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BRIEFING FOR A DESCENT INTO HELL: MADNESS AS A LITERARY MOTIF IN WORLD LITERATURE

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Abstract: *The article explores man's eternal fascination with madness or the presumption that a person acts, behaves beyond the rules of the community, of the norm. The work explores the brief literary history of mania, of divine madness as it appears in antiquity. In the Elizabethan era, Shakespeare depicts the world as a stage and the human characters and their behaviours as important pieces of the puzzle that Freud would later describe in his work dedicated to the human psyche. The article is named after Doris Lessing's novel, Briefing for a Descent into Hell, a novel that imagines the fantastical "inner-space" life of an amnesiac, a man supposed to be mad. Madness and moreover its depiction are mere performances of imagination on our part, because all literary endeavours on depicting madness are attempts to understand a universe, a reality, a pathology so different from our reality or what we consider to be real.*

Keywords: *madness, divine madness, performance, tragedy, pathology*

Since ancient times, people have been fascinated by madness. Famous characters from Greek mythology and ancient tragedies are afflicted by this disease, and scholars and philosophers address the phenomenon of madness in their writings.

In Antiquity, several forms of madness were distinguished. Poetic inspirations and the gift of prophecy are considered 'positive' forms of madness. In ancient Greek the word mania is related to the words rage/rage, as well as to the similar Greek word mantis, which means seer or prophet. Ecstasy was also considered a form of madness, especially Dionysian rage. Plato (c. 427 BC - c. 347 BC) distinguishes four forms of productive madness: mantic madness, mystical madness, poetic madness and erotic madness. "Divine madness" can lead to true knowledge and can thus be regarded as positive.

Another form of madness already described in Antiquity is sickly melancholy. It contains the possibility of self-generation, already suggested by Aristotle (b. 384 BC - d. 7 March 322 BC) and Cicero (b. 106 BC - d. 43 BC), which later triggered a veritable 'cult of melancholy' in humanism. Already Aristotle observed that melancholics would be unequal in character because of the particularly unequal properties of the black bile. Characteristic of melancholics are unusual lability and eccentricity. The philosopher also finds it remarkable

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that 'all important people in the fields of philosophy, politics and poetic art or technology are prone to a black bile, and some of them are so dominated by melancholy that they suffer considerably from it' (Jagow/Steger 2005: 843).

In contrast to melancholia is mania or anger and rage which, unlike melancholia, is characterised by more intense brutality, anger and rage.

Famous Greek mythological characters Heracles (Hercules) and Aiax are afflicted with mania. Heracles is the most famous hero of Greek legends. He represents the ideal of unparalleled male power. Although he is essentially benevolent, trustworthy and faithful, he also has an obvious tendency towards Dionysia. Because of this, he often has fits of reckless rage, in which he beats his boyfriend, wife and children (see Daemmrich 1987: 169). Thus, this character symbolizes the dual nature of man. Heracles, to whom madness comes from the goddess Hera, endures it innocently and reaches through this terrible experience a higher stage of the capacity for knowledge (see Daemmrich 1987: 334). He becomes the mirror of human suffering. In Sophocles' drama (497/496 BC - 406/405 AD) The Thrainians (before 442 AD) and in Euripides' play Heracles (480 BC - 406 AD) (ca. 421 - 416) he is at the centre of the action.

Ajax appears in Homer's Iliad (760-710 BC) (c. 850 BC). After Achilles' death, he competes with Odysseus for Achilles' weapons and armour. Odysseus comes out the winner. Ajax is restrained, but is unable to overcome his defeat. That same night he wakes from an uneasy sleep in a fit of rage and kills Odysseus' flock of sheep and whips the goat to death, thinking he is striking Odysseus. When he recovers, he plunges to his sword in shame for his unworthy deed.

This theme was reworked by Sophocles in his tragedy Aiax (premiered in 449 B.C.) In this play, the goddess Athena drives the protagonist mad so that he cannot harm her protégé Odysseus. But from a psychological point of view, the protagonist's hallucinations are explained by his inferiority complex towards Odysseus. He cannot get over the fact that he was defeated by him during the verbal dispute. In the end, Aiax is punished by death for his pride. This punishment of the gods for human hybris contains in its meaning a reference to the antagonism between reason and lack of judgment, as Horst S. and Ingrid Daemerich point out (Daemmrich 1987: 334).

In Aeschylus (525 BC - 456 BC), the earliest of the three great Greek dramatists of antiquity, along with Sophocles and Euripides, madness also appears as punishment for a crime. In the trilogy Orestes, which was written in 458 BC, Aeschylus describes the end of the curse that has befallen the Atria. It illustrates the evolution of the ancient conception of law, from the principle of individual vengeance to acquittal by a group (judges, juries) representing society. The trilogy consists of three parts: Agamemnon, Choephorae and Eumenides. After Orestes first kills his mother's lover Aegisthus, and then kills his own mother Clytemnestra, he is introduced to the merciless Eumenides who drive him mad. The Erinias appear to him alone and embody his conscience. His state of madness after the murder of his mother must be understood as punishment.

The goddesses of vengeance bring madness and death to one who is guilty of a bloody deed against his own family. Although his mother's murder was planned as an act of retribution, Orestes goes against the moral basis of civilization. Therefore, this sin can only be atoned for through deep suffering as well as acknowledgement of one's own guilt. Thus, the goddesses of vengeance, the Erinies, can be tamed through a judicial process. In a tie, the goddess Athena pronounces acquittal, ending the family's curse. The Erinias renounce their hatred and are transformed at the end of the play into the "well-meaning" Eumenides, who glorify the goddess Athena.

Horst S. and Ingrid Daemmrich draw attention to two different conceptions of madness in Antiquity which are also reflected, as we have shown above, in theoretical concerns about

the phenomenon of madness. The first conception, that madness is a punishment for crime and sin, is established from Antiquity until the 19th century. In the second conception, the madman is also seen as a wise man who, unlike the ordinary man, understands the deeper meaning of human suffering (Daemmrich 1987: 333). In this context, the motif of madness comes close to that of the wise madman (see Frenzel 1999: 560-575).

According to Horst S. and Ingrid Daemmrich (1987: 335), literary representations of madness in antiquity are marked primarily by the alternation between reason and lack of judgment, between clairvoyance and demonic possession. Erotic ecstasy, untamed wildness and Dionysian drunkenness contrast sharply with Apollonian clarity and the desire for moral perfection. Both authors cite Euripides' drama Bacchantes (406 BC) as an example of this. The Bacchae are worshippers of the god Dionysus (Latin Bacchus).

In his exoteric appearance he is the cheerful, harmless god of wine, whereas in his esoteric appearance he is perceived as a god of profoundly serious dimensions, the opposite of the god of hell. The play shows Dionysus returning to his home town of Thebes in the guise of a man to take revenge on its inhabitants who did not recognise his status as a god. He drives all the women of the city mad and takes them to Mount Kithairon. Among them is Agaue, the mother of the lord Pentheus. Messengers report that the women live with wild animals and beat the rocks with tiers sticks to get wine out of them. They hunt and kill wild animals, which they tear alive and eat raw. When disturbed, they destroy everything in their path with superhuman power. The target of Dionysus' wrath is, in particular, Pentheus who, despite the advice of the prophet Tiresias and his grandfather Kadmos, decides to use weapons against Dionysus and the women. In the end, Pentheus is torn apart by the Bacchae. Although he tries to be recognized, even his own mother does not recognize him. She returns with her son's head, which she mistakes for the head of a slain lion, to Thebes and only realizes what she has done with the help of her father, Kadmos. It is at this moment that Dionysus appears, for the first time as a god, and announces the fate of the Thebans. In this way, Euripides depicts the orgiastic cult of Dionysus as an extreme form of mythical trance appearance. Euripides' drama is today the most important document for understanding the cult of Dionysus.

Madness also appears in antiquity as the madness of love, as expressed in Plato by erotic madness. In his tragedy Medea (written in 431 BC), Euripides links madness with the unconditional claim to love. At the centre of his drama is the woman whom love drives mad and who kills her two sons in revenge on her husband Jason, who has cheated on her. Elisabeth Frenzel believes that Euripides is the one who associated Medea with the murder of children. This murder is the ultimate consequence of her passionate love for her unfaithful husband. The Roman philosopher and writer Seneca (c. 4 BC - c. 65 AD) wrote in the 1st century AD Medea. His main aim was to demonstrate, through the figure of his protagonist, the harmful consequences of reckless action under the impulse of an emotional state. For him, the irrational also means the inhuman. As Frenzel observes, Seneca mediated the motif of the modern era in which it has often been reworked (Frenzel 1998: 510).

As in the ancient conception, the middle Ages sanctioned the insane. This manifests itself in various forms of ecstasy or visions. The madness of the saints therefore has a positive connotation.

As Horst S. and Ingrid Daemmrich point out, madness plays a similar role in the religious writings of the middle Ages as in ancient tragedies, being the embodiment of punishment for immorality and perversion of the soul (Daemmrich 1987: 334).

The high point of interest in world literature is reached in the Renaissance with the depiction of madness as a specific form of individual human existence by the English dramatists of the Elizabethan era.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is one of the greatest creators of human characters in 16th-century literature. He often uses madness as a means of creation.

His great tragedies *Hamlet, The Prince of Denmark* (1608), *Othello* (1622), *King Lear* (1608) and *Macbeth* (1623) bring to the stage important, timeless characters and exemplary stories; they give their subjects a universal setting and a philosophical stamp, belonging to Shakespeare's undeniable masterpieces. These tragedies dramatize the action of evil in the world and locate the conflict in each individual man, revealing political crimes committed out of hubris and blindness, the reckless transfer of power and generational conflict, personal revenge, the play of intrigue and the delusion of lovers. Shakespeare manages to penetrate to the depths of the human soul, to the brink of madness.

As the lexicon Literatur und Medizin (Literature and Medicine) points out, even in early modern literature we find passages from true madness and the delusion of madness, born of need and cunning, to hypochondria and simulation (Jagow/Steger 2005: 848). Shakespeare lets Hamlet simulate madness so that he can discover the truth and take revenge on his uncle. The other characters in the drama intuit the causes of Hamlet's madness. Polonius sees in the prince's confusion a form of unrequited love for his daughter Ophelia. Hamlet's mother, the Queen, blames the hero's madness on grief over his father's death and his hasty marriage to Claudius. Hamlet has often been recognised, on the basis of his slow temperament, as the melancholic type (see Stompe/ Ritter/ Friedmann 2006: 489; Jagow/ Steger 2005: 526-527). The only truly mad person in the play is Ophelia. After Hamlet accidentally kills Ophelia's father, mistaking him for the king, she goes mad. Her songs highlight the struggle that goes on within the character and thus allude to the cause that triggered the madness through grief. Ophelia commits suicide by drowning herself in the sea.

According to Ovidiu Drîmba, Othello is the masterpiece of Shakespearean theatre, Shakespeare's clearest, most homogeneous, best constructed play, in which all dramatic resorts are purely human (Drîmba 1968: 302). The figure of Othello is the noblest Shakespearean creation, the hero whom the playwright endowed with the highest moral qualities. He is a brave and balanced man, a generous and dignified character, a glorious general - yet a modest nature and a righteous soul. He falls victim to his too great trust in men, specifically his trust in Iago. With subtle perfidy he sneaks in the venom of doubt about Desdemona's honesty. All the tragedy of the play is concentrated in Othello’s suffering, disappointment and torture of the soul. His tragedy is the tragedy of betrayed trust, the tragedy of losing faith in people, in fairness, in honesty. Collapsed in his terrible disappointment and blinded by jealousy, he kills Desdemona in the belief that he is thus avenging the very honesty and justice of mankind that he has betrayed. Then, when convinced of Iago's deceit and Desdemona's innocence, Othello commits suicide.

The same fear of being deceived by his wife also causes the protagonist's madness in *A Winter's Tale* (1623).

King Lear is the victim of his dead-end situation. His blindness to the events around him, as well as the malicious and threatening actions of his opponents, lead to the onset of madness. After dividing his kingdom to his two daughters and banishing his third, Cordelia, he is deprived of his kingdom and banished in turn. From this point on, his catastrophic moral collapse begins. He is struck down by the ingratitude of his daughters, but more than that, he suffers the terrible drama of the awareness that, in the face of the falsity and cruelty of the selfish world, man, deprived of power and wealth, remains nothing more than a poor, powerless creature, forsaken and urged. He now realizes how deluded his opinion of himself and of power has been, how unjust his conduct towards honesty, truth and justice, towards pure human feelings and towards the oppressed. His drama takes on cosmic proportions: the whole of nature unleashes its stymies, shares in the boundless pain of a broken soul. Lear's monologue in the storm scene is, according to Ovidiu Drîmba, one of the grandest, most human and most moving pages in the entire universal theatre (Drîmba 1968: 303).

The tragedy of *Macbeth* (1623) makes it clear that evil originates in the unjust rules of the world, but also in man. The Scottish nobleman Macbeth, gnawed by the worm of vanity to rule and instigated by his wife, Lady Macbeth, kills his king. Shakespeare shows that the nature and power of evil are limitless. Once you give yourself to evil, it puts a tyrannical stranglehold on you. Macbeth thus becomes a helpless plaything of evil's blind power. All the tragedy of the play lies in the performance of this hopeless state of the protagonist's soul. Although he is a murderer, the spectator cannot hate him, but pities him, seeing him as a tormented prey of remorse and powerlessness to return to the path of good. Therefore, in the end, he welcomes death as a release from the heavy burden he has placed on his own soul.

In Macbeth's tragedy it is shown that the man endowed with a moral conscience, by committing evil, condemns himself to heavy torment. Despite Macbeth's slow madness and the monomania with which Lady Macbeth pursues her plans, the categories of individual morality, remain active. The burden of their deeds hovers differently over Macbeth and his wife. While Lady Macbeth, who had been an energetic and unscrupulous woman, finds no peace because of her complicity in his guilt, sleepwalks through the corridors of the palace and finally takes her own life, her husband deludes himself by seeing with his own eyes, and becomes an irascible tyrant, deserted one by one by the people around him, until he ends in a violent death.

As in his dramas, Shakespeare also describes in his verse the intrigues that lead to madness, in all their aspects and nuances. He reveals both the happy and the dark side of love: calculated carnal love, deceit, sickness and love.

In modern literature, too, we find numerous texts in which the motif of madness appears. Thus William Faulkner (1897-1962) compassionately describes in his novel The Sound and the Fury (1929), now considered an important work of early modernity and one of the most valuable novels of American literature in general, the feelings, thoughts and language of Benjy Compson, a mentally deficient man. To portray the decline of the Compson family, the novel draws on four different perspectives. The first three perspectives are those of family members, while the fourth is that of an anonymous narrator. In the first part of the novel, an ordinary day in the life of the Compsons is described from the perspective of the mentally alien Benjy, who has come of age and communicates with his family by moaning, whining and shrill shouting. All of his perceptions are no more than a brief memory; people and things appear in his field of vision from somewhere and disappear in an equally mysterious way.

The Austrian physician and writer Arthur Schnitzler (1862-1931) describes in his last work, the novella *Flucht in die Finsternis* (1931), the gradual loss of contact with reality of his protagonist haunted by the idea that his brother has taken his own life. The novel was written between 1912 and 1917 and was originally entitled *Wahn (*Madness). The delay in the publication of the text could be attributed to Schnitzler's portrayal of his strained relationship with his brother Julius.

But poverty and hunger can also drive people mad, as the American writer John Steinbeck (1902-1968) demonstrates in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and his novel *Of Mice and Men* (1937).

In the theatre of the absurd, madness characterises the very conception of the world that seems to have no rational meaning. For the protagonists, this can also mean recognising the absurdity of making sense of their existence. In this context, the French writer Jean Genet's (1910-1986) drama *Le Balcon* (The Balcony) (1956) is an example. Madness also serves social criticism. The American poet and leading representative of the Beat Generation, Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), became famous with his Howl and other poems (1956), in which he expresses his protest against the technicalised society of the masses in metaphorical language. The poem Howl is dedicated to Carl Solomon whom Ginsberg met in a psychiatric clinic. The title of the poem comes from the fact that, when recited, the first part of the poem gives the impression of a prolonged roar or wail. It is a scathing critique of American society, which, in

Ginsberg's view, causes madness, especially through the influence of the metropolis, money and the consequences of the capitalist system.

As the lexicon Literatur und Medizin (Literature and Medicine) points out, in the 1970s of the last century the closest connection between literary representations of schizoid psychosis and medical theory, which was in crisis, was apparently reached in German culture. The literary function of the representation of psychoticism as a critical instance of the normal, supposedly healthy state is therefore in line with the respective medical theories.

If at the beginning of the 20th century psychotic phenomena represented experiences of the modern subject as such, now, madness becomes a useful borderline experience, opposed to the normal world, being associated with a metaphorical universe in the realm of travel and adventure stories. In the field of science, psycho- reactive and sociological theories of the occurrence of schizophrenic illnesses in relation to environmental factors (Life events) are widespread. Jagow and Steger (2005: 687) give the following examples for such texts: Doris Lessing (1919-2013) *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971); Gerhard Roth (b. 1942) *Autobiography des Albert Einstein* (1972); Heinar Kipphardt (1922-1982) *März* (1976); Ernst Augustin (b. 1927) Raumlicht: *Der Fall Evelyne* B. (1976); Kurt Sigel (b. 1931) *Kotilow oder Salto mortale nach innen* (Kotilow or the Deadly Leap inland) (1977); Brigitte Schwaiger (1949-2010) *Wie kommt das Salz ins Meer* (How salt gets into the sea) (1977); Walter Vogt (1927-1988) *Der Vogel auf dem Tisch* (The Bird on the Table) (1978) and Harald Kaas (b. 1940) *Uhren und Meere* (Clocks and Oceans) (1979) (Jagow/ Steger 2005: 687).

In her novel *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, the Nobel Prize-winning English writer Doris Lessing explores the possibilities of how, through madness, a harmonious form of consciousness can be achieved.

Austrian author Gerhard Roth stopped studying medicine because he found it incompatible with writing. The theme of his debut novel *Die Autobiographie des Albert Einstein* (The Autobiography of Albert Einstein), in which he recounts the fictional autobiography of a schizophrenic, is the breakdown of the usual patterns of perception. Roth traces the gradual disappearance of the boundaries between madness and reality, expressing a consciousness incapable of establishing order.

Heinar Kipphardt is a leading representative of the documentary theatre, widespread in German literature in the 1960s. The protagonist of his novel März is a schizophrenic poet whom he portrays as a result of his own experience as a psychiatrist in the well-known psychiatric clinic Charité in East Berlin. Between 1973 and 1975, he first wrote the screenplay for the film *Das Leben des schizophrenen Dichters Alexander M.* (The Life of the Schizophrenic Poet Alexander M.) which was released in 1975. A year later, he dealt with the same theme in his novel März. Shortly afterwards, he produced a radio version entitled März - ein Künstlerleben (März - an artist's life) for the Bavarian radio station. The play *März - ein Künstlerleben* (März - an artist's life) did not premiere until 16 October 1980 at the Düsseldorf theatre. For Kipphardt, the story of the unhappy anti-hero Alexander März is a confrontation with psychiatry. For him, schizophrenia, like all psychotic illnesses, has a social cause: sensitive people break down as a result of family and societal interventions. In this sense, the schizophrenic poet März also burns himself up in front of his doctor, because the world cannot help him. The source material for his novel is authentic: the dispute over methods in psychiatry, the results of his own research in psychiatric clinics, patients' accounts of their illness and, above all, the poems of the schizophrenic writer Ernst Herbeck (1920-1991), published by his Austrian psychiatrist Leo Navratil (1921-2006).

The writer and psychiatrist Ernst Augustin, who defended his doctoral thesis Das elementare Zeichen bei den Schizofrenen (Elementary Symptoms in Schizophrenics), depicts in his novel Raumlicht: Der Fall Evelyne B. (Light in Space: The Case of Evelyne B.) the journey into the inner soul, into the soul landscape of a schizophrenic sufferer.

The portrait of a schizophrenic for whom reality slowly loses its contours can also be found in the text Kotilow oder Salto mortale nach innen (Kotilow or the somersault inwards) by German writer and artist Kurt Sigel (b. 1931). His protagonist is entirely focused on his ego, a prisoner of his autistic drives and experiencing the world only as a fantastic possibility.

Austrian writer Brigitte Schwaiger's debut book *Wie kommt das Salz ins Meer* (How the Salt gets into the Sea) has become a bestseller. From the perspective of a first-person narrator with autobiographical implications, it tells the story of the failure of a bourgeois marriage, which triggers the protagonist's psychological problems in reaction to the constraints and demands of society. *In Fallen lassen* (2006), the author recounts her own experiences in psychiatry.

At the age of 40, Swiss doctor and writer Walter Vogt devoted himself to studying psychiatry in order to treat himself. In his novel *Der Vogel auf dem Tisch* (The Bird on the Table), he focuses on the inner life of his protagonist Johannes Lips, a bookseller's assistant who suffers from anxiety and compulsion.

In the 1980s of the 20th century, a stylization and aestheticization of the motif of madness can be observed in German literature. In this context, the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989), who himself suffered from depression, analyses the manifestations of a schizophrenic painter in his first novel Frost (1963). In his novel *Verstörung* (Disorientation) (1967), as well as in his dramas *Ein Fest für Boris* (A Party with Boris) (1970) and Der Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige (The Ignorant and the Madman) he gives a detailed description of the various symptoms of madness. The mentally ill protagonist of his short story Die Billigesser (1980) is a genius. The central character's illness is seen as a distinct form of the unusual, which motivates the contempt with which he regards the healthy.

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