

MOMENTARY EXPRESSION THROUGH ADDICTION

Sarah Pacella

Autobiography is a genre of writing that assumes an autonomy within each individual person by presenting a narrative written by and about the subject himself. Therefore, when reading an autobiography, the audience assumes they are witnessing an expression of the singular self, presented through the interior character of the autobiographer. Robert Jay Lifton and Sidonie Smith have raised suspicions concerning the integrity of the autobiographical expression of a singular self by expressing their doubts about individual autonomy. By illustrating the common norms that many people adhere to in their daily lives, these authors suggest that the self is a social construction rather than something that comes from within each singular self. Smith observes the self within the autobiographical context in "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance," while Lifton examines the notion of the singular self in relation to society in *The Protean Self*. The autobiography *More, Now, Again*, by Elizabeth Wurtzel, succeeds in further complicating the implications of singularity within the self by conveying a character that shows many different faces of her self, one of which is the face of a drug addict. Although Wurtzel is a woman inscribed by the conventional, gender-assigned roles of society, she begins her autobiography resisting these roles by describing her unconventional role as a drug addict, listing each drug she had become addicted to within the time frame of the text. For her, these pills created an escape from her roles; they helped to free her from the responsibilities of living. They took the place of every aspect of her daily life, including her relationships with family and friends. The more she sunk into her addiction, however, the more Wurtzel realized it was becoming a problem. In an attempt to leave the inescapability of the drug in New York, she moved to Florida in hopes that a geographical relocation would provide the necessary separation from her addiction. Although the quiet, peaceful setting provided by Florida seemed to have a positive impact on Wurtzel, she managed to slip back into her addiction while she attended therapy there. She was prescribed Ritalin in hopes that it would help her to combat her depression and enable her to leave the drugs behind, but this new pill simply became another source of dependency.

She was lead into her Ritalin addiction because of the positive effects it had on her emotions at the time: since the Ritalin seemed to quell her depression, she wanted to do more to maximize her happiness. By slipping into addiction, Wurtzel's self is transformed into one that loses grip on her socially-normative selves and becomes a secluded, antisocial self. The self portrayed by Elizabeth Wurtzel is completely different from one moment to the next, which challenges the conventional notion that autobiographies present the audience with a singular self. This challenge shows that a person can have a multiplicity of constantly changing roles. Wurtzel is a woman who "finds herself on multiple stages simultaneously, called to heterogeneous recitations of identity"(Smith 110), which Smith might also see as performative roles. Wurtzel is called to portray the identities of writer, daughter, friend—roles that overwhelmed her to the point that she felt as though she needed to find an escape from them. Drugs provided her with the easy ability to break out of her expected roles, and she therefore moved from the roles of writer, daughter, friend, to the role of an addict. Robert Jay Lifton describes this fluidity and the ability to shift selves according to social influences as "proteanism."

Not until after she became addicted to drugs could Elizabeth Wurtzel's "protean" self emerge. The drugs helped to ease the necessity to transform her self because the addiction took the place of every other role Wurtzel had previously been accustomed to. As her protean self emerged, it gave Wurtzel the ability to change, which provided her with the willingness necessary to seek help for her addiction. This in turn led her to a state of mind in which she was able to re-embrace her performative roles. Proteanism became Wurtzel's savior as well as her downfall because, although it was necessary for her to use proteanism to be willing to change her addict self by checking into a rehabilitation center and embracing new ideas, it still left no permanence to her recovery because there was always the chance that she could re-embrace her habits as an addict. This addicted, protean self, formed by Wurtzel, is very performative in nature, as are her previous roles, but this particular role is also performatively resistant on a very basic level. Drug addiction in itself is a rebellion against society because there are no expectations placed on any person to become a drug addict. Therefore, since the selves portrayed by Elizabeth Wurtzel in this autobiography both support and dispute the arguments presented by Lifton and Smith, her autobiographical selves show that neither of their arguments is foolproof. The arguments do, however, succeed in illuminating the drawbacks of giving

complete integrity to the author of an autobiography as presenting a unique self. For this reason, it is necessary to find a common ground between the belief that people have a singular self and the viewpoint that people are mere products of their social influences. In order to reach a better understanding of the importance of autobiography, it is essential to consider that a person can have a self—but it is sometimes only momentary. The self portrayed in an autobiography can be considered a person's momentary self and these selves can shift from one to something completely different on a momentary basis in reaction to events that occur. An autobiography, then, can be said to be an expressive compilation of momentary selves presented by the autobiographer.

According to Sidonie Smith, society expects each person "to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once" (Smith 110). People are expected to fulfill multiple roles in reaction to the different tasks they are faced with: a single mother who has to nurture her children is also expected to be a good worker in order to provide for her children. Therefore, the mother may play multiple roles, thus negating the singularity in the term "self." This normative idea of the self is very important to Elizabeth Wurtzel because she is always reacting according to the expectations of society. Even when she is alone, she is being performative because she is very self-loathing and does not accept her own *self*. She is never good enough to live up to her own expectations; therefore, she uses the normative self to perform and fulfill her roles of society even when alone. It is necessary for her to have these multiple "meaningful roles" in order to be satisfied with herself.

The phenomenon of needing to fulfill multiple roles is seen in the case of many drug addicts, according to a survey done by Tom Decorte in the *International Journal of Drug Policy*. "Controlled users have a multiplicity of meaningful roles, which give them a positive identity and a stake in conventional daily life, and both these factors anchor them against drifting toward a drug-centered life" (Decorte 101). In contrast, the uncontrolled user or the addict, who does not have a multiplicity of meaningful roles, lives a life that is completely controlled by the drug. People who use drugs for recreation have the "multiplicity of guarantees" Smith describes, and these positive meaningful roles help to prevent someone who is a drug user from having a drug-centered life because they have a "positive identity." This notion of the controlled user avoiding addiction is not the case with Elizabeth Wurtzel: her

“multiplicity of meaningful roles” did not “anchor” her against “drifting toward a drug centered life.” She becomes an addict despite her roles, or possibly because of the pressures caused by them. The drugs help her forget about her need to be performing and they give her the ability to cope with her life roles by not caring about them. She secludes herself from her friends and family because of the drugs and therefore loses her “stake in daily conventional life.” The drug is what defines her *self* because she will do anything in order to get the drug and she no longer cares how society views her unconventional behavior. Wurtzel does drugs in order to stop feeling the constant need to be performative, but in the end it causes her to be more performative. Throughout the autobiography, she makes many references to her need for drugs, and how she had to perform as though she wanted to speak to a friend when in reality she simply wanted to get drugs from him.

Max seems to want me to go through the motions of acting like I care.
Yuck. I’m too tired and jonesing to manage it. I’ve been antisocial for so long that I don’t know how to talk to my friends anymore. I try to make conversation like I’ve been missing him for the last few months, like I’ve been meaning to pick up the phone for a while now. (44)

Wurtzel describes how she has to perform in order to get her drugs, to pretend that she cares in order to get cocaine, but since she has not really been missing Max she is being very performative in her addicted self.

The roles performed by a person are a result of the external norms of the society; they are roles attached to a person of a specific gender, race, or sexual categorization. These norms are impressed upon a person from a very early age: “your programming happens early, and correcting bad input is almost impossible after a certain point. . . Who can say if therapy, even with all the good medications, will ever be enough?” (Wurtzel 220). Obviously, Wurtzel was greatly affected by her cultural surroundings and the daily life she experienced as a child. She believes that if something is constantly impressed upon you as a child, “bad input” in her words, then it is possible that this may never be corrected—in fact, it is “almost impossible.” The input, bad or good, is what helps to create a person’s self in that it causes reactions to social expectations. In Wurtzel’s case, it was instilled in her that being alone is a form of rejection, and it is this that she is constantly struggling with throughout the autobiography. Robert Jay Lifton also believes that society has a great

impact on an individual, and his concept of the "protean self" provides a complicated sort of solution for the addict self that Wurtzel has become.

The protean self is necessary for a person who is attempting to overcome addiction because by definition "idea systems can be embraced, modified, let go, and re-embraced, all with new ease that stand in sharp contrast to the inner struggle people in the past endured with social shifts"(Lifton 6). A person can easily embrace a certain idea one day and modify it the next, and then completely reject the same idea at some other time. For Wurtzel this is a very important concept of the self to consider because in order for her to recover from her addiction, she needs to let go of the thought that drugs are helping her and to embrace a new life without drugs. There is a problem with the necessity of the protean self, however, because although it allows Wurtzel to overcome her addiction, it also leaves room for her to relapse. Once she lets go of her addiction, there will always be a chance that she may re-embrace her old habits, which she eventually does: "I had reverted completely back to type. Congratulations, Miss Wurtzel: you are the same as ever. Your resilience, your ability to bounce back to your old habits, is admirable. You are to be commended for your stubborn desire to stay the same. Your uniqueness has made you a common idiot" (Wurtzel 245). The ability to re-embrace ideas, provided by her protean self, enabled her to "bounce back" to her addiction.

The drugs originally allowed Wurtzel to become less self-judgmental, so she took more of them in order to maximize her happiness. Gary Becker defines this consumption as the "maximization of utility": according to the psychology of the addict, if a small amount of a drug leads to happiness, the maximization of that drug will lead to ecstasy. He defines the utility maximization further by separating it into two parts: "1) reinforcement in which 'greater current consumption of a good raises its future consumption' and 2) tolerance in which 'given levels of consumption are less satisfying when past consumption has been greater'"(Becker 682). The reinforcement of the happiness caused by the original consumption of the drug leading to more use is the first step in the process of addiction. The original consumption of the drug will, in time, lose its effect because the body will gain tolerance to it. Therefore, the drug abuser will find herself consuming even larger quantities to gain the same effect from the drug.

The drugs failed to make Wurtzel forget about the external expectations of society, and they did not give her the ability to be self-expressive even when she was

alone. As Wurtzel begins to realize that her drug-use has become an addiction, she decides to check into a drug rehabilitation center. After being clean in rehab for four months, Wurtzel is eager to prove to everyone that she is finally *normal*:

but I am so dying to be a normal girl. I want it so badly that I am going to sabotage this opportunity. I want so much to get out into the world to prove that I *can* get out into the world. . . I want so much to test my ability to have romance that I will try it out before I am ready. I want to take what I know and use it. (220).

Since Wurtzel believed before her addiction that she had failed her expected life roles, she turned to the drugs in order to resist the performative nature of life. However, even while she is on drugs she finds that she cannot escape her desire to be normal and therefore she was even performative in her drug use. She constantly felt as though she had to prove to the world that she was good enough. While in rehab she feels the same way, that she has to “prove that [she] *can* get out into the world” in order to show everyone that she can recover and regain her “stake in daily conventional life.” Wurtzel’s certainty that she can get back into the world and maintain her newly gained resistance to drugs represents a newly formed momentary self. This self is different from any other self that she has shown throughout the rest of the autobiography because, although she knows she may relapse back into her addiction, she is motivated at this point to get back to her daily performative roles and reacquaint herself with normal life.

This particular momentary self is protean in nature because, according to Lifton, the protean self “makes use of bits and pieces here and there and somehow keeps going . . . We find ourselves evolving a self of many possibilities, one that has risks and pitfalls but at the same time holds out considerable promise for the human future”(Lifton 1-2). While in the rehabilitation center, Wurtzel “makes use of bits and pieces” of what she learns at the center and feels as though it is enough make her capable of returning to her performative roles without relapsing back into her addiction. She does evolve “a self of many possibilities” because, although there is a good chance that she will once again return to her addiction, there is also a chance that rehab was enough to keep her away from drug abuse. Returning to her addiction is the risk that Wurtzel is willing to take to return to a life that is more normative. She does eventually relapse back to her drug abuse but she still has the hope that, through proteanism, she will someday be able to completely rid herself of this habit.

According to Luis Botella, it is human nature “to interpret experience, seeking purpose and significance in the events that surround us”(Botella 57). People experience events and are always interpreting what has happened in order to gain some piece of information that leads to their own self-awareness: events tell them and society something about their character. By Wurtzel’s ability to “prove that [she] *can* get out into the world” she believes that she is proving to society that she is a “normal girl.” She believes that if her recovery has been a success and she can easily go back into society and function in multiple meaningful life roles, and that it will have a great significance and keep her from relapsing into her addiction. She also believes that people will interpret her rehabilitation period as successful and that consequently she will have the approval she so desperately seeks. What she does not realize, however, is that she still will not be able to be satisfied with herself when she is alone because she continues to look for approval from external sources rather than internal ones. All of her momentary selves respond to society and its expectations, but once she learns to be less performative within herself, she will be able to have more self-expressive moments in her life, and create more self-expressive momentary selves. This is something that is very difficult for Wurtzel to achieve, though, because she always worries about her normative self.

The solution proteanism provides for the addict self can also be applied as a solution to Smith’s belief that performativity is inescapable and to Wurtzel’s own inability to escape it. The idea of performativity is based on the idea that social norms are a strict set of expectations impressed upon a person according to race, gender, age, and so forth. Since proteanism allows for idea systems to be embraced with new ease, it also allows a society of people to have a belief about a performative expectation and to change it into something completely different with this same ease, in complete contrast to the idea that social norms are permanent and therefore the sole influential force of self-formation. If idea systems can change so easily from one person to another, there can be no standard expectation of any performative role. Therefore, if everyone acted in accordance with Lifton’s concept of the protean self, there would no longer be a normative self within any culture because everyone accept fluidity and change in other people. Although the protean self is very effective in solving many problems within the self, there is the one major problem facing a drug addict’s protean self: it leaves no room for permanence of recovery because one of the main aspects of this self is the ability to be open to constant change and fluidity;

therefore, it is not always a positive thing for someone who is trying to recover from a drug addiction. However, the protean self does assume that the self is resilient and capable of taking bits and pieces of life's unpredictability and leaving other aspects behind. From undergoing rehabilitation, Wurtzel sees that she is capable of being happy without drugs, takes the lessons that she has learned from relapsing into her drug self, and is persistent in her attempts to get clean. The lack of permanence of the protean self is the reason why Wurtzel questions the solidity of her rehabilitation—"Who can say if therapy, even with all the good medications, will ever be enough?" It is impossible to determine whether or not a person will ever remain drug-free due to the constant modifications of ideas within the protean self.

The protean changing of selves can be described by the notion of momentary selves: a person's self at any given moment can be immediately changed to a new self in the next moment. These selves are often reflections of a general display of selves presented by many people in society; however, once one person has a group of these selves within him, they become unique to that person. Although most times, the self of any given person seems to be the same self presented in many other people, there are particular moments when one can be seen as a unique, autonomous self. These moments, when a person is being completely self-governing and not reacting in accordance to a social expectation, occur most often when a person is alone. This is a time when people have no one to perform for; therefore, they can do whatever their interior self tells them to do without outside judgment. Often, however, the norms that are said to be products of society are impressed so deeply on people that they perceive themselves in situations according to these norms. People worry about how others would react if they were to perform an action in public that they would have no inhibitions about doing while alone. When someone cannot handle being alone with herself without worrying about external judgments, she cannot be self-expressive. Internalized social norms forced Elizabeth Wurtzel to have a great deal of self-disapproval, which, in essence, led her to addiction:

But me, I can't handle the twenty minutes it takes for someone who I know likes me to call back. I am so fucking empty . . . So I date more than one person at once so that the fear of it not working with one is mitigated by the fear that it won't work with another and so on, and I

do drugs to mitigate the fear of the whole thing. I do cocaine to get through the twenty minutes of waiting for a returned call. If I don't, I cry like a baby until it rings. I'm ridiculous. This is how you become an addict. You have no inner resources. (58)

In her relationships, Wurtzel constantly fears rejection from people who obviously love her. She gets hysterical every time she is alone if she is not on drugs because she believes that people do not want to be around her and therefore that they are rejecting her. She is incapable of self-expression because of her conditioning to social pressures; she has no "inner resources."

In the end, one can conclude that it is the ability of Wurtzel's protean self to be resilient and her ability to learn from her mistakes that will eventually enable her to maintain a lifestyle of sobriety. According to Tom Decorte:

Self-regulation is usually seen as a cycle of processes, which includes the observation of one's own behavior and its consequences, the comparison with an internal standard, the search for alternative, effective realistic possibilities, the selection of goals, the development of a behavioral plan, the execution of behavior, and the observation of its consequences and relation of goals. (Decorte 20)

In order for someone to fully recover from addiction they need to regain their multiple life roles through self-regulation and self-reflection; a person has to gain life goals in order to be satisfied with life away from drugs. This poses a problem in Elizabeth Wurtzel's case because she could only sometimes see her performativity, although she claims that she was aware of what she was doing the entire time. Recalling the concern of her family and friends when they were made aware of her addiction, Wurtzel relates:

Drugs put the fear of God into people the way a bad mood, even one that goes on for a decade, just does not. You can always wake up feeling better; that's always the hope with a depressive. But no one around me harbors that hope any longer. They are petrified. They are disgusted. At long last, my pain is a serious matter. I've won. (154)

She uses drugs as a way of making people worry about her, to prove to herself that people actually do care about her. This continues to show her performative nature because, although she is really suffering, she uses the addiction to say that she has won. It is as if she wants the reader to believe that she intentionally became addicted

to drugs, knowing that once people saw how desperate she was they would not leave her alone, but the whole time the audience can observe that Wurtzel is completely distraught in her solitude and is not purposely becoming addicted.

Although drug addiction tormented Wurtzel mentally, she did turn to drugs in order to get attention (even though this is not the main reason for her addiction) and she was well aware of her behavior and its consequences. Her original problem was that the expectations that she had of herself had become overbearing and drugs were a way to relieve that tension. As she regains these expectations of herself (as suggested by Decorte's "comparison with internal standards"), she may feel the pressure once again, and then the cycle of addiction would restart. In order to really recover, it is necessary for her to be less dependent upon other people as well as less self-judgmental. Once she can stop evaluating herself according to what she believes are social expectations, she will be able to function more self-expressively, even though performatively, in her life roles. Despite Sidonie Smith's profuse denial of the possibility of self-expression, she merely deals with a person's performative roles. When a person is alone, however, he has no social influences to react to, and these moments can signal an interiority of the self. When people become too dependent on their normative selves, they feel overwhelmed by pressure and some are forced, as Wurtzel was, to addiction. Therefore, it is necessary to find a middle ground between performativity and self-expression. If Wurtzel no longer places as much emphasis on her normative selves while she is alone, she will be able to gain more self-expressive momentary selves and will be able to be alone without feeling rejection. Then she will be able to regain her "stake in daily life" because she will have a balance between her performative and self-expressive moments.

The autobiography of Elizabeth Wurtzel teaches the audience of memoir that a self is more than just a reflection of society; but the autobiography also recognizes that social norms can be transformed from external to internal pressures on the individual that can lead someone to addiction. Wurtzel saw drugs as an escape from the pressures of society and she believed that they relieved her of the anxiety to perform as a group of normative selves. Each moment of her autobiography portrays a momentary, protean self, which combines with the other momentary selves to create a whole, unique group of selves that expresses the person that Wurtzel was during the time of her addiction and recovery. Although the self that she portrays throughout her narrative is mostly performative in her actions and thoughts (because of external

expectations being internalized), the selves that she created can be seen as unique because once they are all connected together, the compilation of momentary selves is something different from any other. The protean self allows the creation of the momentary self because it enables a person to change easily from one moment to the next, therefore changing her self. Smith would argue that there is no expression of a unique self in Wurtzel's account because she is defined through her performativity throughout the autobiography, and even in writing it. However, Wurtzel as a narrator can be seen as the final momentary self of the memoir as a whole, the unique expression of momentary selves giving her the final autobiographical authority.

WORKS CITED

- Becker, Gary S. and Murphy, Kevin M., "A Theory of Rational Addiction." *Journal of Political Economy* 96. (1988). 675-699.
- Botella, Luis. "Qualitative Analysis of Self-Narratives: A Constructivist Approach to the Storied Nature of Identity." Ramon Llull. University Cister: Seattle, Washington. July 1997.
- Decorte, Tom. "Drug Users' Perceptions of 'Controlled' and 'Uncontrolled' Use." *International Journal of Drug Policy*. 12.4 (2001). 297-320.
- Lifton, Robert Jay. *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*. New York: Basic Books, 1993.
- Smith, Sidonie. "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance." *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.
- Wurtzel, Elizabeth. *More, Now, Again: A Memoir of Addiction*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002.

COMMENTARY: "MOMENTARY EXPRESSION THROUGH ADDICTION"

Yana Zeltser

When I walk into a bookstore I find myself overwhelmed by the number of shelves laden with autobiographies and memoirs. Some of these books are authored by famous media personalities: best-selling writers, movie stars, journalists, stand-up artists, talk show hosts, and even political figures, while other books come to us from lesser-known personalities and rely on telling compelling or inspiring stories of their lives; these people are travelers, war veterans, activists, cancer survivors, and drug addicts, to name a few. All of these writers engage in the task of presenting to the world the self that they have carefully constructed through their writing. In her essay, "Momentary Expression through Addiction," Sarah Pacella takes on the challenge of examining the complications that arise in the "expression of self" with a focus on the autobiography of a recovering addict, Elizabeth Wurtzel. Through a skillfully manipulated dialogue between Wurtzel's memoir and the examinations of the self from Robert Jay Lifton and Sidonie Smith, Pacella challenges the notion that an autobiography is limited to expressing a singular self; an autobiography, Pacella argues, presents us with a writer's protean self, and Wurtzel's addict self is just one of them, a momentary self that is ready to slip into another role at any moment: a writer, a friend, a daughter.

A significant portion in "Momentary Expression Through Addiction" is lent towards an examination of the multifaceted role our society plays in shaping the writer's self: "The autobiography of Elizabeth Wurtzel," Pacella states, "teaches the audience of the memoir that a self is more than just a reflection of society; but the autobiography also recognizes that social norms can be reflected from external to internal pressures of the individual that can lead someone to addiction." There is fine line that an autobiography walks between portraying a privately suffering momentary self and portraying a momentary self that seeks self-gratification and profit by opening itself up to society when the autobiography is published. Why should Elizabeth Wurtzel's memoir matter? This is the question I've found myself asking while reading Pacella's essay, where the tight focus on the memoir may create a misleading impression of Wurtzel as a literary ingénue. I did not find out till later that the memoir was not Wurtzel's first work; indeed, she has earned a Rolling Stone College Journalism Award for essay writing, and burst onto the literary scene in the 1990's with her first memoir, the bestseller *Prozac Nation*. What significance could

Wurtzel's success with her first memoir play in shaping the protean selves we find in the new autobiography? What role did society's perception of the earlier book contribute to the momentary selves, and the addict self in particular, which Wurtzel presents in her latter book?

Had there been the opportunity to expand this essay, it would benefit from considering how society and the media shape the writer's role in something as personal as an autobiography being opened up to the public, but as it is, the essay is already thought-provoking. "[It] can be said that an autobiography is an expressive compilation of momentary selves presented by the autobiographer," Pacella offers. Her essay takes on the ambitious task of exploring the fluidity of protean selves one encounters in an autobiography of a writer who is more than just an addict, and succeeds to both elucidate and to open up to further debate the position of the writer's self in our increasingly complex society.