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Affect and sibling relationships: a humanities perspective.

I'd just like to outline a few talking points generated by my own interest in affect, relationships and storytelling but also provoked by my teaching of a third year undergraduate module entitled *Madness, the body, and literature* at the University of Lincoln which is a survey course that starts with French decadence, moves through Freud and Dora, shellshock, existentialism, anti-psychiatry and concludes with thinking about a selection of contemporary therapeutic discourses, particularly those generated by the self-help industry.

One of the things I have noticed throughout this module so far is that my students are very interested in bringing their own stories and experiences to bear in their working through of both the novels and theoretical texts on the module. In fact, sometimes it is difficult to get them to separate the experiences of a character in, say, Janice Galloway's 1989 novel *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, about a woman suffering from anorexia, from their own cultural and personal understanding of the condition. That is to say, when it comes to *teaching* stories, the lines between real-life and fiction are difficult to negotiate and seem more so the nearer to the contemporary moment that we get in the module. Whilst the early 20th century hysteric's story seems distant to my students, the 1990s' anorexic's or depressive's [this week we are discussing *Prozac Nation*] does not. It is tricky, as a lecturer, but also interesting as an exercise, to keep my students on-topic when it comes to

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discussing such novels and the issues they raise. And I think this difficulty has a lot to do with the affective relationships that novels about mental health issues potentially, and perhaps, specifically invite with their readers. Particularly when reading a novel such as *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* which experiments with form as a way to illustrate the central character's fragmented thinking and ontological insecurity, to use R.D Laing's phrase, the reader is encouraged to *inhabit* the mind and body of the unwell protagonist. As such, my students often report these stories, in particular, leaving them questioning their own mental coherency: such is their affective power. This was also particularly the case when we read Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist classic, *Nausea*, a few weeks ago. "It left me feeling sick", one student reported. Another complained "I just wanted him to shut up: it was so claustrophobic."

All of this is a rather long-winded way of illustrating that both the telling and consuming of stories affects us, sometimes in ways that we cannot predict and that might feel uncomfortable, sickening, stifling or upsetting. One of the things that really interests me about Martha's work is her ability to generate and encourage these affective moments with the viewer, whilst still retaining a simple and somehow parodically child-like form in her art. The stories that "work", I would argue [and I appreciate that there's a lot contained in that word "work" that would bear unpacking] are the stories that don't try too hard to make their audience feel

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anything, least of all what they want their audience to feel. The stories that work are stories that manage to transcend the author's or artist's personal experience [presuming there has even been such an experience; it's too easy to assume with telling stories about mental pathologies that such stories are always autobiographically motivated] whilst also retaining the ability to inspire sympathetic or even empathetic feeling. The stories that work, I would argue, are stories that tread the tightrope between the specific and the cultural or societal. I hesitate to use the word 'universal' here, because I think we need to be very careful when describing any kind of human experience as universal, or legible as such.

Moving back to my professional experience of teaching stories, briefly now, I'd like to just think about the notion of the coherent vs. the incoherent story and how we might problematize or at least speculate about this notion. In my recent seminars, we have spent a large amount of time thinking about and returning to Steven Marcus' contention, a propos the talking cure, that:

[the ability to tell] a coherent story is in some matter connected with mental health [...] and this, in turn, implies assumptions of the broadest and deepest kind about both the nature of coherence and the form and structure of human life. On this reading, human life is, ideally, a connected and coherent story, with all the details in explanatory place, and with everything (or as close to everything as is practically possible) accounted for, in its

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proper causal or other sequence. Inversely, illness amounts at least in part to suffering from an incoherent story or an inadequate narrative account of oneself. [Marcus, 71].

By Marcus' account [or at least, by his account of Freud], it is not just the ability to tell a story about one's life that is 'in some matter connected with mental health' but the ability to tell a *coherent* story. Coherency, for Marcus here, means a story that is linear in its structure, causal in its logic and connected in its form. 'All the details', he comments '[are] in [their] explanatory place' in the coherent story and 'everything [is] accounted for'. Conversely, the incoherent story, one presumably that is non- or anti-linear, characterised by fragmentation, repetition and lacunae, gaps, hesitations and stutterings, is a sign, for Marcus, following Freud, of illness. We can take this one step further and say that, in Marcus' formulation, an incoherent story is not just a sign of illness but might even *cause* illness. 'Illness amounts', he says 'at least in part to suffering from an incoherent story or an inadequate narrative account of oneself.' Telling stories wrongly can make us sick, says Marcus. And that's before we even get on to thinking about telling the *wrong* stories: a possibility that raises all kinds of questions about what we tell, and don't tell, and why.

When I initially discussed this notion of the coherent story with my students, one of the things we talked about was the feasibility and, indeed, desirability of being

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able to tell a coherent story. I asked them to recall an event in their own lives which struck them as important somehow. Would they be able to tell it coherently, according to Marcus' model of what coherency would look like? And, in telling this story coherently, would there be anything lost from the story itself, particularly in terms of their emotional experience of the event being recounted? In other words, in this emphasis on *coherent* storytelling, do we risk losing out on the affect, the feeling of that story as a lived, not just a recounted event?

What came out in our seminar conversation about these questions, a conversation that has continued throughout the module, is that whilst there is real value in the telling of a coherent story, and there has to be kind of a baseline for comprehension and communication in any story, there might feasibly also always be a gap between the event itself and the story or stories we tell about it. For coherency to happen, incoherency has to be excluded. And this, potentially, means excluding all of the features [we might even want to think of them as tics] that characterise daily experience: gaps in memory, repetitions, unresolvable, incomprehensible and unsalvageable feelings. That is to say, it might be that in telling a story about a life, or a life event, we are tempted to make that story much more coherent than it ever felt to us at the time. And there are risks in doing this, I think. We risk presenting ourselves to be more coherent, more comprehensible than we actually are. It could, of course, be the case that some people genuinely *do* experience themselves to be coherent and tell stories about themselves that are

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likewise. I can only say that this doesn't bear out in the stories and the people that I find the most interesting, nor in the novels that we read throughout the module. What happens in the gaps, incoherencies, margins, and repetitions of a story is often where the real interest lies, as far as I'm concerned.

I'd like to move on now to just a few thoughts about the notion of telling stories about siblings; a notion that has shaped Martha's conception of this event. I am an only child so, from a personal perspective, am summarily unqualified to speak to this as a theme. But from an academic and, specifically humanities perspective, the question of who gets to tell or own a story is a particularly interesting one to me. I don't have any well-rounded theories to offer here in response to this question. Rather, in a typical English lit lecturer's move, I'd like to offer some questions in response to this question.

Firstly: where do the parameters lie around a particular event in terms of whom that event 'belongs' to? Following the poststructuralist turn of the 1960s and 70s, the credo was that no-one 'owned' stories or, indeed, language. Just because I tell a story does not mean that it belongs to me: as soon as it is out there in the ether, it is anyone's and everyone's, to interpret as they see fit. Also, just because an event has happened to me does not grant me the sole preserve of the role of storyteller.

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Yet the lines of experience, prerogative and voice are very tangled ones here, it seems to me. That tangling leads to my second question: in telling a story, what are the risks? What are the risks, pertinently here, in terms of one's 'real-life' relationships, here, sibling relationships? If something happens to my brother or sister does it, by fact of our familial bond, always also happen to me? Do certain stories demand to be told, whatever these risks and, if so, is the storyteller really prepared to face the consequences of their telling? What about when money enters the equation? Should misery be sold? Should that which is painful be commodified? And is there a way of making art out of experience, of making stories that doesn't always immediately render these experiences as commodity?

The professor of philosophy, Richard Kearney writes in his work *On Stories* that 'telling stories is as basic to humans as eating' [Kearney, 3]. He goes on to argue that this act of telling a story was recognised as integral to human life from the roots of Western civilization onwards. Furthermore, Kearney adds 'the art of storytelling – defined as the dramatic imitating and plotting of human action – is what gives us a *shareable world*.' [3]. I think Kearney means several things by this notion that storytelling gives us a 'shareable world'. Firstly, I find fascinating [if not also frightening] Kearney's suggestion that without telling stories, we do not have a shareable or, indeed, *shared* world. What this implies to me and I think that this is an idea that goes to the heart of Martha's work and discussions happening at this

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event more broadly this evening is that, without the telling and sharing of stories, we might as well all live in different worlds. Stories bring us together. They can also, of course, tear us apart. The question is: are we ready for either? And what is not told, in the telling of stories? How might we listen, and tell, differently?

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