

4 How Can I Speak of Madness? Narrative and Identity in Memoirs of ‘Mental Illness’

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Abstract

In this paper I examine some of the implications, possibilities, and dangers of addressing the experience of ‘madness’ or ‘mental illness’¹ within autobiographical narrative: in particular, I ask *how* madness can be narrated, or spoken. I suggest that an attentive reading of narrative form, as the outworking and evidence of a way of knowing and thinking about the world, may reveal authorial attempts to manage and stretch the constraints inherent in conventional narrative’s tendency toward linearity and resolution, a tendency which is, arguably, inimical to the expression of madness. Insinuated in this process of working with form is a particular *narrative mode of existence* which has implications for the psychodynamics of living with mental distress. With reference to the work of Sarah Kofman, I propose the idea that a ‘writing without power’ may be a salutary way to address chronic distress, and to reformulate identity in the light of biographical disruption.

Speaking of Madness

Fundamental difficulties present themselves to the autobiographer recording a descent into madness. Traditional narrative *form*, in which raw events are re-codified into a coherent plot, and also language’s inherent quality of producing meaning via order and sequence, may be inimical to the expression of what Julia Kristeva, writing of melancholia, has called the “excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos” (Kristeva, 1989: 33). Many autopathographers² have addressed this difficulty. For instance, in 1903 Daniel Schreber wrote of his psychotic experience: “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” (Schreber, 1955: 41). More recent memoirists who have expressed similar sentiments include Ross Burke: “The truth cannot be expressed. It is the land of the id” (Burke, 1995: 193); Andrew Solomon, who insists depression “can be described only in metaphor and allegory” (Solomon, 2002: 16); Lauren Slater, who writes of the “subtleties and

horrors and gaps in my past for which I have never been able to find the words” (Slater, 2000: 219-20); and William Styron, who speaks of a “horror”, “so overwhelming as to be quite beyond expression” (Styron, 1990: 83).

Such sentiments call to mind arguments emerging from ‘trauma theory’, that body of work which, amongst other things, addresses the epistemological implications of traumatic experience and its representation: in particular, they evoke the supposedly unspeakable nature of trauma. This aporetic state is engendered by (at least) two factors. 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 (see Freud, 1991; Felman and Laub, 1992; Caruth, 1996 and 1995; Herman, 1994). 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. Moreover, if we do narrate the limit-experience, won’t this 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, a story which is dissonant with the self’s distress?

In the case of madness, these questions come into particularly sharp relief. It is, arguably, an *a priori* proposition that to faithfully describe or express the manifestations of madness within a discourse governed by reason will be an undertaking, which, at the least, is fraught with difficulty. Madness is, after all, defined by its *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. In that light, then, is narrative representation intrinsically inimical to its expression? I’m reminded here of Jacques Derrida’s observation, in an essay which addresses the verbal expression of madness, that, “By its essence, the sentence is normal. It carries normality within it [...]”; “discourse”, he goes on, is a “nothing that neutralises everything” (Derrida, 1978: 54-5).

There may also be a further difficulty for the autopathographer. If madness is a condition centring on and evoked within various aspects of cognition, then an autopathography 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 narrative journey, therefore, may be a perilous one; and this in turn insinuates that the *form* of narrative might map more than a discrete history, but rather may dramatize the very echoes and reverberations of distress.

This is, I suggest, the case with Elizabeth's Wurtzel's well-known memoir of depression, *Prozac Nation* (Wurtzel, 1999). For, just as the narrator of Dante's *Inferno* laments that narration is itself a perilous enterprise - "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" (Dante, 1997: Canto I) - so Wurtzel as narrator frequently appears imperilled by the material she relates. Indeed narrative form often seems to dramatize or perform the experiences Wurtzel describes. For instance, the ambiguous and confusing chronotopes³ of her novelistic text strikingly parallel her description of the way in which a balanced sense of past, present, and future are painfully disrupted in her depression. So, passages narrated in the preterite (or simple past) are continually disturbed by the incursion of the present tense, as if the act of remembering has awoken slumbering horrors which invade the moment of writing. As if attempting to explain this narratological and psychological dynamic, at one moment in the text when describing a nervous collapse, Wurtzel writes of the act of remembering as an invasive counterpart of breakdown:

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.

(Wurtzel, 1999: 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 remembering consciousness of the narrator/writer, leaves 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 *still happening* at the moment of writing?

Another text which evokes the sense of a narrative self caught up in the events it relates is Tracy Thompson's *The Beast: A Journey Through Depression* (Thompson, 1996). For, despite an ostensibly assured narrative voice, Thompson tells her story, particularly the story of an abusive relationship, with very few narrative overviews. Relating her involvement with a man who at first appears kind, but is soon revealed as a manipulating bully intent on convincing her that she is responsible for bringing her suffering onto herself, 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 the reader may feel temporarily unsure 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.

While both Thompson and Wurtzel do actually provide narrative overviews - in the form of Epilogues, Afterwords and Introductions, as well as occasional prolepses and analepses - their narrative descents imply not only the problematization of narrative as a detached vehicle for an objective life-history, but also, I suggest, evoke a *kind* of speaking, or narration. In each text the narrating self refuses to separate itself off from its 'history', and resists a strict demarcation of discrete regions of health and illness, instead *allowing* the unsettling refluxes of distress and uncertainty to imbricate its telling. In sum, whether entirely willed or not, the narrative stances adopted are predicated on an *openness* to the unforeseen, and most importantly do not attempt to shut out these emergent and anarchic energies; they are each, to use Peter Brooks's formula as he describes the narrative dynamics at work in Freud's case history of the 'Wolf Man', restagings of a "complex and buried past history [...] as it covertly reconstitutes itself in the present language" (Brooks, 1992: 283).

All this brings me back to the first of the difficulties I spoke of earlier: the issue of whether it is possible to speak of madness in such a way that does not do violence to the speaker and their experience. The French philosopher Sarah Kofman imagined (and demonstrated) just such a way of speaking in her book *Smothered Words*, a meditation on the effects of the Holocaust on discourse (Kofman, 1998; see also Kofman, 1995); she named this discursive mode *ecrire sans pouvoir* - 'writing without power'. In 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'" (Liska, 2000: 91). 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.

(Kofman, 1998: 10)

Note the two imperatives in Kofman's dictum: first *to speak*; and second, *to speak without power*. Such a speaking, she says, does not attempt to master the traumatic event - does not attempt to make that which is aporetic - intrinsically full of doubt - into something that can be fully known and understood. Instead it represents, as Kofman's translator Madeleine Dobie explains it, an "attempt to give voice to a language beyond the authority of an author"; and is a "writing without being able to write [...] the impossible writing which is not of the order of intentionality and power" (in Kofman,

1998: xiv). Importantly, for Kofman the converse of this impossible writing - narratives defined by their self-sufficiency, their movement towards closure and coherence, their inherent drive for mastery over the chaos and incomprehensibility of events - *reproduces* the dynamic which led to the Holocaust, and which W. G. Sebald, in his novel *Austerlitz*, called a “mania for order and purity” (Sebald, 2002: 278). So Kofman links the desire for philosophical - and narrative - mastery to a desire to exterminate that which is other - to destroy the unknown, and to delimit the infinite.

A writing without power is perhaps particularly relevant in the context of the representation of mental distress. And significantly this particular sort of knowing and representation stands in stark contrast to the world-view implicitly underpinning a purely biomedical stance on madness; indeed, one might characterize the biomedical position as precisely an attempt to enclose the intrinsically aporetic in the clarity and happiness of (a scientific, diagnostic) daylight. As we have seen, memoirists often point to a mystery and unknowability inherent in madness. Its extremity, its antinomic relation with reason and linearity, its generation of both insight and utter despair, its inextricable implication in the social, the complex effects of stigma, and, moreover, that all this and more is experienced through the very lens of ‘mad’ perception, means that a narrative model which only explains, connects, and concludes will at best fail to signify its object.

Lauren Slater, in her memoir of mental illness, *Spasm*, directly addresses these issues. She claims her account is “passionately dedicated to the truth” (Slater, 2000: 160), yet it is subtitled *A Memoir With Lies*, and she describes it as a “slippery, playful, impish, exasperating text, shaped [...] like a question mark” (ibid: 223). *Spasm* mixes together fiction with memoir, with its author refusing to reveal what is ‘true’ and what ‘false’; it is couched in a poetic and postmodern style, in which the ‘end’ of the story occurs in the middle of the book, and metanarrative is utilised to usurp any suggestion of a detached or transparent view; it includes letters to the reader and the publisher, and extracts from medical textbooks. The point of all this is that Slater wants to convey narrative (rather than narrowly referential) truth, by using a metaphorical (rather than an informational) discourse: “invention”, she claims, can “get to the heart of things”, while metaphor can gesture towards “the silence behind the story”: “through it we can propel silence into sound” (ibid: 196 & 219-20).⁴

Metaphor, then, or more specifically the literary or poetic narrative, is used by Slater, by Wurtzel and Thompson in their novelistic and open texts, and also by many other autopathographers (see, for instance: Kaysen, 1995; Burke, 1995), to point beyond itself to that which cannot be said - the silence behind the story. In a similar vein to Slater, the literary theorist Shoshana Felman, discussing the representation of trauma, writes of its intrinsic otherness, and that authors need to acknowledge that they cannot fully ‘possess’ it. Citing the

poets Mallarmé and Celan, she formulates a notion of *precocious testimony* which is, she claims,

the very principle of poetic insight and the very core of the event of poetry which makes [...] language - through its breathless gasps - speak ahead of its knowledge and awareness and break through the limits of its own conscious understanding.

(Felman, 1995: 29-30)

“Poetry”, she continues, can “speak *beyond its means*”; and is thus able to testify to a half-known trauma, the repercussions of which, in their “uncontrollable and unanticipated nature, still continue to evolve even in the very process of the testimony” (ibid: 30).

Such an evolving is evident in Slater’s *Spasm*, and in the memoirs by Wurtzel and Thompson. The sense connoted by their shifting and uncertain narrative dynamics is that selfhood is still being formulated; the subjectivities described, therefore, are not enclosed in the clarity of daylight, but are bound up with language, expression, and the negotiation of the temporal. Intrinsic to this, and implicit in Kofman’s notion of a writing without power, is that narrative in such works allows space for otherness, or that which cannot be fully understood and assimilated. In my context here, such an alterity stands for that which inheres in the experience of madness but which the biomedical narrative cannot account for; and it also allows for the otherness of the *self*: narrative selfhood is connoted not as atomistic and contained, but as something labile that cannot be completely known.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that a speaking or a narration without power is not equivalent to a speaking which eschews agency. Kofman draws inspiration from Maurice Blanchot, who writes that a crisis-experience in which the sense of ‘I’ is utterly dispersed can only be transformed into “salvation” with a restorative reformulation of subjectivity. He asserts that:

there must be restored - beyond this self that I have ceased to be, and within the anonymous community - the instance of a Self-Subject [...].

(Blanchot, 1993: 134)

Blanchot describes this mode of existence as one which is “no longer [...] a dominating and oppressive power drawn up against the ‘other’”, but rather is that which “can receive the unknown and the foreign, receive them in the justice of a true *speech*” (ibid). But, intrinsic to true speech - and to a writing without power - is the reclamation of the ‘I’: if the psychical fragmentation of acute distress is to be transformed then a willed occupation of the ground of first-person discourse is essential.

A writing without power, a true speech, or, as Blanchot also names it, an “attention to affliction” (ibid), is an ethical mode of being because it is predicated not on a desire for total understanding, but allows for an excess - the

unknown and the foreign - which is outside of comprehension, and approachable perhaps only via art, via the elliptical, the sidelong, the metaphorical. Such a just speaking is particularly germane in my context here, because, as that which is outside reason, madness is patterned by the movements of 'otherness'. A just speech could be envisaged as the self speaking into, and of, multiplicity and inner storm with a singular voice, thereby strengthening a sense of selfhood and agency (see Morin and Everett, 1990; Davidson and Strauss, 1992), 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. This is, potentially, a salutary mode of existence: allowing for the irruptions of otherness within speech and writing may help effect a reconciliation with what Kristeva names the 'foreigner' "within ourselves" (Kristeva, 1991: 1), and repudiate stasis and repression in favour of a joy which emerges from "perpetual transience" (ibid: 4). Paradoxically, however, such an openness may also threaten the self. Allowing the other - in its very distress - 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 it may only be in such a mode of narrative existence that an authentic, and therefore ethical, relation with the self - Blanchot's 'salvation' - is possible.

Notes

- 1) I have put these terms in scare quotes because both can, for different reasons, be problematic for those who live with acute mental distress.
- 2) Autopathography: an autobiographical story of illness.
- 3) The sense of space and time in an artistic work (see Bakhtin, 1981: 234).
- 4) Cf. George Aichele's definition 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 language" (Aichele, 1985: 143).

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