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Diaries, Self-talk, and Psychosis: Writing as a Place to Live

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In this paper I consider the therapeutic consequences that writing, and in particular, the writing of a diary, may effect for those subject to the intense distress of psychosis. I have taken my lead from two sentences at the close of a journal kept by a woman hospitalized with an acute psychotic disorder. Subsequently published as *Phone at nine just to say you're alive*, this text records the trajectory of Linda Hart's year-long illness. Writing on the day before she returns to work, Hart (1997: 352–53) makes the following bold assertion concerning the efficacy of keeping a diary: 'Writing this journal has kept me on the edge of sanity. Without it, I believe I would have tipped over into the chasm of madness from where I could not be reached.' With reference to *Phone at nine*, and also to another hospital diary published as *These are my sisters*, in which Lara Jefferson makes similar claims to Hart's, I consider here whether writing can really ameliorate the devastation of psychosis. My central contention is that the process of writing is beneficial because it is able to attenuate the malformation of identity characteristic of so much acute mental illness.

Psychosis and writing

> For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live.
> (Theodor Adorno, 1974: 87)

Writing on the day before she returns to work after a lengthy period hospitalized with an acute psychotic disorder, Linda Hart (1997: 352–53) makes the following assertion: 'Writing this journal has kept me on the edge of sanity. Without it, I believe I would have tipped over into the chasm of madness from where I could not be reached.' She is not alone in

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claiming that writing can ameliorate the depredations of madness.[1] In a hospital journal written 40 years before *Phone at nine*, and also produced in the midst of acute mental disturbance, Lara Jefferson (1975: 112) makes similar assertions, describing her writing as a 'ladder of words – strong enough, and long enough – to reach out of this'. At the end of her diary, shortly before she is transferred to an open ward, Jefferson declares that writing has been instrumental in her recovery: 'I kept writing in an effort to escape [madness] . . . I have sat through floods of raving and built a barrier – a breakwater of small black words around me' (1975: 236); and suggests that if she had not written she might instead have been relegated 'to a place still lower in this limbo' (1975: 238).

Hart's diary records a prolonged episode of severe mental illness in 1985 during which she was compulsorily hospitalized; the text begins with her transfer to a locked ward in a Leicestershire psychiatric unit, and ends the day before she returns to her job, working for social services in the field of mental health care. A literate, intelligent woman, it becomes clear as the diary progresses that Hart is from an impoverished and abusive family background (Hart, 1997: 186–89). However, the text reveals relatively little about her history and is far more concerned with recording everyday life on the hospital ward, presenting often mundane descriptions of interactions with friends and relatives who visit, and conversations with nurses and doctors. Although when published, *Phone at nine* went on to win the 1996 MIND book of the year award, it is important to bear in mind that the text began life as Hart's personal diary, transcribed at the time of her illness. This is evident in its form, and particularly in its omissions of many of the narrative signposts that one might expect to find in a memoir: explanatory, scene-setting, reader-orienting lexia are absent. In *Phone at nine* the reader discovers key information about Hart's psychiatric history only in textual asides, as if by chance. It appears, on the whole, to be an unembellished record of Hart's day to day experience of hospital life and reads as an ongoing, contingent facet *of* that experience.

Similarly, Jefferson's text, first published in 1947, traces the in-progress fluctuations of a negotiation with self and madness. Although a more self-consciously literary work than *Phone at nine*, *These are my sisters* also largely consists of observations of everyday hospital life, and in particular detailed accounts of the experiences of Jefferson's fellow patients – the 'sisters' of the book's title. Like Hart, Jefferson provides little background information about herself prior to entering hospital. According to Anthony Whitehead's introduction, Jefferson was 'labelled as suffering from schizophrenia and committed to a mental hospital in the Midwest of the USA sometime just before the second World War' (in Jefferson, 1975: 3). The publisher's notes state that the original manuscript was discovered in the 'violent ward of a state 'Mental Hospital' . . . pencilled on an odd

assortment of scrap paper' and 'was not written for publication'. An introduction to the original American edition of *These are my sisters* goes on to say that Jefferson was 'unavailable' to prepare a preface, but it does not specify whether she was contacted and refused or was unable to be traced. Exergual material from the British edition published in 1975 states that Jefferson died in the late 1940s, but that, apart from her text, little else is known of her.

It is plain that both Hart and Jefferson are living through chronic distress at the time of writing. Hart writes: 'Deep down I feel like I'm living through the last few weeks of my life . . . I cannot envisage a real life or a future' (1997: 83). Her psychosis is manifest in auditory hallucinations of her dead father's hostile voice; this characteristic entry describes her symptoms: 'Very tormented all day. My father is interfering with my thoughts by putting images of me, dead by violent means. In particular, one with my stomach shredded and maggots spilling out' (1997: 207). In *These are my sisters*, while demonstrating an awareness that her madness has been exacerbated, even caused, by oppressive social and gender mores, Jefferson emphasizes the fact of a suffering in which mania and despair alternate. She writes of her condition as like having 'nothing solid to stand on – nothing beneath me but a vast treacherous quagmire of despondency' (1975: 21). And while such abyssal experiences are sometimes 'followed by periods of exultation and ecstasy', this hypermanic bliss leaves her drained and debilitated; madness 'caught me and swept me – where I do not know. All the way through hell – and very far into heaven. Now it has whirled and left a stranger unknown to me. Sitting here in my body, I am weak, sick, and vomit much, and stagger so I can hardly walk' (1975: 18).

Madness and the shattered self

Although Hart and Jefferson do write of their distress, their descriptions are brief, and neither text includes a great deal of psychological analysis or revisiting of their authors' histories. What is it, then, about keeping their diaries that prompts Hart and Jefferson to so unequivocally denote writing as a key factor in recovery? How can recording one's meals, the weather, the names and occupations of those one is hospitalized with, one's occasional trips out at weekends, affect mental health?

To attempt to answer this, I want to turn first to a recurrent theme in Hart's journal: the way in which she experiences the very foundations of her identity as threatened by her illness. In the following description, early in the text, she touches on several of the themes I want to deal with here: 'Today my father has attempted to get control of my mind. He does it by subtle means. Taking away my speech, closing me down and taking me away from the world' (Hart, 1997: 14).

There are three points in this passage I wish to highlight. First, psychosis effects a suspension from the social realm ('taking me away from the world'). Secondly – and a means by which this suspension is effected – it is experienced as a muting agent: it involves the loss of speech. That is to say, Hart's internalized image of the dead father threatens her existence as a speaking subject, and this in turn absents her from the consensual world of discourse and action: by taking away her speech, madness also removes her from the world. Thirdly, and as we shall see intimately connected to the preceding two points, Hart denotes that her sense of selfhood is under immediate threat: not only is her 'control' over thought weakened; not only is her ability to speak 'for herself' and act in the world attenuated; in addition, she notes that her father is 'closing me down'. This felt 'closing' of the self is subsequently described in various ways. A particularly disturbing example is the way in which her father's voice repeatedly urges her to literally make herself disappear by killing herself. Linked to this theme, the voice also conjures up images of death, decay and absence. Thus, when Hart records that, 'his voice became more insistent. He told me my skin was coming off and that I could disappear' (1997: 33), madness manifests as an impression of bodily disintegration – a powerful image of the nullification of the self.

Many accounts produced by those who have experienced madness emphasize, as Hart does, the radical disruption to a settled sense of identity, a felt impression that selfhood and *being* are under imminent threat of complete disaggregation. A powerful example is found in an account of manic-depression by 'David', a young man whose narrative has been recorded by James Glass (1989: 34 and 37): 'I hear this voice sometimes … it always tears away at me, rips my identity into shreds, and slices away at everything I am … It's like my cells are exploded over the universe … you're left trying to find yourself amidst this infinity of particles.' Similarly, in her journal, Jefferson (1975: 19) describes madness as subsuming the self; it is a 'flood … swirling about me … sucking me under … there is only a shadow remaining of the person I used to be'.

Such observations concerning the disruption of selfhood in psychosis accord with the opinions of a wide variety of commentators on mental illness. In the mainstream of psychiatric opinion it is axiomatic, for instance, that the psychological process known as dissociation, which involves troubling alterations in the sense of self, is common to many different psychological disorders (see Saxe *et al.*, 1993; van der Kolk and van der Hart, 1995), and physicians such as Bleuler (1966), Jaspers (1962), Federn (1952), Freeman (Freeman *et al.*, 1958), and, more recently, Spitzer (1990), Helmsley (1998), and Fabrega (1989) have contended that, specifically in the case of psychosis, this disruption is particularly acute. In addition, clinicians such as Richard Grossman (2000) have tracked

the disintegration of self in depression and in narcissistic personality disorders.

Notwithstanding disagreements over aetiology, commentators from the more critical fringes of the human sciences and the humanities concur. For example, David Mann (1991: 216) insists that 'what is most important about psychiatric ailments … is that they can be understood as losses of self'; Robert Young (2004: para 28) comments that, for the psychotic, 'fragmentation of self becomes the norm'; James Glass (1989: 2) notes that psychotics 'experience themselves as inhuman, as things or objects, as pieces of dead matter' and writes of the shattering of a 'core sense of self' (Glass, 1993: 27); David Levin (1987: 522–23) avers that 'the suffering of the schizophrenic … divides the Self … and threatens to destroy … integration and wholeness'; while Marta Caminero-Santangelo (1998: 103) writes of 'the absolute powerlessness of one who cannot completely claim the 'I' for herself'.

Madness, then, throws the feasibility and constitution of human identity into question: what had been taken for granted is opened to challenge and uncertainty, and the whole basis of what makes selfhood viable may need to be urgently reformulated. And, unless we are to cast the mad as utterly removed from our own particular strain of humanness, even those of us believing ourselves to be untouched by madness may feel obliged to confront the questions raised about everyday understandings of personal identity.

EGO IS SHE WHO SAYS EGO

I suggest that Hart and Jefferson make the claims they do for diary writing because by this means they are actively reforming their shattered senses of selfhood. On one level it is not difficult to see how asserting a 'voice' in the context of a journal might alleviate the erosion of voice which Hart describes as concomitant with psychosis. That is to say, in the diary the 'voice' on the page is more identifiably the writer's, rather than emanating from an external source. To write, therefore, may be to counter voicelessness. But rather than end with this (overly simple) observation, I think there is a lot more we can learn from the implications of Hart's and Jefferson's claims. To begin to follow through these implications, I want to turn now to that strand of theory which challenges notions of the self as transcendental essence, and posits human identity as intimately bound to language.

One of the most influential proponents of the linguistic basis of subjectivity is Emile Benveniste. In *Problems in general linguistics* he makes the famous assertion that it 'is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of

"ego" in reality, in its reality' (Benveniste, 1971: 224). 'Subjectivity', he goes on, 'is only the emergence in the being of a fundamental property of language. "Ego" is he who says "ego" ' (1971: 227). To put it simply, to signify is also to *be*, or more accurately, to effect being. Following Benveniste, and referring to the work of Derrida and Lacan, Anthony Kerby (1991: 72) argues that subjectivity is constituted in the 'presence of the voice', and that 'soliloquy', as he puts it, 'is especially important to the question of self-identity'. Arguing against Husserl, Kerby questions 'expression theories of meaning', in particular the notion that verbal expression is a 'duplication or reproduction of a prior stratum' – specifically 'the interiority of consciousness' (1991: 74). In line with Derrida's arguments in *Speech and phenomena* (1973), he contends that expression 'generates the subject and object (qua intended) *presupposed* by it' (Kerby, 1991: 74), and that 'the disclosive power of language is formative of the subject' (1991: 82). Considering the question of whether a subject existed 'preceding expression', he contends that 'in solitary monologue one's expressions … render the meanings of one's experiences or states present to oneself' (1991: 76). For both Kerby and Benveniste, then, the very marrow of subjectivity is sited in a lexical reservoir:

> Those iterable words that are always at my disposal are my lifeblood, for it is here that a certain self-consciousness arises and is constantly renewed in the form of hearing oneself speak. It is perhaps this relation . . . that best founds our sense of subjectivity or self-consciousness.
>
> (Kerby, 1991: 77)

Intriguingly, the notion that it is via the use of language that selfhood is constituted is not only representative of a strand of theoretical thinking on subjectivity, but is also broadly consonant with more empirical work in psychology and neuroscience on the role of 'self-talk' or 'inner speech'. The extensive work of neuropsychologist Alain Morin on the constitution of selfhood and its relation to inner speech is of particular interest in this regard (see Morin, 1993; 1995a; 1995b; 2003; Morin and Everett, 1990). In a co-authored piece, Morin contends that the self 'acquires information about itself' and forms a 'coherent picture of what it is' by 'talking to itself about itself' (Morin and Everett, 1990: 338). Inner speech, he argues, is critical for the development of self-consciousness and self-knowledge: conscious awareness is not only dependent upon but 'almost s*ynonymous* with our "inner voice" ' (1990: 341), and is 'probably one of the most important cognitive processes needed in the development of the cognitive self' (1990: 342). Addressing the alleviation of mental distress, Morin and Everett (1990: 351) suggest that 'low self-conscious subjects' might be taught 'to talk to themselves about themselves', and note that 'when irrealist cognitions are at the core of clients' problems, introspective

self-talk could be learned to identify and change maladaptive self-talk'. In a very similar vein, the neuroscientist Bernard Baars (1997: 77) describes schizophrenia as an inner speech 'that has run out of control', and suggests that a possible treatment might be to 'teach schizophrenics to speak to themselves in different voices, at will, to regain control over the inner voice'.

The arguments of Benveniste, Kerby, Morin and Baars enable us to read beyond the content of Hart's and Jefferson's journals and to grasp their broader importance. If 'personhood is dependent on expression' (Kerby, 1991: 123), then an easily overlooked redemptive function may adumbrate the process of inscription. My suggestion is that the journals of Hart and Jefferson are textual examples of the kind of soliloquizing Kerby invokes, and that by this means their authors are (re)fashioning shattered identities. To claim that this chain – from self-talk to selfhood – is a propitious one in the context of psychosis accords with observations by psychiatrists Davidson and Strauss (1992: 131), who argue that 'an enhanced sense of self' can provide persons suffering from 'prolonged psychiatric disorders' with a 'refuge from their illness and a foundation upon which they may then take up the work of recovery in a more active and determined fashion'. When they go on to argue for the necessity of conducting a 'personal inventory' (1992: 136) and speak of the crucial role of asserting the 'voice' and controlling 'attention' (1992: 140) if the patient is to cultivate a sense of selfhood and agency, their argument reiterates that controlled self-talk is of critical importance to psychological well-being.

Seen in this light, seemingly simple sentences in *Phone at nine*, in which Hart's 'I' assumes the place of subject, or which, having assumed that placing, describes and comments on existence, take on a new significance. For example, in the entry for 20 November, Hart first implicates herself in her consideration of another patient, and then moves on to describe this other: 'I haven't yet had eye contact with Pam. She wears the same clothes each day and night and her black hair gets more and more greasy' (1997: 11). Here, by taking up the position of the first person, a self, or a sense of selfhood, is established which enables the speaker to look outside herself from that position. The 'technologies' at work also include the focusing outside the self, the attending to the external, interpersonal realm as a counterweight to the internalizing energies of psychosis. But for the moment I want simply to highlight this assumption of the 'I' as a necessary prerequisite to such subsequent works of the self.

To clarify, I should emphasize two points. First, I am invoking self-talk as a process by which the self, *in a willed and self-conscious movement* separates itself from the flux of existence and speaks to itself – and which here is externalized in textual form. The diaries of Hart and Jefferson

represent reclamations of the 'I', willed occupations of the ground of first-person discourse in which consciousness gathers itself and speaks with one voice into a multiple and frightening cacophony. Thus, and secondly, the way that such diaries reclaim selfhood is *not* (only or primarily) by producing a narrative *account* – a story – of the self. Rather, identity is established by means of assuming the subject position of an 'I' within language, simply by speaking/writing as an 'I', or to adapt Benveniste: *ego is she who says ego*.

To such contentions the reader might object that speaking as an 'I' is a part of most personal speech and as such represents nothing remarkable but is simply a reflex or a grammatical habit. To counter this, I could cite the observations of, for instance, Richard Jenkins (1996: 40)[2] or Louis Sass (1998: 491) that chronic mental distress may lead to individual difficulty in understanding and using the first-person singular, but a more productive approach might be to look closely at and differentiate between particular modalities of 'speaking', and in particular between what we might designate 'everyday speech' and the type of discourse being formulated in the diaries. It is with this distinction in mind that I have highlighted the importance of self-awareness and will in Hart's and Jefferson's 'speech'. In the same vein, Baars (1997: 131) hints at an important difference between modes of speech when he emphasizes that 'very similar voluntary and nonvoluntary actions' are *experienced* as radically dissimilar.

'Everyday speech', and speaking of the everyday

To elucidate this distinction further it will be helpful to consider briefly an essay from Maurice Blanchot's 1969 text *The infinite conversation* entitled 'Everyday speech'. This piece illuminates my argument, although perhaps not entirely for the reasons that Blanchot intended to highlight. His overriding purpose is to redeem the quotidian from its tainted status as an unexamined and hence unlived existence (after Socrates' maxim) by indicating, and to an extent celebrating, its subversive undercutting of comforting illusions of self-presence, and ideals such as value and judgement; Blanchot aims to resist the valorization of mastery concomitant with notions of 'self-awareness' and self-control. In 'everyday' being-states, he argues, 'speech' is typically *absentminded and unaware of itself*; and the corollary of this is that when we exist and move within this realm we are barely conscious of ourselves as selves. The forgetful unaware state of everyday speech is the antithesis of a fortress-like sovereign ego bolstering itself by excluding and denying otherness: the everyday and its mode of speaking represent 'the power of dissolution' (Blanchot, 1993: 242).

However, Blanchot also notes that potential dangers lurk in the realm of 'everyday speech', and these reservations are important to consider in my context here. He observes that because the 'day-to-day indifference' of the everyday puts 'into question' the very notion of a subject, it 'tends unerringly to weigh down into things', and is a medium in which 'alienations, fetishisms, and reifications' may flourish because of the lack of an engaged awareness to resist and divide the unconstrained flow of impressions (1993: 245). Moreover, the individual labouring in a monotonous existence who has *only* the everyday is 'he for whom the everyday is most heavy' (1993: 244). For the vulnerable subject, therefore, the everyday's effacement of subjectivity, and in particular its effacing of the subject's sense of separateness from existence, leaves him or her wholly subsumed by oppression: 'the person no longer exists in his or her personal identity … the one afflicted no longer has any identity other than the situation with which he merges. … This is the trap of affliction' (Blanchot, 1993: 131 and 132).

So, while the realm of everyday existence counterbalances western obsessions with self-control and self-knowledge, the exigencies of suffering would seem to demand humility and caution on the part of the cultural critic. And, in the context of madness, Blanchot's notion of the sedimented fetishisms of the everyday have a particular resonance. For Hart, the fetishisms of everyday speech include the virulent antipathy and ceaseless murmur of her internalized father: subsumed by this, she is in danger of complete capitulation to an unbearable everyday composed of hostility and fear, or, as she puts it, lost in a 'chasm of madness' (1997: 353). This subsumption, indeed, might serve as one definition of the particular agonies of psychosis: deprived of a coherent 'I', the psychotic is akin to a character trapped in a nightmarish fiction without a narrator. For the psychotic, the dissolution of a strong sense of self is a lived reality, and is manifest as suffering. There is little danger – or even possibility – that those who have such intimate knowledge of the radical contingency of the 'I' could ever retreat behind the ramparts of a fort-like ego. After journeying through the dispersions of madness, the psychotic is more likely, it seems to me, to adopt, not a faith in the plenitude of the 'I', but something closer to what Jenkins (1996: 18) calls 'pragmatic individualism': an awareness that the construct of the 'I' can disintegrate and is contingent, but also a cognizance that in order to act in a concerted fashion as a singular subject, or to speak in such a way that one is understood by others and oneself, the adoption of this 'position from which to speak' is vital.

Although Hart's and Jefferson's diaries speak *of* the everyday, they are not therefore 'everyday speech' as Blanchot describes it; rather, they represent its inverse: self-aware embarkations into language, which in turn, I argue, comprise willed reconstructions of shattered selfhoods.

Text as event

The contemporaneous nature of the writing is key to these journals' dynamics. Rather than presenting the 'story' of Hart's illness, *Phone At nine* represents the trace and embodiment of Hart's struggle to speak in a voice she identifies as 'hers' and thereby to resist suffocation and non-being. Because the entries punctuate the experiences described, they represent moments of awareness and self-talk that are intercalated into the very business of living. In the diary, the self is speaking to itself of its own experience, is verbalizing its existence, with this verbalization interwoven into the fabric of that existence.

Thus, early on in the text, we witness Hart urging herself not to capitulate to her father's hostile voice: 'Don't listen to the voice who threatens more depths of despair than I can comprehend' (1997: 6); later, she interposes a textual response:

> There's a big bad voice saying, 'Your life is over – it won't be long now before you join me in death. You've got nothing to live for anyway, I've destroyed it all. Your guts are full of maggots. You are rotting away . . .'. It's not true. I have my family and friends to live for.
>
> (1997: 194)

Such engagements with language and voice are portrayed as agonistic struggles against the invasive depredations of the voice of the internalized father. In one particularly powerful expression of despair, Hart asks: 'Where can I be? I can't leave my head somewhere, I need respite. I need to get away from this fucking voice. The more voice my father has the less voice I have' (1997: 49). Elsewhere, she links the disintegration of the embodied self with mutism:

> Are we flotsam? Washed up like stranded jellyfish on a beach? No armour, no ribcage, no skull and no spine. Liquid almost; no defences. Sometimes the surprise of a sting. No voice, though. No secret whale song to encourage popularity.
>
> (1997: 28)

This theme of the effacement of voice recurs when Hart records that the acuteness of her distress has rendered writing difficult or impossible; such entries again highlight the contemporaneous nature of the writing, strengthening an impression that the text embodies an ongoing negotiation with a disruptive and chronic suffering. Thus, the entry for 28 November ends, 'Too low to write today' (1997: 29); 15 December: 'I can't write any more because I'm crying again'; 14 January: 'I can't concentrate on anything for too long which shows in my writing' (p. 127); 17 January: 'Not settled enough to be able to read back over

what I've written recently' (p. 131); 3 May: 'I feel too low to write tonight' (p. 262).

Also evidencing the contemporaneity of her writing, in *These are my sisters* the reader follows Jefferson's attempts to aid herself. For example, her assessment of her disturbed cognitive processes proceeds in incremental steps. First, she acknowledges what currently pertains: 'I know I cannot think straight' (1975: 11); then outlines the implications of this condition: 'Unless I learn to think differently, I shall shortly be insane' (p. 13); arriving at the critical question of what action she can take to change this: 'How – how – *how*? In the name of God – how does a person learn to think differently?' (p. 13); and concluding that, despite the difficulty, the task belongs to her: 'If I must learn to think differently – there is nothing to do but to go about doing it with what few remaining shreds of intelligence I have. But how – is the question. It is plainly my job for none other can do it.' (p. 15).

The means on which Jefferson resolves is writing: 'Because I must face the problem and deal with it somehow – I evolved this pen and paper idea' (1975: 24). She then explicitly links her own continued existence to writing:

> The flood that was swirling about me was sucking me under – and the pencil I had in my hand was a straw to be caught. It was just a straw – but I caught it – and now I have kept my head above water for a while – even if what I have written does not make sense to anyone – at least – it has helped me a little.
>
> (1975: 24–25)

Explicit here is that while writing has enabled Jefferson to keep her 'head above water', this is by no means an assured or stable state. As readers we sense that she, like us, is unfolding a story, the outcome of which she is unsure of. Moreover, the crux of this story is the effect of its own production on its author's mental condition. Because Jefferson chooses writing as the agent of her salvation, the efficacy of this strategy will be measured within and by the text itself – writing will measure its own effect. It would be quite possible, indeed, to imagine a different outcome from Jefferson's eventual return to sanity, one in which her strategies failed and subsumption by madness was total.

The social self

A critique of my argument thus far might suggest that the model of identity formation I am tracing is peculiarly solipsistic, that the troubled self appears to retreat to its diary, or to its own cognitive recesses, where it begins to speak to itself and by so doing forms, or strengthens, its sense

of (disembodied) identity. Close study of Hart's and Jefferson's texts suggests, however, that their rebuilding of broken identities is *inextricably* linked to an engagement with the social.

I have noted that neither journal is marked by a preoccupation with the self and its own tribulations. This is not to suggest that this critical concern is avoided, but that it is by no means a predominant focus. Rather, a prominent motif of both texts is an acute awareness of others, of the social, interpersonal and dialogic dimensions of life both on and off the hospital ward. Rather than extensively detailing their authors' symptoms, both texts are preoccupied with other people – hospital staff, other patients, friends, relatives. Even in their titles this focus is evident: 'phone at nine just to say you're alive' picks up on the injunction placed on Hart as she begins brief visits home to remain in contact with the ward by telephoning at 9 a.m. and 9 p.m. to report on her state of health; in addition, it invokes her continual use of the telephone to call friends and family. Both of these factors situate Hart at the centre of a web of care, an interpersonal network of others. Similarly, the title of *These are my sisters* encapsulates the governing concern of Jefferson's writing: the welfare, behaviour and history of her fellow patients.

Moreover, both texts often take into account and allow for possible or actual readers. As Hart's writing develops she begins to plan for and allow staff and friends to read her journal, and her writing is spoken about by others who encourage her to publish it (before she is released she learns that extracts will appear in a mental health journal). Her text sometimes takes the form of a letter to a possible reader, with Hart directly addressing others 'outside' the text: for instance, she writes to an unnamed reader, 'Let me tell you about the typical routine of the ward' (1997: 100), and concludes the text with 'Thank you, Pat Jenkins, for suggesting I write' (p. 353). Jefferson also regularly addresses imagined readers outside the text. In addition she conjures up a textual alter ego and her writing periodically resorts to a dialogue with this 'other'. This is not a manifestation of psychosis, but a conscious strategy which she adopts after a nurse interrogates her about her writing.

> The nurse just now picked up one of the sheets I have written. She read it – looked at me oddly – and asked what in the hell I thought I was doing. And because she expected an answer in keeping with my strange occupation [. . .] I gave her an answer that fitted. I told her that I was Shakespeare, the reincarnation of Shakespeare trying to sidestep a strait-jacket. (I'll admit that I feel queer enough to be the reincarnation of something but I doubt if Shakespeare would claim me). But hurray! She came back down the aisle with whole ream of paper and said to me: 'Go to it, Shakespeare!'
>
> (1975: 25–26)

Following this successful evasion of the medical gaze, Jefferson then welcomes 'Shakespeare' as an intra-textual reader and companion.

> Verily, verily, Shakespeare, I had no idea you could be called from your quiet English grave with so little effort. In my present predicament, I know of no-one who could be quite such a fortunate choice for a delusion of grandeur. So welcome! I hope you will be as pleased with the arrangement as I am. Poor fellow, this is surely a come-down from your former position. (1975: 26)

'Shakespeare' remains as a presence throughout Jefferson's journal, exerting, perhaps, a salutary pull on the introspective tendency as Jefferson imagines another alongside her, reading her text. At the close, as she is about to be transferred to a 'semi-civilized' (1975: 236) ward, she relinquishes this strategic other. It is clear that she understands well the tactical nature of a creation which has enabled her to survive: 'Goodbye William. You were one grand delusion! If you had not come to me, perchance this transfer would have been to a place still lower in this limbo – instead of one step upward' (1975: 238).

The various interpersonal concerns and forms manifest in these diaries are crucial to their import, and enrich an understanding of the way in which the self-fashioning process I have been arguing for operates. In order to better understand why this is so I will conclude by considering the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky on the genesis of 'inner speech'.

VYGOTSKY AND EGOCENTRIC SPEECH

In *Thought and language*, Vygotsky argues that 'inwardness' has an essentially social nature. He deals at length with the development and constitution of 'inner speech', and proposes that the dialogue of the self with the self is a development from, and remains intimately related to, social, interpersonal speech (here his theories converge with those of Bakhtin (1984; 1994) and Volosinov (1976)). Selfhood, therefore, is a boundary phenomenon rather than a privatized realm: in Vygotsky's words (quoted in Shotter, 1993: 112): '*we become ourselves through others*'.

Hart's and Jefferson's diaries resemble, I suggest, *textual analogues* of one of the key developmental stages in Vygotsky's account of the genesis of inner speech: the ontogenic precursor to 'true' inner speech and what he calls (after Jean Piaget; see Kozulin, 1986; Ashworth, 1979) *egocentric speech*. Vygotsky defines this as a phase in which, from speaking to and with others, the child begins to speak aloud to itself while in the company of others. It represents a 'transition from speech for others to speech for

oneself' (Vygotsky, 1986: 235); it is a kind of conversation with the self, but one which 'occurs only in a social context' (p. 253), and in which the child assumes 'that his egocentric talk, directed to nobody, is understood by those who surround him' (p. 231). By arguing thus I am, of course, appropriating Vygotsky's work in a way which he did not intend. But in the light of Hart's and David's descriptions of the way in which psychosis radically disrupts any sense that the inner voice is *theirs*, it does not seem to me too far-fetched to suggest that some kind of equivalent process in adulthood may be necessary to achieve a less painful mode of being.

Vygotsky contends that inner speech results from the incorporation of egocentric speech into the psyche. Whereas egocentric speech is more or less grammatically complete, and 'spoken as an utterance, that is, as public speech in a specific environment' (1986: 235), inner speech is marked by a distinctive 'tendency towards abbreviation and predication' (p. 243). Inner speech, therefore, is an intimate distillation of what was originally egocentric, public speech. The condensation is possible because:

> We know what we are thinking about; i.e. we always know the subject and the situation. And since the subject of our inner dialogue is already known we may just imply it. ... Piaget once mentioned that we trust ourselves without proof; the necessity to defend and articulate one's position appears only in conversation with others. Psychological contact between partners in a conversation may establish a mutual perception leading to the understanding of abbreviated speech. In inner speech, the 'mutual' perception is always there, in absolute form.
>
> (1986: 243)

Thus, inner speech can be abbreviated because of the certainty of context: the subject is present to itself in the 'absolute form' of 'mutual perception', in that we always 'know what we are thinking about'. It is surely striking, however, that these psychological prerequisites are precisely what the psychotic lacks. Hart and Jefferson describe psychic economies which are far less self-assured than Vygotsky implies here. Cast adrift in the turbulence of psychotic thought, there is a sense in which the subject precisely does *not* know, and cannot predict, the direction of her thinking, because the thoughts appear to come from an autonomous agent. Moreover, it is the *lack* of trust in the self which is one of the prime causes of suffering in madness: at any moment the hostile energies of psychosis may attack the 'thinker'. Rather than facilitating the intuitive 'mutuality' of the self-dialogue, the omissions and ellipses of inner speech may present spaces and opportunities for the irruptions of psychotic forms of thought to 'enter' and colonize the self.

Thus, to nuance and develop the argument that the diaries represent exercises in self-talk, and therefore self-reconstitution, we might read

these texts, particularly in the light of their prominent engagement with the interpersonal realm, as textual analogues of the more complete expressions of egocentric speech: to borrow from Vygotsky, by this means Hart and Jefferson are reforming shattered identities and 'becoming themselves'. That their 'speech' takes textual form is not surprising given their situations. If these adults hospitalized with psychotic disorders were to practise egocentric speech by talking aloud to themselves in the company of others, it would probably be read as pathological behaviour. (Moreover, psychotics are certainly not immune from social embarrassment, and there are strong cultural prohibitions against adults talking to themselves in social situations.) So Hart and Jefferson write, yet their writing is not a quietist retreat into solipsism but rather is continually inflected by the interpersonal: they write while in the company of others on their wards; their writing is *understandable* by others; they imagine others reading the texts; they address entries to imaginary readers; their texts continually picture others, and are actually read by others. This focus on, and awareness of, the social realm is vital for their purpose of rebuilding selfhood, which, if we follow Vygotsky, is intrinsically bound to and dependent upon the interpersonal. Moreover, the formulation of complete, grammatically coherent sentences may operate as a counterweight to psychotic fragmentation. Perhaps, with the sedimentation of egocentric speech and a return to a measure of psychological health, some 'internalization' and abbreviation of self-talk may eventually be possible, but in the midst of the psychotic storm such a modality of inner speaking is, it seems to me, impossible.

Conclusion

To recap: I have described how, in acute distress, human identity disaggregates, and I noted the clinical view that rebuilding a sense of self may ameliorate the suffering of madness. I went on to describe the arguments of Morin, Baars, Benveniste and Kerby that the very basis of selfhood is founded in our speech to ourselves; and with reference to Baars and Blanchot I stressed the experiential difference between different modalities of 'speaking'. Finally, Vygotsky's work on the development of inner speech reveals that what is often taken to be a private, personal experience is founded in and produced by an engagement with the social.

Perhaps, then, we may begin to understand why Hart and Jefferson make such startling claims for the efficacy of writing, even though their diaries largely record the mundane realities of hospital life, and epiphanic moments of understanding and insight are absent. These texts represent exercises in 'voicing', a tentative 'starting to speak', by means of which their authors attempt to re-establish a salutary relation with the self, and

activate or construct a self by speaking as an 'I'. That these reformulations of selfhood are bound to the intersubjective realm is of particular significance in the context of psychosis – which effects a breach with the social world. Hart, we recall, opens her journal by invoking this separation when she describes her psychosis as 'Taking away my speech, closing me down and taking me away from the world.' In writing, she recovers her speech, the closed-down self is reopened, and eventually she returns to the world. Solipsism inheres not in the self-talk of the journals, but rather in the 'morbid introspection' of madness, as Jefferson (1975: 14) describes it, or, in James Glass's words (1989: 16), the 'isolated realm of the interior monologue . . . without any shared component or audience'. For Jefferson and Hart, writing turns their gaze outwards, towards the conversations and lives of others. The reformulated narrative relationship with the self, a relationship, indeed, that *is* the self, is thus intercalated into the intersubjective social realm. The selves that (re-)emerge in *These are my sisters* and *Phone at nine* are radically dependent on the words, lives and presence of others.

Notes

1 See Carole North's (1990: 61) memoir of her schizophrenia: 'my thoughts sometimes got so hopelessly jumbled that I needed to write them down for my own comprehension'; and Bonnie Schell (n.d.: para. 2), also schizophrenic, who describes reading and writing as 'the only order I could feel in the universe . . . typing sentences and editing was my way back to recovery'.

2 Jenkins refers to E.H. Erikson's study *Identity: youth and crisis* (London: Faber, 1968) as support for this contention.

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