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« Mad Narrators »: oxymoron or pleonasm?

Nathalie Jaëck

“Mad narrators” is a rather improbable couple, or at least a very dialogical one. The representation of madness has always been one of the favourite *topoi* of literature, and from the medieval fool up to some of the most iconic characters, Hamlet probably ranking first, mad characters have proliferated in fiction. Literature has thus always been interested in representing and circumscribing madness, in accounting for it, in showing it off as well (the monstrous avatars literally colonise collective memory) — and in this respect, it has not been very different from any other disciplinary discourse, choosing madness as its object.

Yet, it appears that fiction also does something else, when it untypically allows madness where it does not belong, when madmen become narrators, and thus access a position of control. Indeed some of the most influential 20th century French philosophers, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida in particular, have claimed the exceptionality of literature in this respect, its superiority over philosophy, and have made it a central part of their work to analyse the exceptional links of intimacy between writing and madness. In his *History of Madness*, published in 1972, Foucault has documented the fact that from Descartes onwards, Western thought has built madness as essentially *other*, as the very condition for the impossibility of

thought; it has externalized madness from the realm of reason. In a symbolic system where the word *logos* tellingly means both *reason* and *discourse*, it thus reads as a very dissident experiment, nearly as an oxymoron, like a literary Jekyll and Hyde, when a “sane” author — we have decided indeed in this volume to study madness when it is a deliberate textual phenomenon, and not the unconscious effect of the author’s pathology — chooses to release the language of madness, to allow it to settle within narration itself, thus threatening the coherence of speech, and the possible stabilization of meaning. The aim of the articles in this volume would thus be to wonder what the agenda of a writer is when madness is no longer an embedded object but becomes a writing process, a practise controlling discourse and acting out upon a text. Reading the different contributions, it seems that three lines of analysis appear: an ethical one, a rhetorical one, and a metatextual or aesthetic one.

Indeed, mad narrators are a way to turn literature into a site of resistance, quite simply to voice out a minor and repressed voice in order to rectify an improper imposition of silence, but above all to assert the symbolic relevance and creative power of madness beyond the inexistence and indefinition where it is usually relegated. In this case, the fiction conjured up by the mad narrator, with perhaps Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly* as prototype, aims at undermining self-satisfied rational discourse, and paradoxically unveiling it as a delusion. Folly, the character of the book, becomes the owner of a superior kind of knowledge, difficult, esoteric and fascinating, it becomes “the comic punishment of knowledge and its ignorant presumption” (Foucault, 41). Mad narrators, writing from within, thus provoke a rhetorical inversion, and denounce as the greatest delusion of all, the belief that one can give an objective account of reality and that language can serve that purpose. Rational discourse is reduced to a megalomaniac logocentric hallucination; mad narrators constitute what I would call “an interruption” in the self-satisfied working of the system of representation, the opposition of a disquieting mirror-image that contradicts the existence of a tight barrier between reason and madness, and brings about a disquieting incorporation.

This sense of disquiet is also a very efficient textual device — the couple may well be improbable, it is highly functional from a rhetorical point of view. Indeed, because they contradict the pact of “suspension of disbelief” that Coleridge defined, mad narrators disturb reading habits, and create specific textual dynamics, involving instability, doubt, and the necessity for the reader to adjust his practice processing the possibility of that new data. Mad narration thus turns out to be a real semiotic structure, a specific variation on the phenomenon of unreliable narration as it was first theorized by Wayne Booth. It introduces indecision in the narration, and as James Phelan developed, it creates two sets of unstable relations: those between characters, that he called “instabilities” (Phelan, 315), and those between implied author, narrators and audiences, that he called “tensions” (*ibid.*). It thus mobilizes and puts to the test the metarepresentational abilities of the reader, it forces him out of a passive reception to contribute to actively decoding signs, and several papers in this volume analyse the variety of effects and narrative interests this produces.

Finally, beyond ethical or rhetorical interests, the “mad narrator” specifically addresses the difficult and fascinating question of the nature and specificity of literature. Several papers address that issue, and develop the idea that mad narrators may provide some writers with an experimental poetical matrix, a metaphor for an ideal literary form, a literary temptation — delirium as the horizon for literature, what Deleuze called “*le devenir-fou de la structure*”.

In fact, arguably every narrator in fiction is what Lars Bernaerts called “un fou imaginant” (Bernaerts, 185) since according to Deleuze’s famous quote: “*Écrire n’a rien à voir avec signifier, mais avec cartographier, arpenter, même des mondes à venir*” (Deleuze, 11). Writing fiction amounts to opting for an alternative use of language, disengaged from the necessity to convey a single meaning through transparent form. I will take the example of Sherlock Holmes, who, at the end of every story, supplants Watson as the narrator and rewrites the whole case, ordering reality along the stable categories of positivist discourse, typically using language to “signify”. He may be

quite a mad character (and such nearly cosmetic madness has become part of the myth: his idly scraping on his violin, his injecting himself with cocaine, his spending days fasting, his beating dead pigs in the morgue with a cane), but he definitely passes for a very sane narrator. And yet, though his eminently rational narration invariably convinces everyone, though everything *fits*, one thing is clear — that such stabilisation of “the truth” is invariably *a choice*, and a strategic one, the choice of *a* possible convincing, reassuring, order-maintaining way through the facts. As Sherlock Holmes himself boasts in a crucial quote from “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches”: “I have devised seven separate explanations, each of which would cover the facts as far as we know them” (Doyle, 323). So before he claims reason enables him to reduce reality to the truth, he has uncovered a series of possible and plausible worlds, and has made fiction proliferate over reality. The champion of reason is above all a “delirious narrator”, an emblem of fiction. Truth is rewritten as plausibility; it is redefined as an agreed-upon, institutionalised version of reality, as *a validated story*, what Lyotard called a “metanarration” — still it is the produce of a delirium of interpretation, of irresistible logophilic fiction. There is indeed one story, “The Yellow Face”, where this is made explicitly clear, when Holmes’s reconstruction, though just as convincing as usual to his admiring public, is reduced to mere delirium by the central witness, who provides the bewildered audience with another version of the facts, forcing the detective to recognize his rather flippant treatment of facts:

“Watson”, said he, “if it should ever strike you that I am getting a little over-confident in my powers, or giving less pains to a case than it deserves, kindly whisper ‘Norbury’ in my ear, and I shall be infinitely obliged to you”. (Doyle, 423)

Now Sherlock Holmes disguises his aptitude and taste for delirium behind a mask of linguistic hyperrationality — he is “a fou raisonnant”, and wants his fiction to pass for the truth, to “make sense”: he thus uses language as a seemingly harmless rational decoy. For other mad narrators, it is not only reality that is delirious, it is language itself.

Mad narrators may then introduce an irreducible difference within official language, a resistance: they decompose structures, they abolish forms and contest the codification of language itself, its norm, its collective coherence. As Foucault develops: “*Par la folie qui l’interrompt, une œuvre ouvre un vide, un temps de silence, une question sans réponse, elle provoque un déchirement sans réconciliation où le monde est bien contraint de s’interroger. [...] La folie est une rupture absolue de l’œuvre*” (Foucault, 556-557). In his lifelong work on madness, Antonin Artaud developed the idea that words are dead-ends, static forms that reduce dynamic forces – and his whole work was about finding an alternative of writing that would never fall back to forms or figures, to any stratification or conservation of meaning, a kind of vibrating suspension, resisting stasis and fixation. “*Quelque chose troue le langage*” says Beckett. This brings to mind with another famous 19th century mad narrator, Mr. Dick in *David Copperfield*, who precisely defines himself as a hole, as a vacancy: he has “a vacant expression” (250), he is “all out of his mind” (251), and he only needs to blow on himself to make himself disappear: “I’m only Mr. Dick. And who minds Dick, Dick’s nobody! Whooh! He blew a slight, contemptuous breath, as if he blew himself away.” (721) Mr. Dick is the genial and unforgettable eccentric rescued from the madhouse by Betsey Trotwood — “he has been called mad” (259) understates Betsey —, and his sole occupation in the novel is to write a memoir to the Lord Chancellor to denounce the fact that his abusive family want to put him in a lunatic asylum. So every morning, he takes up a blank sheet, and starts telling his story. But every morning, he undergoes a schizoid dissociation, and the course of his narration gets diverted by the uncontrolled irruption of Charles 1st, whose troubles he mistakes for his own, and he has to start all over again, transforming each used sheet, everyday, into a kite, where he “sends the facts flying”, “disseminating” them: “He had told me, in his room, about his belief in its *disseminating* the statements pasted on it, which were nothing but old leaves of abortive Memorials” (273). This obsessive writer, a diminutive version of the author, stands in the text as a marginal narrative double and literary rival to David. His never-to-be-finished, both fragmentary and proliferating Memoir reads as

a counter-discourse to David's, as a literary alternative, abolishing the possibility to come up with a whole text, destabilising David's confident, but delusory, "egology". Writing is thus redefined along other lines, it is contingent, fragmentary, unstable, and illustrates Barthes's appeal about what literature should do: "*mettre quelque chose (le sujet) en état de variation continue (et non plus l'articuler en vue d'un sens final)*" (Barthes, 35). With Mr. Dick ambushed in the text, Dickens intimates that a mad narrator is thus no longer an oxymoron, but may well be closer to an ideal pleonasm.

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