

Project Description — “Between Neurons and the Self: Concepts of Consciousness, Identity and Reality in Representations of Mental Illness in Anglophone Novels since 1950”

1. Current State of Research

The representation of illness – and mental illness in particular – in literature has come under increased scrutiny in recent decades. In *Madness in Literature* (1980), Lillian Feder discusses literary treatments of mental health as a means to reflect and challenge cultural suppositions, taking into account narratives ranging from Greek mythology to the writings of Sylvia Plath and Allen Ginsberg. Sander Gilman (1988) also takes on a historical viewpoint, encompassing not only literature but also visual and performing arts to illustrate the persistence of cultural stereotypes concerning illness and the ill.

Around the turn of the millennium, trauma became a prominent topic in literary theory. Theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra discussed psychoanalytical notions of trauma as a tool to study the cultural and personal effects of (historical) events. Caruth particularly stresses the benefit of studying literary representations of trauma, asserting that “literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing, and it is at this specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience and the language of literature meet” (3). About a decade after these observations had been published, the meeting point between trauma and literature received new prominence in literary treatments of the September 11 attacks and their aftermath (e.g. Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, Jess Walter’s *The Zero*).

While mental illness and trauma seem to be recurring themes in literature and art in general, T.J. Lustig and James Peacock make out a tendency in contemporary English and American literature to discuss mental conditions in neuroscientific rather than psychoanalytical terms, a phenomenon they call the “syndrome syndrome” (i). Their collection of essays features reflections on scientific influences on fiction writing. Patricia Waugh, for instance, identifies a tendency of favouring biomedical explanations for mental illness over self-reflection and the exploration of social factors in what she calls the “neo-phenomenological” (25). Stephen J. Burn, on the other hand, makes out a tendency in more recent novels of including the spiritual and mystical as “a certain resistance to the totalising claims of contemporary neuroscience” (47).

In general, critics observe a negotiation in contemporary literature between phenomenological, psychological and neuroscientific depictions of human behaviour. Additionally, some focus has been placed on the language writers use to convey abstract notions of mental illness. In their analysis of Marya Hornbacher’s *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*, Karsten Senkbeil and Nicola Hoppe explore the use of cognitive metaphors as tools for conveying the experience of mental illness and note that the book’s success is based on the fact that readers could understand the “creative renegotiations of metaphorical meaning” (14). In other words, the text succeeds in creating a discourse with which to convey subjective experiences of anorexia and bulimia to a wide audience.

However, language is not the only factor in representing mental illness in fiction writing. In his discussion of cognitively disabled narrators such as Benjy in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, Michael Bérubé points out that a narrator’s mental disability illuminates “the role of temporality, causality, and self-reflexivity in narrative” (576). It is not unlikely that this foregrounding of narrative techniques is an effect tangible in literary representations of other mental disorders as well.

The competing influences of neurological and psychoanalytical discourses in contemporary literature along with the ongoing theoretical discussion of the effects of the portrayal of mental disorders on fictional narratives offer a framework which should prove stimulating to an exploration of the fun-

damental concepts involved in the treatment of mental illness in contemporary anglophone literature.

2. Fundamental Questions, Methods and Aims

In my dissertation, I will focus on the way the treatment of psychological conditions in literary texts helps to explore concepts of 'consciousness', 'identity' and 'reality'. These explorations are meant to enable the discussion of current discourses on mental illness and the human mind and the way literature helps to broaden our understanding of the above-mentioned concepts. In particular, the relationship between the treatment of these concepts in literature, neuroscience and psychology shall be examined. Furthermore, I will study the treatment of concepts of 'sickness' and 'mental health' in literary texts in the light of ongoing discussions about the risk of over-pathologising human behaviour (see for example Brinkmann).

Among the more specific questions I intend to address during my readings of the texts are the following:

- What are the major differences between literary and scientific representations of mental illness, what functions do these different representations perform, and how do they relate?
- How much control is ascribed to an individual over her or his own mental state? How do writers weigh up evolutionary and biochemical factors against social and cultural factors and personal experience?
- How are mentally ill characters set apart from healthy individuals in terms of narrative function and the language that is used to convey experiences and behaviour?
- Do depictions of psychological conditions cater to culturally pre-formed expectations or – if not – how do they deviate from them?

For my close readings of literary texts, I will enlist a mix of theoretical frameworks and methods whose combination should prove helpful to the aims described above, including narratology, stylistics and cognitive poetics. Through the consideration of these different approaches, I hope to gain a broad perspective on the implications of psychological conditions in literary writing. Whereas narratology will be used to study the effects of voice, perspective and narrative structure on the depiction of mental illness in the texts, stylistics shall elucidate how specific linguistic devices shape the way in which psychological processes are explained and represented. Furthermore, cognitive poetics will illuminate the conceptual metaphors relating to psychology at work in the text.

3. Corpus

Since my aim is to study the various ways in which mental illness is depicted in literature in relation to neuroscientific and psychological discourses, I will focus on literature that has originated during a time when neuroscience's influence on psychology is apparent. I therefore plan on discussing primary literature from around the middle of the twentieth century until today.

Concerning literary form, I will focus on the novel, since it is able to offer an extended examination of a character's mental state and raises questions of perspective and narrative style.

Among the works that I have already selected for further scrutiny are the following:

- Filer, Nathan (2013): *The Shock of the Fall*
- Frame, Janet (1982-84): *Faces in the Water*
- Greenberg, Joanne (1964): *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*
- Haddon, Mark (2006): *A Spot of Bother*
- Kaysen, Susanna (1993): *Girl, Interrupted*
- Mathews, Harry (1994): *The Journalist*

- McCarthy, Tom (2006): *Remainder*
- McEwan, Ian (1997): *Enduring Love*
- Plath, Sylvia (1963): *The Bell Jar*
- Powers, Richard (2006): *The Echo Maker*
- Ruff, Matt (2003): *Set This House in Order*

So far, the list comprises fictional as well as (semi-)autobiographical accounts. In terms of representational strategies, I deem both categories equally important. However, an emphasis on the latter may provide for a deeper examination of different concepts of 'identity', since the construction of identity is a major concern of life narratives and mental illnesses often manifest themselves as challenges to this construction (Cook 456). The corpus might therefore still be narrowed down in this respect during the first stage of my research.

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