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Barriers to the Self: Productivity and the Depressed Woman in *The Bell Jar* and *Prozac Nation*

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*This article explores Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1967) and Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* (1994) through the effects that depression has on the creation and perception of self in young women. Depression is explored in terms of the barriers it erects around young women's attempts to conceptualise selfhood as it forms in adolescence. This article particularly focuses on the problem of productivity in both texts as protagonists Esther Greenwood and Elizabeth Wurtzel appear to view productivity, particularly academic and literary, as the means through which they will create and establish a coherent self. This fetishised productivity is halted by their depressions, illustrating a further tension between the wider capitalist society which demands productivity and the destabilising nature of depression. Whilst Esther and Elizabeth have different experiences, due to the periods of composition, both characters and texts have striking similarities which suggest that there is a common thread which unites the experiences of female depression in the late twentieth century.*

The autobiographical elements of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* have fascinated readers and critics alike since it was first published under her name in 1967 (Gill 74).¹ *The Bell Jar* offers a first-person narrative of depression and its treatment, particularly for the mid-twentieth century female patient, with the novel still retaining its status as an iconic depression narrative today. As a result, Plath's Esther Greenwood has been viewed as one of the archetypal depressive figures in the American and wider Western consciousness, with Iris Jamahl Dunkle stating that "often, when the novel appears in American films and television series, it stands as a symbol for teen angst" (15). While this presents a rather reductive view of the novel, it does illustrate the extent to which the novel and Esther have permeated the Western psyche. Similarly, this position of eminence also later came to be occupied by Elizabeth Wurtzel in her memoir *Prozac Nation* (1994), an iconic text which encapsulates the disillusioned and cynical tone of Generation X literature and culture.

Depression narratives, as characterised by Tina Stern, are narratives through which the writers attempt to make sense of what has happened to them or their narrators as a result of the depression which is "at various times impenetrable, elusive, unfathomable, unknowable, and inexorable" (94). These two seminal female depression narratives present a struggle to attain a stable sense of self amid the depression that morphs and alters their behaviour and perceptions, with both young women experiencing mental obstacles in their adolescent self-creation. Both Esther and Elizabeth link their identities and self-worth to literary and academic creation and

success, suggesting a commodification or exploitation of depression both in the American capitalist system they are part of, which favours hyper-productivity and the 'self-made man', and within their own self-perceptions. This mindset excuses or praises depression if one can glean some literary or artistic production from it and therefore memorialise one's identity as one of the 'creatively mad', a title which has particularly strong connotations for women following the seminal theorisation of the female writer in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). However, these narratives illustrate that this mindset is ultimately an idealistic and fallacious perception of depression as both women engage in a continual struggle against the depression which constantly erects barriers in their quest for self-creation.

Both works create intrigue due to their autobiographical elements, whether explicit in Wurtzel's memoir or more oblique in Plath's novel. Wurtzel's work does not attempt to conceal its simultaneous position as a memoir and a consciously constructed narrative, with Kenneth Millard emphasising that *Prozac Nation* sets out to interrogate its "assigned" genre of non-fiction (70). Indeed, Wurtzel's dismissal of certain events from her recorded narrative, such as her application to Harvard University, and inclusion of copious amounts of dialogue highlight her hybridisation of the memoir and fiction genres.² This hybridisation of genres illustrates an interesting element of Wurtzel's construction of her narrative self as she has consciously constructed a self which, whilst it does include many instances of the bleak and stagnant elements of depression, focuses on her pushing on with academic and creative work, galvanising a selfhood based on productivity despite suffering from depression.³ Similarly, Plath also somewhat hybridises fiction and memoir, though less explicitly than Wurtzel, with Jo Gill stating that the novel was initially dismissed by publishers and critics on the charge that it "ceases to be a novel and becomes a case history" (74). The term 'case history' explicitly links Plath's work to her mental illness through its medical lexis and thus participates in the characterisation of Plath as an archetypal depressed woman by refusing to separate Plath from Esther's narrative. However, this apparent inability to view Plath as separate from her narrative does mean that she embodies the ideal of 'creative madness' as her poetry and prose is constantly viewed retrospectively through the lens of her mental health and subsequent suicide. Therefore, she comes to exemplify the capitalist ideal of productivity despite depression, later also embodied by Wurtzel. Through the epigraph to her chapter entitled "Woke Up This Morning Afraid I Was Gonna Live"

(256), Wurtzel acknowledges her debt to Plath in her later reimagining of this archetypal depressed young woman. However, she also explores depression in the new age of Prozac, a drug which was newly available and changing the face of mental health medication as well as promising lighter, brighter, and more productive personalities for those who took it, often prescribed to women who were simply feeling temporarily melancholic (Cheever 357). Linda Blum and Nina Stracuzzi in their exploration of the effects of Prozac's emergence onto the market illustrate that discourse surrounding the prescription of the drug reinforces rather than lessens "gender boundaries," enhancing "more masculine-typed emotional detachment... productivity and work-place success" (273). Furthermore, Jonathan Metzl argues that so-called "Prozac protagonists open businesses, return to school, enter professions, and are freed from depression in order to work" creating a "productivity narrative," emphasising the role of capitalist narratives at the centre of mental health treatment (356). Despite these developments in Wurtzel's more contemporary text, Plath remains a figure who looms behind Wurtzel's narrative as her position as the seminal twentieth-century female depressive causes conflict as to whether part of Wurtzel/Elizabeth's identity has already been created due to her participation in a gendered cultural narrative established following reaction to Plath's work. However, through Wurtzel's narration of the peculiarly modern depression of the 1990s, she illustrates both new obstacles which prevent authentic self-creation and those which persist following Esther's more fundamental struggles to galvanise her selfhood amid the more limited opportunities for women in the 1960s.

The episode where Esther is transferred from the state psychiatric ward to a private hospital by her college scholarship benefactor Philomena Guinea illustrates the extent to which Esther views productivity, particularly academic, as fundamental to her creation of self. Esther surmises that Philomena is interested in her case because she had also been in an asylum "at the peak of her career" (177) as a novelist, which immediately links female literary production with mental illness. Furthermore, it appears that it is after Esther's mother informs Philomena that "it is Esther's writing. She thinks she will never write again" (178) that Philomena fully commits to helping Esther's case. Esther views her treatment in academic terms, stating that her hospital transfer felt "as if she had a scholarship" (178), leading Linda Wagner to argue that Esther "remains a good student" and that "[i]n her study of suicide, she reads, asks questions, correlates material... as if she were writing a term paper" (Wagner 62). Here

there is a deliberate intertwining of Esther's conception of her own selfhood with academic production and success, framing even the experience of psychiatric treatment as something to be studied and reported upon rather than purely therapeutic. The link between 'madness', or depression, and literary creation is one that has particularly haunted women, especially following the publication of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, but it remains a contentious topic within feminist critique. Some mainstream feminist criticism suggests that madness constitutes a liberation from the normative female role and an escape into the peripheries of society, which allows roles such as that of the writer explored (Dean 69). However, Marta Caminero-Santangelo contests this view to suggest that madness is "the final removal of the madwoman from any field of agency," (12) a removal of agency inherent in Esther's narrative through her stay in the asylum and forced medication with insulin. Therefore, in Esther's case 'madness' does not allow her to engage in any liberating creativity or productivity, despite the efforts to view it in academic and productive terms mentioned earlier, and therefore she struggles to cement her identity as a writer. Esther's attempts to write a novel over her summer vacation illustrate this struggle with identity as her previous markers of selfhood, creativity and productivity become unavailable to her. The oppressive stagnation of mind and body she feels can be witnessed in Elaine, Esther's protagonist, who she states "would be [herself], only in disguise" and who also experiences "[i]nertia [which] oozed like molasses" through her limbs (116, 117). Esther's productive energy is refocused into the study of her illness which confuses her former notions of selfhood which were dependent on academic success. However, this study of her illness through an immersion in it, and the institution which will supposedly cure her, presents a strange marrying of agency and removal of agency. Esther's efforts to 'study' her illness and the framing of it in academic terms means that she appears to be conscientiously trying to overcome the barriers which halt her creation of selfhood by returning to the familiar patterns of thinking and self-perception that she had outside of the asylum and before her illness fully took hold. However, the tightly controlled environment of the asylum and compulsory treatments Esther endures whilst there, evident in the secretive hush around when patients will next receive electroconvulsive therapy and the regimented withdrawal of food before these appointments, perhaps illustrate Caminero-Santangelo's argument that Esther is removed from any field of agency. Whilst in the asylum Esther's ability to produce work is completely halted and her

attempts at self-creation are mediated only through her illness, suggesting a cessation of personal and creative agency. However, as it is Esther's treatment at the asylum which eventually allows her to be "born twice – patched, retreaded [sic] and approved for the road" (233) it appears that it is not wholly the institution which halts her agency and productivity, but the illness which the asylum aims to cater for and cure. Therefore, whilst Caminero-Santangelo's argument finds support in the descriptions of the asylum, these descriptions of the asylum's control only support her argument because it is a space characterised by the depression or 'madness' that already steals female agency, however when considered alone it is a place of healing for Esther.

Despite this view of the asylum as a space which allows Esther to regain some agency through its treatment of her depression or 'madness', Bruce Cohen's Marxist analysis of mental health treatment argues that the mental health system "seeks to normalise the fundamentally oppressive relations of capitalism" through its pathologisation of the individual rather than wider society (19). This pathologisation means that the administering of treatment and drugs was for the goal of readjusting the patient to capitalist society, rather than the admittance that it is the demands of hypercapitalist productivity that have contributed to the mental decline of the individual. Cohen particularly focuses on the increased "labelling and confinement of women as 'mad'" which served to "legitimate the needs of capital and patriarchy for subservient and conforming women" (148). This view of the institution of mental healthcare suggests that neither the 'madness' nor the cure can free women such as Esther and Elizabeth from the demands of the productivity and conformity obsessed culture they exist in. However, Plath's novel ends on a note of hope as Esther "stepped into the room" (Plath 234) of her depathologised and re-energised self, whereas Wurtzel, despite triumph at her own recovery from depression, remains melancholic because of the depression that is "in the air" (Wurtzel 311) and unshakeable in the demands of her late-capitalist and neoliberal society.

In Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation*, depression doesn't so much remove Elizabeth's agency in the creation of a self as it removes her ability and motivation to create and produce work, which she views as integral to her selfhood as one who has always been academically and creatively gifted. She laments that if only she could write her "Space, Time and Motion" paper then everything would be better and she wouldn't feel as "derailed," leading to hyperbolic statements such as "I'm either writing my papers or I'm killing myself" (176). Whilst such statements seem excessive, they emphasise the

extremity of Elizabeth's link between academic productivity and her fear of completely losing herself to depression. Her belief that the paper can "redeem [her] whole life" as well as her perception of herself as a "weeping heap of junk" (176, 177) emphasises this point as she regards her life and self as worthless if she cannot produce work. Furthermore, her statement that "if I die any time soon, at least they'll be able to say that I led a productive life and did all my work on time" (Wurtzel 177) ties her legacy to her ability to produce work once more, a legacy of forging a productive self despite the lethargy of depression reflecting that which Plath initiates in *The Bell Jar*. Elizabeth's depression does not remove her agency in the same way as Esther's and she can be seen to muse on the characteristics of her illness, rejecting the term 'madness' to describe her malady:

Madness is too glamorous a term to convey what happens to most people who are losing their minds. That word is too exciting, too literary, too interesting in its connotations, to convey the boredom, the slowness, the dreariness, the dampness of depression. (Wurtzel 259)

Here, Wurtzel appears to write back against popular notions of the 'creatively mad' female artist, particularly refuting the reinstatement of agency to the 'mad' female artist or writer figure of Gilbert and Gubar's criticism, instead emphasising the atrophying effects of depression. Therefore, it appears that the elevation of the creative 'madwoman in the attic' of previous feminist criticism has in fact perhaps undermined and minimised the stagnatory experiences of the many women who suffer and have suffered from such illnesses. Indeed, Metzler states that throughout *Prozac Nation* Wurtzel describes her depression as an ongoing state of "inquietude and self-criticism" (347) which isolates her from both her creative work and those around her. From the first lines of the text this state is framed in capitalist terms: "*I felt 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*" (1). This provocative statement reveals a critical perception of the self through the lens of commodity consumption and production, a view that permeates through the text and characterises the way Wurtzel views her struggles with selfhood throughout her adolescence and early adulthood. What Wurtzel and Esther, via Plath, are illustrating are their attempts to overcome this inherently boring and stagnatory state of depression, which prevents the fullness of self-creation that they desire, and their efforts to create new selves through this battle. This longing to become atypical depressives and produce brilliant

work, which is congruent with their former perceptions of selfhood as academically gifted young women who lost their productivity to depression, perceiving their lives and treatments as a race against time to prove themselves as noteworthy and special despite their illnesses.

A recurrent theme of both Esther and Elizabeth's depression is hyper-consciousness of time and the threat it poses to their formation of coherent selves. Both women worry that their depressions will halt their academic and literary productivity, and therefore their self-development, evidenced in their frantic attempts at production even in the depths of their illnesses. Time appears as a barrier for self-creation for both women as they perceive themselves as falling behind their cohorts in the race to establish and solidify one's self and identity. Esther's narration explicitly depicts this after she has a meeting with her editor/mentor Jay Cee as she states:

I felt now that all the uncomfortable suspicions I had about myself were coming true, and I couldn't hide the truth much longer. After nineteen years of running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort and another, I was letting up, slowing down, dropping clean out of the race. (Plath 27)

Here, "dropping clean out of the race" illustrates the way in which Esther's depression causes her to become unstuck from the time zone she previously occupied. Tina Stern comments that depression causes the sufferer to inhabit a "different time zone" (96), a notion expanded by Andrew Solomon's statement that "when you are depressed, the past and future are absorbed entirely by the present moment" (52), illustrating depression's ability to alter personal temporality. As one's self-perception is dependent upon past memories and future plans, depression's collapse of the two into the present moment means that Esther and Elizabeth's efforts towards literary and academic productivity, something so connected with their sense of self, is an attempt to forge a recognisable self in the face of depression's destabilising atemporality. This is evident in the emergence of the bell jar image in Esther's narrative as she states, "wherever I sat – on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok – I would still be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (78). The "sour air" within the bell jar suggests decay and putrefaction which the jar has contained, mimicking its scientific use for the display and preservation of specimens or taxidermy, which Esther resembles through her static and depressive sense of self. Similarly, Elizabeth's insistence that she must write her "Space, Time and Motion" paper despite her suicidal ideation also emphasises the link between time and

depression. It appears that through the exploration and analysis of time in her academic paper she hopes to both solidify her self-identity as one of the academically productive and gifted as well as situate herself within the temporal structure of school deadlines that depression has removed her from, therefore preventing herself from becoming “derailed” (178) from time itself. Esther’s own ‘study’ of suicide appears as an attempt similar to Elizabeth’s to resituate herself within the confines of familiar temporal limits whilst physically outside of these limits in the asylum. Esther’s academicization of her experience and treatment allows, like for Elizabeth, some sense of the normative progression of time and selfhood to be experienced in the atemporal space of the asylum. This desperate grasp towards any sense of productive normality amidst destabilising depression illustrates the extent that these novels portray depression as an almost insurmountable barrier to the creation of selfhood for Esther and Elizabeth, demonstrating the necessity of moving beyond the earlier feminist view of the creatively liberated ‘madwoman’.

Esther and Elizabeth both rush to try and establish a coherent self amid their destabilising depressions, resulting in their narratives adhering to the conventions of the bildungsroman, in which the central character comes of age through understanding their place in history (Millard 11). Furthermore, Michael Longrie and John Lyons point out that many Marxist critics argue that the plot of the typical bildungsroman, using Mikhail Bakhtin’s classification of “youthful idealism and fantasies [growing into] to mature sobriety and practicality,” (Bakhtin 22) means that the genre is “complicitous with bourgeois capitalism” (Longrie and Lyons 19). This complicity is seen in the gradual maturation of the protagonist and acceptance of the capitalist status quo in the traditional bildungsroman, which is somewhat incompatible with Plath and Wurtzel’s texts. Unlike the traditional bildungsroman, which also traces a challenging yet upward trajectory in society (Wagner 55), these texts narrate the opposite: a descent into a depression characterised by oppressive stasis. The opening line of *The Bell Jar*, “[i]t was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs” (1), situates Esther within American history in a similar way to Wurtzel’s countless references to contemporary music, literature, and culture in her narrative. However, depression destabilises this attempted situating of the self within history in both narratives, as both women somewhat slip the bonds of their contemporary moment in the experience of their isolating illnesses, which means the genre of bildungsroman is an uneasy classification for these novels. Indeed, it is

only at the point of Esther's asylum discharge meeting and Elizabeth's eventual medication with Prozac that both characters fully re-enter into the usual progression of time and selfhood, overcoming the barrier of atemporality that depression caused. Esther's statement prior to this meeting that "there ought... to be a ritual for being born twice" (233) emphasises this point as the second 'birth' she imagines as she leaves the asylum suggests the commencement of a new self whose creation was halted by an environment centred around her depression. The unstable and inconsistent ability to create a self in the two narratives leads to various dichotomies of selfhood evident in both texts, such as the mentally healthy versus mentally ill and between those deemed 'good' or acceptable women and 'bad' or unacceptable women. Esther's admittance to the asylum, and Philomena's involvement in her case appears more acceptable as there is not "a boy in the case" but rather Esther's belief "she will never write again" (177, 178). Philomena's approval of the case because it has no trace of sexual scandal highlights the dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad' women, also evident in Elizabeth's desire to be academically successful and her shame around her feelings of "crazy lust" (Wurtzel 53). This connects her fears of "going crazy" to the lust she believes a "good girl" should not have (Dean 57). Patricia Spacks has argued that female bildungsromane "stress the world's threat more than its possibilities" of education, adventure, monetary success and a "ringing self-confidence" usually emphasised in male bildungsromane (120). This threat is evident in Plath and Wurtzel's texts as they present strict acceptable and unacceptable versions of womanhood whilst the possibilities and excitement seen in the male bildungsroman are notably absent. This threat appears to force Esther and Elizabeth further into their depressions and increase the obstacles present in their frantic pursuit of selfhood as they strive to present the correct form of womanhood. This process is not aided by their contemporary postmodern societies which, whilst at different stages of postmodernity, both emphasise and praise an individual productive life amid the innovations in technology and "withering of community life," a state which further alienates those stuck stagnant in depression (Dean 81). Furthermore, despite the increase in productivity observable in the period of the 1960s-90s, Plath and Wurtzel also chart the increasing dissatisfaction and alienation that also characterises the period as a climate perfect for breeding depression (Dean 19). The threat from the world that Spacks observes is evident in Plath's narrative through the references to the Cold War, in the detailed description of the UN building in New York, and female marital

entrapment, characterised by Dodo Conway. Whereas in Wurtzel's narrative this threat comes through in the resounding dissatisfaction, uncertainty, and familial breakdown that she presents as a hallmark of Generation X:

In the world that we live in, randomness does rule. And this lack of order is a debilitating, destabilising thing. Perhaps what has come to be placed in the catch-all category of depression is really a guardedness, a nervousness, a suspicion about intimacy, any of many perfectly natural reactions to a world that seems to be perilously lacking in the basic guarantees that our parents expected: a marriage that would last, employment that was secure, sex that wasn't deadly. It is a cliché at this point to make reference to the economic and social insecurity that is said to characterise a mass of people that's been known collectively as Generation X or twentynothings, but obviously there is a lot of unhappiness going around in this age group (Wurtzel 301-302).

These threats, whether worldwide conflict or nationwide generational depression, appear as barriers to both the formation of a coherent self and mental stability. Therefore, Esther and Elizabeth, as well as Cold War America, cling to aesthetic markers of selfhood such as literary production, academic success, and 'good' womanhood in the place of a coherent sense of self which depression has deprived them of.

The Bell Jar and *Prozac Nation* fall into what Abigail Cheever describes as the pre- and post-Prozac divide in depression narratives, however, both texts explore the difficulties navigating the formation of self-identity whilst grappling with an illness that presents a barrier to authentic selfhood (350).⁴ This authentic selfhood is a perception of the self not warped by depression, but also not dependent on the production of creative and academic commodities to sustain it. The difference that the advent of Prozac presents is the apparently easy reinstatement of the depathologised self following its use, which suggests perhaps a future breakdown of depression as a barrier to the creation or sustaining of a coherent self. However, this also begins a medicalisation of the self, perhaps dependent on external means to sustain it, a state which is viewed with suspicion by those such as Cohen who is sceptical of the pathologisation of the self in a patriarchal and capitalist society. Despite *The Bell Jar* falling into the pre-Prozac period, the novel still chronicles an intense grapple with self-creation through depression, even if it is ultimately through treatment that Esther is able to surpass her restrictive identity as a depressive and emerge tentatively reborn

into the world. Whilst using electroconvulsive therapy, insulin treatment, talking therapy, and medication is presented as perhaps the quickest way for Esther and Elizabeth to re-enter productive society, it also emphasises the capitalist paradigm of self-creation that they struggle against. If the biological self is subject to interpretation and treatment through purely material and capitalist means, then the incorporeal mental self has little defence against the capitalist society that dictates its treatment and acceptability. Therefore, it is clear why Esther and Elizabeth so frantically attempt to engage in literary and academic creation: to solidify and justify their selves within a capitalist society that requires material evidence of selfhood and productivity, which their depression consistently prevents through its unsurpassable stasis which presents an insurmountable barrier to productivity and self-creation.

Notes

1. The *Bell Jar* was originally published under a pseudonym Victoria Lucas in 1963 and was rejected by the publisher Knopf who published the rest of Plath's work until it was revealed that the author was indeed Plath (Gill 74).
2. Whilst the inclusion of dialogue is not a feature of only the genre of fiction, the vast amounts of dialogue included by Wurtzel suggest a fictionalisation of true events as it would be almost impossible to accurately recall so much speech.
3. I have elected to refer to Elizabeth Wurtzel in two ways throughout this essay as the fictionalisation of her life, despite *Prozac Nation's* position as a memoir, means that the Elizabeth of the narrative appears as somewhat of a different entity to the Elizabeth who wrote the memoir and lived the events, more of a constructed character than a direct reflection of her true self. Therefore, when referring to events of the novel and the character I will be using the name 'Elizabeth' and when referring to the formal, literary, and artistic choices of the author I will refer to 'Wurtzel'.
4. Cheever distinguishes between pre-Prozac narrative portrayals of depression as a means to discover the authentic self through psychotherapy and post-Prozac portrayal of depression as a state of being and identity in its own right, through the alleviation of symptoms and behaviours through medication without necessarily 'curing' the underlying depressive state (Cheever 359).

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