

THE MADNESS NARRATIVE, BETWEEN THE LITERARY, THE THERAPEUTIC AND THE POLITICAL

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Abstract: *The present paper discusses the types, functions and limitations of the madness narrative, a particular type of text dealing with a popular research topic: mental instability, within the larger contexts of women’s autobiographical writing and illness-based writing. The overview aims to provide the theoretical framework necessary for the further analysis of specific madness narratives.*

Keywords: *autobiographical fiction, madness, madness narrative, pathography, scriptotherapy.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Why Madness?

Canadian psychologist Leonard George opens his Foreword to Richard Noll’s third edition of the *Encyclopedia of Schizophrenia and Other Psychotic Disorders* as follows:

Our species is haunted by madness. One in every 100 of us will fall prey to it at some time in our lives, and of those, one in 10 will be driven by misery or confusion to take their own lives. Not only the afflicted suffer, of course. As Aristotle famously noted, we are social animals, profoundly linked with each other, and derangements of the psyche ... strain the social web, burdening family, friends, communities, and economies. Directly or indirectly, madness touches us all. (2007:IV)

Moreover, as Neil Pickering (2006:3) points out in *The Metaphor of Mental Illness*, madness is “deeply entrenched in the day-to-day fabric of ordinary lives, and in the medical, legal and constitutional arrangements of developed ... societies.” It is true: madness is nowadays as much an indisputable social phenomenon as it is a disputed medical condition (or plethora of conditions), and, once desacralized, the former has also become a cultural, political and ethical issue. As a result, irrespective of whether one believes that madness is “a victim of fads and fashions if not also political ambition” (Roy Porter, qtd. in Barker 2011:61), “a symptom of the degeneracy of modern society” (Wing 2010:10), an illness in its own right, or one of fate’s many forms of cruel arbitrariness; whether one regards it as the result of “perennial human problems [being] translated from moral dilemmas into manifestations of some form of ‘mental illness,’ ‘psychiatric disorder’ or ‘psychological dysfunction’” (Roy Porter, qtd. in Barker 2011:61), or of

a chemical imbalance or neurological abnormality, favored by a certain genetic disposition, madness is, in the end, relevant for each and every one of us.

What makes it particularly relevant is the fact that the history of madness, “the perpetual amorphous threat within and the extreme of the unknown in fellow human beings” (Feder 1980:4) parallels, in a sense, the history of humanity. Thus, accounts of madness date back to the earliest religious and philosophical texts, from Mesopotamia to Ancient Greece. Literary depictions of madness are also age-old, and the motivation behind them lies in our species’ simultaneous fear of and fascination with the mysterious workings of the mind.

Such unsettling texts became, inadvertently at first, cultural chronicles (which does not mean that literary texts should ever be trusted as historical documents), for, as much as society has historically tried to shun the mad as deviant, erecting literal and symbolical walls “to keep apart the other against whose apartness [it] asserts its sameness and redefines itself as sane” (Felman 2003:5), the mentally unstable individual does not exist in isolation and, thus, he or she “embodies and symbolically transforms the values and aspirations of his family, his tribe, and his society, even if he [or she] renounces them, as well as their delusions, cruelty, and violence, even in his [or her] inner flight” (Feder 1980:4).

Literature and insanity have always shared a symbiotic relationship, with the former acting as a mediator between the latter and medicine. However, it was only fairly recently (after the treatment of mental illness started being revised) that sustained academic interest began to be awarded to a particular type of text dealing with madness, the so-called *madness narrative*. Indeed, due to the great scientific advances under way, with brain imaging technology, neurochemistry and neuropathology all trying to fight against the ultimate enemy of the human brain, its sophistication, and to prove the organic nature of mental disorders, ultimately absolving sufferers of all cultural blame, “the story of the extraordinary human mind – in brilliance and in sickness – begins to be legible, and [it] is a remarkable one” (Nettle 2001:11).

As a result, madness has become a popular research topic across various disciplines (sociology, philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, anthropology, literature, linguistics, etc.), having occasioned one of the most fertile cross-disciplinary dialogues ever recorded. Yet, as Shoshana Felman (2003:12) suggests, “while madness has today been recognized as the most subversive of all cultural questions, certain writers deplore that it has been sensationalized to the point of banality.” In other words, writing about madness has become so commonplace, that it borders on meaninglessness. Faced with this “inflation of discourses on madness” (Feder 1980:13), we, as philological researchers, have thus two options: either “to deplore this phenomenon and take our distance from it” (Feder 1980:13), or to “join our voices to the general chorus, promoting our own ‘madness’ goods as the latest thing in order to publicize our avant-gardism, or, as Mallarmé would say, ‘proclaim ourselves to be our own contemporaries’” (Feder 1980:13).

Yet, is writing critically about madness merely a question of embracing a trend set out by the academic community? For me, it is not. I do believe that madness is “a sort of mirror held up to society, in which, if we read the blurred images aright, we can discover the truth about ourselves and our future” (Wing 2010:2), and that “in the very solitude of madmen there is

something at stake for all of us” (Feder 1980:13). Indeed, Andrew Scull (1989:1) was right in stating that “intellectual choices ... are not made in a vacuum, flowing in substantial measure from a complex interaction between biography and circumstances of which we are seldom fully aware.” In my case, apart from this complex interaction, what motivated the decision to choose madness narratives as the topic for my doctoral research (and, consequently, for the present paper) stems from a feminism that I understand as the struggle for the empowerment of all people whose rights are infringed upon, irrespective of gender, race, sexual orientation, degree of mental health, or any other of the numerous aspects that shape our identity as individuals, but do not essentially define (or restrict) us as human beings.

An openly stated feminist perspective can, however, be misleading. (After all, it is a known fact that, despite scholars’ strive for objectivity, the results of a research depend largely on the methodology (and ideology) used – or, as philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein phrased it, “show me *how* you are searching and I will tell you *what* you are looking for” (qtd. in Pickering 2006:6)). Indeed, both in the present paper and in my doctoral research at large, I do focus exclusively on madness narratives belonging to female authors. However, instead of seeking to portray women as the exclusive victims of dangerous mental health policies, of a discipline that, for a long time, regarded itself as mandated by society to label and regulate deviation, as it may be inferred, my work actually aims at highlighting the fact that women’s madness, more likely born out of socio-cultural inequities (legal powerlessness, economic marginality, imposed submission, etc.), in other words of a pathological context, rather than the much-invoked proneness to emotion or unstable sexuality, has, compared to men’s madness, historically born heavier connotations. This does not mean, of course, that male insanity is not symbolically and politically charged – there were, however, greater stakes associated to female madness as far as the reproduction (literal and cultural) of patriarchal society was concerned.

1.2. Why Madness Narratives?

The answer to the question “Why madness narratives?” is quite simple: the only means of tracing a true, all-encompassing history of mental instability is by valuing the subjectivity of the perspectives of those individuals whose lives have been touched by it, and by including their stories into this history, since a “history of the victors, for the victors, and by the victors is not only indecent, but also bad history and bad sociology, for it makes us understand less the ways in which human societies operate and change” (Teodor Shanin, qtd. in Scull 1989:1).

What precisely is, in the end, a madness narrative? Firstly, it must be noted that this umbrella phrase is used deliberately, as a strategy to simultaneously “recognize the meaning attached to the perception of illness or dysfunction in the psychological domain” (Jane Ussher, qtd. in Hubert 2002:19), avoid psychological and psychiatric jargon (as in *accounts by schizophrenics*), and “interrogate the discourses that maintain the construction of mental illness and the bifurcation of sanity and insanity” (Hubert 2002:20). A good definition for the phrase was provided in *Questions of Power: The Politics of Women's Madness Narratives*. The author, Susan Hubert, states that any “firsthand account of the experience of ‘mental illness’ and

psychiatric treatment, even if the narrative is presented as a fictitious account or case study” (2002:19) qualifies as a madness narrative. She adds:

The term ‘madness narrative’ includes novels, journals, anonymous accounts, and narratives presented by an interlocutor, as well as traditional autobiographies. Also, the designation avoids the boundaries of asylum autobiography and therefore allows for the consideration of madness narratives that are not centered on the experience of hospitalization. (Hubert 2002:19)

Madness narratives are, thus, texts at the border between creative writing, pathography, scriptotherapy and political activism. They are, mainly, either entirely fictional accounts of madness (after all, “conjuring imaginary beings and effecting a cure are not mutually exclusive practices” (Thiher 2004:1)), instances of (auto)biographical fiction dealing with mental instability, or the self-proclaimed *non-fictional* madness memoirs (including borderline texts such as journalist Nelly Bly’s *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (1887), a remarkable account of her stay in the Women’s Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell’s Island as part of an undercover assignment), and, according to certain critics, *relational madness narratives*, texts “whose primary subject is not the writer but a proximate other, such as a blood relative or a partner, or the relationship between the author or that other” (Couser 2009:12), as well.

Despite great impediments (which will be discussed further in the present paper), starting with the fifteenth-century *Book of Margery Kempe* (a pious woman who regarded what today would be diagnosed as *psychosis* as the result of divine intervention, defying the church, her townsmen and late medieval gender roles in her quest for autonomy), a fair number of madness narratives in English have been authored.

Many of these texts are written by women suffering from depression, “the paradigmatic mental illness of the postmodern period” (Couser 2009:5), since depression is emotionally, rather than mentally debilitating. Another reason for the considerable number of depression narratives is provided by Suzanne England, Carol Ganzer and Carol Tosone in “Storying Sadness”:

In attempting to explain to herself the causes of the suffering and to find relief, the woman with serious depression grasps desperately for some way to think coherently about the experience – to make sense of it all in order to plan an escape from the pain. (2008:83).

For many such women, the answer is precisely writing – after all, according to life-long diarist Anaïs Nin, “stories are the only enchantment possible, for when we begin to see our suffering as a story, we are saved” (qtd. in Henke 2000:141).

It is the case of native Ghanaian Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, the author of the inspirational memoir *Willow Weep for Me: A Black Woman’s Journey through Depression* (1998). Danquah allows readers to discover a condition that “offers layers, textures, noises” (qtd. in Radden 2008:22):

At times depression is as flimsy as a feather. ... Other times ... it present[s] new signals and symptoms until finally I am drowning in it. Most times, in its most superficial and seductive sense, it is rich and enticing. It is loud and dizzying, inviting the tenors and screeching sopranos of thought, unrelenting sadness, and the sense of impending doom. (Qtd. in Radden 2008:22)

Other notable memoirs of madness include *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* (1995), by Kay Redfield Jamison, a Psychiatry professor at John Hopkins University, and *The Loony-Bin Trip* (1990), by feminist writer, activist and scholar Kate Millett. From this point on, however, the present paper will focus on the functions and limitations of autobiographical fiction dealing with mental instability.

2. Writing a Broken Self

In autobiographical works dealing with mental instability, fiction is often regarded as a defense strategy in the face of either the mental illness itself, or the unbearable memory of its ordeal. Johnnie Gratton defines (genuine) fiction as “making and not just making up; ... as the corollary of imagination, fantasy and desire; ... as the supplement of memory (a supplement probably always ready *in* memory)” (qtd. in Gudmundsdóttir 2003:4). He adds that fiction “affirms the increasingly-highlighted ‘act-value’ of autobiographical writing at the expense of its traditionally supposed ‘truth-value’” (qtd. in Gudmundsdóttir 2003:4). Nevertheless, is writing fiction less courageous than writing a memoir when it comes to madness? Are the “embellishments to carry out the ideal” (Gilman Ch. 1995:331) also intended as a shield against social stigma?

2.1. Writing the Self

As human beings, we owe it to ourselves to make sense of our existence, and what better way to do it than through writing, for “time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode” (Charon 2006:42). Indeed, “plot is ... the product of our refusal to allow temporality to be meaningless, our stubborn insistence on making meaning in the world and in our own lives” (Peter Brooks, qtd. in Gudmundsdóttir 2003:60), yet, authoring autobiographical texts meant for publication is one of the most difficult endeavors. On the one hand, it requires the overcoming of the legitimate hesitation that such an exposure as that derived from turning the intimate into the public (even if in veiled form) occasions, in the context of writing already being a delicate, emotionally-consuming, methodical process (quite removed from the muse-induced, nearly automatic pouring on the page that readers may envisage). Irish author Niall Williams’ description of the writing process is revealing in this respect:

How do I write? One word at a time. The first sentence feels like the tip of a thread. I pull it very gently. Another sentence. And again I try, teasing out phrase after phrase and hoping that the thread will not break.

It is as if before me there is an invisible garment of which only one thread can be seen. Each day I draw it out a little further. (Qtd. in Bolton and Mazza 2011:131)

Indeed, as emphasized by Susanne Langer, the author of *Feeling and Form*, “literary composition, however ‘inspired,’ requires invention, judgment, often trial and rejection, and long contemplation” (qtd. in Bonime and Eckardt 1993:204), therefore “an air of unstudied spontaneous utterance is apt to be as painstakingly achieved as any other quality in ... fiction” (qtd. in Bonime and Eckardt 1993:204).

On the other hand, apart from an often painful introspection and the “agonizing questions of identity, self-definition, self-existence, or self-deception” (Sidonie Smith, qtd. in Beilke 2008:29) that it occasions, what the *writing of the self* also entails is the unavoidable need for mediation between the *I* as “both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance and contemplation” (Smith and Watson 2010:1). Furthermore, when writing autobiographically, before the “creative imposition of order, pattern, and meaning on what is remembered of one’s life” (Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, qtd. in Beilke 2008:30) – imposition that is vital for a coherent text – can be achieved, one must struggle with the defense mechanisms of one’s own memory, as well as the latter’s incommensurability, given the fact that “the pen will never be able to move fast enough to write down every word discovered in the space of memory” (Paul Auster, qtd. in Gudmundsdóttir 2003:30).

2.2. Writing a Female Self

For women, writing autobiographically (if at all) has always proven particularly challenging. Anaïs Nin stated, for instance, the following in relation to her writing: “To create seemed to me such an assertion of the strongest part of me that I would no longer be able to give all those I love the feeling of their being stronger, and they would love me less.” (qtd. in Henke 2000:27). In other words, Nin perceived writing as a powerful act of self-affirmation whose negative social consequences she would not be able to escape. She managed, in the end, to overcome the psychological impediment that derives from such an implanted view and to become highly prolific, both as a diarist and as a writer, but many other aspiring women writers have not.

Indeed, having been denied access to publishing, women have historically resorted to diaries and letters, remaining in the sphere of the private, “a scene of writing that invites the female, a separate space at the very limits of the generic divide between the autobiographical and other kinds of writing and the gender divide between the masculine and the feminine” (Benstock 1988:1). Yet, even diaries often seem to betray by offering what proves to be the mere illusion of empowerment. Thus, for Kate Millet, the journal turned “friend, solace, obsession”, the notebook which gives her “the ability to record experience which makes [her] more than its victim” and allows the “magical transformation of pain into substance” (qtd. in Felski 1989:90), reveals itself, at times, as what it truly is: “an untidy scribble without meaning, body or direction” (qtd. in Felski 1989:91). What results is the unhealthiest of ambivalences.

For a long time, those autobiographical works that women did publish lacked a genuine female voice, whereas, as Gloria Anzaldúa points out, “for silence to [truly] transform into speech, sounds and words, it must first traverse through our female bodies” (qtd. in Perreault 1995:1). Some female writers still lack this voice. Against the greatest of odds, the authors of most madness narratives do not.

2.3. Writing a Broken Female Self

Writing autobiographically becomes an almost insurmountable task in the context of the “communicative breakdown” (Scull 1989:9) and “compromised personhood” (Radden 2008:18) that is, generally, madness. It is true: “in the word ‘autobiography,’ writing mediates the space between self and life” (Benstock 1999:7), yet women’s autobiographies have already been characterized by what Estelle Jelineck calls “a multidimensional, fragmented self-image colored by a sense of inadequacy and alienation” (qtd. in Beilke 2008:30). What mental disorder does is to bring the fragmentation and alienation to an extreme. As a result, since “‘writing the self’ is [already] a process of simultaneous sealing and splitting that can only trace fissures of discontinuity” (Benstock 1988:29), how does one write an already broken self?

Furthermore, how does one discern between multiple, competing selves, for the *genuine* one? Kay Redfield Jamison, for instance, asks herself: “Which of my feelings are real? Which of the me’s is me? The wild, impulsive, chaotic, energetic, and crazy one? Or the shy, withdrawn, desperate, suicidal, doomed, and tired one?” (qtd. in Beilke 2008:29). Moreover, how does one overcome the anxiety occasioned by the need to express the inexpressible? How does one deal with a text that often appears as “an endless chain of signifiers that can never encapsulate the fullness of meaning which the author seeks and which would put an end to the writing itself” (Felski 1989:91)?

Indeed, as highlighted by Susanne Langer, “there are countless devices for creating the world of [a literary work] and for articulating the elements of its virtual life, and almost every critic discovers some of these means and stands in wondering admiration of their ‘magic’” (qtd. in Bonime and Eckardt 1993:204). Yet, what are the right literary devices for a madness narrative, those devices through which the author can attempt “to resist the grand medical-psychiatric narrative and its attendant theories and practices, and to reclaim the individuality and richness of the experience of suffering” (England, Ganzer and Tosone 2008:83), since “at traumatic extremes experiences can be narrated only through a kind of aesthetic violation” (Clark 2008:4) and “madness is the absolute break with the work of art” (Foucault, qtd. in Wing 2010:3)?

What is the tone of such a piece of writing? Is it accusatory, as in Dadaist poet Hugo Ball’s sonnet “Schizophrenia”?

A victim of dismemberment, completely possessed
I am – what do you call it – schizophrenic.
You want me to vanish from the scene,

In order that you may forget your own appearance.
I will press your words
Into the sonnet's darkest measure [...]. (Qtd. in Gilman S. 1985:288)

Or, on the contrary, apologetic? Or maybe triumphant? Should such texts reveal individuals scarred, but not defeated by their experience, with a thirst for life that can only be encountered in those people who have been deprived even of the simple pleasures one generally takes for granted, or individuals disillusioned with the world, embittered even?

These (and more) are all questions that I will try to answer throughout my PhD thesis, one madness narrative at a time. For now, the conclusion would be that female authors of autobiographical works dealing with mental instability have undoubtedly had to face obstacles coming from three sources: their very status as women, the nature of the writing of the self as “a slippery undertaking that requires investigating past events with meaning they may not have had when originally experienced” (Beilke 2008:30), and, certainly not least, the mental disturbance itself. Many women have, nevertheless, managed to overcome these difficulties and save themselves through writing, even if only temporarily.

2.4. Why Should One Write a Broken Female Self?

How did this saving through writing occur, in the end? Given their very abundance, the primary function of madness narratives does seem to be therapeutic, since “the whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative” (Ricoeur 1990:75). In order to understand how the healing effect of these accounts of mental disturbance is achieved, one must first comprehend the economy of illness narratives, in general.

Illness narratives or *pathographies*, “compelling because they describe dramatic human experience of real crisis, ... give shape to our deepest hopes and fears about such crises, and in so doing, ... often draw upon profound archetypal dimensions of human experience” (Hawkins 2003:31), occupy a particular place in the context of life-writing. The latter was rejected by New Criticism as a result of a previous, fundamental rejection of everything outside the text, as well as the ambiguous nature of this type of writing, deriving from the blurred boundaries between biographical fact and literary fiction, between the objective and the subjective, and the fact that much of it (diaries, letters) is generally not intended for publication. Cultural Studies, on the other hand, a multidisciplinary field able to deal with the complexity involved in the reception of life-writing, and, not accidentally, the critical framework within which I, as a philological researcher, operate, embraced it.

Within life-writing, illness narratives generate a shift from the disease itself to the individual. Madness narratives are a particular instance of illness narrative, given the stigma associated with mental instability and the attempts at reclaiming a robbed humanity, of claiming agency over one's own life that they, in the end, represent. As medical historian Roy Porter suggests in *A Social History of Madness: Stories of the Insane*, “the pontifications of psychiatry have all too often excommunicated the mad from human psychiatry, even when their own cries

and complaints have been human, all too human” (qtd. in Barker 2011:24), whereas madness narratives bring the experience of the mad, in all its desolation, hope and, in the end, humanity, back into the foreground. Refusals of isolation and marginality in their essence, such texts allow the expression of repressed emotions, as well as self-scrutiny, for the mind can be its own tormentor, but also its own healer, if a state of awareness regarding its manifestations and their impact is reached.

When not utterly silenced, the words of the mad, a subject presumably “engulfed by his own fiction” (Felman 2003:49), are generally treated as symptoms, not pieces of a trustworthy, legitimate, albeit subjective, testimony. What madness narratives achieve (when their authors manage to overcome the resulting view of themselves as supreme unreliable narrators, as unable, given their insanity, to produce texts that would be read as sane) is to provide a previously-denied voice. As a result, each such text “continues to communicate with madness – with what has been included, decreed abnormal, unacceptable, or senseless – by dramatizing a dynamically renewed, revitalized relation between sense and nonsense, between reason and unreason, between the readable and the unreadable” (Felman 2003:5).

Yet, there are also great limits to madness narratives. Indeed, it is only through language that experiences can be organized and evaluated, so that understanding and self-understanding can derive from them, yet “each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (Mikhail Bakhtin, qtd. in Treichler 1990:113). Consequently, even when setting out to write the most personal of all the narratives of madness, one may find oneself actually writing the overall story of the madness of a particular time and place in history.

Moreover, there are sensitive ethical issues related to the portrayal of mental illness, issues that are valid for madness narratives and their filmic adaptations alike. Indeed, both madness and literature “enable us to believe in and to be moved by what in a sense does not exist, by fictions, imaginations, hallucinations, inner voices” (Thiher 2002:1), yet the greatest similitude between literature and madness does lie in the fact that they could, indeed, both “be defined as that which speaks, precisely, out of what reduces it to silence” (Felman 2003:17). Moreover, apart from this defiance of muting that both literature and insanity stand for, “literature sheds light on madness in a specifically literary way, a way that is not merely a reflection of the theoretical pronouncements of psychoanalysis, sociology, or philosophy”, all “tinged with a shade of the madness they examine” (Felman 2003:17). Yet, despite this (seeming) lack of bias, there are great challenges when it comes to the literary portrayal of individuals forced to live on the outskirts of society, for no representation of madness can escape reflecting (and being influenced by) questions of power.

The ethical dilemmas deriving from writing madness become even more acute when it comes to relational madness narratives, where the risk of misrepresentation is always present. One way to avoid these dilemmas is, thus, writing one’s own story of madness. This comes, of course, as shown above, with dilemmas of its own, but, as Anaïs Nin states, “it is [apparently] easier to excavate on one’s own property” (qtd. in Long 1999:38).

3. Conclusions

In his Preface to *Mental Health Ethics: The Human Context*, editor Phil Barker wonders to what extent we have, despite the apparent progress in the social integration of individuals with mental disturbances, really changed our mentality regarding mental instability: “To what extent are we merely recycling older, outmoded models of human problems: trying to avoid confronting the personal, social and political issues that we obscure with our increasingly technical concepts of ‘psychiatric disorder’?” (Barker 2011:4) In other words, in the era of liberal thinking, have we failed our mad? We may have, but not entirely.

Over the last decades, madness narratives have managed to act as agents of significant inner and outer change. They have denounced the “uneasy alliance” (Barker 2011:24) between psychiatry and medicine and have provided a better understanding of mental instability, which is of outmost importance in a world that still fears its mad(ness), regarding it as a crime, rather than a misfortune.

As Susan Sontag (qtd. in Fink and Tasman 1992:148) points out in *Illness as Metaphor*, “any disease that is treated as a mystery and acutely enough feared will be felt to be morally, if not literally, contagious,” therefore raising awareness regarding the complex issue of mental instability and the enduring need to discuss it, through all means possible, is vital. The present paper has sought to do just that.

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