

THE JESTER AND THE MADMAN, HERALDS OF LIBERTY AND TRUTH

I. Hardly any other mythical creature has enjoyed the ubiquity of the clown: "There are few other myths such as this one about which it can be affirmed without any doubt that they involve the most ancient modes of human expression," wrote Paul Radin in his famous essay on the figure of the clown among primitive American Indians.¹ "There are few myths which have retained their original characters with so few changes." The character of the Fool, the Jester, the Joker appears in a clearly identifiable fashion in the most primitive as well as the most highly cultivated groups: among the Greeks as well as the Chinese; in Japanese civilization as well as the Semite world. The medieval juggler is the embodiment of this figure of many aspects who perdures in the theater, especially puppet theater, and in the guise of the circus clown.

Apparently this is a theme or a thematic ensemble of undeniable charm and with an exceptional power of attraction which has existed since the dawn of civilization. The clown, as we shall see, is by turns creator and destroyer, a strange being who grants and

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¹ Paul Radin, *Der göttliche Schelm. Ein indianischer Mythen-Zyklus*, Zurich, 1954.

who refuses, duper and duped according to the situation. He seems to propose nothing precise, to give in to impulses which he cannot control. He knows neither Good nor Evil, or pretends not to know them; he removes himself from the realm of both and declines all responsibility for either one or the other. But beneath his apparent madness it is the Good which he seeks. And despite his "demonism" he offers the inverse image of Goethe's Mephisto who declares, "I am the spirit who always denies..., for everything which exists is worthy of being destroyed." His acts impart a new vigor to life.

We are here at the heart of the problem. We will be unable within the confines of this study to cite the rich references to our subject in the most diverse primitive contexts.² We shall limit ourselves then to establishing that this symbolic figure, like practically all mythical beings implied in a fundamental existential problem or linked to an extreme situation, manifests an ambivalence or even a polyvalence which we discover in all mythologies. The quadruple function of demiurge, benefactor, liberator and fool is a specific trait of hero-clowns. Even if the state of clowns disappears, games remain, often to our astonishment.

Outside of time, a frequently priapic actor stands on the world stage with alternating positive or negative consequences. Sometimes he seems to have no purpose, "but at the conclusion of his deed and acts he changes his first appearance to reveal a new psychic orientation in a new milieu where nothing is created *ex novo*," notes Radin once more. Here the new is born as an inversion or a remodeling of the old, or, in a negative manner, of the demonstration that a certain conduct is the inevitable cause of derision and shame and sometimes even of death. Divine juggler! We laugh at him, but he mocks us. For what happens to him happens to us.

In his critique of this *mythologème*, Karl Kerényi refers to the relation between the clown and the Spanish *picaro* (still quite current but until now badly identified) and notes the correspondence between this and the Doric-Italian inspired jokes brought to the stage by actors disguised as large phallic Phlyaques, remind-

² Paul Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, New York-London, 1927; Alfonso Di Nola, *Antropologia religiosa*, Florence, 1974; Giuseppe Cocchiara, *Il mondo alla rovescia*, Turin, 1963, etc.

ing us that wiliness and stupidity often combine.³

The “psychological” commentary of C. G. Jung on the work of Radin is no less interesting. According to his seductive but non-demonstrable thesis, the clown is a faithful image of the still undifferentiated human conscience. The “civilized” person has forgotten the clown and only recalls him in a metaphorical and improper fashion when he becomes irritated at his own erratic actions. This he blames on the intervention of sprites and imps, trolls (in Scandinavia), *spiritelli*, *monacelli* and others (in Italy), or, in serious cases, to that of demonic influences, scarcely imagining, unless only vaguely, the risks and perils which these discarded wraiths prepare for him, nor the psychotherapeutic effect which they might involve. “The myth of the clown offers to the now evolved individual that which he possesses deep down intellectually and morally so that he does not forget his past,” continues the Swiss psychologist. “With his god-like character the myth of the clown exercises a direct action on the unconscious, whether this action is clearly perceived or not. The fact that his role still exists, constantly renewed, is explained by his *utility*... the clown is thus a collective shadow figure, the sum of all the inferior characteristics of the individual.”

II. But this is only one of the aspects (and not the least) of the figure of the clown: if he causes laughter and is a source of liberation and criticism, he does not necessarily take part in the laughter and his attitude is frequently one of disturbing sadness. For he is conscious of the responsibility of the role he plays which is a cause of social conflict. The importance of this role and the attitude of the clown in his own regard have frequently been discussed. Instead of once more perusing the psychology or anthropology texts, I prefer to evoke poetic images.

In *Lucinde*, Friedrich Schlegel wrote of a comic situation. “This reminds me of the famous clown, often very sad while he made others laugh. Society is a chaos to which only humor can give form and harmony. Unless we joke and make fun of passion,

³ W.B. Kristensen, *De goddelijke Bedrieger*, 1928, and Josselin De Jong, *De Oorsprung van den goddelijken Bedrieger*, 1929, both in *Mededeel. Akad. Wetensch., Afd. Letterk.* and an article of R. Pettazzoni in *Paideuma*, 1950.

it condenses itself into thick masses and darkens everything.”⁴ Among modern authors, Ernst Jünger uses roughly the same terms. “Irony should always be preceded by a disagreement.”⁵ After watching a circus he reflects on the part of gracefulness in this ambience, on the charm of the itinerant spectacle where the very ancient (*uralt*) origins of the juggler who “perhaps traveled the world like a merchant for more security”⁶ became evident.

Finally, according to Zamjatin in his *Theory of Prose*, there are only two means of overcoming the tragic in life: religion and irony. In reference to this it has been correctly observed that laughter is a basically anti-religious manifestation.

Clown, jester, joker, fool, trickster as well as other terms abound; *bouffon, jongleur, arlequin, polichinelle, mat; gaukler, schelm, hauswurst, dummer auguste*. (This last name seems to me terribly derisive since against the background of the destructive sarcasms of a wild mob in a public square, the *Augustus*, the lord of the world, is given attributes of stupidity.) The list of names continues, an entire repertory of titles, significant, suggestive and as varied as the costumes proper to the hundred manifestations of the same hero.

To understand better what this figure retains and imparts of mystery, it is useful to have recourse to symbols; and among symbols the most common and most explicit, as well as the richest, is a deck of cards. The fool or joker is almost always present, found all the way to the south of India. In Europe, among cards habitually used, one always finds the image of the “jolly joker” dressed as a court jester. He is a powerful *burlador* since, depending on the rules of this or that game, he counts for everything or for nothing. It is in the Tarot cards that the imagery of the fool is the richest and most fascinating. This image is more illuminating than a long discourse and it furnishes us the key which permits us to grasp the relationship of the fool to madness and how the two faces of the character fuse in their critical and liberating functions.

The order of the twenty-two cards is indicated both by Hebrew numbers (i.e. letters) and by Roman numbers (from I to XXI).

⁴ Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde*, Ed. Munich, 1876, p. 117.

⁵ Ernst Jünger, *Strahlungen*, II, D.T.V. Taschenausg., Munich, 1965, p. 18.

⁶ *Id.*, *ibid.*, III, 1966, p. 258.

This is followed by the joker as the final card, distinguished from the other cards, which are full of fundamental meanings and a remarkable symbolic richness, by the total lack of numerical value. The joker is in the twenty-second place; but his "cosmic" value is zero, or infinity, depending on how one reads it. No fixed position can be attributed to him; he can be anywhere, and we can insert him wherever we wish. As a being non-existent on the intellectual or moral levels, *he does not count*. Unaware and irresponsible, he passes passively through life and the fortunes of the game. He is a person who does not know his way, he is pushed by irrational impulses. He belongs only to himself: if he is possessed it is by dispossession. He is "alienated" (mad) in the strict sense of the world.

The joker of the Tarot deck is dressed in a multi-colored costume to indicate the multiplicity and the incoherence of the influences to which he is subjected. The dominant color of the turban which envelops his head is red-orange, the color of a destructive fire whose dangerous blasts contaminate thought. In his right hand he holds a long staff with which he gropes the path like a blind man in the eery painting by Breughel. He is bearded and raises a desperate face toward heaven; his way is determined by the unforeseeable suggestion of the moment. Like a mountebank, his strange brother, a kind of Charon, he lives a life of transit. He passes.

With his left hand he rests a short club on his shoulder; a sack hangs from this which would seem to be full of childish nothings. His yellow pantaloons of medieval cut hit him at his calves and expose his bottom. Here it must be remembered that in the biblical context nudity is shameful and sinful even if involuntary. Since the unspeakable mystery escapes us (and it can hardly be translated into words), the indiscreet person who wished to penetrate it is punished. He will be condemned if he assists at the procreative act which should remain confined to the shadows.

A white lynx (or might it be a dog?) bites the joker's left ankle. The unhappy figure is also forced by the animal to walk towards an overturned obelisk profiled on the horizon where a crocodile crouches ready to devour that which must return to chaos, that is to the primeval substance from which issued the world which we suppose to be an ordered one. The only hopeful sign of

discovering intelligence is a tulip whose petals open at the base of the image. Thus the Spirit has not abandoned the fool, irresponsible and innocent.

Contrasting with his poor clothing, the joker wears a belt of gold, composed of twelve panels, corresponding to the zodiac which girds the cosmos. For the fool represents everything which is beyond the intelligible world, the infinity which surrounds the finite, the bottomless abyss, the ancestor of the gods and the enemy of Zeus. This belt also represents zero which, as we have seen, is the negative sign which dominates the image, the Nothing which fills the primeval void from which everything came forth.

The joker also reminds us to be on our guard and to avoid the distraction which menaces every man who would pass beyond the boundaries of the real, whose beginning and end are designated by the I and the XXI, the Aleph and the Tau. The sense of this figure of the joker then is to signify that which has no value: it is a phantom of the unreal which is opposed to the Everything beyond which existence is not conceivable. The wise man is warned: make no mistake. To avoid madness, respect the limits of the human person.

The symbolic short-hand of the Tarot joker is thus a warning, a reminder for others. As for himself he is blessed with a certificate of non-culpability since he has been declared, classified and defined a fool. As a fool he is *legibus solutus*, exempt, free from the observance of laws and social conventions, free from submission to *idola foris*, from ideas received, from the powers that be. His madness even serves to liberate him. He is the only one who, without running the risk of punitive sanction, can do what he pleases, and especially what seems to him true and just, in the face of the pope and the emperor. In a certain very significant fashion it is precisely this attitude which we expect of him. This is his role and his duty. Besides, the truths he hurls at us are difficult and disagreeable (today we would even—incorrectly—say desacralizing) and he can utter the ultimate warning: *memento mori*.

This is precisely one of the points we would like to emphasize.

III. Now that we have seen that the clown or jester is a kind of “social legate” fulfilling the liberating task of the madman, some-

times as victim, sometimes almost as victor but always “alienated,” let us examine under the same criterion (the freedom to “speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth”) the “true” madman, the mentally ill.

One could write a history of civilization simply by tracing different attitudes toward various manifestations of mental illness (which Michel Foucault attempted⁷). Here we shall limit ourselves to outlining the constant factors of social behaviors, determining the image which civilizations have of man and of his relations with his neighbor, and in particular the evaluation of the dissolution of self and of depersonalization, mysteries of the psyche and destructive manifestations of the spirit.

Mental derangement: this current expression which already stigmatizes the individual whose situation is “different,” who is not himself according to common opinion, betrays a complete manner of considering madness. The deranged or “alienated” person, something like an adulterer, has severed his affective relations, renouncing the pact of union of himself with others and has devoted himself ultimately to something different, strange, contrary and opposed. Just as the verb “to alienate” signifies to transfer to another a good or a right, to sell it or to cede it, so in the area of human relations “to alienate oneself” means to lose one’s reputation, one’s friendships, to make oneself unfavorable or even hostile.

Mad, lunatic, foolish, insane are all terms roughly synonymous and nevertheless varied. It is the same in all languages: *folie*, *déraison*, *manie*, *démence*; *verrückt*, *wahnsinnig*, *irre*, *toll*, *narr*, *närrisch*; *matto*, *pazzo*, *folle*, *maniac*, *demente*, *mentecatto*. Each of these words can help illuminate the dark areas of a dramatic situation, and to bring out substantial differences. But such is not our intention and we shall limit ourselves to a definition of a few elementary propositions useful for the creation of an hypothesis which is for us, of course, more than a simple hypothesis.

No doubt there are certain states of madness which result from an aberration, an alteration or a macroscopic and verifiable degeneration of chromosomes. Some are due to the destructive action of pathogenic agents or to various traumas, particularly the one

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Paris, 1961 and 1972.

which strikes persons put away as the result of simple doubts about their behavior. But there are also those who are or who become mad “for no reason.” To say that they too are victims of “alterations” is only a *post hoc* observation with no certitude of the *propter hoc*. The reason for this alteration must be determined. What is it which causes the dissolution of a personality, the initially furious and then passive refusal, the negation of one’s own life, the abdication of the self, the decision to enclose oneself in an innocent and vegetative life with no more responsibility which is, consequently, less demanding. Pascal already remarked that, “men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would be the same as to be mad in another way.”

Is it not true that an apparently inevitable exigence of social co-existence obliges all men to live in aberrant structures and that as a consequence madness can be seen from two opposing poles?

The word “mania” comes from the Sanscrit *manyu*, anger or fury. However one can only be furious with something either within us or outside of us. “Fury” can be traced to its ancient roots in *furere*, to steal, to alienate, to take away. As for melancholy, which accompanies madness so often that it is considered one of its first symptoms, is it not simply a consequence of a “flow of black bile,” thus infernal and destructive?

Let us examine then these three elements: “maniacal” fixation; fury “against” (self, the world, others), the will to withdraw from others; melancholic sadness as a consequence of a “diabolically” troubled inner state. All three have a common root in a decision, conscious or otherwise, of a predominantly opposing nature or, to be more correct, of revolt, of a refusal to accept the rules.

It would be well here to introduce several considerations on the relationship between genius and madness, on the “ingenious” side of madness and its frequent tendency to “originality”. These are all well-known observations which were certainly not invented by Cesare Lombroso since the Greeks, Plato and the poets, already discussed this as well as Seneca and Cicero, not to mention the speculation of the 17th century.

Let us note only that madness is no guarantee of genius and originality. The mediocre man who goes beserk does not thereby lose his mediocrity. *Mente captus*, an imprisoned spirit, he can

descend to the lowest possible level, but it is even more probable that he will become an *exalted* person, someone who — let us be careful — rises above his previous level. And, let us again be careful, “something” in him pushes him to have recourse to that slick maneuver which is correctly called fool’s wits. This desperate maneuver will give the poor man the justification, the visa which permits him freedom of action and of word. Which leads us to another point.

For, if the major characteristic of a genius is his originality, his different “nature,” is not the fact of differentiating himself from others often the undeniable sign of the presence of the demon in the human soul? On the other hand, what is “originality” except the ability to distill new juices from already known plants or to experiment with new uses for these plants or even to discover new plants. In other words, to be able to see what others overlook or miss, “to find the first beginning in oneself.” The genius bridges the gap between instinct and intellect, between feeling and reason. Resolved to be himself from now on, he knows that “the man who finds himself has ended his misery.”

On the other hand the madman, of the kind we could call “ordinary,” exchanges his misery for another one, moves from one prison to another. In any case, if he *acts independently*, consciously or not, it is often for the simple purpose of using a trick—heavy-handed or simple according to the case—to withdraw himself from the obligations of existence, from social constraints, conduct, manner, and responsibilities which he no more wishes to understand than to accept, nor to share. He escapes from common existence and hides himself in the prison of his own life; and, just as all ancient civilizations have realized, he himself thus becomes sacred in the double sense of *vitandus*, excluded from the functions of the city and at the same time to be respected and feared because “possessed,” the prey of the demonic, of the “divine.”

If the hypothesis we have hazarded is grounded, then when and why is the refusal born? Is it true that the common root of madness and mania is, at least in certain cases, the will not to participate in the great tournament (or comedy) of social existence? This is a perilous game, a game where the rules change quite often, become complicated or are improvised before the

match is over, a game full of cheaters, of counterfeiters, of rogues, of assassins.

IV. Thus madness becomes a kind of “place of refuge,” a pretext for abandoning the struggle. We cannot help thinking of Lenau, Kleist, Hölderlin-Scardanelli, Van Gogh, Rimbaud and so many others, and to a situation which in a poetic fashion Pirandello illustrated impressively in his *Henry IV*. But the “true” madman acquires the same liberties which the juggler, the clown, the *joculator* enjoy (if we can speak of enjoy), all “antagonists” in the etymological sense of the term.

The clown, as we saw, is the one who speaks the truth, who can yell it out in the face of the tyrant without fear of punishment since it is permissible for him to do so. He is the only one, along with madmen, to use this liberty because he feigns madness himself; and even if the others know that the clown is no fool, they act as if they think he is. A foolish situation, indeed! Alas, the truth has two faces, one light and the other dark. The latter, the abysmal face of secret and repressed intentions, of betrayal and fear; what is this but the demonic side of the human condition.

The “desacralizing” function of the juggler and the madman is twofold: positive or negative according to the point of view chosen. Positive when it uncovers the lies which subdue the world, when it denounces shallow conventions, aberrant institutions; negative when it puts on the mask aiming to destroy the structures whose survival is judged desirable. Under the eyes of the spectator the diabolic clown rips off the veil. His commentary is sly, ferocious and *true*. But in the final analysis the world does not love those who would take away the “sacredness” of its institutions especially when these begin to decline. Gallows and prisons are eloquent reminders of this fact.

Here then is the utility, the justification of the clown, of the madman, of the madman who clowns, all institutionally exempt from punishment, a *poenis soluti*. “The social function of the satire of clowns who jeeringly accompanied conquerors and kings is undeniable,” remarked Roger Caillois.⁸ And vice versa all dictatorships, especially the stupidest ones, had at their head at the

⁸ Roger Caillois, *L'Homme et le sacré*, Paris, Gallimard, 1950; *Les Jeux et les hommes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1958.

beginning, leaders who did not know how to laugh at themselves; moral, religious and spiritual dictatorships included. For the comic view of the world frees man of the terrifying presence of the “demonic,” of *religio*, the bonds connecting him with the divine, and makes him forget the perils, the weight and the severity of existence.

The poet Jean-Paul Richter, who has elaborated a philosophy of humor, noted correctly that the clown fulfills in a comedy the role of the chorus in a tragedy: he discovers, criticizes and comments on the event in which he participates and which he judges. “To move from a dramatic comedy to a lyric comedy, there is, it seems to me, no other mediating figure like the clown. In a comedy he is the chorus. Just as in a tragedy the chorus announces the action to the spectator, introducing and presiding over the characters without being a character himself, so the harlequin, who is no particular character, represents humor in its pure state, playing without passion or interest like a true god of laughter. At the court of the prince, the gaiety which he engendered of himself aided the unhappy man to overcome his cares. Free, generous, impertinent, cynical: what kind of a reception would we not give to Diogenes of Synopis if he were to return to us in the guise of a clown.”⁹

In certain primitive rituals at princely courts and in popular games (*festum stultorum* or *follorum*, April Fool’s, etc.) and especially on stage, the clown represents a kind of answer. A number of specialized works and histories of theater have devoted a large amount of space to him.¹⁰ Miklós Szabolcsi, eminent historian of Hungarian literature, wrote in *The Clown as Self-Portrait of the Artist*,¹¹ “King of the Saturnalia, king of carnival, king of beggars, respectable and despicable king, adored and outcast, good to love, good to kill, a figure who aims for order in his decadence and in his strength, fortuitous messenger of the truth, shaman

⁹ Jean-Paul Richter, “Vorschule der Aesthetik,” *Der Hanswurst*, p. 40.

¹⁰ Hancock E. E. Welsford, “The Fool” (Jester), *Encyc. Brit.*, 1961/IX, p. 465 and following; *id.*, *The Fool*, London, 1935; C. F. Fogel, *Geschichte der Hofnarren*, 1789; A. Canel, *Recherches historiques sur les fous des rois de France*, Paris, 1873; J. R. Allardyce Nicoll, *Masks, Mimes and Miracles*, London, 1931.

¹¹ Mikós Szabolcsi, *A clown mint a művész önarcképe*, Budapest, Corvina, 1974.

gone mad, sacrificial king of the Netherworlds, magician possessed. He too becomes a part of the drama, a synthesis of the customs of dead societies, restructured in the course of these new times, rich in multiple meanings, playfully restoring to us the flavor of the past, revealing to us as well that of the present... at once the herald and model for the artist who hides himself in order to represent under a simultaneously tragic and grotesque appearance the torments of his derisible condition."

As far as theatre is concerned, the function of fool or jester is not limited only to the character wearing a fool's costume, even in Shakespeare who accords such an important role to the fool. In the vast Shakespearian repertoire, there are strong characters who at a certain point take refuge in madness finding there a protection against the terrors of life or a means of acting without fear of repression: Lear and Hamlet, or differently Coriolanus and Timon of Athens, and also Falstaff, the pitiable drunkard, all these turn themselves into jesters in a desperate escape.

Even if the fool, as we have seen, has always held a place in folklore, poetry and the pictorial arts, the high popularity he has enjoyed from the third decade of the last century, wide-ranging and long-lasting even to our own times, is still astonishing. The roots can be found in the horrible and pitiful masks of Goya or in the famous *Gilles* of Watteau whose anguished charm is perhaps the symbol of a clown. With Victor Hugo and Musset, the clown entered the new theatre; with Schumann and Verdi he appeared in music. Nor can we overlook Zarathustra of Nietzsche, the juggler who comes down from the mountain to preach the dangerous life and the experience of ultimate adventures, the jester who hopes to snatch the masses away from their vulgarity and their misguided ideas.

Our catalogue must be limited and incomplete, but the clown also appears in the paintings of Picasso, Ensor, Chagall. He is the *Narr der Tiefe* of Klee, the *arlequins* of Miró. A figure of sparkling magic, he is infinitely diverse and always similar. He can be found in the works of Apollinaire, of Max Jacob and of Alexander Bloch, in the stories of Kafka or in the complex games of Thomas Mann, in the verbal acrobatics of James Joyce ("I am only an Irish clown, a great joker at the universe") or the stylizations of Eliot's *Prufrock*. There are the *Clown* of Michaux and the *Ansich-*

ten eines Clowns and *Oskar* of Heinrich Böll. Finally we recall the long line of Italian jugglers who proclaim the unity of truth and liberty: from Bontempelli to Bacchelli, from Palazzeschi to Malaparte, from Barilli to Calvino, Savinio to Buzzati, Flaiano to Sciascia.

V. There is much more which could be said, but we shall limit ourselves to noting that in the course of the past 150 years, the figure of the madman-clown has experienced a significant development and that one can easily associate this suggestive image with a theory of the *game* of freedom and truth in which the unbalancing of reason, real or simulated, constitutes an essential element. Out of this flows the hypothesis of a socio-historical creation of the mask whose purpose is to laugh and to cause to laugh and whose cathartic function is evident. The conflict which arises between the creative artist, mime and magician, and his society is purifying. This also explains why a masquerade is often an *alter ego*, the self-portrait of the artist in society. Starobinski terms this a "derisible epiphany" to indicate that one of the functions of the "counter-creation" of art is to affirm the primacy of reason over chaos, to build a bridge toward others, to establish a bond with the community in order to free man from his solitude.

If the close connection between the clown and the clinically insane is self-evident, reason reminds us that the madhouse is a strange place, an asylum and a refuge sometimes wisely chosen, but also a place of pain and not a sanctuary of justice and truth.

This is the double function of the madman. An *apologue* of Kierkegaard in frighteningly modern tones gives pause for reflection. "It happened in a theater where the wings had just caught fire. The clown came out to alert the spectators to the calamity. Thinking it was a joke, the audience began to applaud, and as the clown repeated his cry of alarm, they laughed all the more. I think this is how the world will perish; in the midst of gaiety, laughing people will think they are taking part in a joke."¹²

¹² Soeren Kierkegaard, *Diapsalmata*, in *Opere*, Florence, 1972, p. 4.