The Critics

CRITIC AT LARGE

Do my tweets really matter?
The pathologies of modern life now take forms that we used to associate with creative writers.

By Talitha Stevenson

"Find a band to manage. Understand the news. Study Japanese. Practise the harp," reads Sasha's to-do list in Jennifer Egan's novel A Visit From the Goon Squad. Egan distills in four short sentences a prevalent kind of anxiety. Sasha's goals require her to possess multiple shades of talent and skill, and the list is poignant because we know it's unlikely she'll actually do these impressive-to-dos. Had the list read, "Become a better teacher. Walk more frequently. Remember people I love," its poetic impact would have been quite different. But Egan wishes us to anticipate the miniature tragedy awaiting Sasha just as it awaits us all during lives in which there is never time to download all the photographs, live in the context of which, like Sasha, we find it hard to 'understand the news', not solely because we are wise to the fact we are not hearing the whole story, but because the concept of 'understanding' entails a purposive change in behaviour in order to make it feel meaningful.

A new book by Anne Cvetkovich, Depression, A Public Feeling (Duke University Press, £15.99), sets out to challenge "contemporary medical notions" of depression "that simultaneously relieve one of responsibility (it's just genes or chemicals) and provide agency (you can fix it by taking a pill)". Depression, she says, "can be seen as a category that manages and medicalises" the feelings associated with "keeping up with corporate culture and the market economy, or with being completely neglected by it". A section in which Cvetkovich describes her own depression is followed by chapters that focus on contemporary artists and also on a number of writers, each of whom suffered from depression and writer's block. In anamalising her "lived experience" of writer's block, Cvetkovich invites the reader to ask whether, despite the trade-specific terminology, this is still a symptom exclusive to writers.

In a celebrated essay published in Harper's magazine in 1996, Jonathan Franzen describes being "a local kid returning to St. Louis on a fancy book tour". This was "obscurely disappointing" to him, but he said nothing, having "already realised that the money, the hype, the limo ride to a Vogue shoot weren't simply fringe benefits. They were the main prize, the consolation for no longer mattering to the culture." What kind of mattering would have been enough?

Franzen's disappointment was directed outwardly, at "the culture", but its source, like the source of every writer's ability to turn lived experience into symbolic stories, may have been in his own infatuated development. The nostalgia implicit in "no longer mattering" refers to an idealised past but perhaps also, unconsciously, to a remembered experience. The desire to matter as much as we once did to our mother is at the broken heart of all narcissistic endeavour, whether it's writing novels, tweeting or carrying the right kind of handbag. Writing fiction is the symptom of many psychological distortions - a terror of mortality among them - the most poignant of which is a longing for perfect recognition, perfect understanding. This is the illusion hovering at the end of every painstakingly edited line. There was a time when Franzen's mother imitated his "wuh" sound, mimicked his O-shaped gape, as if it was a work of genius, as if it mattered to the culture. The secret motivation of even the most gifted writer may be to enjoy this again - this is our blueprint for the experience of mattering - and "writer's block" is perhaps a fancy way...
of describing the moments in which this seems impossible.

Franzen’s “obscure disappointment” developed into what he called “depression”. He is a writer, so it got pretty intellectual and complicated. He describes his emergence from this state in terms of his writing, as “a move from depressive realism”, in which “you decide that it’s the world that’s sick”, to “tragic realism… the most reliable indicator [of which] in a work of fiction, is comedy.” The psychoanalyst Melanie Klein described aspects of Infantine development that bear comparison with Franzen’s ordeal. In order for a baby to emerge from a primitive mental state, which Klein called “paranoid-schizoid”, he must acknowledge the separateness and the coexisting virtues and flaws of his mother. This new consciousness comes with grief but it also engenders compassion and art, and one of its reliable indicators is comedy. Once experienced, the paranoid-schizoid state is not forgotten, however; it is recalled in adult life through paranoia or any state that seeks to locate an unequivocal badness outside the self. There have always been experiences afforded by a writing life – the omnipotent fantasy at the desk, the horrors of the mixed reviews – that seem to invite this recollection.

But as a psychotherapist I see people with solicitor’s block and banker’s block and designer’s block and surgeon’s block – and the pain is the same pain in each case. The variation is in its intensity, the circumstances in which it is experienced and the vocabulary used to describe it. The degree to which the “block” gives rise to “depression” in writers, or non-writers, may depend on each individual’s adjustment to the impossibility of “mattering” in any way that obliterates the fact of death, the possibility that there is no God and the minuteness of the self in the grand scale of time. Existential fears, like the literary ones that give them a specific iteration, may be a grown-up way of recalling the first experience of powerlessness, of “not mattering” to a mummy busy with an independent life.

When asked to name what sort of training is required to become a writer, Hemingway is said to have replied “an unhappy childhood”. Could it be that people are all somehow becoming more like individuals who have, historically, become writers? Could our lives all somehow be offering experiences very like writers’ experiences? No matter how extraordinary the circumstances in which they experience their “not mattering”, writers are themselves extraordinary only in the sense that our maladjustment to ordinary vulnerabilities palls – whole lives spent toiling away at not very lucrative works of art. Tolstoy eventually gave up writing because he felt it distracted him from the more important work of prayer. He was probably right but it is hard to be so generous to his private soul as to wish away his art, even though its production must have required him to realise – even after Anna Karenina – that he still didn’t matter enough and there would need to be another book.

Cvetkovich notes the universal vulnerabilities exacerbated by the specific crises of her academic life – getting tenure, writing papers, teaching, publications – this widescreen perspective makes room for her abstract idea that “depression emerges in response to the demand that the self become a sovereign individual defined by the ability to create distinctive projects and agendas”. The consequence of this “demand” is that “those who fail to measure up… are pathologised as depressed”. Sasha’s to-do list captures precisely this contemporary desperation to “create distinctive projects”, which, if you don’t write a book, require a personalised and personally demanding array of accomplishments. And alongside this need to prove oneself sits the related longing to achieve a meaningful role in an unfathomable, media-imparted sense of the world. Or, in Egan’s excruciating abbreviation, to “understand the news”.

Though Cvetkovich’s prose can sag with a peculiarly American brand of preciousness and indiscriminate rapture, her perceptions are agile. She notes the ways in which our culture particularly excites and torments the self-obsessed or narcissistic elements of human personality, just as the experiences of the writer have always excited them. In the words of Oscar Wilde, “A poet can survive everything but a misprint” or of Truman Capote, “Finishing a book is just like you took a child out in the back yard and shot it.” We all come with these narcissistic traits good-to-go – every “personality disorder” is an intensification of normal traits – but they have not always been so ubiquitously and so precisely stimulated. It may be that in each age our common traits find distinct stimuli and expression, emerging like a scatter of lit and unlit Christmas lights, and that this pattern characterises the age, just as the pattern of individual neuroses characterises the individual.

That the paralysis associated with “writer’s block” is currently available to anyone who is not primarily occupied with survival is a result of the particular torments and tormenting ideals of our time. Among the torments are emigration, divorce, long working hours and secularisation, all of which help to make a tormenting ideal of the “sovereign individual”. When
this ideal meets with the inadequate means we have for experiencing it — through technology, mass-marketed products or the dream of fame — the set-up offers a surging reconnection with infantile grief. We usually associate this type of mental agony with the immaturity and self-absorption — out of which Woody Allen has made a glorious career — of creative artists.

Cvetkovich, who is a founder of a group called “Feel Tank Chicago” (feel, not think), views this prevalent agony as a form of “political critique”. People who now suffer just like writers, might have suffered in other ways in other times, but this is how they suffer now. There is, after all, a non-literary version of Franzen’s “obscure disappointment” to be felt while using Facebook; it’s possible to realise that no matter how much you “personalise” your technology, it will never be personal. Some may even find themselves clutching their heads, Proust-like, and asking, “Do my tweets really matter to the culture?”

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