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INSANE, MAD, CRAZY...
ABOUT THE FUNCTIONS OF INSANITY IN LITERATURE
(on the basis of works
by G. Kanovich, L. Fuks, P. Schneider and J. Krzysztoń)

Piotr Fast

In studies devoted to literary works dealing with the mad, insane or crazy, a frequently encountered opinion is that undertaking such subjects is connected with a natural human's desire of the cognition of the mechanisms of 'overpassing the limits of human condition' (Biedka, 1993, p. 95). The most popular work connected with this subject seems to confirm such thesis. From the sphere of my direct interest, one could evoke *The Idiot* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nikolai Gogol's *Madman's Diary* or *Ward Six* by Anton Chekhov. These works are very different and even though they are linked by the same desire to know the extreme ways of the functioning of human consciousness and to explore the peripheral regions of the 'normality' of human societies (and simultaneously devising historical pictures of that 'normality'), very different ideas about that psychological state (different visions of abnormality) are created in them. Similarly, the pictures, roles and functions of the insane characters are presented differently and often the textual constructions depicting those motives differ diametrically.

A reader not acquainted with the classical Russian tradition (in which, for example, *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov or *Altist Danilov* by Vladimir Orlov should be included) will be introduced to the matter by the reminiscence of such classical works as *One flew over the cuckoo's nest* by Ken Kesey, *Auto da fé* by Elias Canetti or *The prairie wolf* by Henry Haller.

Even a brief review of these works shows that the whole subject requires at least a schematic systematisation. It is obvious that there have been such attempts. Referring the basic assumptions of the existing systematisations, we will endeavour to describe the following works: Peter Schneider's *Schlafes Bruder*, Grigori Kanovich's *Slozy i molitvy durakov*, Ladislav Fuks' *Spalovač mrtvol* and Jerzy Krzysztoń's *Oblęd*, heading towards devising some basic typological criteria that would allow us to systematise the problematic-thematic sphere of literature under research.

The basic division, first pointed by Michel Foucault in his fundamental *History of madness in the classical era*, consists in treating insanity, from one point of view, as a cognitive initiation, and from another, as going astray. This opposition is also visible in the French terms 'folie' and 'déraison' (Foucault, 1987; Janion, 1984, p. 366). The first one — 'madness' — in the Polish cultural tradition is connected with a romantic mission, which is accompanied by 'an ability of absolute sacrifice in the name of the most noble ideal, a deep initiation in the Christ's sacrifice' (Janion, 1984, p. 367). Thus, madness is equal to a certain illumination, to a social mission contracted by the character's sacrifice. In this tradition 'insanity' is a lack of reason, it is just like a medical diagnosis — it is an illness, not a calling. Thus, a madman carrying his mission is opposed to man deprived of reason.

In the works devoted to Russian literature, various ways of the categorizing of this phenomenon are encountered (Thompson, 1973), from which the one by A. Drawicz (1996), construing madness as a mask, punishment or a stroke of fate, should be pointed.

By the way, the completion of these possibilities by treating madness simply as an illness seems to be quite obvious, as in the Russian tradition an opposition similar to the Polish 'madness' and 'insanity' functions: the 'yurodivyi', the God's mad, the 'Possessed', through whom the absolute truth shows, is opposed to stupidity or insanity as an illness (Skotnicka-Maj, 1993). The difference between the opposition functioning in the Polish and Russian traditions is only that the Polish 'madman' is endowed with self-consciousness and the Russian 'yurodivyi' is only a medium of transcendental values, but is deprived of the awareness of his mission (Fast, 1996, p. 119–120).

The opposition shown here functions on the border of two basic spheres in which insanity in a literary work should be looked upon. One of those treats the whole matter as an object of presentation — as the work's topic. It sees the insanity substantially, as the object of description. Thus, it presents studies on the development of an illness, as from its point of view insanity is mostly considered an illness. This is, to a large extent, a characteristic of Jerzy Krzysztoń's novel, showing a 'journey inwards' (Janion, 1984, p. 372).

Novels of this kind become a sort of a description of the anatomy or morphology of insanity. Thus, their semantics head towards the realisation of cognitive tasks. They become a sort of report or a work in the traditional mimetic 'realistic', sense. Their domain is the presentation of insanity understood as a state of the body rather than a state of mind. The narration is just an 'illness history', as some critics treated Krzysztoń's *Obłąd*, reading the work as a description that is clinical rather than metaphysical (Piecbara, 1980, p. 130).

However, this mimetic illness history often becomes a premise for applying the character's self to various contexts. Thus, the journey inwards, mentioned by M. Janion (1984, p. 327) ultimately constitutes "the condition of an initiation into the concrete sense of myths and symbols." So does the insanity outgrow itself in the literary sense. It becomes a key, a metaphor, a kind of cognition, reaching the rank of epistemology.

And this is the second aspect of the matter. Madness is no longer an entity that is just substantial. It becomes the object of interpretation or even a tool of this very interpretation. It is endowed with deeper and multidimensional semantics. It achieves a functional status.

The basic role of madness in such circumstances is making one realise what is considered to be 'normal'. The insanity exists in two aspects. The first is psychological. The consciousness is shown in a subjective dimension. It sees itself and diagnoses itself in comparison to its own knowledge of the stereotypes of normality. Then the internal state of the character in his subjective perception is the object of description. In the textual dimension it means first-person narration with a personally created character, being self-conscious and aware of the literary aspect of his relation. In such a case, the interpretative solutions head towards two opposite directions. In the first one, the character sees the 'normality' standard in himself and treats the world as 'abnormal' (this is the case of the mentioned work by Gogol), in the second — he perceives his own 'abnormality' and most often sees insanity as an illness. In the first case the work shows the external world as filibuster, conventional, limiting the freedom of an individual etc. Most often, he sets himself the task of a social critic, like Chekhov in *Ward no. 6*. A slightly different aspect of treating insanity in such a way can be found in Chekhov's famous *Chornyj monakh*, where the madness is a way of escaping the reality, and constitutes a sort of a shelter in which the character really exists, free from the reality's limitations, but also richer by the full dimension of his own delusions.

The second case is the state of the character's consciousness from the external point of view. The protagonist is presented from a perspective placed outside his consciousness. The textual formula is most often personal third-person narration allowing a simultaneous introspection and adopting an external ideological position by the narrator (Uspienski, 1970, p. 135–158).

The character is then perceived as the one breaching the rules and one sees evil in him. The relation among the characters of the Alexander Griboiedov's drama, *Горе от ума*, is a typical example of such a role distribution. While Chatski sees the surrounding world as filled with falsity, other characters consider him crazy.

Actually, this opposition can be reduced to a difference of points of view on the plane of spatial and ideological organisation of the text. Both aspects of the point of view are placed inside the character (observation conducted from a spatial and evaluative point of view of the character as opposed to placing the spatial point of view internally, with the isolation of the narrator's ideological position, very different from the ideological position of the character).

The sketch of substantially and functionally different presentations of madness or insanity presented here finds many different textual realisations in literature, in which those roles, functions or ways of interpretation often coexist in one work.

To make constructing the basis of systematical typology of this phenomenon possible, let us shortly review works which — being an excuse for analysis of the functions of insanity in literary works — shall become examples of practical solutions used in different cultural spheres.

The already mentioned *Obleđ* by Jerzy Krzysztoń is a first-person narrated novel constituting — as I have said — the illness history of the main character. Insanity is the OBJECT of a detailed description here. The novel contains an analysis of individual stages of the illness' evolution and the process of Krzysztof J. getting out of insanity (official diagnosis: fear-delusion syndrome). The character's insanity here is an illness *sensu stricto*. That does not mean that the novel's text doesn't suggest other possibilities of interpretation. Focus on some Polish national myths as important elements of the character's self, as well as their reinterpretation and perception as factors influencing the illness process allows using in the interpretation a key different than just 'medical.' This is, however, a separate topic which will be discussed later.

Obleđ has autobiographical sources (Krzysztoń underwent a psychiatric therapy in the well-known clinic in Tworki, near Warsaw). This premise allows us — similarly to the presence of Polish myths — to change the interpretative perspective and to abandon treating this work in the categories of pure anatomy of insanity. This is however, like in the previous case, more likely an element of interpretative basis, rather than of direct qualities of insanity treated as an object of presentation (Rogatkó, 1988, p. 223).

Anatomy or morphology of insanity contained in Krzysztoń's novel is an object of artistic study itself. Adopting interpretative optics, i. e. treating the presentation as a realistic narrative fact or studying it as a reaction to certain subjective or objective contexts, in which the character is set, is an external problem — from one point of view of illness etiology, from another — of the interpretative approach relating the work to an external system of relations and values seen by the interpreting subject.

Another work — *Слезы и молитвы дураков* by Grigori Kanovich — shows a protagonist, 'a man in a yarmulke', following a convention fixed in Russian tradition — of 'yurodiviy,' the God's Madman, who — thanks to the insanity's stigma — can exist for others as a man who speaks absolute truth. The character then exists as a transcendence medium. His insanity is a mask of truth, being simultaneously a signal of a particular social role. Depriving

the character of reason allows an assumption that what he says is a reflection of absolute values. The Russian plebeian cultural tradition (Likhatchov, Pantchenko, 1976) ascribed peculiar functions of critic of social conventions, hypocrisy, falsity to the insane.

From this point of view, the subject of description in the novel is not the insanity itself, understood as a state of illness of the character, but rather those elements of the surrounding world, which, in contact with this 'insanity,' are disclosed and stigmatised as 'inhuman' or 'abnormal.'

In Kanovich's novel, who also used the Jewish tradition, the accent has been moved from the social aspect of insanity to the internal conflict existing in the character's consciousness. It is an opposition of the character's rational consciousness to his irrational outbursts, directing him into the domain of subjectivity, which attains the rank of special 'personal metaphysics.' In his madness, the character does not actually see the deficiencies of the social system (like in Chekhov's *Ward no. 6*), but rather the most overall characteristics of human condition. The insanity becomes a language — a code of existential and metaphysical values giving the work the traits of a literary parable.

Peter Schneider's *Schlafles Bruder*, the debut novel of a young talented Austrian writer, has become a bestseller of the last years. It is a story of a young peasant boy, very talented in music, endowed with enormous artistic and emotional sensitivity and a subtle intellect. The extraordinary musical talent in the novel is treated as an aspect of that emotional sensitivity. The emotional and intellectual qualities of Johannes Elias Alder give him the possibility of perceiving the reality in a way entirely different from what is accepted in his environment. His perceiving of the world as a source of internal experiences leads to a situation in which his reactions to reality also go beyond the commonly accepted patterns.

The result of the emotional evolution of the character is experiencing a great love, which he treats as an absolute value. Desiring to communicate with it, to experience this feeling, he abandons everything which could disturb him in associating with this pure emotion. He refuses to sleep, concentrating on experiencing his emotion. For a period of time, he gains the ability to hear sub- and supertones, inaudible for the others. The world reaches him multiplied, extraordinary. Strict ascetism, to which he condemns himself, leads him to death — this death for him is, however, only the crowning of the beauty and the love he experiences. Johannes Elias Alder is treated as a martyr by some and as an insane by others. However, a genius going beyond the limits of cognition available to a human being can be seen. In Schneider's novel the reminiscences of *Doctor Faustus* by Tomas Mann, which undertakes a discussion on genius and the way it functions in the world of stereotypes and conventions are plainly visible.

Spalovač mrtvol by Ladislav Fuks is a book, in which insanity is shown in an entirely different way from the three works discussed so far. Its main character is a representative of a rather gloomy profession — a crematory worker Karol Kopfrkingl — who, inspired by his work, constructs a 'private philosophy of death aesthetics.' The character is subject to a double influence of external factors: the work carried out, enforced by that private vision of an orderly world and the pressure of the rising popularity of fascist ideology. The result of this relation is a developing insanity of the 'corpse stoker,' who later takes up the post of crematory's director. Seeing in the surrounding world elements of 'disorder,' that is such behaviours or facts that violate his vision of an orderly world (both in a personal and socio-political sense), he undertakes actions (in fact criminal) — indispensable from his point of view — for restoring the world's normal state. He kills his children in the name of an imaginary external order. Ladislav Fuks experimentally verifies 'how does man react to a series of atypical exter-

nal factors, how they make the way inside to his interior, how they occupy and deform his consciousness, which predispositions they actualise, and how they finally destroy his psyche' (Stoff, 1980, p. 32).

* * *

The short characteristics of chosen works, which I have presented above, makes us aware how great is the variety of ways of using insanity in literary works. However, they simultaneously show that there exist certain premises for building a particular typology, which could encompass all possible variants or several complementary typologies allowing quite a clear description of this complicated material.

The basic rule of such a systematisation could be the place of insanity in a literary work or in literary communication, as different works treat this phenomenon in different ways.

First, the insanity can simply be an object of a more or less accurate description. Thus, then the insanity is a trait of character's personality, it functions as a 'presented subject,' which is not attributed any special semantic functions — it is neither a great metaphor of the world, nor a symbol of social relations, etc.

Secondly, one can separate the works on the basis of rhetorics used to describe insanity. The insanity is described differently when it is just an object of presentation, and differently when it becomes a special 'code,' a way of presenting reality, when it is given a symbolic meaning, etc. In the first case one can speak of an immanent scope, in the second — of a contextual one.

Thirdly, the strategies of interpretation of insanity will be different if they are made dependent on the interpreter's attitude or on the context to which the functions of the madman are related.

In one of the descriptions of Krzysztoń's *Oblęd* we find suggestions pointing out four such interpretative strategies in which the analysed work can be approached: 1) psychiatric-realistic, 2) sociological-historical (political), 3) cultural-symbolic and 4) romantic-phantasmatic (Biedka, 1993, p. 94). However, these four approaches can be finally reduced to groups of psychological and cultural nature.

From another point of view, the presentation of insanity may be differentiated on the basis of insanity's morphology (with the distinction of the two approaches: 'from inside the character' and 'from the outside'), possibility of contextual (psychological or cultural approach) or parabolic interpretation. This typology consists actually in distinguishing different levels of interpretation — the grades of abstraction of the description from the text's matter.

Insanity in literature can be discussed yet in another key when following the relations among its etiology, anatomy and the results of deformation of the character's psyche. Two opposite approaches can be distinguished here: 1) 'internal' when the etiology is psychological and the interpretation is socio-cultural and 2) 'external' when the insanity is a result of an influence of external factors deforming the character's psyche.

As it is visible on the basis of this short characteristic of the whole subject, it is a problematic sphere which is very complicated and multi-planar, requiring a simultaneous application of many various points of view and undertaking analyses in very different aspects and layers of the literary work.

Generalising the introductory observations signalled in this sketch we can propose the following differentiation of the modes of existence, functions and interpretation in a literary work, shown on the diagram below:

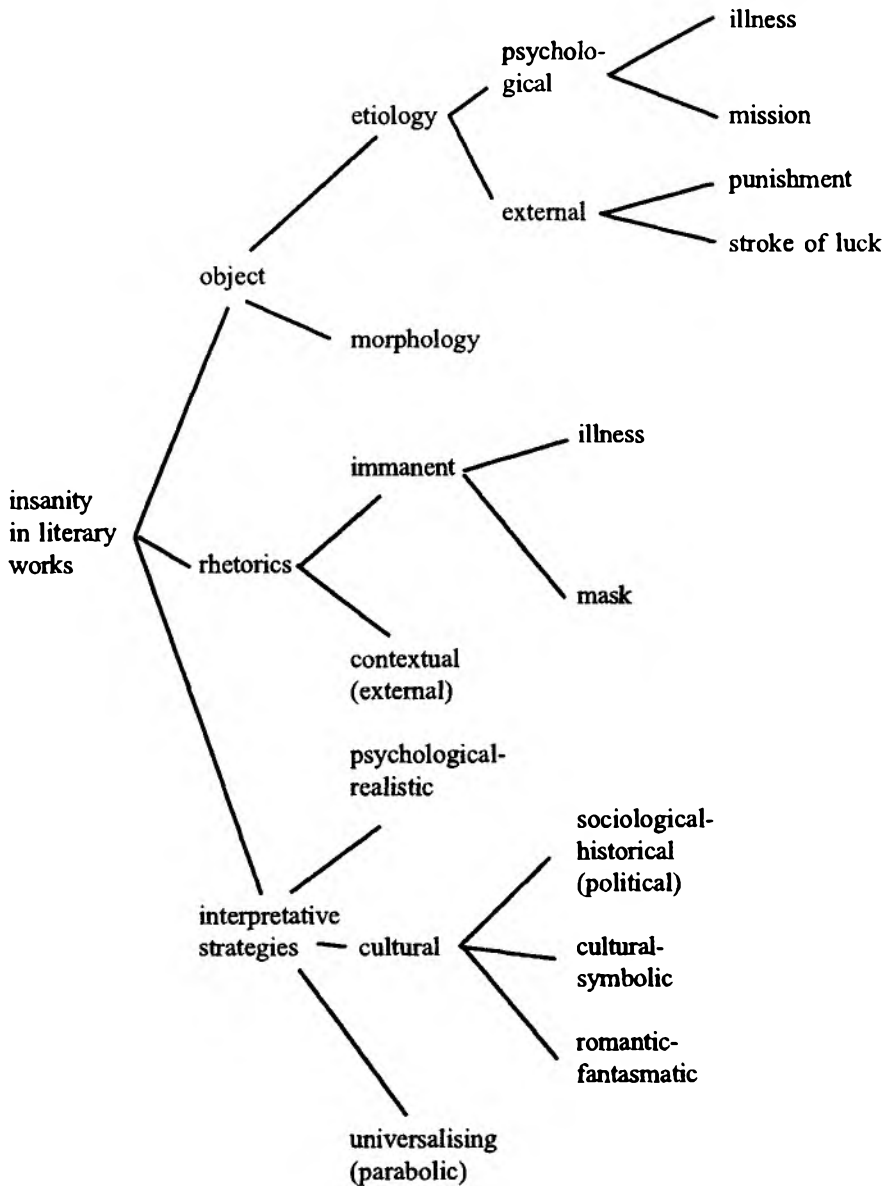


Fig. 1: Typology of functions of insanity in a literary work

The typological project presented in this schematic presentation can surely be completed, made more complex or modified on the basis of cultural experiences stemming out of different cultural paradigms. One may only hope that the confrontation with literary works and cultural spheres other than those known by the author will allow this schematic typology of this very interesting phenomenon to be improved.

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