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Kathleen McNerney

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CATALAN CRAZIES: THE MADWOMEN IN MARIA-ANTÒNIA OLIVER'S ATTIC

KATHLEEN McNERNEY

For Michel Foucault, madness is more a social situation than a disease of individuals — his history of the treatment of madness indicates that people are put into asylums to fulfill a need of society — a way of obtaining forced labor for example, of putting down uprisings or of avoiding a scandal.¹ Both Pascal and R.D. Laing would go even further, claiming that to function normally in such an insane society is itself a symptom of madness, and that the only truly sane people are those the society considers crazy.² Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilman apply similar ideas specifically to women who have historically been considered mad.³ In her book *Madness in Literature*, Lilian Feder defines madness as «a state in which unconscious processes predominate over conscious ones to the extent that they control them and determine perceptions of and responses to experience that, judged by prevailing standards of logical thought and relevant emotion, are confused and inappropriate».⁴ What strikes me about these and other definitions, including one from Webster's Dictionary which speaks of being «completely unrestrained by reason and judgement» is their subjectivity and relativity — it depends so much on who is making the decision. R.D. Laing very nicely turns the tables on the psychiatrist E. Kraepelin, who, in describing the actions of a young patient, tries to force things from her hands and prevent

¹ Michael Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1965).

² Ronald D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Ballantine, 1967).

³ Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

⁴ Lilian Feder, *Madness in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 5.

her from walking, and sticks pins in her forehead, in an attempt to show that she is crazy. Laing concludes, and I have to agree, that the doctor is at least as crazy as the patient. It is Laing's interest in the alienation of most «normal» people that is most relevant to Maria-Antònia Oliver's various protagonists; he finds that we are all raised to be alienated from ourselves and others, and that alienation is not only the «normal» condition of modern people, but also that it accounts for our destructiveness. For example, he says, «Normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years» (28); the present nuclear arms race is merely the most recent extension of this lunacy.

The theme of madness in literature is an endless one. In her treatment of the subject, Feder constantly gives attention to the cultural milieu of the protagonists she presents, emphasizing the relativity of her definition. The prophetic frenzy of Cassandra in the *Oresteia* is an example of reason in madness; Cassandra's predictions are a result of the ability to juxtapose images of past, present and future with her special kind of wisdom. Her problem is that no one listens to her. Poet Anne Finch, considered mad by most literary historians, portrays in her work a wife's struggle against a subservient role in marriage. Cervantes gives us both Don Quijote and Tomás Rodaja of the «The Man of Glass» as examples of the wisdom of idiots; for all his tilting at windmills, the knight errant is very lucid and intelligent about all subjects except knight-errantry, and Tomás Rodaja, while he fears he will be broken because he believes he is made of glass, attracts people for miles around who seek his advice. In García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, two characters slip into a level of isolation more severe than the rest and are considered mad by the other characters. José Arcadio Buendía, whose search for occult knowledge and fascination with mechanical inventions become obsessions, discovers that he is stuck in time and cannot escape Monday. This terrifying impasse precipitates a total loss of contact with everyday reality. His crisis manifests itself in his sudden-

ly unintelligible speech, and in the violent destruction of his house in an effort to make physical changes in his surroundings which will move time forward. He spends the rest of his days tied to a chestnut tree. Years later his greatgrandson, José Arcadio Segundo, inherits his interest in wild schemes and also his madness, which is characterized by similar symptoms: complete hermeticism, an inability to take care of his bodily functions and empty, motionless eyes. His crisis is precipitated by the massacre of banana company strikers, an event he witnessed, but which is denied by those around him. The list could go on endlessly, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Faulkner's «*The Hamlet*» and *The Sound and the Fury*, indeed a tale told by an idiot. To name just a few female writers with female protagonists or subjects, one must include Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and Marguerite Duras' *Lol V. Stein*, among many others.

In much of her work, Catalan novelist Maria-Antònia Oliver demonstrate her belief in the social utility of the madness label. Joana, the last survivor of *La molt anomenada ciutat de Montcarrà*, plays the role of observer, analyzing lucidly the destruction of her civilization, due in many ways to the madness of her society. The novel develops along the parallel lines of the saga of Majorca and the coming of age of this alienated young woman, one of the younger generation of a family not unlike the Buendía family of Macondo. The Bibiloni-Caimari clan represents not only its own lineage and Majorca, but the human race as well. In concentric circles, Oliver narrates the chronicle of three generations: the first with its patriarch who goes and comes from America; the second with men on both sides of the Civil War and then the Second World War; the third with young people totally alienated from the meaningless ways of the past and the empty values of «progressive» present. The homosexual son disappears into the big city, Barcelona, and only Joana remains. Always an outsider because of her illegitimacy, she refuses to take seriously the rules of a silly game she is already disqualified from playing. When an

aunt announces that Joana's destiny must be sin, since she was born from it, her reaction is a mad, and maddening, laughter. She refuses to accept either the old values or the new, and in her distancing she is the one who most clearly sees the impending destruction of the whole system. No one believes in the predictions of the giants from the Majorcan «rondalles», or fairy tales, any more, but to her the old legends make perfect sense, and the novel's final vision is of her, alone on the island about to be engulfed in the ultimate waves.

Majorca's poetic «rondalles» form not only the background of the novel *El vaixell d'iràs i no tornaràs*, but also its tone and the language itself. The principal narration tells of the strange adventure of a group of travelers who embark on the ship *En Falaguer* in Maó, Minorca, headed for Barcelona. The legendary giants appear, along with fish with magical powers, time that stands still, and a thousand other surprises. The protagonist, Aina, is a young woman who likes to get to the bottom of things and will not take bureaucracy for an answer. The narration in the foreground alternates with Aina's interior monologues, which at times becomes a silent «dialogue» with interlocutors present in the story but not at the conversation. These musings are her way of working out problems with others and within herself, including which version of reality to accept. The novel is a study in fascism, a look at the power of the giants, which exists as a result of very real external factors, but also because the victims cooperate, allowing themselves to be controlled. They do not ask uncomfortable questions, they do not resist. So great is the power of those who control, and the inertia of those who do not resist, that Aina doubts her own perceptions, and finally her sanity. In one of her interior monologues, she decides that even if she is crazy, she prefers that to the state the others are in:

i potser llavors resultarà que som jo la que no fil bé i serà que he tornat loca, però te jur que m'estim més estar loca jo que no veure que hi estam tots, que és com dir que ja sé que un dia m'he de morir, i em desficià pen-

sar-hi, però encara m'engoixaria més pensar que amb mi es morirà tothom alhora i no quedarà ningú per llavor, m'entens?⁵

That is, admitting the possibility that she is the crazy one, she still has her obligations; in this case, to instigate and organize the rebellion against the malignant powers. It is a little like Pascal's bet, but in political terms instead of religious: just in case she is right, she needs to fight.

Even though Aina does not have it clear at every minute what her fight consists of, she has the impulse to question authority, an instinct to follow her own judgement, which floats to the surface much more in her monologues than in the narration or in dialogues with others. What she is constantly resisting is the intervention of others in her destiny: the giants' interception of her ability to choose, and the collaboration with them of others, such as the ship's captain. Her sense of responsibility for her own actions makes her try to overcome deflection from her own destiny, to be arrived at by her own decisions.

Her interior monologues serve not only as a time of reflexion, a «reality check», but also for self-encouragement. They are also the moments of doubt, as she tries to reassure herself in her role as leader. Her lover Bernat, called Góngylus in her mind, reacts in another way: he is capable of helping in the resistance, but only by closing himself up, protecting himself, as if in a suit of armor. She is the one, she tells herself, to play the role «de nyeu-nyeu, queixar-me, dubtar, estar sempre desorientada, embullada, capficada» (113). But Góngylus plays for her, at least in her mind, the role of sounding board, because her monologues, though monologues they are, are always directed at Góngylus-Bernat. At her very lowest point of depression and despair, what she most regrets is the loss of surprise, because she believes she knows how everything will turn out, including the loss of Góngylus, and she

⁵ Maria-Antònia Oliver. *El vaixell d'iràs i no tornaràs* (Barcelona: Laia, 1976),

wants to make love, for it might be for the last time. Things do not turn out as disastrously in reality, but in the meantime we have seen the development of this marginalized protagonist, through her thoughts and actions, from the first moment of enthusiasm and flirtation upon embarkation to the recovery of her destiny at the end.

Crineres de foc, Oliver's longest novel to date, is also structured around binary oppositions, or parallel stories, introduced together in the first line: «El dia que la nina va venir al món fou el dia que el poble va començar a fer-se prop del Casal».⁶ The story moves back and forth constantly between the development of the town, El Claper, and the growth of the girl, Estel. The inhabitants of El Claper are fugitives from Els Fucs, factic powers from the world outside, from where they have escaped in order to begin their lives anew. Estel lives with her family in El Casal, and though the town is close by, she is not permitted to leave the house.

Els Claperers, in spite of being fugitives from an illegitimate power with memories of fear and repression, end up accepting a new despot, l'Home blanc. As soon as he arrives in the town, he begins to impose order: if before the sun was enough to tell time, he brings clocks and schedules, dictating types of work to everyone, one of the most important being that of Arxiver, or historian. The only initial voice of rebellion is that of the old padrina. No one pays attention to her, and everyone says she is crazy, but La Cornera, also a historian in her own way, files her words away and will remember them later, l'Home blanc manages to conquer them because he is charming and good-looking and seems to do things for their good, and the Claperers do not analyze his words and actions as they should. The strongest person in the town, since the padrina is old, is La Cornera, and for this reason the tyrant must treat her with special care: he puts her in the highest position in the town and makes her his lover.

⁶ Maria-Antònia Oliver, *Crineres de foc* (Barcelona: Laia, 1985), 9.

The points of contact between Estel and El Claper are multiple and fluid. Inside the house, Estel, as an adolescent, discovers the pleasures of her body, but she knows instinctively that it has to be kept secret and she hides to do her exploring. One day, she discovers her first menstrual blood. For her, it is something to celebrate; she is delighted to be an adult, for now she can go to the town, she believes. She triumphantly announces to her father that she is a woman now. But her father teaches her first shame — as a woman she must be discreet, and then hypocrisy as a woman, she can no longer kiss and embrace her father. Estel's rebellion leaves her father astonished. Incapable of understanding why she refuses the incestuous plans he has for her, he labels her as ungrateful, rude, and quite crazy. Similarly, when in the town La Cornera finally begins to question the status quo and the rules of l'Home blanc, she is officially named mad, as the *padrina* had been earlier, and the despot gives orders that no one is to listen to her words. The two patriarchs, then, react to these threats by tranquilizing their subjects, as they have done so many times in the past, but this time the rebels know that real tranquility comes only from taking control of their own lives.

The «madness» of Estel had an antecedent in El Casal; the grandfather, that is, the father of patriarch, also had his day of rebellion against the power of his son. Something like the mother of Bernarda Alba, he knows that the closed-in life in the house is not normal: he wants to go out and see the town, and he spends his days looking out of the window until finally he goes mad in a violent form, throwing furniture around and destroying things. The patriarch, furious at this attack on order, repeats exactly the same actions, but no one calls him crazy, since he is the one to label others.

Naming oneself symbolizes the parallel struggles in the two worlds created in *Crineres de foc*. La Cornera, after founding the town, had forgotten the secret of happiness, the same secret Estel is seeking. For towns, and women, need their own identities, without intermediaries. The struggle may not be perfect happiness,

but what they find out is that it is the only possibility of finding it.

Other protagonists of Oliver's fictional world react differently to difficult situations. In «Muller qui cerca espill, les mans s'hi talla I», a young woman with few choices in life limits her rebellion to an impotent lashing out at her own image, which she despises for its representation of her narrow possibilities. Two older women protagonists react in ways that might seem impotent to some but could also be considered the ultimate rebellion. Marta of screenplay *Vegetal* tries to be useful to society, but since she has been raised to be decorative, she finally joins the rank of her beautiful plants, the only friends she has. In «Muller qui cerca espill les mans s'hi talla II» a woman is locked up by her husband and son because she does «crazy» things; all she really wants is to revisit her mother and birthplace, across the sea. She manages to escape and try that ultimate voyage, and her body is found on the seashore. Sebastiana, the young Majorcan of *Estudi en lila*, victimized by rape on the one hand and an inflexibly cruel traditional family on the other, finds no way out of her dilemma.

Oliver leaves us with a fluid definition of madness, but basically one that is in accord with both Foucault's and R.D. Laing's social theories. The individual women in these stories are reacting to insane forces in ways that seem perfectly logical given the crazy restrictions to their freedoms and their possibilities for self-development. Sometimes they succeed, sometimes not, but in all cases it is the struggle that matters.

KATHLEEN MCNERNEY
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY