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**MADNESS AS A CHALLENGE, AS A DEVICE,
AS A MAGNIFYING GLASS:
A BRIEF INTRODUCTION**

“some of the highest goods have come to us by way of madness”
Plato, Phaedrus 244a

The intersections between philosophy and madness are as ancient as they are deep. From Plato to Erasmus of Rotterdam, from Montaigne to Hobbes, from Kant to Hegel, from Foucault to Blanchot, many philosophers have tried to investigate theoretically the darkness caused by the night of reason: from melancholy to foolishness, from mental deficiencies to intellectual disorders, from hypochondria to insanity up to delirium and nonsense¹. Other philosophers, however, in the course of their existential parable, have been forced, more or less directly, into the depths of mental illness - as happened to Friedrich Hölderlin in the long years spent in the tower of Tübingen (1807-1843) or Friedrich Nietzsche as a result of the mental breakdown of 1888-89 - or as indirectly happened to Hegel, who had to deal with the pathological hypochondriacal melancholy that affected his sister Christiane Louise (Birkert 2008; Vieweg 2019). However, other philosophers, such as Karl Jaspers in his pathographic writings (1922) or Giorgio Agamben (2021), have wished to explore the most secret heart of the schizophrenia of brilliant figures of art and philosophy such as Van Gogh, Strindberg and Hölderlin, showing a particular interest in that point of conjunction between philosophy, aesthetics and madness. Precisely this connection will be the privileged observation point of this Focus of Lebenswelt entitled Philosophy, Aesthetics and

¹ For further investigation on the subject please refer to Weineck 2002; Laxenaire 2013; Feloj/Giargia 2012; Failla/Iannelli 2020 as well as Iannelli/Failla (in press).

Madness², which proposes three tracks of inquiry: a) to investigate mental illness as a theoretical challenge for philosophy, but also b) to consider madness as a device for self-exploration in times of crisis or c) to use it advantageously as a magnifying glass or, even better, as a special telescope pointed at the complex constellation of creativity and human subjectivity.

A) Following the first track, we will first deepen the theoretical interest for mental illness of some great philosophers of Western culture and then evaluate how a "circular insanity" is fundamental to the self-conception of philosophy. In this sense, against the gloomy background of a Europe plagued by epidemics and pandemics, the essay by Marco Duichin and Pietro Stampa *Il lato oscuro della ragione: sogno e follia in Kant, Hegel e Goya* investigates the lively interest of two giants of Western thought such as Kant and Hegel for psychic pathologies, as well as the influence of their reflections on some renowned psychologists and psychiatrists of the 1800s-1900s such as Pinel, Janet, Adler, James, Binswanger and Freud. The nightmares, ghosts and perturbing monsters painted by Johann Heinrich Füssli in *The Nightmare* (1781) and by Francisco Goya in *Los caprichos* (1799) are the visual scenery of a sleeping reason that takes refuge in the dream, after having lost every link with the "common" world.

On the other hand, in the essay *The circular insanity of Philosophy: An aesthetic vision* Stefano Oliva emphasizes - with Žižek - the duplicity of melancholy that characterizes, as an aesthetic emotion, the basic tone of philosophical research. If it has always been identified a close connection between melancholy, genius and philosophy, it may be valuable to subtract the philosophical investigation to a predominantly "depressive" mood, due to the dissatisfaction that accompanies the philosopher in his insatiable search, to enrich - with Wittgenstein - the philosophical investigation with a "manic" experience of jubilation for the existence of the world, beyond any possible objectual satisfaction. Philosophy would therefore be

² Some of the essays in this Focus were first presented at the international conference *Philosophy and Madness: from Kant to Hegel and Beyond* that I co-organized with Mariannina Failla at the University of Roma Tre from May 30 to May 31, 2019. For the constant and valuable collaboration be thanked here the Editorial Team composed by Ilaria Mannino and Davide Vangi.

constantly traversed by the waves of melancholy understood as “manic-depressive” disorder that creates an insuperable but fruitful “circular insanity”.

B) A further aim of this Focus is to evaluate whether there is a specific "aesthetic" way of understanding mental illness as a "methodology" or creative strategy of reaction to a claustrophobic, frustrating and humiliating personal, historical or cultural reality. As an author such as Marr Jurelle Bruce made clear in *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* of 2021, the "choice" of madness can present itself as a compensatory aesthetic practice. This perspective emerges in the present Focus thanks to the essay by Carla Subrizi *Madness and Modernity: The Drawings of Antonin Artaud from 1944 to 1946*, in which the author clarifies how the "written drawings" made by Artaud during the final phase of confinement in the clinic of Rodez exhibit a process of self-examination, in which there are tensions, contradictions and intermittent interruptions. Madness then becomes a "device" that Artaud uses to explore what he was no longer able to express in words. The artistic testimonies of that period can therefore be used to reflect on the notion of identity of an entire generation that, torn apart by the pain of the Second World War, fragmented, deformed and dismembered itself.

Furthermore, in Felice Cimatti's essay *The Lure of Nothingness. Art And Crisis of "Presence" in Ernesto De Martino*, the author - with and beyond a great philosopher and anthropologist like De Martino - looks at the destabilizing power traceable in many artworks of contemporary art understood as cruel and brutal art that remains dangerously poised between "presence" and "crisis of presence". If De Martino, more prudently, considered art both "descent into hell" and "recovery" of the social and intersubjective value of "sick" and dehumanized objects, for which aesthetics had a therapeutic value as a cure, Cimatti proposes instead a much more radical conception, in which contemporary art, no longer illustrational, amplifies that "illness of objects" that according to De Martino art was still able to soothe.

C) Last but not least, this Focus aims at investigating the growing interest during the 20th century - thanks to intellectuals such as Hans Prinzhorn, Mircea Eliade and Robert Volmat - for the

artistic production of psychic patients, intended as a practice of self-therapy that allows to shed light both on the archaic and primitive mentality and on the anti-naturalistic tendencies of the 20th century avant-gardes. This is well analyzed in Giuseppe Maccauro's essay *"Au Paradis Des Archétypes": Follia e mondo primitivo nell'Art Psychopathologique di Robert Volmat* in which a significant paradox emerges: in the major masterpieces of psychopathological art in which the "schizophrenic masters" free themselves from the tyranny of imitation, representation, and objecthood, there still remains an attitude that directs mentally ill with artistic aptitude to give expression to their pathology and likewise prevents alienated artists from expressing themselves in a fully "pure" and anti-historical way as it would seem. Although they aspire to regress to the sources of Gestaltung, "schizophrenic masters" cannot, like all other artists, tap into the original and deeper dimension of human creativity while exhibiting this universal desire in an exemplary manner.

Additionally, the artistic ability of personalities affected by mental illness makes it possible to explore more generally the constellation of creativity, with its major and minor stars from authenticity to autorship and forgery, through the analysis of the artistic production of borderline figures. This is well analyzed in Lisa Giombini's essay *Music from beyond (Or how to deal with a musical forgery)* in which we deal with a "composer" sui generis as Rosemary Brown (1916-2001), for some a medium inspired by the beyond, for others simply a psycho or a charlatan eager to become famous, to whom famous composers such as Bach, Chopin, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Berlioz, J. S. Bach would have dictated post-modernism. S. Bach would posthumously dictate their unpublished compositions. So mental illness becomes - as Kandel (2018) argues - a privileged observatory, a special magnifying glass to investigate, more generally, human subjectivity with its deviations, allowing us to better understand canons and aesthetic obsessions of the West (from the cult of genius to fetishism towards celebrities) and to unmask hypocrisies and abuses of power of the alleged "healthy" towards the alleged "crazy"³.

³ This short-circuit between normality and madness was masterfully investigated by Rebecca Reich in her 2018 volume *State of Madness: Psychiatry*,

Finally, it should not be forgotten that the artistic production of the mentally ill should always be strongly problematized and screened in its own "artistic" status. This is exemplified by the concluding essay of this Focus, namely *L'art entre Hubris et Mania - Du Pathologique au Sublime* by Bernard Salignon. The author underlines how the art of psychotic patients is never completely different from the subject who realizes it, but it is rather an extension of him, without gaps, without negation, without difference, and indirectly reminds us that lacking intentionality it cannot be properly called art. Nevertheless, precisely these productions of patients with mental disorders reaffirm the impossibility of dominating the unknown that embraces human existence and emphasize the inability to decode the enigmatic relationship between genius and madness that some masterpieces of great artists of the West shaken by madness - not without mystery - keep.

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