

Introductory Notes on *The Madhouse*

I wrote *The Madhouse* with the intention of communicating in the language of the ordinary human senses something which cannot be understood by the ordinary human senses, and therein lies the whole problem.

Communicare, from which our modern word derives, means to make something in common. This is more than to merely transmit or share information: the author's task is to ignite unmistakable meanings in the soul of the reader. He must choose his tools accordingly. A descriptive narrative is adequate for concrete, sensible things; one can picture thereby a cross, say, or the geometry of a crescent, but not their symbolic extension in human life. The discursive or philosophical is similarly useful for ideas, but leads to the lop-sided kind of understanding typified by the well-intentioned Professor Beauxdraps' introduction (does any reader look up the meaning of his and his associates' names?) and which the storyteller has always struggled to avert. How then to communicate that uniquely human impulse towards self-transcendence, wholeness, unity - whatever term one uses to describe the process by which a human being becomes truly human - without making an obscure lecture out of it? This, and all its ups and downs, is what *The Madhouse* is in essence about.

Allegory permits something which the discursive denies. It maps in recognizable symbols the topography of a parallel world suggestive of a higher experiential order. In so doing it sets out signposts of meaning which the reader may follow according to his own experience,

making the journey towards understanding uniquely his own. It also relieves the reader of the illusion of intellectual certainty, and gives doubt and ambiguity a sporting chance. This is important; meaning is not simply found in words, but in what they point to. Perhaps this interpretive breathing space is why allegory is the preferred traditional method for exploring psychological and spiritual themes and in particular the soteriological. It gives room for meanings to enlarge, sometimes over the course of years, within the safety of reader's own intuitive territory, a slow steeping of significance impossible to substitute by the transmission of mere facts. Imagine Dante's or Bunyan's characters and their traits as bullet points in a PowerPoint presentation, robbed of all power, beauty and imperfection.

The risk is that an allegorical tale which draws on realistic elements may be taken in the most literal sense by the reader who, in an age of hyper-realism, is trained to look for meaning on the surface of things. Such a tale will seem strangely incomplete and unsatisfactory, the way stories from the Bible seem unsatisfactory to children, frustratingly similar but never fully corresponding to real life, like the features on a map held upside down against an unfamiliar landscape. But once the allegory itself begins to make sense, things resolve differently, and other clues (those scattered throughout *The Madhouse* begin on the first page of the introduction) can come to its support.

The Madhouse is built on the assumption that Man - I mean Woman too, of course, and everything in between which is human - is so constructed as to experience the taste of both infinite and finite things; of the eternal and the temporal; of values as well as facts; of the things of both God and Caesar. When the experience of the latter inevitably falls short of the former, dissatisfaction of an unworldly kind arises. A sense - perhaps only dimly or occasionally felt - of isolation from what is most real and authentic and satisfying in life. This interior yearning for wholeness, if nourished and directed, engenders a second life in Man, sometimes called spiritual, which expresses itself as a search for what in some contexts is called God, in others Reality or the Ground of Being, and against various cultural backgrounds is given so many different names. Such a search, paradoxically, is for something that cannot be easily known or named. Yet the yearning for it, as inarticulate as it is universal, could never be so deeply felt unless this

condition of dissatisfaction with ordinary life arising from separateness had not first been seeded within the human soul.

None of this is at all new. The opening lines of Rumi's poetic and spiritual masterpiece *The Mathnawi*, composed seven hundred and fifty years ago, expresses in much more satisfying language this very notion:

*Listen to this pierced flute as it sounds its sad lament of separation
Bringing men and women to tears since it was torn from a bed of reeds
Seeking a heart rent from pain with which to share its longing
Like all those who live in exile yearning for the day of their return*

Hearing this lament, in whatever form or culture, a man or a woman's life changes inwardly. His or her life begins to run on parallel lines, no longer simply directed towards outward and worldly goals, but towards inner ones too. Alongside the outer demands of life there now run inner exigencies; inner observations, valuations, relevancies and, possibly, transformations. Out of these a new inner axis evolves, unaffected by the turmoil of ordinary life. *The Madhouse* is about the discovery of these things. They are, of course, in part the author's discoveries, but none of them is either unprecedented or original.

If allegory, then, does its work by pointing to something beyond itself, it may be wiser not to interfere in the details too much, like the child who tugs at the roots of a newly-planted seed to see if it is growing and kills it caringly in the process. Perhaps for this reason I should say what *The Madhouse* is not. It is not, emphatically, the description of a real or imagined madhouse (an early outline portrayed a man adrift in a largely abandoned mansion and led to the title *The Resident*, but as the spectrum of strange encounters began to multiply, the idea of a madhouse seemed to better convey the spirit of the place).

Nor are its characters intended to depict real or imaginary people. Real aspects of people, yes, but deployed for the technical rather than purely dramatic purpose of shedding light on the peculiar psychological structure of humans. The *dramatis personae* of the story - even the dreadful Petra - are evocations of multiple, fragmentary selves and their characteristics, whose appearance in ordinary life passes swiftly beyond the screen of awareness. But under certain conditions,

they become stubbornly present. Those conditions express the idea of a parallel, interior and ordinarily invisible life, with its own well-established norms and characteristics, which have long been understood by those who have explored them. A man or woman's discoveries in this inner territory quickly reveals the scattered and fragmentary nature of the mind, its transient whims and many 'selves' which, from the view of ordinary life, appear 'mad' or at least topsy-turvy. But as this territory becomes better-known, as it attains a certain familiarity and coherence, a strange reversal begins to occur, whereby the ordinary run of life begins to resemble the upside-down version.

Lastly, *The Madhouse* has nothing to do with pathology in its scientific sense. Quite the contrary: the character of the protagonist attempts to represent the individual who is psychologically and spiritually healthy and, skeptical of all theory, robust enough to undertake the journey towards self-discovery.

The three main characters, whose names are clues to their potential fulfillment, mirror the primary aspects of human function: mind, feeling and instinct. Each is blighted in some fundamental fashion. At the outset of the tale, Vasily is a gifted but troubled intellectual whose worldly vice is addiction to vodka but who is, in essence, paralyzed by abstraction and theory with no practical application. Tevdore's immense strength, which represents the power of feeling, is similarly unharnessed. Vanity, fantasy and imitativeness can, I think, be said to be the chief vices of Fidel. All these afflictions overlap, as they do in a person. Their collective transformation is enabled only by a higher, ordering principle – that of escape. Lacking this, they remain largely passive and ineffective. Only the pertinacity of the story's protagonist, whose restless ambition serves as a catalyst to action, is sufficient to bring them together to jointly pursue the transcendent and unifying goal of freedom.

It isn't all plain sailing, of course. The protagonist's entry into captivity is akin to a painful descent into incarnation, to which the imagery of birth woven into the opening chapter alludes. The rude shocks that follow set off a problematic process of education, embracing much discovery but also the slings and arrows of disillusion and despair which I believe are universal features of inner exploration

and growth. A Jungian analyst familiar with the notion of individuation might liken this process to the dissolution of the *persona*; in Persian mysticism the term is simply ‘cooking’. Different traditions give this as many different names.

Either way, it is neither a smooth nor gentle process: it is never easy to authentically give up what one is. Relinquishing the various forms of self-love that impede inner development means *change*, and to change there is an existential price that popular notions of self-improvement have a way of sugaring over, as if psychological transformation were simply a quantitative matter. Our condition is one of attachment, and change through relinquishment is never without pain: it affronts the ego. A window and a Petra cannot co-exist in the same house; sooner or later, one of them has to go. This is the parting of the ways alluded to in so many traditions.

Nor, as Vasily points out to his overconfident housemate, can one *think* oneself to the world outside; to self-transcendence, in other words. The way is slow and above all practical. But crucially, there does exist the possibility of choice: despite the sound of keys, the door of the protagonist’s room is never actually locked, and there is unexpected freedom within his confinement. Herein lie possibilities undreamed of by the majority of the inhabitants of *The Madhouse*, who remain obediently locked in their rooms. Perhaps you know the type.

The field of this unfolding, this bat-like but purposeful navigation, is a grand old house, once cared for. But in its present form it is a place of barely-controlled chaos, violence and inexplicable strangeness. It has different levels, where different things are possible, and impossible. It is perhaps infinitely explorable, and the protagonist’s discoveries are but a tiny portion of what might be uncovered (just as a book is an imperfect marriage of experience and expression). But he is who he is. His discoveries, to re-state this central idea, are attended by a quality of inversion, particularly in respect of time, space and identity, relative to the ‘real’ life that has been left behind in the so-called ordinary world. A troubling awareness of the upside-downness of things is never far away. But if the narrator comes to recognize two opposing lives in himself, one corresponding to the laws of ‘out there’ and another to those ‘in here’, it is not because he has lost his mind but

because he has been granted the gift (or perhaps burden) of added perception. His perception grows in different directions along different lines, enhanced by new understanding in both mind and feeling, as well as by physical endeavor, underpinned by the quest to fathom and eventually to be free from the strange conditions of captivity; in another language, from selfhood.

Viewed from the measurable and repeatable world of materiality with which science is occupied, the invisible events and laws of psychological and spiritual experience are indeed often ‘mad’; but the inverse is equally true (I think involuntarily of Screwtape’s ingenious inversion of human experience to fit his devoted task as a Devil). There is no reason though, why a reconciliation between the two is impossible, as Vasily hopes – bravely or naively? – to prove, at least theoretically. The ‘reformation’ of Vasily and the others alludes to the results of such a quest for unity. It is probably an individual matter, best demonstrated by experience.

Symbolic references to Man as a house, and a masterless house, abound in the Gospels, and in many Eastern tales; the earliest I have found is in Plato who draws (in the *Phaedrus*) in greater detail on another ancient symbol to portray the divided nature of Man, the chariot, most famously depicted in the *Katha Upanishad* of Indian tradition. The inner disunity of the human being and his quest for integration (*e pluribus unum*, in the *Republic*) can safely be called a universal theme whether the setting be a house, city or symbolic landscape; all are informed by an underlying struggle towards unity, harmony and transcendence.

I write all this now as if I had known and planned it when I started *The Madhouse*, which began with the simple idea of the discovery of a world of higher experience by a man who, returning to the people among whom he lives, is considered mad. Exactly the same scenario is described in Plato’s most famous parable. Perhaps it is one of the oldest stories of all. But at the time I had never read any Plato, nor wrestled with any of the theory. I wrote the story as it unfolded to me, stumbling only later towards a personal understanding of the themes which, as they were written, made only an inarticulate kind of sense. Yet now it seems obvious to me that the struggle towards towards self-transcendence, integration, realization - call it what you will – is the

thing that makes possible a reconciliation between inner chaos and inner unity; or to put it more simply, spiritual death and spiritual life.

All this is of course deeply personal; no-one else's experience can substitute one's own, though it may resonate like a note on a nearby string. The life of an individual is a small thing, but the meaning discovered within it is, for the individual, everything. Its greater resonance is perhaps the role of life itself, as the bridge between the cosmic poles of spirit - whole, unifying, transcendent - and matter - enslaved, random, passive. Without life, the magnificent and bewildering drama of manifestation would have neither stage nor spectator.

Nor anyone, it now occurs to me, to suppose that if separation is the price of existence, then the price of intimacy is extinction - not the worldly kind, but the kind that liberates within life. This may not be the most popular conclusion, but it seems to me the most realistic, and the conclusion at which *The Madhouse* arrives. What happens next is another story.

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