



You have downloaded a document from
RE-BUŚ
repository of the University of Silesia in Katowice

Title: The Wild, the Unconscious, the Mad

Author: Tomasz Kalaga

Citation style: Kalaga Tomasz. (1997). The Wild, the Unconscious, the Mad. W: T. Rachwał, W. Kalaga (red.), "The wild and the tame : essays in cultural practice" (S. 71-74). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



Uznanie autorstwa - Użycie niekomercyjne - Bez utworów zależnych Polska - Licencja ta zezwala na rozpowszechnianie, przedstawianie i wykonywanie utworu jedynie w celach niekomercyjnych oraz pod warunkiem zachowania go w oryginalnej postaci (nie tworzenia utworów zależnych).



UNIWERSYTET ŚLĄSKI
W KATOWICACH



Biblioteka
Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



Ministerstwo Nauki
i Szkolnictwa Wyższego

TOMASZ KALAGA

The Wild, the Unconscious, the Mad

While the medical science recognises a number of symptoms which point to a particular mental disease and the methods of diagnosis and treatment are very advanced, madness still remains a vague and unclear term. This opaqueness becomes evident when one attempts to position a barrier separating sanity and insanity, and finds that the two elements of the binary opposition are, in fact, blended into one another without a precise point of distinction. Instinctively one feels that such a border must exist, but its location remains unclear. When investigating, for example, the effects of a horror story, which deals with madness, upon its reader one cannot resist the impression that the narrative in some way provides a very close insight into insanity. This insight exists, however, only in the form of a short-lasting emotional imprint; by no means is it an actual dynamic process of crossing a supposed barrier between sanity and madness. Madness stubbornly avoids enclosure into semantic boundaries: attempts at finding the line which separates the world of the normal and the world of the mentally sick seem futile.

The initial question of where such a border exists, should perhaps be replaced by an inquiry into the reasons behind the inability of its direct establishment. Some sort of mental fuzziness hovers above the concept of madness, and it will be this vagueness that will come under discussion during the course of this article.

The introduction already hints that madness will be treated here not on the level of its physical signifier, i.e. its symptomatic, medical representation, but solely as a mental concept. Its physical results are the domain of psychiatry, psychology and sociology. The article will only deal with its signified, a universal opposition to normality, which exists on the mental plane; an abstract conceptualisation of insanity.

Madness or the mad may be presented as an aspect of wildness or the wild. For reasons which will become apparent shortly, the wild will not be given any specific definition at this point in time. It may, however, be understood as a concept of large semantic scope, encompassing phenomena beyond our control or understanding, some of which may fit into the broad category of the Other. The reason for prescribing madness under the category of the wild, and not *vice versa*, lies in the size of the semantic scope of the two terms. Despite their common characteristics, the wild seems to extend further – features of the mad may be identified as features of the wild, but wildness goes beyond and includes that which has little to do with the idea of insanity.

The terms madness and wildness share in three distinct features. These common points exist on the grounds of the semantic definition of the two words, or more precisely, in the nature of interpreting and attaching meaning to their signifiers.

Firstly, whatever notion of their signified one may possess, there may be noticed a distinct ambiguity and lack of transparency as to their precise meaning. They entail spiritual, sociological, and psychological states, without ever completely separating themselves from one of the categories while being applied to another. Their connotations are interwoven into a complex matrix which reaches into many different aspects of human perception.

Secondly – and this is the reason for initial refraining from precise description of the wild, any definition that one may possess of these two terms is always based on exclusion. To comprehend the concepts embraced by the signified of the mad and the wild, one perceives them as what they are not. Mad is all that is not sane, normal, or acceptable, wild is all that is not tamed, civilised, or controlled. This peculiar way of defining terms by their binary opposites, and only by their binary opposites, stems from the third similarity – namely, the subject who operates with the two signs always believes himself to stand on the side opposite to the one expressed in their signifier.

The wild and the mad is employed and understood in speech or thought precisely from the point of view of its opposite equivalent – the sane and the tamed. The peculiar nature of these terms does not allow for their user to employ them in auto-description. It is always the Other that has to be deemed wild or insane. Thus the arbitrary character of the concepts becomes transparent – their employment is strictly subjective. A person may be called a madman, but he will consider others to be insane and himself normal. Similarly, the wild knows not its wildness, a statement beautifully illustrated by the Holy Crusades, where either side believed the enemy to be a barbaric infidel. Any auto descriptive use of the concepts is strictly hyperbolic, “I am insane with jealousy” or “what I did was really wild”, for example. In reality, the signified of the mad and the wild is projected unto the stance opposite to and unapproachable by the subject using them.

The nature of the two signified that have just been discussed, bears a startling resemblance to the one found in the Jungian concept of the unconscious.

Beginning with a short definition of the unconscious, one may note the similarities that it has with the mad and the wild and touch upon the odd relationship that exists between the three, a conclusion which may shed some light upon the initially presented problem.

The Jungian classification of the human *psyche* begins with establishing the *ego* as the foundation and the centre of the sphere of the conscious. The *ego*, as the subject of the acts of consciousness has the potential of widening its scope of experience indefinitely, but its practical boundaries lie at the threshold of the unknown. According to Jung, the unknown may be divided into external and internal. The external belongs to the surrounding world, i.e. to the environment and is reachable through sensory perception. As such it may become part of the conscious in form of impressions.

The internal unknown is termed the unconscious. Jung divides it into three categories – the temporary subliminal, which may be recalled at will – memory for example, the subliminal – which cannot be recalled at will but occasionally enters the domain of the conscious, and that which may never enter the conscious or has not yet done so. Another classification is also applied: the unconscious is divided into personal and collective. The personal unconscious constitutes an integral part of the whole of personality and may as well at some stage become part of the conscious though processes leading towards self-knowledge and self-development. The collective unconscious on the other hand is composed of the archetypes and almost never enters the consciousness.¹

The influence of the unconscious, particularly the collective one, upon the *ego* is tremendous. The personality in Jungian terms is a combination of the two, and it is incorrect to assume that the processes for which the *ego* is responsible, occur without being in some way influenced by the unconscious. The functions of *ego* are always dependent on the unconscious. This is a very important point, which must not be ignored if the relationship between the wild and the unconscious is to be noted.

One should now focus on this relation, by pointing to the similarities between the nature of the signified of the “unconscious” and “wildness” and “madness”. The common features of the wild and the mad are, to remind, the broadness and ambiguity of their meaning, definition through exclusion and the positioning of their operator at the point of view of their binary opposite.

The signified of the unconscious shares these characteristics. As the unknown, it is naturally unclear and opaque. The primary feature of the unknown is its lack of precise semantic boundaries. The unconscious is *terra incognita* – as it may never be fully understood, it remains mystical and beyond complete analysis. It forms no precise image of its scope and extent; as a matter of fact, for all one knows, it may be indefinite. In this respect its reach is even greater than that of the wild and the mad.

It is also defined through exclusion. Since its extent remains clouded, only description through elimination is possible. The unconscious as immediately

¹ C. G. Jung, *Archetypy i symbole*, trans. J. Prokopiuk (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1976), pp. 59–64.

unreachable to the subject, entails all that the conscious, the *ego*, doesn't. It is not possible to approach the unconscious by ascribing to it advert features – any features appear only by the way of contrast with the conscious. If it were otherwise, unconscious would no longer be unknown.

And thirdly, a fact perhaps the most important of all, the meaning of the signified is, at least seemingly, understood and employed from the point of view of the *ego*. Direct speech and thought are ascribed to the conscious. As one is most frequently unaware of the operations of the unconscious, the sign is used by the conscious part of the personality. This does not exclude the possibility of the unconscious taking part in the creation of its very meaning – it is known that it has a tremendous influence over thought processes, an idea which is in fact crucial to its relationship with the wild and the mad. However, immediate operations on the sign “unconscious” are always performed by the conscious. While its origins may lie in the overlapping area of the two components, its realisation is left to the conscious.

One could now classify the unconscious, like it was done in the beginning paragraphs of the article with madness, as an aspect of the wild and not be entirely mistaken. After all, the unconscious is untamed, unapproachable, uncontrollable, and as such it seems to fall under the extent of the wild. This is one possible relationship between the two concepts.

However one must not forget the role the unconscious plays in the processes for which the *ego* is responsible. The signification and as such the signified of wild, must from the psychological point of view influenced by the unconscious. While falling into the scope of the wild's meaning, the unconscious at the same time takes part in the creation of this very scope. Psychologically the unconscious creates the connotations of the wild, semantically it falls into the created categories. The unconscious conceives a concept which inherits its very characteristics, a concept through which it may be described, but at the same time, due to the nature of this concept, avoid any concrete definition. The wild – as an immediate offspring of the unconscious, may, just like its parent, be described only through exclusions and only from the contrasting point of view.

At the beginning madness was classified as an aspect of the unconscious. One may broaden the definition now, by suggesting that in the signified of madness, the signified of wildness finds its more concrete realisation. Madness is the embodiment of the wild's more sublime features, and is without question easier to conceptualise. Nevertheless, it bears the wild's ties with the unconscious. This relationship enforces upon its signified the shadings of ties the wild has with the unconscious. It is endowed with the opaqueness and ambiguity. Attempts at placing it within accessible frames is futile as it is branded by the unreachable nature of the unconscious. The signified of madness will remain unclear because as the wild personified, it cannot escape the overwhelming influence of the unconscious upon the *ego* that attempts to limit its meaning and create artificial boundaries.