

**Do literary accounts add to, or detract from our
social scientific understanding of madness?**

The social scientific approach to madness¹ can be viewed as a reaction against the medical conception of mental illness, with its focus on detaining patients in asylums, which remained prevalent until the second half of the twentieth century at which point “it was faced with a sustained analysis and critique” (Pilgrim & Rogers 1999:147). By this time biological explanations of mental illness had been challenged by facts such as the post-traumatic stress, often referred to as ‘shell shock’, suffered by soldiers during and after World War I which indicated that “environmental factors were prime contributors to mental illness” (Mowbray, Grazier & Holter 2002:1). This consideration of external influences coupled with an acknowledgement that the sufferers themselves could offer meaning to their symptoms emerged in the 1960s and were elements of a movement which was dubbed anti-psychiatry; Brandon describes this as “accepting the consumers as an intelligible human beings, no matter how ‘mad’” (1991:42).

The idea of recognising the consumers’ voice as making a valid contribution to the mental illness debate has been increasingly accepted from the 1980s and can be seen in the growth of organisations concerned with supporting ‘survivors’ and ‘consumers’ of mental health services, and intervening and lobbying in policy decisions within the health service. An example of their inclusion can be seen in the report of a routine inspection earlier this year by the Healthcare Commission which commends the West Sussex NHS Trust for “involv[ing] service users in the trusts (*sic*) work” and “interview[ing] current service users to determine their levels of satisfaction with service provision” (2005:1).

Despite it only being within the past 25 years that the service users’ voice has been listened to, written accounts indicate that users have been endeavouring to publicise their experiences for at least 150 years. The fact that so few accounts are available must be attributed to the prevalence of the medical model, proponents of which would argue that in mental patients’ cases it is their brain that is sick, which

¹ The term ‘madness’ is used throughout to refer to a contemporary Western understanding of mental illness(es).

logically dictates that they are unable to reason. In turn, their incapacity for rational thought means that their views and opinions can be disregarded by the alleged experts in their case, the doctors. The service users' movement, although only one aspect of a social scientific understanding of madness, is important and of current interest, and by its very nature can be seen to cross the boundaries between science and Art and can readily be explored in literary accounts by those labelled as mad.

One of the earliest literary accounts of incarceration is *A Narrative of the Treatment Experienced by a Gentleman During a State of Mental Derangement* written by John Perceval after his release from two different asylums in 1834 and published in two volumes in 1838 and 1840. His, presumably, retrospective view of his time in Dr Fox's Brislington asylum and Dr Newington's Ticehurst asylum are summarised as providing a "maddening" regimen in which "any patient with normal, healthy impulses would indeed be driven mad by it", and rather than "curing madness" it systematically made "confusion worse confounded" (Porter 1999:185ff). As a result of his experiences Perceval got involved in the Alleged Lunatics' Friends Society in 1845 which was a group promoting the first collective action in the reform of the Victorian asylum system (Barnes 2002:1).

The poet John Clare was writing at a similar time, but unlike Perceval who looked back on his time in asylum, Clare's later works were all written from within Northamptonshire General Lunatic Asylum where he was held from 1841 until his death in 1864. His works were not widely known until after the centenary of his death, and this could be seen to be a reflection of the contemporary value given to the writings of an incarcerated poet; interestingly even Clare's entry in the new DNB only devotes one out of seven pages to his time in asylum, despite it accounting for a significant proportion of his life. Although Clare's asylums were "relatively humane by contemporary standards" (Lodge 2000:3), there is evidence of his unhappiness in his work. The 1844 poem *A Vision* (Appendix I) offers clear personal statements about his life: "I lost the love, of heaven above; / I spurn'd the lust, of earth below" (lines 1-2) which portrays his life as suspended between earth and heaven, where he is no longer cared for having rejected his earthly life. Later in the poem, his disassociation from earth is alluded to again as he "wrote 'till earth was but a

name” (line 12), he is now in a position where earth, and everything it meant to him in his life, is no longer a reality to him, presumably as a result of his mental state and the treatment and care he received.

A more famous poem from the same period, *I Am* (Appendix II), provides a deeper insight into both his life and existence. The opening line states “what I am, none cares or knows” indicating that he feels his identity is unknown and irrelevant to anyone now. Even his “friends forsake me like a memory lost” (line 2) denying him and distancing him not just as a memory, but as a lost memory somewhere between their imagination and his physical reality. This idea of being in limbo can also be seen in the structure of the poem in which, although written in a standard form, its sense runs on between the first two stanzas, “And yet I am, and live – like vapours tost // Into the nothingness of scorn and noise” (lines 6-7), creating a confused situation for the reader in which they are not sure where they stand, paralleling Clare’s own perception of his position.

The second stanza portrays the life that he leads in the asylum in uncomfortable terms: “the nothingness of scorn and noise” (line 7) seems to be a clear description of his environment both in the way he is treated, and the general hubbub of the place. Having “neither sense of life or joys” (line 9) suggests that he feels there is nothing worth living for, something which must have been compounded by his appreciation of the natural world in his youth, and this is confirmed in the following line as all he has left is “the vast shipwreck of my lifes esteems” (line 10) – everything he valued or hoped for has been destroyed; indeed, even those people that had been closest to him are now “rather stranger than the rest” (line 12).

Just over one hundred years after Clare wrote these poems Janet Frame was admitted to Seacliff Mental Hospital for the first of several stays, and her autobiography describes her experiences in much less oblique, but not dissimilar, terms to Clare’s. She recognises the loss of identify and parting from reality for her and the other patients, the judgement of insanity “separating me for ever from the former acceptable realities and assurances of everyday life” (69). Clare’s shipwrecked hopes are suffered by

other patients at Seacliff who “had no name, only a nickname, no past, no future, only an imprisoned Now” (69).

The doctors’ self-inferred authority is pronounced in Frame’s experiences, and under their direction she was given “the new electric shock treatment”, the effects of which she portrays chillingly:

my life was thrown out of focus. I could not remember. I was terrified. I behaved as others around me behaved. [...] I felt utterly alone. (95).

The treatment which purported to help her merely enforced her lack of identity, compelled her to behave in the same way as the other patients, and increased her isolation which on its own is a socially destructive action considering her extreme shyness. This was the first of “over two hundred applications of unmodified ECT [electro-convulsive therapy]”, she was to receive each she describes in terms of fear equivalent “to an execution” (109). On being discharged she believed that she was now “officially a non-person”, not unlike the “dehumanizing change” she witnessed in Nola after her leucotomy, again stressing the obliteration of the self brought about by her time in the asylum.

Frame’s discharge after the extensive course of ECT is again indicative of the doctors’ authority; in their opinion she was ‘cured’ and had been transformed into a ‘normal’ person, but she would still retain the schizophrenic label for the rest of her life. Having survived the ECT, narrowly avoided the leucotomy, and witnessed the other patients at Seacliff she believes that she never suffered from schizophrenia, but acknowledges that she has no power to challenge the label applied to her by the doctors, a privilege she lost when she was first admitted in 1945.

Even just considering these descriptions of asylum life, personal feelings, and the barbarity of the treatments briefly, the importance of valuing the service user’s opinion with regard to their condition and recovery is apparent, although it does seem to have been generally neglected. These literary records offer a comparatively rare insight for the social scientist by providing authoritative accounts, even if their

survival has only been guaranteed as the writers are 'celebrity' voices, rather than those of the less fortunate and less prestigious individuals such as Nola.

However, at the risk of following the medical model supporters' mentality, the question of whether these accounts should be approached with a degree of caution must be considered. Frame describes one of the results of her frequent ECT as "having my memory shredded and in some aspects weakened permanently or destroyed" (109), in questioning her own ability to remember she is surely casting an element of doubt on the detail of her thoughts and experiences as it was written decades after the events themselves. Porter suggests that such writings "cannot be taken at face value" and that it "would be silly simply to 'side' with the insane" (1987:231). He feels that although they write just as the sane do, their "nuances are often different [...] or words acquire slightly different meanings in madness" (232), indicating the need for a cautious approach to interpreting their work.

In considering literary accounts as a means of understanding any aspect of madness, it is surely helpful to look at the style of the book. *Angel at my table* is part of Frame's autobiography and as such is a personal record of events in her life, but within the work she refers to her fictional *Faces in the Water* in which she writes "factually of my own treatment and my thoughts about it" (70). In transferring her life experiences into a fictional framework, Frame is not the only psychiatric patient using this sub-genre of writing which, for want of a better term, could be called 'confessional fiction'. More recently Jenny Diski's *Then Again* uses her experiences in a work of fiction, and Sylvia Plath's pivotal 1961 book *The Bell Jar* is a "story", but its writing also satisfied "a more urgent need" (Hughes 1994:2) in providing a cathartic release for her. Although not necessarily relevant it is interesting to note that these three recognised writers all share a failed suicide attempt as being their initial symptom of madness.

If writing is seen to need interpreting before it can be understood, readers must be careful about the conclusions they choose to draw from it. However, in wider terms it must be seen that literary accounts can certainly add to aspects of the social scientific understanding of madness as the users' voice is an

important element in comprehending mental health, even if it is only within the past 25 years that this has been more widely accepted.

By virtue of writing about madness autobiographically, or in 'confessional fiction' accounts, writers are not only providing a voice for the service users, they are also increasing public awareness of the issues faced by service users in society. Informed writing about the subject also helps sate an educative need which is an important element in the provision of better care and support for people within the community.

(2021 words)

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Appendix I

A Vision – John Clare

from the Literature Online

(http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z400314176&divLevel=4&queryId=../session/1119555891_10931&area=Poetry&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=2Kb)

1

I lost the love, of heaven above;
I spurn'd the lust, of earth below;
I felt the sweets of fancied love,–
And hell itself my only foe.

2

I lost earth's joys, but felt the glow,
Of heaven's flame abound in me:
'Till loveliness, and I did grow,
The bard of immortality.

3

I loved, but woman fell away;
I hid me, from her faded fame:
I snatch'd the sun's eternal ray, –
And wrote 'till earth was but a name.

4

In every language upon earth,
On every shore, o'er every sea;
I gave my name immortal birth,
And kep't my spirit with the free.

Appendix II

I Am – John Clare

from the Literature Online

(http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=Z400314261&divLevel=4&queryId=../session/1119178138_6769&area=Poe try&forward=textsFT&warn=Yes&size=2Kb)

1

I am– yet what I am, none cares or knows;
 My friends forsake me like a memory lost:–
I am the self-consumer of my woes;–
 They rise and vanish in oblivion’s host,
Like shadows in loves frenzied stifled throes:–
And yet I am, and live–like vapours tost

2

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,–
 Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life or joys,
 But the vast shipwreck of my lifes esteems;
Even the dearest, that I love the best
Are strange–nay, rather stranger than the rest.

3

I long for scenes, where man hath never trod
 A place where woman never smiled or wept
There to abide with my Creator, God;
 And sleep as I in childhood, sweetly slept,
Untroubling, and untroubled where I lie,
The grass below–above the vaulted sky.