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Sarsenov, Karin

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

SADUR AND MADNESS: PROBLEMS OF REPRESENTATION

KARIN SARSENOV

Representing women's madness has been a concern of art and literature at least since Euripides described Cassandra's prophetic frenzy in *Agamemnon*. In feminist theory, women's madness has proved a fertile site of inquiry, revealing restrictions inherent to the very structure of Western philosophical thought that govern how women can be thought of and represented. The two categories "madness" and "woman" are both disputed: A wide range of discourses compete for the privilege of an ultimate definition—medical, psychiatric, religious, and forensic, to name just a few. Recent theory has subjected any attempts at such totalizing definitions to a profound critique. My own use of these terms must therefore be understood as local and contingent. In the specific context, I concentrate on two aspects of madness: madness as spectacle, with a focus on the visual and theatrical; and madness as language, i.e., madness as coded in linguistic signs.

Both aspects are of great importance in Nina Sadur's writings. Her work features a profound commitment to liminal states of consciousness: alcoholic intoxication, demonic possession, witchcraft, homelessness, and splitting of personality—all of which are possible to subsume under the nebulous category of "madness."

During early perestroika, Sadur drew the attention of readers and theater audiences through her unusual and sometimes unpleasant way of introducing folkloric

horrors into the urban settings of her fiction and plays. Now, as then, her main protagonists are predominantly female and on the margins of society, their refusal to conform to norms and public requirements paradoxically rendering them both vulnerable and empowered. She explores the "conflict between the individual and the collective," a commonplace in the Soviet school program in Russian literature, with a profoundly destabilizing result. In Socialist Realism, the positive hero was always rooted in the people, although on a higher level of consciousness. He embodied the synthesis of the dialectical movement between spontaneity and consciousness, and was therefore fit to lead the masses (Clark, 1981). This positive view of the collective contrasts with the idealization of the "lone wolf" present not only in Western genres, but also in post-Stalinist film, such as Mark Zakharov's 1979 TV-comedy *That Very Munchausen* [*Тот самый Мюнхгаузен*], based on Grigorii Gorin's play by the same title. Here, the corrupt masses are opposed to and completely dissociated from the morally superior but misunderstood hero.

Sadur replaces the male heroes of the cited genres with female characters—a change that turns out to have serious consequences for how the conflict is staged. The female protagonists are neither "part of, but superior to," nor "essentially different from" their social environment. Instead, although different, they are acutely aware that they need this environment in order to survive. This awareness, however, does not prevent them from seemingly self-destructive acts that result in their expulsion. This gendered way of bringing out the interaction between the hero and the masses recalls the drama of the *кликунша* (shrieker), recently investigated by Christine Worobec (2001). *Кликушество* (shrieking illness) occurred predominantly in the countryside and its victims were most often peasant women. They perceived themselves and

were perceived as being possessed by a special type of demon that made them shriek (*кликать*) the name of the one responsible for their possession, i.e., a witch or a sorcerer. Although both men and women became objects of such accusations, women were the majority (66). While neither the *кликуньи* themselves nor their rural environment perceived them as mad, contemporary Russian psychiatry has diagnosed them as suffering from hysteria or, less frequently, somnambulism (148f).

Worobec accentuates the dramatic aspects of *кликуншество* and its therapeutic effect for women on the margins of their communities. It was a drama that involved a large number of participants: the possessed, the person she accused, the priest or monk who finally exorcised the demon, and, finally, the village people, serving as an active audience. Although a number of women were never healed, many experienced relief from heavy household obligations and emotional stress by engaging in the drama. These aspects of *кликуншество* have informed my reading of some of Sadur's early works.

In both, the action is propelled by a public spectacle in which the female character is undoubtedly complicit, but from which she seldom benefits in any obvious way. In Sadur, female agency is frequently conceptualized in the ambivalent figure of the witch, whose powers serve only to alienate her from the community, and, consequently, from herself. Sadur's witch-like protagonists oscillate between the inside and the outside, between a state of accommodation and resistance to their social environment. As in real-life *кликуншество*, the dividing line between perpetrator and victim is often difficult to establish. The central issue is not "Who is the witch?," but the spectacle itself, the apparently absurd, misguided, and uncontrolled outburst that only seems to exacerbate the protagonist's situation.

In an early Sadur story, "Девочка ночью" ["A Girl at Night," 1981], the anonymous female protagonist stages her own destruction by provoking her former lover to send her out into the Moscow night without any money after the metro has closed. This initial event creates expectations about men's violence and female vulnerability that the story does not fulfill. Instead, one of the faceless men the woman imagines will offend her becomes the victim of a car accident, as if her own destructiveness redirects itself onto him. The woman experiences something worse than male offense, a loss of self, which is understood in terms of "a split in personality," foreshadowed early in the story:

Но постепенно она привыкла думать о себе как о мертвой, и об этом думать было спокойнее, потому что потери тут никакой еще не было, она вся была с собой, никуда от себя не уезжала, не бросала себя одну на пустой улице, а честно находилась рядом с собой. (Sadur 2000, 279)¹

The spectacle she stages lacks an audience, she remains invisible, and consequently she does not provoke the desired effects: violence, rape, and victimization. The only being she confronts is herself, as projected onto the surfaces of anonymous people she notices in the street. The ultimate disaster turns out to be the endless multiplication of her own projections and the essential loss of self. This is thus a case of a spectacle deprived of its audience, and thereby devoid of therapeutic powers.

In the novella *Юг* [*The South*, first published 1992], the female protagonist, Ol'ga, becomes the victim of an

¹ "But gradually she got used to thinking about herself as dead, and it was more soothing to think about that, because no loss had yet occurred, she was all with herself, had not left herself to go any place, had not abandoned herself alone on the empty street, but was located honestly beside herself." (Translation here and elsewhere is mine. KS)

indefinite disease that resembles “spoiling” (*нопча*): “кровь устала течь в ее теле” (Sadur 1997, 237).² Her marginal position is construed both spatially—she lives in a dacha outside of town—and socially, through the omission of any references to parents and friends. In an effort to find a cure for her ailment she travels to the South in hope of being healed by the health-bringing winds from the Black Sea, but her own marginality only transfers itself to this likewise peripheral site: “Все здесь чужое,” she concludes (237).³

Finally she stages what appears to be her seduction of her landlady’s retarded son, inevitably provoking her final expulsion from the social community. She becomes an outcast, living on the charity of people who take pity in her, and subjected to the violence and contempt of those who do not. She is mute, and her thoughts grow increasingly disorganized. But in this intricate tale of a woman’s victimization and agency, guilt and suffering, the spectacle of moral corruption becomes the catalyst for events that eventually lead to a release. A couple of pilgrims pick her up on their way to the New Athos monastery in Abkhazia, and after one of them dies Ol’ga is able to respond to the question: “What is your name?” In other words, she regains her faculty of speech and sense of self-identity.

Whereas these two texts deal with a woman’s gradual movement outward from a center, the play *Hoc* (*The Nose*, 1986) stages an effort to move in the opposite direction (Sadur 1999). The witch-like Irma, who has been ostracized by her college friends, invites four of them to dinner. Her initial desire to re-enter the collective is imprinted on her body: she has replaced her long, Baba-Iaga-like nose with a shorter one—a replacement that metaphorically should smooth the pro-

² “[her] blood got tired of flowing in her body.”

³ “Everything here is strange.”

tuberances and offshoots of her personality. However, the nose job does not have the desired effect: the desire to re-enter is gradually replaced by revulsion, leading her to initiate a scandal that ultimately destroys the possibility of her incorporation into the social order.

In Sadur, the spectacular woman, understood in a folkloric/religious framework that connects her to the *кликунша*, poses questions about the requirements of socialization and explores the space beyond boundaries imposed by what in the poststructuralist framework of this article would be called the symbolic order. These spaces are inevitably chaotic, destructive, and mute, but the women’s desire for these liminal loci speaks to the uncomfortable position women inhabit when confined to the position culture assign them.

Having considered madness in visual terms, as a spectacle, let us now turn to the question of madness and language. According to Jacques Derrida, language and madness are incompatibles: “[Sentences] are impregnated with normality, that is, with meaning. [...] They contain normality and meaning, no matter what the state of health or madness of their utterer may be.” (Derrida 1967, 84f, as quoted by Felman 1978, 44, omissions as in Felman). This normality becomes the target in Derrida’s method of deconstruction, directed at the detachment of the signifier from the signified, in an effort to deny self-identity to the logos.⁴ Such a detachment is the object of investigation in another academic discipline: psychiatry. Psychotic speech has

⁴ Jacques Derrida starts from the structuralist gesture of decentering the subject and subjecting it to impersonal systems. He directs our attention to the existence of a center in these systems, the guarantor of meaning, on which the meaning of each unit relies. This “presence-to-it-self” (God, Truth, Reason) grants the repressive dominance of “speech” (which demands presence) over “writing,” and creates a series of other dichotomies, in which one of the concepts is subordinated to the other: absence to presence, error to truth, difference to identity, etc. (Felman 1993).

long served as a base for psychiatric diagnostics, and is therefore thoroughly researched. The fundamental strangeness of this speech depends in certain cases on its focus on its own linguistic features. This aspect also connects it to the self-conscious strategies of modernist literature. In *Madness and Modernism* (1992), the clinical psychologist Louis A. Sass investigates schizophrenic speech patterns, and identifies similarities between them and modernist literature.

One of Sass's categories of schizophrenic speech involves "tendencies for language to lose its transparent and subordinate status, to shed its function as a communicative tool and to emerge instead as an independent focus of attention" (178). Sass proposes the term "autonomization" to describe these tendencies.⁵ When discussing connections between madness and modernism, Sass illustrates the term "autonomization" precisely with Derrida's philosophy of language. Derrida's reading of Plato's *Phaedrus* concentrates not on the communicative intent behind Plato's concept of *pharmakon* (poison, remedy), but, rather, on the different words that *pharmakon* engenders by their phonetic and graphical resemblance. Reading, then, becomes not a matter of communication, but of simultaneous awareness of all possible meanings embedded in each word or, even, syllable.

This observation inclines Sass to a rather disrespectful analogy between Derrida's philosophy of language and schizophrenic experiences: "One such patient, in fact, described what may seem a classic Derridean obsession: he said he felt 'compelled to give things a second meaning, especially if they were spo-

⁵ The question of how to categorize psychotic speech patterns is a disputed one, and the solution must depend on the purpose. Consequently, Sass's categorization diverges from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* used in psychiatry, as his interest lies in the patterns per se, rather than in nailing patients down to a specific diagnosis.

ken by other people" (201). From Sass's discussion it follows that Derrida's method of deconstruction essentially adheres to a pattern present in the experiences of psychotic patients. Sass's main argument, however, is that this "Derridean" obsession is first and foremost shared by modernist authors. He points to the language-centered vision of Mallarmé, Gertrude Stein, the Russian Futurists, and the Parisian *Tel Quel* group.

This modernist vision has not exhausted its possibilities in contemporary Russian literature. The underground literature of the 1960s and 70s investigated aberrant psychic states using experimental, modernist techniques.⁶ During the 1990s, modernism has been revitalized and transformed into what Mark Lipovetsky (2000) calls "neo-sentimentalist" and Andrei Zorin (1999) terms "neo-modernist" prose. Both Zorin and Lipovetsky conceive of this current as a third way between postmodernism and realism, one that does not share the postmodernist ambition to deconstruct "eternal values" or to re-mythologize them in an environment subjected to the interplay between chaos and order. It does, however, share the postmodern disillusionment with reason and its inventions: the dictates of totalitarian ideologies and utopias. In an effort to reach an authenticity beyond dictatorship, this literature uses modernist devices, but for reasons quite different from those informing the visionary, utopian, and absolutist art of the Russian modernists of the early twentieth century.⁷ In this search for authenticity, the body with its pains and pleasures emerges as a site of inquiry. Many of Sadur's later works, beginning with the cycle *Бессмертнику* [*Immortals*, first parts pub-

⁶ For an analysis of three prominent novels within this genre, see Simmons (1993).

⁷ For a discussion of the preoccupation with universalizing systems in early-twentieth-century culture, see Gutkin.

lished in 1993], must be characterized as belonging to this golden mean in contemporary Russian literature.

Sadur's tripartite novel, *Cađ* [*The Garden*], first published as separate novellas in 1994–95, continues the exploration of women's madness initiated in her earlier stories, but now focuses explicitly on language, and particularly mimetic or schizophrenic speech. In the novel, traditional plot development partly cedes to a chain of leitmotifs that turns the reader's attention to issues of lexical and phonetic repetition and variation rather than to decoding an inherent "message" or "intention" in a communicative act. The leitmotifs originate in the stream of consciousness of a mad woman, Anna Ivanova, apparently suffering from a schizophrenia-related disease. The narrative structure of the novel is complicated, and Anna Ivanova disappears from the plot in the second of the novel's three parts. Nevertheless, the symbolic expressions she develops in the first part play a central role in the remaining two, which allegedly focus on her son, Alesha.

The text is replete with language patterns psychiatrists have observed in psychotic speech. Anna Ivanovna's inner monologue exhibits a rapid shift of focus that matches the psychiatric definition of "derailment": "A pattern of spontaneous speech in which the ideas slip off the track onto another one that is clearly but obliquely related" (Andreasen 1979, 1319). The frequent alliteration and rhyming in Anna Ivanovna's speech recalls the technical term "clanging," which indicates that "sounds rather than meaningful relationships appear to govern word choice, so that the intelligibility of the speech is impaired" (1320). Another term useful for interpreting Sadur's text within a psychiatric framework is "perseveration," i.e., persistent repetition of words, ideas or subjects. In a literary context, the technical term for such repetition

would be "leitmotif."⁸ Linguistic traces of madness have trickled into the literary text, placing the madwoman at the very location where we expect to find the object of self-identification, the source of narrative pleasure.

Shoshana Felman's (1978) reading of Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* compresses Foucault's concern into the questions: "How is it possible to think philosophically about madness, in a non-monologic way? Which language, other than the language of reason, could be used to speak madness?" In Sadur's novel, these questions receive a solution reminiscent of Derridean deconstruction. Here, the process of transparent signification is obstructed by a persistent attention to the phonetic make-up of words, as, for example: "Мне бурана охота, говорит ... как это ... ага, жасмина, бурана тумана—это сад мне такой специальный" (Sadur 1997, 106).⁹ The objects enumerated seem to be chosen for reasons that exceed these objects' phenomenological qualities. Instead, what guides the selection are inflection patterns, accent and syllabic structure, i.e., features of the signifier rather than of the signified. The materiality of the word is accentuated and, in Peircian terms, the representation approaches the status of an object, collapsing the semiotic triangle.

In the novel, this relationship to words is embodied in Alesha, the main protagonist of parts two and three. He stutters, a fact brought to the reader's special attention by the title of part two: "Заикша" ["The Stutterer"]. In combination with his alcoholism, this speech disorder emphasizes Alesha's total lack of ver-

⁸ "Derailment," "clanging," "perseveration," and other so-called speech disorders form the category of "disorganized speech," by which psychiatrists diagnose schizophrenia. See DSM-IV-TR (2000, 300).

⁹ "I want a snowstorm, she says ... what's that ... oh yes, jasmine, snowstorm, haze, it's a special garden for me."

bal control and his helplessness in this world. Yet he manages to turn what conventionally is viewed as a handicap into an asset:

Ведь в заикании есть особый и тайный смысл! Потому что нормальный человек, не колебась, брякнет: — Мир-любие! Вперед брякнет, чем подумает, потому что у него широкое горло и слово само вылетит. [...] А заика потянет слово, оно паразит его глубинным, сонным смыслом, и у человека перехватит дыхание, он замрет на ползвучах, потрясенный бездной старинного слова (112).¹⁰

In opposition to the “normal” person’s automatic use of language, he posits his own, de-automated one. His “reading” of the word *миролюбие* (love of the world) explodes in a shower of new signifiers:

Любие ли мира это, аль иное что? И что есть мир? И за что про что ему любие? Чье? И кто я во всем в этом? С любием своим в мир пришел? Слюбится ли? Аль только стерпится? (112).¹¹

By paying attention to the “traces” of other words and how they point endlessly to other ones Alesha makes language itself the subject of his inquiry.

The novel engages in an attempt to make the reader think of madness quite literally: the flow of the madwoman’s consciousness deprives the reader of control and orientation, which transfers her/him to a state close to that of the novel’s deranged (linguistically “derailed”) protagonists. This state allows for an

¹⁰ “There is a special and secret meaning in stuttering! A normal person would blurt out, without hesitating:—‘Peace-loving!’ Just blurts it out, without thinking twice, because he has a wide throat and the word darts out by itself. [...] But the stutterer draws at the word, it strikes him with its deep, sleepy meaning, and the man loses his breath, he is paralyzed in half-sounds, amazed by the abyss of the ancient word.”

¹¹ “Is it love for peace [the world], or something else? And what is peace? And why, about what should it be loved? Whose love? And who am I in all this? Did I come with love to this world? Will we fall in love with each other? Or just get used to each other?”

eschewal of the repressive power of rational thought. The reader’s lack of control is also reproduced on a thematic level: the protagonists are repeatedly made victims of forces stronger than themselves, and their consciousness is obscured by delusions and alcoholic intoxication.

In the impersonal systems investigated by post-structuralist thought, woman figures as the universal equivalent of man.¹² This puts her in a paradoxical relation to madness: on one hand, her equivalence can be understood as *man’s* possibility of recognizing himself in her, as her ability to reflect *his* ambitions and supporting *his* self-image. This understanding dissociates her from madness: she is *not* a woman when she does not resemble her equivalent. But, on the other hand, the same quality of being in binary opposition to man simultaneously posits her as the opposite of (masculine) reason, i.e., as mad. As Felman puts it: “the woman is ‘madness’ since the woman is *difference*; but ‘madness’ is ‘nonwoman’ since madness is the *lack of resemblance*” (1993, 35). Representing the mad woman therefore becomes a problem, as she, due to the demand of resemblance to her binary opposition, is not recognizable as a woman when mad. Hence her metaphorical captivity in literature’s different attics, hence her invisibility to the reviewers of Balzac’s story “Adieu,” as Felman points out (29). Felman challenges women to “reinvent language, to re-learn how to speak: to speak not only against, but outside of the specular phallogocentric structure.” (40) In the West,

¹² In *Speculum de l’autre femme*, Luce Irigaray adds Femininity/Masculinity to Derrida’s series of dichotomies (see note 4), as the phallus is presence per se, opposed to feminine absence (of external genitals). She detects a latent design in Western philosophy to exclude woman from the production of speech, based on woman’s status as philosophically subjugated to the logical principle of Identity, apprehended as male self-presence. This discovery coined the term “phallogocentrism.” For a discussion of Irigaray’s argument, see Felman (1993).

women writers such as, for instance, Marguerite Duras, have responded to this challenge in writings that explicitly or implicitly state women's right to be mad, by refusing to comply with the rules of language and communication (Thiher 1994). These writers see being a woman and being psychotic as co-existing conditions and seek to write madness from within.

Sadur does not attach any liberating qualities to madness. But, by connecting woman's madness explicitly to female bodily imagery, Sadur's novel explores the possibility of acknowledging the "womanliness" of the madwoman, despite her non-equivalence to man. The heroine or, more precisely, the female consciousness present at different narrative levels of the story splits into at least three different hypostases, all of which parody different notions of womanhood and subject them to grotesque exaggeration. The main narrator of the first part, Anna Ivanova, locates her madness in her caked breasts after delivery. The infection gives her a temperature, which becomes her metaphor for the mental illness that prevents her from caring for her son. Motherhood is construed as bodily pain, agony, and utter lack of agency:

Алешина мама меж тем [...] слабо держала Алешу в слабых руках, держала, держала, и выронила, как большинство русских детей тех времен выпали из маминых рук по детдомам и по бабушкам (Sadur 1997, 98).¹³

In the second part, womanhood is understood as the object of male desire. In what probably is a hallucination due to severe alcoholic intoxication, Alesha and his friend Dima venture on a romantic quest for Dima's beloved, the singer Aida Ivanova. When Dima seems close to reaching his goal, the beautiful singer

¹³ "Meanwhile, Alesha's Mom [...] feebly carried Alesha in feeble arms, carried, carried, and dropped him, as most Russian children in these times were dropped from Mom's arms into orphanages and onto grandmothers."

is suddenly transformed into an old, repugnant hag. In a gesture that irrevocably inverts all elevated notions of femininity, she squirts breast milk on her visitors, who hurry to leave. The maternal, the erotic, and the post-menopausal repulsive woman are here assembled into one grotesque image.

In the third part, a similar inversion of romantic notions of love takes place. We find Alesha at his job as a male nurse in a hospital, where he cares for the elderly patient Anna Ivanovna Burankina. She is senile, and convinced that Alesha is her fiancé, who saved her life during the battle of Stalingrad. The romantic commonplace of the maiden in love is effectively ridiculed when the maiden in question receives enemas and misplaces her false teeth.

In Balzac's story "Adieu," womanhood and madness are dissociated: the heroine when mad is no longer a woman, for she does not resemble her male equivalent. Felman understands the story as a critique of male narcissism that fails to recognize woman as anything outside the grind of binary oppositions. In *The Garden*, this very "outside" is explored in minute detail. Madness is understood in terms of female corporeality, as milk threatening to explode the breast from within, an allegory for essential femininity going astray. The female consciousness splits into a multitude of fractions, all of which represent conventional conceptions of woman in an inverted, grotesque, and ridiculed manner. The madwoman becomes a site of inquiry into the absurdity inherent in what may seem 'natural' ways of representing and understanding woman.

This article has dealt with Sadur's work within contemporary literary representations of women's madness. Sadur addresses that madness on many levels: thematically, structurally, as violent spectacle and muteness, as mode of speech, and as corporeal sensations. I have used the marginal figure of the *кликунша*,

the peasant demoniac, to frame my reading of a number of her stories that deal with madness as social display. By positing her protagonists on a trajectory between center and periphery, Sadur investigates the territory of the liminal, of the betwixt-and-between.

In Sadur's later prose, here represented by the novel *The Garden*, madness influences the very narration, and to such a degree that it leaves the reader profoundly uncertain about almost every aspect of Sadur's fictional world. A persistent attention to features of the signifier recalls both Derrida's "infinite play of signifiers" and tendencies within schizophrenic speech. I would argue, however, that although signifiers are certainly at play, this play is not infinite. The text conveys a strong commitment to meaning in its careful organization of leitmotifs and spatial and temporal elements. This meaning is maximally expanded to avoid the trap of realist closure, but seems to be able to resist the destabilizing effects of excessively playful signifiers.

This commitment to meaning, admittedly elusive, would then imply that the novel maintains and supports the phallogocentric structure, by depending on a last instance, a center, guaranteeing meaning to the signifiers. This support, however, is undermined by the novel's way of conceptualizing madness in terms of female corporeality. The novel's obstinate insistence on recognizing the madwoman *as a woman*, in spite of her lack of equivalence to her male binary, renders it a profoundly critical text, although not in the sense that it easily coalesces with political and theoretical positions of Western feminism. Its intervention into women's madness carries a distinctly tragic mark, and seems to be as much a lament over a lost order as an attempt to destabilize it.

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