Utopian Visions of Madness in Austrian Literature

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The project

• “Where such ailments are rampant”: The Representation of Madness in Austrian Fiction

• Austrian fictional texts from the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth century, including texts by Franz Grillparzer, Arthur Schnitzler, Robert Musil, Elias Canetti, Ingeborg Bachmann, Thomas Bernhard, Gerhard Roth, Werner Kofler, and Norbert Gstrein.
The project (2)

• Madness in literature
  – The project regards 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.
  – This knowledge complements clinical knowledge and research by sacrificing isolated variables and repeatability for complexity and individuality.
The poster: Angel Statues on the Church of St. Leopold at Steinhof

Vienna, Austria

Architect: Otto Wagner

One of the most important Jugendstil (art nouveau) churches
a.k.a. Kirche am Steinhof
Lower Austrian State Provincial Institution for the Cure and Care of the Mentally and Nervously Ill “am Steinhof” (1907)
Otto Wagner (1841-1918)

Part of the “Vienna Secession” group, which pioneered the shift from historicism to modernism (including art nouveau).
Plan of the (current) Otto Wagner Hospital and Otto Wagner Health Care Center

Church

Entrance
Points of Departure 1
Austria’s self-image as a breeding ground for madness

• The project proceeds from the documented self-perception of Austrians that their society produces more mental illness than others.

Anton Kuh (1890-1941), “The Lunatics of Görz”

“In those days, the city of Görz (Goricia) still belonged to Austria. As a consequence there was an insane asylum there.” (My emphasis)
Austria as a breeding ground for madness?

*Ingeborg Bachmann* (1926-1973), *The Book of Franza*

“But she wasn’t ...? – to think that he hadn’t thought of that before now! And he went through all of the closer family and then the more distant relations, the marginal familial phenomena, but among the closer ones there had been no mental illnesses, unthinkable in this country where such ailments were rampant, but that’s how it was ...” (30)
The “Narrenturm” ("Fools’ Tower"; Vienna 1784) The first institution in the world built specifically for housing the mad. Now a museum of pathological anatomy.

a.k.a. “Guglhupf”

Source: wikipedia
Sigmund Freud (1864-1939)
“Father” of Psychoanalysis

Source: wikipedia
Sigmund Freud
State Psychiatric Clinic, Graz

“Puntigam Links” Source: wikipedia
Points of Departure 2
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

- The project will thus take a 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 chapter will draw in part on the work of Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can’t Speak, or Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (1998).
Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*  

- “... 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)
Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness*  
(1978; Engl. 1985)

- 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.
The “Utopia” of 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.
Points of departure 3

• The project will apply Arno Gruen’s theory from *The Insanity of Normality* (1987), a functional, sociological definition of schizophrenia:

  • Persons with major mental illness do all they can to resist the fragmenting of their inner emotional integrity, whereas the “insanity of normality” results from precisely this fragmentation of inner emotional integrity.
Points of Departure 4
The Patron and the Client

• In the texts under consideration there is a pattern of human—and narrative—relationships in which one character takes a personal, non-professional interest in another character who is afflicted with madness.

• I call the former patrons and the latter clients.
The Patron and the Client

• 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.
Utopian Visions of Madness

In

Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities* (1930, 1932)


How can madness be *utopian*?

- 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. (See Arno Gruen)
h. c. artmann (1921-2000): One Poet’s Utopian Vision of Madness

Source: Österreichische Gesellschaft für Literatur
What I’d do at Steinhof
h. c. artmann

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 ..

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 ..
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
Arthur Schnitzler (1862-1931)

Photo ca. 1912; wikipedia
Arthur Schnitzler, *Flucht in die Finsternis (Flight into Darkness)* Written 1912-17; publ. 1931.

Source: amazon.de
Flight into Darkness

• The client: Robert, an upper-middle-class government official in the education ministry who has taken a rest cure for his “nervous” problems.

• The patrons:
  – His brother Otto, who is an accomplished professor of psychiatry

  – His family doctor and friend Leinbach
Schnitzler, *Flight into Darkness: The Utopia of Idleness*

“[Doctor] Leinbach shrugged his shoulders: ‘my dear friend, if someone is in the fortunate position of being able to have himself sent away — then of course we send him away. On the other hand, there are many people who simply don’t have enough time to go crazy.’”
Robert Musil (1880-1942)

Source: Brandstätter Verlag, Vienna
Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (1930, 1932)

Source: wikipedia
Musil, The Man without Qualities
The Man without Qualities: Ulrich

• A former soldier and engineer, now an unemployed mathematical scholar.
• Decides in 1913 that he is a “man without qualities” and will take a “vacation from life.”
• His father arranges a position with the “Parallel Campaign,” a celebration planned for 1918 of the 70th anniversary of the emperor’s coronation.
• The “Parallel Campaign” is seeking a unifying “Austrian Idea.”
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, an aesthete.
  - Client 2: Moosbrugger, an intinerant worker who murders a prostitute during a psychotic break.

- **Patron 2:** Clarisse
  - Client: Moosbrugger: “This murderer is musical!” and embodies the “Austrian Idea.”
Clarisse’s Utopia

- Clarisse wants to visit Moosbrugger at 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.
- “Hell is not interesting, it is terrifying.”
Ingeborg Bachmann (1926-1973)

Source: oe1.orf.at
Bachmann, *The Book of Franza*


Bachmann ceased working on *The Book of Franza* in 1966.

Source: amazon.com
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 Utopia

- 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*, “The Egyptian Darkness”: reappropriating the language of psychiatry

• “They entered the desert. The light vomited over them, the sputum of the heavens, accompanied by a hot, clean odor. The great mental institution, the great inescapable purgatory, even if it was open on every side .... The institution had admitted them.” (90)

• “I am in the great padded cell of sky, light, and 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.
Werner Kofler (1947-2011)

Source: Wiener Zeitung

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.
Utopias 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 experiences as social criticism

- “Herbst had suggested a piece about Steinhof: the institution from outside, as a series of pretty pictures, the image of a recreational park landscape, while as the sound accompaniment to these pictures the report of Ida H., a former inmate, about the inside is heard; the geography of a recreation area as video, the geography of a hospital ward as audio.” (Kofler 2000, p. 10)
The “weird girl”

• “It’s true, people told each other all kinds of stories about her, about ‘the weird girl,’ the Steinhof stories, the electroshock stories, the naked-in-St. Stephen’s-Cathedral stories, and the naked-with-the-Mao-handbook-in-St. Stephen’s cathedral stories (which was the reason for her first time —).
An eccentric among eccentrics

“But as somehow just another flipped-out person among flipped-out people, among adherents of far-Eastern doctrines of salvation and nutritional philosophers, between joss and Tibetan prayer wheels, she really didn’t stand out very much. At least he [her friend Loidl] hadn’t found her so weird at all.” (Kofler 2000, p. 25)
Ida’s Utopia

• 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:
• “Nobody’s ever liked it when I’m lying in bed, everywhere I end up the people don’t want me lying in bed ... actually, the thing I like the most is to spend my whole day in bed, and nobody wants that. I’ve hardly ever met people - they have to be like me ... Bed is the homiest place to be.” (182)
The limits of utopia 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 of utopia are 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 the context is not escapable.
The limits of utopia are 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 utopia 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.