

Preface to
Philosophy of Madness; Fundamental and Transgressive Insights

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Once upon a time I was born and raised happily, at least as far as I can remember, in a sweet village in the Dutch fruitland, ‘Batavia’, in central Netherlands. During my youth no particularly special things happened which could be related to madness -- with perhaps one exception. No, I do not refer to exceptional traumas, psychological violence or physical abuse. But what I do want to mention here is a book that I read in my early adolescence, written by an, in those days, not fully unknown writer, named Roger Zelazny.

That book, called *Doorways in the Sand*, is an imaginative adventure story, or more accurately, a science fiction novel. The main character meets a lot of mysterious figures and is searching for an important ‘star stone’ that plays a pivotal role in a cosmic battle. I will not recount the whole story, but will highlight one scene or ‘invention’. Namely, in this book there is a machine called a ‘Rhennius Machine’. This concerns a machine, non-existent outside the book, which can execute something extraordinary. You can put all kinds of objects into the machine, at which point the machine turns these things around, and returns them again to you.

You may think, ‘I do not need a machine to turn things around’, but the Rhennius machine turns them in a very special way, namely, by *mirroring* them. If you would enter a right shoe, the Rhennius machine turns it into a left shoe. A clockwise turning corkscrew comes out spiralling the other way round, anticlockwise. An ordinary book is transformed into a book in mirror writing that starts on the last page and should be read backwards.

But most exciting is when you step into the machine yourself. When you come out again, you are suddenly left-handed instead of right-handed -- or right-handed, if you entered left-handed. The parting of your hair has shifted to the other side, your heart beats on the right side of your chest, and even on the cellular and molecular level everything is turned around. After you have passed through the Rhennius machine, you have been inverted from head to foot, including your nervous system, your mind and spirit, and even the way you perceive and think. However, because you perceive literally everything in an inverted way, you think that you have not changed yourself, but that it is the world that has been thoroughly modified. After a visit to the Rhennius machine the world appears as in a mirror! You see cars driving at the ‘wrong’ side of the road, and doors appear to rotate unexpectedly in the opposite direction.

And if someone wants to shake hands, it is him, not you, who seems to hold out his wrong hand (see chapter 4).

When we think through about what is at stake in a world with such Rhennius cases, we automatically assume one or the other perspective: either the person must have been inverted, or the world has been transformed, depending on the point of view. A more encompassing account would claim however that it is the connection between a person and his world that has become tied up, a fundamental relation has been turned around.

Madness is like a Rhennius machine: according to the outside world the madman has been changed, while from the mad perspective something has been radically changed in the world itself. According to outsiders the madman or psychotic person is behaving strangely, he utters incomprehensible irrelevancies and speaks gibberish. He even invents new words or inverts existing ones. But the madman does not consider himself to act or speak strangely. It is not he who has changed, but the environment to which he only reacts. Something strange happened in the world, something has gone wrong. There lies an unspeakable blanket of suggestive change over the world; things appear as somehow the same but in a radically different way than before.

There is huge gap between these two perspectives, of the madman and of the outsider, which we could also call the subjective experience and the objective description. Taking account of this gap is of great importance for understanding and treatment of what is called 'psychosis'. After you have been mad, there are essentially also two ways in which you can look back at what happened in your mad episode. Firstly, you may adopt the perspective of the outside world, or even worse, that of the psychiatrist. Then you perceive, conceive and evaluate your own Rhennius-like experiences, during which the world was wholly different, retroactively through the eyes of an other. Then you re-interpret and re-value your own experiences as literally 'twisted' and wrong. Then you imply that all mirroring effects and strange events during your madness were, after all, 'unreal', mere phantasies, triggered by a supposed illness or mental disorder.

It should be clear by now that this is not my conception. In madness you roam in a world that may be frightening, repulsive and darkening, and that perhaps better should be avoided. However, this same mad or psychotic world offers also something seductive, mysterious, meaningful, and enlightening. And when afterwards, you diagnose your own experiences and adventures only as fearful, senseless and sick, you deny your own pleasure, desires, motivation and your own will with which you at first instance stepped through that

mirror to the other side of reality. Moreover, the more you deny that the mad world has any sense or meaning, the higher the chances are that you secretly long to return to that realm..

Therefore, you'd better not hide such mad experiences behind safe psychiatric labels, like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Instead, you should confront yourself again with what happened, re-chew on that, relive these experiences in a more controlled way, in order to extract more insight, sense and meaning from them, both for yourself and for others.

This difference, between how you experience something yourself and how outsiders observe and describe this, is the main theme of my 2004 book *Pure Madness*. In that book I present my own memories of my psychosis of 1987 and confront this with the so-called objective descriptions of my behaviour as recorded in the psychiatric reports. The comprehensive report that was written then includes day-by-day observations about me by nurses and other caregivers in a mental hospital. In *Pure Madness* I put this report along side my own memories and I attempt to construct a bridge, a language, to reconcile the two very diverse perspectives.

But before going on, lets first take a few steps back to my adolescence when I was reading this book. I was not yet locked up in an isolation cell in a psychiatric ward. Let's continue this story: after having finished this book by Zelazny, as well as some other books, I went to college and moved to a university town in the middle of the Netherlands. Apart from visiting college I got interested in all kinds of activities of student life, that were quite pleasurable, but that also bore a certain risk. First of all, there were illegal drugs, which are, as is commonly known, quite important for inducing psychosis. For anyone who wants to know what it's like to be psychotic, but does not want to read my books, I would strongly advise take a considerable amount of marijuana, hashish, or even better, LSD, mescaline or XTC (see chapter 10). Of course, the risk of walking this path and taking these substances is that it may cost more time, more energy, and more money in the end, and that you would have been better off when you had bought and read my books instead.

The second affair of importance to me in that university town was love. I am not aware of all ins and outs of how love is managed these days among adolescents, but I do know that it used to be quite a to do. One moment you had a lover, next moment another one, and if you had finally found the true one, this true one turned out not to be as true as you had wished, and would run off with someone else. Of course, we can put on a serious face and talk quasi-professionally, quasi-scientifically about neuro-transmitters, genes, stress-inducers, and other psychiatrically flavoured obsessions, but the fact remains that everyone who falls into love

runs a certain risk. Where love reigns, there is also its shadow side, and the more intense love is, the deeper the fall out of love may be. Love with all its successes, failures, anxieties and ecstasies is one of the most neglected risk factors for a psychosis. Psychiatrist Edvard Podvoll remarks wisely in his book with the nice title *Seductions of Madness* the following (1990: 210):

“More men, women, and, especially, adolescents have become insane in the wake of unrequited love affairs than those driven mad by toxins, defective genes, and other abnormalities put together. It is a clinical commonplace that the phenomenon of unrequited love is a fertile occasion for madness, and this probably has been so since prehistoric times. Perhaps this is why it is said the world over in pretechnological healing traditions that excessive passion is a "poison" that makes one's system "toxic" and then endangers the mind. The humiliated lover is involved in a predicament. From rejection, or from a real or imagined loss, the lover suffers the crushing disappointment of an intense conviction. His "conviction" might be of his destined place in another's life, or of his sexual irresistibility, or of having found an ultimate mate, or of living only the shadow of a life when not with the other, and so on in countless variety. He has reconstructed a "self" that can only exist in the presence of the other. When this self is rejected, the "groundlessness" or emptiness of his existence can be similar to (and feel like) the "tearing down" experiences of the drug-induced state. But he sometimes rises up from that experience and "switches out," traversing the psychotic "spiral of transformation" into an existence of magic and power. A new passion emerges, one of infinite nature, a celestial version - as the predicament comes to completion.”

The last sentence in this quote is significant: madness as a passion for infinity. My description of madness then would be: “madness is a socially awkward expression of a desire to infinity in a world that defines itself as finite.” The mad drive towards infinity is found to produce numerous thoughts and perceptions that are framed in religiously tainted language (see chapter 11). In the mad world Jesus characters abound, as well as visitations by Maria, revelations, prophecies, gods and demons. Their role and their behaviour can be further explored, which I do extensively below in *Philosophy of Madness*. In this preface I just want to make one personal remark on the religious dimension of madness. After a short and mad period of religious enthusiasm in the psychiatric institution in 1987, that I describe in *Pure Madness*, I had been avoiding everything that calls to mind religion and spirituality for many years. I thought that by engaging again with religious themes and thought, I would come too close again to madness, too close to the burning fire, too close to uncontrollable, vague, floating reveries that could only lead to madness and folly. Today, many years later, I

consider that anti-religious attitude unwise. Today I think that expressions of religion, spirituality, and especially philosophy, are the most apt means to provide viable forms, thought and discourse to the desires that underlie love and madness (see chapter 14).

During madness, you are, as it were, trying to resolve the most fundamental questions of existence, albeit in an uncontrolled, wildly associative way. You want to know what the point is, you are obsessed by the center around which everything turns. You are determined to find the relation and foundation of good and evil, and focused on the meaning of life and the cosmos. Such existential questions and considerations should not be denied, but thought through, not be smothered, but lived through -- even when this means a risk of becoming mad. In the end everyone shares this fate to be confronted with irresolvable questions. You may try to run away from them, to numb yourself or to deny the relevance of these questions, but sooner or later these emerge again, only to haunt you more, the more you suppress them.

Not everyone agrees on this. In 2013 I gave a lecture on these themes, when a social worker in the audience wanted to know why I, having suffered from a psychosis, did nevertheless undertake such a possibly confusing study in philosophy. It appears that social workers and therapists tend often to be too cautious towards people who have extreme, extraordinary experiences like a psychosis. They may advise a gardening course above an academic study philosophy, because that would be more restful. But no, you'd better not listen to that! Yes, gardening can be an interesting option, but do not listen to that kind of mistaken advice.

To resume my life story; after I had become acquainted with the desires towards infinity, love and drugs, I vanished during three months under lock and key in a mental hospital in the summer of 1987. Perhaps it was not only love and drugs after all. Perhaps I had been affected deeply by the ideas from weird books such as Zelazny's about the Rhennius machine. Those ideas of 'inversion', 'reversal' or 'mirroring' are however not unique to my psychosis, neither is reading Zelazny a pre-condition for pondering these themes. We find such themes in many ways in the autobiographies and reports by those who have been psychotic. It is manifest in motifs like concrete mirrors, word reversals, reversals in time and space and it has also been much discussed in the literature, ever since Freud and Lacan. In addition, many other interesting, almost science-fiction like -- and philosophical -- ideas are found in madness, for instance, the idea that other people are in fact inanimate robot-like creatures, that in the deepest of your thoughts you can entertain telepathic contact with others,

that time-travelling is a viable option, etc. I discuss the rationale and motivation for these kinds of ideas extensively in the book to follow.

However, before we really start, perhaps you will follow me just a bit further into my life story. After my psychosis had ebbed away, I have had a pleasurable and satisfying life, essentially not unlike that of many others. Different from my peers however, was the quite unique fact that I had been psychotic for a while and that I had even been compulsorily institutionalised. I did not keep that as a secret, but told my story whomever wanted to hear. Although most people were curious and attentive, I still could not get rid of the feeling that they did not fully understand and that it remained hard or even impossible to explain how it is like to be psychotic. So I decided to put everything on paper, which resulted into my book *Pure Madness* of 2004. With this book I won two big prizes, one in the domain of psychiatry, and one in philosophy.

After publication of this successful book my life was altered rapidly. I had enough of the boring work I did at the university at that time, and I considered 'pure madness' so interesting that I decided to make more work from it. So I quit my academic position and began anew with a study into philosophy, to examine down to the last detail what a psychosis exactly is, in relation with reality, with time, with life. We now have arrived to the ominous year of 2007, in which I again published a book on madness, about my experiences from 1987 with isolation cells, called *Alone. Messages from the Isolation Cell*. In that same year I intensified my academic studies in philosophy, I gave many interviews on madness in spoken and written media, and I was fully in the embrace of searching for the fundamentals and essence of madness. And then, again under influence of complex love affairs and drugs, and just after finishing a huge bachelor thesis about 'the experience of time in madness', I ended up again in an isolation cell of a mental hospital, exactly twenty years after my first visit there.

One of the funny things in that summer of 2007 was that the nurses and the psychiatrists already knew me from my books. I was the so-called expert-by-experience, who lived out this experience again. One of the psychiatrists had even, just recently, written a review of *Pure Madness*, and some nurses asked me to sign a copy of my book. For myself it was stranger than strangeness. I knew exactly what a psychosis was, found myself deeply immersed into this extraordinary state of madness, and nevertheless could not pull myself out of it. Then madness appeared as an unavoidable truth and reality. What and how this truth and reality is and what it entails, I further reveal below, in this book, *Philosophy of Madness*.