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MADNESS IN FICTION

Literary Essays
from Poe to Fowles

Mark Axelrod-Sokolov



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As ALWAYS, TO MY SON, MATÍAS ALEJO

FOREWORD: A MAD INTRODUCTION, OF SORTS

I have always been intrigued by the notion of madness in fiction since I have always thought in order to write fiction one needed a sense of madness with which to begin. How that dispersion of madness was conveyed from an author to a particular character was the art of his/her conjoined madness. To that end, I wanted to write a collection of essays that conveyed a sense of madness not in the style of the essays themselves (which I had considered, but dismissed as being “insane”), but in the content of the essays relative to the characters the authors created. In some cases, the “madness” may have been physiological as in Hamsun’s, *Hunger*; in other cases, possibly neurological as in Fowles’ *Collector*; and in others, somewhat mescalinated as in Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* or entomologically and artistically mad as in *The Metamorphosis*. Regardless, I have always been intrigued by how certain writers created and conveyed that sense of madness in their works to a particular audience.

I have selected these authors diachronically. In other words, I wanted to select works that evinced some kind of madness (real or imagined) from the nineteenth century through the twentieth century and across literary borders, hence the use of: Poe’s *Cask of Amontillado* (1846); Hamsun’s *Hunger* (1890); Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915); Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* (1927); and Fowles’ *The Collector* (1963). Arguably, one could add many more to this list. One could make an argument that Nabokov’s Humbert was mad or Melville’s Ahab or Breton’s Nadja or Kobe Abe’s *Woman in the Dunes* or Camus’ Meursault or Tolstoy’s *Memoirs of a Madman* not to mention texts such as *Don Quixote*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Frankenstein*, *Yellow Wallpaper*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *We Have*

Always Lived in a Castle. The list is as potentially maddening as the titles themselves.

Be that as it may, I have selected the texts I have selected because I have been enamored with the unique madnnesses of the characters and their literariness and in an age of facile novels written by writers such as Chuck Palahniuk and Stephen King and Nobel awards awarded to literary poseurs such as Bob Dylan (whose award gave Mario Vargas Llosa a very wry smile) a few of these writers are and have been seemingly ignored for quite some time. Perhaps, that may be the reason for a kind of “end of literary criticism” or at least a dearth of literary criticism in a way that is not unlike Fukuyama’s notion of the “end of history.” To that end, there have been a few obstacles in writing these essays. Primarily, obstacles related to recent literary criticism, which, in a way, has ignored these writers. Nevertheless, I have tried to be as critically current as possible in a manner that would enhance the content and context of these essays, the texts that, for me, remain as vibrant as when they were first written. One can argue that that longevity is a testimony not only to the madness of the individual characters, but also to the madness of their individual creators.

2017

Mark Axelrod-Sokolov

SUMMARIES

THE MADNESS OF INSULT IN POE'S *CASK OF AMONTILLADO*

It is the Fool from the Tarot and the selection of his dress that really shows how brilliant Poe is. The Fool's dress is exactly like that worn by Fortunato as he strides negligently across a rocky landscape without appearing to pay any attention to the lynx-like animal that falls upon him from behind with savage fury. The man leans upon a staff, while a bag is suspended from another staff that is slung across his shoulder. That the carelessness and folly of the man are not due to the natural and passing heedlessness of youth is shown by his short pointed beard; he is one who has reached mature years, but has only succeeded in dissipating his powers. He is the same person as the Juggler who has chosen the wrong turn when put to a test and instead of controlling and making use of his natural forces, he has stowed them away in his bag. The card symbolizes the folly and degradation of man who, having no fixed place or time of manifestation and being subject to no rules of reason or logic, will fall unexpectedly across even the most carefully ordered life and bring the luckless subject to unhappiness or destruction.

THE MADNESS OF STARVATION IN HAMSUN'S *HUNGER*

Published in 1890, *Hunger* is probably Hamsun's best known and, arguably, his best-written novel. Largely autobiographical, it deals with the time Hamsun existed in Kristiania (Oslo) and is extraordinary in terms of psychological depth and poetic temperament. But one cannot easily

dismiss the effect starvation had on Hamsun and to that extent one cannot discount intentionality. As Robert Ferguson writes of *Hunger* in his biography, *Enigma, the Life of Knut Hamsun*: “In writing it he drew on the experiences he underwent during his two most desperate periods in Kristiania in the winters of 1880–81 and 1885–86, and probably, also drew on the experiences of his winter in Chicago in 1886–87. The many small correspondences of fact and fiction—the narrator’s visit to the castle, for example, and his address at Tomtegaten II—as well as the autobiographical details that crop up in letters to Erik Frydenlund and Johan Sørensen, indicate that the book is Hamsun’s self-portrait in fiction” (Ferguson, 110). Implicit in that notion is that the voice of the protagonist is often the voice of Hamsun not only in terms of content, “The things I have written about in *Hunger* I have experienced here—and many more worse things besides. God how I have suffered. But I live...” (Hamsun, Letters 97), but in terms of poetics, “My book! My book! About these delicate nuances. I would want to sift through the remotest nuances of the mind—I would let them listen to the mimosa’s breathing—every word like brilliantly white wings—movements on the shining surface of language” (Hamsun, Letters 88).

The course of the novel follows the nameless protagonist as he wanders virtually throughout the city while dwelling on the notions of life, death, homelessness, hunger, and art all within the confines of the city’s ethos. What one discovers about the character, if not with all people who are homeless, impoverished, and hungry, is that their *raison d’être* is a kind of survival, contingent on mobility and as hunger sets in so too does a kind of madness. That is, without mobility they are effectively doomed to perish, death being the virtue of stasis. It is only this ability to move, to push a shopping cart, or carry a knapsack, or just be able to walk, that enables them to survive.

THE MADNESS OF MADNESS IN HESSE’S *STEPPEWOLF*

The subtitle (*for madmen only*) of *Steppenwolf* is interesting since it is not *by lunatics only* or *on madmen only*, but *for madmen only*; presumably, only madmen will understand it and this brings up the notion of what it is to be mad. There is nothing in Haller’s records that would indicate “madness” in the sense of being out of control. To the contrary, Haller is always in control, at least at the beginning of his records, and the beginning of his

records is the beginning of his quest since we are dealing with an artist who has been, or is, on some kind of spiritual quest.

We have an indication of the conflict Haller goes through early in the novel (see p. 25) when he writes, "I had been for an hour's walk ... old books." What is clearly set up here is the relationship between nature and intellect, between the life of the spirit and the mind, which is also established in the preface. What happens now is that the notions established in the preface are expanded in the records. In a way this is not unlike Dostoevsky's (another author mentioned) *Notes From the Underground* (*Memoirs from the Mousehole*) in which the first part of the story lays the foundation for the philosophy and the second part of the story effects the practice.

At this time, something else has to be considered and that relates to the notion of discourse. Though the novel is translated from the German there seems to be a tie that links or unifies the preface with the records. Namely, the voice in the discourse seems to be very similar. In other words, Hesse seems not to be interested in altering the sound and substance of the discourse to relate to any particular character. Whereas one author may say I have to change the way this person speaks to give him/her character, Hesse does not do that with the nephew or with Haller. Nothing in the way the voice of the discourse sounds or with the substance has altered. The only thing that is different is what the nephew says about himself and how that differs from Haller. So the differences are purely in terms of quality and not in terms of context.

THE MADNESS OF MARGINALIZATION IN KAFKA'S THE *METAMORPHOSIS*

In his *Letters to Felice*, Kafka writes, "The life that awaits you is not that of the happy couples you see strolling along before you in Westerland, no light-hearted chatter arm in arm, but a monastic life at the side of a man who is peevish, miserable, silent, discontented, and sickly; a man who, and this will seem to you akin to madness, is chained to invisible literature by invisible chains and screams when approached because, so he claims, someone is touching those chains."

There have been many analyses of this work, but not necessarily anything devoted to the notion of victim as the author of his own madness. No two texts reveal this notion of victim as author of his own madness

better than these two, as both main characters try to maneuver their way within a social complex that is constantly denying them the ability to function as they are. Given that state of creative oppression, it is apparent that eventually the character will succumb to the oppression either through madness or through death or both.

THE MADNESS OF ROMANTIC OBSESSION IN FOWLES' *THE COLLECTOR*

As Fowles' novels go, for example, in the *French Lieutenant's Woman* or *The Magus*, *The Collector* is one of the least complex in terms of structure, yet it is quite complex on both social and psychological levels as well as on a stylistic level. What is curious about it, at least at the structural level, is that Fowles has acknowledged that two events influenced the writing of the novel. As I mentioned, the first was "a performance he attended of Béla Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle*, an opera about imprisoned women seemed to relate symbolically to the adolescent male daydream of being isolated with an attractive, but unapproachable female. Second, he came across an account of a young man who had kidnapped a girl and held her for 105 days in a backyard air raid shelter in London" (Aubrey, 86–87). But there are other motivations as well since Fowles was deeply influenced by the work of the French writer, Alain-Fournier, and his perceptions of women are not entirely divorced from these two particular items. To that extent, I think it important to see what, in fact, Fowles was dealing with in terms of the opera—one that was based on the work of the French writer, Charles Perrault. What is of interest is how Bartok has adapted the Bluebeard tale and, in like manner, how Fowles has also adapted it.

What is curious is that Fowles explained to a US interviewer how he wanted the novel to be read: "'*The Collector*' he said, 'is a parable: I don't want it taken as a thriller and reviewed in the crime columns. It's symbolic, it's an allegory. The girl represents good humanity, hope for the future, intelligence and love. The young man represents the opposites—the affluent society in a world where children eat earth they're so hungry. The generous versus the mean. I'm trying to show that our world is sick'" (Aubrey, 90). Clearly, Fowles had no notion of how sick sick could be, but the novel clearly established Fowles' career as a writer and established the main character of Clegg as one of the maddest of twentieth century madmen.