De(ar)ranged Minds, Mindless Acts and Polemical Portrayal in Kleist and Canetti

Introduction

In this paper, I aim to deal with the representation of normality and insanity in third-person narration. As a point of departure, I will briefly sketch the quarrel between narratology (Dorrit Cohn) and New Historicism (John Bender) on the (debated) functional analogy between the "impersonal, disembodied matrix" (Bender 28) engendering the normality of modern subjects and third-person narratorial agency in (non-)fiction. Whereas recent cognitive approaches tend to highlight the experiential and mental nature of the narrative representation of madness, I aim to bring into play a more social and historical dimension of the attribution of normality by focusing on the exterior dimension of the representation of madness. In my view, this necessitates a rhetorical approach to narrative and in particular to its stylistic expressivity. Third-person narration can be conceptualized as a flexible relay of information that does not simply rely on readers' cultural routines and expectations, but that gives a performative, creative twist to the inferential activities of narrators and readers.

In order to illustrate this approach, I will discuss the role of narratorial agency and polemical portrayal in texts by Heinrich von Kleist and Elias Canetti. Both authors share an emphasis on the external constitution and attribution of an apparently mental and internal phenomenon like madness. The broader ambition is to present a feasible framework to link the rhetorical-narratological interest in formal and stylistic characteristics with the study of the historical construction of normality across media and genre-related speech positions.

Narratology, Madness and History

The question whether the narratological discussion of the representation of madness can be aligned with historical issues regained attention in the context of New Historicism. In the debate between Dorrit Cohn and John Bender that took place in New Literary History in 1995, some of the fundamental challenges and options of
a possible historical narratology were thematized. Cohn took issue with Bender’s historicization of narrative form on two accounts. Bender’s first claim was that “the penitentiary [that is, the prison built on the model of Bentham’s Panopticon] stages impersonal, third-person presence . . . so as to represent an actual character and conscience as fictions capable of alteration” (Penitentiary 203, qtd. in Cohn, Distinction, 169). Secondly, the fictionalization of the panoptic model finds its reflection in third-person authorial fiction (e.g. Fielding), whose “authoritative presence” is dispersed and obfuscated “into the very third-person grammar and syntax through which the illusion of consciousness is created” (Bender 29), namely in Free Indirect Discourse (FID). According to Bender, third-person narration cannot provide a genuine insight into the performative constitution of subjectivity, since it basically copies the panoptic, controlling dimensions of institutional authority engendering the subject in Foucault’s terms.

Bender’s account is in contradiction with Dorrit Cohn’s description of FID in Transparent Minds. According to Cohn, FID is not a form of disciplinary control or disembodiment. On the contrary, Free Indirect Discourse, as paraphrased by Fludernik, signals a willingness to “incorporate otherness” (Fludernik, ‘Natural’ Narratology, 368). Mounting the positive example of Defoe’s homodiegetic narration against Fielding’s authorial narrator, Bender claimed that only “first-person narration limits power to regulate the implications of stories in any container of narrational authority” (Bender, Imagining, 121). Strikingly, in her Transparent Minds, Cohn challenged the view that direct quotation and sustained internal view should be the most appropriate approach to the representation of the workings of a deranged mind. Cohn highlighted the importance of third-person narration in this register by stating that in particular “[m]odern novelists who know their Freud, therefore, would be the last to resort to direct quotation in order to express their characters’ unconscious processes” (88). According to Cohn, modernist authors “prefer to tell rather than to show those psychic happenings that their characters cannot plausibly verbalize, employing analyses, analogies, and other authorial indirections to penetrate the speechless nether realm” (88).

Bender’s suggestion is that narratology, due to its formalist legacy, is incapable of providing a “thick description” of the power relations behind the construction of the normality and the sanity of the modern subject. Bender stresses the institutional and social conditions that were at stake in excluding the insane and the socially destitute alike, e.g. by referring to “The Rake in Bedlam” (1734) from Hogarth’s The Rake’s Progress: the abnormality of the detainees is constituted by the gaze of depicted visitors, who were actually paying visitors. To prove that narratology can
indeed be made compatible with the ambition "to study the interaction of widely various discourses, visible formations, and institutions under concrete historical circumstances" (Bender, Reply, 33), is an interesting challenge to be derived from this debate. The encounter has led Dorrit Cohn to stress the distinction of fictional and historiographical narrative, which led her to dismiss the challenge raised by New Historicism. Nevertheless, I fundamentally share Cohn’s "skeptical assessment of all manners of simple and stable correspondence of modal type and moral stance" and the investigation of alternatives to what she calls "the traditional link between authorially focalized novels and clear normative values." (Distinction 179) In fact, this claim as well as her interest in heterodiegetic unreliability have guided and continue to motivate current research in rhetorical narratology, as I intend to argue in the following pages. Both the aspects of narratorial indirectness and the issue of context-sensitivity deserve further attention with regard to the representation of madness.

Narratology, Madness and Rhetoric
Heterodiegetic representation of madness may resort to analogies and analysis. As such, it tends to apply a radically normalizing logic to madness instead of providing an immersive inside view. Faced with Robert Musil's psychopath Moosbrugger, both the heterodiegetic narrator and the protagonist of Musil's Man Without Qualities compare cruelty and madness with aesthetic perception, or even a slightly stretched version of the statistical average. "This was clearly madness, and just as clearly it was no more than a distortion of our own elements of being" (76). Statistically speaking, "[o]ur normality is an averaging out of all the crimes of which we are capable" (516). From Musil's point of view, steeped in experimental psychology, rhetorical hyperbole is a socially accepted, even stimulated form of dissimulation and pretence quite comparable to madness. But is this normalizing drive also inherent in a particular novel's heterodiegetic regime?

Recent research indeed tends to address the literary representation of madness primarily in autodiegetic narrative fiction. This may have to do with the premises of cognitive narratology. In autodiegetic narration, the activity of narration itself is psychologically motivated, and the narration's terms of address may lead us to question the sanity of the narrator. The tenets of cognitive narratology seem to meet the profile of such narration half-way. From the fact that a homodiegetic narrator addresses and overinforms a particular narratee, readers will indeed deduce more readily a psychological profile. According to Fludernik, the madness of a homodiegetic unreliable narrator has a more specific gripping effect since it fundamentally affects "our access to the information circuit" ("(In)Sanity" 92).
As is the case in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, “[t]he narrator is unreliable to the extent that she pretends to be perfectly sane and, as we come to note with shock, turns out to be ravingly mad” (“(In)Sanity” 91). No such spectacular, surprise contradictions seem possible in heterodiegetic narration, as it frequently identifies, names and *labels* the symptoms it registers. The point to be made here, however, is that heterodiegetic narration, even in its covert reflectoral guise, may remain inconclusive with regard to the derangement of characters and as such may have an even more disorienting impact on the reader, e.g. whenever the very expectation of conclusive evaluation is undercut by local assonances with one of the portrayed characters’ idiolects. This may lead to a more fundamental disorientation and a heterodiegetic type of unreliability, as the case study of Canetti aims to illustrate (cf. infra). In this respect, Cohn convincingly refuses to attribute a normalizing force to heterodiegetic narration as such, arguing that “a novel bent on transmitting the most decisive values may rely on figural focalization, just as a novel intended to present normative ambiguities may be focalized by an eloquent narrator” (*Distinction* 180).

Cognitive approaches rely on “realist frames of cognition associated with the “category person” (Nünning 214). Rhetorical approaches, however, seem to entertain a diverging view on what personifying features or signs of the teller actually are. This can be seen to have its effect on the definition of narrative unreliability in particular. According to cognitive conceptions of unreliability, readers will project a troubled or deranged mind in order to come to grips with deranged textual material. This seems to turn narrative unreliability ultimately into a mechanism geared towards personifying texts at all costs. Stylistic devices are discussed in terms of “verbal tics.” Cohn, however, argues that it is possible to discuss heterodiegetic unreliability even in the absence of a clear-cut personified narrator. In another context, I have argued that the scope of unreliability should indeed be extended in order to include dynamic rhetorical effects of transgression which allow to discuss unreliability in terms of its actual performance rather than as a pre-established conventional “frame.”² The branch of rhetorical narratology applied here is one in which a bottom-up, situated description of the narrative function of tropes and their interconnectedness is central.³ From the point of view of this branch of rhetorical narratology, personification is not a point of departure but rather a strategy exploited and foregrounded by specific genres and texts. The rhetorical approach allows highlighting the stylistic discursivity of narratorial performance.

Recently, cognitive narratologists have begun to extend the meaning of the notions “cognition” and mind so as to include aspects of communication and
interaction ("affect, cooperativity, exteriority and contextuality" [Palmer 200]). The aspects that Palmer highlights are central to the present attempt to locate exterior, distributed dimensions in the representation of madness. In general, however, cognitive narratologists tend to allot less relevance to narratorial indirectness and agency in the representation of mental states, especially when the focus is on autonomous embedded narratives of the characters. Marie-Laure Ryan maintains that in the case of anonymous frame narrators who fail to take on individual identity, "the reader may dispense with the reconstruction of their personality, beliefs, and judgments as an autonomous private domain" (71). Taking one's cue from a rhetorical account of narrative agency, however, it is possible to give a more positive twist to what Ryan, with particular reference to anonymous third-person narration, describes as "a mere speech position, a "rental consciousness" for the author's relocation in the textual reference world" (71). This can be achieved by highlighting the narrative function of the narrative function of stylistic elements (cf. Biebuyck/Martens). Ryan's possible worlds theory, by contrast, stresses the immersive quality and autonomous reality of fantasy worlds and hallucinations and their appreciation by the reader. The cognitive orientation brings her to ultimately evaluate matters of style (such as metaphor) as pointers towards individual embedded mindsets, on account of which they are indeed bound to appear as deficient and lacking in immersive, experiential quality. Unlike full-blown possible worlds, metaphor itself does not involve "relocation to a new system of reality" (82-83). The branch of rhetorical narratology applied here precisely aims to look at what disembodied, distributed types of agency add to a narrative by means of rhetorical patterning. This can be made evident in particular by examining texts with a thematic and/or stylistic relation to polemical communication, since that genre markedly refuses to share or coherently embody another person's perspective. In a second step, I will highlight the implicit historical and gender options with regard to the demarcation of normality and madness. Polemical communication stages radical distancing and non-empathy, in other words the refusal to share other people's perspectives. On the other hand, the refusal of empathy with the opponent is only apparent: it is counterbalanced both by the attempt to establish an intimacy of connivance with the audience and by the tendency to engage in an intense dialogue with the stylistic and idiosyncratic traits of the opponents' discourse. In this respect, polemical communication constitutes a strategic mind-blindness: while it deliberately ignores the depth of the opponent, it cannot help scratching and rearranging the surface of the opponent's discourse. I do not use the term "polemical" in the sociological-institutional sense nor in the broad sense delineated by Bakhtin as a dialogic quality.
De(ar)ranged Minds

of the word in the novel, although the latter may provide a feasible pathway for the extended accounts of free indirect discourse touched upon later. Rather, I consider polemics in its stylistic apparel as a discourse of amplification with an inclination to hyperbole, polarization, performative utterances, and personification. Despite the impression that polemical communication says more about extratextual relations and fields than about its intratextual performance, it constitutes a discourse type in which style inextricably becomes a matter of agency. One of the returning features in this register is the narrator's distancing and iterative description of a character's speech habitus and behavior.

Kleist's Minds and Bodies of the French Revolution

In his essay On the gradual completion of thoughts in the process of speech (ca. 1800), Kleist inserts an anecdote on Mirabeau, the bold orator of the French Revolution. Kleist's larger goal is to affirm that language sometimes proceeds independently of thought or consciousness. Kleist recalls the "thunderbolt of Mirabeau" (406) with which he dismissed the master of ceremony, who has just adjourned the last parliament under the monarchy. Kleist's bold claim is that "it was perhaps the twitching of an upper lip or an equivocal tugging at the cuffs that brought about the overthrow of the orders of things in France" (407). He does so by stressing the mindless insolence of Mirabeau's performative utterance. Mirabeau's reaction is rendered as follows:

I think of the 'thunderbolt' with which Mirabeau dismissed the Master of Ceremonies who, after the meeting of 23 June, the last under the ancien régime, when the King had ordered the estates to disperse, returned to the hall in which they were still assembled and asked them had they heard the King's command. 'Yes', Mirabeau replied, 'we have heard the King's command' — I am certain that beginning thus humanely he had not yet thought of the bayonets with which he would finish. — 'yes, my dear sir,' he repeated, 'we have heard it.' — as we see, he is not yet exactly sure what he intends — 'But by what right...' — he continues, and suddenly a source of colossal ideas is opened up to him — 'do you give us orders here? We are the representatives of the nation!' — That was what he needed! — 'The nation does not take orders. It gives them.' — which launches him there and then to the highest pitch of boldness — 'And to make myself perfectly plain to you...' — and only now does he find words to express how fully his soul has armed itself and stands ready to resist — 'Tell your king we shall not move from here unless forced to by bayonets.'

After which, satisfied with himself, he fell back on his chair. If, for a moment, we step into the shoes of the master of ceremony, we can imagine him being in nothing less than a mental state of total bankruptcy, similar to the law of electricity, according to which a body without charge in the state of zero suddenly is charged when it is brought in touch with the magnetic field by a charged body. . . . In the manner of a Kleistian flask he had now become neutral once more and, alighting from his reckless flight, re-admitted caution and fear of the Châtelet.
Kleist's narrativization provides the scene for a single phrase that is arguably the decisive discursive shift of the French Revolution, namely the performative statement: “We are the representatives of the nation.” Although Kleist relies on existing sources, the actual “formulation granted Mirabeau is Kleist’s dramatic invention” (Gailus 6). Jacques-Louis David's thematically related etching The Tennis Court Oath (1789-1791), by contrast, situates the same assertion of the sovereignty of the people at a different location, outside the official premises of political representation. By relating the assertion of the right to assemble to a group event (of June 20, 1789) which slightly precedes the confrontation selected by Kleist (June 23), the painting locates the same assertion that the sovereignty of the people did not reside with the King effectively in a group of people. David moves Mirabeau to the background, with the future first president of the Assemblée Bailly taking centre-stage. Both David and Kleist strip Mirabeau of the physical ugliness and the coarse manners generally ascribed to him, which happened to be in striking contrast with the sophisticated appearance of the King’s master of ceremony, Henri-Evrard de Dreux-Brézé, which is highlighted in Michelet’s version. As such, the idea of an autonomous assembly had already been collectively agreed upon earlier during the Tennis Court meeting.

To some extent, this conflicts with Kleist's suggestion (and especially the marked metaphorization) that “suddenly a fountain of colossal ideas opens up” to Mirabeau. Kleist depicts the threatening apostrophe as a “flash of genius” bordering on madness. Kleist fashions Mirabeau as a typically Romantic, reckless, and solitary genius. Whether the transgression qualifies as an act of madness is deliberately left undecided. Similarly, Kleist alludes to an only minor approximation of madness (231) in his novella on the “sublime hero” (Gailus 117) Michael Kohlhaas (1810). Kohlhaas' sense of justice leads him to commit violent and cruel violations of the law. He does so in a state of mindless persistence and boldness similar to that of Mirabeau. In its subtle reference to exterritoriality rather than insanity, the Kohlhaas novella echoes the central political performative act attributed to Mirabeau: “[Kohlhaas’] mandate, approaching insanity [“Verrückung”], concluded: ‘Signed here at the fortress of Lützen, the seat of our provisional world government’” (231).

Kleist’s sympathy clearly resides with the revolutionaries. The opponent remains nameless throughout and is only mentioned in terms of his official function (“master of ceremony,” “the Châtelet”). Moreover, his contribution to the exchange is only mentioned in indirect summary and through the behaviorist description of his body language. A structuralist narratological account would highlight that the historical event is rendered by means of elaborate direct quotation, which gives the action
both a scenic and rather heroic quality. Beyond that, the rhetorical patterning of this passage is of particular importance to Kleist’s narrativization of the historical event, since it presents Mirabeau’s deed, in rather behaviorist way, as a mindless act. Although the historical evidence is on the whole sparse and anecdotic, Kleist’s narration is typically breathless. More ruthless than a speech act critic, the narrator glosses the improvised utterance. In a manner typical of the narrators in his stories, Kleist quotes from Mirabeau’s speech but “consistently interjects his own comments” (Smith 215), as if in a procedure of externalized “midwifery of thinking” (Kleist 407). Kleist’s account “stresses that it are not primarily verbal responses or questions on the part of the addressee that help the speaker’s thought along. . . . Rather, Kleist focuses on the interaction between the speaker and the body, not the words, of the listener” (Esterhammer 263f; my emphasis). In this sense, “the twitching of an upper lip or an equivocal tugging at the cuffs” (406) may have brought about the revolution. Meaning and historical change are brought about by exteriority, circumstances, and not primarily by a self-conscious subject’s intentionality or interiority. The emphasis is not on psychology, but on constellations and materiality, which are consequently relayed through a comparison rather than rendered in an immersive way. The elaborate comparison (inspired by the widespread theory of animal magnetism) obviously escapes the perception of the characters on the scene, and not only because of the playful reference to the “Kleistian flask” invented by Kleist’s namesake. Kleist clearly draws on the metaphorical discourse of polemical exchange (“annihilated his opponent,” “to express how fully his soul has armed itself and stands ready to resist”). The metaphors and the extended analogy that Kleist introduces in order to set the scene of the polemical confrontation “draw on the almost pure formalism of a binary code, the plus and minus of electrical charge” (Esterhammer 264).

Kleist’s usage of narrative in the argumentative context of an essay constitutes an interesting rhetorical strategy which enables us to rethink the contextual value of personification and narrativization. Both with reference to the historical context and within the framework of rhetorical narratology, personification cannot simply be studied as a prerequisite, as an ontological given within a storyworld. In the midst of essayistic, argumentative writing, the anecdote serves as a double personification, both of the historical discursive shift and of the abstract idea Kleist aims to prove, namely the (Romantic) idea that the subject may achieve rhetorical effect and aesthetic perfection only when its body acts without interference of the mind. As part of that rhetorical setup, its identification as madness cannot primarily be measured in terms of its immersion in mental activity or in terms of its historical accuracy.
The refusal or the inability to enter a person's mind is not only a thematic aspect of the scene, it is also a formal aspect of its presentation. In Cohn's terms, this passage would classify as dissonant psycho-narration, since it features a "prominent narrator, who even as he focuses intently on an individual psyche, remains emphatically distanced from the individual consciousness he narrates" (Transparent Minds 26). In order to convey the idea that Mirabeau's mind is a temporary blank, the description, despite its overt deictic traces (exclamations, visual effect of distinctive typography), takes recourse to an after-the-facts, even proleptic type of account ("I am sure he not yet thought of the bayonets"), reinforced through the stand-offish diction of scientific analogy. Hence, Kleist does not conjecture a psychological motivation in actu, but presents the event as elicited by bodily surface phenomena and facial expressions.

The performative nature of Kleist's storytelling and especially its defiance of standard narrative, psychological causality have duly been highlighted by poststructuralists. At the same time, Paul de Man, in discussing a related usage of anecdote in Kleist's Marionettentheater, pointed out that the narrative recounted (containing performative statements) is itself rendered in a very performative way: "although [Kleist's essay] can be said to be about proof, it is not set up as one but as the story or trope of such a demonstration, and a very complex one at that." (268) Within the framework of rhetorical narratology and in view of the historical background, the narrativization stages mind-blindness as a local, strategic, rhetorical refusal of empathy. One may at times gain the impression that, due to the stress on psychological conceptions of personhood, in cognitive narratology, lack of empathy is almost by definition equated with a mental condition in clinical terms such as autism (Zunshine). Rephrased in New Historicist terminology, the rhetorical analysis of the anecdote enables insight into its foveation, its “ability to keep an object within the high-resolution area of perception” (Greenblatt 34). Kleist's micro-narrative, while refusing to engage in psychologization, is indeed, precisely through its distancing psycho-narration and its "authorial indirection," a "thick description" of a distributed and highly suggestive approximation of madness. It has its place within an alternative tradition of behaviorist and rhetorical portrayal.

Laughter, Gender and Madness: Elias Canetti's Die Blendung
As second example, I now consider Elias Canetti's novel Die Blendung (1935, Engl. Auto-da-fé, 1946), with a brief glance to its remediation as a radio play in 2003. The protagonist of Canetti's Die Blendung, Peter Kien, is a highly intellectual, bookish philologist whose scientific eloquence and self-discipline is gradually shown to be a sublimation of misogyny. His self-sufficiency is increasingly haunted by more
bodily, erotic and pragmatic demands of life, which materialize in the form of his ambitious housekeeper Therese, who manages to take control over Kien’s life and library. Although his brother, a psychiatrist, shows up to reinstate order, at the end of the novel Kien sets fire to his library in a hysterical fit of laughter. The self-persuasion, delusion and solipsism of the characters is conveyed through specific narrative procedures: whereas the elaborate free indirect discourse remains quite consonant to the perception of Kien, the housekeeper Therese’s more restricted code is typified by a mix of commonplaces and obstinate repetitions of clichés.11

This stylistic rift has important consequences for the assessment of madness and for the reliability of the heterodiegetic narrator with regard to this subject. One can agree with Darby that “narratorial comments” (Structures 71), in the sense of straightforward evaluative diction, are “extremely infrequent.” The heterodiegetic narrator “offers no display of superior narrative authority” (Structures 71). This is particularly the case with regard to “the condition of Kien’s psychological well-being.” According to Darby, despite its “diegetic medium of omniscient third-person psycho-narration” (Structures 72), Die Blendung is particularly prone to “sudden switches between omniscient psycho-narration and other modes of third-person narration more influenced by figural consciousness” (Structures 167). Especially Kien’s diction infiltrates the narratorial discourse to the extent that readers at first tend to be carried away by the protagonist’s more elaborate code: Distinctive inflections and elements of the male character’s rhetorical, self-congratulatory diction “infiltrate” the heterodiegetic narrator’s discourse.

While Canetti’s narrator employs the prerogatives of the traditional story-teller (third person, use of the tense of narration, gnomic-sounding utterances), the novel itself pulls the rug of reliability out from beneath him, discrediting his putative authority and independence. . . Kien’s grandiose academic standing — promulgated initially by the narrator — is nothing more than the protagonist’s own pretension. Canetti’s mercurial narrator is repeatedly infiltrated by the novel’s cast of characters, and the reader quickly learns to suspect that the claims issued by the narrator typically emerge from quite vested interests. The narrator of Die Blendung is reliably unreliable. (Donahue 671)

The infiltration and the ensuing uncertainty as to the stability of the narratorial frame, “endowed with a doubtful authentication authority” (Darby, Structures 71), even extend to such simple questions as the profession and age of the characters: it becomes increasingly doubtful whether the philologist Kien, introduced by the narrator as “Professor Peter Kien . . . man of learning and specialist in sinology” (Canetti, Auto-da-fé 10), is actually entitled to carry the title of “Professor” (Structures 71). The reader’s assessment of the narrator’s (un-)reliability is not based on ontological privileges, but rather on the stylistic profile and rhetorical
performance of the particular dictions and idiolects involved: because "the greatest
sinologist in the world" uses a more elaborated code than the other characters
(especially the female ones) and because the narrator follows suit, the reader
tends to get oblivious to the subsequent infiltration of Kien's worldview into the
narratorial discourse, despite blatant exaggerations and inconsistencies. The analysis
helps to foreground the novel's polemical impetus: especially "the novel's larger
treatment of the feminine should be understood as perspectivized and polemical"
(Donahue 685).

Although potential analogies to psychoanalysis (especially sublimation) abound,
the novel is more adequately read within a different tradition of 'psychology of the
masses' and of experimental psychology, and to some extent also as a prelude to
the anti-psychiatry movement. The protagonist's brother, George Kien, is a clear
forerunner of the anti-psychiatry movement: he cultivates and worships his patients'
mental problems and attributes "the obstinacy of a madman" (Canetti 395) to the
representatives of "official psychiatry":

what miserable single-track creatures, what pitiful and inarticulate bourgeois we are,
compared with the genius of this paranoiac... Is a miracle any the less a miracle because
we have labelled it Paranoia chronica? We sit on our thick-headed sanity like a vulture on
a pile of gold. If there is a life purely of the mind, it is this madman who is leading it!

(Auto-da-fe 406)

George's convictions are initially inspired by the encounter with an animal (a
Gorilla), for whom language and words necessitate a gesture-like performativity.
(401). Due to his preoccupation with group dynamics, Canetti can be said to be
critical of the domestication and individualism underlying modern psychoanalysis.
Canetti's close attention to bodily signs (breathing, laughing, posture, facial
expressions) deliberately stays at the surface of things, taking at face value what in
a more psychoanalytical train of thought would be reduced to a depth structure of
clinical universality. As such, he takes exception with the current "state of affairs"
in sociology and psychology in order to link back to the prehistory of modern
psychology, as exemplified e.g. in the rhetorical tradition of "portraits" (beginning
with Theophrastus) and the practical knowledge of physiognomy. As such, Canetti
provides an interesting historical backdrop to the interrelation between empirical
psychology and the literary representation of madness, also explored more recently
by Sloterdijk (229-37). In his *Crowds and Power* (1960), Canetti advocates a
positivist-evolutionary hypothesis by interpreting the inciting quality of laughter
as expressive of malicious, perverse delight and joy.

Laughter has been objected to as vulgar because, in laughing, the mouth is open wide and
the teeth are shown. Originally laughter contained a feeling of pleasure in prey or food
which seemed certain, a human being who falls down reminds us of an animal we might have hunted and brought down ourselves. Every sudden fall which arouses laughter does so because it suggests helplessness and reminds us that the fallen can, if we want, be treated as prey. If we went further and actually ate it, we would not laugh. We laugh instead of eating it. ... Only man has learnt to replace the final stage of incorporation by a symbolic act. It is as though the whole interior process of gulping down food could be summed up and replaced by those movements of the diaphragm which are characteristic of laughter.

(233)

Canetti is widely known for his autobiographical writings, featuring partial, polemical portrayals of people like Musil, T.S. Eliot and Iris Murdoch, in bold, unsparing, even aggressive strokes. In his autobiography of the exile period in England, the portrait of the philosopher Bertrand Russell establishes the same contrast between the rationalist’s mathematical logic and the animalism of his laughter:

But he ended his speech with a goat-like laugh that was so wild and dangerous as to be shocking. He refused to end it, drew it out, one could sense how hard it was for him to part with this laughter. Even Mrs Phillimore, who must have known him well, was shocked by it. All the animalism in his nature was expressed in this laugh.  

(87)

Hence, it is not a coincidence that the novel *Die Blendung* frequently refers to hysterical laughter from the point of view of external physiology rather than internal psychology. In the novel, laughter is systematically linked with cannibalism, madness and (impending) (self-) destruction: “Devouring laughter shook the dwarf” (Canetti, *Auto-da-fé* 235). Kien himself is terrified by the rumor that a monster “gets fat on books. ‘He —’ ‘ —devours books!’” (242). In turn, Kien expresses his belief that Therese has eaten her own body, which is probably one of the least felicitous things to say when standing on trial. “It is true: I locked her in. But was it necessary for her to devour her own body?” (Canetti, *Auto-da-fé* 301). If one knows that Canetti repeatedly compared psychoanalysis with cannibalism in his diaries, these references to the physiological surface of laughing gain extra weight.

The repeated references to laughter pose are relevant in view of the “switches” between character perceptions and narratorial presentation outlined above. Classical narratology relied on the substitution test, which primarily focussed on the unambiguously transformable grammatical characteristics of narrative texts in order to arrive at the detection of focalisation. In the era of increased transmediality, it is possible to tease out the (potential) pragmatic effects of different types of narration by taking a look at remediations or recontextualizations such as the radio drama adaptation of Canetti’s novel. The radio play (directed by Helmut Peschina and produced in 2003) features separate voices for the narrator and the characters. The director has to some extent sidestepped the issue of the novel’s attribution.
voices, imaginative perceptions and hallucinations by drastically cutting down on the passages of narrated monologue and by mainly culling dialogue passages and narratorial discourse from the novel. This shifts the emphasis from the self-persuasion, delusion and solipsism of the characters to a more outspoken physical battle of the sexes: the result is an absurd play of misunderstanding and non-communication. The novel, in contrast, operationalizes the characters as compound, constructed characters, as verbal reservoirs consisting of highly recognizable and normal, yet also deranged and quaint dictions and gestures. As a side-effect of the dialogic redressing carried out by the radio play, this unsettling effect sacrificed to a more realistic representation. In terms of gender the radio play also redresses the balance which, as mentioned earlier, is deliberately distorted in the novel.

The media-specificity entailed in the adaptation helps to elucidate the novel's stylistic options *ex negativo*. Especially in the setting of the court, Kien's animalistic behavior and laughter completely undercut his feeble attempt to wrestle free from his being cast as an assailant and to press with scientific authority and poise his own charges and damage claims. In one instance, the novel has Kien climb unto Thérèse “quick like a monkey” in order to prove that he can still overtop her: “Scarcely had he overtopped her — he was a head taller — than he began to laugh. ‘She hasn’t grown!’ he said and laughed, ‘she hasn’t grown!’ He had in fact decided to rid himself of this mirage by measuring himself against it.” (Canetti, *Auto-da-fé* 306) The passage is a satirical realization of a figure of speech (“überragen,” i.e. to overtop/outperform) which reveals his attempt to stress his masculinity as feeble and wrong-headed. The fact that Thérèse, in his mind, has grown into mythical proportions also reveals that his view on reality is deranged and phantasmatic. While the narrator indeed refrains from labelling, his indirect rendering of Kien's apologetic speech gives an external, physiological touch to his behavior and continues, as it does throughout the novel, to complicate the — evaluation of his behavior as madness. The way in which laughter is introduced into the text is of particular narratological interest, since it is quite jarring within the FID and strongly suggests that Kien's laughter is a citation too, unnatural, theatrical and mechanical rather than a sincere emotion. “He laughed. A scholar of his stamp was not lost. . . . He had his laugh out. [Kien lachte zu Ende.] Then he set to work again. As his courage and confidence grew, the quality of his performance diminished. When he began to laugh the spectators still found him amusing.” (Canetti, *Auto-da-fé* 307) In the radio drama version, the protagonist is simply laughing and the phantasmatic dimension of his embodiment as a linguistic reservoir of gender and other stereotypes is reduced to realistic action.
The reason for this peculiar return to psychological realism might be that
the novel is more post-dramatical and anti-psychological than a mainstream
radio-dramatization would risk to reproduce. In order to stress the obsessive and
monologic nature of the characters’ thoughts, the novel has the characters engage in
free indirect discourse. In this respect, the novel can be said to be more consonant
than the case of Kleist’s narrator. Yet, such stretches of narrated monologue are at
times either interspersed with references to bodily action (cf. supra, “he said and
laughed”) or juxtaposed in a kind of “dialogue des sourds,” in which the characters
keep referring to the other and even to themselves in third-person terms. Next to the
effect of absurd non-communication, this stresses that their personality is deeply
determined and possibly even constituted by cultural expectations, clichés, gender
stereotyping, and by the materiality of language or, in Canetti’s term: the “acoustic
mask” of “linguistic and stylistic code” (Structures 33), pace and diction. Already
the fact that the radio version opts for an instrumentation by means of distinguishable
individual voices rather than for e.g. a choric fusion of the discourses embedded in
the characters, signals the choice of a more standard psychological representation of
madness. The novel’s stress on linguistic materialism rather than on psychological
deepth does not only pay tribute to its historical and philosophical underpinnings;
it also has consequences for its reception by the reader. Very unlike the marriage
comedy enacted in the radio play, the novel’s mode of narration poses a challenge
to the reader, since its wry humor allows “no laughter ever quite to escape an
accompanying sense of complicity in the values that inform the discourses the
novel parodies” (“Review” 445).

Conclusion
This article has attempted to arrive at a more historical conception of madness by
turning towards specific instantiations of the historical interest in psychophysical
monisms (animal magnetism in Kleist, anti-Freud “surface psychology” in Canetti).
This interest can help to explain why it is in fact methodologically more feasible
to discuss the representation of madness in a more comprehensive way, including
rhetorical gestures and inflections and not just minds. As such, Kleist’s and Canetti’s
texts can be situated within a wider rhetorical tradition of behaviorist description.
Some of the methodological concerns underlying this dialogue, such as the friction
between narratology and stylistics, could only be touched upon tangentially within
the scope of this article. Nevertheless, the following specifics have emerged and may
provide pathways for further discussion. Whereas in recent debates, the narrative
representation of mental conditions like madness seems to have shifted towards a
systematic, at times clinical description in terms of universal aspects of cognition,
experientiality and embodiment, a different access-route can be taken by considering personification as a textual effect, a narrative with specific purposes and degrees of realization, rather than as a conditio sine qua non. Kleist’s and Canetti’s texts illustrate the extended range of stylistic expressivity one may wish to take into account when discussing that situated and “ascriptive” dimension of madness or normality in narratological terms. By attending to the narrative function of rhetorical and stylistic elements as implicit and explicit dimensions of narratorial agency such as arrangement and emphasis, a more performative and historically situated notion of normality is likely to surface.

Notes

1 Cf. Bernaerts; Freißmann.

2 Martens, Extending. Sternberg also advocates an approach in which “reliability and unreliability are both constructive options, and as such equal amid polarity.” For other discussions of heterodiegetic unreliability, see: Darby, Disintegration; Donahue; Herman/Vervaeck, Handbook, 88.

3 Cf. Martens, Extending, 92-93.

4 In Bakhtin’s account of free indirect discourse, “another’s discourse is seen to act upon that of the author, usually in the form of a ‘hidden polemic.’” (Bakhtin 185-199).

5 Michelet, Rèvolution, 1315. Michelet, like most historiographers, depicts Mirabeau’s role in the light of future events: In reality, Mirabeau’s historical role in the revolution proved to be of a fatally bipolar nature. After his death, his body was removed from the Pantheon when his persisting allegiance to the King was discovered (November 1792).

6 In her inquiry into the narrative representation of historical events, Rigney (81-86) pointed out that heroic and positive actions tend to receive scenic and repetitive representation, whereas less honorable deeds are presented iteratively.

7 In a mixture of Marxist materialism, Heiner Müller’s postdramatic aesthetics and Nietzsche, Alexander Kluge maintains that bodies precede minds: bodies “use the minds and the acts attested by the historians in order to impose themselves in a verifiable form, so that no doubt will remain that all recourses, and unsuspected powers, derive from them, from the bodies” (Kluge 86).

8 The condenser was invented almost simultaneously in the 18th Century by Ewald Georg von Kleist and by Jan van Leyden, hence its more common denomination as the “Leyden jar.”
9 In his discussion of literary speech acts, Hillis Miller credits Kleist with “new Kleistian laws of storytelling, in defiance of traditional laws of the relation of narrative to history or of probability to truth” (Hillis Miller, Topographies 91). Hillis Miller also discusses Kleist’s rendering of the Mirabeau scene (Hillis Miller, Pygmalion 113).

10 Quite fittingly, Greenblatt’s example of a “thick description” is that of “the distinction between a twitch and a wink,” transferred from a typically analytic philosophical, “thin” and intentionalist discussion into a narrative anecdote and its ensuing historical relevance (Greenblatt 34). On rhetoric and history, see Pieters.

11 “[T]he narrator is no affirmative action employer: Therese doesn’t get nearly as many pages as Kien, nor is her verbal repertory any match for the master philologist.” (Donahue 1997: 674)

12 It comes as no surprise that the prominent and prolific anti-psychiatrist Thomas Szasz has attempted to extract (somewhat overenthusiastically) arguments for his claims from the Vienna-based positivist tradition of opposition to Freudian or Freud-like depth hermeneutics. To this tradition Wittgenstein, Canetti, Musil and also Karl Kraus belong. Cf. Thomas S. Szasz: Karl Kraus and the Soul Doctors (1976); Anti-Freud: Karl Kraus’s Criticism of Psychoanalysis and Psychiatry (1990).

13 In this respect, the novel is more akin to Kathrin Röggla’s contemporary representation of the alienation of corporate culture in wir schlafen nicht (2004, tr. we never sleep, 2008), both available as docu-novel and (postdramatic) theatre production.

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Works Cited


De(ar)ranged Minds


