

MERIDIAN | CROSSING AESTHETICS

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Editor

WRITING *and* MADNESS

(Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis)

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Madness and the Literary: Toward the Question of the Book

In what way does madness account for the thing called literature? Why madness? Could I not just as well have said the "reason" of the text? What, finally, was at issue here, *texts about madness or the very madness of the text?*

This book has attempted precisely to examine the *relation* between the two: to think about what "speaking about madness" means by exploring the relationship between the texts of madness and the madness of texts. I have tried to show some of the ways in which the rhetoric of madness and the madness of rhetoric in effect do meet and act upon each other, and not simply through a play on words.

What we find in these texts on a first reading is the thematization of a certain discourse about madness, which, mobilizing all the linguistic resonances of eloquence, asserts madness as the meaning, the *statement* of the text. This is what is called in this book the "rhetoric of madness." Now, whether this discourse about madness is a way of saying "I"—the cry of the subject who, considering himself as "mad," thereby claims to be exceptional [the narrator of *Memoirs of a Madman*]—or a way of saying "(s)he," of acting out a diagnosis which, projecting madness outside, *locates* it in *the Other* (Wilson explaining the madness of the governess, the governess asserting the madness of the children),

the rhetoric of madness always turns out to be mystified and mystifying. *To talk about madness* is always, in fact, *to deny it*. However one represents madness to oneself or others, to represent madness is always, consciously or unconsciously, to play out the *scene* of the denial of *one's own* madness.

But even though the discourse *on* madness is not a discourse of madness (is not strictly speaking a mad discourse), nevertheless there still exists in these texts a *madness that speaks*, a madness that is acted out in language, but whose role no speaking subject can assume. It is this movement of non-totalizable, ungovernable linguistic play, through which meaning misfires and the text's *statement* is estranged from its *performance*, that I call in this book the "madness of rhetoric."

Paradoxically, then, the madness of rhetoric is precisely what *subverts* the rhetoric of madness. It is at the very point where the mystified pathos of the subject and the false scientific neutrality of the exclusion of the Other are both subverted, at the very point where the rhetoric of madness is undermined, that the madness (rhetoricity) of the text is situated. If the rhetoric of madness is a rhetoric of denial, denial is itself inhabited by the madness it denies.

Madness, in other words, is what a speaking subject can neither simply deny nor simply affirm or assume.

It is somewhere *between* their affirmation and their denial of madness that these texts about madness *act*, and that they act themselves out as madness, i.e., as *unrepresentable*. It is somewhere between their literary rhetoric of madness and the madness of their literary rhetoric that these texts, in *speaking about* madness, in effect *enact* their madness, enact the *encounter* between "speaking about madness" and the "madness that speaks." If the texts about madness are not conscious (are not *present to*) their own madness, it is because they are, paradoxically, the very madness they are speaking about.

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But, madness in what sense? one might ask. What, in the end, does madness really mean in this book? What is the rhetorical status of the term "madness" in my own critical and theoretical discourse? Is madness used here in its literal sense or is it simply a metaphor?

The texts studied in this book do not permit a simple, unambiguous answer to that question. Whether they discuss psychosis, neurosis, or simply the stereotypical, stylistic usage of the term "madness," the texts about madness baffle our preconceived notions about the rhetorical status of the madness they both express and put in question. As this book draws to a close, I would like to open up the following question: Might it not be possible to define the very specificity of literature as that which *suspends the answer* to the question of knowing whether the madness literature speaks of is literal or figurative? The specific property of the thing called literature is such, in other words, that the rhetorical status of its madness can no longer be determined.

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To put it differently, I would like to suggest that literature's particular way of speaking about madness consists in its unsettling the boundary, not only between *symptom* and *metaphor*, between "the madness that gets locked up" and "the hallucination of words," but, more specifically and more strangely, *between psychosis and stereotype*, between the madness of *Aurélia* and the madness of *Memoirs of a Madman*. The uncanny quality of what literature conveys resides in the uncanniness of this encounter, this linking effected by the signifier "madness" between the functioning of cliché and the functioning of psychosis.

It is doubtless no coincidence that Jacques Lacan, studying the writings of psychotics that at first appeared to be "inspired," identifies as their salient feature what he calls their "stereotypy," their "automatism": "Nothing is in fact less inspired," he writes, "than these writings experienced as inspired." In this strictly clinical study, Lacan brings to light the central role of rhythm in psychotic writing: "Conceptual formulations (. . .) have no more importance than do the interchangeable words in a rhyming song. Far from motivating the melody, the words are rather sustained by it (. . .). In these writings, only the rhythmic formula is given, a formula which remains to be filled in by ideational content."¹

Now literature also, through the very topos of madness, points toward a complicity between the signs of inspiration and the signs

¹Annales médico-psychologiques, 1931.

of automatism. It seems to me that, if only we knew how to listen, literature might have something entirely new to say about *rhythm* and about *the enigma of the very meaning of automatism*. The unsuspected knowledge underlying literature's uncanny linkage of psychosis and of stereotype constitutes, perhaps, the question of the future: the question that literature, from its unique position, invites us to ask and that, from its unique position, it addresses to psychiatry, psychoanalysis, biology, and linguistics.

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If literature, from its unique position, has something to teach us about madness, can madness in turn teach us something about literature? It seems to me that if something like literature exists, only madness can explain it. But if, as in my view, it is madness that accounts for the thing called literature, this is not, as some have thought, by virtue of a "sublimation" or a properly therapeutic function of writing, but rather by virtue of the dynamic *resistance to interpretation* inherent in the literary thing. In the end, madness in this book can be defined as nothing other than an irreducible resistance to interpretation.

Madness, in other words (like literature), consists neither in *sense* nor in *non-sense*: it is not a final *signified*—however missing or disseminated—nor an ultimate *signifier* that resists exhaustive deciphering; it is rather, I would suggest, a kind of *rhythm*; a rhythm that is unpredictable, incalculable, unsayable, but that is nonetheless fundamentally narratable as the story of the slippage of a reading *between* the excessive fullness and the excessive emptiness of meaning.

Every reading is a narration whose rhythm is determined by the rhetoric of what it fails to say about its relation to the text and to the madness of the text.

The final theoretical proposition to emerge from this book's analysis is thus the following:

The more a text is "mad"—the more, in other words, it resists interpretation—the more the specific modes of its resistance to reading constitute its "subject" and its literariness. What literature recounts in each text is precisely *the specificity of its resistance to our reading*.

That, at any rate, is the way I view today the relation between literature and madness. Such is, at the very least, the story of my reading, the narrative that, in its rhythm and its rhetoric, its theories and its resistances, I would like to offer as a question—as a *sign*—to an interpretant to come.