Depression and its Expression

Art as Problem Solver
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Abstract: This workshop will focus on the ways in which our Journal Double Dialogues dealt with the question of the 'Anatomy of Pain'. In this workshop, by a process of demonstration and interaction, we will look at the theme of the representation of pain and engage with the ways in which different disciplines (psychological, visual, performative, philosophical, aesthetic and literary) explored this question. Emphasis will be given to the 'double dialogue' nature of the discourse in which practitioners of the arts have found a 'language' from aesthetics, history, theory, and philosophy that has succeeded in establishing a dialogue between the art-work and the discourse that might spring from the work itself or provide a relevant context. This session will draw on the expertise of the audience for discussions and experiment within the Double Dialogue model.

Keywords: Arts Practice and Theory, Arts as Expression of the Ineffable, Depression as Inexpressible Experience?, Inter-Disciplinarity, Globalisation, Aesthetics, Anatomy of Pain and Poetics

There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be
Compared with that profounder site
That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself –
Finite infinity (Emily Dickinson)

Depression afflicts one person in four at some point in a life. Depression is not a 'sadness', but better characterised as Lewis Wolpert expresses it - a 'malignant sadness'.


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ing the body and understanding the mind and the extent to which the mind and body impinge on each other.

As a researcher primarily engaged in literary and philosophical discourse, my interest is in, not so much why their words fail to communicate the anguish, loneliness, alienation and despair of the depressed person, but instead, whether there exists in human expression representations of their experience. If it is discerned that this information does exist how might it be drawn on in the treatment of depression? Depression, once termed melancholia, has been documented throughout the ages. One only needs to look at the plays of Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles, the myth of Job and Abraham, and the Romantics for representations of the condition. The work of Giorgio Agamben has mapped the ways in which it has been understood across time and place.

The modernity of the experience has been best expressed in the literature termed ‘existential thought’ which, as we know, grew in part out of the disillusionment experienced in the wake of the events second world war. This modernity was pre-empted in the works of Frederick Nietzsche whose early work The Birth of Tragedy, provides the insight that ‘it is better not to have been born’ and who argues that it is aesthetics, rather than religion, that will make our human fate bearable. Existentialism was refuted by thinkers, when it first emerged because, on one hand, it was a recoil from rationalism in that it insists that, despite the force of reason, reason also had its limits. Positivists and analytical philosophers thought that the reliance on non-mental processes of consciousness was outrageous. On the other hand, Neo-Thomists and other moral philosophers were alarmed at the way existential thought was jettisoning a traditional scheme of values. It is a significant point that the emergence of different treatments for depression has caused the public and the medical professions to support one treatment over the other by engaging in heated debates either dictated by ‘values’ or rationalised paradigms. The following relevant areas in the experience of depression incur the antagonism of both those that apply values, and those that apply rational, scientific solutions: problems of diagnosis; the source of depression being discoverable and negated by returning to childhood trauma; the explanation is presented as biological or psychological; the best treatments for depression are either medication or psychotherapy.

The proponents of existential ethics in the past and proponents, for example, of a non-pharmacological approaches to the treatment of depression, have much in common:

Both demand a re-evaluation of values; both reject the reigning paradigms that dictated behaviour at the relevant historical points of opposition; both require a rebellion against prevailing belief systems and both posit the possibility that it is only in the creative act (of thinking, of analysis, of ‘making words’ or making art) that one can escape the black hole of despair.

Accessing the experience of the depressive in words is, it seems, impossible. The depressive is unable to work, to eat, to think, to feel, to read, to write, to dance, to paint or to wear the mask of the actor. There are, of course, the art and writings that they will do, if they are so inspired or appropriately skilled, when not gripped by the disease. There is a ‘space’, between the initial descent into immobility, and the final arrival in ‘the abyss’, when the subject is able to emotionally and intellectually navigate between being in the social world, and knowing she is in the process of moving outside it, and beyond it, to a place of private and inaccessible terror. It is a ‘space’ that one might equate, in terms of making sense of experience and thought, with the fact of dream, that expresses emergent images from an unknowable unconscious realm which is unhindered by the rationality and demands of the world of consciousness. My study with my subject occurred at these times.

This paper has a hypotheses. It is based on a reading by a severely depressed person of the literary text by Jean Paul Sartre titled Nausea. The subject of the study understands her depression in a Freudian sense, positing its deep-seated causes in her childhood, when she was sexually abused by her father. She believes that her mother, and the role this mother played in a dysfunctional family, was the more critical element in her adult descent into depression.

Roland Barthes writes in his treatise on photography of the place of the mother. The ‘mother’ he notes is the known site, it is ‘somewhere where we all know is a place we have been’. He though, speaks of the ‘mother’ in the spirit of celebration, as a source of well-being, as evidence of being in the world. The subject of my study is understood as a daughter of the archetype disturbing mother. This is deemed the

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6 See Wolfert, pp. i-xi.

unimaginable source for many people and yet one that assumes a ‘sacredness’, a space where iconoclasts fear to tread. The victim of the disturbing mother is not inclined to voice his or her despair. Kristeva, drawing from the classic psychological theory of Nicholas Abraham, Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein sees depression like mourning. She notes that depression conceals an aggressiveness towards the lost love object and that this in turn reveals an ambivalence of the depressed person with respect to the object of mourning. She characterises the inner dialogue thus: ‘I love that object, but even more so I hate it; because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I imbued it in myself; but because I hate it, that other within myself is a bad self; I am bad, I am non-existent, I shall kill myself’.  

Consequently, the analysis of depression involves bringing to the fore the realisation that the complaint against oneself is a hatred for the other. The identification with the loved-hated other, through the incorporation, the introjection and the projection, leads the victim to imbue in herself its sublime content, which becomes her necessary, tyrannical judge, as well as its subject component, which demeans her and of which she desires to rid herself. The love/hate of other and self conjoin and is expressed in a terrible depression ‘a non communicable grief’, a disinterest in words, actions, and life itself. Kristeva’s questions have a universal impact on those that have known this condition. She asks ‘Where does this black sun come from? Out of what eerie galaxy do its invisible, lethargic rays reach me, pinning me down to the ground, to my bed, compelling me to silence, to renunciation?’

Our case-study, Karina, speaks of it as ‘the one aspect’ - one’s own interior within the world. She speaks:

‘In a depressive episode your interior becomes your exterior. You therefore take a position in the world that is different from before. There is no mind/body anymore. You become an entirely different species; from homo-sapiens to a psychological invertebrate. Perhaps that is why pleasures of the flesh are almost instantaneously ruled out - sex, eating or, as well meaning friends suggest, a ‘nice’ massage. You are only your psyche and it needs massaging badly - but it becomes so suspended in the darkness that there is no access to it’

Justin Clemens and I are presently working on a project entitled Depression and its Expression. Can one get off the Merry-go-round? Our first question has been, is it really the case that depression is inexpressible? Is it ineffable? Questions that follow concern the best possible ways of knowing the condition, treating it, learning from it, taking it to its counterpoint of affirmation. Present psychiatric treatment seems to be somewhere suspended between two supposedly oppositional paradigms. On one hand we have the Freud/Jung/Kleinian model which advocates returning to the source of pain in order to live with the present, on the other, we have the cognitive, behaviourist model, which seeks to remove the aberrant symptoms, adjust behaviour to make living bearable and practical. It is our contention that, as practitioners continually test these hypotheses, they ignore the Kuhnian paradigm shift- they lose sight of new possibilities. Is there a third hypothesis one that accesses the intensity, the passion present in its absence, the creativity of its knowing and experience. Can we, in the sense that Guattari[11] expounds, with the knowledge we gain about ourselves, from both models, move towards another model, establish a new hypothesis and, from within the depressive experience, create aesthetically and produce a subjectivity. I am reminded of Nietzsche who in determining that all the old ideals were fabrications proclaimed the need ‘to let the old idols learn what it means to have legs of clay.’ And to give present reality the possibility of new values, meanings and veracity. Can the depressive escape the shackles of name-calling existent since the dark ages of ‘malingering’, ‘the bad’, ‘the lazy’ and ‘the impossible one’.

People who experience depression know something that I do not. Like Nietzsche they might prefer to be the satyr rather than the moralist, and partake in a raw Dionysian insight that it is better ‘not to have been born to be, to be nothing’ but within their trauma and isolation there is no veil of Maya, no apollonian form to make this insight bearable. Theirs is the experience of the unutterable and yet the intensity of their experience is part of being and the source of a greater realisation of self and capable ‘of enormous expansion and transformation through the absorption of experiences which mostly we attempt to suppress or deny’. Is this unutterable or is it not the case that literature, art, dance, music and theatre have given us the words and apprehensions of meaning?

8 Julia Kristeva, p. 11
9 Ibid
10 Ibid., p.3.
It was in this state of inquiry that I sat with Katrina and read Jean Paul Sartre’s *Nausea*. For me, until recently this was an existential text, the work of a phenomenologist. Sartre, unlike Albert Camus, is understood to deal with the concept of existence of ‘en-soi’ and ‘pour-soi’ conceptually, that is as an abstraction. Camus, alternatively, has no interest in the phenomenological explication of existence as an abstraction of life; he deals with existence itself. He is interested in the ‘how’ instead of the ‘what’ that explains the ‘how’, his is an existentialism of action and choice. Kierkegaard expressed this need for action pre-empting Nietzsche and Camus in his journal:

‘What I really need is to get clear about what I must do, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act, what matters is to find a purpose... the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die’.

Sartre’s interest in ‘knowing’ should not preclude from our understanding of his work his ability to write and encapsulate, in symbolic form, the existential moment of knowing. This paper in analysing *Nausea* attempts to show how Sartre’s representations of experiencing ‘nausea,’ despite all its phenomenological concerns, succeed in rendering ‘anxiety,’ an act of consciousness towards freedom, and that these representations succeed in communicating the experience of being depressed.

Sartre’s *Nausea* as a text testifying to an abstraction is understood to represent the protagonist, pre-occupied with the writing of a biography on Rollebon, becoming increasingly overwhelmed with a ‘nausea’ as he begins to strip away at appearance to find at its core a nothingness. The novel written in diary form pits purpose against all possible meaningful experience: will it be found in scholarship, in travel, in physical sensation, in love. As each is deemed meaningless Roquentin moves from one experience of nausea to the next reaching a place in which ‘nothingness’ is ‘being’ and the point from which one owns ones freedom , ones creation of values, ones engagement and a purpose of a kind. The existential, philosophical nature of the text is explicit. What if, I ask, that at the centre of this explored experience there is uttered the being of depression... and if this is the case then the abstraction, the rationalist exploration of the existential quest, is a mask of a psychological process, enacted as anguish, as emotional and self-conscious awareness? As such, it embraces a philosophical question. The existential intuition that all ideals are mere fabrications carries with it despair. Solutions supplied by Christianity transferred the meaning of death to other kinds of answers. However Kristeva gives the story another edge when she writes:

This is a survival of idealization - the imaginary constitutes a miracle, but it is at the same time its shattering: a self-illusion, nothing but dreams and words, words, words... It affirms the almightiness of temporary subjectivity – the one that knows enough to speak until death comes.

Sartre’s ‘words’ in *Nausea* reveal, as they conceal, the experience of the deepest of anguish that is known to the depressive. Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* distinguishes the experience of ‘anguish’ from other emotions. He sees ‘anguish’ as a reflective emotion: ‘anguish is distinguished from fear in that fear is fear of beings in the world whereas anguish is anguish before myself’. Joseph Fell argues that ‘anguish’ assumes for Sartre "special importance as revelatory of freedom" and follows Heidegger’s view that there are certain moods that "have the function of "disclosing" to man the nature of his "being-in-the-world". My reading of Sartre’s *Nausea* tests the extent to which the expression of nausea is in fact an expression of what depressives know when in anguish and that it holds within it the core of our choice to either live or not live in this world. This reading takes account of Nik Fox’s insight that "Sartre’s idea of a contingent, non-essential subject (which he argues for consistently throughout his work) has much in common with, and indeed prefigures the decentred subject theorized by post-structuralists and postmodernists". Rather than Sartre’s ‘subjectivity’ being seen as working primarily with the Cartesian tradition of modern philosophy, it can be shown that his work as a whole pre-empted themes considered the inventions of Lacan, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss and Derrida, in his treatment of the decentred subject, the rejection of a metaphysics of presence, the critique of bourgeois humanism and individualism, the concept of the reader as producer of the text’s multiple meanings, the recognition of language and thought structures as masters rather than mastered in most acts of discourse and thinking, and a materialist philosophy of history as detotalised and fragmented. Despite the importance here

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15 Kristeva, p. 103.
of emphasising that Sartre’s work is not obsolete and that his ‘modernist’ views of the world are relevant to the twenty-first century, my focus is on his understanding of ‘anguish’ as a crucial moment that expresses the de-centring of the subject; the ‘I’ is something always in the process of becoming, and ‘exists’ when it is seen by others. If one creates oneself within a context where there is no identifiable or known self, no blue-print of self to deliver any kind of conformity, a choice made towards living and being in the material world is one of huge responsibility which is inevitably accompanied by an anguish. It is an anguish that testifies not only to easy reconciliation in ‘bad faith’ (that is, making the safe choice that will be readily ratified by a conforming society), but also the more difficult experience of living intellectually and materially (mind and body in a co-dependent relation). It is what Kristeva in Black Sun notes about her experience of depression; she felt she was dealing with an integral aspect of being a philosopher. She writes: “On the frontiers of life and death, occasionally I have the arrogant feeling of being witness to the meaninglessness of Being, of revealing the absurdity of bonds and beings”.

Roquentin in Nausea in his quest for ‘meaning’ is riddled by anxiety, by the condition that debilitates, that takes a person outside the realm of understanding by others who watch—a condition known intensely, felt in both the body and the mind inter-dependently by the depressive.

The arrangement with Karina was: As we read tell me when this is familiar, when the story enacted touches the heart of being depressed. This was not to be a matter of my interpretation, my experience—only her’s.

The ever increasing mounting descriptions towards states of nausea were identified. The episode with the hands when Roquentin feels alienated from his own body and the time he looks askance at his own reflection.

Karina speaks

‘In a depressive episode your interior becomes your exterior. You therefore take a position in the world that is different from before. There is no mind/body any more. You become an entirely different species; from Homo sapien to a psychological invertebrate. Perhaps that is why pleasures of the flesh are almost instantaneously ruled out - sex, eating or, as well meaning friends suggest, a ‘nice’ massage. You are only your psyche and it needs massaging badly - but it becomes so suspended in the darkness that there is no access to it’

Karina speaks

This state of being depressed strangely, (or perhaps not so strangely) brings with it an acute hypersensitivity to your surroundings and the choreography of you own movements. Sartre brings this out immediately when Roquentin is puzzled about his hands. They are new, and the hand of another a ‘fat white worm’ (4)

She continues

With your interior so exposed and your form obliterated, things take on a new experience. I recall looking in the mirror for a very long time and my face, once familiar and mine, was strange. A stranger’s. My features were all there - but it seemed they were in the wrong order.

For Roquentin this seems to be the genesis of his suspicion that something is wrong. He is experiencing the world in a new way - a way he can neither fathom nor control. And it tells him that things are askew. This remains the position for the duration of any of my depressive episodes.

The onset of depression is insidious. By the time you have walked the plank marking the journey into the abyss, you are already in the water and drowning before you realize you are in the midst of something ferocious. Only when you look backwards do you see its subtle beginnings. (With relapses you see the signs early and they are terrifying because you know it heralds another attack.) Note Roquentin’s sudden departure from Indo-China with Mercier. Mercier had asked him to accompany him to Bengal—somewhere Roquentin has always wanted to go. Staring at an object (a statue), he found it boring and not only refused the invitation, but said he was to go home. It was at that moment, confronted with something that ought to have inspired his usual passion but failed, that he realized that he was experiencing something debilitating.

The object somehow precipitated the realization and refusal of the otherwise tempting invitation. He found the statue stupid and, in so doing, it alerted him, quite fiercely, to his own boredom. Objects, the intimate, change our relationship with ourselves. In many an episode, where I have still been at the stage of being mobile, I have walked through a newsagency looking for a magazine to read (light reading is the only possible thing) and have become madly irritated at their shiny covers and promises of answers and entertainment. A warfare begins between me and the magazine on the shelves; they are temptresses and I almost fix them with
a consciousness of their own and they willingly test my patience, the result of which is usually me walking out empty-handed and disgusted. Roquentin was annoyed at the statuette and it woke him to his general malaise.

But the relationship with objects/the rest of the world isn’t only fixed with disharmony. I’ve envied highlight pens for not feeling what I am feeling. Sometimes it just makes you an astute spectator—like Roquentin on Sunday. We experience that entire day through his psychology. There’s the bowing, waving, handshaking, dialogue, prattle, lunchtime ritual. He sees, in his Sunday, class structure with all its features: love, religion, human ritual, and he hears snippets of gossip. In my own experience of depression, I have experienced everything in this way, as a spectator. My senses are elevated such that any experience is augmented, enhanced. Maybe that’s why I can’t bear to be out of my own room, staring at my own ceiling, being perfectly still. It’s almost as if my senses have become over-stimulated, bruising my mind—leading to the state of depression. Perhaps the only way to recuperate is to be still. Not to hear, taste, tell, listen and do. After all, characteristic of all depressives is their inability to move, to take the paces necessary to sustain daily life.

Karina and my journey through this text after 7 sessions of 4 hours duration is just beginning. The thesis is still raw. Our discussions get focussed in bits of Sartrean prose: In matters pertaining to the flow of time, of people experiencing life only in order to tell it, the pebbles and chestnut tree that exhale beyond and within their surface a nauseous ‘nothingness’, the jealousy of another’s clearly known and expressed pain, the need only for sleep, people floating past like phantoms, the recognition that old memories and their associated joys have no meaning anymore, things that are not themselves though essentially themselves, senses interacting—black wood oozing secretion, melting, smelling, the amorphous, vague, sad state of being yet with it sometimes an icy ecstasy.

Allow me to give you some direct quotes that brought the most intense response from Karina: I will allow them to speak for themselves:

Then the nausea seized me. I dropped to a seat.
I no longer knew where I was. I saw the colours spin slowly around me. I wanted to vomit. And since that time, the Nausea has not left me

An hour later the lantern was lit, the wind blew, the sky was black; nothing at all was left...

I can’t explain what I see. To anyone. There, I am quietly slipping into the water’s depth, towards fear.

The sun and blue sky were only a snare. This is the hundredth time I’ve let myself be caught. My memories are like coins in the devil’s purse, when you open it you find only dead leaves (32)

The nausea has stayed down there, in the yellow light. I am happy; this cold is so pure, this night so pure: Am I myself not a wave of icy air? With neither blood, nor lymph, nor flesh. Flowing down this long canal towards the pallor down there. To be nothing but coldness

A wall without opening, without doors, without windows, a well which stops 200 yards further on, against a house. I have passed out of range of the lamp-post; I enter the black hole...I have the impression of passing into icy water...(p.25)

cities have only one day at their disposal and every morning it comes back exactly the same

Existentialists queried the meaning of life in which death without belief in God became meaningless. Depressives ask: what is it that I am, that has not self, meaning, or relevance, that is dark, without help? They, in their void, experience the Dionysian insight ‘that it is better not to have been born’ When not locked motionless in their rooms they push through the fog of days in pain, fear and isolation. Lights can sear into their souls, loved ones become irrelevant, the body always wanting to fade into oblivion. This is ‘being’ at its darkest, this is part of our human condition, it is our suffering and known to Buddhism and Nietzschean insight as that which must be named -we cannot go on or transform it if we do not affirm the fact of suffering. An interface between philosophical axiom, in its creative Sartrean delivery, and psychological experience occurs. The ‘thing’ finds expression. People recover from depression. It is conquerable. It is argued that it is inexpressible, that we must see it as a ‘black bile’ and feel comfortable with the drugs that placate its demons or analysis that names its causes. Sartre’s Nausea demonstrates the way in which one can hear its essence which is its ‘nothingness’. For the existentialist ‘en soi’, that is nothingness, equals being, it is from this ‘being’ that man and woman create their ‘essence’, or as Nietzsche has argued-can be transformed by art and the art of living. As Sartre proclaimed ‘Life begins on the other side of despair’.

Of course this is only the case if the depressive has not ended her life. Accessing the words and their messages of the depressive before self-destruction might occur, being able to understand what is being
thought, is necessary in a research field which, up to this point, has not been able to identify commonality in the behaviour of people who subsequently take their own lives.

In approaching the world of the depressive the prime immediate aim, of those deemed qualified to help the patient, is to prevent this person committing suicide.

One of the unknowable distances in the leap from thinking about suicide, planning the moment of self-destruction and the reflection upon its necessity is the relationship between these reflective strategies and the moment of its execution. On one hand, one can make sense of an embrace of an ultimate silence, a final escape from a world that denies answers to depression, physical pain or expression of a tenable self. On the other, except in circumstances such as euthanasia or joint suicides, there is usually not a witness to the moment it occurs. We cannot know what this moment is like and whether it is dictated by mind or an uncontrollable physiological response to mental and/or physical pain.

Karina often entertained the idea of suicide. She canvassed every relevant site on the net, she spoke at length about her children being better without her and she spoke of the extraordinary will entailed when walking across a bridge, or standing on the top of high buildings, to resist an ‘outer body’ invitation to fall to death. It perhaps is the most often expressed view that the very person who takes his own life may be, at the moment of decision, the least aware of the essence of the reason for doing so. This forms an ‘explanation’ for those of us who go on living.

Depressives walk a tight-rope. Anti-depressants subdue the dark anguish as they negotiate the day and night through blurred eyes and tranquillised minds, but the rope must be walked regardless. The ‘time out’ they may need from the activities of daily life may be denied them whether that be the responsibilities towards family or the demands of their working and social life. Indeed the refusal of the work-place or incomprehending loved ones may be the final cause of a decision made.

Attributing causes tells us little about the moment that brings about an ending. We are obsessed with endings in our lives. We know the nature of ending a sexual relationship, or ending a way of behaviour peculiar to being a child, being a parent or being a friend. We know the experience of the death of others which often brings with it a host of endings covering the gamut of experience pertaining to the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of ‘being’. Endings suggest a boundary, a borderline and thus deny a further ‘becoming’ in relation to others and the world. Sometimes we proclaim an ‘ending’ or have one imposed on us. Our experiential life enacts it but our inner life and self-esteem cannot and does not accept it.

The object of our love, and a source of what we understand to be the mirror image of what we secretly like best about ourselves, fingers and lurks and dictates the emergence of something uncontrollable to end the ‘narrative’ and make it bearable. Popular fiction and film feed on a market that knows most people demand a conclusion to a narrative. This way we can escape into a world-view that suggests that there are answers, explanations to an otherwise enigmatic universe. The fact of suicide asks very different questions about ‘ endings’.

What is this moment like before the thrust towards death? Is it one of incomprehensible joy whether deemed from the outside as mad or not? A. D. Hope, an Australian poet, when asked by me, his biographer, where he would start if he were to write about the life of someone, gave his clues, noting that we are not only the result of what we choose, but also, the result of what we reject or is seemingly chosen for us. What interests me about Hope’s words which were delivered in the form of a poem, is the significance he gives to the final moment which is our death, when he notes, we have no choice at all. Observers of another’s life wait for what is an ending and he suggests a moment of knowing:

They wait for a moment where at last we shall meet
The only moment that gives me no choice at all.

The moment that makes me whole, all my acts complete
When I see the other moments crumble and fall.
And merge the things I did with those undone.
Since I am the product of everything that I
Rejected or chose to do in the long run
And I shall not reach it until I come to die
(Hope. ‘Letter to Ann McCulloch’)

Hope is here, of course, speaking of a death that has not been chosen. I wonder whether the moment that someone takes his own life whether it involves choice as we understand it, or is it thrust upon them as if outside their control. Such a view might offer comfort to those who are left behind. On the other hand it would anger those who see someone’s chosen death as a poetic statement- one that reflects the utter courage of those who have no where else to go or who simply feel that their life is complete. See for example Bruck’s mixed response to Primo Levi
death. At first she was incensed at the apparent selfish uselessness of the act. ‘I couldn’t forgive Primo’ she wrote. But as she gradually accepted the loss and the subsequent grief, she revisited her response and came to believe that ‘Levi’s suicide was his one true “howl of freedom” in all his sixty-seven years’. She noted that there were no “howls” in his writing which she saw as containing controlled emotion. She sees it as celebratory that Primo gave such a howl of freedom at his death. For Bruck Levi’s suicide turned out to be, for her, an act, almost of heroism proclaiming: ‘My life is mine and mine alone to take’.

However this is one story and it is difficult to believe that the forced celebration of someone left behind truly represents the state of being of the person who has seemingly chosen death.

Is the state of depression a terrible desolation and woe without expression or is it not the case that literature, art, dance, music and theatre have given us the words and apprehensions of its meaning? It is common knowledge that writers/artists who are depressives speak of how they have been saved by their art. This is not to argue that because they were depressed, and ‘found themselves in the dark wood’ that this then made them great artists. I am not suggesting a cause and effect here. Nevertheless, great artists (to mention but a few) from the laments of Job, the choruses of Sophocles and Aeschylus, verses of Emily Dickinson, and the prose of Dostoyevsky, Edgar Allen Poe, Albert Camus, Virginia Woolf, the engravings of Albrecht Durer and the paintings of Vincent van Gogh, to the extraordinary scenes in Haruki Murakami’s contemporary novels—where his characters sit at the bottoms of darkened wells—have given expression to the condition of Melancholia. Depression, let me insist, is not simply sadness, it is not ‘being a bit down,’ it is being swallowed up by a void and made voiceless. What is this place known to so many? What is its value to our lives? How might it be tapped by an analysis of this language and the visual images of art.

Our research into the language of depression, whether written by the depressive retrospectively, in pathologies, or recognised by depressives when reading literature, or experiencing art, or created in art by depressives that find in this act a means of survival provide vital source material for researchers looking for answers, not only to recognise in the language of depressives an “intention” or propensity to commit suicide, but also as a means of accessing the experience and meaning of depression itself.

References


About the Author

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Dr Ann McCulloch is an Associate Professor, and Associate Head of School, at Deakin University. Her book The Dance of the Nomad on A.D. Hope’s Notebooks, his life and his art is in press and is to be published this year by Pandanus Press (November, 2005). She has written, directed and produced a six programmed documentary on A.D. Hope’s life and work (The Dance of Language: The Life and Work of A.D. Hope, Deakin Uni, 1996) and written a monograph that accompanies the programmes. She is also the author of A Tragic Vision: The Novels of Patrick White, UQP, 1983, and author of many articles and essays on biography, A.D.Hope, Patrick White, Christina Stead and Arts Discourse. Ann McCulloch was the Director of Maelstrom Theatre (1988-1992); she produced and wrote 14 theatrical performances culminating in a six-act play Let Gypsies Lie and Odyssey Enflamed. She is currently executive Editor of the Journal, Double Dialogues, and working on a book.
with Justin Clemens on Depression and its expression. Her work on Nietzsche and Australian Writers (with Dr Ron Goodrich) will be submitted for publication in 2005.