

The Function of the Portrayal of Madness
in ‘The Diary of a Madman’ and *The Madness of George*
III: the Effects of Tragedy and Comedy

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Nikolai Gogol’s ‘The Diary of a Madman’ and Alan Bennet’s *The Madness of George III* offer readers and theatregoers two very intense portrayals of madness. On the one hand, those representations of madness profoundly distress, they are highly dramatic and excite sympathy and pity. On the other hand, their function is to entertain: the characters’ madness is somehow risible and people laugh at it or are, at least, entertained. That reaction, laughter, shows the distance which madness creates between madmen and the people who laugh at them, because laughter needs a level of insensibility to be occasioned. How can these two very contrasting functions of madness coexist? One indicates and produces distance from the madman, the other produces vicinity. I argue that, through both sympathy and laughter, readers and observers are led to acknowledge the senselessness of the injustices the mad character endures. The social accusations brought forth by the literary text—denouncing the little knowledge the public has of madness and the fear this lack of knowledge generates – are thus recognised by readers.

Of the two, the function of the portrayal of madness which most clearly allows readers to see what the mad character sees, and suffer with them, is the dramatic one. When Aristotle defines drama in his *Poetics*, he writes that ‘through pity and fear’, drama ‘effect[s] the proper

purgation [*catharsis*] of these emotions'.¹ Observers identify with the characters and sympathise with them, they feel pity and fear, and so manage to take the character's point of view. If a portrayal of madness is tragic, and if it underlines the helpless situation of the mad characters, it will arouse sympathy, and the injustices the madmen suffer will be exposed. Still in the *Poetics*, as Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle noted, 'Aristotle argued that character is 'secondary' to what he calls the 'first essential' or 'lifeblood' of tragedy—the plot—and that characters are included 'for the sake of the action'.² Many critics have questioned this assumption, and in their *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Bennett and Royle argue that, as Henry James wrote, plot and character are two equal parts of a whole. According to them,

to identify with a person in a novel or play is to identify oneself, to produce an identity for oneself. It is to give oneself a world of fictional people, to start to let one's identity merge with that of a fiction. It is, finally, also to create a character for oneself, to create oneself as a character.

(Bennett and Royle, p. 67)

Identification blurs the confines between what is real and what is fictional, projecting readers onto characters, making the ones sympathise with the others. Sympathy, which literally means 'feel together', allows readers to feel deeply the injustices suffered by the characters.

This introduction on sympathy and dramatic character will help me explain how Poprishchin and King George manage to engage readers and, through this engagement, lead readers to share their distress. In 'The Diary of a Madman', the portrayal of the protagonist's

¹ Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. by S. H. Butcher (Salt Lake City: Project Gutenberg, 2008), p. 28.

² Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Harlow: Pearson, 2004), p. 60. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

madness slowly grows in intensity, as his alienation from reality brings him to disillusionment and to be locked up in the asylum. The protagonist narrates his experiences in first-person, writing about them in scraps of a diary. He seems to be jotting down thoughts and impressions, gradually more disconnected and nonsensical. The dates which precede each new entry change from ordinary dates to fantastical inventions: ‘Marchember 86th’ and ‘No date. The day had no date’.³ As an intimate way of narrating one’s story, the journal—and especially such a disarranged one, apparently not intended for others to read—allows readers to enter the narrator’s private life. Reading an intimate, first-person account of his fall into madness makes it easier for them to identify and sympathise with Poprishchin.

When readers have already entered his most private and illicit thoughts, his alienation degenerates: ‘Spain has a king. He has been found. I am that king’ (Gogol, p. 294). Readers, whose sympathy has gradually increased thanks to the intimate form and private content of the diary,³ are affected by this deterioration in his writing. They might be surprised or shocked, they might have expected it, but as his madness degenerates, his style of writing becomes even more direct, honest and unmediated. Poprishchin is confessing to his journal, and its readers, that he is ‘that king’, the king of Spain: readers might be touched by his disarming frankness, and their sympathy heightened rather than lowered by his madness.

His mad beliefs give him the power he needed not to go to work and not to care about social rules and appearances. When he finally agrees to go to the office, but only ‘as a joke’, he narrates: ‘when he [the director] was passing through our section, everybody buttoned up their tailcoats; but I – nothing of the sort! What is a director that I should stand up before him – never!’ (Gogol, pp. 294–95). As Richard Peace argues, ‘madness, it seems, is the outer world’s lack of harmony transferred into the inner realm’: it is ‘the outer world’s lack of

³ Nikolai Gogol, *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, trans. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Granta Books, 1998), pp. 294–96. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

harmony', its nonsensical injustices, that madness reveals.⁴ Poprishchin's lucid insight into the senselessness of class hierarchies is permitted to him because of his alienation from reality. Readers, through the sympathy they feel for him as first-person narrator, as mad and mistreated character, are asked and led to see the truth he is speaking.

The climax of his madness and of the reader's sympathy occurs when he is locked up in the asylum. In four last journal entries where his madness, his pain and the readers' pity escalate, harrowing hints about the tortures he suffers coexist with the fanciest thoughts. He writes:

he saw me and chased me out from under the chair with his stick. That cursed stick is extremely painful. However, all this has been rewarded by my present discovery: I've learned that every rooster has its Spain, that it's located under his feathers.

(Gogol, p. 299)

He talks nonsense, but as he dramatically describes the punishment he gets for it, we see how disproportionate the one is to the other. This contrast is sharpest at the end of the story, when he is painfully lucid and then plunges back, with the last sentence, into madness: 'No, I no longer have the strength to endure. God! what they're doing to me!' (Gogol, p. 299). His desperation allows him a moment of recognition, when he acknowledges his infirmity: 'Dear mother! pity your sick child! [...] And do you know that the Dey of Algiers has a bump just under his nose?' (Gogol, p. 300). His dramatic powerlessness against the tortures he undergoes, and the perdurance of his nonsensical speech, lead readers to sympathise and, through identification and sympathy, to see the injustice and cruelty he has to endure. Those injustices and cruelties are perpetuated by public institutions, not sadistic individuals. They take place in

⁴ Richard Peace, *The Enigma of Gogol* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 130. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

a hospital, an asylum, a centre created and administrated by the State. Social condemnations are implicitly present in the story and, through character identification, are internalised and perhaps understood by readers.

What happens in *The Madness of George III* is, under this point of view, very similar. The madman is intimate with the spectator, in this case, not because he writes in first-person but because he is himself speaking directly to the audience, as a character in the play. When the king is on stage, spatially close to the spectators, what he feels, says or endures is immediately captured by the audience, without being mediated. Theatregoers get engrossed in the character through the dramatic intensity of his madness, which excites pity. Bennett himself comments: ‘What I had not anticipated is that the audience would be so wholeheartedly on the King’s side.’⁵

As in the ending of ‘The Diary of a Madman’, the episodes which most excite sympathy are those when the king partly recognises his madness but is powerless against it. At the beginning of his infirmity, he notices the change:

KING What do you know of my mind? Or its frame? Something is shaking the frame; shaking the mind out of its frame. I am not going out of my mind; my mind is going out of me.

(Bennett, p. 23)

This scene is essential to understand the helplessness of the king’s situation, and the sympathy it excites in the audience. He addresses directly both his ‘loyal servants’, the government representatives on stage, and the audience: ‘what do you know of my mind?’ (Bennett, p. 22). None of them can understand what his ‘frame of mind’ is—none should have a say in what he

⁵ Alan Bennett, *The Madness of George III* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

can or cannot do. His ‘loyal servants’ are the same who will later make decisions for him, will allow the king to be tortured and controlled. By saying that no one—not even himself—can know anything about his frame of mind, the king foreshadows the illegitimacy of doctors’ so-called cures. The cause of his madness is just ‘something’ which is ‘shaking the mind out of its frame’. What this ‘something’ is remains vague, unknown, as well as the way to remove it. By saying that it is not him going out of his mind, but his mind going out of him, the king underlines that his mind is controlling him now, and leaving him: he has no choice, no power over it. Seen by spectators as an object used by his own mind, as ‘me’ and not ‘I’, the king is pitied as powerless and continually stripped of his own will. When he is tortured because of something he cannot control, the absurdity of his suffering is shared by the audience.

The height of the aroused sympathy occurs when the madman’s powerlessness is complete. Since the action takes place on stage, this climax happens when the king gets physically restrained:

(... we see that he has been strapped into the chair, feet and arms clamped, his head held rigid by a band round his forehead.)

KING: *(Howling)* I am the King of England.

WILLIS: No, sir. You are the patient.

(The Coronation Anthem finally reaches its climax and bursts forth in the chorus of Zadok the Priest, as the KING struggles, howling, in the chair...)

(Bennett, p. 44)

This scene represents the height of his madness: from that point he begins to become ‘himself again’ (Bennett, pp. 80–81). The tragedy stands, again, in the impossibility of the king to win the fight against a stronger power. Asserting ‘I am the King of England’ is a desperate attempt to get his will and stop the tortures, to reiterate his nominal power. But that power is inexistent:

‘No, sir. You are the patient’ is the only answer he gets. The moment is extremely tragic, anti-glorious; a deposition scene on the notes of the Coronation Anthem. The king gets stripped off of all powers, even the control of his own body, and is so shaken that when he gets well, at the end of the play, he needs to show the re-obtaining of his power by negating Willis’s statement: ‘I am not the patient [...] the King is himself again’ (Bennett, pp. 80–81). This abasement, this divestment of all dignity and strength is felt as unjust by a sympathetic audience. Internalising the king’s sufferings through sympathy, spectators are drawn to reflect on questions such as: how much power, physical as well as psychological, can you impose on someone considered to be mad? To what extent can you restrain, torture, subdue, and is it humane to do so? Assisting to these tortures, being unable to intervene, and being at times considered by the king the same as his torturers—for example in the previous ‘What do you know of my mind?’—strain the audience and test its limits. The contrast present in hearing the Coronation anthem and seeing a king deposed on stage is mirrored by two coexistent reactions in the audience: its potential for violence and enjoyment of violence contrasts with the highest level of sympathy for the tortured king. Overcoming or setting aside any possible enjoyment of violence, we might recognise and understand the tragic position of the king, and the broader social critique it excites.

The comedic aspects of literary works are more difficult, at first, to see as edifying. This is largely because, as Jonathan Wild writes, ‘The perennial problem with comic drama is that critics have proved reluctant to take it seriously. [...] The main difficulty for comedy in this context has been its perceived role as providing mere entertainment to its consumers.’⁶ Comedy has been underestimated and dismissed as merely a pastime, a silly entertainment. I have two counterarguments for those who dismiss it: firstly, comedy should be valued and

⁶ Jonathan Wild, ‘Comedy’, in *The Edinburgh Introduction to Studying English Literature*, ed. by Dermot Cavanagh and others (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 189–98 (p. 189).

respected even only as entertaining – it keeps readers engaged and it produces a momentary feeling of happiness. Secondly, I believe that laughter does spark a further reaction in readers, especially when the object of that laughter, as it happens in many portrayals of madness, also excites sympathy. Unlike tragedy, comedy creates a distance between readers and characters. Henri Bergson argues that the comedic effect needs ‘the absence of feeling to work’:

Here I would point out [...] the ABSENCE OF FEELING which usually accompanies laughter. It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion. I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity.⁷

Comedic effect could not be ‘produced’ unless the receiver, the reader or spectator, is ‘indifferent’. That indifference, Bergson writes, can only be a passing indifference; if we sympathise with the character who is the object of the comedy, in order to laugh we must ‘for the moment [...] impose silence upon our pity’. Poprishchin and King George, whose madness continually excites sympathy, can and are laughed at, but at that particular time our sympathy must be buried by indifference. When a representation of madness is both tragic and comic, we need to understand how the sympathy which the tragic generates coexists with the insensibility the comedic needs.

It happens both in *The Madness of George III* and ‘The Diary of a Madman’ that something comic in the portrayal of their madness entertains us, makes us laugh. For a second, when laughter is generated, we forget our pity. One of the many examples of this can be found

⁷ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Salt Lake City: Project Gutenberg, 2003), I.1. Online text.

in Gogol's short story, when Poprishchin tells his house-servant Mavra about his discovery: 'First off, I announced to Mavra who I am. When she heard that the king of Spain was standing before her, she clasped her hands and nearly died of fright. The stupid woman had never seen a king of Spain before' (Gogol, p. 294). The style is satirical; the explanation he gives for Mavra's reaction, 'the stupid woman had never seen a king of Spain before', is dictated by his alienation from reality, and it is comical. As in other instances, the fact that he finds a perfectly logical explanation for something his madness caused, together with the satirical tone used, is entertaining. In order to enjoy the comic in it, readers have to forget for a moment that his madness is speaking. They also have to surpass his calling her 'stupid woman', momentarily failing to notice the rudeness of it.

In *The Madness of George III*, comedy initially exploits the audience's potential for the enjoyment of violence, even more than it does in Gogol's short story. While falling into his fragmentary speech and alienation from decorum, the king still has the perfect response, and a clever joke, for every occasion:

WILLIS: Our saviour went about healing the sick.

KING: Yes, but he had not £700 a year for it.

(GREVILLE and the PAGES laugh but not WILLIS.)

Yes, but he had not £700 a year for it, eh? Not bad for a madman.

(Bennett, p. 42)

Right before he gets restrained, and after he has been tortured with blisters, the king maintains his ability to joke and make people laugh. Even in the most tragic moments, his madness has something risible in it: a king in his nightgown, shouting nonsense and ordering his pages around, a king struggling for his freedom and telling his doctor 'shut up, you sanctimonious piss-hole', can be entertaining because of its absurdity (Bennett, p. 43). The comedic effect

stands in the fact that his behaviour does not conform to the traditional, regal, dignified king we might expect. But in order to laugh at it, we have to forget that he is being tortured and stripped off of his power for something that he cannot control. Entertainment, in this case, seems to be a complete opposite of the moments which lead the audience to set aside their possible enjoyment of violence to sympathise and reflect on the scene—entertainment uses that same enjoyment of violence to make spectators laugh. Readers, for a moment, ally with the inflictors of the torture, laughing at the madman and forgetting their sympathy.

On the contrary, Richard Peace, writing about Gogol's short story, argues that the comic in a portrayal of madness sharpens the sympathetic effect of tragedy. He writes: 'the sudden descent from the high note of genuine pathos to the grotesque inconsequentiality of 'and do you know that the King of France (*sic*) has a lump right under his nose?' is [...] a sudden tension projected on to the moods of pathos, which heightens and sharpens its impact' (Peace, p. 125). For Peace, the comic effect of madness only serves as an opposite to the tragic, and therefore augments the educating effect of the latter. This reading of comedic traits is limiting; it circumscribes entertainment only as a function of the tragic, as something that is only important when considered as opposite, not worthy of consideration for itself.

Differently to what Peace argues, I believe that the comic effect of representations of madness has important functions in itself. Partly, entertainment is present simply for the sake of entertaining. Both Gogol's and Bennett's literary works keep people engaged through comedy. But laughter also has an edifying function, despite the insensibility it needs, or rather because of it. These two portrayals of madness generate a bitter laugh: Poprishchin's inconsequentialities and logical excuses, the king's jokes and ridiculous behaviour are entertaining, and when laughter starts it is genuine. What happens almost at the same moment is this: readers and spectators catch themselves laughing; they immediately realise that it is not very appropriate. Their momentary insensibility is made patent by laughter itself, and that

realisation generates a sense of guilt which stops the laugh. In this way, the entertaining aspect of the portrayal of madness cooperates with the tragic (and is not peripheral to it) in order to lead readers to reflect on what is or is not appropriate, sympathetic or humane to do when confronted with madness. Through sympathy and checked laughter readers internalise the character's situation, to the point of being personally affected by their reactions. When we catch ourselves laughing and realise we have momentarily forgotten our pity, the shock can be so private, so emotional that we stop laughing; we even regret our laughter and blame ourselves for it. It is our embodiment with the mad characters, and our own reactions, which can lead us to reflection upon the social premises which generate both the characters' treatment and our response to it.

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