

EXPERIENCES OF MELANCHOLY IN ROSE TREMAIN'S *MUSIC AND SILENCE*

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Abstract: The current paper shows how the experiences of melancholy are represented in *Music and Silence* (1999), a postmodernist historical novel by Rose Tremain. Tremain's novel suggests that the experience of melancholy and the workings of the imagination are interconnected in a variety of ways. It represents the experience of melancholy within the broader context of the relations between the understanding and the imagination as well as between reason and unreason in the first half of the seventeenth century. Tremain's novel makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate about reason and unreason, which is an important part of the postmodernist debate with Enlightenment culture.

Key words: melancholy, madness, unreason, Michel Foucault

In postmodernist literature and theory, a great deal of attention has been paid to the question of the interrelations between reason and unreason. Starting with Michel Foucault's groundbreaking *History of Madness* (1961), there have been numerous attempts to unearth and represent the experience of unreason in its various forms. The question of unreason and madness is inextricably interconnected with the question of the relationship between the imagination and the understanding. Indeed, in his *Continental Philosophy* (2005), Andrew Cutrofello refers to Foucault's project of writing a history of unreason as an archaeology of the imagination: 'an "archaeology" that would be able to plumb the depths of what it is tempting to call the "deathworld", the night out of which the imagination shapes the human relation to nothingness' (Cutrofello, 2005: 80-81). Somewhat less poetically, I would refer to Foucault's project as an archaeology of the changing patterns of the relations between the imagination and the understanding and between reason and unreason.

According to Cutrofello, in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche 'shows how an originally free imagination came to be subordinated to the understanding. More precisely, he shows how an original alliance between sensibility and imagination (Dionysus and Apollo) gave way to one between imagination and understanding (Apollo and Socrates)' (Cutrofello, 2005: 19). To a greater or lesser extent, this subordination of the imagination and sensibility to the understanding is a motif in major Western philosophical works from Plato to Hegel. However, a number of thinkers from Nietzsche to Foucault have stressed the need to free the imagination from the constraints imposed upon its free play by analysing, ordering and classifying rationality that gained ascendancy in the Enlightenment.

The imagination plays such a crucial role in accounts of unreason and madness because, arguably, it can never be fully subordinated to reason and consequently always remains a source of disturbance and unease for the rational mind. In his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) Robert Burton follows the long tradition of subordinating the imagination to the rational faculty when he compares it to 'the rudder of this our ship, which reason should steer'. If the ship of our reason is 'overborne by phantasy', however, 'it suffers itself and this whole vessel of ours to be overruled, and often overturned' (Burton, 1977: Partition 1, 257). According to Burton, the disturbances of the imagination are some of the most important causes of melancholic symptoms. Sounding like Freud's forerunner, Burton suggests that the imagination is especially active and powerful when we sleep: 'In time of sleep this faculty is free, and many times conceive strange, stupend, absurd shapes, as in sick men we commonly observe' (Burton, 1977: Partition 1, 159).

While it does seem to be the case that to a certain extent the imagination became subordinated to the understanding in metaphysics and especially in scientific rationality, it has remained predominant in literature, where it has preserved its alliance with sensibility, which enables literature to open up a space not only of difference but also of empathetic understanding. It is precisely because literature focuses on the experience of the concrete and the particular that it has managed to avoid the trap of a rationality that works by means of analysis and abstraction. In my paper, I would like to show how the experiences of melancholy are represented in *Music and Silence* (1999), a postmodernist historical novel by Rose Tremain. Tremain's novel suggests that the experience of melancholy and the workings of the imagination are interconnected in a variety of ways. It represents the experience of melancholy within the broader context of the relations between the understanding and the imagination as well as between reason and unreason in the first half of the seventeenth century.

Tremain's novel is set in 1629-1630, that is in the Baroque period, which can be seen as a transitional period between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, when madness is no longer seen as a manifestation of transcendental truth, nor is it excluded in houses of confinement. According to George Rosen, in the Renaissance there was 'an attitudinal shift from the idea of madness as a cosmic phenomenon to the view that madness is born in the hearts of men' and in the late 16th and early 17th centuries 'Folly and madness had become integral elements in the world of people and things' (Rosen, 1963: 225, 226). Thus, there was no sharp division between reason and unreason. Indeed, Rosen writes that 'Montaigne had still been able to accept and to discuss reason and unreason as related, interwoven facets of human behaviour' (Rosen, 1963: 234). In his *History of Madness* (1961), Foucault contrasts Descartes's separation of madness from reason with Montaigne's lack of assurance that 'all thought is not haunted by unreason' (Foucault, 1972: 69). Unlike Descartes, Montaigne does not presume to be able to draw a distinct borderline between reason and unreason and to condemn what passes for unreason as 'false and impossible'. Thus, in the sixteenth

century madness is seen as a cause of doubt on a par with other forms of illusion: 'One is not always sure that one is not dreaming; one is never certain that one is not mad: "Should we not remember how many contradictions we feel in our own judgments?"' (Foucault, 1972: 69).

In Tremain's novel, the Danish king Christian 4 has similar doubts about his '*Phantom Observations*', that is about those of his thoughts whose origin is unclear. The king acknowledges that he does not know the answer to the question whether a man should strive 'only to let in those thoughts which proceed logically from other thoughts and to protect himself from everything that had about it the *feeling of uninvitedness*' (Tremain, 2000: 154). He thinks that the randomness and spontaneity of his '*Phantom Observations*' might overwhelm reason:

Is the human brain like a plot of earth where mighty crops, flowers, weeds and even the embryos of mighty trees could seed themselves according to the direction of the wind or the flight patterns of birds? If so, might it be overtaken by the random – as if by giant roots and thistles – so that reason has no space in which to thrive? (Tremain, 2000: 154).

He wonders, however, whether it might 'be true that certain kinds of valuable perception only arrive as the wind-blown seed arrives in the water meadow, their provenance for ever unknown or unrecorded' (Tremain, 2000: 154). Despite all his doubts about the value of his intuitive knowledge and his fears lest his intuitions overwhelm his rational faculty, the king does record his '*Phantom Observations*'. When he rereads them, however, they 'sometimes seem to have no meaning at all, as if they were the jottings of a madman' (Tremain, 2000: 154). Just like Montaigne, the king in Tremain's novel is full of doubts about the sanity of some of his thoughts. Nevertheless, he does not shrink back from them and concedes that they may contain a certain truth even though it is different from the truth of logical reasoning.

Indeed, in Tremain's novel there is no sharp division between dreaming and waking, or between the imagination and reason. *Music and Silence* treats dreams as an important type of human experience, only occasionally leading to melancholy and madness. In Rose Tremain's novel, almost every character is given to both dreaming and daydreaming. The boundary between sleep and wakefulness appears to be very fuzzy because the images of the dream keep haunting the awoken mind. In a sense, the characters are not fully awake and hover on the border between sleep and wakefulness. What keeps the dreams present in their minds even when they are awake is their desire not to part with the images of their dreams or the uncertainty about the reality or unreality of the contents of their dreams. They often ask themselves if what they have experienced happened in their dreams or in reality. For example, the king is not sure whether his lutenist Peter Clair is a real person or only an image in his dream: 'I was wrong. I thought I must have dreamed you in the night, but you are perfectly real after all' (Tremain, 2000: 28).

Just like every other major character in the novel, Christian 4 is a great dreamer, and his dreams are of many different kinds. Some of them are of his childhood friend Bror Brorson, the vision of whose terrible death plagues the king's sleep; some others are of his beloved wife Kirsten Munk, who betrays him with her lover Count Otto; and many of them are of his kingdom, which experiences serious financial difficulties, sinking into debt and poverty. In view of all these troubles, it is not surprising that the king feels melancholy. On his lutenist's advice, he attempts to apply Descartes's analytical method to his predicament. Peter Claire explains to the king, that Descartes's method consists in 'reducing the complex to the simple'. According to this method 'we should reject as false everything that we cannot directly know', and that we are unable to verify. If, in the course of this procedure, we arrive at '*one incontrovertible thing*', such as the truths of mathematics or the cogito, 'then, based upon this one incontrovertible thing and proceeding only from it, [we] might be able to find a pathway through what at present seems confusing' (Tremain, 2000: 82-83).

The king, however, has serious doubts about the usefulness of the Cartesian method, for the problems that confuse his mind and that he is powerless to resolve do not concern the principles and demonstrations of mathematics but the mysterious workings of human emotions and desires, which cannot be analysed into their parts, and the unpredictable vicissitudes of life, which elude definition and rationalization. Christian 4 confesses to Peter that the only incontrovertible thing in his life is his love for his wife Kirsten Munk. It is the king's absolute and indubitable certainty, but it is vastly different from Descartes's ultimate certainty, for, unlike the intuition of the cogito, which the thinking mind discovers in isolation, love involves a relationship between two people, and the certainty of the king's proposition *amo, ergo sum* is undermined when his wife stops reciprocating his feelings for her. Christian 4 concludes that it is impossible to apply the Cartesian method of analysis in 'matters of *feeling*', such as love, for in such matters there is nothing that is 'knowable *beyond all doubt*' (Tremain, 2000: 228). Descartes's method fails to work in the king's case because in 'matters of *feeling*' we deal with vague and ambiguous emotions, which cannot be given unequivocal definitions, not with clearly and distinctly apprehended simple natures and first principles. Therefore, it is futile to attempt to rationalize our feelings and to try to fix them in the rigid moulds of definitions. It is important to acknowledge that both rational and non-rational faculties, such as intuition, imagination and emotion, have important roles to play in a person's mental life and, as Blaise Pascal says in his *Pensées* (1677), 'The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know' (Pascal, 2010: *Pensée* 277). What the argument with Descartes in Tremain's novel suggests is that the sphere of life in which the analytical method can be successfully applied is limited and it is important to acknowledge this limitation.

The king finds music, whose harmonious order helps to restore his peace of mind, a much more successful remedy for melancholy than Descartes's analytical method. Indeed, music is one of the king's chief consolations and cures for his dejected condition. As Foucault explains, in the Baroque period music was

believed to cure various mental disorders, including melancholia ‘by acting upon the entire human being, by penetrating the body as directly, as efficaciously as it did the soul’ (Foucault, 1988: 179). Christian 4 explains to Peter Claire that he loves music because there is order in it, while there seems to be little apart from chaos in human life or in human emotions: ‘Order. That is what we long for, in our innermost souls. An order that mirrors Plato’s Celestial Harmonies: a corrective to the silent chaos that inhabits every human breast. And music comes nearest to restoring this to us’ (Tremain, 2000: 29). Peter Claire’s view of the origin of music is somewhat more complicated than the king’s, however. He believes that music “is born out of fire and fury [...] but also out of the antitheses to these – out of cold reason and calm,” (Tremain, 2000: 6), that is music is a fusion of the Dionysian and Apollonian principles. While the king emphasises the Apollonian principle in music, the story of an Irish earl Johnnie O’Fingal told by his Italian wife Francesca O’Fingal brings to the fore the potential for Dionysian intoxication, which is also inherent in music.

Johnnie O’Fingal awoke one night after a very vivid dream in which he had heard music of ineffable sweetness and beauty. He took that music to be a creation of his own imagination. He easily recalled and played a part of the melody, but he found it impossible to recall the rest of it. All his desperate attempts to recollect and record in its entirety the piece of music that he had heard so clearly and distinctly in his dream failed despite the assistance of the talented musician Peter Claire. On one of his visits to Dublin Johnnie O’Fingal went to a church where he heard the same sublime music that he had heard in his fateful dream. It turned out to be the creation of the great baroque Italian composer Alfonso Ferrabosco, which Johnnie must have heard somewhere before. What he had taken for a product of his imagination happened to be the memory of a past event disassociated from its context and appearing in the guise of a dream. Johnnie’s experience shows that the imagination and memory are so closely interwoven that sometimes it is impossible to differentiate a memory from a product of the imagination. More importantly, Johnnie’s experience of the sublime music in his dream allows him to transcend the lifeworld and leads to a kind of Dionysian intoxication with the ineffable.

Cutrofello compares Kant’s and Nietzsche’s approaches to the experience of the sublime. While ‘Kant describes the feeling of sublimity ... as a recoiling from the “horrible” aspect of nature to an inner satisfaction in our moral vocation as rational beings’, Nietzsche refuses to recoil, preferring Dionysian intoxication to the constraints of morality and rationality (Cutrofello, 2005: 19). Similar to Nietzsche, Johnnie refuses to recoil and to return to his former position in the lifeworld, endlessly and futilely trying to recapture the irretrievably lost object of desire: ‘I have been face to face with the sublime and they have never come near it. I have heard the melody in the heart of the universe and then lost it’ (Tremain, 2000: 68). Eventually, however, his obsession with his dream leads him to melancholy and madness. In twentieth century psychiatric terms, his condition can be characterised both as obsessive-compulsive and as maniac-depressive,

for his mood swings from sadness to elation, from a glimmer of hope – when he thinks that he is on the verge of recreating the lost melody – to utter misery, anguish and despair when he realises that he can never recapture the music for, as he says, ‘what we achieve in our dreams seldom corresponds to what we are veritably capable of’ (Tremain, 2000: 33).

In addition, he develops delusional beliefs, such as the paranoid conviction that it is his wife who is to blame for his misery and anguish. What is even worse, he falls out of the texture of social life as his madness prevents him from carrying out his duties and obligations so that both his professional and social functioning is greatly impaired. His family life is almost completely ruined. He either displaces his frustration and anger onto his children and his wife or simply ignores them, paying no heed whatsoever to their needs and wants and thus causing them not inconsiderable suffering. This is how his wife describes the changes in his behaviour that were due to his obsession with the sublime object of his dream:

He never came to my bed, but occupied a distant room that looked northwards towards the hills of Cloyne. He never visited the children’s schoolroom nor talked to them at mealtimes nor took them out on any picnic or pleasing adventure. In the daylight hours he would either sit and gaze into the fire in his study or go about his lands all alone and often with no coat or hat, and walk for hour after hour until he grew tired and returned to sleep (Tremain, 2000: 67).

Johnnie gradually turns from a loving and caring husband and father into an egocentric brute incapable of showing concern for anyone. As Francesca writes in her diary, his children ‘saw him slowly sicken in madness and despair – in which state he could not love any living thing but on the contrary cast about him all the while for some breathing creature to wound, so that others might suffer as he did and know what he felt’ (Tremain, 2000: 39). Moreover, he completely neglects his public duties as the lord of the manor, which brings a lot of misery to his tenants and their families:

Seeing him wandering like this, with his wild distracted look and his hair unkempt and thin clothes in winter [...], his tenant farmers and peasants on the estate grew anxious for their future. Always in the old days, he would stop at every cottage or dwelling and talk to the people there, but now he passed them by and did not return their greetings, [...] he did not give them any answer, but only passed by as though he had not heard them (Tremain, 2000: 67).

According to Foucault, madness in the classical age was believed to consist in, among other things, ‘fixation of ideas and attention on a theme that gradually prevails over all others’ (Foucault, 1988: 172-173). Christian 4 observes: ‘This is how the human mind destroys itself – by turning and turning upon the one thing that gives it pain’ (Tremain, 2000: 294). In other words, a person runs the risk of becoming mad when he grows blind to the world around him and

focuses exclusively on his own preoccupations. This seems to be exactly Johnnie O’Fingal’s case. He becomes mentally deranged when he gets obsessed with the music he hears in his dream to such an extent that he becomes totally oblivious to his family and to all of his social responsibilities and obligations. Eventually, his obsession leads to the severing of almost all of his relations with others. In his highly unconventional account of mental disorders *Madness Explained* (2003), the British clinical psychologist Richard P. Bentall suggests that while there are many cultural differences in approaches to madness, which makes it impossible to draw clear and universally acceptable boundaries between normal and abnormal types of behavior, there is a point on which nearly all cultures agree. Referring to Horacio Fabrega, Bentall writes that

human behavioral breakdowns are nearly always recognized when individuals are unable to participate and function in social life. The apparent consensus between different cultures about madness therefore concerns behaviors and experiences that are associated with an inability to cope with the demands of living (Bentall, 2004: 136).

Writing about the treatment of mental troubles in the non-hospital domain in the classical age, Foucault explains that to be cured one needed ‘to return to the world, to entrust oneself to its wisdom by returning to one’s place in the general order of things, thus forgetting madness, which is the moment of pure subjectivity’ (Foucault, 1988: 175). Since madness involves concentration, and fixation, on a certain idea or theme, which acquires an overwhelming importance for the mad person, the treatment of madness should include the redirection of one’s attention from oneself and the object of one’s fixation onto something else. In the classical age, it was believed that a maniac could be cured if his attention were distracted ‘from the pursuit of deranged ideas’ and directed onto others. Travel, for example, was prescribed for melancholiacs and maniacs in order to distract them from their obsessions (Foucault, 1988: 175). In the novel, Francesca O’Fingal wants to take Johnnie to Bologna, for she hopes that ‘in the altered environment of [her] father’s house, his maddening dream might gradually float away and cease to torment him’ (Tremain, 2000: 41).

The treatment of Johnnie’s mental disorder is different, however, and ultimately unsuccessful. When he understands that the sublime melody he has devoted so much of his time and energy to recovering is not his own creation, he finds it impossible to become reconciled to the loss of the sublime and to accept the mundane reality of his life, which leads him to despair again: ‘So now I know that I am empty of anything noble, anything that transcends the ordinary and the workaday. I have given up years of my life to this search and it has all been in vain. All that I have done is to make myself ridiculous and contemptible’ (Tremain, 2000: 145). When Johnnie understands the true origin of the music he has heard in his fateful dream, he is cured of his obsession but not of his melancholy, nor is he restored to the lifeworld. The Johnnie O’Fingal episode in Tremain’s novel seems to suggest that a kind of Dionysian intoxication with some of our

excessive passions and desires may wrest us from our relations with the world, with other people and with ourselves and make the restoration of these relations impossible. After considering Johnnie's rueful story, it is hard not to agree with Ratty Møller's conclusion that 'certain dreams and longings can bring forth more suffering than they could ever cure' (Tremain, 2000: 398) or with George Middleton's conviction that 'It is wretched ... when a person goes into realms of fancy' (Tremain, 2000: 376).

Johnnie is the only character in the novel, however, who is tormented by his dream to such an extent that it causes him to become mad. On the whole, the minds of the characters in Tremain's novel are not split between reason and unreason; instead, they are wholes made up of a number of mental functions, or modes of thought, including dreams and daydreams, intuitions and reveries, imaginings and illusions, beliefs and desires, insights and premonitions. *Music and Silence* shows that reason is only one of many important human faculties, and that emotions, or 'passions', imagination, dreaming and intuition are important forces in human lives that have to be reckoned with.

Foucault believes that in his first meditation Descartes surmounts the possibility of error inherent in sensory perception, imagination and dreams, while Derrida claims that Descartes never circumvents it, for 'the certainties and truths that escape perception, and therefore also escape sensory error or imaginative and oneiric composition' are 'certainties and truths of a nonsensory and nonimaginative origin. They are *simple* and *intelligible* things' (Derrida, 2004: 99-100). Tremain's novel suggests, however, that the products of our imaginations, be they dreams or '*Phantom Observations*', may possess a truth of their own, and the fact that their truth lacks the clarity and certainty of mathematical principles and demonstrations does not make them any less important as they are an integral part of our lived experience of the world. While the imagination allied with sensibility is non-rational, it is not necessarily irrational. On the other hand, Tremain's novel suggests that we should not allow the imagination to overwhelm our rational faculty completely, for fully subordinating the understanding to the imagination and sensibility, or the Apollonian principle to the Dionysian, may prevent us from functioning successfully in both private and public domains and disrupt our relations with others. Since we are deeply involved in a multitude of relations with other members of our shared social world, our withdrawal from this world may cause suffering not only to ourselves but also to others. In short, the novel suggests that there needs to be a balance between the speech of reason and the silence of emotions and the imagination to ensure a harmonious functioning of the human psyche. Just as the Dionysian and the Apollonian principles combine to create music so the rational and the non-rational faculties of the soul should function together to enable an individual to live a fulfilling life.

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