

# Towards a Writing without Power: Notes on the Narration of Madness

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In this paper I consider some of the implications, possibilities and dangers of addressing the experience of ‘madness’ or ‘mental illness’<sup>1</sup> within autobiographical narrative: in particular, I ask *how* madness can be narrated, or spoken. Engaging with theoretical interventions by, amongst others, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Shoshana Felman and Maurice Blanchot, and looking at three autobiographies of madness, 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. This tendency, I argue, is 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 on the representation of trauma, I propose that her conception of a ‘writing without power’ may be a salutary way in which to address chronic distress, and to reformulate identity in the light of biographical disruption.

## SPEAKING OF MADNESS

How can one speak of that before which all possibility of speech ceases?  
——Sarah Kofman

Fundamental difficulties present themselves to the autobiographer recording a descent into the troubled spaces of madness. Traditional narrative *form*, in which raw events are recodified 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 (1989: 33), writing of melancholia, has called the ‘excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos’. Many autopathographers<sup>2</sup> have

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addressed precisely 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 the following: Ross Burke (1995: 193), who writes that 'The truth cannot be expressed. It is the land of the id'; Andrew Solomon (2002: 16), who insists depression 'can be described only in metaphor and allegory'; Lauren Slater (2000: 219–20), who writes of the 'subtleties and horrors and gaps in my past for which I have never been able to find the words'; and William Styron (1990: 83), who speaks of a 'horror', 'so overwhelming as to be quite beyond expression'.

Such sentiments call to mind contentions 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. First, 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, for instance: Caruth, 1996; Felman and Laub, 1992; Freud, 1991; 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, surely this narration would transform trauma into something that 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?

While one might conceivably argue that the cautionary sentiments of the memoirists I have quoted simply represent instances of a version of the rhetorical device of *recusatio*,<sup>3</sup> 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, in the case of madness, the questions I have highlighted as crucial in considering the representation of trauma 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, 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; generally speaking it is characterized variously by fragmentation, amorphousness, entropy, chaos, silence, senselessness. Inhabiting the sufferer's mind is not the 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 being-states do not fit well with narrative's drive to organize and arrange experience: whether the author is describing his or her experience from *within* madness, or from a position ostensibly situated outside it, there would appear to be a disjunction between the content to be narrated and the possibilities inhering in conventional narrative forms.

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 the madness of chronic depression is characterized by a 'glaring and inescapable' 'lack of meaning ... compelling me to silence' (Kristeva, 1989: 3). 'For the speaking being', she goes on, 'life is a meaningful life' (1989: 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' (1989: 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' (1989: 33). 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 by its nature unorderable, or by a frozen stasis, concomitant with which is a powerlessness inimical to the willed production of meaning that is the narration of one's story.

The question of whether narrative, indeed linguistic, representation is intrinsically inimical to the expression of madness also informed the famous debate between Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, initiated in 1961 by the publication of Foucault's landmark work *Folie et deraison* (the much abridged English translation to which I refer here is entitled *Madness and civilization* (Foucault, 1999)): in fact one could say that this issue was the fulcrum on which Derrida's trenchant critique turned. There is not space here to do justice to

the richness of the arguments aired (for a lucid and accessible account of the debate see Boyne, 1990), but, in my reading, and 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 (1978: 43): 'madness is what by essence cannot be said', while for Foucault (1999: 107), 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'.

The crux of Derrida's objection to the project of *Madness and civilization* was that in practice Foucault forgot his own monitory sentiments. Specifically, Derrida claimed that Foucault, in attempting to write the archaeology of the 'silence' (Foucault, 1999: xiii) dividing madness from reason (a divide that Foucault claims took place at a historical juncture), by means of revisiting the 'zero point . . . at which madness is an undifferentiated experience' (1999: xi), was overreaching himself. For Derrida, the schism between madness and reason is absolute, and the Foucaultian project merely reinters madness within reason: only by 'imprisoning madness' can 'speech . . . open up the space for discourse' because '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' (Derrida, 1978: 61).

If we accept these arguments, then a fundamental problem confronting the autopathographer of madness is that, to use Derrida's terms, 'by its essence, the sentence is normal. It carries normality within it' (1978: 54–5); or to put it another way: in constructing sense-making sentences the essence of madness evaporates, is swallowed up by reason. Certainly in one view, this could be construed as a potentially beneficial effect – one might picture the reasonable discourses of sanity as an island reached by the exhausted swimmer adrift in the turbulent tides of psychic chaos. Yet I think one might legitimately question what value the resultant narrative would realistically hold for its author if its very structure and dynamics were so absolutely dissonant with the experience intended by its account. Would not such a document, governed as it would be by the reasonableness of linearity, cause and effect, and the progressive 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? I will shortly explore one approach to the writing

of madness and trauma in which the limitations of narrative and linguistic form may be negotiated in a more salutary fashion by the autopathographer, but before I come to that I want first to outline a further potential difficulty awaiting those who revisit the dark spaces of lunacy.

### PERILOUS JOURNEYS

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 renegotiating 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 themselves 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 that 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, I want to suggest, 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.

This is, I would argue, the case with Elizabeth’s Wurtzel’s well-known memoir of depression, *Prozac nation* (1999). For, just as the narrator of Dante’s *Inferno* (Dante, 1997, Canto I) 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’ – 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, resulting in an often radically incoherent text. 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 the lack of a 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 reimagined 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* (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 textbook, representation of that endless, repetitive grieving named by Freud (1958; 1981) as characterizing melancholia.

One particularly interesting feature of *Prozac nation* for my context here is the way in which the ambiguous and confusing chronotopes<sup>4</sup> of Wurtzel's 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: 101–102)

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?

A similar sense of the narrative self caught up in the events it relates, albeit conveyed via a very different formal style, is evident

in Tracy Thompson's memoir *The beast: a journey through depression* (1996). 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. The frustration for readers may be that what is plain to them, is apparently lost on both protagonist and narrator. The claustrophobic sense of being caged in a suffering and oppressed consciousness is such that any hints of retrospection, or narrative distancing, stand out – because of their relative scarcity. As with Wurtzel's memoir, *The beast* occupies an uncertain narrative ground with the narrator refusing to completely distance herself from the protagonist's experience of distress.

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 of these texts 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, to the irruption of the 'past' within the present moment of writing, 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).

#### WRITING 'WITHOUT POWER'

All of 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 (1998) imagined (and demonstrated) just such a way of speaking and writing in her book *Smothered words*, an extraordinary and moving meditation on the effects of the Holocaust on discourse (see also Kofman, 1995). She named this mode *écrire sans pouvoir* – ‘writing without power’.

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”’ (Liska, 2000: 91). Addressing the representation of trauma, 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 (and, therefore, consigned to ‘history’ and forgotten). 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 that led to the Holocaust, and which W.G. Sebald (2002), in his novel *Austerlitz* – a work that tracks the reverberations of this historical trauma on the individual psyche – called a ‘mania for order and purity’ (2002: 278). Kofman, therefore, 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.

Kofman’s concept of a writing without power is, I think, particularly relevant and useful when thinking about the narration of mental distress. And significantly this particular mode of representation (and the kind of knowing implied by it) 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. From such a starkly materialist position, disease is knowable, as Roger Levin (1987: 165) puts it, ‘as the simply physical through reductive analyses unencumbered by the complexity of subjective meanings’; yet as we have seen, memoirists frequently point to the 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 that only explains, connects and concludes will at best fail to signify its object.

The American psychologist and author, Lauren Slater (2000), directly and indirectly addresses some of these issues in a memoir of her own mental illness entitled *Spasm*. She claims her account is ‘passionately dedicated to the truth’ (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’ (2000: 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 a metanarrative is utilized 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’ (2000: 196).<sup>5</sup>

Slater, then, is not concerned with autobiographical precision. She openly acknowledges that the ‘sounds’ generated by her use of metaphorical discourse and elliptical narrative methods would not correspond to that chimeric shibboleth, the detached, objective life-narrative. Yet, as she puts it, ‘even if the sounds are not altogether accurate, they do resonate in some heartfelt place we cannot dismiss’, and it is this poetic resonance that satisfies the autobiographical impulse: ‘That is why it is in this book, although not always factually correct, that I have finally been able to tell a tale eluding me for years, the story of my past’ (Slater, 2000: 219–20).

In *Spasm* Slater draws out the implications of those memoirists’ sentiments regarding the unspeakability of madness with which I

opened this essay. Her valorization of a metaphorical, literary approach to the narration of its strange alterity also chimes with the sentiments of the anonymous author of *Autobiography of a schizophrenic experience*, who, even in the midst of her madness, discovered the salutary value of an artistic engagement: 'I was unable to think coherently or plan any action, but I had to use my Poetic imagination instead, for poetry could be counted on not to lead me astray' (Anon., 1964: 96–97):

At the end of *Spasm* Slater highlights some of the more socio-political ramifications of her writing strategy, by emphasizing the narratological nature of diagnosis, and implicitly arguing for the kind of 'cultural epidemiology' in which, as David Levin (1987: 7) puts it, 'The assumed subject of epidemiological study can no longer be separated from questions traditionally reserved for humanism and the social sciences.' Slater's description is less formally expressed, but occupies the same thematic ground:

All I know for sure is this. I have been ill much of my life. Illness has claimed my imagination, my body, my brain, and everything I do I see through its feverish scrim. All I can tell you is this. 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. Line up all the DSMs, the book from which mental health professionals draw their diagnoses, and you will see how they have changed, how they have radically altered from decade to decade depending upon the Zeitgeist of the time. ... Therefore, despite the huge proliferation of illness memoirs in recent years, memoirs that talk about people's personal experiences with Tourette's and postpartum depression and manic depression, memoirs that are often rooted in the latest scientific "evidence," something is amiss. To me, the authority seems illusory, the etiologies constructed.

(Slater, 2000: 219)

A cultural epidemiology representing 'the ideal of a fateful intersection' between 'the sciences of nature and the sciences of life' is seen by David Levin (1987: 8) as proffering the possibility that 'the condition of human suffering' might be fruitfully interpreted, while yet 'acknowledging its speech and listening openly to its dangerous truth'. He goes on to claim that 'even madness is death only when its truth cannot be heard. Compassion begins when this truth and the pain it exacts can be freely shared' (1987: 8). It is to this end – the proclamation of a dangerous truth, the sharing of pain, and possibly, as I shall later elaborate, the genesis of a more compassionate stance towards mental illness in her readership – that Slater employs

a literary or poetic autobiographical narrative style. So too, I think, Wurtzel and Thompson in their novelistic, open and unsettling texts, and many other autopathographers (see, for instance, Burke, 1995; Kaysen, 1995), attempt to twist the limits of narrative structuring, using literary techniques so that the text might point beyond itself to that which cannot be easily said – the silence behind the story, or, perhaps, the reverberations of an ancient distress still at work within the psyche, and showing through the writing consciousness like a half-glimpsed palimpsest. In such works narrative remains un-finalized and open ended, preserving the uncertainty inherent in their protagonists' and narrators' experience of madness, refusing to consign the experience wholly to a biochemical disruption within the self, or at least grappling with the phenomenology of such synaptic storms. To use Derrida's terms, in a passage where he appears to acknowledge the metaphorical, poetic drift of *Madness and civilization* (and, incidentally, by this admission weakens his critique in my view): 'the silence of madness is not *said*, cannot be said in the logos of this book, but is indirectly, metaphorically, made present by its *pathos*' (Derrida, 1978: 37). Derrida is here evoking pathos as not only that which excites pity or melancholy, but also as an art inflected by transience and emotion, as opposed to one aspiring to permanence or the ideal: logos. He is also addressing a very similar problematic to the one Kofman considers in *Smothered words* – encapsulated in her question: 'How can one speak of that before which all possibility of speech ceases?' (Kofman, 1998: 9).

A particularly intriguing commentary on the theme of the metaphorical approach to the 'unrepresentable' can be found in the literary theorist Shoshana Felman's essay 'Education and crisis, or the vicissitudes of teaching' (Felman, 1995). Felman, a professor at Yale, describes the processes, problems and insights encountered both by her students and herself during the teaching of an undergraduate module on testimony and trauma. (Her analysis, with its emphasis on the organic, evolving character of education, in which the learning process is osmotic and mutual rather than monologic, has important things to contribute to pedagogical debate, and it is not too far fetched, I think, to extrapolate from her essay a model of a 'teaching without power'.) On the representation of trauma, one of Felman's most interesting conclusions is that inherent in the traumatic experience is an intrinsic otherness, an alterity which, if the author is not to produce a 'bad faith narrative' (see Craib, 2000), cannot be 'possessed' or fully enclosed within a discrete narrative form. 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’ (1995: 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 the 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; more broadly, it also allows for the otherness of the self: narrative selfhood is insinuated not as transparent, atomistic and contained, but as something labile that cannot be completely known.

Finally, Julia Kristeva also suggests something along the same lines as Derrida, Kofman, and Felman, albeit in more psychoanalytic terms, when she writes that ‘art seems to point to a few devices that bypass complacency and, without simply turning mourning into mania, secure for the artist and the connoisseur a sublimatory hold over the lost Thing’ (Kristeva, 1989: 97). Certainly her assertion that ‘by means of prosody, the language beyond language that inserts into the sign the rhythm and alliterations of semiotic processes’ (1989: 97) resonates with the agitations – the ‘spasms’ perhaps – at work within narrative form in the memoirs by Wurtzel and Thompson. Of particular interest, and leading me conveniently towards the conclusion of this essay, is that, in her analysis of the effects of the artistic sublimation of distress, Kristeva indicates that redemptive possibilities for the self may lie in such an engagement with language:

Sublimation’s dynamics, by summoning up primary processes and idealization, weaves 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, better than it was and within an unchanging harmony, here and now and forever.

(1989: 99)

## AGENCY AND 'SALVATION'

Despite the openness to the unexpected which Felman highlights in her account of teaching trauma, she does not shun the more linear and conventional pedagogical aims of accumulative insight and directed learning. Felman's direction is tempered by a readiness to encounter the 'eventness' of the classes, the texts and the conversations, but she still guides her charges through the module. Progress, then, is not aleatory or haphazard, but is aimed at facilitating a better understanding of the mechanisms of testimony. Similarly, in the context of autobiographical writing about the experience of mental illness, it is important for me to emphasize that I am not envisaging a speaking without power as equivalent to a speaking that eschews agency. Sarah Kofman's model is inspired in part by the writings of Maurice Blanchot, in particular a section of *The infinite conversation* where Blanchot discusses Robert Anteleme's Holocaust memoir *The human race*, and then from this engagement examines the dynamics of speaking the unspeakable. Blanchot writes that the crisis experience in which selfhood – the sense of 'I' – is utterly dispersed in and by the depredations of extreme suffering can only be transformed into 'salvation' with a restorative reformulation of subjectivity: '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 restored 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* (1993: 134). But, intrinsic to true speech – or 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.

Such ideas chime with those advanced by James Glass in his ongoing work on the politics of the self and mental illness; indeed, the salutary effect of narrative agency is one of the central concerns of his book *Private terror/public life* (Glass, 1989). 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, and in this book he records and comments on their narratives. He is particularly sensitive to the importance of language and its intimate implication with issues of action and agency, and he links psychosis with a deleterious internalization of language, which in turn spawns a semi-autonomous 'discursive' or symbolic realm displacing the individual as agent,

and in generating a disorienting power of its own. It is worth noting in my context here Glass's insistence that delusion equates to action; psychosis is described by his narrators as a drive and a dynamism that dismantles subjective structures and dislodges the individual from the social, while also putting into place a new, nightmarish architecture of the psyche. 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' (Glass, 1989: 12).

In Glass's analysis, the agency of the autobiographical narrative act also returns the speaker to 'history, time, continuity and action . . . to feel tied to the Other through a dialectical and shared symbolism' (1989: 34); moreover, he contends 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' (1989: 16). While the dialogic character of autobiography is not my primary focus here, it is worth noting that in these observations Glass concurs with Blanchot's insistence on the redemptive speech act being situated within a social context. On this point, it is interesting to note that the memoirs by Slater, Wurtzel and Thompson are explicitly oriented outwards towards their imagined readers. Each of these narratives openly acknowledges the importance of the one who hears, thus demonstrating an awareness of an other outside the text; as such they implicitly contest notions of autobiographical identity as atomistic and self-contained. Slater is particularly remarkable in this regard, in that she links her metaphorical writing strategy to a desire to reach out to the other haunting the fringes of her narrative:

I have decided not to tell you what is fact versus what is unfact 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, 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.

(Slater, 2000: 163)

Such an awareness of the other points towards the potentially transformative power of autobiographical discourse within culture.

When the boundaries between self and other, author and reader are blurred in an attempt to make the text a dialogical encounter as opposed to deepening that Foucaultian silence separating reason and unreason, then there may be a possibility that reading and writing can become instances of praxis, a stage on the path towards a more progressive politics. As I have said, to do this subject justice would require a much longer discussion than I have space for, but I think that Patrocínio Schweickart (2000) is proposing something very similar in her illuminating essay ‘Reading ourselves: toward a feminist theory of reading’, where she urges a choice of the ‘dialectical over the deconstructionist plot’, suggesting that it is ‘dangerous for feminists to be overly enamoured with the theme of impossibility’ (2000: 4). Similarly, Marie Lovrod (1998), in a study of sexual abuse survivor narratives, comes to a comparable conclusion, and eloquently summarizes how a transformative potential might inhere in the transmission and reception of such texts:

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.

(Lovrod, 1998: 32)

## CONCLUSION

A writing without power, a true speech, or, as Blanchot (1993: 134) also names it, an ‘attention to affliction’, 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 only via art, via the elliptical, the sidelong, the metaphorical. In the case of a Holocaust memoir this is a particularly potent notion, as it inverts those destructive dynamics bent on purity or homogeneity, but such a just speaking is also germane in my context here, because, as that which is outside reason, madness is patterned by the movements of ‘otherness’. A just speech might 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 Davidson and Strauss, 1992; Morin and Everett, 1990), 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 (1991: 1) names the 'foreigner' 'within ourselves', and repudiate stasis and repression in favour of a joy which emerges from 'perpetual transience' (1991: 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 have 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', or Kristeva's 'remaking of nothingness' – is possible.

## NOTES

1 Both these terms can, for different reasons, be problematic for those who live with acute mental distress – hence my use of scare quotes here. In the rest of the essay I drop the quote marks and generally use 'madness'. I personally prefer this term because it does not so overtly tie chronic distress to the medical model.

2 Autopathography: an autobiographical story of illness.

3 A rhetorical device in which a poet declines to write a certain type of poem or treat a particular theme in his or her poetry because, ostensibly, he or she lacks the necessary skill: a conviction of superiority usually lurks beneath these displays of mock modesty.

4 The sense of space and time in an artistic work (see Bakhtin, 1981: 234).

5 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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