in more detail shortly.

The sentiments of the memoirists I quoted above do, to some degree at least, accord with the idea that madness may elude capture in the net of reasoned discourse. And although, despite their reservations, all of these authors have attempted to set down their madness, it is worth noting that the majority of the texts I study here, indeed, the majority of autopathographies of madness per se, ostensibly foreground themselves as written ‘after-the-event’, that is, from a standpoint of relative sanity. Perhaps, then, the professed difficulties of signifying madness spring from the fact that this is being attempted from within the strictures of reason. Later in this chapter, I study a text produced in the midst of madness; yet while we may feel that, in the delirium of this work, we draw close to the experience of alterity, if such a proximity is effected it is achieved despite, rather than by means of, the textual strategies at work.

4.2.2 Silence and sound

In *Spasm*, as I discussed in chapter two, Lauren Slater addresses some of these issues directly. She writes there that, in order to indicate “the heart of things”, she must employ “narrative truth” and “invention”; and, of her discovery that a documentary discourse is inadequate to convey her story, claims that only metaphor can express the “subtleties and horrors and gaps” of her history: “metaphor is the greatest gift of language, for through it we can propel silence into sound”.¹⁸ A similar theme is explored in her *Prozac Diary*. Beginning the memoir, Slater struggles to capture depression within language: “How do you describe emptiness? Is it the air inside a bubble, the darkness in a pocket, snow? [...] the language of emptiness, the language of

Routledge, 1978 [first published in French 1967), pp. 31-63. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from these texts, abbreviated as MC and CH, are given in parentheses.

¹⁷ For a lucid and accessible history of the debate see Roy Boyne’s *Foucault and Derrida: The Other Side of Reason* (London: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁸ Slater, *Spasm*, pp. 219-20.

loss, evaded me”.¹⁹ When she moves “into metaphor”, however, emptiness takes on “weight and presence”.²⁰ This shift into an overtly figurative discourse is precipitated when she buys and eats a chocolate sweet in the shape of a baby; significantly, this act is also associated with an individuation in which the ingested confection is re-imagined as a self. Thus Slater uses symbolism to make both self and melancholia present:

*I felt it move down my throat and into my stomach, and when it mixed at last, with my blood, the baby turned blue. This I take as a truth. I also take as a truth that at night, while from the floor below me my mother paced, I could hear the baby turn and sometimes cry. I could talk to it, and it could talk to me. Later on I would populate my innards with more figurative people, but this was the first [...] I called the presence Blue Baby. Its deadness, in its own way, was alive. This was my first love. This was my world.*²¹

Metaphoricity is constructed here as a process by which Slater makes sense of her world. The way in which this episode is narrated leaves it ambivalent whether this process is operative within the realm of the historical story-world, or only at the time of narration. The ‘move into metaphor’ is to an extent insinuated as involving the child protagonist, who constructs a symbolic realm which ‘was’ (in the past of the diegesis) her world, but this remains shaded by ambiguity as it is the adult narrator who ‘takes’ (in the narrating present) such symbolic constructions ‘as truth’. This ambivalence is significant in that what seems to be most important in this passage and in much of the book is the narrative remaking of a dislocated and unsatisfactory childhood. This is hinted at in the assertive “*This was my world*” with which the passage ends. When this is read in conjunction with Slater’s invocation of veracity (“*This I take as a truth*”) there is a sense implied that while the world narrated may not have been Slater’s world *then*, the ‘then’ of history is here being deliberately refracted through the lens of the narrating present, and is thus being spoken into a new configuration. In addition, that the historical ‘veracity’ of the child Slater’s embracing of ‘metaphor’ is embellished by, and interwoven with, the reflections of the narrator (the sophisticated poetic language and concepts used imply a grasp of the significance of this developmental shift outside the cognitive ambit of a “*six, seven, eight*” year-old²²) also invokes a fashioning of myth, in which what might have seemed mundane is bestowed with a retrospective import. The use of figurative and symbolic modes of discourse are here insinuated as means by which to approach and represent history, and also as processes whereby the

¹⁹ Lauren Slater, *Prozac Diary* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1999), pp. 16 & 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

past may be revived and endowed with (new) meanings. While this particular passage has ‘metaphor’ as its theme, what is most significant is that the theme of metaphor is *signified* in a figurative manner. The same narrative method characterizes *Prozac Diary* throughout. This text is charged with an often dense symbolism, and, like *Spasm*, it rejects attempts to tell ‘Lauren Slater’ via an informational discourse and proceeds by allusion, trope, and impression.

Slater’s aspiration in *Spasm* to make silence audible, to express, as she puts it (quoting Tillich), the “silence behind [her] story”,²³ curiously echoes Foucault’s stated aim in *Madness and Civilization* to “write the archaeology of that silence” (MC xiii); it also summons to mind Derrida’s acknowledgement that Foucault does indeed recognize the perplexities inherent in an attempt to speak madness in the language of reason:

The resolution of this difficulty is practiced rather than formulated. By necessity. I mean that the silence of madness is not said, cannot be said in the logos of this book, *but is indirectly, metaphorically, made present* [...] (CH 37; emphasis mine)

Derrida’s assessment here is, I suggest, alluding to the distinctive prose style of *Madness and Civilization*. For most readers it is difficult to ignore the role of the expression plane in Foucault’s oracular and imperspicuous text; and there is no sense that the signifier is intended to efface itself as it issues seamlessly into an ineluctable and fixed signified. Rather, the reader must grapple with tortuous syntax and with intricate allusions and metaphors in order to follow Foucault’s thought. Indeed, a common complaint about Foucault’s writing style is that singular meanings are difficult to glean from his work – that ambiguity and ambivalence render his arguments hard to summarise.²⁴ Yet if one accepts Derrida’s estimation that Foucault’s intention is to indirectly, or metaphorically, make the signified present, then perhaps such criticisms can be mollified. Indeed, George Aichele’s explanation of metaphor as “any figure (or trope) of language, in which language resists our desire to possess it through a single, identical framing of sense and reference; the fundamental incompleteness of

²³ See *Spasm*, p. 196.

²⁴ Interestingly John Searle claims that Foucault has criticised Derrida for the abstruse nature of his writing: “Michel Foucault once characterized Derrida’s prose style to me as *obscurantisme terroriste*. The text is written so obscurely that you can’t figure out exactly what the thesis is (hence “*obscurantisme*”) and then when one criticizes it, the author says, “*Vous m’avez mal compris; vous etes idiot*” [‘You haven’t understood me; you’re an idiot’] (hence “*terroriste*”). John Searle, ‘The word turned upside down’, *The New York Review*, 27th October 1983, p. 77 (pp. 74-79). See also Searle’s ‘Reiterating the Differences: A reply to Derrida’, *Glyph*, 1 (1977), 198-208.

language”²⁵ accords with Foucault’s own notion of writing as an action that tests “the limits of its regularity”, or as a “game” that “inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind”.²⁶

Of course, it is entirely possible to argue that all language can only ever proceed via metaphor, and that Derrida’s statement is axiomatic, in that a constitutive operation of much language use is to draw attention away from its own materiality and towards its intended referent. However what Derrida highlights is the way that Foucault consciously and overtly plays with this operation, and that in the context of a theoretical work such as *Folie et Deraison* this is an unconventional strategy. Rather than attempt linguistic precision, Foucault’s language, Derrida suggests, wishes to gesture beyond itself, beyond logic and history, and signify in a manner much more associated with the poetic or literary, so that the ineffable economies of madness and silence might be grasped.

Derrida’s argument that Foucault was attempting to communicate indirectly via ‘metaphor’ has been taken up by, amongst several others, Shoshana Felman, who has underlined the centrality of the poetic, not just in Foucault’s text, but also in Derrida’s reply, pointing out that in both works *literature* is figured as opposing itself to philosophy, forming a “buffer zone between madness and thought”.²⁷ Christina Howells has made a similar point about Derrida’s style, noting that “the extraordinarily dense and often plurivalent” tenor of his writing poses “problems of reading and interpretation rarely if ever encountered to the same degree in other philosophers”, and suggesting that form is inextricably linked to the deconstructive project:

Derrida’s writing is in a sense itself ‘performative’, that is, it enacts what it describes; it is not merely constative and argumentative, but it exemplifies the features it is discussing. This kind of language use is alien to most

²⁵ George Aichele, *The Limits of Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 143.

²⁶ Michel Foucault, ‘What is an author?’, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. by Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press), p.116. Terence Hawkes’s definition of metaphor as that which “aid[s] language to achieve what is seen as its major goal, the revelation of a ‘reality’ of a world that lies unchanged beyond it”, seems at first glance to denote the metaphorical as contrary to the spirit of Foucault’s enterprise. Yet, extrapolating from Hawkes’s summation that language in itself is always inadequate to convey ‘reality’, and that in order to signify unreason, or to indicate silence, language must be twisted “beyond its reasonable limits”, then viewing Foucault’s text as metaphorical (or allegorical) may make more sense. T. Hawkes, *Metaphor* (London: Methuen, 1972) p. 92.

²⁷ Shoshana Felman, ‘Madness and Philosophy or Literature’s Reason’, *Yale French Studies*, 52 (1975), p. 206. See also Felman’s *Writing and Madness (Literature/ Philosophy/Psychoanalysis)*, trans. by Martha Noel Evans (Palo Alto, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2003). *Madness and Civilization* evokes literature not only in Foucault’s elliptical poetic rhetoric and the emotional intensity of his arguments, but also in his invocation of literary texts – by Holderlin, Sade, Artaud, and Nerval – and in his imaginative excursions into representing the inner world of the mad themselves. In the English edition, examples of such ‘excursions’ can be found on, for example, pages 93-6.

philosophical traditions, and is more readily thought of as a feature of literary texts; but [a] feature of the Derridean strategy is to undo the conventional distinction between literature and philosophy and the hierarchy which subordinates the former to the latter.²⁸

Just as the astute reader of Derrida or Foucault must take into account the way in which they write, so too the form, construction, and tenor of many memoirs of madness are important components of their method of signifying, and critically affect their overall import. Works like Slater's *Spasm* and *Prozac Diary* occupy a space between literature and non-fiction: in such memoirs the poetic and literary interanimate the referential and informational. I turn now to discuss another text which problematizes easy distinctions between genres, but also uses literary, figurative, techniques specifically to undercut the positivistic narratives of psychiatry, and to foreground a (salutary) multiplicity of the self. Moreover, evoking Slater's metaphorical reconstruction of herself as a child, this work refigures personal 'history' in order to redeem it: adumbrating stark and distressing 'truths' with a symbolic and more equivocal story.²⁹

4.3.1 Metaphorical Significations: *Girl, Interrupted*

*But the people here
Have no journeys to make,
No destination to arrive at.
Michael O'Higgins³⁰*

In *Girl, Interrupted*, Susanna Kaysen describes her two year stay in an asylum in which she was hospitalized after a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder (BPD).³¹ A paratextual note claims that while working on a novel, 25 years after this episode, her

²⁸ Christina Howells, *Derrida: Deconstruction from Phenomenology to Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p. 71.

²⁹ Two obvious points of reference in a discussion of illness and figurative discourse are Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* and *Aids and its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 1991). However, there are important if subtle divergences between Sontag's emphases and the direction of the current chapter. Sontag is concerned to free illness from its implication in the metaphoric, contending that "the healthiest way of being ill – is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking" (p. 3). She does not address mental illness at any length, confining her discussion to tuberculosis, cancer and AIDS (although she does briefly mention the homological nexus between TB and 'melancholia' in the fourth chapter of *Illness as Metaphor*).

³⁰ From: Michael O'Higgins, 'Ward', in *Speaking our Minds: An Anthology of Personal Experiences of Mental Distress and its Consequences*, ed. by Jim Read and Jill Reynolds (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 83.

³¹ Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted* (London: Virago, 1995). Subsequent page references are given parenthetically in the text.

memories “began to emerge”, and “with the help of a lawyer she obtained her 350 page file from the hospital. *Girl, Interrupted* followed”.³²

Evoking aspects of the arguments in *Madness and Civilization*, at the outset of her memoir Kaysen specifically addresses the lacuna between the worlds of mental health and sickness. She designates madness as one of many ‘parallel universes’: “worlds of the insane, the criminal, the crippled, the dying, perhaps of the dead as well. These worlds exist alongside this world and resemble it, but are not in it”; and describes a membrane “between here and there” (5) which separates the two worlds, claiming that the parallel universe of insanity “is invisible from this side”, although “once you are in it you can easily see the world you came from” (6). There is an intriguing coincidence between Kaysen’s ‘topography of the parallel universe’ and the Foucaultian contention that madness is one in a series of ‘forces of unreason’, a series which, according to Foucault, also includes the dispossessed, the poor, the indigent, and the crippled (MC 46ff & 65ff). While Kaysen diverges from Foucault in that she claims the world of reason is visible from the other side of the membrane (“Every window on Alcatraz has a view of San Francisco” [6]), her notion of a barrier separating madness and reason is consonant with Foucault’s construction of the “broken dialogue”, “which relegates Reason and Madness to one side or the other of its action as things henceforth external” (MC xi).

Again evoking Foucault, Kaysen’s understanding of madness as an ineffable otherness may help explain why she chooses to present her story as ‘literature’, why her account of suffering is inflected with poetic and novelistic resonances. And as with the approach to the history of madness exemplified in *Madness and Civilization*, she does not lay out a chronology, nor a history, of her stay in hospital or of her illness.³³ Rather, her account is conveyed via impressions, allusions, and the relation of fragmentary episodes through which the autobiographical subject and her madness are

³² This note can be found in the unnumbered introductory pages.

³³ On Foucault’s approach to historiography, see G. S. Rousseau’s review of *Madness and Civilization* in which he writes that Foucault, “as a historian”, “believes it more important to ask the right questions than to accumulate meaningless unrelated facts”: “The real achievement of this book is its invention [...] in this day and age a reviewer usually speaks about accuracy or the lack of it, accepting or dismissing a book from academic groves on grounds of right or wrong. Foucault has a thesis which is neither right or wrong – for such designations are meaningless when applied to a province of intellectual history as elusive and theoretical as this.” G. S. Rousseau, Review of *Madness and Civilization*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 4.1 (Autumn 1970), pp. 92 & 95. See also Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Allan Megill, ‘The Reception of Foucault by Historians’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48.1 (Jan. - Mar., 1987), 117-141; Hayden White, Review of *Surveiller et punir*, *American History Review*, 82 (1977), 605-6; Gary Gutting, ‘Foucault and the history of madness’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. by Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 47-70.

hinted at rather than pinned down. Shot through with a wry humour and detachment, Kaysen's narrative is distinguished by novelistic presentations of conversations and apparently inconsequential events which, when woven together in the reader's consciousness, cumulatively insinuate a sense of import and significance.

In addition, however, this explicitly poetic, literary technique is of particular importance for Kaysen because a central concern in *Girl, Interrupted* is her resistance to the notion of a fixed, lifeless self pinned down and defined by the static narratives of psychiatry, or, as she puts it: "one moment made to stand still and to stand for all the other moments, whatever they would be or might have been" (167). As if to emphasise the contrast between her impressionistic narration and the definitive, positivistic narratives of medicine, Kaysen includes photographic reproductions of medical documents relating to her illness in the memoir. Comprising such items as case reports, physicians' correspondence, and inter-office memoranda, this counter-narrative exemplifies the "monologue of reason about madness", as Foucault describes "the language of psychiatry" (MC xii - xiii), and interweaves another, very different, version of Kaysen's story, one which does indeed attempt to pin 'Susanna Kaysen' down in time, and "to stand for all the other moments". Yet, as I go on to argue below, the overall consequence of this entwining of narratives is actually to adumbrate a stark reductionism with the uncertainties of the poetic, and thereby to undermine its claims to an exclusive truth.

When Kaysen writes of the static, representative moment, she is ostensibly referring to a Vermeer painting, 'Girl Interrupted at her Music', but she reworks its iconography into a metaphor for her own interrupted life. She first views the painting, "from whose frame a girl looks out, ignoring her beefy music teacher", just before her admission into hospital, and interprets its symbolism as monitory: "She was warning me of something [...] Her mouth was slightly open as if she had just drawn a breath in order to say to me, "Don't!" (166). Kaysen returns sixteen years later – long after her release:

She had changed a lot in sixteen years. She was no longer urgent. In fact, she was sad. She was young and distracted, and her teacher was bearing down on her, trying to get her to pay attention. But she was looking out, looking for someone who would see her.

This time I read the title of the painting: *Girl Interrupted at Her Music*.

Interrupted at her music: as my life had been, interrupted in the music of being seventeen, as her life had been, snatched and fixed on canvas: one moment made to stand still and to stand for all the other moments, whatever they would be or might have been. What life can recover from that? (167)

The girl in the Vermeer, Kaysen implies, has been interrupted twice. Within the ‘story-world’ of the painting she is accosted by her music-teacher interlocutor; but simply by being represented she is also frozen in time – frozen at a moment when she is already interrupted: interruption is thus doubled. Analogously, incarceration in hospital effected a temporary hiatus in Kaysen’s ontogenesis, but the static representation of that interruption (in the form of her psychiatric history) excludes the possibility of mobility and progression and reifies the transient. Thus the leitmotif and purpose of *Girl, Interrupted* is the ‘recovery’, perhaps the ‘redemption’, of an interrupted self fixed and ossified within a psychiatric narrative, the introjected traces of which have shaped Kaysen’s psychology. Moreover, as I will go on to show, the mechanics of this recuperative process include the expression of, and negotiation with, a series of selves – a variety of ‘Susanna Kaysens’ – which are made present in the text, and offer a striking contrast to the singular self outlined in the psychiatric narrative.

In *Girl, Interrupted*, then, Kaysen tells a new story, one which allows for movement and reconfigures simplistic diagnostic judgements. For, as she says of the definition of her condition found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, such a representation may be “accurate”, “but it isn’t profound” (150). Thus, narration here is an attempt to smudge the clean boundary lines which enclose the filled in pro-formas, and which also figuratively encircle and define her, as her own ‘narrative’ of self, that is, the thread of her existence, endeavours to free itself and move forward in time: the narrative of *Girl, Interrupted* attempts to recover the complexity of the self. In contrast to the clinical delineation of Kaysen in the official material, the subject in her memoir is a complex, ill-defined character, and the impression one gets of her is just that – an impression, rather than a definition. In addition, *Girl, Interrupted* is not just an account of madness: it also foregrounds Kaysen ‘now’, writing of ‘then’, acutely aware both of the difference between ‘here’ and ‘there’, but also of the ease by which one might “pass over incrementally, making a series of perforations in the membrane between here and there until an opening exists” (5). This impression of a temporal and ontological instability is heightened and made present in the text by the way that the narrator appears sometimes ‘there’, sometimes ‘here’: that is to say, oscillating between her writing and protagonist selves. Whereas the psychiatric narrative is discrete, definitive, and static, presenting an objectified, enclosed self, Kaysen’s narrative, characterized by dialogue, poetry, and uncertainty,

plays with ideas of permeable boundaries, of versions of the self interanimating each other.

This is not to claim that Kaysen's purpose is to erase completely the distinctions between madness and sanity. She speaks of her illness as characterized by a terrifying difference, comprising: "complete desolation. Desolation, despair and depression" (157); and, while acknowledging the treacherous porosity of the "ever-shifting borderline that like all boundaries beckons and asks to be crossed", she determines to remain on the side of sanity: "I do not want to cross it again" (159). Furthermore, she records how she has distanced herself from the implications of her past:

I stopped telling people. There was no advantage in telling people. The longer I didn't say anything about it, the farther away it got, until the me who had been in the hospital was a tiny blur and the me who didn't talk about it was big and strong and busy.

I began to feel revulsion too. Insane people: I had a good nose for them and I didn't want to have anything to do with them. I still don't. I can't come up with reassuring answers to the terrible questions they raise. (125)

However, despite this ostensibly stark differentiation and resolve, the narrative strategies of *Girl, Interrupted* undermine and transform the harsher implications of these statements. For paradoxically, of course, the memoir is an exercise in "telling people"; it resurrects the "me in the hospital", and, by virtue of its non-definitive style and refusal to take refuge in history, itself raises unsettling "questions" about selfhood and sanity. Importantly, by writing of her madness, and particularly by relating how she attempts to repress and shut out the past, both are scrutinized and put under question. That is to say, while Kaysen says of the insane that "I still don't" "want to have anything to do with them", her memoir intimately and compassionately records the life of the insane; indeed one of its defining characteristics is the amount of attention she pays to the others in the asylum rather than to herself. Therefore the fact of her memoir undercuts the declaration. It is as if "I still don't" is a line in a novel spoken by a character who we, as readers, grasp as more complex than this bald assertion would imply. The statement's drift, therefore, is subverted and undermined, connoted as representing only one facet amongst a variety rather than forming a definitive pronouncement.³⁴

³⁴ Leslie Hill describes a similar effect produced by Maurice Blanchot in his fiction, *La Folie du jour*: "The opening sentences, with their cautious clauses of denial, their moment of self-confessed understatement, and their allusion to the impending (impossible?) possibility of death, all serve to mark the limits within which the narrator is speaking; but paradoxically, by the very fact of marking these limits, Blanchot's sentences place themselves beyond them. To draw attention to such limits is to efface

This undercutting effect is significant when contrasted with the diagnostic narrative of a singular defined self. In this instance, mediating between readers and their interpretation of Kaysen's statement are the implications of the text as a whole: in other words, there is not a single version of 'Kaysen' connoted here. In her statement, Kaysen ostensibly speaks as narrator, but, in the light of the overall narrative of *Girl, Interrupted* which undercuts this pronouncement, the 'narrator' here is perhaps more likely to be read as a 'character'. But, whether interpreted as 'character' or 'narrator', the effect of the text as a whole insinuates that 'above' this particular level of the text is a further narrative layer which also represents a 'layer' of selfhood. One might designate this as the "governing 'consciousness'" or possibly the 'implied author' of the work,³⁵ but such descriptions are potentially misleading because, as in *Prozac Diary*, the implied norms in *Girl, Interrupted* remain largely as inchoate and mutable insinuations rather than forming a rigid framework. In this instance they inflect Kaysen's statement with implicit resonances; but at no point in the text does the implied author assume consistency or an authoritative stance.³⁶ Thus, the impression is produced of a kind of intra-textual dialogue between layers and versions of the self, in which different manifestations have precedence at different moments. Rather than a singular entity, 'Susanna Kaysen' is adumbrated as multifaceted and existing on several levels.

The narrative mechanisms of Kaysen's memoir, then, effectively denote and activate a heterogeneous version of the self which is in stark opposition to the uni-dimensional character described in the hospital records. And something broadly similar can be said of the documentary 'proof' of Kaysen's illness, in that its very inclusion in a work of literature produces a sense of its contingency, and foregrounds its own dissimulation of that contingent status. No longer appearing as a transparent and neutral medium transmitting information about a mental patient, it assumes an

them, and the principle of limitation turns unaccountably into one of excess". *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, p. 97.

³⁵ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 86. Rimmon-Kenan is here summarizing Wayne Booth's conception of the implied author. On the implied author see Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961) and Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1978). Chatman writes: "[The implied author] instructs us silently, through the design of the whole, with all the voices, by all the means it has chosen to let us learn". Quoted in Rimmon-Kenan *Narrative Fiction*, p. 87. Rimmon-Kenan notes that while Booth designates the implied author as a "second self" to the author, Chatman depersonalises the concept as an 'it'.

³⁶ Given that Rimmon-Kenan contends that "the implied author of a particular work is conceived as a stable entity, ideally consistent with itself within the work", the concept begins to seem inadequate, or to need reworking, to describe the mechanism at work here. *Narrative Fiction*, p. 87.

enigmatic status: through the implications of contiguity and association it becomes caught up in – ‘infected’ – by the poetic text in which it is intercalated. As an example of the way this process operates, an ‘Abstract from Voluntary Application’ dated April 27 1967 records Kaysen as having

contemplated jumping into the river. fully realising the nature of her act. Patient withdrew to her room, ate very little, did not work or study and She signed this voluntary application”. (43; punctuation and capitalization as in original)

The impact of this terse prose, however, which on the surface denotes a self driven and eventually beaten by despair, is leavened by Kaysen’s description on the facing page of a complex psychology motivated by a definite strategy – of ‘negation’:

I have to admit, though, that I knew I wasn't mad.

It was a different precondition that tipped the balance: the state of contrariety. My ambition was to negate. The world, whether dense or hollow, provoked only my negations. When I was supposed to be awake, I was asleep; when I was supposed to speak, I was silent; when a pleasure offered itself to me, I avoided it. My hunger, my thirst, my loneliness and boredom and fear were all weapons aimed at my enemy, the world. They didn't matter a whit to the world, of course, and they tormented me, but I got a gruesome satisfaction from my sufferings. They proved my existence. All my integrity seemed to lie in saying No.

So the opportunity to be incarcerated was just too good to resist. It was a very big No – the biggest No this side of suicide.

Perverse reasoning. But back of that perversity, I knew I wasn't mad and that they wouldn't keep me there, locked up in a loony bin. (42)

This juxtaposition exposes the straightforwardness of the utilitarian hospital text to another very different narrative which denotes a rich, if still disturbing, universe: a text-book representation of the blankness of apparent anhedonia and asymbolia³⁷ is thus overlaid with the complexities of an active and resisting consciousness producing meaning.

In this manner *Girl, Interrupted* resists and undercuts the definitions imposed by the texts of psychiatric history. Throughout, the psychiatric narrative’s aspiration to scientism is undermined by its inclusion within the antithetical poetic text which surrounds it. What was intended to be discrete and finalized is thereby exposed to the vagaries of uncertainty, ‘ongoingness’, and ‘literature’. Kaysen describes a section of her memoir as an “annotated diagnosis” (150), and the phrase is also apt to summarise the effect of juxtapositions like the one I describe above. As narrator, Kaysen

³⁷ Anhedonia is an absence of the ability to experience pleasure, and is a symptom of several severe mental illnesses. For asymbolia see my discussion of Kristeva’s *Black Sun* earlier in this chapter.

effectively annotates her diagnoses by offsetting them against a series of rich, contrasting stories of her own: the stark designations of pathology are thus qualified and overshadowed, and thereby rendered aleatory, inchoate. Just as the multiplicity connoted in the narrative layering of versions of 'Susanna Kaysen' erodes the notion that *Girl, Interrupted* signifies a singular self, so the multifaceted self that emerges via this narrative process is no longer sharply defined and easily categorized, but flickers half-seen in the margins of the text(s).

To intimate the aesthetic strategy she uses to produce this haunting, liminal, effect, Kaysen once again mines a figurative significance from Vermeer's artistry. She describes the "entirely credible yet unreal Vermeer light" (168) which distinguishes and illuminates two other Vermeers in the gallery. Unlike the work which gives her memoir its title, these are "self-contained paintings": "The people in them are looking at each other". In contrast, the 'interrupted girl' looks out of the frame at the viewer, and "sits in another sort of light, the fitful, overcast light of life, by which we see ourselves and others only imperfectly, and seldom" (168). While the reader may quibble with Kaysen's assessment of Vermeer's style, what is important here is that the linguistic and narrative tone and style of *Girl, Interrupted* are akin to her description of this second sort of light, in that the memoir's subject(s) are imperfectly visible, sometimes occulted, sometimes half-glimpsed. Equally, the outward-facing, 'incomplete', stance of the girl in the painting corresponds to the way that different selves, and different versions of 'a' self, reach across time and space toward each other. We have seen how the writer revisits her younger self and thus imbricates 'history' with revisions from her present. But the past remembered self also 'speaks' to the present moment in the form of Kaysen's returning memories 25 years after her hospitalization. The stories told by memory kindle fear as they speak of the permeability of the divide between madness and sanity, but they also facilitate understanding, and, in their interanimation with and catalyzation by the present narrating consciousness, a recovery of the self's narrative from moribund fixity. This mobility within time, the way that conversations between versions of the self are allowed to flow in Kaysen's work, is the antithesis of the self pinned down in time, the opposite of "one moment made to stand still and to stand for all the other moments".

The outward-facing stance of the interrupted girl in the Vermeer might also serve as an analogue of the way in which *Girl, Interrupted* is oriented 'outwards' towards its 'reader', inviting, by means of its form, a kind of dialogue; that is to say, by

virtue of its incompleteness, its novelistic, impressionistic use of language and narrative, it is, to use Roland Barthes's terminology, a 'writerly' work.³⁸ The reader is not presented with a documentary style of discourse purporting to define Kaysen and her madness; 'understanding' is here an intuitive process in which undefined and shifting impressions are evoked by an elegiac, lyrical style, a concatenation of instances and anecdotes, and a necessary mediation, on the reader's part, between at least two apparently conflicting narratives. In addition, this juxtaposition requires the reader to instinctively grapple with notions of 'history' and 'truth', for while the psychiatric narrative was produced contemporaneously with the events it describes, *Girl, Interrupted* was written long afterwards. The text is as much a *reconsideration* of madness and subjectivity as it is a record of a set of events; the reader must, therefore, try to account for, and to extract meaning from, the gaps and dissonances between the two narratives. And, as with other texts I have considered, invoked by/in this (necessary) negotiation is an interrogation of the notion of memoir as a simple recording of a discrete 'history': the positivistic and 'dispassionate' documentary account is adumbrated as inadequate and one-dimensional when it is juxtaposed and contrasted with the negotiation of the past by a present subject, a negotiation in which subjectivities and temporalities mingle and converge to produce a less easily assimilated entity than a (case) history.

4.3.2 Blanchot: Reading and interruption

The writerly strategy of *Girl, Interrupted* facilitates a dialogistic, relational, reading in that spaces are deliberately left open for the reader to inhabit and fill. While, arguably, all literary works, perhaps all texts of whatever nature, must have interstices, rents in their textual and semantic wefts via which the reader can enter, in *Girl, Interrupted* this appears to be an intentional strategy which is integral to its effect and import. Unlike the two Vermeers bathed in an "entirely credible yet unreal" light, this is not a "self-contained" work; rather, like the interrupted girl, the text gestures outward, out of its frame and toward its witness. And that the autobiographical subject is not perfectly visible here, that she is glimpsed "imperfectly", is connected to this writerly and

³⁸ See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990 [first published in French, 1973]), p. 5: "The writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular section [...] which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages".

'relational' aspect of the text. The 'psychiatric story' presented by the collection of documents is, or wishes to be, a self-contained picture, requiring no other to catalyze its subject into being. Its aim is to definitively delineate the subject, 'Kaysen', to throw her into a sharp relief in an unforgiving light which eliminates all shadows, all uncertainties.³⁹ In this relational, outward-facing text, however, there is an imponderable: the (anticipated or imagined) response of an other. Therefore the story on its own can never be self-contained or complete, for even when the other's response has been 'heard', the potential for 'dialogue' to continue remains.

Maurice Blanchot's description of reading as "a dance with an invisible partner in a separated space"⁴⁰ evokes something of what I intend here. For Blanchot, however, the 'dance' of reading – and also of authoring – is always transformed by its refraction 'through' the enigmatic space of 'literature'. The quotation comes from Blanchot's early work *The Space of Literature*, a text in which his lifelong interest in the absence and negativity at the heart of literature, or 'writing' as he calls it, is evident; his focus on the ultimately inscrutable nature of literary language may help to illumine further the implications inherent in Kaysen's choice of a 'literary' strategy to convey her story. For Blanchot, literature – in which category I am including *Girl, Interrupted* – as opposed to informational discourse, 'negates' not only the thing referred to, but also the idea of the thing. The literary text, in foregrounding the materiality of its language and form, ultimately refers neither to thing nor to the idea, but to itself: its words link to other words. Thus, there is an intrinsic incomprehensibility at the heart of literary language which is "infinitely open" and allusive and spurs the reader on to "endless interpretations that forever remain unsatisfied".⁴¹ Thus, the absence at the centre of the literary text compels interpretation, but also renders it impossible to ever 'complete'. If the literary text is ultimately resistant to explanation and interpretation, then it stands in stark opposition to the positivistic, informational narratives of psychiatry. Moreover, 'Susanna Kaysen', refracted through, and therefore dispersed in, the enigmatic language of the text, eludes definition.

³⁹ C.f. Sarah Kofman's description of the totalitarian potential of language to negate doubt, and her proposed alternative, following Blanchot and Levinas, of a speaking or writing 'without power': "To speak: it is necessary – *without the power*: without allowing language, too powerful, sovereign, to master the aporetic situation, absolute powerlessness and very distress, to enclose it in the clarity and happiness of daylight." *Smothered Words*, trans. by Madeleine Dobie (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 10. In the following chapter I discuss Kofman's work in more detail.

⁴⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 197. Subsequent quotations from this work, preceded by the abbreviation SL, are given in parentheses in the text.

⁴¹ Ullrich Haase and William Large, *Maurice Blanchot* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 33.

In considering reading and authorship, and in addressing the figures of the reader and the author, it is perhaps important to emphasize here that in Blanchot's construction, writing – as an “incessant and interminable” “murmur” (SL 48) – ultimately remains a realm in which “no one speaks and what speaks is not anyone” (SL 41). In other words, there is a kind of subversive autonomy at work in literary language which does not allow itself to be forced to submit to one set of intentions nor to represent a single voice. As Blanchot puts it: “words, having the initiative, are not obliged to serve to designate anything or give voice to anyone, but [...] have their ends in themselves”.⁴² That said, in *The Space of Literature* and elsewhere Blanchot does address at some length the metastases involved in reading, and, for the author, in the process of writing for a ‘reader yet to come’.⁴³ Moreover, his assertion that “reading is not a conversation; it does not discuss, it does not question” (SL 194) is aimed at simplistic models of communication in which defined and static meanings are unproblematically transmitted between consciousnesses (“between two persons in whom two stabilized demands have been incarnated” [SL 199]). “The work”, that is, the literary text, nevertheless remains, he contends, a “dialogue”, but one in which intentions, interpretations and locutions are refracted through the prism of language, and thereby may assume unexpected and unpredictable trajectories.⁴⁴

Blanchot's invocation of a “dance with an invisible partner in a separated space” is apt for my context here, in that the ‘dialogues’ I have been invoking must always occur ‘elsewhere’, in the ‘separated space’ of another's consciousness – either that of author or reader: ‘dialogue’ therefore is intrapsychic. For the author, the other takes the form of an anticipated but unpredictable response; thus, their discourse is inflected by expectation and an attentive openness: arcing ‘out’ towards, and taking into account, what must remain an imponderability. As Blanchot puts it: “writing assumes the characteristics of reading's demand, and the writer becomes the nascent intimacy of the still infinitely future reader” (SL 199). In this sense, the authorial other is intimately linked to the relation with the self; which in this construction opens out onto that which subjectivity necessarily excludes in order to make itself coherent and self-same. For the reader, the challenge is to hear the textual voice which calls for a response (Blanchot: “the work is realized outside of itself” [SL 205]), and, in

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ See *The Space of Literature*, pp. 191-207. For the ‘reader yet to come’ see p. 199.

⁴⁴ See *The Space of Literature*, p. 199: “this ‘dialogue’ is primarily the more original combat of more indistinct demands, the torn intimacy of irreconcilable and inseparable moments which we call measure and measurelessness, form and infinitude, resolution and indecision”.

responding, to begin the dance with this invisible partner: again, imponderability evokes an intrapsychic other. In sum, and to use Ulrich Haase and William Large's summary of Blanchot's reflections on the nexus between speech and writing: both reader and narrator/author are therefore drawn "into a strange space that dispossesses them of their self-identity and repose".⁴⁵

In this passage Haase and Large are referring to Blanchot's conception in *The Infinite Conversation* of, as he puts it, "a relation of the third kind", a "relation entirely other", which is sensed through "the experience of language – writing".⁴⁶ Recalling aspects of Schweickart's "dialectic of communication",⁴⁷ in the 'third relation', the encounter with the other is neither a total comprehension ("the law of the same" [IC 66]), nor the formation of an ensemble of consciousnesses ("a possible unity" [IC 73]), rather each remains 'foreign' to the other. It is, therefore, an encounter or relation which preserves the essential otherness of the other and at the same time undoes any pretensions to a self possession predicated on an effacement of difference. Crucially, in the context of my discussion here of the effects of the 'literary', novelistic memoir, Blanchot characterizes a proposed strategy of attempting to sense "another form of speech" and relation, in which the other's presence "would return us neither to ourselves nor to the One" (IC 67), as "one of the essential traits of the 'literary' act: the very fact of writing" (IC 73). The openness of texts like *Girl, Interrupted*, *Spasm*, and *Prozac Nation* seem to dramatize – and enact – that refocusing on an imponderability ("the relation of otherness itself", as Haase and Large put it⁴⁸) which releases the self from incarceration within a less salutary ontological relation.

The dynamic of the 'relational' text also opens the possibility of a more salutary construction of 'interruption' than its connotations of suspension, stasis, and rupture.

⁴⁵ Haase and Large, *Maurice Blanchot*, p. 79. Haase and Large are discussing Blanchot's *The Infinite Conversation*, but their phrase invokes the earlier work *The Space of Literature*, in which the literary text is seen as a paradoxical and impossible site: "the experience of impossibility", as Blanchot writes there (p. 199). Blanchot's discussions in his later work of the infinite relation to the Other – a 'relation without relation' – represent a recasting of this trope of 'impossibility' under the influence of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*. See, for instance, pp. 51-2 in *The Infinite Conversation* (trans. by Susan Hanson [Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993]). See also Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, pp. 167-184 (particularly, p. 171). In this section, entitled 'Transcendence and the Other', Hill draws out the implicit and explicit dialogues with Levinas that inform much of *The Infinite Conversation*.

⁴⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 73; emphasis in original. Subsequent quotations from this work, preceded by the abbreviation IC, are given in parentheses in the text.

⁴⁷ Patrocínio P. Schweickart, 'Reading ourselves: Toward a feminist theory of reading', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (2nd edition), ed. by David Lodge and Nigel Wood (Harlow: Longman, 2000), p. 438. See my discussion in chapter 2.

⁴⁸ Haase and Large, *Maurice Blanchot*, p. 79.

Blanchot points out that “interruption is necessary to any succession of words” (IC 76), and defines dialogue as structured around discontinuity:

when two people speak together, they speak not together, but each in turn: one says something, then stops, the other something else (or the same thing), then stops. The coherent discourse they carry on is composed of sentences that are interrupted when the conversation moves from partner to partner [...] The power of speaking interrupts itself [...] This role [is] so enigmatic that it can be interpreted as bearing the very enigma of language: pause between sentences, pause from one interlocutor to another, and pause of attention, the hearing that doubles the force of locution. (IC 75)

Thus, “interruption permits the exchange”; “the *strangeness* between us [is] an interruption” (IC 68). The discontinuities which distinguish *Girl, Interrupted* are a *sine qua non* of dialogue – which is itself the inverse of the monologic texts of medicine. Kaysen reclaims her story, but she also implicitly redeems or reworks the ideation of the interruption, the hiatus or lull; the openness of her narrative style introduces that “intermittence by which discourse becomes dialogue” (IC 76), its unfinished quality connoting a series of pauses between locutions. And to return to my assertions concerning the intrapsychic nature of dialogue, Blanchot allows that this must include intercourse with the multifarious self. Thus, he writes of interrupting “oneself for the sake of understanding”, and of “speaking [...] only to interrupt oneself” (IC 79); moreover, his essays in *The Infinite Conversation* often take the form of conversations with himself, in which, he claims, “I listen in turn to these two voices [...] from the one to the other, interrupting myself” (IC 72). As an addendum it is worth noting Blanchot’s tart (and apt, for my context) aside that “We end up confining someone who speaks without pause” (IC 75). In *Girl, Interrupted*, Kaysen, indeed, speaks *with* pause; and perhaps in some way this signifies a kind of ‘sanity’, or, better, a humanness, which is open to “the foreignness between us” (IC 77). One might even conjecture that, by including the medical narrative, a conversation is inaugurated with these formerly closed texts.

4.3.3 The strange space of autopathography

The ‘imperfection’ and incompleteness manifest in *Girl, Interrupted* also characterizes Lauren Slater’s *Spasm* and Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation*; in both texts narrative strategies are inflected by hesitations concerning the efficacy of language to convey experience. Wurtzel’s relentless ‘anti-narration’ of her depression resists the finalizing

tendency of conventional narrative forms which would impose closure on an experience from which meaning cannot be gleaned so easily;⁴⁹ Slater's memoir, in an attempt to make silence 'audible', sets out to problematize distinctions between literature and other forms of writing.⁵⁰ In both texts, in very different ways, signification is refigured in order to indicate an 'inexpressible'.

Intriguingly, Haase and Large's phrase "strange space", which they use to summarize Blanchot's conception of 'writing' and the relation of readers and writers to the literary text, is also used by Slater right at the end of *Spasm*, and by Derrida in his famous essay 'Différance'. Addressing writing and speech, Derrida declares:

This différance belongs neither to the voice nor to writing in the ordinary sense, and it takes place, like the strange space that will assemble us here for the course of an hour, *between* speech and writing, and beyond the tranquil familiarity which binds us to one and to the other, occasionally reassuring us in our illusion that they are two.⁵¹

Derrida here is blurring distinctions not only between speech and writing but also between self and other, collapsing, in effect, a "naturalized dichotomy between subject and object, knower and known", to borrow Dwight Fee's phrase.⁵² In the same way that Derrida challenges the comforting illusion that it is only he, Derrida, who speaks and produces meaning, so too, and as an extension of his argument, he wants to evoke the space of encounter as a site between speaker and attendee, to reveal, that is, the way that dialogue, intertextuality, and a complex web of associations and debts inform his context. When Slater uses the phrase she wishes to invoke a dialogism inhering in memoir:

Lauren.
My name is Lauren.
And you are?
Here, in this strange space, is where we meet.⁵³

Slater here seems to be intimating something very close to the experience of "otherness" which Blanchot foregrounds in *The Infinite Conversation*. Slater's 'strange

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America: a memoir* (London: Quartet, 1999).

⁵⁰ Lauren Slater, *Spasm: A Memoir with Lies* (London: Methuen, 2000), p. 220.

⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Différance', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (London: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 385-407 (p. 388). (Essay originally published in *Speech and Phenomena and other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. by David Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), pp. 129-60.)

⁵² Dwight Fee, 'The Broken Dialogue: Mental Illness as Discourse and Experience', in *Pathology and the Post-modern: Mental illness, Discourse, and Experience*, ed. by Dwight Fee (London: Sage, 1999), p. 4.

⁵³ Slater, *Spasm*, p. 223.

space' insinuates that it is 'within' the enigmatic site of the literary text – in which language (and narrative) is both resistant to comprehension and somehow autonomous – that consciousness meets the other, that speech encounters otherness.⁵⁴ Indeed in Slater's and Kaysen's fragmented narrative methods there are echoes of Blanchot's fictions, in which the reader is lost in indeterminacy, precipitated into an epistemological crisis in which the true otherness of the text cannot be passed over.⁵⁵ The resistance in these memoirs to determined, fixed stories of self, their summoning of the reader into participation, surely illustrate something of Blanchot's definition of 'literature': "the essence of literature is to escape any essential determination, or any affirmation which stabilises or even realises it: it is never already there; it is always to be found or to be reinvented."⁵⁶ ('Essential determination' might serve, indeed, as a description of the purpose and intention of the assemblage of psychiatric documents in *Girl, Interrupted*.)

Thus, as with Derrida's assessment of *Madness and Civilization*, *Girl, Interrupted* 'metaphorically makes [its subjects] present', but if we encounter 'presence' it is at least in part manifest via absence and elusiveness, and therefore is not measurable – nor 'present' – in any positivistic sense. This is to say, that while the interrupted girl may gesture to us, and to Kaysen as author, from the text, she remains, and must remain for Kaysen's purpose, ultimately undefined.⁵⁷ 'Metaphor' here, then, invokes George Aichele's broad definition as representing language's resistance to "our desire to possess it through a single, identical framing of sense and reference".⁵⁸ The elliptical ways in which Kaysen's text signifies its subjects is in direct contrast to the psychiatric narrative (which is in turn absorbed into 'metaphor'); and these strategies of signification are, in part, a resistance to a view of subjectivity, narration, and language

⁵⁴ C.f. Julia Kristeva: "A body, a text that bounces back to me echoes of a territory that I have lost but that I am seeking within the blackness of dreams in Bulgarian, French, Russian, Chinese tones, invocations lifting up the dismembered sleeping body". *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. by T. Gora, A. Jardine, and L. Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), p. 163.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Blanchot's *La folie du jour* (Montpellier: Editions Fata Morgaria, 1973). Available in translation in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, ed. by G. Quasha, trans. by P. Auster, L. Davis and R. Lamberton (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1998). Both Jacques Derrida and Helene Cixous have written intriguing commentaries on this key Blanchot text. See Derrida's 'The Law of Genre', *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), pp. 62-70, and Cixous' *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva*, ed. and trans. by Verena Andermatt Conley (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) pp. 95-109.

⁵⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), pp. 293-4, quoted in John Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers from Structuralism to Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 209. Translation by Lechte.

⁵⁷ C.f. Blanchot: "Nor is to read to send out a call [...]. Doubtless there is a sort of call, but it can only come from the work itself. It is a silent call, which amidst the general noise imposes silence, and which only reaches the reader's ears because he answers it". *The Space of Literature*, p. 196.

⁵⁸ George Aichele, *The Limits of Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 143.

in which definition and transparency effectively encloses the person. Kaysen's stylistic strategies also mirror the slipperiness of her theme. For Kaysen, indecision, vagueness, or hesitation are not pathological instances of BPD as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* would have it, but a fact of existence; "I still have that uncertainty", she writes, referring to the *Manual's* description of the sufferer as possessing an "uncertainty about several life issues, such as self-image, sexual orientation, long term goals or career choice, types of friends or lovers to have" (150). In *Girl, Interrupted*, 'uncertainty' is implicit in selfhood and is dramatized by the text's narrative methods. As I have already noted, Kaysen describes her commentary on the simplistic certainties of the *Manual* as an "annotated diagnosis" (150), and this designation encapsulates the effect of the text as a whole. But equally 'annotation' is extended to subjectivity itself, and insinuates selfhood as a penumbral entity inflected by its various temporal manifestations, its position in relationship with others, its refraction through the lens of literary form, and by mobile and evolving attitudes. Rescuing her interrupted, static self from its incarceration in an ossified set of records, Kaysen questions the negative connotations of the *Manual's* designation of the BPD patient as characterized by "A pervasive pattern of instability of self-image" (147), suggesting that 'instability' may not necessarily be a symptom of pathology, and that to deem stability of self-image normal or normative is to render the self lifeless.

4.3.4 An obscure light

To conclude this discussion of *Girl, Interrupted*, I return to a comparison I alluded to following my opening discussion of the form of *Madness and Civilization*. Kaysen's aspiration to portray her subject in the imperfect "fitful, overcast light of life", seems to echo the way in which theorists like Foucault, Derrida, and Blanchot have resisted "the call for a 'plain style', for clarity and simplicity in writing".⁵⁹ It is instructive, for instance, to compare Kaysen's description of Vermeer's "muted, winter light" (166) with Paul de Man's eloquent assessment of Blanchot's poetic style:

Blanchot [...] never intended to perform a task of exegesis that would combine earlier acquired knowledge with new elucidations. The clarity of his critical writings is not due to exegetic power, they seem clear, not because they penetrate further into a dark and inaccessible domain but because they suspend

⁵⁹ Fredric Jameson, 'On Jargon', *Minnesota Review*, 9 (1977), p. 31.

the very act of comprehension. The light they cast on texts is of a different nature. Nothing in fact, could be more obscure than the nature of this light.⁶⁰

On the nexus linking the literary and the critical, Fredric Jameson has argued that “theoretical jargon and poetic speech” face similar situations and have similar dilemmas to overcome. His contention that

The poets and the theoreticians are both at work desperately in an increasingly constricted network of reifying processes, and both violently have recourse to invented speech and private languages in order to reopen a space in which to breathe⁶¹

could easily be reworked to apply to the ‘reifying processes’ of psychiatric discourse, or to the ‘private languages’ which authors like Kaysen and Slater construct by twisting narrative to suit their purposes. Jameson contends that a demand “for clarity and simplicity in writing” may be predicated less on an aversion to obscurantism and more on an (ideological) intention to secure the ground “for one or the other versions of British empiricism or common-sense philosophy”⁶² (what Catherine Belsey has named “the tyranny of lucidity”⁶³). Such a prosaic empiricism is indeed the governing principle of the psychiatric narrative; taken as a whole, however, *Girl, Interrupted* insists that the ‘clarity and simplicity’ of positivism cannot do justice to the complexities of the self. It is, I have argued, for precisely this reason that Kaysen has rejected using an informational model of discourse to present her memoir, for that would simply repeat the strategies of the medical story as she sees it. Choosing instead the ‘metaphorical’ path of the ‘literary’, she has effectively incorporated those harsh and inimical documents into a greater, but less defined narrative.

4.4.1 The collapse of fiction: Remembering Ross Burke

Solitude or noninteriority, exposure to the outside, boundless dispersion,
the impossibility of holding form, within bounds, enclosed [...].
Maurice Blanchot⁶⁴

I turn now to a very different example of ‘metaphorically making present’. Notwithstanding what I have said concerning Blanchot’s subversive conception of

⁶⁰ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 62-63. Blanchot, indeed, sets out to present “the language of research” in an ‘obscure’ light; he wishes to speak, he claims, “so that speech is essentially plural” (IC 8).

⁶¹ Jameson, ‘On Jargon’, p. 31.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 4.

⁶⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995 [first published in French 1980]), p. 30.

'literature', Kaysen's narrative strategy produces an impression of control and regulation – as in Lauren Slater's texts, her elegiac discourse expends itself sparingly. 'Writing' may, in Blanchot's rather abstract terms, necessarily subvert intention, and even manifest a kind of "violence",⁶⁵ but I am invoking here the lyrical tenor of *Girl, Interrupted*, and specifically the poetic way in which it deals with the disaggregations of madness. While distress is described, it is not done so via a raw overflowing, nor a wild dehiscence splitting apart the surfaces of narrative; rather, to borrow Michel Foucault's evocative observation on the memoirs of Hercule Barbin and Pierre Riviere: "One feels, under words polished like stone, the relentlessness and the ruin".⁶⁶ Kaysen's and Slater's words are restrained, understated, and, indeed, "polished", in their poetic resonances.

However, in Ross David Burke's autobiographical novel, *The Truth Effect*, in which the central character Sphere's descent into schizophrenic psychosis shadows Burke's own breakdown, another kind of 'metaphorical' signification is enacted, one which is much less distanced or controlled.⁶⁷ Here, distress erupts through the fabric of the narrative, tearing its weft apart against the will of its narrator, and subjectivities collide and coalesce within a textual chaos. 'Relentlessness and ruin' are apt descriptions of the terrible suffering dramatized here, but it is not a suffering half-glimpsed under words 'polished like stone'. Rather, language and coherence are burst open, denounced as inadequate to convey distress, and narrative strategies of irony, fiction, and humour collapse; it is via this violent crumpling and disintegration that the story of Burke is made present. Whereas Kaysen and Slater appear in control of their linguistic and narratological materials, seemingly willing an effect, the import of *The Truth Effect* emerges despite the narrative strategy, or the narrator's will.

The Truth Effect was written during the course of Burke's illness – in part while he was living in various hospitals and jails. Published posthumously – after his suicide – as *When the Music's Over: My Journey into Schizophrenia*, it was edited by Robin Hammond and Richard Gates, the latter a clinician who treated Burke. Burke requested

⁶⁵ See *The Space of Literature*, pp. 198-207.

⁶⁶ Michel Foucault, 'The Life of Infamous Men', in *Power, Truth, Strategy*, ed. by Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton (Sydney: Feral, 1979), p. 77.

⁶⁷ Ross David Burke, *The Truth Effect*, published as *When the Music's Over: My Journey into Schizophrenia*, ed. by Richard Gates and Robin Hammond (New York: Basic Books, 1995 [Armidale, N.S.W.: University of New South Wales, 1993]). Subsequent page references are given parenthetically in the text.

in his suicide note that Gates publish the manuscript “accompanied by a factual description of schizophrenia”⁶⁸ – of which illness he wrote:

*I think that they (secret organization) is listening to my thoughts. I cannot live in insanity and that is the only reason why I die. I'm a paranoid schizophrenic and for us life is a living hell.*⁶⁹

A complex, tangled, multi-layered work, *The Truth Effect* is extremely difficult to summarize. This is not because of its plot, which is simple, if dramatic; rather, any summary of the events which did not take into account the narrative's context and style would completely fail to engage with this book. The novel centres on Sphere and a group of friends deeply immersed in drug use. It records Sphere's many adventures with illegal drugs, his brushes with the police and a spell in prison, his sexual relationships and the birth of his daughter, and his gradual breakdown. The narrative's tone evokes, initially at least, the counter-culture of the early 1970s in which it is set, and ostensibly places *The Truth Effect* in the 'hippy-text' genre.⁷⁰ Thus, fantasy and reality are often entwined: myth, mysticism, science-fiction, drug-fuelled hallucination and paranoia, graphic sexual imagery, and nonsense imbricate a recognizable world which sometimes forms a ghostly subtext but is often completely invisible. What marks the book out, however, are the signs of an attritional process at work in the consciousness of the narrator. Indications of a growing distress and disintegration are increasingly intercalated into the narrations of sex and fantasy; and the laconic irony of the narrative tone – a kind of stoned stupefaction – eventually collapses under the weight of a burgeoning anguish. The text is characterized by its inability to contain itself: its themes, its tropes and methods. Thus, fiction spills over into memoir, delusion into reality, irony into despair, distance into subsumption. This vivid sense of limits being exceeded recalls Kaysen's imagery of the 'ever-shifting borderline' between madness and sanity, and suggests, indeed, that this boundary is repeatedly crossed both within and outside the diegesis of Burke's text. Perhaps the most striking

⁶⁸ Publisher's note on dust wrapper of American edition of *When the Music's Over*.

⁶⁹ From Ross Burke's suicide note, *When the Music's Over*, p. 221.

⁷⁰ Examples of this 'genre' could include: Richard Farina's *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me* (London: New English Library, 1972 [1966]); Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (London: Paladin, 1972); Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969). This type of writing was heavily influenced by the anti-psychiatric movement which was spearheaded by R. D. Laing, David Cooper, Joseph Berke and Aaron Esterson; while less populist, Foucault's *Folie et Deraison* also played an important role in influencing the terms of the debate. (See Laing's review of the English translation in the *New Statesman*: 'The Invention of Madness' [16 June 1967, p. 843]). For an account of Laing and his work which (rather uncritically) illuminates the link between him and the counter-culture see Edgar Friedenbergs's *Laing* (London: The Woburn Press, 1974). Other figures who influenced hippy writing include Carlos Castaneda, William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Timothy Leary.

impression produced by *The Truth Effect* is one of radical incoherence: the effects produced by the inconsistent convolutions and apparently arbitrary invaginations of its narrative line and structure are confusing in the extreme.

4.4.2 The death of fiction

The most obvious limit crossed in *The Truth Effect* is that which divides fiction from fact. This ‘crossing’ is evident both within the text’s story-world, the coherence of which gradually fractures to indicate a terrible and subsuming distress, and also in the treatment accorded to Burke’s novel after his death.

On the latter point, ostensibly this work is not about Burke but Sphere. Yet to innocently speak of this text as fiction is barely possible any longer. *The Truth Effect* does not stand on its own but is set within the larger volume entitled *When the Music’s Over: My Journey into Schizophrenia*, a book which contains a foreword by the founder of Schizophrenia Australia commending Burke for his courage in recording his own illness, and various writings by the editors which relate the action and tropes of *The Truth Effect* to the facts of Burke’s life. Further, a set of endnotes ties particular events in the text to the specifics of actuality. Moreover, all advertising of the book, including the commentary on the dust wrapper, refers to Burke’s life (and death). One is more or less compelled, therefore, to approach this work as allegorical or symbolic, to begin reading by stepping through a portal of correspondence (a mechanism invoked intradiegetically when Sphere observes, acerbically: “Psychos use allegory [...] The allegory of Sphere is that it sends you crazy being locked up with me” [178]).

Most poignant of all, a reproduction of Burke’s own suicide note is included at the end of the book – facing the closing page of the novel on which Sphere anticipates his own suicide. This in effect closes the gap between Burke and his narrator, and consummates a prophecy with which the text opened. Sphere’s declaration there, “I am a little-known secret that is soon to become a well-known secret” (26), is an accurate summation of the way that Burke’s hellish interior world was posthumously opened up to view by the publication of his novel.

While the editors’ diligence in meeting Burke’s final wishes is commendable, the posthumous treatment of *The Truth Effect* has closed down the possibility that a reader might be able to encounter this text as solely fiction. Yet, in a strange way, this treatment is entirely apt in that its effect replicates the abiding motif of the narrative.

The setting of the narrative ‘fiction’ within a historical context, the way that *The Truth Effect* is placed between portals which confront the reader with the ‘facts’ of Burke’s distress, is an analogue of a mechanism at work within the text itself in which the architecture of the fictional world is destabilized and collapses. As one reads this extraordinary work, rents in the diegetic weft and a series of reflexive metanarrational crises become increasingly obvious, and operate to destroy any sense of a discrete and coherent diegesis. In an important sense *The Truth Effect* is precisely ‘about’ the impossibility of maintaining a fiction in the face of overwhelming distress.

4.4.3 The collapse of wholeness; the collapse of fiction

A central preoccupation within the narrative of *The Truth Effect* is Burke’s/Sphere’s desire to maintain a fiction in the face of an abiding distress; and Burke and his madness are ultimately signified by the failure of this strategy. The way in which this attempted transformation of suffering into fiction unravels is intimately connected to a central textual conceit. *The Truth Effect* is a book written by Ross Burke, but it is about a character named Sphere who is also writing a book about his life. The foundation of the conceit is that these ‘two’ books are one and the same, in other words, that the artefact we are reading was actually written by Sphere.

The reason why fiction is important to the narrator(s) and narrative of *The Truth Effect* is alluded to at several moments. Burke/Sphere denotes *The Truth Effect* as an attempt to achieve “*the right perspective on a swaying environment*” (35; original emphasis), and in the following passage reflects on his reasons for writing:

It’s a book about the things a man couldn’t face but, once faced, their significance fades into insignificance. It’s about the meaning of a word, *Sphere*, that means nothing, zero or perfection. I wanted a reason to live so I invented a reason. (198)

Here, the fictionalizing of the self is insinuated as a potentially salutary process. ‘Invention’, the transmutation of the serious into the forgettable, and the creation of an alter-ego are ways in which Burke/Sphere attempts to manage his existence, and in particular “the things [he] couldn’t face”. Indeed, his *raison d’être*, the basis for continuing to exist, is situated in an invented realm and is itself an ‘invention’. Thus, a considerable investment appears to have been placed in what is subsequently revealed, as the narrative progresses, to be a fragile fictional economy. In addition to indicating the importance of the transformation of life into fiction, by extension such passages

also throw light on the significance and symbolism of the abject fracturing of this realm which will ultimately transpire.

The very first sentence of the novel by its syntax and epideictic stance tacitly acknowledges that it embodies the beginning of a process of fictionalization: “Once upon a time, the story began with our hero, *hereafter called Sphere*, answering the unmasked question” (26; emphasis mine). The impression produced here is of an author drawing a curtain aside on his creation, then attempting to remove himself from the reader’s purview and directing attention instead toward his fictional protagonist. Moreover, the explicit *naming* of this alter ego is foregrounded (“hereafter called Sphere”); and this naming occurs at an apparently intradiegetic moment. Similarly, in the passage I quoted earlier, the name is intimated as having been carefully chosen. Indeed, Burke’s choice of name for his protagonist is, I think, highly significant; in particular, it sheds further light on the fictionalizing process, and on the eventual collapse of fiction.

When Burke/Sphere speaks of “the things a man couldn’t face”, his allusions to fictionalization, that is to say, his mentions of ‘invention’ and ‘the book’, are proximate to an invocation of the connotations inhering in the name ‘Sphere’ (“It’s about the meaning of a word, Sphere, that means [...] perfection”). The choice of this name is insinuated as connected in some way to the transformation effected by the process of writing; indeed, that Burke/Sphere here denotes Sphere as a “word”, rather than a name per se, also seems to foreground that it has emerged from a process of lexical craft and creation. One reason that this word in particular has been selected is implicit in its connotation of perfection; for a persistent and defining motif of *The Truth Effect* is Burke/Sphere’s longing for an unattainable wholeness of self. And this desired wholeness is, it seems to me, intimately linked to a view of fiction as somehow self-sufficient and untainted by the world, in which, through the process of fictionalization, what is in actuality painfully ‘significant’ may be transformed and refracted into trivia.

‘Sphere’ is highlighted as symbolizing ‘perfection’ (in addition to “nothing, zero” – the implications of which I will return to), and the word does indeed evoke connotations of plenitude and self-sufficiency. Heidegger’s comments on this symbolic plenitude are worth quoting here:

But only Presence itself is truly present – Presence which is everywhere as the Same in its own center and, as such, is the sphere. The spherical does not consist in a circuit which then embraces, but in the unconcealing center that, lightening, safeguards present beings. The sphericity of the unifying, and the

unifying itself, have the character of unconcealing lightening, within which present beings can be present. This is why Parmenides [...] calls the eon, the presence of what is present, the *eukuklos sphaire*. This well-rounded sphere is to be thought of as the Being of beings, in the sense of the unconcealing-lightening unifying.⁷¹

Confirming that the name has been selected because of its connotations of wholeness, echoes of Heidegger's invocation of the 'well-rounded sphere' as the 'Being of beings' reverberate at various points in *The Truth Effect*, for instance, in the following passages:

The symbol is sphere. When the last sphere, the sun, the earth rolls into its ordered place, you will see before your eyes all the days of your life. (195)
Go to the centre of the Sphere. I am the perfect ego self [...]. (180)

One might, as I say, tentatively compare the 'wholeness' and perfection of the mythical sphere to an (equally mythical) image of the fictional text as separate from the painful contingencies and exigencies of existence (or, to borrow from Yukio Mishima, "a refractory object not even attempting to extend itself beyond its contours"⁷²). The comparison is reinforced in that, just as the fiction of *The Truth Effect* eventually collapses, so the perfection of the sphere is insinuated as violated even on the first page of the text. Thus, the narrative opens with Sphere asserting that his story is the corollary of his existence in a phrase which evokes an atomistic and contained Cartesianism – "I answer because I am" (25).⁷³ Yet, a dissilient counter-text immediately comes into play when he undercuts this reworking of the cogito by declaring: "I am Sphere, and this is the book of fear". The sentence foregrounds the phonetic proximity of 'Sphere' and 'fear', and, presaging the terror which will haunt the narrator throughout, the name's connotations of wholeness are undermined by the intimation that something presently unnamed and 'other' – a catalyst for terror – will pierce the sphere's/self's smooth periphery. This, together with the designation 'book of fear' – the opposite of the stoned, peacenik, hippy text – presages the insistent, aporetic sub-text which overshadows even the most anarchically joyful scenes.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language and Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 123.

⁷² Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, trans. by John Nathan (London: Secker & Warburg, 1966), p. 76.

⁷³ A possible interpretation of this pronouncement is that *being* requires an 'answer', that narration is a corollary of existence.

⁷⁴ The use of the name 'Sphere' might be interpreted as an attempt to absorb or transform fear into plenitude, or to negate it; again this is analogous to the purpose behind Burke's fictionalising of his life.

4.4.4 Narrative fragmentation in *The Truth Effect*

It is as if the realms of fiction and reality were divided by a line
that, when maintained, offers the possibility of winning but,
when crossed, signals the inevitability of losing.
Toni Morrison⁷⁵

The peripeteia which will destroy Sphere is, at it were, anticipated by the phonetic resonances of 'Sphere' as name/word; and just as dehiscence is signified within and by a name which contains the seeds of its own destruction, so too the fractures in the fictional world's integrality emerge from within its interiority. Burke/Sphere's intentions to recast the 'significant' as trivial or nonsensical fail because the 'insignificant' world of his invention fractures, its sphere pierced by distress and incoherence. This fracturing process, the details of which I will now consider, is most obvious in, firstly, the gradual collapse of the intradiegetic realm as 'consensual', that is to say, shared and participated in by all of the characters who appear to inhabit it, and, secondly, in the implications of the metafictional conceit around which *The Truth Effect* is structured. In practice, however, as with so much about *The Truth Effect*, these two factors do not remain discrete, but coalesce and interanimate each other.

4.4.4a The end of consensus

In the initial pages of *The Truth Effect* it appears as if all the characters, not just Sphere, participate in the bizarre mixture of the prosaic and fantastic which is the narrated story-world, but any impression that the text is structured around a singular mutual 'reality', albeit a particularly strange one, is quickly undermined. It soon becomes apparent that first the protagonist and then the narrator inhabit different universes to the other characters, and, at times, to each other, and that narration is not a reliable window onto a consistent realm but is, rather, the outworking of a lonely pathology or suffering.

The initial impression of consensuality, of a coherent story-world, is effected by Sphere's use of 'we' and 'us' in his narration, which insinuates that all the characters share in the same *weltanschauung* (and 'welt'); thus: "We were on our way to the local hotel to get the monetary system into our septic system" (26); "a sense of alienation from all earthly gods surrounded us" (34). However, the alert reader will soon notice that while the others in the group participate in the hallucinatory drug-fuelled

⁷⁵ 'Playing in the Dark', in *Literary Theory*, ed. by Rivkin and Ryan, pp. 923-935 (p. 930).

discourses which characterize the narrative, a gap or dissonance separates them from the hero. For instance, in the following extract Cane Toad and Elysium are clearly taken aback after Sphere, in the middle of a haircut, has incoherently proclaimed to his barber that he will “tell [...] the truth, about me who catches the world and twists it around till I am too confused to perceive the truth. I am the bullshit substitute” (31).

Once outside, Cane Toad, Elysium, and I chuckled. “Friend, you nearly got us put away,” Cane Toad exploded. “Your little exhibition just about gave me a heart attack. I was ready for a blood-curdling yell, your body hurtling through the air, clutching at the barber’s throat.”

I was worried about you,” Elysium said.

“Mate,” I gave an amused chuckle, “you missed the point. When I get stoned and confused and start babbling away, I black out in a past realization.”

“That’s heavy, I don’t understand it but it sounds heavy,” Cane Toad thought out loud.

“I’m very sensitive to the sunshine cosmic vibes. The barber’s a case. I could pick up his karma and it was all bad. It was a case of sadism, if I know my waves. I didn’t like the way he cut my hair. By the way, I meant what I said when I was in the chair. I don’t think it’s funny anymore. Mushrooms are killing me. People freak me out. People stare at me with telepathic eyeballs. Did you get a good look at his eyeballs? He was a gremlin, I’m sure. He had a screw loose. He lives in a dream, trying to erase his memory. He’s as mad as a two-bob watch. Yeah, I think he was a case.”

‘More like a babbling idiot who talks too much,” Cane Toad said.

Elysium smiled and said, “You can’t stand eyes either, Sphere....”

“Yeah,” I replied. “They remind me of the balls.”

“Balls?” Cane Toad asked.

Elysium and I remained silent and then I replied, “It’s where I come from.” (32)

The impression produced here is of baffled tolerance rather than a comprehension based on mutual experience. As the narrative unfolds, forbearance gradually shades into irritated rebuttals of Sphere’s fantasies:

I didn’t know what they were talking about as I slipped in the gutter, stumbled, and got it together again.

“Are you alright Sphere?” Elysium asked.

I was flipping out into a science-fiction nightmare. “Rainbow, did you say that we had been captured by an unidentified flying saucer?” I asked.

“No, mate.”

Shit, the meaning of the universe lost. [...]

“You and your dreams usually make no sense. You’ve got a disturbed head.” (38-9)

My conviction is for all of our thoughts to be free.

“Bullshit,” Wasteland says. (112)

I said, “[...] I’m a sorcerer and we will live in lightning flashes for ever.”

“Footrot, mate,” [Cane Toad] replied. “When are you going to talk straight?” (118)

Intradiegetic resistance and hostility to Sphere reach a crescendo about a third of the way into the narrative, shortly after his first stay in an asylum. When Sphere announces that he is going to “write the Great Australian Dream song about my life”, Wasteland reacts negatively: “So you’re going to write some babble about your life [...] A dirty poet. You’re going to tell the world who you are. They don’t need your lies mate” (88-9). In reply to Sphere’s declaration that he has “a hundred revelations rocking in my head and I want to escape the madness”, Wasteland retorts: “It sounds like you’re in psychosis”, and later suggests that Sphere’s verbal phantasmagoria is unworthy of cultivation: “Write a book of poetry then. Nobody will read it. Your mouth is your religion. You put your faith in a hole like that?” (90).

Episodes such as this one, in which the protagonist’s faith in his fantasy life is undermined, often issue into intense moments of anguish and self-doubt for the hero, while also connoting a sense that the narrator-author is becoming increasingly isolated within and from his own creation. The foundations underpinning Sphere’s world-view are thus insinuated as unsound, and he is left, as both narrator and protagonist, anxiously attempting to shore up a set of fixed points. In this latter instance, for example, *within* the realm of the story-world, following Wasteland’s caustic ‘logic’ Sphere internally recites, mantra-like, an apprehensive phylactery: “I crossed the room and looked into the mirror and thought, *Whoever knows the rules can play the game Whoever knows the fear words can control the universe*” (91). An impression is then produced that this withdrawal from engagement with Wasteland is reproduced in the *narration* as it switches to the present tense: “Still I know that nobody controls the universe. In the end it comes and goes and we’re going back to where it comes from. Now it comes back on me as five years ago it was the culmination of acid rock and now I have become disco”. Here it is as if Sphere-narrator has (albeit, in this instance, briefly) figuratively retreated from the diegesis – as if he no longer narrates but, rather, speaks to himself of lonely delusion. This pattern recurs throughout the text, until, at the close, Sphere’s narration barely engages with his characters at all.

Some of the most hostile reactions to Sphere’s growing madness occur when he talks about his literary aspirations; within the diegesis, therefore, writing is adumbrated as a contentious arena, deemed problematic and a manifestation of dysfunction. So, as the narrative structure gradually disintegrates, the impression is connoted that what was first expressed intradiegetically has arced out to be manifest and consummated in *The Truth Effect* as artefact.

As an example of this intradiegetic problematization of writing, after reading Sphere's "book of imagery songs", Wasteland responds:

"So these are your poems', he said. 'I'll tell you straight. They're shit, mate [...] Sorry, Sphere, but they are *poor*. These poems are the biggest load of aggrandized garbage I've read [...] Poets identify with their own thoughts and think they are magical. They think insanity is beautiful. Mate, don't fall into the same trap". (93)

As Sphere then reiterates his conviction that he "created rock and roll", Wasteland replies:

You're the inventor of shit, mate [...] Here's some advice, Sphere. You're shut in a room and all you have to do is open the door. You think the door is locked but it isn't. You just haven't the brains to open the door and to see people how they really are. You can't even see yourself in the mirror. You don't want to look. You want to hide away in your own little world that you created. If you're the inventor of rock and roll, why hasn't someone recorded these thoughts? (94)

Wasteland's cryptic retort gestures toward the dysfunctional and complex logic which structures *The Truth Effect*. Sphere as protagonist appears to be erecting a fictional or delusional world around himself which his friends perceive but do not partake in. Wasteland and most of the others consider that this fantasy realm could be easily dismantled if Sphere so chose. Yet the allusions and references to Sphere's distress connote that the fantasy is both a symptom of that distress, and a way of managing it: that is, Sphere attempts to convert distressing delusional systems into a coherent and less malignant fictional 'sphere' – a process which is of course reproduced within the narration. Sphere as protagonist appears to be wholly caught up within his fantasy, interpreting other's cynicism as ill-will or mean-spiritedness; Sphere as narrator/'author', however, occupies a shifting and uncertain ground, at times appearing subsumed by the fantastic, at others at least partly detached – in that he is able to record the others' reactions with dispassion and clarity, and on the whole narrates them without comment or challenge. Thus, episodes are often narrated so that they end dramatically with a put-down or challenge, leaving an impression of a truth having been spoken, and of Sphere's increasingly solitary madness. An example of this is the way that the chapter in which Wasteland tells Sphere that he is "the inventor of shit" ends:

"The songs aren't about my painful visions," I replied.

"Is love a painful vision?" he asked.

"No, but sex is. Rock and roll is not about love, but sex, anyway. [...] The musicians believe in the same music that I believe in."

“Yeah. Good luck with your madness.” And he got to his feet and walked away. (94-5)

For the reader, no matter how sympathetic, the likelihood is that s/he will share Wasteland’s confusion at Sphere’s bizarre discourse. While probably adjudging Wasteland’s too brusque a treatment, the reader in effect also ‘walks away’ from Sphere, in that comprehension or connection become progressively harder as the protagonist’s madness deepens. Intriguingly, the subsequent chapter opens with narration briefly switching to the third person, as if the narrator has also forsaken his subject.

The interaction between protagonist and narrator is central to the text’s impact; and a key reason why *The Truth Effect* does not cohere as a narrative is because the fluctuation between narratorial detachment and subsumption is inconsistent and contingent. The situation of the narrator is never satisfactorily resolved here; instead it shifts restlessly, insinuating distressed and ineffectual attempts to find a coherent subject position. Just as the hero’s chimeras are unmasked by the others, so the narrator is unable to maintain a distance from the raw materials of his story, that is, the force and source of his pathological delusion and distress. At first, while the narrator is sympathetic to the protagonist’s plight he does not wholly identify with it. Yet as the story progresses, this distance lessens, until, towards the close, it fragments in entropy and implosion, and, as I shall show, narration is akin to anguished diary entries. In fact the distance between protagonist and narrator oscillates in a precessional motion throughout the text – subtly librating between proximity and detachment.

Rather than a consensual sphere, at least *two* story-worlds are thus intuited: firstly, the startling phantasmagoria of Sphere’s interiority, and secondly, a half-seen penumbral region reflected back to Sphere by the other characters whom Sphere narrates, and which, gradually, one may come to recognize as one’s own world. This gradual understanding will be particularly disorienting for the reader who had thought to process the incongruities of the story by consigning *The Truth Effect* to a counter-cultural ‘genre’, thereby assimilating the unsettling narrative into a recognizable paradigm. Confusion is compounded by the implications of Sphere as narrator both creating and abiding in the fantastical while, at the same time, apparently allowing his reader to understand that this is a claustrophobic and deluded realm which is alienating him from others. Sphere appears to be both consumed by fantasy *and* aware of its delusional status; moreover, in an act of unsettling and anarchic rebellion mirroring a

schizophrenic psychology, his narrated characters seem to escape his attempts to direct their intradiegetic movements.

4.4.4b Metafiction as prison and magnifier

Burke's/Sphere's attempts to fabricate a coherent and discrete story-world are also destabilized by the metafictional underpinnings of *The Truth Effect*. The narrative is, indeed, a fiction about Sphere's fiction; not only is *The Truth Effect* supposedly the "book of Sphere", but within this artefact Sphere discusses the making of his text. Ross Burke, therefore, has written a book about an alter-ego who is writing a book, central to which is an analysis and account of the process of its writing: the book tells the story of its 'own' conception, genesis, and failure. This complex narrative structure may be a component of the distancing I have written of above, in that several narrative layers separate the 'real' author from his text, but, equally, that Burke's own actual situation is to some extent reproduced and, as it were, locked into a Chinese box narrative structure suggests, inversely, that the collapse of distancing is a corollary of this strategy. That is to say, Burke's distress is magnified and perpetuated by a mirroring effect, and the resultant kaleidoscopic array of self-images means that the suffering self is continually re-encountered rather than rendered "insignificant". Indeed, more often than not metafictional episodes expose Burke's/ Sphere's fictionalizing as delusion, as instances of pathology, thus puncturing the fantastical story-sphere. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is when Sphere narrates the return of his lover, Elysium Dream, and his daughter, Euthanasia; for immediately after this, as he talks with Abraxas, his doctor, this episode is revealed as delusional, and Sphere's attempts to achieve a salutary distancing through the mechanics of fictionalizing are uncovered.

In the psychiatric hospital I talked with Abraxas.

"I read your book. Why did you say Elysium returned when she didn't?"

"I visited her in the commune and discovered the child was not mine."

"Why give in to the delusion, then?"

"I wanted the book to have a happy ending, but it didn't work out that way. It's a worthless book. It does nothing except entertain a fringe audience. It's a failure, about a failure. I wanted a long, happy ending."

"Life isn't like that," Abraxas explained. "There are always bills to pay, dishes to wipe, the kids getting sick and a living to earn, and if you understand that, then that is all anyone can accomplish. Life does not have a happy ending. There will always be good and bad times. Your bad times have been worse than most. I gathered that from your book, but it sounds like there were plenty of good times. Try to understand, you are a paranoid schizophrenic and still you

had the courage to write a book. You don't know everything. You have been living in a romantic nightmare."

"The book is a fraud, Abraxas. I was a man seeking an answer and always the answer slipped away [...]". (197)

Here, the metafictional Chinese box effect has Abraxas's exposure of Sphere's book contained within that very book, while also occupying an undefined space in another unspecified work. That is, the conceit that this is the 'book of Sphere' still pertains, yet both Sphere and Abraxas objectify this artefact: Abraxas denoting its delusional status, and Sphere discussing its fraudulent character. In what space do these utterances occur? From what position does Sphere speak of his book? And if his book, as a record of his own subjectivity, is a fraud, then does not this reveal, within the diegesis, that 'Sphere' is himself an chimera? Such narratological aporias break down any distancing effect and produce tears in the narrative fabric through which one glimpses the real author's confusion and distress. Together with the way that consensus among characters as to the nature of the fictional realm is exposed as illusory, such metafictional crises insinuate a sense that the text's characters are sabotaging the intentions of the narrator, breaking free of his attempt to confine them within a created world and reflecting back to him his own suffering. In the example above, even Sphere-protagonist splits off from the trajectory set up for him by Sphere-narrator and admits that his 'book is a fraud': it is as if protagonist speaks directly to narrator, usurping his role as director of the fabulation. Yet hero and narrator also effectively coalesce here, in that when Sphere as protagonist speaks to Abraxas he is addressing him as a *reader* and acknowledging the failure of his fictional strategies. Abraxas, therefore, stands in for the real readers of this text, who may also conclude that *The Truth Effect* conforms to its oxymoronic description as a 'romantic nightmare' (or the "aggrandizement of the book" [198], as Sphere puts it) fashioned from, and in, adverse psychological conditions. Finally, Sphere's own assessment that his book is a 'failure about a failure' – a metafailure perhaps – is an apposite, if poignant, summation of the way in which this complex narrative produces its disturbing effects.

4.4.5 The ending of the fiction

It will perhaps be apparent from my attempts to unpick the narratology of *The Truth Effect*, and specifically the ways in which its fictional universe disaggregates, that this is not a straightforward task. The incoherence of the narrative structure means that the

text often appears akin to an engraving by Escher in which impossibility, narratological solecisms, and disorienting antilogies adumbrate even those moments in which a more familiar (narrative) universe is briefly glimpsed. As the text progresses, attempts to differentiate between narrative layers and levels become more difficult as distinctions become increasingly unclear. Sphere as protagonist, Sphere as narrator-author, the 'implied author' of *The Truth Effect*,⁷⁷ and its real author, Ross Burke, gradually coalesce or are displaced into incoherent and impossible narrative spaces. Moreover, the narrated characters begin to assume an unnerving autonomy, or appear to know more than their narrators.

At the dramatic and terrible end of Burke's text the full force of narrative and personal collapse are evident. Here an excoriating process which has been evident from the first page is consummated. In the opening scene of *The Truth Effect* Sphere's narrative of his ironic and light-hearted reworking of the cogito is undercut when he grants the reader access to his fragmenting interiority:

Magic Flower frowned, but I laughed. Yeah, I laughed. I was out of control, lost in my world of confusion. I realized that something was going wrong with my reasoning. I was talking shit again. My thoughts jumped. (25)

By the close of the narrative, Sphere's intuition here that, notwithstanding affectations of coolness and nonchalant self-possession, he is 'out of control', is frighteningly evident. After Sphere's relationship with his lover, Star Ship, ends, so too the story-world vanishes, and the penultimate chapter is comprised of a series of bizarre and delusional passages detached from any diegetic context. The only way that one can assimilate this section into the diegesis that has preceded it is to decode it as a narrative immersion into the outworkings of a lonely pathology, an immersion which insinuates Sphere's complete detachment from the earlier social context of interactions with other characters. Mapping his subsumption into delusion and fury, the narrative finally shatters into an acknowledgment of despair and collapse; and, significantly, at this anguished apogee, Burke/Sphere relinquishes the fantasy of his fiction, signalling its failure as a strategy.

Fuck it. Fuck it. Fuck it.

Cursed. My life is a living hell. The book is a lie. Do you fucking understand, creeps and cretins? It's a lie. I am a liar. It's a fantasy.

I smiled and knew they understood years ago. I am Abraxas. I am disturbed. I have been insane. Do you want a flower? Da, da, da, da, da, da. Tears in my eyes, I cry in my lonely room. I never will escape from paranoid schizophrenia.

⁷⁷ For the implied author see footnote 39 (this chapter).

How would you like to be called disturbed for the rest of your life? How would you like to be locked in an institution? How would you like to repeat second class? How would you like to be taught by nuns? How would you like to be a sexual deviant? How would you like to be a drug addict? How would you like to be me? How would you like to be a man? How would you like to be such a fool? (217)

In this confrontational moment, the narrator(s) of *The Truth Effect* first figuratively tear up what remains of its fantasy world, then directly address their readers. In anticipating the contents of Burke's own suicide note,⁷⁸ the terrible acknowledgments that Burke/Sphere will "never escape from paranoid schizophrenia" and that his life is "a living hell" are the keys to this passage, and are intimately linked to the failure of the fictional narrative to transform affliction into a counter-cultural fantasy. With the realization that his illness is still virulent and invasive, so Burke/Sphere is forced to relinquish his attempts at fictionalization. "The book", he presently adds, "has died" (220). Following the aggressive series of questions to the reader, Burke/Sphere then declaims, "This is the world I love being murdered by the beasts of more. This is our salvation and our destruction", and goes on: "Do you want more? Shall I go on? *More, more, more.* The child molester came out of hell. Do you want more?". The following page is entirely filled with the italicised word '*more*' arranged in lines and columns. This shocking and unexpected textual syncope confirms the sense of the breakdown in narrative and cognitive coherence which has increasingly inflected the narration. Insinuated in this moment of lexical excess is a collapse of limits and an invasion of textual space; an impression is produced that the story to be narrated can no longer be contained or expressed within a textual economy, and that, to return to William Styron, 'behind' this page is "a horror [...] so overwhelming as to be quite beyond expression".⁷⁹

This collapse at the text's close is the consummation of a process which, as I have said, inflects the entire work: a definitive characteristic of this text is the lability of the textual-narratological limits and boundaries – an instability which reflects the narrator's interior life. This, indeed, is a primary way that *The Truth Effect* signifies: the manner that shifting boundaries are continually transgressed, leaving the reader disoriented is, as Sphere puts it, the way that "the *spirit* of the book [speaks]" (212; my emphasis). The real story of *The Truth Effect* cannot be understood by attempting to

⁷⁸ "I cannot live in insanity and that is the only reason why I die. I'm a paranoid schizophrenic and for us life is a living hell." *When the Music's Over*, p. 221.

⁷⁹ Styron, *Darkness Visible*, p. 83.

follow the bizarre and often nonsensical action, but is intuited by an engagement with its narratology and an understanding of its ineffectual limits: these are the arenas in which Burke's/Sphere's madness and subjectivity are figuratively made present.⁸⁰

4.4.6 Blanchot: fiction as detachment and negation

In attempting to manage distress by refracting it through the lens of fantasy, *The Truth Effect* represents an attempt to achieve “*the right perspective on a swaying environment*” (35). In order to further understand the implications of fictionalization, I want to return briefly to Blanchot, in that aspects of his discussion of the enigmatic nature of literature may be germane in this context. Timothy Clark explains Blanchot's conception of the role of the imagination in symbolic narrative thus:

Imagination is made possible by the ability to *detach*, as it were, reality from itself, that constitutive re-move whereby imagination negates given states of affairs. It is a power of bracketing, capable of even sidestepping the world itself.⁸¹

For Blanchot, a distancing, then, is “constitutive of the imagination”,⁸² and it is precisely this distancing effect which Burke seems to be consciously invoking in *The Truth Effect*. In Blanchot's terms, he notes in *The Space of Literature* that, “To write [...] is to pass from the first to the third person, so that what happens to me happens to no one, is anonymous insofar as it concerns me, repeats itself in an infinite dispersal” (SL 33). In addition, the theme of distance and transformation is linked in Blanchot's scheme to a further motif, one which I touched on earlier with reference to Kaysen's memoir, and which may be instructive to revisit. In the quotation above, Blanchot alludes to his idea of literature as a ‘negation’ of both the object it refers to and the idea of the object – that is to say, instead of referring ‘outwards’, literary language ‘repeats itself in an infinite dispersal’. This notion may shed further light on Burke's choice of name for the protagonist of *The Truth Effect* when we recall that ‘Sphere’ is deemed to connote not only “perfection”, but also “nothing, zero” (198). Seen in this light, fictionalization and the transformation of Burke into Sphere may in part be intended as

⁸⁰ On the role of boundaries in the sense of selfhood, Sheila McNamee's observations are pertinent. “Once drawn, a boundary signifies identity; it provides a sense of what sort of ‘thing’ is being identified by indicating that from which it is distinguished. It is at this point that the possibility of constructing the ‘other’ emerges”. ‘Reconstructing Identity: the Communal Construction of Crisis’, in *Therapy as Social Construction*, ed. by Sheila McNamee and Kenneth J. Gergen (London: Sage, 1992), pp. 187-8.

⁸¹ Timothy Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 77.

⁸² *Ibid*, pp. 77-8.

neutering processes in which the problematics of existence, including the dysfunctional, suffering self, are nullified.

4.5 Conclusion: metaphors – selves

At the close of *The Truth Effect*, the nullification of the self assumes a different significance to that which I have invoked above, however. Following the narrative collapse I have described, the book concludes with a poem entitled ‘Self destruction Self construction’ and a single page of text spoken by a protagonist whose identity remains uncertain. Both poem and text contain contemplations of suicide, and the final line of the narrative implies that the demise of the ‘book’ will be followed by the death of speaker. That on the facing page a transcription of Ross Burke’s own suicide note has been reproduced only strengthens this impression, while seeming to reiterate the coalescence of narrator-protagonist and author. The narrative of *The Truth Effect* ends in this implied convergence of Burke’s and Sphere’s trajectories, the startling moment of conjunction consummating an attritional process which has been at work throughout the text.⁸²

The Truth Effect records, and is an instance of, an attempt to “take refuge from inner and outer reality”. This phrase, from Aldous Huxley’s definition of “the schizophrenic”, which Burke adopts as his novel’s epigraph, defines the schizophrenic’s “sickness” as “the inability to take refuge from inner and outer reality [...] in the home-made universe of common sense – the strictly human world of useful notions, shared symbols and socially acceptable conventions”.⁸³ The bizarre landscape conjured up in *The Truth Effect* is Burke’s/Sphere’s own “home-made universe”, yet his alienation from his peers, and the reader’s own experience of estrangement, dramatize how the paucity of “shared symbols” within this realm pushes Sphere inevitably toward isolation and breakdown. It is as if, as readers, we reproduce and participate in the alienation of the hero. A process which structures and defines the content of the text is therefore reproduced in its reception: the densest, most imperspicuous passages occur when Sphere is locked into his own interiority, when

⁸² Mark Williams has suggested that suicide may itself be an attempt to articulate an inexpressible suffering; certainly his notion that self-annihilation may be a last gasp at retrieving control over an existence slewing adrift would be an apposite corollary of the attritional erosion of narratorial autonomy dramatized in *The Truth Effect*. Mark Williams, *Suicide and Attempted Suicide: Understanding the cry of pain* (London: Penguin, 2001).

⁸³ Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (London Chatto & Windus, 1954), quoted in *When the Music’s Over*, p. 23.

interaction with others is absent, and it is precisely at these moments that the reader is most lost and disconnected from the hero.

Burke/Sphere's final lament that "the book is a lie", comes immediately after an admission that his life "is a living hell" (217); the unavoidable implication is that the ironic distancing of his attempt to fictionalize his life has glossed over the abiding and chronic suffering from which its hallucinatory landscapes have been fashioned. The 'truth effect' of the novel is consummated in the complete collapse of this distance, the coalescence of narrator and narrated, and the acknowledgment that the novel's universe has been an anamorphosis, the hip and self-sustaining figure of Sphere a chimera. At the close of the book an unmanageable and terrifying distress invades and destroys the narrative – the force of which is inimical to the spirit of fiction as construction, artifice, art.

In this chapter I have been focussing on the literary representation of madness as an "abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief".⁸⁵ The two instances of 'metaphorically' 'making present' I have considered both invoke madness as in some sense unrepresentable, but they do this in very different ways. For Susanna Kaysen, refracting her story through the lens of literary device and form reclaims it from the prosaic empiricism of psychiatry; not only her madness, but also her frozen identity are rescued from definitiveness in the indeterminacy of the literary text. For Ross Burke, however, madness overwhelms the text, and the attempt to transform the self via the literary and figurative fails. In the complex narrative economy of *The Truth Effect* a subjectivity and its distress are connoted, but both remain resolutely unknowable and alienated. *Girl, Interrupted*, *Prozac Diary*, and *Spasm* are polished works, which, by employing poetic, literary techniques, and by drawing the reader in to participate in the production of a signified, elliptically and obliquely signal the unspeakable. In contrast to these relational narratives, Ross Burke's text produces an impression of utter desolation and isolation, as the reader is alienated by its complete otherness, confused by its byzantine narrative (il)logics. Finally, one can only peer into Burke's/Sphere's aloneness, unable to connect, as both protagonist and narrator are swept away by the force of delusion and grief. Paradoxically it is precisely in the narrator's inability to manage the narration of distress or to convincingly translate delusion into fiction, and in the erosion and overwhelming of narrative intention, that the reader perceives the figure of the madman and his madness.

⁸⁵ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 3.

5. Autobiographical Interventions: Starting to Speak

Only horror-films and fairy-stories tell the truth about the worst things in life,
the moments when hands turns [sic] into claws and a familiar face becomes a living thing.
1982, Janine, Alasdair Gray¹

5.1 Introduction

Given the inherent ‘unspeakability’ of madness which I discussed in the last chapter, it is perhaps surprising that so few autopathographers have employed a graphic, concrete, method of articulation of the sort exemplified in the anguished repetition of “*more*” filling an entire page and concluding *The Truth Effect*. For paradoxically, in this breakdown of narrative coherence, perhaps for the first time in this complex text a ‘meaning’ is clear: that of the concomitant cognitive collapse of a subject disintegrating under psychological assault. Yet, despite the characteristic “internal chaos”² of madness most autopathographies adopt a singular narrative accent and a reasonably conventional narrative style. I will, in the next chapter, suggest why this might be the case, with specific reference to the diary form. But first, and bridging the apparently wide gap separating the ordered tones of the texts I consider there from the incoherence of *The Truth Effect*, I will look at a novel – Alasdair Gray’s *1982, Janine* – which takes as its theme the various narrative means by which one may approach the distressed self. Because it purports to signify madness as if it were happening at the moment of narration (various narrative devices are used; as it were, to make madness appear present on the page), this work illumines what is not said in most autopathographies. In positioning itself at the level of consciousness and taking in the full ambit of the cognitive processes of the narrator, Gray’s novel highlights, I suggest, usually unstated but crucial dynamics inherent in much autopathographical writing of madness.

The remarkable similarities between *1982, Janine* and *The Truth Effect* include the protagonist’s construction of elaborate fantasies to transform distress and the radical use of typography to convey psychological disorder. However, while *The Truth Effect* despairingly concludes with breakdown and suicide, *1982, Janine* moves beyond disintegration to propose another (narrative) mode of being in which the self adopts a

¹ Alasdair Gray, *1982, Janine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), p. 244. Subsequent page references are given parenthetically in the text.

² Carol S. North, *Welcome, Silence: My Triumph over Schizophrenia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 67.

different mode of ‘speaking’ of and to itself. It is the movement from fantasy and avoidance, through collapse, to an active and autobiographical speaking of the self which makes *1982, Janine* a particularly important work for this study. For at least as much as telling a story it is also a meditation on and a demonstration of a particular type of story-telling and its importance for the well-being of the self.

5.2.1 Fantasy and truth

1982, Janine is narrated by Jock McLeish, a middle-aged supervisor of security installations. Mapping an acute psychological crisis, the story takes place over the course of a single drunken night in a Greenock hotel room and is almost entirely the record of McLeish’s thoughts and cognitive processes there. The novel is divided into three sections, distinguished by striking shifts in narrative style. The first of these charts the despairing McLeish’s attempts to imaginatively ‘author’ escapist pornographic fantasies often involving sado-masochism, rape, and various sexual fetishes, and centring around several women, including the Janine of the title. The relentless attrition of his distress, however, eventually leads him to make an unsuccessful suicide attempt. In this central section, the depiction of McLeish’s fragmenting consciousness is achieved by startling and innovative uses of typography. In the final part of the book a chastened McLeish ‘begins again’, and, attempting to forgo fantasizing, relates the story of how he arrived at this despairing impasse. This narrativizing process leads him to understand the dynamics of his despair and facilitates the recovery of personal agency; the book ends with McLeish finally intervening in the ‘facts’ of his life. Significantly moreover, the fact of autobiographical narration is itself insinuated as an instance of intervention and the deployment of agency.

In the first part of *1982, Janine* it soon becomes apparent to the reader that fantasy, together with alcohol, are mechanisms by which McLeish is attempting to suffocate the memory of a painful personal history (“I refuse to remember my marriage. I will pour into the mouth of this head another dram of stupidity. The questioning part of this brain is too active tonight” [15]). Unable to maintain the continuum of fantasy, however, details from his real life continually intrude, irrupting through the weft of his imaginings. Moreover, the cognitive and narrative processes by which he attempts to construct fantasy and repress memory also form components of the narrative action. This section of the novel is presented as a patchwork of fragments,

its plot (if such can be said to exist here at all) oscillating wildly between the convolutions of McLeish's agonized psyche, his ridiculously overblown pornographic imaginings (which recall the fantastic realms of *The Truth Effect*), and the often painful autobiographical memories which he tries to suppress.

Despite his attempts to shelter beneath a veil of fantasy, in this section of the novel the reality of McLeish's life flickers in the margins of the text. In the glimpses we are afforded of his history, in the force of his need to hide in fantasy, and in the manner in which fantasy is deployed, a narrative running counter to the stories McLeish constructs becomes increasingly evident. Thus, instead of following the plots of the distasteful 'fictions' which McLeish authors, the reader, together with a reluctant McLeish himself, intuits a different story in which the need to fantasize forms part of an autobiography of failure, powerlessness, regret, and despair. Moreover, it gradually becomes apparent that the fantasies' contents are not divorced from his real life, but rather enact and reproduce the structures and events which have determined his existence and identity, primarily his subsumption by the imperatives of his political-economic milieu (thus, for instance, the powerless women in his fantasies mirror his own powerlessness), and also a deep sexual unhappiness and guilt predicated on his failed relationships with women. Indeed, the omnipotent narrator of the fantasies who declares, "This is splendid. I have never before enjoyed such perfect control" (28), is the inverted image of the McLeish adumbrated as an ineffectual agent in his lived existence.

McLeish's intention in this section, then, is to confabulate, and escape into, a bizarre and oppressive sexual universe in which he, as 'author', has total control. His fantasies are gradually revealed, however, to be veils with which he attempts to shroud his unhappiness,³ and which, as in *The Truth Effect*, actually reproduce the contours and outlines of his psyche and history.⁴ Thus, the 'plot' of this section of *1982, Janine* is not the 'fiction' of McLeish's imaginings but the tensions and distress which

³ In Merle Rubin's words, they are "structures that screen out the past, the future, politics, family, friendship, love, common sense, and even God". "The comedy of desperation, the tears of hope", *The Christian Science Monitor* (October 5th, 1984). Rubin does not make the link, but the notion of 'screening structures' inevitably calls to mind Freud's contention that 'screen memories' thrown up by the unconscious protect the psyche from painful and forgotten experience. See Sigmund Freud, 'Screen Memories', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Volume III), trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London, 1962), pp. 303-21, and also *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. by Alan Tyson (New York: Norton, 1965), pp. 43-52.

⁴ *1982, Janine* maps a process described by Elizabeth Wurtzel, in which distress manifests itself *through* other discourses, despite the author's intention: "it just kept creeping up, over and over again, like a palimpsest, a text hidden beneath whatever else I was working on that refused to remain submerged". *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America* (London: Quartet, 1999), p. 315.

surround and motivate fictionalization: a ‘narrative’ of the unsuccessful struggle of consciousness to exclude its own unwelcome other.⁵

5.2.2 Breakdown

McLeish’s growing disgust at his pornographic sublimations and displacements (“God damn my fucking prick” [172]), together with the continual irruptions of painful memories, particularly those concerning his mistreatment of his first lover, Denny, induce him to attempt suicide by means of an overdose. In this central section of the novel, subtitled ‘The Ministry of Voices’, Gray employs radically innovative typographical methods to convey the fragmentation of the self in distress, and particularly to represent the myriad voices of the self colliding and overlapping (“Queer feelings queer words are abroad in me” [177]). Immediately preceding his breakdown, McLeish describes the experience of subjective disaggregation which the subsequent fragmentation of form will dramatize.

I am in chaos [...] my head is full of rubber bullets, my head is full of snow and it’s melting, my head is full of wee boats and they’re all sunk, my head is full of Reichstags and they’re all burning, my head is crammed with engines doing different things at different speeds (you can’t control them) I CAN’T CONTROL THEM [...]. (177)

In the section which follows, as with the conclusion to *The Truth Effect* where the force of Burke/Sphere’s anguish appears to overwhelm the capacity of narrative representation, Gray uses typographical means to convey the extent of McLeish’s internal chaos. McLeish’s increasingly bizarre sexual fantasies persist, but in both margins of the page other voices now intrude. The pages here are divided into three unequal columns each containing a different ‘narrative’ or voice. Fantasy (still ‘central’) is surrounded, on one side, by what is ostensibly the voice of God (“listen i came because you called and now your hot and cold floods of speech hardly allow me a word in edgeways” 178) and is rendered in a minuscule font; and, on the other, by Jock’s own anguish in the form of inarticulate repetitive exclamations: “OO OO OO OO [...] COLD COLD COLD COLD [...] OO NO OO NO OO NO [...]” (178-80).

⁵ C.f. Petar Ramadanovic on Laplanche and trauma: “What is other is not simply an outside which lies beyond the protective layer surrounding our biological organism; the other is not outside, but an addressee who is within and who sends an enigmatic message to an ego that this message also creates.” ‘Introduction: Trauma and Crisis’, *Postmodern Culture*, 11: 2 (January, 2001) <<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.101/11.2introduction.txt>>, para 15 of 19 [accessed 15 March 2003].

The overall effect is to suggest a layering of consciousness in which the competing voices struggle against each other: awareness and subjectivity are presented as split at each moment between different poles and foci.

Eventually Jock's cry of "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO" (181) literally and metaphorically draws a line across the page, and, in this brief textual moment, a singular voice again speaks. The connotation is that the force and imperative of an acute anguish has shut out internal clamour, and truncated the fantasy of the central textual column. Insinuating that his despair is further attenuating the cohesiveness of fantasy, with the return of the triple columnar structure McLeish's sexual visions are replaced by agonized repudiations of sex/uality and a nascent awareness of the restrictive oppressions he labours under: "*hate sex hate sex hate my sex I can play no good games in this tight suit which does not fit*" (182).

In this line 'suit' is a metonym for McLeish's upbringing and work: the figure evokes the way in which ideology encases the subject, and anticipates the nightmarish epiphany dawning on McLeish, in which he comes to understand the full extent of his infiltration and constitution by inimical discourses.⁶ Furthermore, the proximity of the twin repudiations of sex and work indicates ideology's permeation of even the supposedly private realm of sexuality and its associated "games". Continuing this process of dis-illusionment, another 'line' then constructs a barrier across the page, this time taking the form of an exclamatory extrapolation from the term 'echolalia', which, in its definition as a medical condition in which another's words are repeated mechanically, reinforces the impression that McLeish is coming to realize that the 'privacy' of interiority, of language and thought, have been shaped by external forces,⁷ and that his sexual dreams are 'echoes' rather than liberatory original creations.

*I scream I dream and my dream
is an echo echo echo echolalia
lovely word echolalia brain dis-
ease echolalilalilalilalilalila
lalilalilalilalilalilalilalilalilalilalilalilalilalilalilalilalilalilalila*
(182)

As the effect of the overdose overwhelms McLeish's cognitive processes and he begins to lose consciousness, fantasy returns in an ever more incoherent form and with

⁶ See Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), pp. 170-86.

⁷ C.f. Barthes: "the language I speak within myself is not of my time: it is prey, by nature, to ideological suspicion" *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 40.

a fraught sexual longing powering its images. The typographical layout is now fractured into multiple sections, as the voices of the self are let loose in a series of frenzied collisions and interpenetrations which further erode the textual dominance of sexual fantasy. Now, for instance, the “still small voice” (130) is far more verbose and McLeish’s exclamations of agony encroach onto the centre of the page. Evoking the architecture of the self collapsing in the shadow of Jock’s imminent death, narrative coherence almost entirely dissipates in this textual segment: to read the text the reader must turn the book upside-down and sideways, must decipher utterances split in half by inarticulate expressions of grief, must decide in which order to read the disparate narrative threads. ‘Sense’ is here produced graphically as much as semantically. The banks of words which form irregular and shifting shapes and appear to jostle with each for precedence produce a powerful impression of the turbulent flow and violent wave patterns of a psychology at the end of its tether. This climactic textual locus, a crescendo-like consummation of an attritional fragmentation, is the antithesis of a linear ordered narrative.

5.2.3 From breakdown to narrative

‘Salvation’ for McLeish – both from death and his violent patterns of thinking – is obliquely connoted as an effect arising from the disaggregation of the self. In particular, as other voices dislodge fantasy and force their way into his awareness, he is prompted to act, and think, in less self-destructive ways. Thus, he is saved from death by the urging of the ‘small voice’ to make himself sick; it is also this voice which, in the midst of the typographical fragmentation, indicates that there may be a way out of the entrapments of both his conditioning and nihilistic anguish. This latter point is especially germane to my discussion in that, what still appears at this stage to be the voice of ‘God’, hints that McLeish can find release from suffering by adopting a different mode of ‘narrative engagement’ with himself, and attending to his neglected history:

listen i am the mercy you asked for the child and future you prayed for a new
past listen look back the past is that fountain where all streams spring listen
streams you damned flow under my ground dig here for the needed water. (182)

Although McLeish does not at the time appear to heed this gnomic pronouncement, this is a crucial moment, for signalled here is the avenue whereby cognition will be

transformed from psychosis and self-destructive fantasy into a creative and agential autobiographical engagement. McLeish will indeed choose to 'look back' to the past by narrating it, and therein will lie a kind of 'salvation'.

The stylistic shift from the chaos of distress to the relative order of autobiographical narration is heralded by several blank pages signifying McLeish's lapse into unconsciousness. Following this hiatus, and as if he has heeded the prompting of 'God', on awakening, McLeish determines to tell:

The story of *how I went wrong* [...] telling my story in the difficult oldfashioned way, placing events in the order they befell so that I recall the purchase of my new suit before, and not after I seduce Denny in it. (191 & 192)

This intention to narrate is subsequently consummated in the next section of the text (although the conventionality and simple linearity invoked here do not do justice to the fluid and dynamic self-telling which will evolve). But even before he begins to tell his story, McLeish outlines how such a narration might catalyze and enable change.

It behoves a man every so often, from time to time, now and again, to speak out and inform the world (that is to say, himself) just what his game is; and if (having been carried by the prevailing current up shit creek after mislaying the paddle) he has no game of his own and finds life pointless, it even more behoves him to tell truthfully how he reached this pointless place in order to say Goodbye to it and go elsewhere. If he wants a change. Which I do. (191)

5.2.4 Making the narrative self

McLeish's linking of narration and change recalls theoretical work on the concept of narrative identity, in which, via the production of narrative, agency may be recovered and a 'coherent' identity formulated.⁸ Thus, in Kim Worthington's summary: "a narrative of self provides the human subject with a sense of self-continuity and coherence that enables the projection of desire and intention towards an imagined future".⁹ Such a writing of the life-story also "performs the rewriting of self in ways that impact on the present and offer new configurations for the future"¹⁰ and allows the subject "to function as a purposive, morally responsible agent".¹¹ Such ideas encapsulate the effects produced by the autobiographical turn in *1982, Janine* in which

⁸ See my first chapter for the theoretical background to the concept of narrative identity.

⁹ Kim L. Worthington, *Self as Narrative: Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.13. See also Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), in which she addresses the notion of narrative "as foundational to the construction of a coherent sense of self" (p. 80).

¹⁰ Worthington, *Self as Narrative*, p. 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 13.

“new configurations for the future” do indeed issue from the process of narration. But in addition, the very act of purposive telling is here presented as an example of agency; moreover, narration is the most important instance of McLeish functioning as a “purposive, morally responsible agent” because only from this kind of narrative base is further action feasible. What transpires in this final section is that McLeish sets out – embarks – on a narrative course, using language to carve a route through a remembered history and the emanations of a present distress to formulate a coherent story and sense of self – which then in turn enables him to intervene in the facts of his existence and subjection.¹² This is in stark contrast to the first two sections of the book, in which a kaleidoscope of fragmentary texts have washed over and eventually overwhelmed him.

5.2.5 Politics, narrative, redemption

McLeish’s reclamation of narrative is not portrayed as a quietistic action but is intimately enmeshed with the socio-political. The ‘telling truthfully’ of autobiographical narration is denoted here as crucial for the self struggling to find a clearing in the entangling thickets of ideology; and such a space is in part produced through the narrative revelation of the extent of his conditioning. In an essay on women’s ‘autobiographical practices’, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have written of the way in which subjects who are “simultaneously implicated in contradictory and conflicting discursive calls” are able, through the work of narrative, to “discover or glimpse spaces through which to maneuver, spaces through which to resist, spaces for change”.¹³ *1982, Janine* is exploring and mapping a very similar dynamic.

Throughout the text, McLeish demonstrates a pained awareness of his intimate entanglement in the multiple and intersecting grids of politics, class, and power. Even

¹² Compare Holstein’s and Gubrium’s invocation of the *active storyteller*: “Storytelling itself contributes to the circumstances of its own narration; the active storyteller shapes the occasion in the process of conveying his or her own account”. James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 107. See also Jaquelyn Wiersma’s discussion of the transformative power of narrative in which she contends that a narrator’s life “changed as she told it, in large part because she was telling it”. ‘Karen: The Transforming Story’, in *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding*, ed. by George C. Rosenwald and Richard L. Ochberg (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 196.

¹³ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, ‘Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women’s Autobiographical Practices’, in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. by S. Smith and J. Watson (Wisconsin and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), p. 23. Smith and Watson are addressing the attempts by feminist scholars, dissatisfied with conceptions of the subject as discursively subjected and therefore deprived of the potential for resistance, to probe the possibilities of agency but without returning to a humanist or Cartesian notion of the autonomous atomistic ‘individual’. See my introduction for further discussion of this position. Also relevant in this context is Michel de Certeau’s seminal *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

in the opening section of the book this is evident; for instance, when he declares: "I am not a man, I am an instrument. I am the instrument of a firm which installs instruments to protect the instruments of firms which produce meat, cloth, machines, and whisky, instruments to feed, dress, move and stupefy us" (105). As a whole, the novel is intercalated with McLeish's angry observations on the state of Scottish and British politics and the iniquitous effect of market economics on cultural life, environment, and nation. These 'ravings' are often moments of agonistic intellectual struggle which reveal to him the painful truth of his own complicities and entanglements, and that his story cannot be hypostatized, separated off from a broader history and context. This interanimation of the personal and political is unambiguously made explicit, when, in what is effectively an idiolectic summation of the insidious mechanisms of interpellation, McLeish laments: "POLITICS WILL NOT LEAVE ME ALONE. Everything I know, everything I am has been permitted or buggered up by some sort of political arrangement" (231-2).

Gray makes it clear, however, that in his fantasy life McLeish's intention is to resist such painful epiphanies in which the extent of his 'instrumentality' is uncovered:

cool down cool down you are goading yourself into a FRENZY my friend, think about Superb, think about fucking Janine, don't think about fucking POLITICS. (66)

This resistance also involves avoiding the 'articulating' (to play on its dual connotations of 'utterance' and 'jointing') effects of narrative whereby such insights may be grasped. For if one defines the making of a narrative as a process of joining together fragments, of weaving the disparate into a whole and appropriating some kind of meaning from both process and artefact, then it is precisely this that McLeish rejects when he laments: "Thinking is a pain because it joins everything together" (66). This reluctance is motivated by the fear that articulation will lead inevitably back to the political awareness which fantasy is in part designed to curtail. Moreover, because fantasy is insinuated as enmeshed in, and shaped by, his social milieu, it must also remain 'unjoined', 'unarticulated', or it will lead him relentlessly back to the 'facts' of his existence. Thus, in his relationship with Sontag, McLeish hides the content of his fantasies from her because he fears she will 'join everything together' and reveal the way that the brutalities of power inform his imaginings:

If she succeeded in connecting them to ordinary life she would make me feel responsible for every atrocity from Auschwitz and Nagasaki to Vietnam and the

war in Ulster and I REFUSE TO FEEL GUILTY ABOUT EVERYTHING.
(66)

Following his psychic collapse, when he has accepted that examining and narrativising his past may offer the possibility of redemption, McLeish's petition to 'God' – "help me become less mysterious to myself" – is predicated on his realization that "it is ignorance of my own nature which has made me an easy tool in the hands of others" (195). The understanding of self, achieved through self-narration, then, will inevitably implicate the operations of power in his interiority; however, in that knowledge also lies the possibility that the pervasive influence of ideology, which flourishes because of its insidiousness, may be attenuated.¹⁴ Involving an interrogation of Jock's own 'stupefaction', narration is thus insinuated as a potentially dynamic catalyst: telling his story, rather than trying to hide from it, is linked to the reclamation of agency.

5.2.6 Telling the story: God

Following McLeish's suicide attempt, the 'story', in effect, begins again, with him embarking on a more conventional autobiographical rendition of his history ("Life was comfortable but depressed in the house where I was born" [196]), but it is not only through returning him to an engagement with politics that McLeish's autobiographical telling avoids solipsism. In contrast to the self-involvement of the first section, this narrative mode is implied as an intrinsically dialogic one.

Right at the outset of his autobiographical turn McLeish acknowledges the importance of an addressee in the mechanisms of story:

¹⁴ See Marta Caminero-Santangelo: "[I]deology can be transformed through an active engagement in the act of representation – through any discourse that challenges previous representations by exposing their ideological function." In *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or, Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 94. Also compare Jeff Lewis on Marx and ideology: "if the working classes are able to conceive of their freedom, it may be that they have already reduced their oppression. That is, the very act of thinking may constitute an overcoming of the limits of oppression." J. Lewis, 'Marxism and the Formation of Cultural Ideology', in idem., *Cultural Studies* (London: Sage, 2002), p. 80. Ian Craib's gloss on Lukacs's analysis, in *History and Class Consciousness*, of Marxism's transcendence of subject/object dualisms is of interest here: "the proletariat becomes conscious of itself as both subject and object through the mediation of the developing relationships with other classes. Its discovery of itself as an object produced in the past, and as the object of present production processes, is the precondition of its action as subject to produce itself as a new future object through a transformation of those production processes and their accompanying social structures". Ian Craib, *Experiencing Identity* (London: Sage, 1998), p. 19.

Telling a straightforward story is like cooking a meal, hard to do thoroughly if you are doing it for yourself alone. I must use my imagination again, deliberately this time, to conjure up a suitable audience. (194)

This passage signals the genesis of a profound ontological shift in which McLeish's narrative stance moves from the fixity and obsession of the inward stare exemplified in his obsessional fantasising to an outward-facing position in which his narrative is consciously inserted into a social context. Following this, he invokes 'God' as his audience, but then imagines the possibility of divine alterity manifesting itself as "all mankind", concluding, "Now *there* is an audience which deserves my full attention. I'll burst my braces to tell a straightforward history if you can appear to me as that" (195). Such statements anticipate McLeish's emergent outward stance; for as his story progresses, narration increasingly orients him 'outward' to encounter the world.

Included in the more dialogic mode of being which emerges with autobiographical telling is McLeish's increased ability to contemplate alterity within the self. His conjurations of a possible 'audience' result from his reflecting on the previously unacknowledged role of 'God' within his cognitive processes. Re-imagining the significance of divinity, he also begins to reclaim at least some of what constitutes 'God' as a split-off aspect of himself. Thus, he re-interprets emanations he had read as divine ("Jumping Jehovah! Is it yourself?" [178]), relegating them from ineffability to a more prosaic status: "You sounded more like Groucho Marx or a critical housewife than the Universal Framemaker" (194). This reworking is then followed by a creative acknowledgement of his need for a sympathetic audience, a rejection of an authoritarian parent-like God figure, and finally a conception of divinity into a form which harmonizes with McLeish's particular subjective situation and needs – culminating in his imaginative construction of God as a symbol of the human 'otherness' that is 'all mankind'.

I hate Big Daddies. What I need just now is what we all need, the unprejudiced ear of someone too wise to be chilled by wickedness or softened by suffering. My wickedness and suffering are average for a middle-aged man in these parts, so if you curse, forgive or bless me you will be committing a serious irrelevancy [...] Another thing: one solitary god is too few for me. I need more of you. (The Holy Trinity?) Too abstract and episcopalian. (JesusMaryandJoseph?) Too catholic and familiar. Nor do I want you splitting into Jupiter, Mars, Venus etcetera, those Mediterranean aristos make me feel cheap and inhibited. Why should you be less to me than all mankind? (194-5).

A complex dynamic, crucial to the evolving story of McLeish's reclaiming of agency and reconciliation with the self, is signalled in this passage. Here he begins a

creative examination of, and engagement with, an otherness which at times has embodied compassion, but at others has nagged and threatened. Continuing by derogating God from the position of alien but omnipotent Father, and reappropriating the powerful sceptical energies he had projected away from himself, McLeish nevertheless does not entirely jettison the sense of ineffability.

I know there was a time when you were worshipped as an extraterrestrial Big Daddy who would one day screw up the earth like bumpaper and flush it down the stank because too many bad boys and girls used it [...] You are not extraterrestrial. You are the small glimmer of farseeing, intelligent kindness which, properly strengthened and shared, will light us to a better outcome. Lead kindly light amid the encircling gloom. [...] It is I who am the cynic, the external judge and condemner of everything. I only believe in an opposite like you to keep a sane balance in my head. (314)

Here two ‘Gods’ are effectively differentiated. One, the “farseeing, intelligent kindness”, is accounted for, but remains, in some sense, unassimilated (the self is *led* by its illumination); the other, in the shape of the condemnatory voice, is aggregated with the narrating self, and is now acknowledged as *constructed* by the self in order to offset McLeish’s tendencies to manic, blinkered obsession. Later, he again re-imagines divinity as a concept in which both alterity and a compassionate self-care commingle. Thus, the formerly monolithic ‘God’ is conjugated into a new paradigm.

McLeish’s conjugation of God produces an agnate figure (or figures) emerging from his experience of the multiple self. The reworked model preserves a sense of otherness; in addition, the process of interrogation embodies agency, in that McLeish examines his own experience of self and attempts to (re)signify it. Beginning this process, McLeish has vowed to use his “imagination again, *deliberately this time*”; the phrase connotes a realization that his earlier fantasising has not exemplified agency, but has rather been an obsessional practice akin to a neurotic tic or addiction, in which the supposed ‘teller’ has actually been ‘told’, and interiority colonized by inimical discourses. At the same time, the refusal to consign the ineffable to a historical and false consciousness – the preservation, that is, of a sense of that which cannot be entirely contained nor deconstructed by the self’s narration – is significant. As I argue below, an important element of McLeish’s autobiographical turn is that it is not a move toward a narrative of certainty.

Autobiographical narration in *1982, Janine* signifies both an inward and outward-facing process; the inward turn of the self to gather up and embrace its disparate manifestations is a dialogic movement which opens the possibility of

encountering alterity.¹⁵ The enmity which has overshadowed McLeish's relations with aspects of the multiple self is replaced by an openness to encounter, and an increasing ability to leave open the possibility of an unaccountable excess. 'God' is encountered within the self, but is linked to multiplicity, the supra-natural, and finally to 'all mankind'. Thus, the other within connects with the other without: both the audience to McLeish's story and the predicted relationships which he envisages as he moves from inward to external agency – "Before I die I will make folk glad I exist again" (340).

5.2.7 Telling the story: the uncertain narrative

The autobiographical turn in *1982, Janine* does not encompass a move to a strictly linear informational narrative form, nor does it represent an attempt to formulate a narrative of existential certainty definitively demarcating a discrete past and precluding ambiguity and contradiction. McLeish warns at one stage that an episode "may not be practically true. I pieced it together from bits of gossip" (235); reiterating Lauren Slater's words in *Spasm*, he warns his reader about his unreliability as witness – "I exaggerate" (246); and, narrating his cruelty to his first lover, he speaks of the inadequacy of an informational autobiographical discourse to convey distress and suffering: "Only horror-films and fairy-stories tell the truth about the worst things in life, the moments when hands turns [sic] into claws and a familiar face becomes a living thing" (244). Even towards the end of his account he highlights its partiality and contingency, asking "What solid truth can we find in our mistaken heads? [...] My head is a windy cave, a narrow but bottomless pit where true and false memories, hopes, dreams and information blow up and down like dust in draught." (329).

Moreover, although McLeish's pathological attempts to suffocate unwelcome aspects of self which characterized the first section of the book are now more rarely evident, his 'dialogue' with the various facets of the self is often more akin to a struggle than a polite conversation; the interjections of 'god' still sometimes trouble the narrating self, and tactics of avoidance are still sometimes resorted to in order to escape from the implications of particularly painful episodes. Most importantly, the fact of the present narrating self is not hidden, but rather is continually foregrounded, along with

¹⁵ See Kim Worthington, *Self as Narrative*, p. 13: "in thinking myself, I remember myself: I draw together my multiple members - past and other subject positions - into a coherent narrative of selfhood which is more or less readable by myself and others".

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alternative ideals of co-operation, mutuality and respect. Similarly, rather than mastering a discrete but factitious ‘truth’ or attempting to master the self by suppressing its otherness, the internal dialogue of the self is now engaged in the articulating effects of narrative and ‘joins together’ his previous exploitative relationships with the strategies of a rapacious science – both of which are signified as springing from the same root.¹⁶

technological men are uncreative liars, mad gardeners who poison while planting and profit by damaging their own seed, lunatics who fuck and neglect everything in reach which has given them strength and confidence, like ... like

...

(Like Jock McLeish fucking and neglecting Denny for a woman he could not fertilise?)

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

(313)

5.3.1 Writing, without power

To speak: it is necessary – *without the power.*

Sarah Kofman

‘Articulation’ and ‘narrative’ are, in *1982, Janine*, nuanced and subtle conceptions. As a process of ‘joining together’, articulation is an ethical act predicated on an acceptance of personal responsibility; it interrogates ideology and disaggregates the foundational ideological structures of subjectivity, but it is not an attempt at mastery or the elimination of uncertainty and ambivalence. In the opening section of the text joining together has been shunned; but paradoxically it is only within articulation that gaps in the weft of cognition and discourse can be comfortably accommodated. An authentic engagement with narrative, therefore, is denoted as involving an orientation toward openness and acceptance; it is portrayed as a process rather than a product, as a dynamic mediation between past, present, and future, between history and fantasy, between regret and desire. Joining together leads to uncertainty as well as knowledge; articulation surprises as well as confirms. In sum, narrative, therefore, is construed as a practice; is dynamic, ongoing, and organic, and leads not to closure but to openness.

¹⁶ C.f. Blanchot: “Behind the man of science, impersonal and as though effaced, there is the terrible flame of absolute knowledge.” Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 25.

These particular conceptions of narrative and articulation seem to me to accord with theoretical reflections by Sarah Kofman (and also Maurice Blanchot) concerning the representation of traumatic experience. Throughout much of her work Kofman was concerned to highlight and challenge the way that traditional forms of narrative in their dependence on retrospective closure, linearity, unity, and coherence repress the possibility of multiplicity and otherness. She searched for, as Vivian Liska puts it, “a mode of thinking and writing capable of undoing the repressive authority and exclusionary mastery in a philosophical tradition that pretends to have conclusive truths, to own the ‘last word’”.¹⁷ Kofman herself put it like this:

To speak: it is necessary – *without the power*: without allowing language, too powerful, sovereign, to master the aporetic situation, absolute powerlessness and very distress, to enclose it in the clarity and happiness of daylight.¹⁸

This passage is from Kofman’s *Smothered Words*, a meditation on the effects of the Holocaust on discourse, and a work which communicates performatively as much as via the constative, eschewing the language of mastery by paratactically weaving together fragments of autobiography, history, and theory with extensive quotations from Robert Antelme’s Holocaust memoir *The Human Race* and the writings of Maurice Blanchot. *Ecrire sans pouvoir* is formulated in the light of Adorno’s post-Auschwitz categorical imperative – “to arrange one’s thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen”¹⁹ – and represents an “attempt to give voice to a language beyond the authority of an author”. As her translator Madeleine Dobie explains, it is “writing without being able to write [...] the impossible writing which is not of the order of intentionality and power”.²⁰

Kofman, therefore, is attempting to think a way out of the aporia into which the trajectory of the horror of the Shoah has led; the implications of this “*absolute event* [...] where the movement of Meaning was swallowed up”²¹ has, she claims, following Blanchot, rendered impossible, or unethical, the rational, enclosed narrative: “About Auschwitz and after Auschwitz no story is possible, if by a story one means: to tell a

¹⁷ Vivian Liska, ‘Parricidal Autobiographies: Sarah Kofman between Theory and Memory,’ *The European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 7.1 (2000), p. 91.

¹⁸ Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, trans. by Madeleine Dobie (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 10. See also Kofman’s ‘Writing Without Power,’ *Women’s Philosophy Review* 13 (June 1995), pp. 5-8.

¹⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 365, quoted in Kofman, *Smothered Words*, p. 7.

²⁰ Madeleine Dobie, Translator’s Introduction to *Smothered Words*, p. xiv.

²¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 47, quoted in Kofman, *Smothered Words*, p.6.

story of events which makes sense”.²² The Shoah was a “rupture which left nothing intact”;²³ and therefore to formulate a writing *with* power, that is, a narrative defined by its self-sufficiency, its movement towards closure and coherence, would be an act of *mauvais foi* which, in its inherent drive for mastery over the chaos of events, enacts the same dynamic which led to “that utter-burn where all history took fire”.²⁴ These arguments evoke wider contemporary scepticisms about any discourse which makes claims of ultimate authenticity, finality, ‘truth’, but it is important to emphasize that Kofman does not invoke silence as a possible counter to the bad faith of narrative mastery.²⁵ “It is *necessary*” to speak, she avers, but, writing of her own father’s death at the hands of the Nazis, she reflects on *how* such a speech might be voiced: “Because he was a Jew, my father died in Auschwitz: How can it be not be said? And how can it be said? How can one speak of that before which all possibility of speech ceases?”²⁶ Writing, or speaking, without power is Kofman’s attempt to answer such questions.²⁷

²² Kofman, *Smothered Words*, p. 14.

²³ *Ibid*, p.15.

²⁴ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 47, quoted in Kofman, *Smothered Words*, p. 6. From a sociological perspective, Ian Craib has argued convincingly for an informed differentiation in assessing the value of various narratives. In his essay ‘Narratives as bad faith’ (in *Lines of Narrative: Psychosocial Perspectives*, ed. by Molly Andrews [London, Routledge, 2000], pp. 64-74), he resists the kind of “naïve psychological conception of narrative” (p. 65) which works, he suggests, to close down “the often incoherent height and depths of human experience” (p. 73). Such conceptual aids can be used by the individual to hide from those “complexities of experience” that s/he finds difficult. In contradistinction, Craib lauds the type of story which facilitates an engagement with uncertainty and which helps us “hold on to [...] our ability to find as much of the human condition within ourselves as possible”. See also, on a similar theme, Craib’s ‘The Unhealthy Underside of Narratives’, in *Narrative, Memory and Health*, ed. by Christine Horrocks (Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press, 2003), pp. 1-11.

²⁵ The same is true of Blanchot; as Lars Iyer points out, in a discussion of the argument in *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot does not advocate “a kind of *mutism* – an *apoliticism* or *atheoreticism* that would manifest itself by opting out of speech, of society. *Not* to speak would be to confirm, albeit in silence, the predominance of a monological discourse that cannot interrupt itself and refuses interruption, determining what mutism is and can be, tolerating it without allowing it to alter speech and the social and cultural conditions to which it answers. *One has to speak*; this is why the eyewitness journalist is admirable, why documentaries are essential – it is why those who are denied a voice should be given one, why speech is a need, even a *right* and we have to listen out for other voices and assume the responsibility of speaking for others who cannot speak, to write on local and specific issues, to engage in discussion in view of particular injustices.” ‘Literary Communism. Blanchot’s Conversations with Bataille and Levinas’, *Symposium, Journal of the Canadian Society for Hermeneutics and Postmodern Thought*, 6.1 (2002), pp. 49-50.

²⁶ Kofman, *Smothered Words*, p. 9

²⁷ Compare Luce Irigaray: “Meanwhile the only activity which endeavours to take women into language is the narrative discourse. She tells about herself [...] That has cathartic effects [...] But it doesn’t establish a new framework and code of symbolic exchanges. This position amounts to the traditional place allowed to women: they tell about themselves, just as they embroider, do tapestry, or knitting. And it’s sometimes more linear and less liberating, since it is the case that the code is not appropriate to them [...] Women create little trouble when they tell about themselves.” In *French Philosophers in Conversation: Levinas, Schneider, Serres, Irigaray, Le Doeuff, Derrida*, ed. by Raoul Mortley (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 72.

The particular kind of autobiographical narration which McLeish eventually resolves on seems to me to be consonant in important respects with Kofman's notion of speaking or writing without power. In addition, with regard to the text of *1982, Janine* as a whole, Gray's use of shifting, unsettled narrative styles implicitly challenges notions that conventional narrative structuring is any way 'natural' or 'innocent', or that thought and story exist in a private interior realm untouched by ideology. This preoccupation evokes Kofman's interrogation of the ethical implications inhering in various narrative modes. George Donaldson and Alison Lee's assessment of Gray's writing strategies further explicates my point; they note that "his fiction is subversive in that it seeks to call into question precisely those literary conventions that seem to reflect reality while they are, in fact, constructing it."²⁸ An interrogative bent toward literary and narrative convention pertains throughout *1982, Janine*, including the autobiographical section which, as dynamic practice, is denoted as constitutive rather than expressive. Moreover, the idea that particular modes of narration are also modes of existing (and carry with them ethical implications) is the chief preoccupation, even the 'story', of this text.

5.3.2 Blanchot and testimony

In his own reflections on the modalities of Robert Antelme's 'just speech', Blanchot writes:

It is not [...] simply a witness's testimony to the reality of the camps or a historical reporting, nor is it an autobiographical narrative. It is clear that for Robert Antelme, and very surely for many others, it is a question not of telling one's story, of testifying, but essentially of *speaking*. But which speech is being given expression? Precisely that just speech in which '*Autrui*,' prevented from all disclosure throughout his or her entire stay in the camp, could, and only at the end, be received and come into human hearing.²⁹

This quotation touches on one of the chief preoccupations of *The Infinite Conversation*: the problematic of *autrui*. *Autrui* represents a particular invocation of other(ness) which, as Blanchot's translator Susan Hanson notes, "cannot be posed apart from the

²⁸ George Donaldson and Alison Lee, 'Is eating people really wrong? Dining with Alasdair Gray,' *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 15.2 (Summer 1995), p. 155.

²⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 134. Subsequent quotations are given in parentheses in the text preceded by the abbreviation IC.

question of human relations”, yet is “both man and other than ‘man’”.³⁰ The specific essay from which this quotation is taken, in which Blanchot reflects on Antelme’s ‘just speaking’ and the ‘limit-experience’ of the German camps, further illuminates the engagement in *1982, Janine* with the limits and potentialities of specific modes of narration.

Before going further, I should first stress again that in *1982, Janine* the drive to dominate and control inherent in a certain sort of ‘narrative’ is directly linked to atrocity and exploitation – and that the Holocaust is specifically included in this. Thus McLeish’s narrational attempts to override the multiplicity of the self’s voices with a dominant narrative of exploitation and sexual cruelty are linked to the strategies of a rapacious scientific-economic complex, with both signified as springing from the same root. McLeish recognizes there is a nexus between his exploitative reveries and the cruelties of history: to connect up his fantasies “to ordinary life”, he declares, “would make me feel responsible for every atrocity from Auschwitz and Nagasaki to Vietnam” (66). In addition, he reflects on the “crime” and “whoredom” of “selling your intelligence”, of which, in his obeisance to a corporate and exploitative ‘narrative’, he has been guilty: such a prostitution and abuse of the self is abhorrent, he realises, because it facilitates the normalization of cruelty, the uncritical acceptance of injustice: “murder follows it, gaschambers, Dresden, arms manufacture, napalm, body dumps and every sort of massacre” (258).

An understanding of the way that the crisis-experience in *1982, Janine* operates and issues into the ‘redemptive’ narrative is aided by Blanchot’s analysis of the limit-experience. With reference to Antelme, he writes that at the moment of utter affliction we are “deprived of the power to say ‘I’” (IC 130) and identity itself is destroyed: “the person no longer exists in his or her personal identity [...] all human power is outside him, as are existence in the first person, individual sovereignty, and the speech that says ‘I’” (IC 131 & 132). Gray’s treatment of psychical extremity is consonant with these observations – for at these instances in the novel, in the disintegration of composition and form there is indeed a radical erosion of the teller, the voice, the very idea of narrative.³¹ Moreover, in its opening section the narrative movement of *1982, Janine* resembles an attempt at repression (of *autrui*), elaborated by Blanchot as the prevention

³⁰ Susan Hanson, ‘This Double Exigency: Naming the Possible, Responding to the Impossible,’ Foreword to *The Infinite Conversation*, p. xxx.

³¹ Because no ‘I’ remains to tell what happens a first person narrative is impossible: if such a narrative strategy was employed its structure and form would immediately nullify affliction’s effects.

of all ‘disclosure’; and in the closing ‘autobiography’ McLeish adopts a narrative in which *autrui* may be received – a ‘just’ or ethical speech³² formulated on the basis of compassion and receptivity.

In Blanchot’s analysis of the relation between *autrui* and crisis a further parallel with *1982, Janine* is apparent. Blanchot contends that the ‘limit’ of the limit-experience is a locus when alterity is encountered – a moment at which “we would be nothing other than this Other that we are not” (IC 130): “fallen away from my self, foreign to myself, what is affirmed in my place is the foreignness of the other who is *autrui*: man as absolutely other” (IC 132). Not in itself redemptive, for this would lend a spurious meaning to the ‘utter-burn’, the alterity encountered signifies not the *I am* of selfhood but the *it is* of *autrui*: “the very presence of *autrui* in himself”, which “bears in itself [...] *the ultimate feeling of belonging to mankind*” (IC 132).³³ In line with the tenor of these reflections, it is striking that, as McLeish’s personality disintegrates, the ‘still small voice’, the absolute other within the self, speaks, and that this previously suppressed and violated alter increasingly encroaches into the *mise-en-page*. That this encroachment occurs as McLeish’s attempt to permanently silence its voice by self-murder reaches its apogee suggests that Blanchot’s formulation of the dismantled self becoming nothing other “than this Other that we are not” may be apposite here.³⁴ Moreover, in the light of Blanchot’s association of *autrui* with the “*feeling of belonging to mankind*” (IC 132), McLeish’s re-envisioning of ‘god’ as “all mankind” (195) is also of interest.

³² Blanchot also calls this speech the “attention to affliction” – an apposite description of McLeish’s autobiographical narrative (IC 132).

³³ Absolute and naked alterity puts the “power of the Powerful radically into question” (IC 133) because the oppressor is only “master of the possible” and cannot overcome “this relation that does not derive from mastery and that power cannot measure” (IC 132). Thus, force cannot “strike down” the “presence” of alterity for presence is either here or not-here: all force can achieve is to “cause [presence] to disappear” (129). Hence Blanchot’s gnomic pronouncement, taken up by Kofman as her conclusion to *Smothered Words*, that “man is the indestructible. And this means that there is no limit to the destruction of man” (IC 135). See also *Smothered Words*, p. 73. The silent presence of alterity cannot be stricken or made to submit, therefore the “Anti-Semite, at grips with the infinite [...] commits himself to a limitless movement of refusal”: for the oppressor, “excluding the Jews is not enough, exterminating them is not enough”, Blanchot elaborates, “they must also be struck from history, removed from the books through which they speak to us” (IC 129-30).

³⁴ While the rage which drives the oppressor is directed outward at the Jew, as the title of Antelme’s book suggests, their force is aimed also at themselves: “there is only one human race” writes Antelme; the Jew, as Blanchot puts it, “gives a figure to the repulsion inspired by the Other, the uneasiness before what comes from afar” (IC 129). Antelme’s and Kofman’s ‘new humanism’ is predicated on the notion of this shared alterity (in contradistinction to a shared essence): the SS man is “locked in the same species and the same history as the detainee” (SM 68) and the “community without community” is founded on a “shared power to choose [...] the power to kill *and* the power to respect and safeguard the incommensurable distance” (SM 70).

Blanchot stresses, however, that the “quasi-impersonal affirmation” of alterity signifies only the ultimate “failure of power”, and that in itself this affirmation is not redemptive (IC 133). It is only transformed into “victory” or “salvation” with a restorative reformulation of subjectivity. He writes:

For such a movement to be truly affirmed, there must be restored – beyond this self that I have ceased to be, and within the anonymous community – the instance of a Self-Subject: no longer as a dominating and oppressive power drawn up against the ‘other’ that is *autrui*, but as what can receive the unknown and the foreign, receive them in the justice of a true *speech*. (IC 133)

Blanchot’s insistence here that that a speaking ‘Self-Subject’³⁵ “must be restored” is reiterated by Kofman in her emphasis on the necessity of speech. And as with Kofman’s notion of speaking without power, it provides an interpretive frame with which to track the shifts in the narrative dynamics of *1982, Janine*. In particular, McLeish’s trajectory on the far side of disintegration as he starts to speak and embarks on a willed narrative course seems to me to exemplify the restoration of a ‘Self-Subject’ now newly alerted to the vital reverberations of the ‘unknown and foreign’ – and therefore formulating a ‘true’ or ‘just’ speech

In the above quotation Blanchot sites the restoration of the Self-Subject as occurring ‘within the anonymous community’. He goes on to write of:

the possibility that a Self outside me become not only conscious of the affliction as though this Self were in my place, but become responsible for it by recognizing in it an injustice committed against everyone – that is, it must find in this injustice the point of departure for a *common demand*.

– In other words, through the intermediary of an exterior Subject who affirms itself as being the representative of a collective structure (for example, class consciousness), the one who is dispossessed must be received back into a situation of dialectical struggle so he may once again consider himself as a force, the force that resides in the man of need, and finally, in the ‘proletarian’. (IC 134)

The emphasis here on the restoration of self-subjectivity as occurring within an intersubjective and collective context, is broadly in accord with the shift dramatized in *1982, Janine* when McLeish adopts autobiographical narration. As we have seen, the radically changed register and style of this section differs from what went before in part because it is concerned with communication, and is oriented outward to an imagined reader – “It behoves a man [...] to speak out and inform the world” (191). Intrinsic to

³⁵ As I read it, Blanchot uses this term, evoking as it does both selfhood and subjectivity, in order to suggest an identity that is poised between the essential and the determined, invoking an identity that is neither fully subjected nor entirely autonomous or sovereign.

this is the possibility that the reader, as an other who escapes McLeish's control, hears his laments, understands his plight, and that his/her invisible presence catalyzes and enables articulation itself. It is as if the reader as imagined witness exerts a subtle but irresistible force on narration, as if McLeish's formerly circular and repetitious refrains come under the gravitational sway of an unseen body, their neurotic orbit shifting. As proof of the efficacy of this realignment, and via the joining processes enabled by it, McLeish is now alive to social justice and inequity, is aware that his story fits within a broader narrative, and determines to act according to that realisation. His narrative tracks the personal and political and sutures them together: a process congruent with being received back into a "situation of dialectical struggle".

5.4 Autobiography as intervention

Although McLeish's autobiographical narrative allows the shadow of a writing without power to darken the "clarity and happiness of daylight", this does not equate to a writing without agency, political focus, or moral compass. Moreover, the reclamation of agency is inherent in McLeish's decision to (re)tell his story. His joining together, or articulation, of disparate elements in his existence, and of the personal and political, is presented as an action, a course McLeish sets out on, which takes place 'inwardly'. The dramatic shifts in narrative style, together with the innovative use of typography, map the real effects of this inner action by making them visible.

Towards the end of his narrative, having apprised himself of his own immersion in and subsumption by the dictates of ideology, McLeish determines to intervene in the facts of his external existence by writing a letter of resignation to his employers.³⁶ This important episode is insinuated as a consummation of the narrative act. In the midst of a final fraught masturbatory fantasy, 'God' suddenly intercedes and an agonistic dialogue with the other in the self ensues. From this, McLeish realises that he can "change things overnight" (321), in other words, that he can still act in the world despite the depredatory affects of ideology.

I INSIST THAT YOU HEAR ME, DID WE RIDE THROUGH THE VALLEY
OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH JUST TO LET YOU TICKLE YOURSELF

³⁶ See Richard Kearney's discussion of the role of narrative in ethical initiative: "For the self to *see* its being-in-the-world in terms of larger possibilities of vision often empowers it to *undertake* action, that is, to better identify its goals and motives and so inaugurate a new beginning", 'Ethics of the narrative self,' in *Between Philosophy and Poetry: Writing, Rhythm, History*, ed. by Massimo Verdicchio and Robert Burch (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 91-8 (p. 96).

INTO ANOTHER WANK? Dear God, you know I need these absurd elaborations to fool myself into believing I can once again clasp the body of a woman. DID WE BREAK OUT OF THE DUNGEON OF DESPAIR JUST TO LET YOU TICKLE YOURSELF INTO ANOTHER WANK? I cannot change things overnight, God. WRONG. WRONG. WRONG.

Wrong?

Yes, on second thoughts I certainly can change things overnight. [...] Open case. Remove notepad. [...] Take pen from breastpocket [...] And now, the truth. (321-2)

The 'narrative' that McLeish now authors is not solely addressed to himself, or to God, but to his superiors. The effect on his consciousness of authoring this new textual production is quietly dramatic: McLeish resumes his fantasy, but this now spirals towards evanescence, and is increasingly shot through with painful moments of self-awareness in which the events and characters of reverie merge with the narrating consciousness. Almost immediately he realises that fantasy has crowded out the possibility of growth and creativity: "Nothing new will grow in a mind containing a Cadillac containing Janine reading a story about Nina surveying herself in a full-length mirror" (324); and this insight then issues into a series of self-reflexive moments in which, finally, the character Janine, as McLeish has done in the course of his autobiography, sees the extent of her own conditioning:

She realises it is her inescapable fate to be a character in a story by someone who dictates every one of her movements and emotions, someone she will never meet and cannot appeal to. (332)

This denouement marks the reclamation of Janine by McLeish as an aspect of himself. In a mirroring effect – a mise-en-abyme in which Janine looks up to her author and sees she is not free – the character arrives at the same understanding that her author has already partially intuited about the extent of his conditioning and relative lack of personal autonomy. Yet in the moment of realization it is also as if, like McLeish, she achieves liberty in the very process of understanding its lack. For Janine, of course, is solely McLeish's 'instrument' – the point of her existence is that she fulfils his desires, that she does his bidding, that she has no will or understanding of her own. Her existence is dependent on the seamless continuum of fantasy; indeed her purpose is to maintain and uphold the effect *of* continuum. Yet, by perceiving the architecture of the conditions of her existence, it is as if the character has broken free of

her author's control, as if she has pierced the continuum and exposed the phantasmatic conditions responsible for her being.

Because Janine is an aspect of McLeish, the moment is also a further step in his growing self-understanding. Here, the self sees itself mirrored in its own productions, sees itself in itself. As if to emphasise this, immediately after Janine's recognition of her status as "a character in a story" McLeish realizes that he too has been 'authored':

For more than twenty-five years [...] I was a character in a script written by National Security. That script governed my main movements, and therefore my emotions. How could I learn to love my wife when for half the week I never even slept with her? I made myself completely predictable so that the firm could predict me. I stopped growing, stopped changing. I helped the firm grow, instead of me. I became a damned chilly gentlemanly mildmannered selfcrushing bore like my father. (332-3)

Because McLeish and Janine are aspects of the same whole, their trajectories mirror each other. And in the end it is through understanding his fantasies that McLeish comes to understand himself. At the close of his narrative, the reconciliation of the self with its own productions is completed when he reclaims Janine as his 'soul': "O Janine, my silly soul, come to me now. I will be gentle. I will be kind" (341). McLeish realizes here that Janine is a figure of the abused self, and his exploitative fantasies metaphors for the way in which he has neglected the aspirations and ideals which form the marrow of his person.

1982, Janine closes, then, with this reconciliation of Janine and McLeish. But, perhaps more importantly, it also leaves McLeish determined to act and understanding that his actions must take into account his interconnectedness with, and need for, others. As morning dawns, and he imagines himself leaving the hotel room, although his future is open and uncertain rather than 'scripted', he voices this resolve: "I will have the pose of an acrobat about to step on to a high wire, of an actor about to take the stage in a wholly new play. Nobody will guess what I am going to do. I do not know it myself. But I will not do nothing. No, I will not do nothing" (341). As with his decision to tell the story of how he 'went wrong', this is an expression of agency, and it is motivated by a desire to matter, to connect, to relate:

Before I die I will make folk glad I exist again [...] I will work among the people I know; I will not squander myself in fantasies; I will think to a purpose, think harder and drink less; I will be recognized by my neighbours; I will converse and speak my mind; I will find friends allies, enemies if need be, and I (don't name it). (340)

5.5.1 Where shall I live?: narrative and attachment

Echoing and proceeding from his reconnection with the split-off aspects of the self, in the preceding quotation McLeish recognizes, and vows to re-insert himself into, a social, interpersonal network and context. This highly significant shift in his narrative stance brings to mind James Glass's contention, in a study of the utterances and narratives of mental patients, that a "compelling desire" of his subjects is to find a "way back to a communal attachment".³⁷ In this study I have already referred to Glass's work, and I will revisit it now as it provides further insights into the plot of *1982, Janine*. Firstly, I should point out that McLeish's experience within the lonely phantasmagoria of fantasy accords uncannily with Glass's description of the radical alienation inherent in madness.

Persons who experience themselves as inhuman, as things or objects, as pieces of dead matter, as merging with spaceships or spirits, live in unfree states of being. Nothing in a world of community or association – none of the benefits of a participatory citizenship – lies within their frame of reference. It is a condition radically alienated from civilized values; it is a tragedy, a withdrawal from shared public realities, from being and working in common [...] such individuals feel themselves driven from a common humanity and a common history. Their experience shows a retreat to private inner worlds whose meaning is obscure, whose function lies in defending the self from fear, annihilation, and fragmentation. (PT 2)

In *Private Terror/ Public Life*, Glass's central argument is that the self is essentially "political – more accurately, communal or social", and that madness alienates individuals from the political realm: they must subsist "outside [...] the walls of the *polis*" (PT 1 & 2). He summarizes the dilemma of the "psychically estranged" as encapsulated in this question: "Where shall I live? In my delusional world with its familiar and busy action or in agonizing and despairing association with other persons?". Through the "breaking down of delusional defences", he suggests that reintegration "into shared and reciprocal experiences" is feasible (PT 2). Again, these summations resonate with aspects of the plot of *1982, Janine*. McLeish's delusions do, indeed, separate him from engaging with the social and political; his subsequent breakdown disaggregates these defensive delusions; and his longing to re-enter a social, interpersonal context evokes the "compelling desire" of Glass's subjects to return to

³⁷ James M. Glass, *Private Terror/ Public Life: Psychosis and the Politics of Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p.1. Subsequent quotations are given in parentheses in the text and preceded by the abbreviation PT.

“communal attachment” (PT 1). Further, that McLeish’s move toward the social, consensual world occurs after he has reconciled himself to the formerly split-off and reified aspects of the self (which he has indeed experienced “as things or objects”), is consonant with Glass’s contention that “to practice citizenship, the self requires a sense of its own humanness” (PT 3).

Glass’s comment that “the public realm returns the self to the world of concrete experience, to historical time, reciprocal obligation and community” (PT 28), may suggest that the autobiographical act in *1982, Janine is itself* sited within a social, communal realm. For McLeish’s turn to autobiography has not only revisited “concrete experience”, pieced together “historical time”, and uncovered the painful memories of “reciprocal obligation”, it has also been a conscious turn outward, with narrative envisaged as mediating between self and other – McLeish’s “suitable audience”. Such an analysis would be in concert with Glass’s understanding that the narrative act returns the speaker to “history, time, continuity and action [...] to feel tied to the Other [sic] through a dialectical and shared symbolism” (PT 34), and that “the shared, the public, the dramatic as artistic *form* moves outward in contrast to the solipsistic, isolated, realm of the interior monologue, the delusion without any shared component or audience” (PT 16).

5.5.2 Compassion and autobiography

Again paralleling aspects of Glass’s analysis, intrinsic to McLeish’s recovery is the more compassionate stance he adopts following his breakdown, and also his renewed acknowledgement of human need and dependency. Most evident and consummated in his declaration that he will be “gentle [...] kind” to the split-off, cathected Janine, this has also been implicitly operative throughout the autobiographical turn. In the midst of his collapse, ‘God’ has aligned the concept of ‘mercy’ with the recovery of the past (“listen i am the mercy you asked for the child and future you prayed for a new past listen look back the past is that fountain where all streams spring” [182]); it is McLeish’s subsequent application of mercy and forgiveness to the faltering remembered self, together with a stance oriented toward the encounter with otherness which distinguish the autobiographical narrative from the earlier engagements with the self. Moreover, his resolve to re-engage with others – to “make folk glad I exist again” – emerges from the final piece of autobiographical narration, in which McLeish relates

the only “single brave good unselfish action” (334) he can recall himself doing. As a schoolboy, he intervened to stop his class teacher bullying a child with a speech impediment, an action which secured the respect and affection of his peers. The memory is cathartic and allows McLeish to grieve for his own abused soul as well as those he has abused, to acknowledge his desire for meaningful relationship, and awakens possibility and hope: “What is this queer bright fluttering sensation as if a thing weighted down for a long time was released and starting, a little, to stir?” (340).

That the reconciliation with the abused self is consummated at the close of McLeish’s narrative insinuates that the process of autobiography can itself be an act of mercy. In line with this idea, the cultural critic bell hooks has written of her own attempts to write autobiography, and how she moved from wanting to negate a despised historical self, to “kill that self in writing”,³⁸ to an understanding of the recuperative power of autobiography. Her description of autobiographical remembering as a salutary “joining of fragments” recalls McLeish’s understanding that his narrative “joins everything together” (66).

In the end I did not feel as though I had killed the Gloria [Gloria Watson, hooks’s original name] of childhood. Instead I had rescued her. She was no longer the enemy within, the little girl who had to be annihilated for the woman to come into being. In writing about her, I reclaimed that part of myself I had long ago rejected, left uncared for, just as she had often felt alone and uncared for as a child. Remembering was part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, ‘the bits and pieces of my heart’ that the narrative made whole again.³⁹

Similarly, James Glass’s account of a woman’s movement out of psychosis confirms the notion that inhering in acts of self-narration is a recuperative potential; he also highlights that the act of narration should occur within a compassionate context. Like hooks, at first Ruth wishes to “disappear”; like McLeish, she also tries to “kill all forms of human connection” (PT 59). Yet by narrating her story within the secure parameters of a compassionate therapeutic community, Ruth is able to “disentangle” her delusional conceptions and to acknowledge their root, the “frightening pain of a lost and terrified two-year-old child” (PT 84). As she comes to understand “the interpenetration of her perceptions of consensual reality with delusional projections”, so there is a “gradual appearance of an intersubjective self” which provides the “foundation for her understanding of community” (PT 86). Once again, as with hooks

³⁸ bell hooks, ‘writing autobiography,’ in *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work* (London: The Women’s Press, 1999), p. 80.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 87.

and McLeish, the articulating effects of narrative re-integrate the dispersed elements of self. Ruth insists that recovery does not consist of “rebirth”, that is, the fashioning of a new identity, but is “a ‘coming together’, a new understanding of the different components of who she was” (PT 92). And, replicating McLeish’s trajectory in *1982, Janine*, she eventually begins to move from “distrust to trust; from a private, closely held being to a public and participatory one” (PT 96), or, as she puts it, “to rejoin humanity”.⁴⁰

5.6 Conclusion: starting to speak

The guru instructs by metaphor and parable,
but the pilgrim learns through the telling of his own tale.
Sheldon Kopp⁴¹

1982, Janine dramatizes the importance of ‘speaking’, of the potentially liberatory effects of narrating a life, and elucidates processes at work in other, ostensibly very different, narratives. Gray’s text maps an intra-psychic shift from passivity to (narrative) action: in the first section the self is blindly driven by painful obsessions – effectively McLeish is narrated by fantasy rather than vice-versa – and experiences itself as attacked by memory; in the suicide scene the self is a congeries of disparate fragments. When McLeish decides to tell his story the impression at first is of a voice speaking into an interior storm, of consciousness gathering itself and speaking with one voice into a multiple and frightening cacophony. Gradually, through narrating his story, he also becomes an actor in it; and rather than merely a solipsistic production, McLeish’s outward-facing stance at the close of the book suggests that the narrative act can facilitate a re-involvement with the world. Through unpicking his entanglement in the structures of power, McLeish comes to recognize that ‘history’ is not the preserve of an elite coterie but is “what we all make, everywhere, each moment of our lives, whether we notice it or not” (340).⁴² While this recognition imbues the everyday actions of the self – both outer and inner – with political and ethical resonances, the quotidian is also accorded dignity and significance. Moreover, in joining up the fragments of a life, narration can enable an understanding of the actions of the self –

⁴⁰ ‘Ruth’ quoted in Glass, *Private Terror/ Public Life*, p. 92.

⁴¹ *If You Meet The Buddha On The Road Kill Him* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), p. 47.

⁴² Compare this with Anthony Giddens’s characterisation of the picture of self and self-identity prevailing in contemporary Western cultures and influenced by the discourses of therapy and “self-therapy”: “As individuals we are not able to make history but if we ignore our inner experience, we are condemned to repeat it”. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 77.

including those effected by its embroilment in political structures – and with such comprehension, a more compassionate stance may also be feasible.

The plot of *1982, Janine* centres on how Jock's story-telling affects his cognitive processes and his orientation towards the world: the events he narrates are of secondary importance. The drama of this text inheres in its intimate portrayal of contrasting narrative modes of existence; and 'narration' is portrayed here as inextricably linked to the relationship with the self, even *as* the relationship with the self. The insights this novel generates shed considerable light on the processes at work in autopathographies of madness, and in particular on the two ostensibly very different texts which I study in the following chapter.

6. Recovering a voice, Starting to Speak

For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live.

Theodor Adorno¹

6.1 Introduction

Alasdair Gray's use of fiction in *1982, Janine* allows him to map out the minute conceptual and cognitive shifts implicated in a vision of psychological collapse and subsequent restoration. Purporting to make present on the page the intricacies of moment by moment thought-processes, Gray's text maps and reproduces the contours of McLeish's tormented awareness, and is intended to convey to the reader the impression that s/he peers into a consciousness, following cognition and affect as they actually occur within an individual psychology. Such an intimate immediacy of access to individual experience would appear to be solely feasible within a fictional text. After all, in the autobiographical text, no matter what the temporal gap between the actual and its translation into text, intervening between 'experience' and the sentence are the pen or the word-processor, not to mention those mechanics of translation which transpose feelings and inchoate impressions into words.² If the autobiographical writer were to attempt to accurately map his or her own impressions and thought streams, the process would in reality mould those organic, shifting entities into something far more concrete. Derrida alludes to this in his essay 'Cogito and the history of Madness', which I return to in this chapter, when, quoting Joyce on *Ulysses*, he writes of the 'transparent sheet' separating text from madness, a protective "diaphaneity" which, he elaborates, is language itself: the sentence, "by its essence", "carries normality within it"; discourse is a "nothing that neutralizes everything". In other words, the 'turning' of 'experience' into words is to change that 'experience' fundamentally, even to lose it altogether.³

¹ *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), p. 87.

² On the illusory plenitude of 'experience', see Alice Jardine's powerful essay, 'The Demise of Experience: Fiction as Stranger than Truth,' in *Postmodernism: a reader*, ed. by Thomas Docherty (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 433-442. Also of interest is Joan Scott's 'Experience', in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Wisconsin and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), pp. 57-71.

³ More strongly, this does not touch on the potency of arguments which assert that because all writers are situated within the various grids of history, class, gender, race, not to mention the linguistic grid,

However, in the type of autobiographical writing which I study in this chapter – the contemporaneous journal or diary – the relationship between text and the immediacy of experience may be more complex than might at first appear to be the case. For while reservations concerning the translation of the immediate into textual form are still relevant, the journals I consider here present themselves as the evidence of a practice, a technique, a tool used by their authors for whatever reason (somewhat as McLeish employs his autobiographical narrative in the second half of *1982, Janine*), and that because of this their status and their purpose as artefacts shifts. Reading such texts we witness the manifestation and outworking of a mode of existence, the trace and culmination of a cognitive process worked out on the page. The ‘point’ of the work is no longer primarily the presentation of madness; instead the text records, indeed, in the first text I discuss here, *is*, the writer’s negotiation with the turbulence of his or her existence. This obviously calls to mind points I have made in previous chapters concerning the subject-in-process as evidenced in, for instance, Margiad Evans’s *A Ray of Darkness*, and indeed there are similarities with the diaries I study here. However, as we shall see, the notion of writing as a practice and a tool is far more evident than in Evans’s text.

This nexus (of experience and text) is not inimical to the postmodern critique of ‘experience’ as an unmediated category, a critique, that is, which reads ‘reality’ as itself an “imaginary and symbolic construction”,⁴ for it is precisely via an implicit acknowledgment of the constructed rather than immutable nature of reality that the authors I consider here discover the possibility of change and healing. The influential strand of thought which dismantles subjectivity as transcendental essence and posits selfhood as an effect of language, exemplified most obviously in the work of Emile Benveniste, lays the ground for some of my arguments here. For, if as, Benveniste asserts it “is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of ‘ego’ in reality, in its reality”,⁵ then the language-defined subject may be able to work within, and shift, these self-constitutive linguistic and narrative grids. Admittedly, this may require a leap of the imagination not envisaged by Benveniste; however, a diverse range of subsequent writers, building on insights concerning the subject-in-language, but seeking a way of accounting for the

‘experience’ can never be conceived simply as an immediate affect but instead is always a mediated construction.

⁴ Alice Jardine, ‘The Demise of Experience’, p. 434.

⁵ Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. by Mary Elizabeth Meek (Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971), p. 224.

subject-as-agent, have seen language and narrative as sites of potential contestation and transformation.⁶ As Michel de Certeau, comparing the movement of the subject within language to ‘walking in the city’, somewhat gnomically puts it: “Thus begins the walk that Freud compares to the trampling underfoot of the mother-land. This relationship of oneself to oneself governs the internal alterations of the place [...] or the pedestrian unfolding of the stories accumulated in a place”.⁷

6.2.1 Starting to Speak: Linda Hart’s *Phone At Nine Just to Say You’re Alive*

Linda Hart’s *Phone At Nine Just to Say You’re Alive* is an account of a year-long psychosis which is presented not as an autobiographical retrospective but as the transcription of extracts from Hart’s diary. That Hart herself considers her journal to have served a concrete – and salutary – purpose is confirmed when, in one of the final selections, and on the day before she returns to work, she declares that, “Writing this journal has kept me on the edge of sanity. Without it, I believe I would have tipped over into the chasm of madness from where I could not be reached”.⁸ Similar sentiments about the efficacy of writing have been expressed by other memoirists of madness; for instance, describing the multiplicity of voices imbricating the self, Carole North in her account of schizophrenia records: “my thoughts sometimes got so hopelessly jumbled that I needed to write them down for my own comprehension”.⁹ Another schizophrenic, Bonnie Schell, describes reading and writing as “the only order I could feel in the universe [...] typing sentences and editing was my way back to recovery”;¹⁰ and Lara Jefferson, in her own hospital diary, writes: “I have sat through floods of raving and built a barrier – a breakwater of small black words around me. Day by day I’ve sat here and wrote about it – for there was nothing else in all this world

⁶ See my introduction for a discussion of Judith Butler’s work on subjectivation and agency. Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (trans. by Steven Rendall [Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1988]) is also relevant here, as are aspects of Ricoeur’s discussions in his *Time and Narrative*, Volume 3 (trans. by Katherine Blamey and David Pellauer [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987]), and also his *Oneself as Another* (trans. by Katherine Blamey [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992]). The following are also of interest: Kim L. Worthington, *Self as Narrative: Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

⁷ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 110.

⁸ Linda Hart, *Phone at Nine Just to Say You’re Alive* (London: Pan, 1997), pp. 352-3. Subsequent references are given parenthetically in the text.

⁹ Carol S. North, *Welcome, Silence: My Triumph over Schizophrenia* (London: Arrow, 1990), p. 61

¹⁰ Bonnie Schell, ‘Why we have creative writing at MHCAN’, *Mental Health Client Action Network* <<http://www.mhcan.org/writing/bonywhy.html>> [November 13th 2003] (para. 2 of 3).

to do”,¹¹ describing writing as an attempt to build a “ladder of words – strong enough, and long enough – to reach out of this”.¹²

For Hart, the point of writing has not been description per se; rather, the production of the text has been an ongoing practice undertaken in the midst of madness – an (often agonistic) work which she has performed on her self. Writing is a ‘technology’ (to borrow from Foucault¹³) or a technique of the self which exemplifies and facilitates a ‘starting to speak’. I have already discussed some of the implications of this with reference to *1982, Janine*, but to recap, by ‘starting to speak’ I mean the primary (and for some, taken-for-granted) process by which the self is able to intervene in its own existence, and by which it can, through employing language to its own ends, begin to direct and regulate its lived course thus assuming a degree of agency.

In the previous chapter I detailed James Glass’s contentions in his *Private Terror/Public Life* about the radical alienation of the self within psychosis. He argues that the retreat into the “private inner worlds” of madness separates the sufferer from consensual reality and leaves them adrift in a terrifying and hostile universe. As a part of his study, and from a series of conversations with patients, Glass presents extensive transcriptions of individual accounts of illness which in effect form a sequence of heterogeneous ‘texts’ intercalated into the fabric of the book. One of these is produced by ‘David’, a young man with a diagnosis of manic-depression who is prey to excruciating delusional states. In his comments on David’s narrative, Glass draws the reader’s attention to the way that David’s interaction with language – “the relation of the linguistic self to its symbolic world”¹⁴ – is key to his relative levels of well-being and an understanding of his psychosis. David describes the bi-polar experience as “like being cornered [...] I just let myself go. I give in to it. I strap myself to the mast and

¹¹ Lara Jefferson, *These are my Sisters: A Journal from the Inside of Insanity* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975), p. 236.

¹² Ibid, p. 112. However, at this particular juncture in the journal, Jefferson is expressing doubt that the ‘ladder of the words’ will actually render ‘escape’ possible. Subsequent page references to this text are given in parentheses.

¹³ Michel Foucault, ‘Technologies of the Self’, in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. by Luther H. Martin (London: Tavistock, 1988), pp. 16-49. Foucault describes technologies of the self as permitting “individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (p. 18).

¹⁴ James M. Glass, *Private Terror/ Public Life: Psychosis and the Politics of Community* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 31.

let the sirens take my mind",¹⁵ and elaborates how a central component of his delusional systems takes the form of *voice*:

I hear this voice sometimes. I call it the "maelstrom of manufactured criticism" because it always tears away at me, rips my identity into shreds, and slices away at everything I am. It's like being in the midst of the straits of the Sirens with a ferocious storm overhead, no sun, just black clouds that turn the world into night. Sometimes the voice booms in my ears; other times, it sounds like a song, a melody, but the lyrics, even though the singing is sweet, are filled with criticism and attack. The verbal abuse never lets up. It goes on and on for hours. Nothing outside touches me when it's there: I refuse to talk to anyone; I sit, stare, smoke cigarettes until the voice leaves.¹⁶

For David, then, the 'voice' of thought is far from an unproblematic given, and is experienced as distant from a singular and reassuring 'inner speech'¹⁷ in which the self speaks to itself in its own recognizable accents; rather, voice represents a locus of contestation, struggle, and disturbing multiplicity. As such, voice is not necessarily experienced as 'his', even though he recognizes that, in some fashion, it occurs 'within' the psyche as it separates him from the "outside"; rather, voice appears to have an agency of its own and is experienced as disconnected from his own will.

However, although voice is intimately implicated in David's suffering, significantly it is through voice, through speech, that he is able to withstand the sirenic pull of delusion. Glass comments on the redemptive power which David attributes to the willed excursions into the narrative voice:

Language, David believed, brought him back into history, time, continuity, and action. [...] To speak, to embody in linguistic imagery the variations in pain and terror, particularly in exchanges with staff, allowed David to "resist the Sirens."¹⁸

Glass then goes on to contrast this communicative type of speech with the linguistic economy of David's psychosis:

When he was psychotic, however – when he kept language within, held private monologues, uttered cryptic and indecipherable statements meant for a delusional audience [...] it was as if nothing held "here" (consensual reality) and "there" (the phantasms of the imagination) together. Psychosis destroyed moral and linguistic connections; it projected its own form of knowledge; it massacred the intersubjective and historical self and transformed human

¹⁵ Compare with Lara Jefferson: "So the last connected and coherent thing in my thinking gave way – and the Madness filling me rejoiced. Because at last there was nothing to stay it, it shouted and exulted with a noise that tore my throat out, charging through me till it nearly dragged the life out of me. Part of my mind stood there and took in the whole situation, yet could do nothing about it." *These are my Sisters*, p. 215.

¹⁶ Glass, *Private Terror/ Public Life*, p. 34.

¹⁷ See my discussion of inner speech later in this chapter.

¹⁸ Glass, *Private Terror/ Public Life*, p. 34.

existence into a grotesque play involving inanimate, nonhuman, and sometimes part-human figures. It was a process that in its action (delusion as action) radically disoriented and broke up conventional meaning structures. In dissolving boundaries, psychosis [...] made the Imaginary into the Real. It abolished fixed, external points of reference and led to a mammoth confusion over the relation between identity and reality.¹⁹

Central to Glass's thesis, then, is an acute sensitivity to, and recognition of, the intimate implication of language with issues of action, agency, powerlessness, and madness. The argument in *Private Terror/Public Life* as a whole (indeed in much of Glass's work²⁰) evokes as its subtext the etymological roots of the word *psychopathology*; that is, as David Levin puts it, its reference to: "the 'speech' or logos of the psyche: all the psyche's ways of hiding, manifesting, expressing, communicating, sharing and, in brief, living out its experience of worldly suffering (*pathein*)".²¹ Glass links psychosis with a deleterious internalisation of language, which in turn spawns a semi-autonomous 'discursive' or symbolic realm displacing the individual as agent, and generating a disorienting power of its own. This insistence that delusion equates to action is significant: psychosis is described by Glass's narrators as a drive and a dynamism which dismantles subjective structures and dislodges the individual from the social, while also putting into place a new, nightmarish architecture of the psyche.²² In contrast, the narratives Glass records also represent a form of action, but one which restores the self to a sense of its own agency; indeed, narration is itself the very condition of agency. "Language", writes Glass, is "a form of action. [...] To speak was to find oneself literally engaged with the *action* of speech. [...] Language, being and metaphor became totally bound up in one another, and the speech act itself took on a lived, vital quality".²³

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See: *Psychosis and Power: Threats to Democracy in the Self and the Group* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), and *Shattered Selves: Multiple Personality in a Postmodern World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

²¹ D. Levin, 'Introduction', in *Pathologies of the Modern Self: Postmodern Studies on Narcissism, Schizophrenia, and Depression*, ed. by D. Levin (New York: New York University Press, 1987), p. 2.

²² Compare with Lara Jefferson's claim that "madness will sacrifice its victim gladly in torment if it can find some means of expression". *These are my Sisters*, p 81.

²³ Glass, *Private Terror/ Public Life*, p. 12. See James V. Wertsch's *Mind as Action* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): "language is a cultural tool and speech is a form of mediated action, and for this reason the general claims I have made about mediated action apply to speech" (p. 73). Also of interest is Brendan McCormack's work on the concept of 'narrative identity': "Narrative identity is grounded in language and manifested in discourse (speech acts). This grounding of narrative identity in language and discourse interconnects the person's mind and body through the importance of speech and action, i.e. my speech is action in itself and not separate from any action I take". In: 'The Person of the Voice: Narrative Identities in Informed Consent', *Nursing Philosophy*, 3 (2002), 114-119 (p. 117).

Glass's contentions about language as action resonate with Blanchot's insistence that, in order for affliction to be transformed into "salvation", the "Self-Subject" can only be restored within and via the "true *speech*".²⁴ In the previous chapter I noted Blanchot's emphasis that *speech* is the necessary counterweight to the limit-experience's eradication of the 'I'. Evoking the dispersion of the self experienced by the psychotic, Blanchot writes that the moment of utter affliction deprives the person "of the power to say 'I'",²⁵ with identity itself disintegrating: "the person no longer exists in his or her personal identity [...] all human power is outside him, as are existence in the first person, individual sovereignty, and the speech that says 'I'".²⁶ The restoration of the subject to first-person speech is therefore highly significant, and is connoted by Blanchot as having something of that "lived, vital, quality" which Glass describes.

Many of the arguments in Glass's *Private Terror/Public Life* are strikingly resonant with Linda Hart's analysis and observation of her own negotiation with the daily fluctuations of psychotic reality. For instance, one of Glass's central concerns, that the psychotic is effectively absented from the social (and therefore the political) by madness, is brought to mind when, early on in *Phone At Nine*, Hart records some of the mechanisms of her psychosis:

Today my father has attempted to get control of my mind. He does it by subtle means. Taking away my speech, closing me down and taking me away from the world. (14)

Here Hart notes how her psychosis effects a suspension from the social realm; moreover, and again with Glass, she connects this rupture to the loss of speech.²⁷ The manifestation of her psychosis orients itself as a muting agent in that her internalized image of the dead father threatens her existence as a speaking subject, and this in turn absents her from the consensual world of discourse and action: by taking away her speech, madness also removes her from the world.

²⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 133. See the preceding chapter for my discussion.

²⁵ Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 130.

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 131 & 132.

²⁷ See here also Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) in which she contends that chronic depression is characterized by a "glaring and inescapable" "lack of meaning [...] compelling me to silence" (p. 3). "For the speaking being", she goes on, "life is a meaningful life" (p. 6), but without the cogency of 'speech', however, meaning is lost: melancholics are "mute and steadfast devotees of their own inexpressible container [...] unbelieving in language" (p.14). The depressed person "appears to stop cognizing as well as uttering, sinking into the blankness of asymbolia or the excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos" (p.33).

Therefore, the stage on which Hart's suffering is played out is at least partly constituted by the linguistic and discursive, and it is, I suggest, only when read with that understanding that the often mundane and repetitious journal entries can be interpreted for what they are: an embarkation into language which encompasses a necessary and difficult resistance to the centrifugal energies of psychical turbulence. As with McLeish in *1982, Janine*, Hart has to re-establish a ground (which those who have not been subjected to the extremities of madness may well take for granted) by using language to carve out a route through history and the emanations of distress. Yet, unlike McLeish she is not primarily concerned here with constructing a historical autobiographical narrative in which sense is gleaned from a life by the process of narration;²⁸ rather, this is a document chiefly preoccupied with the present, with the moment to moment experiences of the self and their articulation, with the micro-workings of language as they occur within the psyche. Although intercalated into her accounts of hospital life, interactions with friends, colleagues and patients, and descriptions of her distress, are a series of narrative fragments which provide glimpses of the story of Hart's childhood, the 'purpose' of her diary is the negotiation of the present through the formulation of mechanisms for survival (and ultimately, as I shall go on to argue, the 'raising' and construction of the architecture of selfhood). Inevitably, as a result of the inclusion of these autobiographical fragments, together with the gradual accumulation of the micro-narratives of the daily entries, a 'story' of a self emerges, but this is not the primary 'purpose' of the text. It is via the apparently inconsequential interventions, and via the manifestation of voice which the journal entries represent, that Hart formulates her easily overlooked survival strategies; and crucially it is in this very fact of writing – that is, to return to Blanchot, "writing" as a form of "speech"²⁹ – that the most potent of the strategies lies.

6.2.2 The erasure of self

Hart's diary is characterised by its often childlike simplicity of tone, its relative lack of rhetorical flourishes, its guileless recordings of the quotidian and mundane. Yet into this unremarkable account of the comings and goings on the hospital wards are also

²⁸ *Phone at Nine* is not the complete story of Hart's psychiatric history, but is simply the transcription of one hospital journal.

²⁹ In *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot makes it clear that the ethical speech he valorizes encompasses writing. See particularly p. 29: "Speech (at least the one we are attempting to approach: writing) lays bare even without unveiling", and also his discussion of Antelme's memoir on pp. 130-5.

interspersed quite brief descriptions of her experience of distress: her hallucinations of putrefaction; her certainty that she is filled with maggots and rotteness; and most potent of all, the voices which order her to kill herself and invoke troubling images of death and decay. And as with David, Hart's psychosis manifests itself as a hostile agency which attenuates any sense of self as able to intervene in its own existence or to orient itself. For instance, evoking David's description of the "sirens" colonising his mind, she notes how, following the attrition and insistence of her father's voice, "*my mind escaped my control*" (15), and she frequently details the way in which she experiences cognitive process as invaded and threatened:

My father was interfering with my thoughts by placing images of me dead, by violent means, in my head. (10)

My father is having fun with me. Threatening to take over the bit of my mind that functions. [...] He can claim my psyche perhaps more easily. There are dangers everywhere because it's so unreal. To tip over the last threads could happen effortlessly because I'm so tired of it all. (13)

Hart's internalised and hostile father is experienced, variously, as "goading" (20); as the progenitor of frightening visual and auditory hallucinations (43); as a threat to Hart's "rational mind" (96); and as an ordering and controlling power effecting her physical actions ("A few minutes later I went to the phone again but just kept on walking. I heard my father say 'car', so I went to the car and drove home" [225]). But the persistent motif which links the majority of these intrusions are the attempts to cajole or threaten Hart into killing herself, and the conjuration of images of death.³⁰ The internalized father, then, is experienced as a hostile energy dedicated to Hart's non-being: his/its psychic assaults are predicated on a desire to eradicate Hart as a person. Moreover, her father frequently fashions terrifying psychic scripts, narrating scenarios in which the details of her death are made clear. For instance, he tells her at one stage that her body is beginning to disintegrate, presaging a complete nullification of the self: "As the day progressed, his voice became more insistent. He told me my skin was coming off and that I could disappear" (33). Here again the consonance with David's narrative is striking – for he too frequently evokes images of the fragmenting body: "You don't know if you're going to be alive the next second [...] or sliced into a thousand pieces by some berserk person swinging an ax" (35); "you feel yourself dissipating" (36); "It's like my cells are exploded over the universe [...] you're left

³⁰ At one particularly intense moment of distress, Hart writes: "I'm very troubled, my father won't leave me alone. There is the smell of death wherever I go" (p. 86).

trying to find yourself amidst this infinity of particles” (37). For both Hart and David psychosis works to disaggregate and therefore effectively erase the self.

In the aim of nullifying Hart, the force of what she experiences as these hostile vocative energies is directed towards a similar target as that intended by the strategy of rendering her mute. The voiceless subject is to all intents and purposes a non-subject; to quote Caryl Emerson: “If you cannot talk about an experience, at least to yourself, you did not have it”;³¹ or, as David puts it: “the voice blots out any sense of an I” (36).³² Indeed, as we saw in the extract I quoted earlier, Hart also links her silencing with an existential extinguishing when she equates “Taking away my speech” with “closing me down” (14). Whether by killing her or rendering her mute, the consequence is the same: virtual non-being.

6.2.3 Resisting erasure

Phone At Nine both tracks, and is the embodiment of, Hart’s struggles to articulate, to speak in a voice she identifies as ‘hers’, and thereby to resist suffocation and non-being. However, this embarkation into a willed engagement with language is by no means easy. Rather it is portrayed as an agonistic struggle against the invasive depredations of the voice of the internalized father. In one particularly powerful expression of despair, Hart asks: “Where can I be? I can’t leave my head somewhere, I need respite. I need to get away from this fucking voice. The more voice my father has the less voice I have” (49). Elsewhere, in a passage invoking the spaceless, free-floating character of psychotic experience, she links the disintegration of the embodied self with an aphonic being-state:

Are we flotsam? Washed up like stranded jellyfish on a beach? No armour, no ribcage, no skull and no spine. Liquid almost; no defences. Sometimes the surprise of a sting. No voice, though. No secret whale song to encourage popularity. (28)

³¹ Caryl Emerson, ‘The Outer Word and Inner Speech: Bakhtin, Vygotsky, and the Internalization of Language’, *Critical Inquiry* 10 (December 1983), p. 25.

³² Conversely, theorists such as Blanchot claim that language negates reality because of its intrinsic abstracting quality: the idea is substituted for the encounter with the actual. In *The Work of Fire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) for instance, he writes: “A word may give me its meaning, but first it suppresses it. For me to be able to say ‘This woman’, I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her” (p. 322). There is a point of homology here with the arguments Derrida advances concerning consciousness and the translation of affect and impression into words in his essay ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’, and which I discuss shortly.

Moreover, at several moments in the diary Hart records that the acuteness of her distress renders her unable to write; and although at these times the reader is not always sure how much her depression and inarticulacy is linked to the voice's hegemony, the entries do evoke the intimate connection and interanimation between Hart's own voice and her suffering. Thus, her entry for Sunday 28th November ends, "Too low to write today" (29); Wednesday 15th December: "I can't write any more because I'm crying again"; Tuesday 3rd May: "I feel too low to write tonight" (262). In addition, such entries highlight the contemporaneous nature of the writing, creating an impression that the text embodies an ongoing negotiation with a disruptive and chronic suffering, or, to use Tracy Thompson's metaphor, functions as a "bulletin" sent back from a "foreign territory".³³ Producing a similar impression, Hart also tracks the way that cognitive dissonance disrupts the textual processes of reading and writing: "I can't concentrate on anything for too long which shows in my writing" (127); "Not settled enough to be able to read back over what I've written recently" (131). Such entries again underscore that the diary is mapping the fluctuations of a psyche-in-process while also emphasizing the ways in which distress disturbs Hart's interactions with her text.

The contemporaneous nature of the writing in *Phone At Nine* is key to the narrative dynamics of this text. Because these entries punctuate the experiences Hart describes, they represent moments of awareness and self-talk which are intercalated into the very business of living. In the diary the self is speaking to itself of its own experience, is verbalizing its existence, with this verbalization interwoven into the fabric of that existence. It is impossible to be certain whether the diary entries are the manifestation of an inner dialogue which is first occurring in the psyche, or whether they actually *are* that dialogue, but, in the light of Hart's descriptions of the way that her father's voice closes down her own, her declaration that, "writing this journal has kept me on the edge of sanity", and the specific mechanisms and strategies detectable within the entries, it seems quite likely that the text *is* the dialogue with the self, that no ur-discourse lodged in an interior space lies behind the words on the page.³⁴

³³ Tracy Thompson, *The Beast: A Journey Through Depression* (New York: Plume, 1996), p. 13.

³⁴ On this point see John Searle's comments in an exchange with Derrida. He discusses there, "the illusion that somehow illocutionary intentions if they ever really existed or mattered would have to be something that lay *behind* the utterances". He goes on to say that, in what he calls "serious literal speech", "the sentences are precisely the realizations of the intentions: there need be no gulf at all between the illocutionary intention and its expression. The sentences are, so to speak, fungible intentions. Often, especially in writing, one forms one's intentions (or meanings) in the process of forming the sentences: there need not be two separate processes." 'Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida', *Glyph* 1 (1977), p. 202. Compare also Wittgenstein: "When I think in language, there aren't 'meanings' going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions: the language is itself the vehicle of

One particularly vivid illustration that the writing of the text is coeval with Hart's struggle to speak and the fluctuations of distress, and which also gives some insight into the muting effect of the delusory voice, can be found in the entries for the 22nd, 23rd and 24th December. The first two of these entries again do little more than note an aphonic state, but the entry for the 24th details the psychical background to this silence.³⁵ Thus the entry for the 22nd consists of the single sentence, "I want someone to put me to bed" (87), while the entry for the 23rd reads: "One of the worst days of my life, but I have been loved by Margaret and Basil, Gordon, Sheila, Annie, Rita, Joy, Kate and Jane, Jack and William, Will fill in the spaces tomorrow, so much to write" (87). The entry for the 24th then revisits these missing days and does indeed fill in the spaces which have signified through their blankness the living through a period of acute distress. Hart details there the events elided in the textual hiatus and in so doing conveys an impression that she is cognitively processing and ordering what was experienced as amorphous and frighteningly chaotic, while also providing insight into the scenarios behind the blanks in her text. She writes that, on the 23rd, she was "low and tearful", that she "continued to pace from room to room" and "couldn't stay in one room too long at a time [...] I had also to get away from the people". She goes on: "I wanted to bring forward my father's plans for me. I wanted to die but dying seemed to take up more energy than I had resources for" (87). The entry continues by recording how the hospital staff, seriously concerned for her welfare, and noticing "The pacing, the torment in my face, the influence my father seemed to have over me" (88), decided to transfer her to a locked ward. This move compounded Hart's distress, and, now ensconced in an inimical environment, she details the resurgent depredations of her father's voice, which had previously silenced her.

The next day, 23 December, I started crying before I even drank my first cup of tea. The voice was really loud. He was saying that he was going to drive me crazy and keep me locked up here in Brendon until I was totally insane. He said he would make me stab out my cigarette in my eyes so I would never see again. He said that at the earliest opportunity he would drive me to suicide, either by going to the station and jumping under a train or by jumping off the roof of a

thought". *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), remark 329; and Vygotsky: "Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them [...] thought is born through words". Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, trans. by Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar, ed. by Alex Kozulin (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 218 & 255. On writing as thought see also Janet Emig, 'Writing as a Mode of Learning,' in *The Web of Meaning: Essays on Writing, Teaching, Learning, and Thinking* (Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1983), pp. 123-131 (the title of Emig's book is inspired by Vygotsky's description of writing as a "deliberate structuring of the web of meaning": see *Thought and Language*, p.182).

³⁵ This entry also exemplifies Hart's survival mechanism of narrativizing experience.

multistorey car park. I started wandering around the ward crying and terribly distressed. The nurse, Bridget, said I had to sit down and talk. I thought to myself I would never talk to a single soul again. How could I trust anyone?
(89)

The rest of the entry records the events of the day of writing and her gradual recovery of some psychical equilibrium, but in this particular passage Hart is narrativizing events which in their intensity had rendered a transcription coeval with the experience of distress impossible. The loudness and ferocity of her father's voice, combined with (and probably exacerbated by) her anger and distress at the move, are placed within a narrative frame; one has the sense of a radical and incoherent grief being retrospectively articulated and (temporally) processed. This narrativising process represents a kind of resistance both to the domination of psychosis as well as to the relative powerlessness inherent in Hart's status as a patient. That is to say, although her father's voice and the events of the move rendered her unable to translate experience into text at the time of their occurrence, her later intervention redeems these moments of blankness retroactively: in retrospect, experience is reclaimed textually, with the diary operating to reinsert the subject, Hart's 'I', into a temporal and spatial locus in which the self had at the time been a liminal and threatened presence.

The story Hart constructs in this entry also conducts a tacit negotiation with the staff's reasoning as to why reallocation was necessary, with the result that a measure of rapprochement and equanimity is achieved within the text, and, judging by its content, with the staff themselves: by narrating the story of the day Hart comes to understand some of their previously incomprehensible logic. This is a recurrent mechanism in the text: by noting what happens to her, and how she reacts to events, Hart constructs a narrative and uses that narrative to make sense of perplexity. In this particular instance, after transcribing the reasoning of Colleen, one of the nurses, that Hart had displayed "a clear indication of deterioration [...] a kickback psychosis" (90) and that because this vertex, a probable result of a change in medication, would only be temporary, she would not stay long on the ward, Hart is able to close the episode with a kind of narrative resolution: "It was a great relief to see Colleen. Although I'm still wounded, the knife has stopped twisting. We parted on good terms" (90). The closure with Colleen, effected by dialogue, is thus reinforced by Hart in a textual dialogue with the self. Immediately following this, she goes on to focus on her present surroundings and subsequent events, and it is apparent by her tone that her mood has considerably improved.

6.2.4 'I', and the everyday

The entry for the 24th December exemplifies one of the ways in which, via writing, Hart manages distress and the disorientation of hospital life; furthermore, such retroactive interventions represent instances of a 'starting to speak'. Of the strategies on display in the diary it is precisely the latter which is the most crucial because without it any other means of aiding the self are unfeasible. There are various ways in which this primary process and strategy might be approached and theorized, some of which will elucidate my argument and which I will explore, but it is worth first emphasising the simplicity of what I am referring to here with the phrase 'start to speak'. For Hart, starting to speak is the embarkation into a particular form of 'self-talk' (or 'inner speech': although see my discussion of Vygotsky's theory of inner speech later in this chapter) – a process by which the self, *in a willed and self-conscious movement* separates itself from the flux of existence and speaks to itself, and which I am suggesting is here externalized in textual form. That is, her diary represents a reclamation of the 'I', a willed occupation of the ground of first-person discourse, a process akin to McLeish's engagement with narrative which in the previous chapter I described as 'consciousness gathering itself and speaking with one voice into a multiple and frightening cacophony'.

Notwithstanding the observations of, among others, Richard Jenkins, that conditions of chronic mental distress may lead to individual difficulty in understanding and using the first-person singular,³⁶ it is, of course, true that speaking in and as an 'I' is a part of most personal speech. But I want to emphasize the difference between the speaking I invoke here, and what Maurice Blanchot calls the speech of the "everyday".³⁷ In his essay 'Everyday Speech', Blanchot points out that the "everyday escapes" because it "is without a subject";³⁸ by which he means that within the absent moments of the quotidian, there is only existence – rather than one who exists, only speaking – rather than one who speaks: the "constitutive trait" of mundane experience

³⁶ *Social Identity* (London, Routledge, 1996), p. 40. Jenkins refers to E. H. Erikson's study *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (London: Faber, 1968) as support for this contention. See also Louis Sass: "schizophrenic patients will sometimes avoid the words *I* and *me*, preferring to refer to themselves in the third person or to speak of 'my person' or 'my personality'." Louis A. Sass, *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 491, n. 6.

³⁷ 'Everyday Speech,' in *The Infinite Conversation*, pp. 238-245.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

is that it is “*unperceived*”.³⁹ Everyday speech is “an unspeaking speech that is the soft human murmuring in us and around us”.⁴⁰

The drift of Blanchot’s essay is an attempt to redeem the everyday from its tainted status as an unexamined and hence un-lived existence (after Socrates’ maxim) by indicating, and to an extent celebrating, its subversive undercutting of comforting illusions of self-presence and ideals such as value and judgement – “What is proper to the everyday is that it designates for us a region or a level of speech where the determinations true and false, like the opposition of yes and no, do not apply”.⁴¹ However, he is also aware of the dangers that may lurk in this seemingly blissful state of unawareness, dangers which may be particularly important to consider in the context of a disturbed and distressed being-state. He points out that because the “day-to-day indifference”⁴² of the everyday “cannot be assumed by a true subject (even putting into question the notion of a subject)”, it “tends unerringly to weigh down into things”, and is a medium in which “alienations, fetishisms, and reifications” may flourish because of the lack of an engaged awareness to resist and divide the unconstrained flow of impressions.⁴³ Moreover, the individual labouring in a monotonous existence who has *only* the everyday is “he for whom the everyday is most heavy”.⁴⁴ In the context of madness, the notion of ‘fossilized behaviour’ and the fetishisms of the everyday have a particular resonance. Even in supposedly less severe disorders such as clinical depression, so-called ‘fugue-states’, in which negative and troubling thought flourishes and sediments, are common.⁴⁵ For Hart the fetishisms of ‘everyday speech’ include the virulent antipathy of her internalized father.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 242.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, p. 245.

⁴³ Compare Blanchot assertions concerning the reifications of the everyday with Lev Vygotsky’s discussion of the problem of “fossilized behaviour”. John Shotter explains this as “behaviour at its very highest stage of development” which has become “automated and mechanical” and is therefore difficult to modify. In: *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life: Social Constructionism, Rhetoric and Knowing of the Third Kind* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), p. 119. For Vygotsky see *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, trans. and ed. by M. Cole (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 63-5. See also Dorothy Holland, William Lachicotte, Debra Skinner and Carole Cain, *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 190-1.

⁴⁴ *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 244.

⁴⁵ Psychologists Segal, Williams and Teasdale address the dangers of what they call ‘automatic pilot’ in their book on the treatment of depression. The being-state of automatic pilot is “especially problematic”, they claim, for those who have suffered from depression: “In automatic pilot, fragments of negative thinking are less likely to be noticed. If unchecked, they may coalesce into patterns that lead to stronger feelings of sadness and more severe depression. By the time the unwanted thoughts or feelings surface they are often too strong to be dealt with easily”. Zindel V. Segal, J. Mark G. Williams, John D.

Blanchot goes on to detail the moment when a self-conscious cognizance of mundane existence occurs:

There must be no doubt about the dangerous essence of the everyday, nor about the uneasiness that seizes us each time that, by an unforeseeable leap, we stand back from it and, facing it, discover that precisely nothing faces us: ‘What? Is this my everyday life?’⁴⁶

In Blanchot’s context, the ‘unforeseeable leap’ represents a moment when the individual steps out of the oblivion of the everyday, and examines what surrounds her, what has passed, and what is passing through consciousness: an action opposed to the everyday, which is “without direction and without decision”. But this description of the leap also invokes something of what I am calling ‘starting to speak’ – in which the self ‘stands back’ from the flux of distress and disturbance and, conscious of itself as self, formulates the coherent ‘I’.⁴⁷

Although my argument will become clearer as it proceeds, I need to stress at this juncture that by invoking the movement of the self towards a willed adoption of first person speech I am not intending to make claims of a metaphysical nature. ‘Will’ is not invoked here as transcending the context in which it operates and – if we follow Judith Butler⁴⁸ – by which it is constituted. Moreover, I am not summoning the ‘I’ here as a site of plenitude and stability, but simply as a position from which to speak. In itself, then, it is effectively empty. Thus, I am not disputing the substance of that Nietzschean strand of thought which ‘exposes’ the ‘I’ as a ‘fiction’ or construct, and which has been taken up by Butler and others. The following passage from Nietzsche, cited by Blanchot, summarizes this position:

I [...] take the I itself as a construct of thought, of the same order as ‘matter’, ‘thing’, ‘substance’, ‘individual’, ‘goal’, ‘number’, thus as a regulative fiction thanks to which one introduces a sort of constancy, and therefore a sort of ‘intelligibility’ into a world of becoming. Faith in grammar, in the linguistic subject and in the object, has up to the present held metaphysics under its yoke: I teach that one must renounce this faith.⁴⁹

Teasdale, *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression: A New Approach to Preventing Relapse* (New York: Guilford, 2002), pp. 99-101.

⁴⁶ *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 244.

⁴⁷ For a useful overview of some philosophical explorations of the ‘everyday’, see Michael Sheringham, ‘Attending to the Everyday: Blanchot, Lefebvre, Certeau, Percey’, *French Studies*, 54.2 (2000), 187-199.

⁴⁸ See Judith Butler: “there is [...] no conceptual transition to be made between power as external to the subject, ‘acting on’, and power as constitutive of the subject, ‘acted by’”. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 17. See also her ‘Contingent Foundations’, in Seyla Benhabib; Judith Butler; Drucilla Cornell; Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 35-58.

⁴⁹ Quoted in *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 456 n. 4. Blanchot gives the source of the quotation as Nietzsche’s unpublished writings, cited by G. Colli and M. Moniari in the *Cahiers de Royamont* no. 6 (Paris: Minuit, 1967). He prefaces his own citation thus: “In this sense where there is an ‘I’, the identity

My reservation, if such it is, about the sentiments in this passage is that the renunciation of faith Nietzsche argues for is not relevant to the psychotic subject who has already lost assurance in the stability of subjectivity. Moreover this loss of faith has resulted in the privation of agency and the ability to act, resulting in, as Marta Caminero-Santangelo describes it, “the absolute powerlessness of one who cannot completely claim the ‘I’ for herself”.⁵⁰ The psychotic subject does not need telling that the stable ‘I’ is a fragile construct, in that her experience has proved this to be so; but, as Nietzsche demonstrates in his opening “I take”, even a rejection of the metaphysics of the ‘I’ requires a position from which to speak.⁵¹ After journeying through the dispersions of madness, the psychotic is likely, it seems to me, to adopt not a faith in the plenitude of the ‘I’ but something closer to Richard Jenkins’ notion of ‘pragmatic individualism’:⁵² aware that the construct of the ‘I’ can disintegrate and is contingent, but also cognizant that in order to act in a concerted fashion as a singular subject, or to speak in such a way that one is understood by others and oneself, its adoption is vital.

The quality of the type of willed formulation I am invoking – the deliberate and conscious adoption of the ‘I’ – is illumined by the theoretical and empirical work of the neuroscientist Bernard Baars, who in his book *In the Theatre of Consciousness* discusses the psychological concept of ‘attention’. Baars quotes from the seminal 1890 text by William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, in which James describes ‘attention’ as “the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration of consciousness are its essence”.⁵³ It is just such a ‘taking possession’ and its concomitant characteristics of *will, choice, selection, and decision* which I want to emphasize as key in the willed engagement in ‘inner’ speech to distinguish it from ‘unspeaking speech’ or speech which is automatic, habitual – and unaware of itself. Baars suggests that the ability to voluntarily shift attention is under the control of the faculty of ‘metacognition’, or the consciousness of the ability to make a choice, and that in some (‘normal’) psychological states metacognition is absent or impaired. One

of a self, ‘God is not dead’. This is also why Nietzsche’s decisive contestation has to do with ‘consciousness’ or the identity of the ‘I’.”

⁵⁰ Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can’t Speak: Or, Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 103. See also: “[H]ow is any agency possible without a sense of subjectivity – without, that is, being able to identify oneself as an ‘I’ rather than a ‘she’?” (102).

⁵¹ See Judith Butler: “My position is mine to the extent that ‘I’ – and I do not shirk from the pronoun – replay and resignify the theoretical positions that have constituted me”. ‘Contingent Foundations’, p. 42.

⁵² *Social Identity*, p. 18.

⁵³ Quoted in Bernard Baars, *In the Theatre of Consciousness: The Workspace of the Mind* (New York; Oxford: OUP, 1997), p. 98.

of these is 'overload', when working memory and cognitive functions are operating at their full capacity so that all the activities which require metacognition such as "self-monitoring, scepticism, deciding what to pay attention to next" cannot be undertaken.⁵⁴ In the light of Hart's and David's descriptions of their overloaded psychical economies, it is surely not too much of a leap of imagination to suggest that in the midst of psychotic saturation metacognition must be difficult to achieve. Also of interest is Baars's description of the 'normal' psychological state of 'absorption' in which the person is sufficiently enthralled by an activity that self-awareness diminishes, disbelief is suspended, and passivity about choice of attention inculcated, in that this also captures something of the consuming nature of delusion. Using the reading of fiction as an example, Baars contends that absorption "[soaks] up the entire limited capacity of consciousness and working memory" therefore making it "*momentarily impossible to disbelieve*".⁵⁵ In reading a novel, such an absorption is pleasurable, but for the psychotic, absorbed by voices and painful delusions such a subsumption may be a terrifying prospect. Blanchot urges the reader not to "dread" the "infinite wearing away" of the everyday, suggesting that it is feared by "the hero" because it represents "the power of dissolution": in other words, it is the antithesis of the fortress-like ego. Yet it is precisely this dissolution which psychotics like Hart and David do dread, for, even more so than the worker Blanchot evokes who is subsumed by the drudgery of labour, the psychotic is in danger of complete capitulation to an unbearable 'everyday' comprised of hostility and fear: without an 'I', without self-consciousness, s/he is akin to a character trapped in a nightmarish fiction without a narrator. Baars, briefly considering psychopathology, describes schizophrenia as an inner speech "that has run out of control", and suggests that a possible treatment might be to "teach schizophrenics to speak to themselves in different voices, at will, to regain control over the inner voice".⁵⁶ This proposition is quite close to what I am suggesting Hart undertakes in *Phone At Nine*, and it is the 'at will' in this formulation that is most important for my context here. For as Baars points out, *experientially* there is a major difference between "very similar voluntary and nonvoluntary actions": these are *experienced* as profoundly different.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Baars, *In the Theatre of Consciousness*, p. 102.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 103.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 77.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 131.

In sum, then, ‘starting to speak’, is predicated on a moment of self-conscious “decision” that then issues into the primary action of assuming the subject-position of ‘I’.⁵⁸ Thus, the strategy which is of most importance in *Phone at Nine* is the construction of simple sentences in which ‘I’ assumes the place of subject, or which, having assumed that placing, describes and comments on existence. For instance, in the entry for the 20th November, Hart first implicates herself in her consideration of another patient, and then moves on to describe this other: “I haven’t yet had eye contact with Pam. She wears the same clothes each day and night and her black hair gets more and more greasy” (11). By taking up the position of the first person, a self, or a sense of selfhood, is established which enables the speaker to look outside herself from that position. (The ‘technologies’ at work in this example also include the focussing outside the self, the attending to the external, interpersonal realm as a counterweight to the internalizing energies of psychosis. But for the moment I want simply to highlight this assumption of the ‘I’ as a necessary prerequisite to such subsequent works of the self.) Such apparently mundane sentence construction is foregrounded and made ‘conscious’, or ‘voluntary’ in Baars’s terms, in part because written – ‘externalized’ – rather than fading into the ‘internalized’ background noise of inchoate thought. Writing is a ‘concretizing’ factor which allows Hart to speak to herself “at will”, as Baars has it, and thereby to regain control over “inner chaos” (242).

In *Phone At Nine* such a regaining of control over voice is very obvious at times, such as in this extract when Hart records the expressions of the ‘alien’ voice and then answers in her ‘own’:

There’s a big bad voice saying, ‘Your life is over – it won’t be long now before you join me in death. You’ve got nothing to live for anyway, I’ve destroyed it all. Your guts are full of maggots. You are rotting away. You smell.’ It’s not true. I have my friends and family to live for. (194)

In addition to the ‘answering’ evident here, this passage also exemplifies the objectifying process of writing, in which the power of psychosis is attenuated through its very inscription, a mechanism poetically encapsulated in the sentence which opens

⁵⁸ ‘Decision’ is a significant word in my context here, for it is central in Paul Ricoeur’s conception of ‘narrative identity’. In the context of reading he says: “[T]he practice of narrative lies in a thought experiment by means of which we try to inhabit worlds foreign to us. In this sense, narrative exercises imagination more than the will, even though it remains a category of action. [...] [R]eading also includes a moment of impetus. This is when reading becomes a provocation to be and to act differently. However this impetus is transformed into action only through a decision whereby a person says: Here I stand! So narrative identity is not equivalent to true self-constancy except through this decisive moment, which makes ethical responsibility the highest factor in self-constancy.” *Time and Narrative*, Volume 3, trans. by Katherine Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 249.

the journal – “I’m sitting in my own shadow” (3). Here, the act of speaking works to distance Hart from psychotic terror. Psychosis, like a shadow, is ‘produced’ by the individual yet also shrouds her; without the individual there is neither shadow nor psychosis, yet she is obscured by the “seamless cloak” of this engulfing emanation.⁵⁹ Yet, by detailing that very engulfment the speaker re-emerges. In speaking, the first-person pronoun is activated and this particular determinant of psychosis is dissipated; an ‘I’ therefore exists even as it records its own dissolution, thereby reversing those energies bent on destroying a sense of selfhood.⁶⁰

6.2.5 Derrida: the disciple, speaking

In chapter 4 I discussed the debate between Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida initiated by the publication of Foucault’s *Folie et deraison*,⁶¹ and it is from Derrida’s subsequent intervention, his essay entitled ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’,⁶² that I have taken the phrase ‘start to speak’. Before embarking on his trenchant critique of the philosophical underpinnings of *Madness and Civilization*, Derrida, characteristically, traces out a kind of apologia in which he pays homage to Foucault. He laments that to enter into this dialogue is “intimidating” because he previously “had the good fortune to study under Michel Foucault”, and still retains “the consciousness of an admiring and grateful disciple” (CH 31). As this prolegomenon continues, Derrida evokes a model of the subject as ‘intertextual’ – a labile, plural self, made up from the voices of others – and depicts the process of philosophical thinking as a

⁵⁹ See also: “The more voice my father has the less voice I have” (49); and David: “the voice blots out any sense of an I” (36): both express the overshadowing affects of psychotic experience. There is a curious parallel between Hart’s description of sitting in her own shadow, and the idea in Buddhist philosophy that it is the self which shields the individual from happiness. Christmas Humphreys, in his now classic introduction to the Zen school of Buddhist practice, states: “In Zen there is one enemy in the path of final enlightenment, and this is self, the self which stands between a man and the sun while he bitterly complains that it is dark”. *Zen Buddhism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961 [1949]), p. 53. Note that as Hart returns to health she obliquely again invokes the image of the shadow: “Some little girls are dancing on the green outside my window. They look like I feel, free with arms floating in the breeze and with the sun still high, and casting only the suggestion of shadow” (323).

⁶⁰ C.f. Kierkegaard’s famous definition of despair, in which he notes the way that a blindness to one’s own state compounds the soul-sickness he describes: “what characterizes despair is just this – that it is ignorant of being despair”. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. by Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 75.

⁶¹ *Folie et deraison: Histoire de la folie a l’age classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961). I refer here to the much abridged English translation: *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 1999). Page numbers for subsequent quotations are given in parentheses within the text.

⁶² In *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978 [first published in French 1967]), pp. 31-63. Page numbers for subsequent quotations are given in parentheses within the text.

somewhat agonistic negotiation with the voices of others which have been introjected into the self, ending by asserting the necessity of breaking free of this “interminable and silent dialogue” in order to ‘speak’. Here, the primary other is the ‘master’ – that is, Foucault – with Derrida cast as ‘disciple’:

To engage in dialogue with the master or, better to articulate the interminable and silent dialogue which made him into a disciple – this disciple’s consciousness is an unhappy consciousness. Starting to enter into dialogue in the world, that is, starting to answer back, he always feels ‘caught in the act’, like the ‘infant’ who, by definition and as his name indicates, cannot speak and above all must not answer back. And when, as is the case here, the dialogue is in danger of being taken – incorrectly – as a challenge, the disciple knows that he alone finds himself already challenged by the master’s voice within him that precedes his own. He feels himself indefinitely challenged, or rejected or accused; as a disciple, he is challenged by the master who speaks within him and before him, to reproach him for making this challenge and to reject it in advance, having elaborated it before him; and having interiorised the master, he is also challenged by the disciple that he himself is. [...] The disciple must break [...] his infinite reflection on the master. And start to speak. (CH 31-2)

This remarkable and tortuous passage anticipates some of the essay’s subsequent arguments against Foucault about the intimate operations of thought and language, and the (non)relation between reason and madness. In particular, it prefigures Derrida’s assertion that Foucault has misread Descartes’s first *Méditation* as a key and symbolic moment in the history of the incarceration of madness.⁶³ However, these opening remarks – perhaps unintentionally – also evoke the struggle enacted in texts like Hart’s, in which the self mired in madness attempts to overturn the hegemony of a vocative psychosis. In Derrida’s plural model of consciousness, as in *Phone At Nine* and the narratives Glass cites, to ‘start to speak’ is to make the uncomfortable break from an internalised voice – which here is Foucault’s, or the ‘master’s’, voice. In other words, Derrida must formulate and express his objections to Foucault’s arguments. This is also to impose one voice over the many. In arguing contra Foucault, Derrida must select a discursive and philosophical stance, and assume the role of speaker, a movement which is symbolically performed in the essay by his switch from the rather convoluted prose style and use of the third person as he describes his dilemma, to an (albeit hesitant) embarkation into the first person as he does indeed ‘start to speak’, and begins to demarcate the lines of his argument: “As the route that these considerations

⁶³ The short section of Foucault’s text which Derrida critiques is not included in the English translation of *Folie et déraison*. However Cartesian philosophy is a motif which imbricates the pages of the English edition.

will follow is neither direct nor unilinear – far from it – I will sacrifice any further preamble and go straight to the most general questions that will serve as the focal points of these reflections” (CH 32). In his subsequent comment that “My point of departure might appear slight and artificial”, the choice of language connotes that this moment of dissension in which the ‘I’ is assumed and an argument advanced is indeed a symbolic ‘embarkation’.

Evoking the process in Hart’s journal in which the individual voice is asserted over and within the confusing echo-chamber of psychotic experience, Derrida’s essay performs a rendition of the imposition of the singular on the plural; like *Phone At Nine*, his text breaks away from the disorienting echolalia of a fragmented interiority, and begins to chart a willed course from confusion and uncertainty towards meaning through the adoption of a discourse expressed via the first-person. Furthermore, the ‘movement’ enacted in these opening remarks anticipates Derrida’s key thesis in this essay. This is worth outlining briefly as it resonates with, and may help to illumine, my contention that ‘speaking’ – the embarkation into language, or the translation of ‘experience’ into words – is, or at least can be, the converse of madness. In particular, Derrida’s close engagement with the processes of consciousness and verbal thought is of considerable interest when considering the phenomenon of ‘inner speech’.

Derrida’s critique hinges on his assertion that the divide between madness and reason, which, according to Foucault, renders them “things henceforth external, deaf to all exchange, and as though dead to one another” (MC xi), is not, as Foucault claims, the result of wider processes within the consciousness of the ‘Classical age’ which have *inaugurated* an epistemic shift. Rather, Derrida argues that the point of dissension (“the moment of this conspiracy”, as Foucault puts it) occurs within each individual consciousness as we pass from experience to expression, and that the internment and alienation of madness is a daily, mundane, inevitable part of communication, discourse, speech, and even thought itself.⁶⁴ Foucault sets out to revisit the “zero point” (MC xi) and to isolate the great breach, the caesura between reason and madness; but in attempting to predicate his archaeology on a renunciation of the “terminal truths” of reason (MC xii), Derrida argues that he has ignored the fundamental schism *constitutive* of the (non)relation between reason and madness. So, for Derrida, Foucault’s “archaeology of that silence” dividing the ‘man of reason’ and the ‘man of

⁶⁴ “The reign of finite thought can be established only on the basis of the more or less disguised internment, humiliation, fettering and mockery of the madman within us, of the madman who can only be the fool of a logos which is father, master, and king” (‘Cogito and the History of Madness’, p. 61).

madness' is attempting to speak the unspeakable; the attempt to *say* madness will fail because, whatever Foucault's ambition, it must occur within the confines of reason: in fact, says Derrida, it repeats the internment of madness Foucault writes of, and is itself an example of what Foucault calls the "monologue of reason *about* madness" (MC xiii).

Derrida uses the Cartesian project, in particular an analysis of the cogito, to demonstrate the intricate mechanism whereby madness is interred. Without going in to too much detail here, his conclusion is that madness, but also any pre-verbal awareness, is fundamentally altered in character when it is transposed into language. Therefore experience, whether that be madness or an intuitive awareness of one's own existence, cannot be captured within discourse. This pertains even within an individual consciousness. Highlighting the perceptual shift from undifferentiated *experience* to hypostatized *enunciation*, Derrida argues that the split which severs madness and reason occurs in the psyche with articulation and reflection: it is at this juncture that both the creation and internment of otherness takes place, and it is this fundamental schism, the absolute inimicality between discourse and unreason, that renders 'speaking madness' – the capture of that experience of alterity within the language of reason – an impossibility. In Derrida's terms, only by "imprisoning madness" can "speech [...] open up the space for discourse" (CH 61).

I should stress that my argument here has a very different orientation to that motivating Foucault's and Derrida's texts, which are both predicated on the same underpinning assumption that the 'confinement' of madness by reason is *tragic*. For Foucault, in particular, this is complemented by the converse implication that if it were possible for madness to flow uncontained this would be a good thing, and that much of the suffering linked to mental illness is as a result of the 'broken dialogue' between rationality and unreason; Derrida does not take issue with this view, rather he chooses as the ground for debate the cause of the schism.⁶⁵ Attempting to take my lead from

⁶⁵ Derrida's and Foucault's perspectives evoke, and arguably are a part of, the rhetoric of 1960's anti-psychiatry in which madness was deemed to be either a protest against a Western bourgeois rationalism, or an authentic expression of the self. This type of view is now more marginal than it was in the heyday of Laing and Cooper but, nevertheless, it still exerts influence in academic journals, and in the discourses of organisations like *Psychology, Politics, Resistance* and *The Radical Psychology Network*, and publications such as *Asylum* magazine. It would be inaccurate, however, to characterize the anti-psychiatric position as completely out of touch with individuals' own accounts of madness. A number of autopathographers have recorded their experiences of madness from a standpoint sympathetic to the 'Foucaultian' view. Instances include the writings collected in: Jeanine Grobe (ed.), *Beyond Bedlam: Contemporary Women Psychiatric Survivors Speak Out* (Chicago: Third Side Press, 1995); and also Aidan Shingler's memoir of schizophrenia, *Beyond Reason* (Glossop, U. K.: A. Shingler, 1999). (This

the sentiments expressed in the texts I study here, I am not uncritical of what I consider to be this overly-idealistic view. However, Derrida's contentions concerning the inimicality of madness and reason are, perversely perhaps, certainly not antithetical to my argument that, by pursuing a reasoned first-person discourse, by starting to 'speak', Hart is also combating the depredations of psychosis.⁶⁶

6.2.6 Consciousness and self-talk: The self and psychosis

I have noted Hart's descriptions of the way in which psychosis disrupts her sense of self, and I have discussed how, in 'speaking', or embarking on a willed and charted course through language in her journal, she is effectively combating the ravages of madness by formulating a singular voice. In addition, I have suggested that, inherent in this speaking, is the very re-creation of selfhood; for, even in the act of detailing its engulfment in the shadows of madness, the self re-emerges in that same articulation. I want now to say a little more on this, but first it is worth noting that Hart's observations on the loss or displacement of the self in psychosis accord with a very wide variety of opinion, both medical and otherwise, from the mainstream of biomedical psychiatry as well as from scholars and clinicians taking a more critical approach to the causes of mental illness. I discuss this consensus in more detail in my opening chapter.

Through her consciously willed embarkation into language, Hart is resisting psychosis and the attendant disaggregation of the self. However, through her use of the word, she not only resists the dispersive energies of madness, but also fashions subjectivity. To put it simply, to speak is also to *be*, or more accurately, to effect being.⁶⁷ Anthony Kerby in his influential study *Narrative and the Self*, expresses it in

latter is particularly interesting in that Shingler works with images as well as language; this choice may tie in with the notion that verbal discourse is inherently structured by a reason inimical to the experience of 'madness'.) In addition, most of the works I study here take issue with the overly-simplistic positivism of some psychiatric practice.

⁶⁶ See James W. Hickey, 'Writing Through the Pain,' *Journal of Pastoral Counselling*, XXXIV (1999) <http://www.iona.edu/academic/arts_sci/orgs/depression/depression.htm> [November 13th 2003]. In this illuminating article Hickey describes the therapeutic use of writing in the context of depression: "The vague immensity of internal feelings can somewhat be corralled by language. Over time, the very act of trying to capture perceptions as words can produce a gradual distancing from the direct experience of the sensations. Striving to state the situation accurately can evolve into a growing sense of objectivity, though this is achieved as much by focusing on the "striving" itself as on the "situation" being described. This more actively objective sensibility potentially provides an alternative "place to be," beyond the passive role of abject sufferer. At length, accomplishing this alternative sense of Self (as external observer rather than passive subject) can strengthen a sense of personal control and mastery over formerly debilitating feelings of depression" (paragraph 6 of 58).

⁶⁷ This idea is now fairly common currency in the field of study known as discourse theory. See for instance essays in Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates (eds.), *Discourse theory and*

this way: “if there is a presence of the subject to itself, it is the presence of the voice; it is here that I find myself expressed, where I hear myself expressed. The ‘I’ appears in this auto-affective relation”.⁶⁸ Alternatively, and fashioning an analogy from Hart’s own description of attending to a fellow patient, the dialogues with the self reproduced in her journal are “little drops of conversation that begin to form a picture of personality” (20).⁶⁹

We have already seen something of this self-fashioning process in the ‘detailing of engulfment’, in which, even in the recording of self-eclipse, subjectivity is asserted. Similarly, describing her dislocation from the social realm and from the sense of herself as situated within an autobiographical continuum, Hart writes of the way selfhood has been “voided” or “vanished” (84) with her incarceration. Yet, counteracting this, she frequently refers to her past and imagines her future, and by this means keeps an awareness of (narrative) existence animate. Even if these references are often deeply pessimistic or troubled, such as when she records that she “wept for the past, present and future” (76), the process of writing nevertheless situates Hart in a temporal continuum by invoking such narratological concepts: the recording subject gazes across (and speaks into being) its history, current situation, and anticipated life trajectory, and in so doing maintains a sense of continuity, of self as an ongoing, dynamic narrative event. Paradoxically, even when Hart records that she “cannot envisage a real life or a future” (83), her statement obliquely contemplates those concepts; as such, they remain on the horizon of consciousness despite their seeming utter remoteness at any given moment. In addition, such ostensibly hopeless statements nevertheless presuppose a self (a self, in this instance, which is unable to envisage possibility): there is an ‘I’ present, that is, which comments on its own existence. Illuminating this dynamic, Michel de Certeau, in his delineation of ‘everyday practices’ – specifically, the ‘use of language’ and the “traits that specify the act of speaking” – argues that through the “act of the ‘I’ who speaks”, there is established both “a *present*” and also, since “the

practice: a reader (London: Sage, 2001), particularly those collected in the section subtitled ‘Minds, Selves, and Sense Making’ (pp. 186-283). See also: J. Potter, *Representing Reality: Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Construction* (London: Sage, 1996); Ian Parker, *Discourse Dynamics: Critical Analysis for Social and Individual Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1992); R. Harre and G. Gillet, *The Discursive Mind* (London: Sage, 1994).

⁶⁸ Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 77.

⁶⁹ Although the flaw in this analogy is that rather than a *picture* of a personality, the dialogue with the self is selfhood. For an interesting approach to the relationship between subjectivity and conversation, see Michael Billig’s *Freudian Repression: Conversation Creating the Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Billig claims that repression is not “a mysterious inner process” (p. 1) but is learnt through conversational skills, that is to say, is constituted socially.

present is properly the source of time,” the “organization of a temporality (the present creates a before and after) and the existence of a ‘now’ which is the presence to the world”.⁷⁰

In *Phone at Nine*, therefore, although in desperate straits, a self is fashioned in order to comment on its own unhappiness. And the process by which Hart re-inserts herself into a narrative continuum, re-establishing her conception of herself as a present agent emerging from a history and entering into a future, illustrates the broader mechanisms of self-making at work. In the same way that she revivifies possibility and a sense of her past by the simple act of according them attention, so too ipseity (after Ricoeur’s ‘*ipse*’ self⁷¹) is effectively spoken into being when Hart invokes the self within language by positing the first-person singular: this is what de Certeau means when, obliquely referencing Benveniste, he invokes the “existence of a ‘now’ which is the presence to the world”. Even in the process of detailing a sense of displacement and evanescence the fragile self (re-)emerges. Lara Jefferson is referring to something very similar when she writes:

The very fact that a thing – anything – can be fitted into a meaning built up of words – small black words, that can be written with one hand and the stub of a pencil – means that it is not big enough to be overwhelming. It is the vast, formless, unknown and unknowable things that we fear. Anything which can be brought to a common point – a focus within our understanding – can be dealt with.⁷²

6.3 Language and the formation of subjects

In his work on the narrative self, Anthony Kerby contends that it is in the ‘presence of the voice’ that subjectivity is constituted, and that “soliloquy”, as he puts it, “is especially important to the question of self-identity”.⁷³ Arguing against Husserl, Kerby sets out to question “expression theories of meaning”, in particular the notion that verbal expression is a “duplication or reproduction of a prior stratum” – specifically “the interiority of consciousness”,⁷⁴ suggesting instead, in line with Derrida’s

⁷⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 33. Via a footnote De Certeau refers the reader to Benveniste.

⁷¹ *Time and Narrative* (Volume 3), trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 246.

⁷² Lara Jefferson, *These are my Sisters: A journal from the inside of insanity* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975), p. 25.

⁷³ Kerby, *Narrative and the Self*, p. 72.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 74.

arguments in his *Speech and Phenomena*,⁷⁵ that expression “generates the subject and object (qua intended) *presupposed* by it”,⁷⁶ and that “the disclosive power of language is formative of the subject”.⁷⁷ Kerby considers the question of whether a subject existed “preceding expression”, and contends, contra Husserl, that “in solitary monologue one’s expressions [...] render the meanings of one’s experiences or states present to oneself”.⁷⁸ For Kerby, then, the very marrow of subjectivity is sited in a lexical reservoir:

Those iterable words that are always at my disposal are my lifeblood, for it is here that a certain self-consciousness arises and is constantly renewed in the form of hearing oneself speak. It is perhaps this relation [...] that best founds our sense of subjectivity or self-consciousness.⁷⁹

Kerby’s conclusions, as he acknowledges, borrow to a considerable extent from the arguments advanced by Emile Benveniste in his *Problems in General Linguistics*.⁸⁰ Of particular relevance in my context here is Benveniste’s well-known assertion that it “is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of ‘ego’ in reality, in its reality”. “Subjectivity,” he goes on, “is only the emergence in the being of a fundamental property of language. ‘Ego’ is he who says ‘ego’”.⁸¹ In addition, Kerby’s formulation of the individual’s ‘lifeblood’ being lodged in those ‘iterable words’ at his or her ‘disposal’ invokes Benveniste’s pronouncement that “Language is accordingly the possibility of subjectivity because it always contains the linguistic forms appropriate to the expression of subjectivity”.⁸²

The notion that it is in *speaking* that the self is constituted is not only representative of a strand of theoretical thinking on subjectivity; intriguingly it is also broadly consonant with more empirical work in psychology on the role of self-talk. The extensive work of neuropsychologist Alain Morin on the constitution of selfhood

⁷⁵ *Speech and Phenomena, and other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. by David Allison (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 74.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 82.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 76.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 77. Kerby distinguishes between the ‘subject of speech’ and the ‘speaking subject’. The former is “a form of subject that exists solely in expression,” while the latter is “the bodily site of the enunciation or the origin of inscription for written language” (68). “The meaning of the speaking subject,” he goes on, “is only given via its discourse [...] In itself the speaking subject is simply a possible site of utterances, a semiotic body of potential gestures and articulations [...] The speaking subject, then, attains selfhood via its expressions” (69).

⁸⁰ Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. by Mary Elizabeth Meek (Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971). *Narrative and the Self* also synthesizes disparate ideas from, amongst others, Nietzsche, Saussure, Lacan, Ricoeur, and Derrida.

⁸¹ Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, p. 224.

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 227.

and its relation to inner speech is of particular interest in this regard.⁸³ Morin contends that the self “acquires information about itself” and forms a “coherent picture of what it is” by “talking to itself about itself”.⁸⁴ Inner speech, he argues, is critical for the development of self-awareness, self-consciousness and self-knowledge: conscious awareness is not only dependent upon but “almost *synonymous* with our ‘inner voice’”,⁸⁵ and is “probably one of the most important cognitive processes needed in the development of the cognitive self”.⁸⁶ In addition, and consonant with Bernard Baars’s suggestion that encouraging a willed engagement with the inner voice might be salutary for psychotics,⁸⁷ Morin suggests that “low self-conscious subjects” might be taught “to talk to themselves about themselves” and that this type of training may be beneficial “in a clinical setting”.⁸⁸ He goes on to note that “when irrealist cognitions are at the core of clients’ problems, introspective self-talk could be learned to identify and change maladaptive self-talk”.⁸⁹ Morin’s concluding consideration of the “crucial role self-awareness plays in *self-regulation*”⁹⁰ is also relevant to my discussion here. Citing Diener and Mikulas, Morin notes that “self-awareness represents a prerequisite to self-regulation”: “You cannot change a given behaviour in a desired direction if you are oblivious to the way you act”,⁹¹ and suggests that “expanding people’s disposition to self-focus by encouraging them to talk to themselves about themselves should help them to self-regulate”.⁹² Moreover, clinical practitioners such as Davidson and Strauss have argued that “an enhanced sense of self” can provide persons suffering from “prolonged psychiatric disorders” with a “refuge from their illness and a foundation upon which they may then take up the work of recovery in a more active and

⁸³ See for example: ‘Inner speech and Conscious Experience’, *Science & Consciousness Review*, 4 (April 2003) < <http://www.sci-con.org> > [electronic journal]; ‘Characteristics of an Effective Internal Dialogue in the Acquisition of Self-information’, *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 15.1 (1995), 45-58; ‘Preliminary Data on a Relation between Self-talk and Complexity of the Self-concept’, *Psychological Reports*, 76 (1995), 267-272; ‘Self-talk and Self-awareness: On the Nature of the Relation’, *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 14.3 (1993), 223-234; (With J. Everett) ‘Inner Speech as a Mediator of Self-awareness, Self-consciousness, and Self-knowledge: An Hypothesis’, *New Ideas in Psychology*, 8.3 (1990), 337-356.

⁸⁴ Morin and Everett, ‘Inner speech as a mediator of self-awareness’, p. 338.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁸⁷ Baars, p. 77.

⁸⁸ Morin and Everett, ‘Inner speech as a mediator of self-awareness’, p. 351.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 352. Compare with Caryl Emerson: “If you cannot talk about an experience, at least to yourself, you did not have it”. ‘The Outer Word and Inner Speech’, p. 25.

⁹² Morin and Everett, ‘Inner speech as a mediator of self-awareness’, p. 352-3. This emphasis on the ways individuals might intervene in their own existence through practices and techniques evokes Foucault’s work on the technologies of the self which I discuss below.

determined fashion”.⁹³ In this light, it appears that inhering in self-talk’s fashioning of self-awareness is a salutary potential. Indeed Davidson and Strauss also argue for the necessity of conducting a “personal inventory”⁹⁴ and speak of the crucial role of asserting the “voice” and controlling “attention”⁹⁵ if the patient is to cultivate a sense of selfhood and agency.

Returning to Benveniste and Kerby, their arguments are particularly useful in aiding an appreciation of the significance of Hart’s journal because they enable us to read beyond its content and unremarkable style to understand its broader importance. If, as Kerby puts it, “personhood is dependent on expression”,⁹⁶ and in the light of the attenuation of self collateral with illness, then an easily overlooked redemptive function adumbrates the process of inscription. Hart does not directly address this self-making function of her writing, but she does seem to be at least obliquely aware of it. When she contemplates a fall or capitulation into the totality of madness, for instance, she not only deems writing to have saved her, but also imagines that the abyssal depths represent a realm “where I could not be reached” (353). The phrase invokes the spectre of the lost self – certainly adrift from the possibility of therapeutic intervention by others, but also perhaps by Hart ‘herself’.⁹⁷ There are connotations here of the impossibility of grasping the ‘I’, of no longer being able to occupy the position of the first person within discourse, without which meaningful selfhood is infeasible. In this interpretation, when Hart pictures an ‘I’ that cannot be reached, she is using the first-person pronoun to signify a subject-position rather than a self per se. Thus, the ‘I’ which cannot be reached is the position from which selfhood is able to be formulated, and not selfhood itself. Kerby summarises this usage thus: “Subjectivity is attained in discourse by assuming the role of ‘I’ in that discourse”,⁹⁸ distinguishing between what he calls the ‘subject of speech’ and the ‘speaking subject’. The former is “a form of subject that exists solely in expression,” while the latter is “the bodily site of the

⁹³ L. Davidson, and J. Strauss, ‘Sense of self in recovery from severe mental illness’, *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 65 (1992), 131-145 (p. 131).

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 136.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 140.

⁹⁶ Kerby, *Narrative and the Self*, p. 123; n. 11.

⁹⁷ The phrase also insinuates that selfhood is intimately bound up with interpersonal relationship – with the potential to be ‘reached’; this awareness is more overtly manifest in the journal’s continual concentration on Hart’s interactions with others: selfhood for Hart is in part constituted via relationship. I discuss this shortly as an example of one of the ‘technologies’ deployed in her journal writing. On the interpersonal reaching of the self see David W. Mann, ‘Ownership: A pathography of the self,’ *British Journal of Medical Psychology* (1991) 64, pp. 211-223, and Glass’s *Private Terror*.

⁹⁸ Kerby, *Narrative and the Self*, p. 66.

enunciation or the origin of inscription for written language”.⁹⁹ It is only by assuming the position of the subject of speech that selfhood in any meaningful sense is attained:

The meaning of the speaking subject is only given via its discourse [...] In itself the speaking subject is simply a possible site of utterances, a semiotic body of potential gestures and articulations [...] The speaking subject, then, attains selfhood via its expressions.¹⁰⁰

6.4.1 *These are my sisters: Lara Jefferson and redemptive writing*

Whereas Linda Hart does not often comment on the redemptive mechanisms of writing, Lara Jefferson, in a hospital journal first published in 1947 under the title of *These are my Sisters*, foregrounds her production of this text as central to her survival, addressing at some length the ways in which writing aids her negotiation of madness and incarceration. It will be helpful to look briefly at this remarkable work, for in many ways it makes explicit what on the whole remains implied in *Phone At Nine*. Moreover, Jefferson also considers the interrelationship of writing and thought, and anticipates the conclusions of theoreticians such as Foucault on this nexus.

At the end of *These are my Sisters*, like Hart, and employing a similar metaphor, Jefferson also wonders what her mental condition might have been if she had not seized on writing. On the eve of being transferred “to the ward upstairs; to the ‘best’ ward [...] to take up living in a semi-civilized state” (236), she wonders whether, deprived of her writing, she might instead have been relegated “to a place still lower in this limbo” (238). The image is a powerful one, connoting as it does the transitional and liminal state of both madness and incarceration, and insinuating a suspension from the consensual world, of a lost realm wherein the vanished, or, as Hart would have it, ‘unreachable’, self is consigned. Like Hart, therefore, Jefferson concludes her journal by acknowledging that its writing has been instrumental in her survival; however, she also opens the diary by considering the role of writing, and describing how she comes to settle on it as a therapeutic tactic.

Jefferson begins her text aware that her situation is tenuous and perilous; she is conscious of being poised at the brink of a fall into an oblivious suffering in which the rescue of the self might be impossible. Yet even in this treacherous moment the

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 68.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 69.

window of lucidity in which she thinks allows her enough insight to comment acerbically on her assigned place in an impossible cultural double-bind:

I know I cannot think straight [...] I cannot conduct myself as the rules set forth because something has broken loose within me and I am insane – and differ from these others to the extent that I still have sense to know it [...] Here I sit mad as the hatter – with nothing to do but either become madder and madder – or else recover enough of my sanity to be allowed to go back to the life that drove me mad. If that is not a vicious circle, I hope I never encounter one. But today the circle has stopped chasing itself long enough to drop me somewhere along the unmarked line between stark lunacy and harmless eccentricity. (11-12)

Here the urgency which propels Jefferson to seek for a tool with which she can aid herself is evident. At the same time, the passage demonstrates one of the more obvious ways in which Jefferson's response to hospitalization differs from Hart's. *These are my Sisters* presents a more critical stance on the mental patient's plight than is found in *Phone at Nine*.¹⁰¹ At times, there is a distinctly Foucaultian tenor to Jefferson's observations, for instance, her comments that "Ladies of Amazonian proportions and Berserker propensities have passed quite out of vogue and have no place in this too damned civilized world", and "Had I been born in the age and time when the world dealt in a straightforward manner with misfits as could not meet the requirements of living, I would not have been much of a problem to my contemporaries" (11).

Despite her scepticism, however, or perhaps because of it, Jefferson adopts a pragmatic stance, accepting and working within the cultural scripts constraining her, while at the same time determining not to allow the self to vanish totally into madness. This strategic pragmatism¹⁰² can itself be read as evidence of her defiance of the scripts which would render her docile and passive. However, while Jefferson is aware that her madness has been exacerbated, even caused, by oppressive social and gender mores, she also emphasizes the fact of a suffering in which mania and despair alternate. She writes of her condition as like having "nothing solid to stand on – nothing beneath me but a vast treacherous quagmire of despondency" (21). And while such abyssal experiences are sometimes "followed by periods of exultation and ecstasy", this

¹⁰¹ This difference may, in part, emerge from the greater emotional literacy Hart encounters in the medical regime. There is a stark difference between the treatment described in these two texts, which are separated in time, of course, by over 50 years. Perhaps this indicates something of the way in which the cumulative attrition of critical engagements with psychiatry from Foucault onwards have affected medical practice.

¹⁰² I see Jefferson's stance as quite close to Richard Jenkins' notion of 'pragmatic individualism', in which, although recognizing the socio-cultural pressures on and moulding of identity, the person adopts "a pragmatic interpretive framework which permits [her] to construct a first line of sense and defence in a social world". *Social Identity* (London, Routledge, 1996), p. 18.

hypermanic bliss leaves her drained and debilitated; madness “caught me and swept me – where I do not know. All the way through hell – and very far into heaven. Now it has whirled and left a stranger unknown to me. Sitting here in my body, I am weak, sick, and vomit much, and stagger so I can hardly walk” (18). Such descriptions are important to bear in mind when reading this text since they establish that, whatever its cause, and notwithstanding the wry narratorial tone, Jefferson is living through chronic and debilitating distress at the time of writing. Indeed, it is the force of this distress which impels her to seek for a way to aid the ailing self.

Therefore, having established the perilous nature of her condition, Jefferson moves on to consider a work of the self; that is to say, she considers how she might intervene therapeutically and ‘reach’ out to the self. Surveying her situation, she decides that, whatever the ultimate source of her suffering, the resultant effects are now experienced within the very architecture of subjectivity, even have come to constitute subjectivity itself. In one particularly evocative phrase, she writes: “since the tangle is I, I cannot let it lay as it is” (18). This intriguing lexical construction connotes a subtly nuanced view of subjectivity. At first it seems simply to indicate the difficulty facing the individual who wishes to untangle the self, yet has only that same self with which to act: the tangled I must be untangled by that I. Yet it also produces a doubling in the self, implicitly invoking the inherent split in autobiography between the narrated and the narrating selves – or, evoking Benveniste, Lacan, and Kerby, between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the utterance – and signals that in this splitting of subjectivity, on which so much critical energy has been expended,¹⁰³ there may inhere a redemptive potential. For, as the narrating ‘I’ separates off from that which it narrates, so a clearing is made in the oppressive continuum of experience in which a work of the

¹⁰³ For a particularly notable example see Paul de Man’s ‘Autobiography as De-Facement,’ (in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1984], pp. 67-82). For an overview of poststructuralist interventions in debates around subjectivity and autobiography, see Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), particularly chapter 5, ‘Saving the Subject’, pp. 179-228. Of the many critiques produced over the last 35 years or so, one of the most original is *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, in which Barthes fashions an autobiography but also attempts to repudiate any consonance between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the utterance. Exemplifying Derrida’s many interventions in this field is his statement that “what is called the speaking subject is no longer the person himself, or the person alone, who speaks. The speaking subject discovers his irreducible secondarity, his origin that is already eluded”. *Writing and Difference*, p. 178. Also relevant is his deconstruction of consciousness (as unmediated self-presence) – as not an ontological absolute but as a contingent determination or effect. See, for example, ‘Differance’, in *Speech and Phenomena*, pp. 129-60. See also Lacan’s critique of the subject as coherent totality.

self on the self is feasible.¹⁰⁴ The multiplication of selfhood inherent in, and produced by, the ‘autobiographical’ act of reflexive thought, fashions an agent – the reflecting ‘I’ which is not subsumed by the immediacy of suffering.

This redemptive doubling of the self is evident even at this early stage in Jefferson’s journal – before, that is, she has actually settled on writing as her primary technique. Following her invocation of the tangled ‘I’, she goes on to assert that, “although I have lost every encounter, I am still not dismissed from the conflict. If all my weapons have failed, I must find some others” (18). It is quite easy here to read the ‘I’ which has “lost every encounter” and whose weapons have failed, as a ‘different’ entity to the ‘I’ which has not been dismissed and which searches for new instruments with which to combat suffering. In this reading, the second ‘I’ is the self separating itself from, and pondering on, its own history, preparing to intervene in its own experience. Yet in this interpretation, the very process by which Jefferson constructs these sentences is itself an intervention and, as I have already argued, the most significant one, in that the self here is no longer wholly adrift on the tides of distress, but is reflected back to and through itself as it begins to speak of itself. In a similar vein, when Jefferson envisages her condition as a lapse into unconsciousness, her consideration as to how she might resuscitate the self again connotes this reflexive movement: “If I am to be awakened – I must awaken myself – for no one else can do it” (19).

Jefferson decides, then, that she must act to aid herself, and the impression of urgency in these early statements again invokes her critical and defiant resistance to the passive ethos of the asylum in which the female residents “have been relieved of the responsibility of trying” (12). The kind of ‘trying’ which Jefferson then embarks on is characterized by a maieutic¹⁰⁵ process in which the self attempts to move toward

¹⁰⁴ Kim Worthington discusses the creative potential inherent in this splitting of the self when she interrogates poststructuralist accounts of the self as text. With reference to Ihab Hassan’s *The Literature of Silence*, she concurs with him that “the power of human consciousness” exists in the “intuition of our fundamental psychic split [...] The gap between a pre-linguistic experiential self and its entry into conceptual textuality always leaves open a space for revision or change”. *Self as Narrative: Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 179. Also of interest is Richard Kearney’s discussion of narrative identity, where, quoting Paul Ricoeur, he suggests that the “projective function of narrative actually *generates* action by furnishing us with a clearing in which ‘motives may be compared and measured, even if they are as heterogeneous as desires and ethical commands’”. ‘Ethics of the narrative self,’ in *Between Philosophy and Poetry: Writing, Rhythm, History*, ed. by Massimo Verdicchio and Robert Burch (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 91-8 (p. 96).

¹⁰⁵ ‘Maieutic’ is defined by the *OED* thus: “Relating to or designating the Socratic process, or other similar method, of assisting a person to become fully conscious of ideas previously latent in the mind”. More specifically, the Socratic method induces the respondent to arrive at ideas via “a logical sequence of questions”, or a dialectic.

resolution through self-interrogation. Thus, for example, her assessment of her disturbed cognitive processes proceeds in incremental steps. First she acknowledges to herself what currently pertains: “I know I cannot think straight” (11); then outlines the implications of this condition: “Unless I learn to think differently, I shall shortly be insane” (13); arriving at the critical question of what action she can take to change this: “How – how – *how*? In the name of God – how does a person learn to think differently?” (13); and concluding that, despite the difficulty, the task belongs to her: “if I must learn to think differently – there is nothing to do but to go about doing it with what few remaining shreds of intelligence I have. But how – is the question. It is plainly my job for none other can do it” (15).

The ‘weapon’ which Jefferson quickly resolves on is writing. Writing, that is, as a means by which she can survive her suffering and recover or remake the self: “Because I must face the problem and deal with it somehow – I evolved this pen and paper idea” (24). She goes on to link quite specifically her own continued existence to writing:

The flood that was swirling about me was sucking me under – and the pencil I had in my hand was a straw to be caught. It was just a straw – but I caught it – and now I have kept my head above water for a while – even if what I have written does not make sense to anyone – at least – it has helped me a little. (24-5)

This passage is particularly interesting; firstly because of its stark and unambiguous portrayal of writing as a means for negotiating the desperate straits of distress: the pencil, says Jefferson, is holding her above complete immersion in the flood. In that she is writing of the flood, of the self and its confusion and suffering – and in so doing is constructing, as I have said, a second narrating ‘I’ – it may not be too fanciful to compare these two slender and ‘linear’ entities: the pencil and the ‘I’. Similar in ‘form’, both are also ‘instruments’ which the self may take up to extricate itself from ontological peril. The homology is apposite in the light of my earlier discussions of the subject as an effect of, or at least intimately bound up with, language: equating ‘I’ and pencil invokes the closeness of subjectivity and the production of the word. In this interpretation, ‘I’ is a subject position only activated when occupied, in the same way that the pencil is a tool only of use if picked up. Just as it grasps the pencil, the self must also metaphorically pick up the ‘I’. Subsequent to that initial grasping, signification is then possible with both implement and ‘I’: one produces writing, the other a discourse within which the self is situated – yet both self and

writing are inseparably linked, in that the self 'is' writing, and the writing 'is' the self. In addition, neither 'I' nor pencil has an inherent content – only with signification does 'content' emerge. The 'I', therefore, is not a site of plenitude bedecked with the familiar and comforting trappings of selfhood only waiting to be occupied by the lost soul who makes her way home. It is in a sense, and as Benveniste implies, empty.¹⁰⁶

The notion of self as a process spun into being by the use of the 'I' brings me back to another significant motif which the passage I quoted above highlights: like *Phone At Nine*, Jefferson's text is ongoing and contingent, tracing the in-progress fluctuations of a negotiation with self and madness.¹⁰⁷ Specifically, she acknowledges that although writing has so far enabled her to keep her "head above water" this is by no means an assured or stable state. Therefore as readers we have the sense that she, like us, is unfolding a story, the outcome of which she is unsure of. Moreover, the crux of this 'story' is the effect of its own production on its author's mental condition. That is, because Jefferson chooses writing as the agent of her salvation, the efficacy of this strategy will be measured within and by the text itself – writing will measure its own effect. It would be quite possible, indeed, to imagine a different outcome from Jefferson's eventual return to sanity, one in which her strategies failed and a capitulation to madness was total, as in Ross Burke's *The Truth Effect*. In a subsequent passage, splitting herself into an 'I' who writes and a 'her' who is written of, in a 'strong' variant on the mechanism of self-doubling, Jefferson again invokes uncertainty of outcome.

I do have a pencil and enough sheets of paper to last for awhile – and as long as this crazy woman that I have become, wants to rave – what matter if the sound of her raving falls into words on the paper – or goes off into air, and mixes with all the other tumult and uproar that goes on down here. Her thinking is wild – but I have the wilder idea that if I can force her to keep it hitched to a pencil,

¹⁰⁶ See John Shotter's ontology of selves in his 'Metaphysics and Narrative: Singularities and multiplicities of self', in which he describes 'Self 1' as "one pole in a bipolar array of material things", but also "a geographical abstraction, rather like the North Pole in relation to the continents" (p. 61). Shotter says that Self 1, "in the context of perception, is used for the singularity of an embodied point of view, manifested in the structure of perceptual fields, each of which is centred on the location in space and time of the embodied perceiver". In *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*, ed. by Jens Brockmeier & Donal Carbaugh (John Benjamins, 2001), pp. 59-73 (p. 60).

¹⁰⁷ This is hinted at in the opening publisher's notes, according to which the original manuscript was discovered in the "violent ward of a state 'Mental Hospital' [...] [p]enciled on an odd assortment of scrap paper" and "was not written for publication". However, even if this textual signpost had been omitted, the contingency of the narrative is evident in both its form and content. The introduction to the original American edition of *These are my Sisters* goes on to say that Jefferson was "unavailable" to prepare a preface, but it does not specify whether she was contacted and refused, was unable to be traced, or had died by the time of publication. Exergual material from the British edition published in 1975 states that Jefferson died in the late 1940s, but that, apart from her text, little else is known of her. I have been unable to discover any more information about her life.

and hold it down to the slow rhythm of writing things out in long hand – the practice might tame her somewhat. (25)

In the tell-tale ‘might’ here it is evident that the success or failure of Jefferson’s strategy will be mapped out in the pages which follow. The progress of the text itself – its outflowing and process – therefore evidences her attempt to tame madness or the mad self by hitching it or her to a pencil. The uncertainty Jefferson invokes, then, is not a rhetorical device to lend suspense to her tale, and neither is it the product of revisiting a former distress from an island of (relative) sanity as I have argued is the case in Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation* and Thompson’s *The Beast*.¹⁰⁸ Rather, it signifies that the journal’s entries represent momentary and transient feeling-states rendered in textual form, which may or may not persist or evolve. As with Hart’s text, *These are my Sisters* is the manifestation of an ongoing negotiation with madness – a *work* of and on the self.

6.4.2 Foucault, Ricoeur, writing and thought

In the passage I quoted above Jefferson directly links writing and thought. Speaking of the objectified mad self in the third person she has the idea that she may be able to tame ‘her’ wild thinking by keeping it “hitched to a pencil” and “the slow rhythm of writing things out in long hand”. This theme of harnessing the unpredictable wildness of mad thought to the purposeful and deliberate tempo of writing recurs throughout *These are my Sisters*. Writing is frequently depicted as a bulwark against psychological disintegration, a “breakwater of small black words” which proffers the hope of forestalling the chaos of madness:

Once you have felt it, and seen the very force of yourself flow out in a stream of insanity you get a pencil and you sit down and write anything – anything to try and forestall a repetition of your experience. (45)

The task Jefferson sets herself is to alter her habits of thought through the written self-dialogue. She plainly sets out this existential imperative at the outset of *These are my Sisters*: “Unless I learn to think differently, I shall shortly be incurably insane” (13). Moving through perplexity – “How– how – *how*? In the name of God – How does a person learn to think differently? I am crazy wild this minute – how can I learn to think straight?” (13-14) – she arrives at writing as a means by which she might achieve her

¹⁰⁸ See Chapter 3.

aim: “I caught at this pencil to try to stop my morbid introspection” (14). Her text maps out this work of the self on its own cognitive processes, and indeed, as the narrative progresses, her voice subtly modulates, becoming increasingly inflected by a wry humour, for instance, and therefore less subsumed by the exigencies of her situation. In addition, her focus shifts from a preoccupation with her own distress to the suffering of her fellow residents – most of the narrative is primarily concerned with observing the life of the ward. These shifts surely suggest that Jefferson’s attempt to alter her thinking has, to some degree, been successful.

Jefferson’s linking of writing and thought is illumined by Foucault’s reflections in some of his last essays on the practices of asceticism (‘ethical work’) – the various techniques by which one may attend to and care for oneself, practices which include “work not just on actions but also on thought”.¹⁰⁹ One of the most significant of these is ‘self writing’, a reflective practice which Foucault envisages as acting on cognitive process: “The constraint that the presence of others exerts in the domain of conduct, writing will exert in the domain of the inner impulses of the soul [...] By bringing to light the impulses of thought, it dispels the darkness where the enemy’s plots are hatched.”¹¹⁰

In ‘Self Writing’, Foucault elaborates on the relationship between text and ‘life’, discussing the Christian ascetic tradition as set out in Athanasius’s *Vita Antonii* (*The Life of Saint Anthony*), and going on to examine first- and second-century ascetic practice as delineated in various writings by Seneca, Plutarch, and Epictetus. He describes two modes of what he calls *ethopoietic* writing.¹¹¹ These are, firstly, the *hupomnemata*, or notebooks, in which “a material record of things read, heard, or thought” are accumulated for the purpose of meditation and recollection, thereby constituting a “*logos bioethikos* for oneself,” that is to say, “an equipment of helpful discourses, capable [...] of elevating the voice and silencing the passions” – and through which “the writer constitutes his own identity”.¹¹² And secondly, the *correspondence*, in which one offers oneself to the gaze of another through the recounting of the events of the day, but which also act on the writer: “when one writes, one reads what one writes [...] The letter one writes acts, through the very action of

¹⁰⁹ Michel Foucault, ‘Self Writing’, in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin: 1994), pp. 207-222 (p. 208).

¹¹⁰ ‘Self Writing’, p. 208.

¹¹¹ The term *ethopoietic* combines *ethos*, as habit, with *poieo* – to make for oneself, to compose, or to represent.

¹¹² ‘Self Writing’, p. 213.

writing, on the one who receives it".¹¹³ Both *hupomnemata* and correspondence are ways in which writing may be deployed as a technology of the self.

Foucault earlier considered asceticism and the interanimation of thought and action in *The History of Sexuality*.¹¹⁴ Famously discussing 'confessional practice', he argues there that "a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse" is a means of constraining and ordering the behaviour and freedoms of subjects.¹¹⁵ His emphasis in this text, then, is primarily still focused on determinism and the discursive grids through which subjective possibility is both fashioned and delimited. By the time he comes to consider self-writing, and to elaborate on his thesis that 'ethics' flows from the care of the self, however, the emphasis in his philosophical trajectory has, I think, moved on subtly. In these late writings, it is almost as if Foucault is implicitly addressing those recurrent objections¹¹⁶ to his arguments on the constitution of subjectivity which insist that it is necessary to account for the human subject's potential for agency and resistance, and, more pragmatically, repudiate a wholly deterministic view of selfhood as simply too unbearable to contemplate.¹¹⁷ Thus, Foucault now emphasises the potential for (a limited) freedom inherent in his view of subjectivity, a freedom that is the corollary of his insistence on the ethical status of the subject. As David Halperin summarises: "insofar as the subject is an *ethical* subject, a subject of ethical practices, it is to that extent a free subject, for that is what it means, definitionally, to *be* an ethical subject. Without freedom, ethics is impossible".¹¹⁸ This is by no means, however, to

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 214.

¹¹⁴ In the preface to the second volume, following a reassessment of his project in *Madness and Civilization*, he declares that "thought is [...] the very form of action", and ties it to "the relation to oneself and others" (Preface to *The History of Sexuality*, Volume Two, in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, p. 201). Detectable in these sentiments, predicated on a dissatisfaction with what Foucault calls the "theoretical weakness in elaborating the notion of experience" (ibid, p. 200) of his earlier works, is the shift to a preoccupation with "the aesthetics of the self" which, as Jana Sawicki has pointed out, provoked both disappointment and embarrassment in some formerly admiring readers who saw this as a turn toward quietism and a retrenchment toward a notion of a substantive selfhood. With Sawicki, I think such reactions may have been ill-judged, however, in that Foucault's engagement remains with a thoroughly historicized subjectivity, one which is by no means "monolithic and private", but which is *constructed* through "multiple ways of knowing and governing ourselves that are inherited from historical traditions" (Jana Sawicki, 'Foucault, Feminism and Questions of Identity,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. by Gary Gutting [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], p. 288).

¹¹⁵ *The History of Sexuality* (Volume 1), trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 34.

¹¹⁶ See my first chapter for examples of such objections.

¹¹⁷ See Dieter Freundlieb for a rather sceptical view on this movement: "Human agency only comes to the fore [...] in [Foucault's] late project of an aesthetics and ethics of existence concerned with 'technologies' of self. [...] There are clear indications that even in his late work, in spite of its focus on individual self-fashioning, Foucault was very reluctant to grant the subject any real self-determination". 'Foucault's theory of discourse and human agency,' in *Reassessing Foucault: Power, Medicine and the Body*, ed. by Colin Jones and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1999) pp. 152-180 (pp. 176-7).

¹¹⁸ David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 212. See also Foucault's own reformulation of the concept of power in his

say that Foucault has moved to a wholly voluntaristic paradigm for the self.¹¹⁹ A reading of Foucault's last work must at least take into account his earlier pronouncements on the limits of subjectivity – which he sets out to *modify* rather than reject outright;¹²⁰ moreover, he clearly insists in his essay 'The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom' that the available possibilities which the self can occupy are always constrained by history and discourse: "These practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group".¹²¹

The view of subjectivity outlined in these essays is, surprisingly perhaps, comparable to Ricoeur's attempt to negotiate a middle path between the extremes of the Cartesian cogito and the Nietzschean anticogito, in which he resists the notion of self both as substance and as sheer becoming.¹²² What results is the Ricoeurian paradigm of 'narrative identity'. I have described this conception at length in my opening chapter, but to recap, Ricoeur writes:

I am stressing the expression 'narrative identity', for what we call subjectivity is neither an incoherent series of events nor an immutable substantiality, impervious to evolution. This is precisely the sort of identity which narrative composition alone can create through its dynamism.¹²³

Ricoeur denotes this modality as founded in a dynamic process: "It is therefore by means of the imaginative variations of our own ego that we attempt to obtain a narrative understanding of ourselves, the only kind that escapes the apparent choice between sheer change and absolute identity. Between the two lies narrative identity

late essay 'The Subject and Power' where he argues that "Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free". Moreover, "At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom". Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power,' in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd edition, ed. by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 221-2.

¹¹⁹ Contra critiques such as Lois McNay's. See her *Gender and Agency*, p. 9.

¹²⁰ Although to argue against myself, the following comment by Foucault, in an interview with Duccio Trombadori, might be construed to suggest that this is not so: "When I write, I do it above all to change myself and not to think the same thing as before". However, in the light of Foucault's qualifications concerning the constraints on subjective freedom, I wonder if a more convincing interpretation is that Foucault is drawing himself as an 'epigenetic' thinker – that is to say, that his philosophy is accumulative. Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. by R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), p. 27.

¹²¹ Foucault, 'The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom', in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin: 1994), pp. 281-301 (p. 291).

¹²² "[T]he hermeneutics of the self is placed at an equal distance from the apology of the cogito and from its overthrow". Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Katherine Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 4.

¹²³ Paul Ricoeur, 'Life in Quest of Narrative', in *On Paul Ricoeur*, ed. by David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 20-33 (p.32).

[...]”.¹²⁴ In Louis McNay’s words, narrative identity is characterized by the “dynamic unity of change through time”.¹²⁵

Similarly, in his late essays Foucault emphasizes that he is not invoking a substantial self: the subject, he asserts, “is not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself”.¹²⁶ Yet the astute reader will notice that in this quotation Foucault does not dismiss the notion of *identity* entirely. Rather, sameness is rethought: the ‘form’ of the self accrues through the constituting practices of ascesis but always remains pervious to mutation and evolution. Again, there is, it seems to me, some resonance in this formulation with Ricoeur’s differentiation between the *ipse* and the *idem* self, the former indicative of “identity as sameness”,¹²⁷ and the latter of “change through time”:¹²⁸ the intersection of these two polarities produces a narrative selfhood in which “self-constancy is always informed by self-questioning”.¹²⁹ Moreover, Ricoeur’s description of the dialectic underlying the ‘tradition’ of narrative selfhood between ‘sedimentation’ and ‘innovation’ aids an understanding of the process motivating the Foucaultian conception of the self-fashioning subject, or as Foucault puts it, “how the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self”¹³⁰. For Ricoeur, sedimentation represents the horizon of current narrative possibilities open to the subject, that is, the variety of models which constitute a “typology of emplotment”.¹³¹ These models are not “eternal essences”, but “proceed from a sedimented history whose genesis has been obliterated”;¹³² moreover, they stem from earlier innovations and “provide a guide for [...] later experimentation”.¹³³ In other words, sedimentation, or in more Foucaultian terms, the possibilities proffered to us by extant discourse, is not absolutely fixed. This accrual of narrative paradigms has itself sprung from earlier innovatory actions; there is, therefore, “always room for innovation”.¹³⁴ And, in an echo of Foucault’s insistence that ascetic practice is not an invention of the individual but based on existing models, Ricoeur also wants to stress that the potential for change is not unlimited:

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 33.

¹²⁵ Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency*, p. 74.

¹²⁶ Foucault, ‘The Ethics Of The Concern For The Self’, p. 290.

¹²⁷ Paul Ricoeur, ‘Narrative Identity’, in *On Paul Ricoeur*, ed. by David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 188-199 (p.189).

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 190.

¹²⁹ Richard Kearney, ‘Ethics of the narrative self,’ p. 93.

¹³⁰ Foucault, ‘The Ethics Of The Concern For The Self’, p. 291.

¹³¹ Ricoeur, ‘Life in Quest of Narrative’, p. 24.

¹³² Ibid, p. 24.

¹³³ Ibid, p. 25.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

The rules change under the pressure of innovation, but they change slowly and even resist change by reason of this process of sedimentation [...] Innovation remains a rule-governed behaviour; the work of imagination does not come out of nowhere. It is tied in one way or another to the models handed down by tradition. But it can enter into a variable relation to these models.¹³⁵

To return to Foucault's 'Self Writing', the work of writing that we witness in *Phone At Nine Just to Say You're Alive* and *These are my Sisters* does not fit neatly into either of Foucault's categories of *ethopoietic* writing; rather, these texts occupy a space between the twin modalities. Although ostensibly the hospital journals may appear most similar to the *hupomnemata*, Foucault insists that, however personal, the notebooks "ought not to be understood as intimate journals or as [...] accounts of spiritual experience (temptations, struggles, downfalls, and victories)" ('Self Writing', p. 210). Instead their purpose is to "capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the reshaping of the self", that is, to "enable the formation of the self out of the collected discourse of others" (p. 211). Nevertheless, while both journals do include accounts of struggles, downfalls and victories, it is worth noting that they are also full of descriptions of others and detailed records of conversations, or the 'already-said', rather than solely preoccupied with interiority.

Whereas the *hupomnemata* are intertexts, the correspondence, on the other hand, represent "the first historical developments of the narrative of the self". This 'narrative' is most importantly "the account of one's relation to oneself", as a part of which it encompasses:

[A] way of presenting oneself to one's correspondent in the unfolding of everyday life. To recount one's day – not because of the importance of the events that may have marked it, but precisely even though there was nothing about it apart from its being like all the others, testifying in this way not to the importance of an activity but to the quality of a mode of being. ('Self Writing', p. 211)

The correspondence, as "self-narration in the daily run of life" (p. 221), embodies "a kind of reading of the day that has passed" (p. 220), a definition to which both Hart's and Jefferson's journal conform.

However, in addition to 'self-narration', for Foucault the correspondence demonstrates that "one always needs the help of others in the soul's labours on itself" (p. 215). In the letters, "the gaze of the other and that gaze which one aims at oneself"

¹³⁵ Ibid.

are brought “into congruence” (p. 221). Perhaps then, a question to consider is whether the diary form of self-narration signifies a privatization of this self-technology, consonant with modernity’s turn to inwardness and solipsism, in which the self is atomized and dislodged from community. But, in the case of Hart and Jefferson I do not think this is a justifiable argument for two reasons, one connected with Foucault’s introductory remarks on writing as a palliative to solitude, and the other to the awareness in both these texts of their implication with various others, and various potential readers.

On the first of these points, Foucault notes how the simple *act* of writing opens the self to the possibility of inspection. Considering the *hypomnemata*, he argues that writing *itself* “palliates the dangers of solitude”: “it offers what one has done or thought to a *possible* gaze; the fact of obliging oneself to write plays the role of a companion by giving rise to the fear of disapproval and to shame” (p. 207; emphasis added). One might then construe Hart’s and Jefferson’s journals as ‘letters’ to the self, in which the self is both writer and reader of its own discourse and thought. But in addition to this, it is important to bear in mind that a feature of both Hart’s and Jefferson’s diaries is that they take into account and allow for possible or even actual readers outside the text. Thus, Hart allows some of the ward staff and her friends to read her journal,¹³⁶ while also actively imagining and planning for others to do so.¹³⁷ That she writes is not private or a secretive activity, but is acknowledged and spoken about, even encouraged by staff, family and friends.¹³⁸ Moreover, as the journal progresses others are sufficiently interested in her writing to suggest that she publish some of it, and before she is released from hospital she has heard that extracts will indeed appear in a mental health journal.¹³⁹ At other moments, *Phone at Nine* takes the form of a letter to a possible reader, with Hart directly addressing others ‘outside’ the text: for instance, she writes to an unnamed reader, “Let me tell you about the typical routine of the ward” (100), and concludes the text with “Thank you, Pat Jenkins, for suggesting I write” (353).

Jefferson also writes with an other in mind. At several junctures in her journal she speaks to such a reader; and while these moments are often overshadowed by a sense of resignation and hopelessness, the chance that her text will be read by an other

¹³⁶ E.g. see pp. 14; 197-8; 222; 192; 44.

¹³⁷ E.g. see p. 309.

¹³⁸ E.g. see pp. 137; 44.

¹³⁹ E.g. see pp. 185; 302; 309; 350.

remains on the horizon of her sensibility. The following passage, in which, after observing the intense suffering of a fellow-patient, she reflects on both madness and its medical treatment, captures well this oscillation between the dialogue with the self and the possibility that others (with power to act) might also hear.

Perhaps my voice is the only one among the great number who have been adjudged insane, with the courage to voice an appeal (only I cannot voice it either – for I am already locked away with those whose voices can never be heard by anyone). But I do wish I had the power to lift my voice and shout loudly enough to make those on the sane side of living pay some attention – so those whose minds are sane enough to think on the problem might do something about it – something to try to out a stop to this inhuman torture.

Please – Please have the courage to do something about it. (128)

In addition, and invoking the notion of writing as a palliative to solitude, Jefferson conjures up a textual alter ego, and throughout the journal her writing periodically resorts to a dialogue with this ‘other’. This is not a manifestation of psychosis, but a conscious strategy – a technology – which she adopts after a nurse interrogates her about her writing.

The nurse just now picked up one of the sheets I have written. She read it – looked at me oddly – and asked what in the hell I thought I was doing. And because she expected an answer in keeping with my strange occupation – I did not have the heart to disappoint her. So I gave her an answer that fitted. I told her that I was Shakespeare, the reincarnation of Shakespeare trying to sidestep a strait-jacket. (I’ll admit that I feel queer enough to be the reincarnation of something but I doubt if Shakespeare would claim me). But hurray! She came back down the aisle with whole ream of paper and said to me: “Go to it, Shakespeare!”. (25-6)

Following this successful evasion of the medical gaze, Jefferson then welcomes ‘Shakespeare’ as an intra-textual reader and companion.

Verily, verily, Shakespeare, I had no idea you could be called from your quiet English grave with so little effort. In my present predicament, I know of no-one who could be quite such a fortunate choice for a delusion of grandeur. So welcome! I hope you will be as pleased with the arrangement as I am. Poor fellow, this is surely a come-down from your former position.

[...]

Poor Shakespeare – it is certainly a reflection on your former genius to suggest that you must stalk with me over to ‘Three Building’ because you are a maniac. And a still greater reflection on your taste and discrimination – if you had any choice in the matter – to think that you would come back to this world in this sort of setting. But you did not choose me – I chose you – and you should not mind it – for here is an endless array of the themes you like best. (26)

‘Shakespeare’ remains as a presence throughout Jefferson’s journal, exerting, perhaps, a salutary pull on the introspective tendency as Jefferson imagines another

alongside her, reading her text. At the close, as she is about to be transferred to a “semi-civilized” (236) ward, she relinquishes this strategic other. As she does so, it is clear that she understands well the strategic nature of a creation which has enabled her to survive in a hostile environment where correspondence of the kind which Foucault envisages may not have been possible.

Shakespeare is worn out and eager to get out of this racket and slip back to his quiet grave in far England. All things end sometime or other – and the nurse will come shortly to take me upstairs. So goodbye William. You were one grand delusion! If you had not come to me, perchance this transfer would have been to a place still lower in this limbo – instead of one step upward. I shall hate to lose you – but I cannot take you with me because delusions of grandeur are not allowed upstairs. Goodbye William. I am most grateful to you for coming to me. Goodbye. And may long years of peace and rest attend you in your quiet English grave. (238)

A further factor in these texts militates against reading them as manifestations of an inward looking and atomistic psychology. Their content is marked by a singular preoccupation with others – hospital staff, other patients, and friends from outside. Even in their titles something of this trait is evident: ‘phone at nine just to say you’re alive’ picks up on the injunction placed on Hart as she begins brief visits home to remain in contact with the ward by telephoning at 9 a.m. and 9 p.m. to report on her state of health.¹⁴⁰ In addition, it invokes her continual use of the telephone to call friends and family. Both these factors situate Hart at the centre of a web of care, an interpersonal network of others. Similarly, the title of *These are my Sisters* encapsulates the governing concern of Jefferson’s writing: the welfare, behaviour, and history of her fellow patients. The focus on others outside the ambit of the suffering psyche, in conjunction with these texts’ apostrophising tendencies, means that although they are, in one sense, ‘personal’ documents, there is nevertheless a considerable congruence with Foucault’s insistence on the importance of the role of others in the soul’s work on itself.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ See pp. 149 & 177.

¹⁴¹ Foucault’s model of selfhood as a (narrative) accrual seems to have been practically worked out at the level of his own theoretical writing, indeed his own subjectivity. Invoking the way in which writing impacts on thought, in an interview with Duccio Trombadori he remarked: “When I write, I do it above all to change myself and not to think the same thing as before” (In: *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. by R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito [New York: Semiotext(e), 1991], p. 27.); he also commented that “each of my works is a part of my own biography”. (In: Rux Martin, ‘Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault. October 25, 1982’, in *Technologies of the Self*, ed. by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton [Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988], p. 11.) Elsewhere, in answer to a question concerning his multiple roles as ‘philosopher’, ‘historian’, ‘structuralist’ and ‘Marxist’, he links writing and identity as mutable and dynamic: “I don’t feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work

6.5 The texts of inner speech

The essentially social nature of 'inwardness', together with an emphasis on subjectivity as fashioned via 'technologies of the self', characterizes the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, whose work is of particular interest to this discussion. In *Thought and Language*, Vygotsky deals at length with the development and constitution of 'inner speech', and his views share a great deal with those, perhaps better known in the field of literary studies, of Bakhtin and Volosinov. All three propose that inner speech is a development from, and remains intimately related to, social, interpersonal speech. Selfhood, therefore, in this view is not a privatized realm, but a 'boundary' phenomenon. In Vygotsky's words: "*we become ourselves through others*";¹⁴² for Volosinov: "inner speech is itself the product of [one's] entire social life";¹⁴³ while Bakhtin insists that "dialogic relationships" permeate all human speech, indeed "everything that has meaning and significance",¹⁴⁴ and that, "as a living socio-ideological concrete thing [...] language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other".¹⁴⁵

If we follow Vygotsky's account of the development of the self-dialogue, however, the journals of Hart or Jefferson cannot be construed as textual versions of 'inner speech'. Rather, in his terms, they would probably be closer to its ontogenic precursor, what he calls (after Jean Piaget¹⁴⁶) 'egocentric speech', and it is his elaboration of this concept which I think aids an understanding of the process at work in these texts. Both Vygotsky and Piaget defined egocentric speech as the developmental stage where, from speaking to and with others, the child begins to speak

is to become someone else that you were not at the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for a love relationship is true also for life. The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end." (In Martin, 'Truth, Power, Self, p. 9).

¹⁴² Lev Vygotsky, 'Development of the higher mental functions', in *Psychological Research in the USSR*, ed. by A.N. Leont'ev, A.R. Luria, and A. Smirnov (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), p. 43, quoted in John Shotter, *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life: Social Constructionism, Rhetoric and Knowing of the Third Kind* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), p. 112.

¹⁴³ V. N. Volosinov, *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, ed. by Neal H. Bruss, trans. by I. R. Titunik (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1976), p. 114.

¹⁴⁴ M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 40. *Usvoenie* (assimilation) is Bakhtin's term for the way in which social speech is internalised into inner speech. See *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. by Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 89.

¹⁴⁵ 'Social Heteroglossia', in *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed. by Pam Morris (Edward Arnold, 1994), p. 77.

¹⁴⁶ For an account of the relationship between Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories see Alex Kozulin's introduction to *Thought and Language*, entitled 'Vygotsky in Context', pp. iv-lvi. Also useful is P. D. Ashworth's *Social Interaction and Consciousness* (Chichester: Wiley, 1979), pp. 45-58.

aloud to itself while in the company of others. Vygotsky departed from Piaget, however, in his analysis of the significance of this phenomenon. For Vygotsky, egocentric speech is a developmental stage which represents a “transition from speech for others to speech for oneself”;¹⁴⁷ it is, he argues, a kind of conversation with the self, but one which “occurs only in a social context”,¹⁴⁸ and in which the child assumes “that his egocentric talk, directed to nobody, is understood by those who surround him”.¹⁴⁹ In sum, it is an intermediate stage which “already has the function of inner speech, but remains similar to social speech in its expression”.¹⁵⁰

True ‘inner’ speech emerges for Vygotsky as a result of the internalization or incorporation of egocentric speech ‘into’ the psyche. It differs from egocentric speech in that it is marked by a distinctive “tendency towards abbreviation and predication”,¹⁵¹ a tendency which “is not an exception but the rule”.¹⁵² Whereas the former is more or less grammatically complete (and not abbreviated but “spoken as an utterance, that is, as public speech in a specific environment”¹⁵³), Vygotsky contends that the “natural form of inner speech” is predication: “psychologically it consists of predicates only. It is as much a law of inner speech to omit subjects as it is a law of written speech to contain both subjects and predicates”.¹⁵⁴ Abbreviated, predicative, inner speech is distinctive in his definition because *sense* (“the sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by a word”¹⁵⁵) rather than *meaning* (“only one of the zones of sense, the most stable and precise zone”¹⁵⁶) predominates in its usage; it represents a kind of intimate distillation of what was originally social speech, a personal ‘language’.¹⁵⁷ The condensation is possible because:

We know what we are thinking about; i.e. we always know the subject and the situation. And since the subject of our inner dialogue is already known we may just imply it [...] Piaget once mentioned that we trust ourselves without proof;

¹⁴⁷ *Thought and Language*, p. 235.

¹⁴⁸ Emerson, ‘The Outer Word and Inner Speech’, p. 253.

¹⁴⁹ *Thought and Language*, p. 231.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 235.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 243.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, p. 239. It is interesting to compare Vygotsky’s theory of abbreviation with De Certeau’s emphasis, in his comparison of “spatial” and narrative practices, on the “ellipsis of conjunctive *loci*”: “*Asyndeton* is the suppression of linking words such as conjunctions and adverbs, either within a sentence or between sentences. In the same way, in walking it selects and fragments the space traversed; it skips over links and whole parts that it omits.” *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 101.

¹⁵³ *Thought and Language*, p. 235.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 243.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 146.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 146.

¹⁵⁷ Emerson compares Vygotsky’s differentiation of sense and meaning with Bakhtin’s elaboration of the difference between theme and meaning. Emerson, ‘The Outer Word and Inner Speech’, p. 248.

the necessity to defend and articulate one's position appears only in conversation with others. Psychological contact between partners in a conversation may establish a mutual perception leading to the understanding of abbreviated speech. In inner speech, the 'mutual' perception is always there, in absolute form; therefore a practically wordless 'communication' of even the most complicated thoughts is the rule.¹⁵⁸

Plainly, then, the kind of abbreviation Vygotsky invokes here is not present in either Hart's or Jefferson's texts. Yet, while the journals do not conform to this picture of inner speech as a grammatically distinct form, it is worth noting that a breed of abbreviation is indeed present in both journals, in that many of the narrative signposts which one might expect to find in a memoir – the explanatory, scene-setting, reader-orienting lexia – are absent. In *Phone At Nine* the reader discovers key information about Hart's psychiatric history only in textual asides, as if by chance; and in *These are my Sisters* we are told very little about the specifics of Jefferson's life before her hospitalization. In this, one glimpses that these texts were indeed produced primarily as conversations with the self, that is, dialogues which take certain basic information as already known and not in need of expression.

In Vygotsky's description of subjective normativity, then, the self-dialogue can be abbreviated because of the certainty of context: the subject is present to itself in the "absolute form" of "mutual perception", in that we always "know what we are thinking about". But this psychological prerequisite for the successful functioning of inner speech can hardly be said to apply to the being states described by Hart and Jefferson. Both authors describe psychic economies which are much less self-assured than Vygotsky implies here. Cast adrift in the turbulence of psychotic thought, there is a sense in which the subject precisely does *not* know, and cannot predict, the direction of her thinking, because the thoughts appear to come from an autonomous agent; moreover, it is the *lack* of trust in the self which is one of the prime causes of suffering in madness: at any moment the hostile energies of psychosis may attack the 'thinker'. Indeed, this lack of trust in the self is intimately implicated in the characteristic depersonalization of severe mental illness: the sense of selfhood is attenuated because riven by the voices of 'others'.

Thus, inner speech as Vygotsky envisages it, is an unrealistic and unattainable ideal for Hart or Jefferson. For the psychotic, the omissions and ellipses which characterize inner speech and facilitate the intuitive 'mutuality' of the self-dialogue,

¹⁵⁸ *Thought and Language*, p. 243.

may instead present spaces and opportunities for the irruptions of psychotic forms of thought to ‘enter’ and colonize the self. One way to read Hart’s and Jefferson’s embarkations into self-talk, then, is as occupations of the more complete expressions of egocentric speech, in which they are attempting to establish (or perhaps re-establish) a salutary relation with the self. From this position, if we are to follow Vygotsky, it may be possible to ‘internalize’ and abbreviate speech, but in the midst of the psychotic storm such a modality of inner speaking is impossible. There are similarities here, it seems to me, between the image of the Vygotskian child practising ‘voice’ and carving out a linguistic territory for herself, and the narrative work undertaken by Hart and Jefferson. Their texts are also an exercise in ‘voicing’, a tentative ‘starting to speak’, and in addition, through the formulation of complete grammatically coherent sentences, they operate as a counterweight to the psychotic fragmentation of self.

Vygotsky’s delineation of the fundamentally social nature of egocentric speech may help to explain why both of these journals seem to hover between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’, between a conversation with the self and an engagement with the others around their authors. The constant focus by Hart and Jefferson on others, together with the journals’ apostrophizing tendencies, evoke the tentative patterns of egocentric speech, which is validated for the child because, although “directed to nobody”,¹⁵⁹ s/he believes *it can be understood intersubjectively*. So too, despite the apparently private intentions behind these journals, readers may often feel themselves directly addressed; unlike the bizarre convolutions of Ross Burke’s rendition of schizophrenia, an emphasis on clarity, on the desire to be *understood*, is paramount and obvious. The reiterations of conversations, advice, diagnoses and letters and the close observations of others’ actions and words – even if the author is not involved other than as observer – suggest a ‘collecting’ of linguistic, narrative tools from which a satisfactory self may be fashioned. The self is thus envisaged as an ongoing ‘text’ fashioned from the words of others (a process also in concert, of course, with Foucault’s arguments in ‘Self Writing’). To borrow from Vygotsky, Hart and Jefferson are in the process of transforming “the external sign [...] into an internal sign”¹⁶⁰ and ‘perceiving the world through their speech,’¹⁶¹ which itself is interwoven with and interanimated by the speech of others.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 231.

¹⁶⁰ Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, p. 45.

¹⁶¹ See Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, p. 32.

6.6 Conclusion

The work of self-fashioning achieved through (re-)instating the self-dialogue which is evident in Hart's and Jefferson's journals cannot be construed as a solipsistic inward turn. To re-engage with language, to 'start to speak', is bound to the reformulation of subjectivity, but it is founded in and produced by an engagement with the social. If the arguments of Benveniste and Kerby that the (re)formulation of subjectivity is intrinsically bound to acts of signification are accepted, and if signification is intrinsically bound to the social as Vygotsky contends, then to fashion a self involves, by necessity, an engagement with the intersubjective, social, realm.

This is obviously of particular significance in the context of psychosis, which, as we have seen, effects a breach with the social world. Hart, we recall, opens her journal by invoking this separation when she describes her psychosis as "Taking away my speech, closing me down and taking me away from the world" (14). As she writes, she recovers her speech, the closed down self is reopened, and she returns to the world. 'Starting to speak' is the prerequisite of this outward turn; for in addition to being ontologically bound to the intersubjective, self-talk re-establishes a bridge to the world outside psychosis by enabling shared understanding and communication. In this, the narrative act is intrinsically "political" for, in James Glass's words, it returns the speaker to "history, time, continuity and action" and to feel "tied to the Other through a dialectical and shared symbolism".¹⁶² The delusional architecture of the psychoses which Hart and Jefferson describe shuts out others and imprisons the self within its confines; solipsism inheres not in the self-talk of the journals, but rather in the discourse of madness, or, as Glass describes it, the "isolated realm of the interior monologue [...] without any shared component or audience".¹⁶³

¹⁶² Glass, *Private Terror*, p. 34.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, p.16.

7. Conclusion: Re-evaluating Narrative (and) Identity

I have sat through floods of raving and built a barrier –
a breakwater of small black words around me.

Lara Jefferson

When, in the midst of her anguished “raving”, Lara Jefferson asks “How – how – *how?* In the name of God – how does a person learn to think differently?”, her question embodies many of the concerns underpinning the texts I have discussed in this study. Attempting to alter her own psychology, specifically, the psychological mechanisms by which she relates to herself, she learns to think differently by cultivating a specific narrative stance towards herself and the world, thereby building a “ladder of words – strong enough, and long enough – to reach out of this”.¹ Writing holds her clear of the “flood” of madness threatening engulfment; the journal is a “breakwater of small black words” restraining the tides of lunacy.² For Jefferson, narration and writing are intimately bound to thought. She quietens and orders her disturbed cognition by “hitching it to a pencil” and holding it down to “the slow rhythm of writing”. But this does not represent a retreat into self-obsession. Jefferson’s ambition that writing might stop her “morbid introspection”³ is fulfilled: writing the journal turns her gaze outwards, towards the conversations and lives of others around her. The reformulated narrative relationship with the self, a relationship, indeed, that *is* the self, is thus intercalated into the intersubjective social realm. The self that emerges in *These are my Sisters* is made up in large part from the words and lives of others.

The texts I have considered in this study also exemplify ‘ways of speaking’. Concerned with the intricacies and implications of the narrative relationship with the self, they embody attempts to negotiate with language and form in order to achieve a more propitious relationship with self and world. In the disruption and pain of madness, a close engagement with the self’s relationship to narrative and language becomes necessary for their authors, and in this often aporetic process the implications of specific narrative stances become clearer. Attending to such nuanced narrative engagements in the texts of madness, I have suggested here, deepens an understanding of the modality of narrative identity. In my discussions of these disparate texts, a

¹ Lara Jefferson, *These are my Sisters: A Journal from the Inside of Insanity* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975), p. 112.

² *Ibid.*, p. 236.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

number of detailed conclusions concerning the intricacies and implications inhering in this broad concept have emerged.

Firstly, narrative identity is intrinsically bound to the intersubjective. Although preoccupied with the disordered self, most of the texts I study here are oriented 'outwards' and focus on the importance of others in the (re)formulation of identity. This focus includes an acute awareness of the reader as intrinsic to a catalyzing of the text's themes and significance. The one who hears, or is imagined to hear, is key to the production of narrative and selfhood, and imagined readers are incorporated into the very fabric of the self-narrative. Because the text of madness operates at the zero-point of identity, in which selfhood is a liminal and threatened entity, this insistent emphasis on an other in the reformulation of identity is significant. It would seem, particularly in the light of my discussion of Vygotsky's work, that a meaningful sense of selfhood is, by definition, produced in relation to an other. Recalling Vygotsky's theory of egocentric speech, even when this other is imagined rather than actual, the self-narrative is inflected by connotations of dialogue and inter-dependence.

Remaining with the importance of the intersubjective realm to the formulation of identity, these texts also repeatedly manifest a preoccupation with others in the 'story-world'. From Foucault's analysis of self-writing, I have interpreted this as a process by which others' words and actions are systematically incorporated into the self and its story. Again, in this light the self cannot be construed as a bounded monad, but appears as a plural entity constituted from others' stories: selfhood therefore is envisaged as anaclitic and relational. Recalling that Elizabeth Wurtzel is only able to escape the snares of depression after her mother has gifted her with a story to live in, sometimes the process of incorporation would seem to require a loving intervention by a trusted other. In such moments of radical need, dependency on the other – for our stories, and, therefore, our very selves – is absolute.

However, our dependency on others for our stories of who we are carries it with it potential dangers. In contrast to the salutary story Wurtzel's mother gives to her, the families of Lauren Slater and Margiad Evans inscribe their identities with inimical stories. In addition, the pressure of the imagined other in *Spasm* at times forces Slater to deviate from her chosen narrative trajectory and formulate a story that does not 'fit' experience. For a self-narrative to be propitious it should be consonant with the subject's experiences, needs, and desires: the discursive freedom to tell and thereby fashion the self in a way the subject deems salutary is therefore not unlimited. In line

with this, several of the authors I discuss here reject the psychiatric narrative as inimical, and inadequate to account for their experience. The harmful story is also exemplified in the adoptions of fantasy selves which characterize *Prozac Nation*, *The Truth Effect*, and *1982, Janine*; in each of these texts fantasy represents the attempt to suppress rather than articulate the self's history and anguish.

Harmful, inapposite stories, however, can be resisted through the fashioning of a counter-narrative. Although this may involve an agonistic choice between 'authenticity' and the desire to satisfy others' expectations, most of these works, in various ways, move beyond the inimical narrative to construct a different story. The new narrative is not, though, a creation from nothing (and, therefore, as Judith Butler puts it, "no subject is its own point of departure"⁴): in addition to taking up more propitious stories, the self-story refashions the narratives it is rejecting. Thus Susanna Kaysen reworks and subverts her diagnosis by 'annotating' it; and Lauren Slater reworks her mother's bent for fantasy in order to fashion an 'unreliable autobiography' which fits with the strangeness of her experience. Texts such as these exemplify Judith Butler's assertions that what is identified as 'selfhood' involves the 'replaying' and 'resignifying' of "the theoretical positions that have constituted me".⁵

Narration, therefore, can be a redemptive process and can work to offset the tribulations of madness. But the potential for redemption is complex and nuanced in its implications. Firstly, for vulnerable and marginalized subjects who feel themselves disenfranchised from the exercise of power, the act of narrating itself exemplifies an instance of agency (as James Glass puts it: "Language is a form of action"⁶). For the individual psychically disempowered by the stasis of depression or a vocal psychosis the willed telling of his/her story is a highly significant action. Telling one's story embodies an embarkation into language, a rearrangement of the linguistic and narrative structures (of madness and ideology) surrounding and constituting the self. Moreover, we have seen in *1982, Janine* and in Hart's and Jefferson's journals how such embarkations and rearrangements are tied to the most intimate processes of selfhood; 'narrative', then, stands not only for 'story' per se, but for the self's speech to itself. In

⁴ 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism', in Seyla Benhabib; Judith Butler; Drucilla Cornell; Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 35-57 (p. 42).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ James M. Glass, *Private Terror/ Public Life: Psychosis and the Politics of Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 12.

addition, the simple speaking of the self to the self of the mundane events of everyday life represents, in these texts, the very fashioning of selfhood.

Intrinsic to the recovery of agency and the fashioning of selfhood is the assumption in a willed and self-conscious action of the first person pronoun – the ‘I’ – within discourse. This ‘action’ may well be taken for granted by those who have not experienced the subjective disaggregation of madness, and therefore its importance may be easily overlooked or dismissed. For the mad subject whose sense of coherent identity is liminal or non-existent, however, such a movement is ontologically significant. I have not argued against Nietzsche’s (or Butler’s) assertions concerning the contingent, constructed status of the ‘I’, but I have pointed out that lack of metaphysical substance does not equate to a devaluing of its importance for the (vulnerable) subject. Indeed, this is the thrust of Butler’s argument in her essay ‘Contingent Foundations’, where she notes that to deconstruct the subject does not also necessitate that we “negate or throw away the concept”:⁷ “to call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it: rather it is to free it up from its metaphysical lodgings in order to occupy and to serve very different political aims”.⁸

In line with Butler’s arguments,⁹ for the mad subject, a notion of subjectivity as constructed and contingent rather than as a substantive epistemological given need not also entail a deleterious subjection; rather, this conception of selfhood is a potentially salutary one and opens the possibility of change: if the self is made by and in language or discourse, then to ‘speak differently’ is also to shift position, if only marginally, within those constituting grids. We have seen in several of the texts I have discussed such narrative resignifications of identity, and in some of these resignifications selfhood is radically remade. For instance, the deconstructions of subjectivity undertaken by Kaysen and McLeish provide “the conditions to *mobilize* the signifier in the service of an alternative production”,¹⁰ and enable them to rework inimical inscriptions of the self. A foundational view of identity, on the other hand, may tie the sufferer into a dysfunctional identity, forever marking him or her with the impress of an alienating condition. It is especially notable that, although notions of authenticity are

⁷ Ibid, p. 49.

⁸ Ibid, p. 51.

⁹ “To claim the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted nature of the subject is the very precondition of its agency”. Ibid, p. 46.

If the subject is not substantive and given, then “possibilities for new configurations [...] become possible”. ‘Contingent Foundations’, p. 50.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 52.

not jettisoned, none of these texts posit an essential self in the shape of a self-identical non-contingent substance.

The resignification of the self recalls the Ricoeurian notion that the narrative self is a process rather than a substance. Several of these texts explicitly delineate a self-in-process, rather than a finished identity able to be narrated from a position of certitude or 'outsideness'. Authenticity and the production of a salutary narrative are key concerns for most of the authors here, but narrative selfhood is invariably construed as mobile, evolving, and fragile. The thread which conjoins the various manifestations of the self, and thereby effects the 'coherence' of the self, is the narrative process itself. For the vulnerable subject it is particularly important that subjectivity need not be 'whole' or 'complete' before it is told and asserted; such a requirement for wholeness would have the effect of excluding many subjects from (narrative) selfhood. This exclusionary potential indicates a possible problem with an unnuanced narrative concept of identity: in order not to disqualify vulnerable subjects *as* subjects, 'narrative identity' needs to be distanced from any implications that the self-narrative should be 'complete' or conclusive. Benveniste's and Kerby's (as well as Ricoeur's) insights into the linguistic underpinnings of selfhood are important in this context. If 'telling' is also 'making' the self, then, by definition, each instance of telling or (re)signification will alter the self. Narrating is not the *description* of a self, but its repeated (re)construction. Narrative identity needs to be conceived not as the story of a life, but as its ongoing telling.

The 'narrations' of narrative identity are not homogeneous. The way in which the self-story is told is at least as important as what it tells; in particular, I would draw attention to two (related) approaches. Firstly, a literary, artistic approach to narration is highlighted in several of these texts as crucial to the resignification of the self. The value of a figurative approach is exemplified in *Girl, Interrupted* and *Spasm* where the story of the self is rescued from the positivism of psychiatry by refracting it through the lens of literature. In these texts, a 'narrative', as opposed to a narrowly referential, conception of truth is adopted: the self and its experience cannot be definitively pinned down within discourse, but must be alluded to, and evoked – through creative and inventive strategies. Such a notion is particularly important for the mad subject, whose experience of alterity is antithetical to narratives of fixity and reference. In her book on depression, Julia Kristeva encapsulates the redemptive potential of this aesthetic:

Sublimation's dynamics, by summoning up primary processes and idealization, weave a *hypersign* around and with the depressive void. This is *allegory*, as lavishness of that which *no longer is*, but which regains for myself a higher meaning because I am able to remake nothingness [...].¹¹

Also apposite in this context is Derrida's contention that "the silence of madness [...] cannot be said in the logos [...] but is indirectly, metaphorically, made present by its *pathos*".¹²

Connected to the literary re-imagining of the self, is a narrative approach evolving from Sarah Kofman's notion of writing 'without power' and Maurice Blanchot's 'just speech', or 'attention to affliction'.¹³ In the context of madness, I envisage this narrative mode as predicated not on a desire for total self-understanding, but allowing for an excess – the unknown and the foreign – which confounds rational comprehension. Inverting positivism's bent toward homogeneity and definition, such a modality is apposite for the telling of the mad self, in that, as that which is outside reason, madness is (by definition) patterned by the movements of 'otherness'. A just speech might be envisaged as the self speaking into, and of, multiplicity and inner storm, thereby strengthening a sense of selfhood and agency, while yet remaining attentive and open to the unexpected, the mysterious, to dislocation and uncertainty – rather than imposing a rigid conceptual framework on the interior realm.

I would include in this particular modality an understanding that to conceive of the self as plural – in contrast to the monadic self of classical liberal humanism – may be beneficial. This should not, however, be construed as an uncritical valorization of 'multiplicity' per se. Rather, as in *Girl Interrupted*, constructions of a multi-faceted self may be used to offset the oppressive singularity of the medicalized subject, or may be employed as a mode of conceiving of versions of the self strung out across the thread of time and narrative. Such a view of identity facilitates a dialogic relation with the self in which its various manifestations 'converse' within the cognitive mechanisms of memory and anticipation. To summarize, a narration 'without power' represents a potentially salutary mode of existence. In this modality, selfhood can accommodate contradictions, and may be conceived as plural, thus entering into dialogue with its own

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. by Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 99.

¹² 'Cogito and the History of Madness', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 37.

¹³ See: Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, trans. by Madeleine Dobie (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998); Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 134.

manifestations within time. In addition, allowing for the irruptions of otherness within speech and writing may help effect a reconciliation with what Kristeva names the 'foreigner' "within ourselves", and repudiate stasis and repression in favour of a joy which emerges from "perpetual transience".¹⁴

Such a narrative modality may, however, also threaten the self. Allowing the distress of madness to be heard may be to re-experience the roots of the distress and disorder which has precisely engendered, or been engendered by, madness. Yet, as we have seen, narration per se may be a perilous venture. For the mad subject, the production of a self-narrative necessitates a passage through the same spaces of the self in which madness has been, or is still, manifest, and involves prolonged negotiations with, and revisitings of, the scenes and themes of suffering. Thus, as she narrates her story Elizabeth Wurtzel reencounters distress – evident in the obsessive circularity and repetition of her narrative. Even in a narrative such as Ross Burke's where the intention is to produce fiction, the force of anguish breaks through the narrative surface, and the author-narrator-protagonist becomes trapped in a delusional narrative world that magnifies his distress.

In conclusion I would highlight two areas of study as presenting opportunities to further advance an understanding of the interanimation between narrative and identity. The first of these springs from my contention above that the 'narrative' in 'narrative identity' should not be equated with a finished or complete story, as this may be a deleterious or impossible project for the mad or vulnerable subject. To take this further, I suggest that the theoretical concept of 'narrative identity' be reconceived under the sign of the momentary and fragmentary. For those who have lived fractured and rootless lives, the notion of selfhood as being bound to the story of a life may be a deeply unappealing prospect. To tell the story of a life may involve the reiteration of chaos, failure, and despair, and be the inverse of the narrative of progress, achievement, and closure (a story form which seems to reproduce the political imperatives of market driven liberalism – the valorizing of 'free' enterprise, production, and profit). In contrast to this dominant story, a conception of narrative and identity might be advanced in which vulnerable subjects' lives are honoured by attending and granting importance to the contingent, the passing, the incoherent or incomplete, the momentary, the frangible. Such a reconception might begin by studying the diary form, in which, as we have seen with Hart's and Jefferson's texts, the 'everyday' is brought to the fore.

¹⁴ *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans by L. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press. 1991), pp. 1 & 4.

But a better source might be the growing number of weblogs and hypertexts available via the Internet in which vulnerable individuals, freed from the imperatives of commercial publishing, are narrating their lives and producing identities through virtual dialogues with others.¹⁵

Finally, I have argued throughout this study that the reformulation of narrative selfhood is far from antithetical to political and cultural engagement. Rather, after Glass and Caminero-Santangelo, I have contended that the narrative act is intrinsically “political”. As Glass puts it, it returns the speaker to “history, time, continuity and action [...] to feel tied to the Other through a dialectical and shared symbolism”;¹⁶ moreover, through narration those deemed ‘mad’ are able to engage politically with the “constraining representations” disseminated by dominant models of understanding mental illness.¹⁷ This return to the political has been exemplified in several of the texts I have discussed here. But when we consider this aspect of narration in conjunction with the dependence on and invocation of the other – and specifically the reader – manifest in so many of these texts, then a theoretical marriage of these modalities may point toward the potentially transformative power of autobiographical discourse within culture. This is to say, that when the boundaries between author and reader, self and other, are blurred in an attempt to make the text a dialogical encounter as opposed to deepening the silence separating reason and unreason, then there may be a possibility that reading and writing can be reconceived as instances of praxis, stages on the path toward a more progressive politics. A similar point has been made by Marie Lovrod in a study of sexual abuse survivor narratives. She summarizes there how a transformative potential might inhere in the transmission and reception of such stories of vulnerable selves:

¹⁵ While not, as far as I am aware, reconceptualizing narrative identity, there have been studies undertaken in this general area. E.g. Raya Jones (University of Cardiff), ‘Storytelling and subjectivity in cyberspace: personal accounts of bipolar disorder’, Paper given at University of Huddersfield conference, ‘Narrative, Memory and Everyday Life, 3rd April 2004. Faith McLellan, ‘The electronic narrative of illness’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Texas Graduate School of Biomedical Science, 1997), and also: “‘A Whole Other Story’: The Electronic Narrative of Illness’, *Literature and Medicine*, 16.1 (1997), 88-107. For examples of the type of web material I refer to see, for instance: Peter Piwowarski’s website ‘Huddersfield One - Coping With Depression’, <<http://www.huddersfield1.co.uk/depression>> [accessed 12 March 2004]; Jerod Poore, ‘Jerod's Bipolar Blog’, <<http://www.well.com/~jerod23/bp/>> [accessed 12 March 2004] (see also Jerod Poore, ‘A first-person account of bipolar disorder’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7th July 2002 <<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2002/07/07/LV44762.DTL>> [accessed 12 March 2004]); Ian Chovil, ‘The experience of Schizophrenia’, <<http://www.chovil.com/>> [accessed 12 March 2004]).

¹⁶ Glass, *Private Terror/ Public Life*, p. 34.

¹⁷ See: Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or, Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 9.

The writer as a reader of her or his own experience seeks to build a bridge between [...] the violent shocks for which there have been no words and the reader of the survivor narrative so that the process of mediation between abuse and culture may proceed toward validation of the experience and transformation of the culture.¹⁸

In the light of my comments concerning the unspeakability of madness it is interesting to note Lovrod's description of the "violent shocks for which there have been no words". This invocation of wordlessness reminds us that the task of facilitating a dialogue between madness and culture may be laborious and difficult, in that it will also necessitate facilitating a rapprochement between reason and unreason. Nevertheless, a sustained consideration of the ways in which the transformative potential of the (dialogic) text might be best realized would, I think, be valuable and productive. In Blanchot's discussion of the restoration of the Self-Subject, he writes that as s/he attends to affliction, "the one who is dispossessed [is] placed back into a situation of dialectical struggle so he may once again consider himself a force".¹⁹ But this re-in/forcing of the Self-Subject ultimately comes about "through the intermediary of an exterior Subject"; thus, for Blanchot, the restoration of the vulnerable subject is always conceived as a "double relation".²⁰ Narration 'by itself' – if such a thing is possible, which I dispute – is not enough to achieve the "validation of [...] experience". Thus, the dialogue with culture is, as Lovrod hints, bound to the redemption of the suffering subject.²¹ This is not to say that narrative reformulations of identity are wholly dependent on the transformation of culture; as we have seen, the texts in this study effect dialogue and pluralistic models of identity by reaching to and incorporating propitious stories and compassionate others into the self-narrative. Yet given that, as I

¹⁸ Marie Lovrod, 'Art/i/fact: Rereading culture and subjectivity through sexual abuse survivor narratives', in *True Relations: Essays on Autobiography and the Postmodern*, ed. by T. Couser and J. Fichtelberg (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), pp. 23-32 (p. 32).

¹⁹ *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 134.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ David Levin's proposition for a "cultural epidemiology" may be germane in this context. Levin argues that "even madness is death only when its truth cannot be heard", and that "compassion begins when this truth and the pain it exacts can be freely shared". He envisages cultural epidemiology emerging from an intersection and dialogue between "the sciences of nature", "the sciences of life", and the "disciplines of a critical humanism", and suggests that this marriage of disciplines proffers a possibility that the suffering of madness might be fruitfully and sympathetically interpreted, while yet "acknowledging its speech and listening openly to its dangerous truth". 'Introduction', in *Pathologies of the Modern Self: Postmodern Studies on Narcissism, Schizophrenia, and Depression*, ed. by D. Levin (New York: New York University Press, 1987), pp. 1-17 (pp. 7 & 8).

have argued throughout, our stories of who we are – and, therefore, *who we are* – are bound to, and constituted within and from, ruling cultural norms, the transformation of the self through its (re)telling will remain an agonistic process as long as culture remains unresponsive to the stories of vulnerable subjects. Currently such narrative transformations must work against not only the depredations of madness, but also those wider cultural stories which reify stigma and ignorance.

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