

REVIEWS



PROZAC NATION
YOUNG AND DEPRESSED
IN AMERICA

A MEMOIR

Elizabeth Wurtzel

Riverhead Books, New York
1994, 368 pp.

THE CULTURE OF DEPRESSION

It cannot be a coincidence. The afternoon that I finished reading *Prozac Nation*, I turned on the television set just as a documentary about Nirvana was starting. Of course, it centered on the suicide of Kurt Cobain. It was, insofar as

was possible, an homage. After a half an hour, I felt as old as my grandmother. I heard myself saying things that would have felt comfortable coming out of her 80-year-old mouth: "How depressing!" "How awful!" and "How terrible!" were the most frequent. While the performers sang the praises of lithium, their bodies moved slowly and clumsily around the stage. Below, the audience shouted its inexplicable enthusiasm. How can they get excited about it, I asked myself, if the whole show is an anticlimax? My rejection was undoubtedly a reaction to the depression they projected. If I had had to describe somehow what I was watching, I would call it indifference.

Coming back to my point of departure, the non-existent coincidences: A few months ago, *Prozac Nation* was the topic of conversation at every social gathering I went to. The magazine *Vievers* (January, 1996) even published a fragment in its monographic issue on the Generation X.

Although it is an easy book—that is, neither its language nor its structure is experimental—*Prozac Nation* cannot be read rapidly. To

start with, the cover design is disquieting: the portrait of an adolescent girl with an androgynous body, an innocent face and a lost look, hair disheveled, who covers her head with an arm in a gesture of abandon; the photo has been slashed with a razor blade in eight places and sewn back together with tiny stitches. The epigraph, by Marguerite Duras, is another symbol of what it means to be young and depressed. "Very early in life it was already too late for me." The tide of the introduction says it: the book is the story of a young woman who hates herself and wants to die. What is so interesting, then, about reading 368 pages about the misery suffered by someone with chronic depression? And this is where the circle turns on itself, proving that there are no coincidences. The fact that Wurtzel's book was a best-seller tells us something about a cultural tendency: the public is attracted by what I would call the culture of depression.

Harvard graduate Elizabeth Wurtzel is a successful journalist. Her life story has sold thousands of copies; it has been translated into several languages. Undoubtedly she is already an icon of what has been called Generation X, just like Kurt Cobain, who, despite being very rich and very famous, shot himself in the head.

Like any autobiography, when you start *Prozac Nation*, you must make a pact with the book: you know that the narrator identifies completely with a real person; the

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aim of memoirs is to relate real events which happened to human beings like you, the reader. Perhaps that is the basis for the incredible impact of *Prozac Nation* on the reading public: when you read, the ghost of the real reference point is always present, as well as the possibility of identification.

Elizabeth Wurtzel's story seems to me to be a sign of the times. A girl born in the era of divorce, her childhood took place on a battlefield where she was the booty. Meanwhile, she, ingrown, cut her arms with razor blades and tried to commit suicide by stuffing herself with antihistamines. Wurtzel's parents were young during the economic boom that culminated in the counterculture of the late 1960s: the collapse of the American dream. The chapters about Elizabeth's adolescence and youth are full of her comings and goings to the psychiatrist: the collapse of the family dream. Despite everything, she lives up to expectations: she finishes high school, she studies at Harvard. Drugs, alcohol. A pathetic pano-

rama because she finds no meaning in her achievements. What is it all for?

As a corollary to this collapsed building of illusions and certainties, it seems logical that at one point in the story she is invited to be on Oprah Winfrey's show on a segment about girls abandoned by their parents. This was long before the book was written and Wurtzel became a famous author; in other words, she was still an ordinary young woman. Another product of the culture of depression. Another sign of the times. Revealing the most intimate suffering before millions of spectators who, from the comfort of their living rooms watch how other human beings sink into the mud, expose themselves like circus freaks, degrade themselves. Television viewers have a catharsis on their sofas and calm their fears thinking that none of that could ever happen to them. However, as in reading an autobiography, the fascination stems from the fact that it just could. Talk show as talisman. But also as the mirror of a society.

And *Prozac Nation*? Is it another mirror? If one of the costs of modernity in First World societies is depression, it cannot be considered otherwise. A mirror, then? Only that? The process is dynamic. The advent of cultural products like *Prozac Nation* or Nirvana's *Lithium* are a response to a real situation: a depressed society whose heroes are the condemned contemporary poets who sing, disenchanted, about

apathy and get a breather in the reign of prozac, the philosophical touchstone of our era. A reflection of U.S. society, then. Wurtzel says, "After all, what is depression if it isn't the most striking, poignant psychic challenge to the American Dream?" Her aim, then, is to call society's attention to the fact that it has not delivered the promised privileges; what is more, it has not even delivered the expectations. Doesn't this sound like the howls of a spoiled child when vexed?

There is no irony in Wurtzel's memoirs. The reader notices no distancing of the narrator from the narration. I read a review that called this the saddest and funniest account of depression around. I found no humor anywhere in this book, and it seems to me that William Styron's *Darkness Visible*,¹ for example, is a much more penetrating treatment of the painful nightmare of living with depression, perhaps because of the superior literary quality of his text. *Prozac Nation* seems unending in its repetition of episodes and passages because they lack the necessary intensity. However, it does not transmit all the darkness of which Styron speaks. It is the same thing with Nirvana. So, even though the problem is socially so important and individually so destructive, you finish reading *Prozac Nation* like any other best seller, with a

¹ William Styron, *Darkness Visible. A Memoir of Madness*, Vintage, New York, 1990. The Spanish-language version has been published in the Espejo de Tinta collection by Editorial Grijalbo.

certain feeling of superficiality which does not force the reader to touch bottom. Is this related to that puerility I mentioned before? Yes, but there is also something more. Something surprising and frightening. Wurtzel's book is a cry for protection, an attempt to get a grip on things.

This is perhaps why Wurtzel's book is so successful. And also why Kurt Cobain has become a kind of mythical figure since his suicide. The society which has made them idols longs to bury itself in the safety of traditional values, in "back to basics," and since it cannot find its way there, it submetges itself in infinite sadness, in chronic depression. This is the source of the complete identification with these heroes of their culture.

What is more, I think this is why the conservative discourse has been so effectively reborn, because based on the belief that all times past were better times, solutions come to mind which must be the right ones because they are familiar: in respect for tradition lies security, and therefore, we must not question it.

I said at the outset coincidences do not exist. The depressed are the heroes of today. When prozac is offered as the only panacea to disillusionment, it is too late for illusions. A product of this culture of depression, *Prozac Nation, A Memoir*, is but another example.

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