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Madness as Exclusion and Self-Exclusion in Mario Tobino and Dino Campana

During the oral presentation of this paper at UCLA on November 13, 1993, I showed a series of slides that I reproduced from Matteo Collura's *Perdersi in Manicomio*. The photographs in Collura's book were shot one or two years ago in what remains of the mental hospital of Agrigento, Sicily. Psychiatric hospitals were abolished in Italy in 1978. The people portrayed in the photographs—real people—are “left-overs”; they should not be there. As the title of the book says, they got lost at some point along the way. It was not my intention to make a point with the slides, rather I simply utilized the disheartening images to convey some of the ineffable pain and loneliness of the dweller in the universe of madness and its holy *locus*, the asylum.¹

This paper was born from an interest in the role played by madness in literature. My interest in madness, however, is not primarily with its private or interior aspect, but with madness as already processed, so to speak, by institutions, as inscribed in the circle of public acknowledgment. This leads almost naturally to the world of psychiatric hospitals. The two writers I consider here, Mario Tobino and Dino Campana, have in common that they both spent good parts of their lives in psychiatric hospitals—in different capacities, though. When Tobino started his medical practice as a psychiatrist in the hospital of Ancona in 1939, Campana had been dead for seven years, having spent the last twelve years of his life as an inmate of the asylum of Castel Pulci.

The contraposition of the public roles of these two writers, the first a director of a mental hospital for more than twenty years, the second an institutionalized madman, is at the core of this paper. Yet their contraposition falls apart as soon as one approaches these two men, not through their public personae, but through their work. Our expectations tend, surprisingly, to be overturned. Not only are the two writers strikingly similar in their anguish, loneliness and human drama; but Tobino often displays the disorientation one would not expect of a mental health professional, and Campana the lucidity and self-awareness one would not expect of a mental patient.

Deciding whether to attribute insanity to a person is necessarily problematic when it involves the deployment of categories completely different from those in operation at the time of that person's life. The intervention of hospitalization makes things even more tangled, because it augments the pretense of objectivity. It is important to notice that this can work both ways. There is a danger that mental health professionals might be protected from a certain kind of scrutiny, while having been hospitalized even once constitutes a stigma that is hard to erase.

Campana was institutionalized at least nine times (his biography has a number of grey areas).² Four times he was put in jail, five in a mental hospital. Before 1968 in Italy admission to mental hospitals was only compulsory and it was recorded on the patient's documents, so that he or she lost his or her civil rights. According to the 1904 Giolitti Law, dangerousness was necessary for admission (De Girolamo 22). Campana got himself into trouble quite frequently: he had outbursts of rage and acted violently and impulsively. But there is not one single record of his having hurt either himself or other people. The diagnosis of his first hospitalization at the age of 21 is "dementia praecox." The justification is "impulsività e vita errabonda," and excessive use of coffee; in fact, the literal translation of the medical report is "coffee-abuse" (Turchetta 67-8).³ Vagrancy, coffee-abuse and fundamentally harmless outbursts of rage were the grounds of his other four admissions to mental institutions. All the imprisonments were brought about by either analogous causes or by lack of valid documents.

Campana showed early in his life a strong tendency to wander away from home. In his native Marradi he felt constricted, especially since his oddity provoked the jests of his fellow villagers. The various incarcerations exacerbated his isolation, pushing Campana to longer and longer flights and more and more trouble. It is impossible to express a judgment now on whether his problems had a psychological or even an organic cause, but a series of social, political and economic circumstances (Campana came from a poor peasant family) certainly contributed to his public definition as insane. An interesting datum: the years between 1874 and 1913 witness the Italian version of the phenomenon called by Foucault "the great internment." In those years, the inmate population increased from about 12,000 people to over 40,000, with a three-fold increase in hospitalization rate, from 5 to 15 for every ten thousand people (De Girolamo 22). Campana fits right in.

Campana wrote only one book, the *Canti orfici*. The book was published in 1914, when the poet was 29. Four years after the publication of the *Orfici* Campana was committed to a mental institution for the last time and spent there, in silence, the rest of his life. According to Gianni Turchetta the relationship of madness and writing in Campana is one of mutual exclusion. In defiance of all

the myths built around the figure of the poet, Turchetta claims that Campana did not write the *Orfici* because or as crazy, but in spite of his spreading insanity. According to Turchetta, Campana's poetry was the result of a relentless struggle with his insanity, as if the lucid reason that produced the lines of the *Orfici* had had to tear each of them from the hands of delirious hallucinations.

I would like to view the *Orfici* not as the calm before the storm, nor as a depiction of the "still sane" Campana, nor as portrait of one particular phase of his life (the phase, in fact, that preceded his sliding into madness). I would instead like to view the *Orfici* as containing the man in his entirety, engaged in the struggle to express his true self. From this perspective, in the *Orfici* we meet Campana both prior to and after his last and definitive internment. The *Orfici* speak, not only for the still active and public Campana, but also for the incarcerated and silent one.

I will focus here on only a few of the themes of the *Canti orfici*. The themes I have chosen are the ones that most strikingly have a counterpart in Tobino. I will try to analyze them synoptically, in order to evidenciate the similarity of themes in their works, but especially the overturned way in which they appear when juxtaposed. I believe that this overturning points in a direction that frustrates the expectations of the reader. I will try to show the vacuity and inapplicability of the stereotypes associated with madness, on the one hand, and sanity, on the other. The sanity we speak of in connection with Mario Tobino occupies a very privileged position in the collective imaginary, because the psychiatrist is precisely the person who cures insanity and is therefore immune from its manifestations. Once again, I want to make clear that I am not making any claim about the mental health of either Campana or Tobino. What I am interested in are the expectations, the perceptions, the myths derived from their biographies and especially from the roles they perform in the public rituals and representations of madness.

From the perspective of this paper, there is not much to say about Tobino's life.⁴ For a couple of decades, he was the director of a psychiatric hospital, the hospital of Maggiano, which is renamed in his most famous novels as Magliano. Before the reform of 1978, which abolished mental hospitals, the director of an asylum had absolute power. In some cases he was the only physician working in the hospital, while the rest of the personnel consisted of nurses also performing the function of security (Tobino 1963, 10). He was in charge of everything: from admissions to discharges, from any form of medical intervention to disciplinary decisions, from hygiene to management of the personnel, etc. (Ferrario 198 and 202). I will focus on *Le libere donne di Magliano*, first published in 1953.

The key theme of the *Canti orfici* is the theme of travel. Travel, restless movement, is felt by the poet as an invincible compulsion. He has to be constantly

on the move, whether on foot, on a train, or in the hold of a ship. Travel is often associated with the terminology of doom: “destino fuggitivo,” “andar fatale,” “l’eterno errante.” Lucidly, Campana attributes to his mental disturbances this deep restlessness: later on in the book he is asked by a friend to leave with him. He declines. His madness, “la sua pazzia,” is “tranquilla,” and is leaving him alone (Campana 78). There is obviously something deeply painful, deeply tragic in all this wandering. Campana describes it as “la malinconia dell’eterno errante.” His travels do not lead anywhere. Every point of arrival is necessarily also a point of departure. There is no god to be found anywhere:

Sotto le stelle impassibili, sulla terra infinitamente deserta e misteriosa, dalla sua tenda l’uomo libero tendeva le braccia al cielo infinito non deturpato dall’ombra di Nessun Dio. (71)

On the other hand, however, there is a deep element of joy and vibrating excitement in all this travelling. The tragic and the intensely joyful do not contradict nor erase each other. They are two sides of the same coin. Many critics have noticed that the *Orfici* is not a bleak work. The word “dolce” appears so often that it cannot fail to be viewed as a leitmotif.

The experience of the traveller is full of intense, almost intoxicating sensations. Sensations of every kind, but especially visual sensations, described with the obsessive accuracy of the subject who feels the enormous responsibility to be faithful to himself, impregnate the book. Colors explode from its pages: not pastel colors or delicate hues, but primary colors in their purest vividness: red, white, blue, green, black. It is not chance that the art of painting plays such a part in the intertextuality of the *Orfici*. This intense experience of life—we cannot take it to be of anything else—is simultaneously a full immersion in the realities of pain and joy. They are so inextricably linked that it is impossible to experience one without the other. And still, except in some deeply melancholic passages, it is joy, beauty and sweetness that the *Orfici* communicates. The high point of this intoxicating joy of living is expressed in the “meravigliosa . . . dolce e terribile,” mysterious and pure union with nature achieved by the narrator of the “Pampa” (71).

The boundless physical experience of the world of the poet of the *Orfici* contrasts with the immobility and seclusion of Tobino’s psychiatrist. Although a free man, he lives in the hospital. His home must amount for quite a while to a single room, because it is only later on in *Le libere donne di Magliano* that he recounts excitedly the moment in which two rooms are given him. Most of the descriptions contained in the book concern what goes on inside the hospital. The landscape within which the narration expands is comprised of the wards full of beds, the bare, terribly dismal cells of the dangerous and restless patients, and

of the enclosed lawns and courtyards in which they are sometimes allowed. The life of the doctor does not have much wider boundaries. It is mostly from his window that he observes the nature that surrounds the hospital. Also, he truly does not go anywhere. When he needs a bottle of wine from the inn on the other end of the hospital, he sends a meek and cooperative patient. His excursions seem to go no farther than the little room where the receptionist works.

Although immersed in a wonderful, sensual, vibrating nature (waters run and wind blows everywhere), the poet of the *Orfici* is alone. The stars are hugely distant in the imperturbable stillness of the sky, the sun scorches the land but cannot warm the poet, the rivers flow on unregarding; the elements of nature experienced and represented so vividly by the poet are almost without exception inanimate, and do not care. Very seldom do we have descriptions of animals or living things, and when we do they are of disembodied or anonymous objects: wings of birds, fir trees in the distance, waving crops. It is as if, with the same intensity with which he looks for the intoxication of beauty and communion with nature, the poet-traveller seeks distance and isolation. It is in the nature of perpetual movement and compulsive travel to escape connections and links—to keep one's distance. When represented in broad daylight, the world of the *Orfici* is a whirlwind of movement. Everything, including the poet through whose eyes we see everything, moves, and nothing connects with anything. Stillness belongs only to the night, and night is the time of solitude and rest, the time of the blackness of death.

The humans that populate the *Orfici* are in great number prostitutes. The same distance that the poet seeks from nature, he seeks from human society. The whore is the symbol of non-rapport *par excellence*. Furthermore, she is often seen at a window, in a doorway, behind a curtain or walking under the arches, which emphasizes her distance. The relationship with a prostitute is typically undemanding: she gives without asking, and no continuity or commitment are required. In fact, the poet professes explicitly his unwillingness to commit himself to a romantic relationship, or his incapability of doing so. In "Dualismo (Lettera aperta a Manuelita Etchegarray)" he apologetically shouts: "io non pensavo, non pensavo a voi; io mai non ho pensato a voi" (57). The character of Manuelita might well be fictional, but what the poet is saying is clear: no woman, however much loved, can retain him, or his feelings. The poet betrays Manuelita because of his "infinita solitudine." Loneliness, that drives him away from everything and everybody, is his doom. Male friendship, on the other hand, does not really appear in the *Orfici*. Regolo, the friend the poet cannot go away with because in that moment "his madness is calm," is not a friend at all: he is another lonely, compulsive traveller, equally doomed to solitary wandering. Each sees his own image reflected in the other; their resemblance and communality

of destiny moves them. They hug tenderly. But their friendship cannot but be a friendship of good-byes. Lonely souls do not travel together.

In his first person narration Tobino's psychiatrist sometimes mentions his friends. He says that now and then they come to visit. However, we never encounter them. The only company of his we encounter and get to know are the mad people: Tono, who although scared by his inner phantoms goes all the way to the inn to get the doctor his wine; "la signora Alfonsa" and "la Lella," who, in their madness, are sane enough to function as his servants and housekeepers; the door-keeper, to whose solitary little cubicle the doctor goes sometimes to have a chat and kill time. Then, of course, there are the madwomen of the wards, many of whom are crazily in love with him, expose themselves to him, cling, drooling, to the bars of their cells in the desperate attempt to touch him; or the other madwomen, those who adore him in silence, with a never expressed devotion that still constitutes the only purpose of their lives. Like the whores of Campana, these women live at an ungapable distance. One cannot help feeling, in the sober lines of his narration, that the psychiatrist does not dislike their love, devotion and admiration. Somehow, it gives him warmth and, why not, pleasure. But no relationship is possible between the mad population of the hospital and its doctor. No interaction other than force-feeding, mechanical or chemical sedation, and a few interviews can occur between the psychiatrist and the patients. And rightly so, of course. When la signora Alfonsa, after years of tranquility and dedication to her job as the doctor's servant, has a relapse and goes crazy, the doctor is genuinely upset. Still, he locks her up; he pushes her back to the core of the world to which she truly belongs. He has to. With la Lella the matter seems to be different. She remains stable and can continue to work for her doctor; but a sad passage reveals, without any possibility of doubt, the distance that separates them. It is Christmas. For many years the doctor has spent the holiday by himself, in his room. In a rather unusual way he lets us in on his feelings:

Oggi è Natale, ero solo, non sapevo dove andare e non mi riusciva scacciare, mentre si avvicinava mezzogiorno, una sconsolazione che sempre più mi pungeva come volesse farmi arrivare al pianto. (100)

But this time one of his colleagues invites him to his home. For la Lella it is a terrible blow: their reciprocal loneliness had also been their only company on Christmas Day. "Già tante feste avevamo passate tacitamente insieme," says the narrator; where "tacitamente" sadly erases the comfort and coziness of "insieme" (101). The doctor of Magliano is an irremediably lonely man.

Enclosed in the space of the mental hospital, the insane person seems to embody exclusion in a privileged way. Self-excluded in the tragic isolation of

his or her illness, the mad person is excluded from society through incarceration. And yet the matter is not that simple. The psychiatrist of Magliano is equally self-excluded and isolated as the poet of the *Orfici*. Both Tobino and Campana, the former voluntarily while the latter involuntarily, end up sharing the destiny of incarceration.

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Notes

¹Thanks to Simon Evnine for his constant presence and to Professor Joseph A. Dane, without whose encouragement and support this paper would never have been written. I would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of Giovanni Scolaro.

²All biographical information on Campana is taken from Turchetta, 1990.

³The medical record defines Campana "dedito al caffè del quale è avidissimo e ne fa un abuso eccezionalissimo" (Turchetta 68).

⁴I have taken all biographical information on Tobino from Grillandi, 1975.

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