Literature and Crises:
Conceptual Explorations and Literary Negotiations
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ELCH
Studies in English Literary and Cultural History

ELK
Studien zur Englischen Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft

Band 73
MINDS IN CRISSES:
LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF PSYCHOTIC EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on narratives of minds in crises – namely, in the midst of psychosis. The texts discussed not only evoke and convey experiences of mental distress to their readers, but they also reveal the way the human mind is constructed in a constant interaction between the body and the environment, and thus portray psychotic experiences as a part of normal experience and life – as something that can happen to anyone.

I wonder what is going on with my sense of reality?
It is as if there were too much of everything. Someone is talking and it is not Maria or me. (Vaara 1974: 37, translation mine)

But my legs, my impossible legs lay over the wooded mountains and gave shade to the village-studded valleys. They grew and grew! They already reached into the space that no longer owned any landscape, for some time their length had gone beyond my field of vision. (Kafka 1971 [1904-1911]: 46)

An obvious association, when thinking about crises, is illness in its different forms. When ill, one is torn away from the ordinary world, from everyday experiences and social relations. This is particularly the case for individuals undergoing psychotic episodes. Psychosis is often understood as an ultimate crisis of the mind and subjectivity. It is an experiential state in which one becomes unable to differentiate between what actually happens and what is imagined, dreamed, or hallucinated. One’s sense of a unified self – a self that is the agent of actions and the owner of experiences – is compromised. A person no longer knows who is doing what and when, or where the borders

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1 “Mitenkähän todellisuudentajuni laita on? Kaikkea on ikään kuin liikaa. Joku puhuu eikä se ole Maria enkä minä” (Vaara 1974: 37). All subsequent translations indicated by footnote of the original are mine.

2 All translations from Kafka’s story are by Tania and James Stern. The original text can be found on the Kafka project website (cf. Kafka 2011 [1904-1911]). “Aber meine Beine, doch meine unmöglichen Beine lagen über den bewaldeten Bergen und beschatteten die dörflichen Thäler. Sie wuchsen, sie wuchsen! Schon ragten sie in den Raum der keine Landschaft mehr besaß, längst schon reichte ihre Länge aus der Sehschärfe meiner Augen” (ibid.: n. pag.).
between the self, the world, and other people are: “Someone is talking and it is not Maria or me” (Vaara 1974: 37); “But my legs, my impossible legs lay over the wooded mountains [...]” (Kafka 1971 [1904-1911]: 46). Psychosis is also often seen as something ‘other,’ something that escapes meaning and understanding and is outside of language and representation.\(^3\) a kind of suspension of being, or a non-event.\(^4\)

Psychotic experiences have interested many writers who have used them as sources for aesthetic experimentation and exploring the ways experiences – perceptions, thoughts, feelings, emotions – can be turned into words. Especially modernist writers and their successors have created experiential worlds that resemble or even imitate psychotic experiences. In addition to the possibilities of artistic and psychological experimentation afforded by different uncanny experiences, writers have turned to psychotic experiences for ethical reasons: to convey these experiences to other people and to share what it feels like to go through them. Narratives like this contest – at least to some extent – the ‘otherness’ and ‘unrepresentability’ of psychotic experiences. They aim at evoking experiences that go beyond language and representation and share them with their readers through words and fictional worlds.

The conception of psychosis as something other adds an interesting twist to the ongoing narratological debate about the possibilities of accessing other minds through stories (cf. Herman 2011a; Iversen 2013; Caracciolo 2014). As narratologist Dorrit Cohn suggests already in her book *Transparent Minds*, “narrative fiction is the only literary genre, as well as the only kind of narrative, in which the unspoken thoughts, feelings, perceptions of a person other than the speaker can be portrayed” (1978: 7). A novelist has the power to reveal the inner lives of her creations to her readers (cf. ibid.: 4). More recently, drawing on phenomenological research on how we engage with others and understand their experiences in real life, narratologist David Herman has argued that all minds of others’ – whether fictional or real – are actually accessible just the same way: others’ experiences are expressed to us through their bodies and behavior, and we understand others not by inferring or theorizing about their inner lives, but simply because we share a common world with them (cf. Herman 2011a: 15; Gallagher/Zahavi 2012: 213; Gallagher 2005: 213; Zahavi 2007: 38).

But what happens when this pragmatic understanding of others breaks down, for example, when encountering someone who is going through a psychosis and whose experiential world is radically different from others”?\(^5\) As Cohn points out, in narra-

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\(^3\) For example German psychiatrist Karl Jaspers famously – and problematically – stated that: “The most profound distinction in psychic life seems to be that between what is meaningful and allows empathy and what in this particular way is ununderstandable, ‘mad’ in the literal sense, schizophrenic psychic life [...]” (1997 [1913]: 577). Later psychiatry and psychology have often contested this statement, and so does this essay. Psychotic experiences are a form of crisis for the individual, but they are not beyond understanding.

\(^4\) Cf. section 3 in the introduction to this volume.

\(^5\) Herman (2011a: 15) mentions that there are potential situations in which usual ways of understanding break down but does not discuss these further.
tives we are actually confronted with the hidden contents of another person’s thoughts. This is something that is never possible in real life – unless the other verbalizes their thoughts out loud. In other words, narrative fiction can portray the processes of thinking and experiencing, and narratives may also provide insights into experiences that are difficult to understand through a common, shared world in the way outlined by the phenomenologists. In the following, I will continue this line of thought and focus on the different techniques narrative texts use to convey the experiential worlds of psychosis to their readers.

When talking about ‘psychotic experiences,’ I refer to experiential states that resemble but are at the same time different from mundane, everyday experiences of thinking, perceiving, dreaming, and imagining. Relying on recent phenomenological accounts, I understand psychosis as an umbrella term for experiences ranging from altered sense of reality (such as feelings of artificiality or feelings of being one with the world) to hallucinations and delusions (such as hearing voices or believing that someone is inserting thoughts in one’s mind).6 These experiences are frequently understood as forms of illness, in the sense that they often cause distress to the people experiencing them. Yet, many writers’ descriptions challenge this pathologizing view. In fact, literary descriptions can be aligned with philosophical and psychological accounts that understand psychotic experiences as meaningful, although often painful, ways of being in the world. As Finnish psychologist Jaakko Seikkula puts it: “Psychosis belongs to life. Psychotic symptoms are not symptoms of an illness. They are a strategy for our embodied mind to survive strange experiences” (Seikkula 2016: n. pag.).

I will begin with a close reading of four short descriptions by Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, Zelda Fitzgerald, and Maria Vaara. What connects this selection of fictional, semi-fictional, and non-fictional fragments written by different modernist writers across the 20th century in different parts of Europe is that all these texts depict experiences in which the borders between the self and its environment have become fluid. They portray very basic forms of human cognition and consciousness, but also minds that are on the edge of or in psychosis. Following my analysis of these short examples, I will look more closely at Kafka and Vaara’s respective techniques of narrating and evoking feelings of bodily and social alienation (Kafka) and hallucinations (Vaara). Both Kafka’s early short story “Description of a Struggle” (“Beschreibung eines Kampfes,” 2011 [1904-1911]) and Vaara’s autobiographical novel Likaiset legen-dat (The Dirty Legends, 1974) are first-person accounts of what is often described as ‘full-blown psychosis.’ Abstracting a meaningful narrative from the texts demands a lot from a reader: Kafka’s story is a curious dream-like voyage in a storyworld that becomes stranger and stranger; Vaara’s narrative consists of fragments (or ‘legends,’ as the title of the book suggests) that seem to be hallucinated by a protagonist who is in a mental hospital. Readers of both texts encounter vivid, immersive descriptions of

unusual experiences, but they might also become exhausted by the seemingly incoherent and illogical form of the stories. Finally, I will return to the question of sharing experiences through narratives and to the ethical and social functions of narrating these experiences.

1. Altered Worlds and Strange Experiences

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf gives a famous description of the experiential world of Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked First World War veteran:

[...] But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more.

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds. A child cried. Rightly far away a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion –

"Septimus!" said Rezia. He started violently. [...] (Woolf 1996 [1925]: 17)

Woolf portrays how Septimus’ experiences merge with the surrounding world: he feels that the leaves are alive and connected to his body; his body is moving in accordance with the branches; there is meaningfulness and harmony in the sounds of the city. As David Herman puts it, in Woolf’s description, mental illness is not only thematized, but the text also "enacts how the world is experienced by someone suffering from psychotic delusions" (Herman 2011b: 244). If looked at from a psychological perspective, the passage comes close to a feeling described by psychologist Louis Sass as the "truth-taking stare:" a strange, enigmatic atmosphere that sets in before actual hallucinations or delusions take place and in which the world gets a new meaning (cf. Sass 1994 [1992]: 44-45). We are invited to observe the way Septimus feels the surrounding world (the trees, the leaves, the sparrows) as directly connected to his thoughts, his experiences culminating in something that is characterized as a religious experience ("the birth of a new religion"). The third-person narration creates a detailed description of the world and the way it is colored by Septimus’ experiences – until Rezia’s voice appears, breaks the flow of Septimus’ stream of consciousness, and the environment returns to normal.

In a letter to her husband, Zelda Fitzgerald gives a similar description of this kind of "new meaning" that is found in the world prior to full-blown psychosis. She juxtaposes the present moment, in which the world loses its meaning (things feel "barren and sterile and hopeless" [Fitzgerald qtd. in Milford 2001 (1970): 166]), with a past (pre-psychotic) experience of ineffable significance:

Every day it seems to me that things are more barren and sterile and hopeless. [...] In Paris, before I realized that I was sick, there was a new significance to everything: sta-
tions and streets and facades of buildings – colors were infinite, part of the air, and not restricted by the lines that encompassed them and lines were free of the masses they held. There was music that beat behind my forehead and other music that fell into my stomach from a high parabola and there was some of Schumann that was still and tender and the sadness of Chopin Mazurkas… (Ibid.)

Like Woolf, Fitzgerald explicitly frames the experiences as a form of illness (Septimus’ “mad,” Zelda’s “sick”) and depicts the experiential world through a description of the environment. Both for Septimus and Zelda, the idea of being mad or sick is something avoidable and negative (“he would not go mad;” “barren and sterile and hopeless;” “before I realized”), yet their experiences themselves also have an aesthetic quality. The protagonists perceive sudden beauty and harmony in the world – colors, music. In addition, the descriptions reveal something very general about human experience: the way our mental experiences are intertwined with the world and how moods and atmospheres orient us within our surroundings.

In addition to the way the mind is positioned in and intertwined with the world, both writers describe alterations in the protagonists’ bodies and in the ways they perceive others. Septimus feels his body coupled with the leaves and branches. Fitzgerald describes a feeling of music in her forehead and stomach. In another passage, she mentions that also her perception of other people’s bodies has changed: “Now I see odd things: people’s arms too long or their faces as if they were stuffed and they look tiny and far away, or suddenly out of proportion” (qtd. in Milford 2001 [1970]: 177). Other people are somehow distorted, reflecting Fitzgerald’s own experiences of an altered body and world.

These kinds of altered bodily states are also in the focus of Kafka’s text. In a similar fashion, Kafka directs his readers’ attention to the ways minds and worlds are intertwined and one’s bodily experience changes:

And it really was kind of the moon to shine on me, too, and out of modesty I was about to place myself under the arch of the tower bridge when it occurred to me that the moon, of course, shone on everything. So I happily spread my arms in order fully to enjoy the moon. And by making swimming movements with my weary arms it was easy for me to advance without pain or difficulty. To think that I had never tried this before! […] But I couldn’t afford to do too much thinking, for I had to go on swimming to prevent myself from sinking too low. (Kafka 1971 [1904-1911]: 19)

In the passage, Kafka’s narrator first has a solipsistic idea that the moon shines only on him, and then he understands that, because the moon actually shines on everything, he could continue his journey by “swimming” in the moonshine. There is no distinction

between body and thought: moving is thinking, and the borders between the mind, the body, and the world disappear.

Yet another vivid example of the self and the world merging can be found from Finnish novelist Maria Vaara’s autobiographical novel *Likäiset legendat*. The narrating ‘I,’ Maria, describes experiences of turning into a blood cell and floating in space:

The corridor looks like a long blood vessel. Resilient and firm. I suppose I am some kind of a red blood cell then.

-Don’t you think about those things of yours, Annaliina says. She has leisure time and has come for a visit. -You’re supposed to be a human being who knows how to put their shoes on the right feet and keep their apron clean.

But the Scattered drag her away in a triumphal procession. She and her apron don’t belong here.

I am. I am inside the red blood. Suddenly it floods inside me, my hands become redder and redder. Gallons of red billowing behind my eyes. I am inside the blood vessel and the blood is in me.

-Where do the broken pieces on the floor come from?

Someone is breaking coffee cups and slitting chair covers with a nail file. Who have they let in here raging? Usually there are only kind people here, staring, filled with medicine from head to fingertips. It has to be someone from the other ward.

-It’s you they mean, one of the Scattered laughs. -It’s you. (Vaara 1974: 106)

Like in Woolf’s passage, the flow of thought is interrupted by a voice. In this case, however, we can infer from the context that the voices are not actually coming from the outside; both Annaliina and the Scattered are hallucinations. Vaara’s description brings forth some of the core symptoms of full-blown psychosis: loss of borders between the self and the world and the inability to separate one’s own thoughts and actions from those of others.

What brings all of these descriptions together is their focus on the ways minds are connected to the world.8 As such, they resonate with theories of the mind as embodied,

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Mutta irralliset retuutttavat Annaliinan pois riemukulkueessa. Ei hän sovi tänne esiinoinneen.

Olen, minä olen punaisessa veressä. Yhtäkkiä se tulvahtaa sisääni, kädet tulevat punaisemiksi, silmien takana lainehtii liputaapalla punaista. Olen verisuonessa ja veri on minussa.

-Mistä tulee sirpaleita lattialle?


-Sinua ne tarkoittavat, nauraa irrallinen. -Sinä se olet" (Vaara 1974: 106).
which emphasize that consciousness and experiences are constructed in an interaction between the self and the world. According to the embodied view, consciousness is not something separate from the body and the world but rather something that we do through our bodily engagement with the world. Having an experience is thus a form of sense making in which a perspectival bodily organism navigates the environment in which it is embedded (cf. Varela/Rosch/Thompson 1991; Colombetti 2013).

From the embodied cognitive perspective, psychiatric disorders are understood as shifts in the way one makes sense of and interacts with the world. In psychosis, the embodied first-person perspective and the way one is embedded or situated in the world has been altered, resulting in a disconcerting experiential world. Psychotic symptoms such as changes in bodily experiences, experiences of social alienation as well as hallucinations and delusions are understood as the results of these alterations (cf. Colombetti 2013: 1097).

I suggest that precisely these changes in the way one is situated in the world are what texts like Woolf’s, Fitzgerald’s, Kafka’s and Vaara’s are about: they construct disconcerting storyworlds that readers are invited to navigate. In what follows, I will look more closely at the ways some basic symptoms of psychosis — altered bodily experiences, problems in interpersonal relationships, and hallucinations — are evoked and conveyed to readers in Kafka and Vaara’s respective texts.

2. Bodily Feelings, Uncanny Thoughts, and Social Alienation

Before continuing with Kafka, let us look at one more quote, this time from a real-life conversation between a woman called Marian, who is going through a psychotic episode, and two mental health care professionals:

Marian: I’m responsible for my own motives. I keep my mouth closed and my nose open.

Nurse: Can you say things a bit more clearly to let us know what’s going on?

Marian: Just ask my autograph book who was signing it all the time. It’s not my fault it’s ripped up.

Psychiatrist: Did you think we’d know what you meant when you said that?

Marian: I know you all know what I meant.

Psychiatrist: I didn’t.

Marian: It’s not your fault. (Qtd. in Sass 1994 [1992]: 174)

The short dialogue can be read as a demonstration of the so-called ‘praecox feeling:’ an uncanny atmosphere that is sometimes evoked when encountering another person whose world and logic seem to function in ways that defy our understanding of how

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10 For another discussion of embodied cognition in this volume, cf. Oulanne.
things usually are in the world (cf. Sass 1994 [1992]: 14). As phenomenologists have suggested, one of the main symptoms of psychosis is the way interpersonal relationships are altered (cf. Sass/Pienkos 2013). In Marian’s thinking, there is a strange meaning that the psychiatrist and the nurse are unable to grasp. But there clearly is also some kind of unnameable logic according to which Marian’s world functions. In addition, there is communication: there are questions and answers and grammatical structure. The communication is just crippled, particularly at the receiving end: we (readers of the dialogue), the nurse and the psychiatrist are unable to understand what, for example, “I keep my mouth closed and my nose open” means if we try to decipher it according to the normal rules and logic of communication. Yet, the words can be grasped through bodily sensations. Marian is perhaps saying something about maintaining her borders: “I keep my mouth closed,” so I am not giving anything and nothing can come inside me; but, “my nose [is] open,” I am connected to the world. The exact meaning of the words is unclear, evoking a feeling of uncanniness, but we can perhaps understand the utterance through the bodily experiences it evokes. As the metaphorical quality of the speech suggests, there is something highly literary and ambiguous in it: it is communicative, but at the same time uncanny and paradoxical.

Similar uncanny logic and bodily experiences that are full of curious meaning are found in Kafka’s “Description of a Struggle.” In the beginning of Kafka’s story, the narrator quite reluctantly begins a journey with an “acquaintance” (who is later on revealed to be a kind of a Doppelgänger figure of the narrator). He describes a failure in his interactions with his companion: “No sooner had I given him an encouraging slap on the back than I suddenly no longer understood his mood, and withdrew my hand. Since I had no use for it, I stuck it in the pocket of my coat” (Kafka 1971 [1904-1911]: 11). The moment of social alienation the narrator experiences is articulated through the description of the sudden experience of the narrator’s hand feeling like a separate object. Moments later, the narrator and the “acquaintance” head together towards Laurenziberg mountain in Prague, but, while walking, the narrator encounters more strange problems:

While I was still trying urgently to think of some means by which I could stay at least a little while longer with my acquaintance, it occurred to me that perhaps my long body displeased him by making him feel too small. And this thought – although it was late at night and we had hardly met a soul – tormented me so much that while walking I bent my back until my hands reached my knees. But in order to prevent my acquaintance from noticing my intentions I changed my position only very gradually, tried to divert his attention from myself, once even turning him toward the river, pointing out to him with outstretched hands the trees on the Schützeninsel and the way the bridge lamps were reflected in the river. (Ibid.: 16)


12 “Als ich noch rasch nach einem Mittel suchte, um wenigstens ein Weilchen bei meinem Bekannten bleiben zu dürfen, fiel mir ein, daß ihm vielleicht meine lange Gestalt unange-
What we find in Kafka’s description – in a longer format – is an uncanny logic similar to that governing Marian’s speech: the connections they make are seemingly nonsensical but at the same time there are ineffable, bodily meanings. For some reason, Kafka’s narrator feels that he has to change his body position to get along with his “companion.” There is a strange connection between his body (or how he thinks his body should be), his thoughts, and the social environment. In the second part of the story, the storyworld goes through a change. We are led away from the city of Prague to an unfamiliar landscape, and the narrator is suddenly able to modify the world with his thoughts: “I walked on, unperturbed. But since, as a pedestrian, I dreaded the effort of climbing the mountainous road, I let it become flatter, let it slope down into a valley in the distance. The stones vanished at my will and the wind disappeared” (Kafka 1971 [1904-1911]: 22). The narrator turns into a God-like (or author-like) creature who is able to control the world with his imagination and thoughts.

Louis Sass has pointed out that Kafka’s story is a vivid description of the advancement of schizophrenia from early prodromal signs (where meanings of the world start changing and the self becomes alienated) to full-blown psychosis (where the borders between the self and the world dissolve). Sass also notes that many readers of Kafka’s story have found it uncanny, confused, and even perverted – an experience that can be compared to the ‘praecox feeling’ (Sass 1994 [1992]: 317). Yet, I claim that the strangeness can also dissolve if we pay attention to the experientiality evoked in the story and if we set aside our need to make sense of everything that happens in it. Perhaps the uncanniness can actually be seen as a way to solicit readers’ emotions and bodily feelings and to direct our attention toward the ways minds and worlds are intertwined.

What is striking in Kafka’s short story is the constant oscillation between familiar bodily experiences (for example, references to hands, eyes, and breathing) and the uncanny bodily meanings and feelings of artificiality and alienation. This effect is created through different techniques. First of all, there is a lot of detail in the representation of the storyworld: in the beginning of the story, place names create a link between the storyworld and our actual world. Later on, the landscape suddenly changes, but the detailed description of the world continues: there are the mountains and slopes and rivers...
and so on, and the reader is invited to imagine them, but also to simulate the ways in which they become strange. In addition, as we saw, there are the descriptions of bodily experiences: how the narrator’s body becomes alien or how the body is connected to the environment. Finally, the first-person perspective of the text underlines the interaction and constant movement between the narrator’s mind, body, and the environment.

One of the most interesting aspects of Kafka’s story is the constant thematization of fictionality and artificiality: the narrator’s body and world become fictional in at least two ways. On the one hand, he experiences a lack of immersion in the world (the feelings of artificiality and alienation); on the other hand, he feels he is omnipotent and able to control the world with his own thoughts. The text taps into readers’ experiences of being attuned to or immersed in the world, as well as to different states in which this attunement is lost or altered. The text itself resists interpretation, perhaps even its own reading (the reader may grow tired and decide to leave the story unfinished), but when one looks carefully at the narration of bodily experiences and the text’s uncanny logic, there is also something very familiar in them. Even if we are unfamiliar with psychotic experiences, Kafka’s descriptions resonate with, for instance, dream-like states and forms of imagination. I also want to emphasize that the talk of “psychosis” doesn’t bring much to reading the story if we were only to “diagnose” the narrator as a psychotic person. This has not been my point. Rather, I suggest that Kafka directs us to view psychosis as an embodied experience, as an alteration in a person’s way of experiencing their body and being in the world. Kafka’s descriptions bring forth very basic experiences of embodied being and this is also probably why they are so compelling.

The story highlights the ways minds, bodies, and worlds interconnect, and it goes against the dualisms of the self and the world or the mind and the body. It is able to evoke even unfamiliar experiences by using our tacit knowledge of the changes in one’s embodied relationship with the world (for instance, our experiences of dream-logic and imagining). Finally, it illuminates and brings meaning to the ineffable and uncanny experiences of psychosis, thus challenging common cultural and clinical assumptions about mental disorders.

3. Hallucinations and Imaginings

In Kafka’s text, no references are made to clinical diagnosis – the story is, as the title suggests, a “description of a struggle,” and it is left to the reader to interpret the exact nature of the “struggle.” In contrast, Vaara’s Likaiset legendat is explicitly framed as a story about psychosis and schizophrenia. The novel begins with a diagnostic title, after which the narrating ‘I’ proceeds to warn her readers:

14 Emily Troscianko (2014: 343) makes a similar point in her analysis of Kafka’s Ein Hungerkünstler (1922).

15 It is, however, questionable whether the diagnosis was correct. Vaara writes about a possible misdiagnosis in her later autobiographical novel Myrkkyleitikki (Vaara 1980).
Schizophrenia pseudoneurotica
(Borderline case)

You should not actually read this, at least not at a coffee table. And if you read it, you probably won’t understand anything. Or you might think: yes, indeed, dirty legends. Or you might become anxious, very anxious. Or maybe you understand. (Vaara 1974: 5)\(^{16}\)

Vaara’s reference to medical discourse is used to evoke difference and distance and, right after naming a medical diagnosis, the narrating ‘I’ creates even more distance by doubting whether the reader can understand at all. The statement is, however, immediately turned around: perhaps the reader also becomes anxious; perhaps she understands.

Vaara is very skilled in verbalizing what happens in psychosis: throughout the novel, she describes hallucinations, experiences of losing the control of one’s actions as well as experiences of losing one’s borders. She also thematizes the difficulties of representing these experiences on the levels of story and narration: the narrative is fragmented and broken, especially in the second part of the novel, which consists of short, isolated stories – or descriptions of scenes – in which the actual world of the story (a hospital where Maria is admitted) has almost completely disappeared and the storyworld is controlled by the psychotic experiential world of the narrating ‘I.’

Let us look at one such scene and the ways the experience of hallucination is evoked. In the following example, the narrator describes in the present tense what she sees. She offers a vivid description of the world she is in:

There are many swings in the park. People are sitting in them. Are they people? People have eyes. Most of these creatures have no eyes, only smooth, white faces. They have mouths; one has to have a mouth. Hunger lives in the mouth. And they are all hungry. They have noses too. Noses smell dirty things. One must have ears to collect voices, to salvage them.

There is no lack of voices here; one has to be careful not to step on them or not to walk through one by accident. One of the eyeless runs with a butterfly net and tries to catch the voices. I wish they would be able to fill their nets.

Mother has said that there are no voices and that one should not listen to them, but the voices are there! They come even without calling. (Vaara 1974: 100)\(^{17}\)

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She places herself in a park, and the pronoun “here” refers to the psychotic world that is filled with disconcerting creatures and voices. The narrator describes seeing people, but these human-like figures have no eyes. Instead, they have “hungry mouths,” noses that “smell dirty things,” and ears that “collect voices.” The description evokes disturbing images and sensory experiences. The multitude of the transformed bodies and the narrator’s fear of walking over and crushing the voices conveys the chaotic experience of hearing voices. The bodily images and metaphors solicit sensory imagination: when we read, we do not just see “pictures in the head,” but we may feel these unsettling creatures through our bodies – much the same way as Marian’s speech and Kafka’s descriptions evoke bodily sensations.

The scene resembles a dream, but, towards the end, it seems to take the form of a memory (when the mother figure appears, saying that “there are no voices” and that one “should not listen to them”). But we also understand that this is not a dream, as the motif of voice-hearing connects the scene to psychotic experiences and hallucinations. Phenomenologists have pointed out that imagining, dreaming, remembering, and hallucinating are structurally similar processes: all of them are modes of simulating perceptions, and in this sense there is no intrinsic difference between them (cf. Thompson 2014). However, the phenomenal feel of these experiences is quite different. While imagining and remembering are similar experiences (it is very difficult to separate between imaginings and memories), hallucinations are characterized by a feeling of in-between-ness: they are ambiguous, strange experiences, somewhere in-between imagination and perception (cf. Ratcliffe forthcoming). This ambiguity is vividly captured in Vaara’s text through bodily images.

Even if Vaara’s readers have never gone through psychotic experiences, the text invites them to simulate what they feel like by alternating between different modes of experience and by enhancing the effects of the text with unsettling images and metaphors. We are invited to imagine the bodies, the smells, and the uncertainty of whether one is dreaming, imagining or perceiving – the uncertainty about time and place. Narratives often use readers’ folk-psychiatric knowledge and cultural understanding of minds in order to create representations of mental illness. But texts are also able to evoke experiences of mental disorders by manipulating changes in the basic elements of narrative, such as experientiality and time (cf. Herman 2009). They tap into readers’ basic experiences of first-person perspective and embeddedness in the world and are thus able to create storyworlds that capture disconcerting experiences.

4. Psychosis as Part of Life

What is the cultural work that texts like Woolf’s, Kafka’s, Fitzgerald’s and Vaara’s do? The ethical and political function in Maria Vaara’s writing is very clear. Her work is focused on describing experiences that are usually regarded as abnormal and unintelligible, and she discusses explicitly the conditions of psychiatric treatment in 1970’s Finland, sketching a humane, non-stigmatizing approach to mental disorders.
At the time she wrote her autobiographical novels, turning her own experiences to fictional form, people who suffered from psychotic experiences – especially women and people with ethnic backgrounds – were most often diagnosed as schizophrenics and institutionalized. Zelda Fitzgerald underwent such a fate as well and spent her last years in mental hospitals. In a later novel, Vaara recollects the publication of Likaiset legendat and makes an important point about the problems of diagnostic labels and the pathologization of her experiences:

Who would dare to read it [Likaiset legendat] so that they would find in it a normal human being, drawing a picture of a life that is inside everyone, as long as one dares to face it? What if every one of us has Maria’s schizophrenic garden inside us, if we just hoe up the soil surface that covers it? (Vaara 1980: 235)

For her, psychotic experiences are not something “other.” They are rather experiences that are rooted in the ways our embodied minds function, and they could happen to anyone in certain circumstances. The same conclusion can be extended to Woolf’s and Kafka’s fiction and Fitzgerald’s letters: they not only portray experiences of unusual mental experiences but also the ways human minds work in general and convey these experiences to their readers. To return to Jaakko Seikkula’s words, psychosis is not something pathological, it is rather a mode of being, like an emotion or a feeling: “Psychosis belongs to life.”

Works Cited


Seikkula and his colleagues have developed the Open Dialogue approach which has revolutionized the treatment of psychotic disorders in northern Finland (where Vaara also lived in the 1970’s) during the last decades. On the origins and development of Open Dialogue, cf. Seikkula 2011.


