‘Why is this girl telling us all this stuff?’: authenticity and the confessional impulse in Elizabeth Wurtzel’s Prozac Nation

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‘Why is this girl telling us all this stuff?’: Authenticity and the confessional impulse in Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation*

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ABSTRACT

In the Author’s Note to *Prozac Nation*, Elizabeth Wurtzel writes: ‘As far as I am concerned, every word of this book is the complete and total truth. But of course, it’s my truth’. The tension between this absolute claim to ‘truth’ and the acknowledgement that this truth is personal and subjective is one that resonates throughout the memoir. On the one hand, Wurtzel takes great pains to establish the authenticity of her narrative; on the other hand, she is acutely aware of the ways in which it – and the life it describes – is performative, shaped by a confessional impulse that she situates in the tradition of confessional writing. In this article, I explore how *Prozac Nation* stages and interrogates confessional acts, simultaneously constructing and deconstructing notions of authenticity. I focus on the ways in which Wurtzel deploys cultural references to represent herself as both exceptional and representative, her narrative exemplifying what it is like to be, as the book’s subtitle puts it, ‘Young and Depressed in America’, while at the same time insisting on the singularity of its author’s experience. I conclude by arguing that *Prozac Nation* rejects the authentic/inauthentic binary, presenting a mediated series of selves that are always in flux.

Keywords
Elizabeth Wurtzel; *Prozac Nation*; *More*; *Now*; *Again*; authenticity; confessional writing

In [1] the *Author’s Note* that precedes the main text of *Prozac Nation* (1994), Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Zeitgeist*-defining first book, Wurtzel writes: ‘As far as I am concerned, every word of this book is the complete and total truth. But of course, it’s my truth’ (Wurtzel 2017 [1994]: n.p.). This statement encapsulates one of the central paradoxes of the book: namely, that it invests heavily in an idea of authenticity[2] while at the same time emphasising that this idea rests on a contingent subjectivity. The central clause – ‘every word of this book is the complete and total truth’ – is unequivocal and absolute, yet its tautologies (‘every word . . . complete . . . total’) hint at an anxiety that is expressed explicitly in the caveats that surround it. The qualifying clause ‘As far as I am concerned’ which precedes the claim to ‘the . . . truth’ acknowledges that it is made from a particular, personal perspective and the (grammatically incomplete) sentence that follows it confirms that this truth is in fact only one of a number of possible versions. This ambivalent attitude to ‘the truth’ is evident throughout *Prozac Nation*. In fact, although the subtitle of the book promises an account of what

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it is like to be 'young and depressed in America', one might argue that the real subject of the book is subjectivity, in a number of different senses of that word. To put it another way, the book is concerned primarily with profoundly philosophical questions: is it possible to locate an authentic reality? Is there such a thing as an authentic self? If so, can these selves be said to possess agency?

In a tribute to Wurtzel, after her death in 2020, the British feminist journalist Suzanne Moore recalled the former proclaiming, 'I am preternaturally truthful' (Wurtzel quoted in Moore 2020). Yet in *Prozac Nation* Wurtzel relentlessly interrogates both the notion of truthfulness and the ways in which the subject constitutes itself as an 'I'. Early on, Wurtzel recalls the onset of her self-harming behaviour when she was eleven years old. In an italicised passage, she presents this period in her life as a metamorphosis. Sitting on the floor of the locker room cutting her legs, she claims, she '*would fantasize about going back to the person I had always been*' but she finds herself unable to effect such a '*reverse transformation*' (Wurtzel 2017 [1994]: 25, italics in original). Periodically, she resolves to '*be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed that day*', but there comes a time when she '*realized that I could not even fake being the old Lizzy anymore*' (26, italics in original). If she is unable to sustain her performance of 'old Lizzy', however, her new self is not necessarily any more authentic or stable than her prior self.

> *I thought this alternative persona that I had adopted was just that: a put-on, a way of getting attention, a way of being different. And maybe when I first started walking around talking about plastic and death, maybe then it was an experiment. But after a while, the alternative me really just was me.* (25-26, italics in original)[3]

In this passage, 'alternative' is a descriptor of the sub-culture to which the new Lizzy affiliates herself, signified by her appearance ('*pasty white skin ... dark, doleful eyes ... anemic hair*'), her musical taste (Patti Smith's 'Horses') and her topics of conversation ('*plastic and death*'). As an adjectival modifier of the 'persona' that she 'had adopted', however, it also suggests that new Lizzy is as much a performative construct as old Lizzy. This bifurcation of the self into 'old' and 'new' versions recurs throughout the course of *Prozac Nation*. When Lizzy suffers a severe bout of depression at summer camp at the age of thirteen she invokes this paradigm again, insisting that 'I can't be the old Lizzie anymore. I can't be myself anymore. I mean, actually, I am being myself right now and it's so horrible' (43). Here again Wurtzel represents her depressed self paradoxically, as simultaneously more and less authentic than that of the 'old Lizzy', who may, or may not, be the same 'old Lizzy' invoked in the earlier episode of self-harm. On the one hand, the 'old Lizzy' is implicitly identified as the 'real' version of herself, since she feels that in her depressed state she 'can't be myself anymore'. On the other hand, she claims that she is 'being myself right now', speaking from the situation of her depression, in spite, or perhaps because, of how 'horrible' that situation is.[4]

Wurtzel's self-representation in these episodes is further complicated by the dual perspective within the narrative, which modulates from (necessarily unreliable) reconstructions of the experiences and perceptions of her younger selves to the retrospective reflections of her older, narrating self. Cumulatively, these episodes – and others like them - raise the possibility that there may be no such thing as an original, authentic self. If the 'alternative' me of the eleven-year-old Lizzy becomes 'really just ... me' through repeated performance, then perhaps the 'old Lizzy' that she tries in vain to resurrect was also a persona, albeit one perfected unconsciously through the processes of socialisation, as opposed to being self-consciously conceived of as an 'experiment'. Similarly, if the thirteen-year-old Lizzy both is and is not 'being herself' at the summer camp, the very notion of the self has become unstable. Instead of a singular, authentic 'Lizzy', *Prozac Nation* offers a proliferating series of alternative versions of 'old Lizzy' and 'new Lizzy'.

Wurtzel's representations of herself as a series of learned performances might well owe something to Judith Butler's theories about gender performativity,[5] but they also recall the fiction of Philip Roth, whose favourite protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman, forcefully articulates the belief that, rather than possessing fixed identities, human subjects are 'improvisations upon a self' (Roth 1991 [1990]: 94). If Roth and Wurtzel seem unlikely bedfellows, consider the following passages from Roth's *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), *Prozac Nation* and Wurtzel's other memoir, *More, Now, Again* (2002): 'Sabbath began to cry, and not even he could tell whether the crying was an act or the measure of his misery'; 'If he was not coming apart but only simulating, then this was the greatest performance of his life' (Roth 1994: 143, 147); 'I can't believe I am actually being honest. Sometimes my tears are a rhetorical device, sometimes I am just being manipulative.' (Wurtzel 2003 [2002]: 44); 'I wanted to say something that could illuminate the nature of my sorrow for my mother's benefit, but instead I am getting taken in by the pathos myself' (Wurtzel 2017 [1994]: 110).

In the context of the confession that follows it, the statement 'I can't believe I am actually being honest' seems to mean: 'On this occasion, in spite of my habitual disingenuousness, my tears were authentic expressions of grief'. Yet the phrase 'I can't believe' might also be taken literally, transforming the meaning of the sentence into 'I'm not actually being honest', in which case the clauses that follow provide corroboration of Wurtzel's propensity to perform distress as a way of exerting control over those who witness her tears. Conversely, in the second example, Wurtzel begins by apparently wanting honestly to clarify her suffering for her mother before introducing the notion that what she intended to say was a performance – and one so convincing that she has been 'taken in' by it herself. Like Sabbath, who is simultaneously overcome with emotion and sufficiently detached from his grief to wonder whether it is simulated, for Wurtzel the line between authentic feeling and the artificial production of pathos is blurred. She represents her lachrymosity, laconically, as a self-conscious strategy for gaining sympathy ('it's about that time of day when I'm supposed to start crying to elicit some pity' (2017 [1994]: 250), but at the same time she cross-examines her own motives for demonstrating her vulnerability: 'I don't know if I am trying to look meek and defensive, or if this is a reflex and I really *am* meek and defensive [sic].[6] I have no natural gestures left' (2003 [2002]: 144). Like Roth's Sabbath, a former puppeteer and theatre director, Wurtzel's performances are liable to take even herself in, at which point the performance arguably ceases to be a performance. More radically, the terms in which she couches her reflections raise the possibility that no such distinction exists: 'natural gestures' might be read as an oxymoron, while the term 'reflex' (suggesting an involuntary physical reaction to a particular stimulus) seems at odds with the idea of a spontaneously lived experience, the notion that she 'really [is] meek and defensive'.

Wurtzel repeatedly emphasises her sense of self-alienation, but her self-dislocation is both exacerbated and complicated by this compulsive second-guessing of her own motives and actions. These ambiguities are reflected in the paradigms Wurtzel uses to situate her narratives in a wider cultural context. In *Prozac Nation*, she turns repeatedly to the metaphor of life as a film - '[m]y life has become a tearjerker movie' (29) – and in particular to the fantasy of inhabiting the roles played by female film stars. This begins with her comparing herself as a child to 'the daughter in the film *The Goodbye Girl*' (18). As an adult, she identifies herself with 'Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, the independent gal in New York beaming to be on her own' (131) and imagines '*being Ali MacGraw in* Love Story *or Ali MacGraw in* Goodbye, Columbus, *or anybody else in anything else*' (88, italics in original); or 'one of those independent women like Barbara Stanwyck in *Baby Face* or Jean Harlow in *Red-Headed Woman* or any *film noir* star in any old movie' (202-3). These apparently arbitrary references are freighted with significance; part of Wurtzel's self-conscious strategies of self-representation. The daughter in *The Goodbye Girl* (based on a play by Neil Simon) is charming and precocious but also vulnerable; Holly Golightly (the protagonist of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* played by Hepburn in the film adaptation) may appear to be an 'independent gal' but she is also a 'real phony', a figure who, as Abigail Cheever argues, epitomises the paradoxical nature of authenticity in post-war American culture (Wurtzel's use of 'gal', hinting at Golightly's naïve optimism, inflects her identification with Capote's heroine with an ironic detachment).[7]

The other examples listed above also exhibit tensions – between the specificity of the initial references and the generic formulations that follow them. In the first case, Wurtzel names two landmark films of the turn of the 1960s/70s in which Ali MacGraw plays romantic heroines. In the second case, she names two iconic female movie stars of the 1930s, playing similar roles – *femme fatales* who unapologetically seduce and manipulate a series of men to advance their careers and social status – in films released less than a year apart. In both cases, the final qualifying clauses – '*or anybody else in anything else*', 'or any *film noir* star in any old movie' – seem to be after-thoughts designed to disown the very particular identifications implied by what precedes them. In their studied pose of indifference, however, they only serve to highlight the significance of these identifications. In the case of the Barbara Stanwyck and Jean Harlow roles, the attraction is obvious: they exemplify the 'difficult women' whom Wurtzel would go on to celebrate in *Bitch*, the book that appeared in between her two memoirs (in fact she discusses *Baby Face* and *Red-Headed Woman* in one of the sections of that book). They are proto-feminist figures, representing ideas of female empowerment and self-determination. However, the Ali MacGraw roles are more complex. Although both Brenda Patmikin and Jenny Cavilleri are attractive Radcliffe students, the resemblance ends there. In *Goodbye, Columbus*, an adaptation of the novella that made Philip Roth's name, the character whom MacGraw plays is part of a *nouveau riche* Jewish family – a Jewish American Princess figure – whose sense of entitlement ultimately alienates her working-class lover, Neil Klugman. In *Love Story*, on the other hand, it is MacGraw's character, Jenny, who is from a working-class background, a fact that drives a wedge between her lover, Oliver Barrett IV, and his wealthy family. *Goodbye, Columbus* is a satirical comedy which ends with the lovers separating, ostensibly over an argument about contraception, but really because Klugman cannot reconcile his artistic sensibilities with the materialistic values of the Patimkins. *Love Story*, in contrast, is the 'tearjerker movie' *par excellence*: Oliver and Jenny marry and forge a life together in spite of the former being disowned by his family, before Jenny is diagnosed with terminal cancer, leading to a death-bed scene that is one of the most celebrated, imitated and parodied in Hollywood history.

Brenda Patimkin and Jenny Cavilleri represent two versions of Wurtzel: she sees herself as both a privileged 'nice Jewish girl' (2003 [2002]: 99), albeit one who goes to Harvard, like Oliver Barrett, rather than Radcliffe; and as a tragic figure who is destined to die young, with her potential unfulfilled.[8] In fact, the figure of Brenda Patimkin, though never explicitly named in *Prozac Nation*, is implicitly invoked elsewhere in the book. Consider the following passage, in which Wurtzel describes how her mother sabotages one of her teenage romances:

> I befriended a teenage boy named Paul … But when my mother found out about Paul – who was, she noticed, a *black teenager* and therefore probably on drugs – she somehow dug up the money to pay for tennis lessons at school … it wasn't until I was sent away to summer camp and first confronted the Jappy girls from Long Island, who had hours of private lessons and country club memberships and courts in their back yards, that I began to doubt that I could grow up to be Chris Evert. (21, italics in original)

Here Wurtzel both identifies herself with Patimkin and in opposition to her. Having spied Brenda playing tennis at a private club where he is taken as a guest by his cousin, Neil gets her number and rings her up in order to ask her out. However, when he does so Brenda cannot recall meeting him and, after Neil identifies himself as 'dark', asks 'Are you a Negro?' (Roth 1970 [1969]: 5).[9] Symbolically, then, Klugman represents the working-class Jews whose social status in America was precarious before they became sufficiently affluent and assimilated to move to the suburbs; in other words, before they became, as Karen Brodkin put it, 'whitefolks'.[10] In this context, the prejudices of Wurtzel's mother – whom Wurtzel also describes as 'a nice Jewish girl from Long Island' (2017 [1994]: 5) – echo those of Mrs Patmikin, who regards Klugman with suspicion because of his background, and her attempt to sabotage Lizzy's relationship with Paul recalls Mrs Patimkin's efforts to drive a wedge between her daughter and Neil. On the other hand, whereas Brenda is entirely at home on the tennis courts of her private club (when Neil arrives to pick her up for their first date she makes him wait for her to finish her match), Lizzy feels alienated from the 'Jappy girls … [with] country club memberships', placing her in a position closer to Neil than Brenda in the symbolic social order of Roth's novella.

If (Ali MacGraw as) Brenda Patimkin represents Wurtzel's ambivalent attitude towards her Jewish background, then (MacGraw as) Jenny Cavilleri represents her equally ambivalent feelings about her illness.[11] Abigail Cheever claims that 'being Jewish and being depressed are both understood by Wurtzel as identities – modes of being rather than modes of behaving' (Cheever 2010: 97), but I would argue that this is a false dichotomy. For Wurtzel, all the identities she tries out are at once self-conscious experiments – provisional modes of behaving rather than fixed modes of being – and at the same time expressions of an inescapable, authentic kernel of being.

At one point in *Prozac Nation*, high on ecstasy, Wurtzel retreats with her friend Ruby into the swimming pool at her hall of residence in Harvard before experiencing a suffocating sensation.

I started to think that I might just like to fall into the water and drown. Die ... like William Holden's corpse in the opening shot of *Sunset Boulevard* ... or drown deliberately like Virginia Woolf ...

Was I scared of suffocating to death or was I kind of wishing for it? (123)

Once again, Wurtzel uses cultural references to dramatise different versions of herself.

She begins, again, by framing her experience in terms of iconic films and film stars. Although she seems to identify herself in the first instance with William Holden, whose body is shown floating face-down in the famous opening of *Sunset Boulevard*, it is his murderer, Norma Desmond, the faded silent film star deluded by fantasies of a glorious come-back, who is the unnamed double for Wurzel here. This is made clear by a chain of association, from Wurtzel's whimsical reflection that she 'might just like to fall into the water and drown', to the invocation of Virginia Woolf, whose struggles with mental illness ended with her suicide by drowning. The missing link in this chain is implicitly Desmond because, after murdering the screenwriter Joe Gillis (the character played by William Holden), Desmond (played by the real-life former silent movie star Gloria Swanson) threatens and then attempts suicide. For Desmond, life is one long performance: *Sunset Boulevard* ends with her making a grand entrance into what she imagines is the set of her new movie, while in fact she is about to be arrested for Gillis's murder by the police, who play along with her fantasy by pretending to be members of a film crew.

Wurtzel is, similarly, always 'on', always 'in character':

People at school were sufficiently eccentric to offer a new playground for my neuroses, to create novel opportunities for acting out. But in the end, after the curtain dropped over these little dramas, they all seemed able to go back to their rooms and back to their lives ... Only I seemed to be left behind, crying and screaming about wanting more ... wanting to feel something. (Wurtzel 2017 [1994]: 92-93)

Here Wurtzel represents her depression as, in Cheever's terms, both a 'mode of behaving' and a 'mode of being'. The metaphor of the playground as a space in which she is able to 'act out' her neuroses, and the use of the self-deprecating phrase 'little dramas', suggest that the young Lizzy is self-consciously playing a role, or rather performing a series of roles, for an audience. And yet the final part of this passage suggests, again, that the distinction between a staged, public collapse and a private breakdown is a hazy one at best. Her suffering is at one and the same time a histrionic display and an authentic expression of grief. Moreover, she is constantly questioning her own motives and hedging her explanations of her actions with caveats. She begins the passage introducing her suicidal thoughts at the pool with two qualifications – 'I *started to think* that I *might* etc.' (my italics) – and ends it with a question that she leaves unanswered, containing a further equivocation: 'Was I scared of suffocating to death or was I *kind of* wishing for it?' (my italics). Likewise, she inflects her recollection of her 'dramas' at school with a note of uncertainty about both her own state of mind and that of her peers: 'they all *seemed* able to go back to their rooms and back to their lives ... Only I *seemed* to be left behind' (my italics).

On the one hand, Wurtzel sees herself and her illness as self-conscious constructs: 'I had developed a persona that could be extremely melodramatic and entertaining ... [with] all the selling points of madness, all the aspects of performance art' (2017 [1994]: 303). On the other hand, she feels utterly helpless, 'at the mercy of something that felt like a hive of bees buzzing in my head' (135). In the end, the inauthentic performance of mental illness becomes, or reveals, its authentic manifestation: '[i]t seems that I have spent so much time trying to convince people that I really am depressed ... but now that it's finally true, I don't want to admit it' (207). For Wurtzel, admitting the 'truth' of her mental illness – in the sense of acknowledging it as 'a mode of being' – is more traumatic than the experience of it as 'a mode of behaving'. It is only when she finally receives her diagnosis and is prescribed Prozac that she makes a suicide attempt. Yet *Prozac Nation* is also one long exercise in admitting – in the sense of confessing – to her condition of being 'young and depressed in America'. This confessional impulse is legitimised – and even valorised – through another set of cultural references, the discovery of which Wurtzel presents as an epiphany-in-waiting: 'I didn't know [as a young girl] about Joni Mitchell or Djuna Barnes or Virginia Woolf or Frida Kahlo yet. I didn't know there was a proud legacy of women who'd turned overwhelming depression into prodigious art' (31). Woolf recurs later in the book, as we have seen, as does Mitchell (at one point Wurtzel claims that she 'considered taking the term off from school to write a whole book about Joni Mitchell') (233). However, the most important role models for Wurtzel are the confessional poets who emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly those – like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath – who wrote extensively about their suicidal impulses and eventually committed suicide.

The simile of the hive of bees, quoted above, is an implicit allusion to Sylvia Plath's bee poems (in particular, perhaps, 'The Arrival of the Bee Box', in which the poetic persona complains of 'the noise that appals' her emanating from the box), but most of Wurtzel's references to the confessional poets are explicit. These references begin in the Prologue to *Prozac Nation* when Wurtzel observes: 'I'm starting to wonder if I might not be one of those people like Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath who are just better off dead' (xxiv) and continue throughout that book and *More, Now, Again*.[12] Once again, there is a tension here – between the tentative way in which she introduces this thought ('starting to wonder if I might') and the bold assertion that there are people who are 'better off dead'. However, the most significant aspect of this statement is the implication that Wurtzel believes she might belong in the company of Sexton and Plath not just because, like them, she is someone for whom suicide makes sense, but because she shares with them an exceptional talent. In this sense, Wurtzel's memoirs can be read not just as accounts of her struggles with mental illness and addiction but as discursive performances of those struggles: as self-conscious attempts to authenticate her credentials both as the spokesperson of a generation of ‘young and depressed [people] in America’ and as an artist, specifically one whose work should be situated in the canon of confessional writing. In the final section of this essay, I want to trace the way in which this tension – between presenting her experiences as representative of her generation of American youth and as exceptional – structures the confessional discourse of *Prozac Nation*.

In a 2017 afterword to *Prozac Nation*, Wurtzel claims that ‘she was encouraged to make it a sociological study of people my age who were depressed like me’ but that she ‘insisted on the truth’ and that the title of the book was just a marketing strategy, ‘to make it sound not like a memoir’ (331). Yet in *Prozac Nation* and *More, Now, Again*, she presents herself as both exemplifying the *Zeitgeist* – ‘a Census Bureau statistic or some sort of case study on the changing nature of the American family in the late twentieth century’ (2017 [1994]: 14) – and as ‘terminally unique’ (2003 [2002]: 311), ‘a person who had no idea how to function within the boundaries of the normal, non-depressive world’ (2017 [1994]: 322) and who cannot be defined according to the social norms.

Wurtzel's claims to exceptionalism begin with her account of her formative years. In *Prozac Nation* she lists some of the achievements of the young Lizzy:

I'd been in Pampers commercials at six months, had done Hi-C and Starburst ads later, had written a series of pet care books at age six, had adapted ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ into a play at age seven, had turned construction paper and Magic Markers and tempera paint into an illustrated chapbook called *Penny the Penguin* at age eight. (xxxii)

This version of Lizzy – both ‘popular’ and feared among her peers (she claims to have been ‘the class bully’) (xxxii) – seems implausibly precocious, as Wurtzel herself acknowledges when she observes that ‘I was starting to sound like a character in a TV movie with a title like *The Best Little Girl in the World* or *Most Likely to Succeed*’ (170).[13] However, this doesn't prevent her from upping the ante, claiming that while her parents sent her to sleepaway camp as ‘yet another bid in making me normal’, had she been left to her own devices she ‘would have probably read the collected works of Tolstoy, or at least Tolkien’ and ‘might have … written another of the children's books about animals I had started turning out regularly at the age of five’ (59). In spite of the humorous slippage from Tolstoy to Tolkien, implicitly acknowledging that there is an element of hyperbole in these claims of precocity, the overall tendency here is one of inflation: the earlier claim to have produced ‘an illustrated chapbook … at age eight’ is superseded by the assertion that Lizzy had begun producing these books ‘regularly’ from the age of five onwards.

Whether or not Wurtzel is guilty of exaggeration here is neither here nor there: what matters is the lengths she goes to emphasise Lizzy's difference from her peers; to insist that her parents' decision to send her to camp against her will was part of a doomed project to 'mak[e]' her 'normal'. This is part of a larger narrative in which Wurtzel invests heavily: that of an 'adorable and charming' 'golden girl' (20) with an 'overwhelming sense of invincibleness' (21), suddenly and inexplicably laid low. The importance of this narrative is reinforced by the fact that Wurtzel reprises it later in *Prozac Nation*, when reflecting on her struggles with depression at Harvard:

> It wasn't supposed to be like this. I was supposed to be an exotic little American princess, a beautiful and brilliant bespectacled literature student reading Foucault and Faulkner at my rolltop desk in my garret room with hardwood floors, full of whimsical plants and chimes hanging from the ceiling and posters of movie stars from the forties and bands from the sixties on the slightly paint-chipped ivory walls. (88)

Again, there is a note of self-parodic humour here. Wurtzel is keenly aware that the images she presents here, both of her imagined self – as an earnest, attractive intellectual – and of the surroundings in which this idealised version of herself exists – from the stereotypical 'garret room' to the 'paint-chipped ivory walls' – are romanticised. The terms 'exotic' and 'whimsical', and the alliterative pairing of Foucault and Faulkner (echoing the equally incongruous 'Tolstoy and Tolkien' from the earlier passage), reinforce the sense that Wurtzel's tongue is in her cheek. Yet the notion that it 'wasn't supposed to be like this' is seductive and tenacious, underpinned by Wurtzel's paradoxical conviction that she was both destined for great things and doomed to implode before her potential could be fully realised. Hence even in the midst of her worst breakdowns – at the start of Middle School and in her first year at college – Wurtzel still excels academically, 'somehow manag[ing] to win the school Brochos Bee, the Jewish equivalent of a spelling bee, five years in a row' (20) and 'somewhere down the road ... manag[ing] to pick up the 1986 *Rolling Stone* College Journalism Award for an essay ... about Lou Reed' (129). The formulations Wurtzel uses to report on these marks of distinction – 'somehow manag[ing]' and 'somewhere ... managing' – imply both that her achievements were improbable, if not miraculous, given her poor mental health, and that they were further evidence of her peculiar, gifted 'madness'. Depression, she claims, endowed her with 'extreme perspicacity' while at the same time rendering her defenceless, 'as if [she] had only thin gauze bandages to shield me from everything [she] saw' (36).[14]

Ultimately, Wurtzel's claims to be exceptional are ambivalent. They are often self-pitying ('No one will ever understand the potency of my memories') and self-aggrandising ('I alone knew the truth about life, knew that it was all a miserable downward spiral ... [and] sooner or later we were all going to die') but they are almost invariably laced with self-irony (60, 259). In the epilogue to *Prozac Nation*, Wurtzel expresses reservations about how widespread the use of Prozac has become, confessing that she 'feel[s]compelled to remind people that ... [she's] been taking it longer than anyone else on earth (317). Commenting on this passage, Abigail Cheever observes, with some distaste, that 'Wurtzel implies that there are people on Prozac, and there are people on Prozac who are *really* depressed – the others are phonies, posers, wannabes with no business claiming to be depressed at all' (Cheever 2010: 99). Yet Cheever's claim is at best a half-truth. She ignores the fact that Wurtzel is only too aware of the dangers of dividing Prozac users into those whose need is authentic and those who have jumped onto a bandwagon: 'I don't know if I ought to be more dismayed by my need for Prozac one-upmanship, or by the fact that it isn't entirely unwarranted' (317). Arguably, Wurtzel is trying to have it both ways here: to pre-empt criticism of her superior sense of entitlement by registering that she is 'dismayed' by her own 'need for Prozac one-upmanship', while at the same time insisting that this sense is 'isn't entirely unwarranted' (the use of the double negative preserving a hesitancy that may or may not be purely rhetorical).

It may be tempting to dismiss Wurtzel's equivocations as strategically defensive, but alongside the tendency towards self-justification there is an impulse towards self-incrimination, one that is particularly conspicuous in her deconstruction of her desire to see herself as *sui generis*. Consider this (clearly self-satirical) statement from *More, Now, Again*: 'I cannot admit that I am just like all the other addicts who fuck up. Maybe it happens to everybody else, but that does not mean it happens to me' (2003 [2002]: 311). In this case, it is precisely her conviction that she is not like other addicts – or rather her refusal to acknowledge that she is like other addicts – that proves that she is like all other addicts. This paradox is anticipated in *Prozac Nation*, because, while Wurtzel often highlights her difference, she also situates herself as a product of her social-historical circumstances.

This aspect of *Prozac Nation* begins with the book's title – and subtitle ('Young and Depressed in America') – both of which imply that Wurtzel's experiences are emblematic: that she is a synecdoche for her generation and/or that the nation is a metonym for Prozac-users, for whom she is a spokesperson. It continues with Wurtzel's claim, in the opening pages that 'the sixties counterculture – along with its alter ego, eighties greed – has imprinted itself all over me', although she characteristically anticipates the possibility that this might appear to be an over-determined position, pointing out that 'I hate to think that personal development . . . can be reduced to explanations as simple as "It was the times"' (3). Later, reflecting on her weakness for dim-witted Gentile boys who are at Harvard only by virtue of their family wealth, she identifies herself as part of a particular social phenomenon: 'smart urban Jewish girls who worked as waitresses and typists to earn tuition money' and yet, bewilderingly, 'chose to take up with these guys for whom CliffsNotes were invented' (97). When she is rushed into the hospital in the throes of a miscarriage, hysterical and screaming, Wurtzel notes that 'the market and I both crashed at the same time' (165). This is, I think, an allusion to F.Scott Fitzgerald's essay 'The Crack-Up', in which there is an implied correspondence between the Great Depression and Fitzgerald's own depression (though he never uses that word).[15]

Cumulatively, these moments contribute a sociological aspect to Wurtzel's unapologetically self-involved narrative, but the most explicit articulation of this correspondence between her personal plight and that of the other citizens of Prozac nation is withheld until the epilogue to *Prozac Nation*:

> Perhaps what has come to be placed in the catchall category of depression is really a guardedness, a nervousness, a suspicion about intimacy, any of many perfectly normal reactions to a world that seems to be perilously lacking in the basic guarantees that our parents expected: a marriage that would last, employment that was secure, sex that wasn't deadly. (315)

In one sense, this passage is very much of its time (in particular the coded reference to AIDs dates it). In another sense, however, it is part of a tradition of confessional writing in which authors frame their private experiences in the context of issues of public concern; present their lives as microcosms of the life of the nation. More specifically, it may owe something to another of Wurtzel's precursors in the art of the confessional essay: Joan Didion.[16] In the title essay of *The White Album*, Didion abruptly inserts an italicised excerpt of a psychiatric report describing the patient's '*fundamentally … depressive view of the world around her*' (Didion 1993 [1979]: 14). The patient turns out to be Didion herself, who is admitted to a private clinic suffering from '*vertigo and nausea*'. Looking back on these events, however, Didion notes, dryly, that 'vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968' (15). Similarly, Wurtzel suggests that what Didion's doctor characterised as 'a depressive view of the world' might be an entirely rational, 'perfectly normal' response to the collapse, towards the end of the twentieth century, of many of the foundations on which post-war American prosperity and stability had been built. As a consequence of these seismic social shifts, and the mass prescription of Prozac that ensued, Wurtzel claims, she underwent another transformation, from a 'freakishly depressed person' to a 'downright trendy' (310) poster girl for the new miracle drug.

The catalyst for this transformation was, of course, *Prozac Nation* itself, whose success inspires characteristically ambivalent feelings in its author. On the one hand, Wurtzel claims, hyperbolically, that 'memoir was not a category of book' prior to the publication of *Prozac Nation*, presenting herself as a pioneer of a new kind of confessional writing (331). On the other hand, she expresses a queasiness at the publishing trend for '[m]isery-chic' that it helped to initiate (325). It is this confessional aspect of the book, with its attendant questions of authenticity, that has provoked most controversy in the limited scholarship on Wurtzel's work. Abigail Cheever's assessment of *Prozac Nation* is so scathing as to virtually amount to a character assassination of Wurtzel. If Wurtzel were 'uneasy with her own depression', claims Cheever, 'she would hardly be writing a memoir of it, let alone one filled with revealing anecdotes' (Cheever 2010: 98-99). Joanne Muzak sees the shift in emphasis from Wurtzel's depression in *Prozac Nation* to her drug addiction in *More, Now, Again*[17] as fatally compromising the authenticity of the account she presents of her mental illness in the former, a betrayal with its roots in Wurtzel's position of socio-economic privilege: 'Drug addiction continues to carry an ominous and legitimate urgency, particularly for the white, middle-class woman who violates normative femininity by being an addict, while the depressed woman, whose apparent passivity *exemplifies* normative femininity, struggles to find a way to tell her story that will validate her experiences and get her what she needs' (Muzak 2008: 106). Kathy Farquharson takes a less judgemental approach, arguing that 'Wurtzel's disclosures … make a public spectacle of a particularly messy life' in such a way as to highlight the reader's complicity: '[e]very spectator requires a spectacle … The writer and reader of confessional autobiography enjoy a similar symbiosis' (Farquharson 2011: 45, 46). Of all the critics to have written on Wurtzel, Dwight Fee is the most sympathetic to her peculiarly self-conscious confessionalism, suggesting that 'no instance of depression, reflexive or non-reflexive, is any more or less "real" than another' but that reflexivity of the kind that Wurtzel exhibits 'turn[s] many depressions - in all of their constituted elaborateness - *also* into discursive projects that work back into experience', so that 'it does not necessarily lessen or trivialize depression's "legitimacy."' (Fee 2000: 95-96).

In a review of Rachel Kushner's collection of essays, *The Hard Crowd* (2021), Olivia Laing refers, somewhat reprovingly, to 'the millennial cult of the personal essay, with its performance of pain, its earnest display of wounds received and lessons learned' (Laing 2021: 35). Wurtzel is often taken to exemplify, or at least to have partly inspired, the worst excesses of this 'cult', but it seems to me that her work is best understood not as the forerunner of 'misery memoirs' such as Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called It* (1995) series but rather as the continuation of a tradition of confessional writing that might be traced back as far as St. Augustine.[18] In 'The Crack-Up', Fitzgerald claims, aphoristically, that 'the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function' (Fitzgerald 2017 [1936]: 193). For me, Wurtzel passes this test, producing work that, even at its most self-indulgent, is complicated by a nuanced sense of its own excesses. Rather than insisting on its own authenticity, *Prozac Nation* rejects the conventional binary of the authentic/inauthentic. Instead of a stable, unitary self, Wurtzel negotiates the confessional impulse to present a mediated series of selves that are always in flux; discursively constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. For this, she deserves to be seen as an artist, rather than as someone simply spilling her guts out.

Notes

1. This is a quotation from *Prozac Nation* (Wurtzel 2017: 134), in which Wurtzel imagines the (unspoken) responses that her co-workers in an office might have had to the 'brutal, minute details of my life' that she routinely shares with them. Characteristically, she goes on to reflect that what might have seemed to them like raw, authentic confession was in fact 'just shtick, false intimacy at best' (141).
2. It is a strategically slippery *idea* of authenticity that Wurtzel invokes, and that I refer to throughout this essay, rather than a fixed, clearly defined category of truth or sincerity. For an account of the contested nature of the term and the different ways in which it has been mobilised in post-war American culture, see Cheever 2010: *passim*.
3. Much later in the book, Wurtzel recalls this episode as a pivotal moment in the progress of her depression: 'not so long ago … I was a little girl trying on a new persona, trying on morbid depression as some kind of punk rock statement, and now here I am, the real thing' (207). Here again, the phrase 'the real thing' is fraught with ambiguity, particularly because it seems deliberately to invoke the (in)famous Coca-Cola advertising campaign of the 1970s that implicitly called into question the very authenticity it seemed to claim.

4. It seems to me, then, that Abigail Cheever's claim that Wurtzel 'imagines that depression is the self – fundamentally and essentially' is an over-simplification. (Cheever 2010: 98)
5. In *Bitch* (1998), her celebration of 'difficult women' (Wurtzel 1999 [1998]: *passim*), Wurtzel alludes implicitly to Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), although it doesn't appear in the book's bibliography.
6. From the context, I infer that by 'defensive' Wurtzel means 'defenceless'.
7. See Cheever 2010: 42-55.
8. The epigraph to *Prozac Nation*, taken from Marguerite Duras's novel *The Lover* (1984), reinforces, by implication, the idea that Wurtzel's own life had been set on a tragic trajectory during her infancy: 'Very early in my life it was too late' (np).
9. I wish to acknowledge here a specific debt to Bryan Cheyette, who first brought the significance of this moment to my attention, and a more general debt to the work of Dean Franco on Roth and race.
10. See Brodkin 1999: *passim*.
11. MacGraw's roles as Brenda and Jenny are implicitly conflated again later in *Prozac Nation* when Wurtzel describes the dynamics of her romantic relationship with a former college friend, Archer. Like Oliver Barrett IV, Archer is a 'picture-perfect handsome' Harvard graduate from a 'Boston brahmin' family (224). However, Wurtzel also characterises him as 'one of those Yankee gentlemen who collects hysterical Jewesses as good buddies because we are as foreign and exotic to him as the natives in Tahiti were to Gauguin' (224), which recalls Neil Klugman's identification with the black boy who becomes fascinated with Gaugin's Tahiti paintings in *Goodbye, Columbus* (Neil encourages him to take out a book of these paintings from the library where he works and subsequently ensures that he doesn't have to return it by rebuffing the inquiries of an old white man who enquires about the book).
12. Later in *Prozac Nation* Wurtzel includes Plath's poem 'Tulips' in a list of works whose 'sorrow and terror . . . never seem mitigated by exposure' (235), cites lines from 'Elm' as the epigraph to Chapter Thirteen (266) and, in an afterword to the 2017 edition of the book, claims, with obvious pride, that she 'was described as Sylvia Plath with the ego of Madonna' in the wake of the publication of the first edition of the book (331). She also compares herself to Sexton again – 'I keep thinking about all those famous manic-depressives like Anne Sexton who weren't diagnosed until late in life, so they suffered with these horrible highs and lows like I do' (127) – and refers to 'those lines in the Anne Sexton poem "Wanting to Die", in which she says that the urge to kill herself is with her always, even when she has nothing against life' (295). *More, Now, Again* is peppered with quotations from Sexton: from 'Wanting to Die' again (Wurztel 2003 [2002]: 219); from 'The Addict' (101, 139); and from 'Just Once' (261). It also cites lines from Plath's 'Edge' as the epigraph to Chapter Sixteen (193).
13. A more apt analogy – albeit one not available to Wurtzel when she was writing *Prozac Nation* – might be to one of the child prodigies who recur in Wes Anderson's films (the first of which appeared later in the 1990s).
14. I wonder if Wurtzel might have had Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton in mind again, specifically these lines from Plath's 'Ariel': 'And I, stepping from this skin/Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces/Step to you from the black car of Lethe,/Pure as a baby' and these from Sexton's 'Song For a Red Nightgown': 'The girl drifts up out of her nightgown and its color/Her wings are fastened onto/her shoulders like bandages./The butterfly owns her now/It covers her and her wounds'.
15. Fitzgerald recounts how 'as the Twenties passed, with my own twenties marching a little ahead of them' he strives to 'hold in balance the sense of futility of effort and the sense of the necessity to struggle . . . through the common ills—domestic, professional, and personal' (Fitzgerald 2017 [1936]).
16. Evidence of Wurtzel's familiarity with *The White Album* is to be found in *More, Now, Again*, where she refers explicitly to what she calls the 'arid essays' in the collection (118).

17. This move is prefigured by the moment in *Prozac Nation* when Wurtzel 'f[inds] [her]self wishing for a *real* ailment . . . longing to be a junkie or a cokehead or something – something real' (48). Yet the iteration – and initial italicisation – of the word 'real' here paradoxically draws attention to its problematic status, which I think complicates Muzak's reading.
18. It is no coincidence that the epigraph to *More, Now, Again* is taken from St. Augustine's *Confessions*.

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