

TRUTH AND ARTIFICE

REPRESENTATIONS OF MADNESS AND THE SCHIZOID PERSONALITY

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The subtitle of this essay, while essentially dealing with representations of mental illness in literature, had its genesis in the unearthing of the everyday problems faced by the writer producing autobiographical fiction. The question of how the author presents an earlier version of himself, without letting knowledge of the subsequent events of his life, his learning, and current personality into the fictional past, is one that my colleagues in the creative writing department and the post graduate writer's workshop at The University of Newcastle have been in a dialogue about for some time.

This was typified for me in an early workshop where I presented a portion of my PhD major work that dealt with a period when the protagonist was five years old. From the comments around the table that day, it seemed that the five-year-old had too much learning. Even though the piece was written in the third person, and was therefore somewhat distanced from the character, the narrative seemed to have too much of the author's personality and not enough of the five-year-old. Primarily it was a problem of language. Keeping this section of the Major work in the third person, and simple in its sentence structure and vocabulary, appeared to be the best answer. However, this was the least challenging section of the work.

The particular writing that I am interested in presently, as well as being autobiographical, has the added difficulty of having to represent periods of mental illness, from manic highs to severe lows, in all their strangeness. The problem has never been one of memory, but one of identity. The trauma and the glory of bipolar episodes leave an indelible imprint on the hard drive of the brain; the question is how to filter those memories through the clarity of the present, without diluting their authenticity. Another dilemma when representing the present is that these memories, and what they imply, also dramatically affect the current self.

It's an issue that's been discussed widely by medical practitioners in the field; R.S. Milden, writing in the *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, was particularly cogent on the theme:

I contend that because of the nature of this illness affective patients emerge with particular problems in organizing a sense of self that are specific to this illness...

When a patient has a major affective episode, his or her normal self disappears. The patient becomes someone foreign, another self. By

definition, this self has a different affective organization than the normal self. There are different thoughts, behaviours and personality traits.

Who, then, is the real self for someone who has been up and down and in between? Is the real self, who one is when one is euthymic (normal)? Is it possible or even necessary to construct a whole self out of an amalgam of the 'self-in-episode' and 'self-out-of-episode'? Can this integration ever achieve the same coherence of self-structure that the patient previously took for granted?" (Milden 346-7)

These questions and difficulties with my own work led me to re-examine the prose of Australian author, Peter Kocan, and in particular his method of dealing with the issue of multiple selves.

After his failed assassination attempt on Arthur Calwell, the then leader of the opposition party, in 1966, Peter Kocan was quickly diagnosed as being 'borderline schizophrenic' (Freudenberg 341-5) adjudged criminally insane, and subsequently committed to the Morrisett Mental Hospital. It was there that Kocan developed a strong affiliation with the poets of World War I – notably Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen – and started writing and publishing poems documenting institutional life: his aim being to give voice to the trauma and injustice that he was surrounded by – just as the War Poets had done before him.

After his release from hospital this culminated in the two novellas, *The Treatment & The Cure*. Of particular interest is the narrative structure and voice that Kocan adopted for this important work. His intent was clear from the outset; he would not pretend to be one whole person, but rather he represented himself as having a dual-identity: both old and young. So in documenting his existence in prose, Peter Kocan, the rehabilitated author, is present in the narrative to help his fictional younger self, Len Tarbutt, to negotiate the experience of mental hospital. We get a strong indication of this from Kocan's introduction to his later book *Fresh Fields*, another autobiographical work dealing with his early life.

It is meant to convey something problematical about the relationship of the author and the protagonist. The author consciously set out to be an advocate for his earlier self, to try and help that lost adolescent by making a better 'case' for him in retrospect than he was ever able to make for himself at the time. Just as L.P Hartley predicated a novel on the idea that 'The past is a foreign country,' this novel is predicated on the idea that one's earlier self is another person, and somebody who might be in need of one's compassion. (Kocan, *Fresh Fields*)

This being present as an advocate for his younger self is the key to understanding the sometimes complex nature of the narrative structure of Kocan's *The Treatment and The Cure*, where the second person narration is interspersed with lapses into a first person plural voice, which gives the impression of more than one subject being involved in the narrative at a time when we as readers are expecting only one. This is a recurring theme and reminder throughout *The Treatment and The Cure*. To give a few examples:

You'd rather stay in the cool shadows and watch the moon, but it seems spoiled.

At ten o'clock we are herded upstairs. You enter a huge dormitory that looks like a flophouse...(93)

And:

He goes to the office to tell them he can't pay the bill for his appendix. Electric Ned is there with Arthur. Through the glass partition we see Dave waving his hands and talking. We feel the joke's gone too far. Electric Ned and Arthur are looking our way. They know someone's been having fun with Dave. You drift into the background, away from Ray Hoad. (31)

If *you* drift into the background, where am *I*?

It's the use of the plural 'We' that is the most remarkable. A second person narrative, while uncommon and notoriously hard to sustain, is of itself not that groundbreaking. When it works, it usually does so as a default first person voice and is handy when the subject in question has little or no real self knowledge, and almost needs to be told how he or she feels. Normally with a second person narrative, the first person exists as a narrator, but without recognition and talks only about the second person, the 'You' always being mentioned; we don't know or care who the real first person, the actual narrator, is. The effect of this is that generally the reader will identify the 'You' as being the narrator, talking to himself; but this is never made clear for us as readers; it is something we assume to be the case.

A good example of this is the protagonist from Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*, a portion of which is useful to compare with *The Treatment and The Cure* so as to highlight the similar yet essentially quite different styles.

'I'm going to be working for most of the night,' you say.

Actually, you are about to give up, but a night of Allagash is not the remedy for your blues. You're thinking of bed. You are so tired you could stretch our right here on the linoleum and slip into a long coma. (McInerney 32)

You see there that the narrator is doing his best to stay out of the way. It is all about 'You'; 'I' or 'We' are not mentioned. Compare that to the following extract from *The Treatment and The Cure*:

You are thinking though – you're thinking how this is the first time that you've held hands with a girl in the pictures. At twenty-five you are getting a taste of life!

Afterwards we stand in the shadows outside your ward. (157)

Two is company and three is a crowd.

In the first example from *Bright Lights, Big City*, the first person, implicitly present as the one who says 'You' repeatedly, tries very hard to keep himself out of the story; whereas, in this second example, the first person is always present, and reminds us of this constantly by referring to himself as a member of the group 'We'. But he is not reminding us, the readers; he is actually reminding himself – the 'You' always being referred to in the narrative. To clarify the point: 'You' cannot refer to yourself as 'You'; only 'I' can refer to 'You' as 'You'. So in *Bright Lights, Big City*, the 'I' behind the narrative,

because he stays silent, is very much like the common third person omniscient author who exists in space and knows everything about a story without giving a clue as to where the information has come from or the true character of the narrator. The focus is on the subject and the story, at all times, and not on the narrator.

The Treatment and The Cure's second person narration works like that same third person omniscient voice, but, because of the narrator's periodic appearances, it operates more like the narrator who occasionally winks at the reader and shares a joke with them, momentarily letting you know that he is there. Furthermore, Kocan has crucially inverted this clichéd convention: instead of the narrator winking at the reader and sharing a moment with them, Kocan's narrator shares secret moments with his protagonist Len Tarbutt while we, as readers, watch on. Rather than pretending that he is not there as an author, Kocan makes it quite clear through the narrative structure that he is present and reliving the story with his younger self, so as to protect his younger self from the things that he as the author could not defend against in real time.

Kocan had no real desire to tell the truth about his experience from anyone else's perspective; he was intent to right the perceived wrongs of his youth, to go back in time, vindicated by his survival and release, and present a version of the truth that saw him as a child of destiny, unable to change course, seemingly without a choice in the matter: a revisionist history that ultimately saw him as the victor and not the victim.

You weren't a glowering maniac, but a young instrument of fate. A blond death bringer...Some things would have to be got rid of, such as the pile of girlie magazines. They weren't part of the image. The police and reporters would snigger and think you were one of those men who couldn't get a girlfriend. They wouldn't understand how you had *chosen* to live without girls and all that stuff. Had chosen the harsh road of destiny.
(*Treatment and Cure* 27)

Except that destiny chooses you, and not the other way around.

This is exactly the sort of posturing that James Frey did in his now infamous memoir *A Million Little Pieces* as he rewrote key events in his past to paint himself in a heroic light. But he made the categorical mistake of palming off fiction as non-fiction, and subsequently paid the price. When you sell it as fiction, as Kocan has, you get a better deal: a story that everyone believes, because of your personal history, but one in which you have the advantage all throughout the narrative, as you have the license to fictionalize.

So we've established that Kocan's narrator is not interested in a dialogue with us, but his younger self. This is developed through the book in a pattern that reveals the first person to be announced mainly during significant occasions, where the younger self may have felt stress or anxiety. Therefore: 'I' am the current self (from *your* future); 'You' are in the past and in trouble; 'We' will get out of this together. As an example:

You try to make the letter sound reasonable but urgent. That doesn't alter the trap of course. If you are being reasonable it shows that the Stelazine is doing you good. If you aren't being reasonable it shows that you need the Stelazine to help you *become* reasonable.

Your mother comes up from the city and asks to see the doctor.

'Doctor's busy just now,' says the Charge Sister. 'But I'll be glad to answer any queries you may have.'

We go into the Charge sister's office and sit down. (*Treatment and Cure* 166)

And here, the two unknowingly become one:

Whenever we have free time together and Sam wants to hear more of your life story, he'll say, 'Back to the couch!'

'The couch' is our joke, as though Sam is my psychiatrist or something. Now we are lying on the grass near the pool. The other men are splashing and yelling, but we'd rather talk. We're lying full length with our faces near each other. Sam is chewing a stem of grass. It's lovely, lying there in the sun with Sam, talking about things which you want to try and understand about your life... (*Treatment and Cure* 53)

The narrator is having so much fun here that he has stolen his younger self's friend, and Sam becomes 'my psychiatrist', a momentary lapse into the first person.

It is a fitting way to highlight how important the present is to the retelling of the past for Kocan. The past is only revisited under the proviso that the present self of the narrator is there to relive it: The nameless 'I' enjoys old victories, and memories, and steps in to calm the anxiety in the younger self for those moments of high stress. Yet it also gives what is a seemingly stable voice a disconcerting hint of the insane.

Indeed, one of the striking things about reading through *The Treatment* and *The Cure* is how rational the narrator and the subject both sound. And that is the point; the crime itself is hardly referred to, the 'madness thing' (*Treatment and Cure* 35) is not mentioned, and the way is clear for Kocan to portray his protagonist as the only sane person in the place. To emphasize this, the other patients are summarily referred to as 'Retards', 'Dills', 'Mongols', 'Monkeys', 'Purple-Faced Epileptics' and 'Drug Addicts'. Even the staff 'think they are normal', but Kocan's 'Len Tarbutt' knows better. The would-be assassin is seen as the outsider, the once mad, now sane loner who is out to understand and beat the system. We would almost be convinced by this stance apart from the fact that we are reminded that Len Tarbutt, the 'You' of the narrative, is not one person, but the plural, schizophrenic, 'We'. This last example sums it up perfectly:

Half your mind is terribly clear and you are like a bystander watching yourself with this girl, as though you need a witness to tell you it's truly happening; the other half is like a gibbering idiot who wants to kiss and fuck her and cry on her shoulder all at the same time....We are kissing in the shadows outside your ward. (*Treatment and Cure* 157-9)

So one voice is the clear bystander, watching and recording everything going on, and the other half is the crazed 'gibbering idiot' who wants to do everything all at once but can never decide on anything.

To conclude, truth is used to sell us this story; the first thing always mentioned about Kocan is that he shot Arthur Calwell with a sawn off shot gun, and he did go to Mental Hospital, so it lends his writing on institutionalisation some street-cred. But the

artifice he employs with the use of the plural 'We' gives his protagonist Len Tarbutt a sureness of character that he never could have had in real life without having lived it first.

The truth in the work, or the facts of Kocan's biography, helps the artifice to gain acceptance. The biggest lie in the story, and it is there in the early quote from his introduction to *Fresh Fields*, is based on the younger self being a different person. If your younger self is a different person, then you are not responsible for the crimes that the younger self did. So the end result in *The Treatment and The Cure* is: 'You' are responsible for the crime; 'I' am not (I'm from the future); 'We' will endure this together.

But rather than giving us a window into the soul of the author at the age of nineteen, it gives us a clear view of him at the time of the writing. Kocan understood the personal tragedy of his situation, that his action was really a terrible, criminal mistake, and tried to give it some dignity by painting himself as the 'blonde death bringer' and a tool of 'destiny'. We can sympathise with this, but we should not fall into the perverse habit of supposing that fiction holds more truth than non-fiction, especially if the writer has a similar history to his character; in that instance he has more reason to present his view, which can only ever be subjective. It is up to the reader to be objective.

The simple truth about Kocan, and the harder one to bare, is that he was just a very sick young man who did his time and learnt to cope through writing what he saw, whether it was in front of him as reality, or in his minds' eye as fiction. And it is through these actions—the documenting of his life story, the explanation of his thought processes, and providing an inspiring example of survival—that he embraces his true destiny as a writer, and ultimately as a hero, albeit a tragically flawed one.

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