Is Madness its Own Cure? 
Austrian Literature and the Belief in Anomaly

Geoffrey C. Howes
Bowling Green State University
Austrian Studies Association Conference
May 4, 2013
The project

• The Representation of Madness in Austrian Fiction
  – Literature as a source of non-clinical knowledge about madness and its social effects, and hence about Austrian culture.
  – This knowledge is embedded in complex cultural structures, which allows a view of madness as an integral part of society.
Constructivist approach applied to the effects but not to the origins of madness

• The project will assume on the basis of recent research in neurology, physiology, and genetics that the etiology of madness is extremely complex and individual.

• The project will not ask literature to help show how or why a society produces mental illnesses in some of its members, but rather how a society treats those members who do suffer from mental illness.
Constructivist approach applied to the effects but not the origins of madness

- Critical approach toward Foucault’s historical theories of madness and the anti-psychiatric movement (e.g. R. D. Laing, Thomas Szasz, Ken Kesey’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*)
- This presentation will draw in part on the work of Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can’t Speak, or Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (1998).
Belief in anomaly: Foucault

- “... by the madness that interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself.” (288)
Belief in anomaly: Felman


Felman describes “the vanishing point of the uninterpretable toward which the effort of interpretation heads, but where it falls apart” (32).

Interpretation must enact, not explain, this disintegration.
Madness as anti-reason

• Foucault and Felman look for literature that enacts madness rhetorically as an ultimate challenge to the power of discourse (especially psychology) to account for the world.

• This project looks more modestly at literature as a rhetorical and thematic space where competing discourses, including the discourses of the mad, are shown in juxtaposition.
The Patron and the Client

• In my larger project, I analyze fictional characters as “clients” (the mad) and “patrons.”

• The patron figures provide an outside perspective on the mad person that is neither clinical nor first-person.

• Patrons also show the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of non-clinical assistance to, support for, and interactions with the mad.
Madness as its own cure?

Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (1930, 1932)

Ingeborg Bachmann, *Das Buch Franza* (1966)

How can madness be *its own cure*?

- Madness is seen in the face of oppressive social conditions and institutions as a rebellion against or refuge from the limitations of social, political, familial, and gender roles.
- However isolating it may be, madness sometimes seems to inflict less suffering than conformity (and treatment) and create a space for freedom and individuality: if society enforces madness, madness rejects that force.
h. c. artmann (1921-2000): “wos e aum schdaahof darad”

Source: Österreichische Gesellschaft für Literatur
WHAT I’D DO AT STEINHOF

pretty soon I’m gonna give up poetry
an’ report to Steinhof
first thing next Monday mornin’
as a fool and a homing-pigeon breeder ..

then the attendants are gonna order me
a green checkered harlequin suit
as a sign of my feeble brainpower
as a fool and homing-pigeon breeder ..

they’re out there on the pretty lemon hill
in pure peacefulness and bliss
i’m gonna live like a garden gnome
as a fool and a homing-pigeon breeder ..

yep, at the very crack o’ dawn
on the steps outside a round room
i’ll be sittin’ — an’ lookin’ at pigeons
as they fly around over the wien river ..
artmann: “What I’d do at Steinhof”
continued

as they gently float away over there ..
raisins an’ wine berries!
up up up to the firmament
as if to a better life .. !!

but ‘fore it gets dark i’ll wait
with corn kernels fer them ta come back
so they’ll get somethin’ fer supper too
so the people don’t start complainin’ ..

that quiet hill would be no shame
— as a poet i’ll write words of praise —
so i’m gonna put on a harlequin suit:
As a fool and a homing-pigeon breeder ... !

Transl. G. Howes
Musil, Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften (1930, 1932)

Source: wikipedia
Patrons and Clients in *The Man without Qualities*

- Patron 1: Ulrich (the man without qualities)
  - Client 1: Clarisse, the wife of Ulrich’s childhood friend Walter, an aesthete.
  - Client 2: Moosbrugger, an itinerant worker who murders a prostitute during a psychotic break.

- Patron 2: Clarisse
  - Client: Moosbrugger: “Dieser Mörder ist musikalisch!”; and he embodies the “Austrian Idea.”
Clarisse’s Utopian belief in anomaly

- Clarisse wants to visit Moosbrugger at (the unnamed) Steinhof because he seems to represent her vision for a “mad” alternative to society.
- Ulrich arranges the visit.
- Clarisse tries and fails to interact with the inmates, and never gets to Moosbrugger.
- “Die Hölle ist nicht interessant, sie ist furchtbar.”
Ingeborg Bachmann: Das Buch Franza

Source: oe1.orf.at
Patron and Client

• First configuration:
  – Patron: Franza’s brother Martin
  – Client: Franza, who has fled her cruel psychiatrist husband and seeks refuge in her hometown in southern Austria. Depression.

• Second configuration:
  – Patron: Franza, who wants to flee to Egypt to escape the “Whites” and forges a visa to do so.
  – Client: Martin, who is compelled by the manic Franza to take her to Egypt.
Franza’s Utopian belief in anomaly

- If she can escape to Egypt, she can escape the world in which she is a victim of the oppression of patriarchy, psychiatry, and their embodiment in her husband.
From *The Book of Franza*, “Die ägyptische Finsternis”: reappropriating the language of psychiatry

- “Sie sind in die Wüste gegangen. Das Licht erbrach sich über ihnen, der Auswurf des Himmels, von einem heißen, sauberen Geruch begleitet. Die große Heilanstalt, das große unverlaßbare Purgatorium, obgleich nach allen Seiten offen ... Die Anstalt hatte sie aufgenommen.” (90)
- “Ich bin in der großen Gummizelle aus Himmel, Licht und Sand.” (91)
The end of utopia

• But once in Egypt, Franza discovers power structures similar to those in Europe.
• Ultimately she is raped and commits suicide.

Source: buecher.de
Patron and Client

- Patron: Herbst, a writer who knows Ida, a frequent patient in Steinhof, and wants to make a documentary film exposing the poor conditions in the mental hospital. He tries to engage Ida in the project and becomes involved in her complicated life.

- Client: Ida, a former fashion model who has been diagnosed with schizophrenia.
Belief in anomaly in Ida H.

• Herbst’s Utopia: to use art (writing and film) to expose the terrible conditions in the hell of Steinhof (which is at first “interesting”) – practical and artistic anti-psychiatry as a means through social protest to freedom and equality for the “mad.”
Using Ida H.’s anomalous experiences as social criticism

“die Komische”

• “Über sie, über ‘die Komische’ habe man sich zwar die verschiedensten Geschichten erzählt, die Steinhof- und Elektroschockgeschichten und die Nackt-im-Stefansdom-, Nackt-mit-der-Mao-Bibel-im-Stefansdom-Geschichte (weswegen sie ja das erstemal -) aber als Eben-auch-irgendwie-Ausgeflippte unter Ausgeflippten ...
An eccentric among eccentrics

“… unter Anhängern fernöstlicher Heilslehren und Ernährungsphilosophen, zwischen Räucherstäbchen und tibetanischen Gebetsmühlen sei sie eigentlich nicht weiter aufgefallen, zumindest habe er sie zu Beginn ihrer Bekanntschaft gar nicht so komisch gefunden.”

(Kofler 2000, p. 25)
The Attractions and Repulsions of Ida’s Anomaly

• To be able to exist within society, outside of Steinhof, and avoid the loss of her rights.

• Her approach: escaping Steinhof, going off her meds, living with friends, working when she can, but mainly doing what she wants or what she is capable of:
Ida’s Anomaly

• “-Niemand hat je gern gehabt, daß ich im Bett lieg, überall, wo ich hinkomm, wollen die Leute nicht, daß ich im Bett lieg ... ich verbrinig eigentlich am liebsten meinen ganzen Tagesablauf im Bett, und das will niemand haben. Selten, daß ich Leute getroffen hab - die müssen auch so sein wie ich ... “Im Bett ist es am gemütlichsten”. (182)
The limits of anomaly are the limits between madness and society

- In Musil: Clarisse’s attempts to make Moosbrugger the symbol of Austria fail because a community of the mad is impossible.
The limits between madness and society

• In Bachmann: Franza’s attempts to take control of her own madness and flee her social context fail because that context is not escapable. Her madness is culminates in her silence.
The limits between madness and society

In Kofler:

• Ida’s attempts to resist psychiatry by integrating herself into the world outside Steinhof fail because her mad self cannot be integrated into that world.

• Herbst’s ideal of social criticism (in which discourses trump practices) fails because it cannot turn Ida into its instrument.
Marta Caminero-Santangelo: *The Madwoman Can’t Speak*

- “Far from embracing the space of madness offered to aberrant women by dominant discourses, however, the women writers I examine generally share the premise that insanity is the final surrender to such discourses, precisely because it is characterized by the (dis)ability to produce meaning—that is, to produce representations recognizable as meaningful within society.” (11)
A closing thought

• Caminero-Santangelo locates the limit of discourses as the point beyond which communities of meaning cannot follow and states that insanity is the final surrender to such discourses.

• I would adjust this for the texts I am considering: The failure of mad utopias is also the surrender of such discourses to insanity. The authors and patrons cannot follow their clients into their madness.
A closing thought (2)

• Caminero-Santangelo notes that the authors she discusses counter representation with representation, and their madwomen retreat into silence. (11)

• I would add that the authors I discuss not only counter representation with representation, they also counter their own representations with the silence of the mad, which is portrayed by the loss of collaboration – even with the best will and intentions - between the patron and the client.