CONFLICTS OF COMMUNICATION AND PERCEPTION IN MALAMUD'S STORIES ABOUT MADNESS

There are five stories in Malamud's short fiction which are directly concerned with insanity. Curiously, none of them appeared in the best known collections of stories, *The Magic Barrel* (1953) or *Idiots First* (1966), but in the two later volumes, *Rembrandt's Hat* (1973) and *The People and Uncollected Stories* (1989, posthumous). Three of the stories we are going to talk about, "The Letter", "Notes from a Lady at a Dinner Party" and "My Son the Murderer", belong to the first of these, whereas the two others, "A Confession of Murder" and "In Kew Gardens", have been included in the uncollected stories volume. Although "A Confession of Murder" was intended by Malamud as the first chapter of a novel called *The Man nobody could Lift*, which was finally abandoned, its layout and plot uniformity justify its treatment as a story, as indeed the *Uncollected Stories* volume does.

My purpose in this paper is to examine the five stories in Malamud's fiction concerning madness, in relation to two main aspects: conflicts of communication and conflicts of perception, the latter understood as the confusion of reality and fantasy (or fiction). Communication conflicts are, to a given extent, the natural consequence of perception conflicts: different perceptions of the world generate different ways of talking about it. However the main goal of this paper is to study the relationship of madness with each type of conflict, rather than trying to explain the connection between both conflicts, which would be a futile task, since the main stress in these stories falls on one direction or another, and not on the causality between both.

The three stories published in the collection *Rembrandt's Hat*, "The Letter", "Notes from a Lady at a Dinner Party" and "My son the Murderer" deal with the concept of madness in relation to communication difficulties, whereas the ones recovered in the *Uncollected Stories* volume, "A Confession of Murder" and "In Kew Gardens", written at very different periods, in 1953 and 1984 respectively, are concerned with madness in relation to perception. We will first look at the three stories in *Rembrandt's Hat* and later turn to the "uncollected" stories.

The first of the stories concerning madness to be found in *Rembrandt's Hat* is "The Letter". Although the main character in this story is Newman, a sane middle-aged man who visits his father, a patient at a lunatic asylum, it is quite significant that all the other characters in the story are insane: Newman's father, Teddy and Teddy's father Ralph. Teddy wants Newman to post a letter for him outside the institution, but Newman refuses, on the basis that the letter is blank. This same scene happens every Sunday, when Newman is about to leave after the weekly visit to his father. Parallel to this, Malamud also gives us a glimpse of Newman's difficulties in getting through to his father, who refuses to accept his wife's death or give a straightforward yes or no answer to his son's questions. One day, Teddy's father Ralph ap-

Many Sundry Wits Gathered Together 1996: 329-335
Martín Urdiales Shaw

pears, having regained walking privileges, and asks Newman to mail the letter for his son; the latter refuses, arguing (as always) that there is no addressee or content in it, to which Teddy's father retorts, "He wants to communicate with me" and "There's a whole letter in there. Plenty of news". (RH 105 & 106). The parallel Malamud establishes between the two father / son pairs is apparent: Newman is unable to communicate with his father, just as Teddy is, since Newman, on the grounds of rationality, refuses to post the letter, which obviously has great significance for Teddy. "The Letter" is a peculiar story insofar as it inverts the usual proportion, giving the predominant stance to "insane characters" and relegating the only "sane" character to an exceptional status. Malamud suggests that unless Newman agrees to accept the irrationality of insanity, he will never be able to talk to his father, since it is vain to attempt any communication from his stubborn viewpoint of reason. Hence his repeated refusal to post Teddy's letter illustrates precisely his lack of cooperation towards achieving contact.

"My Son the Murderer" has many points in common with "The Letter". Although in a strict sense, Harry the son is not mad in the way Newman's father is in the previous story, it is obvious that he behaves as if he is going mad. The similarities between both stories are so obvious that "The Letter" could almost be considered as a sequel to "My Son the Murderer" if not for the fact that the roles are reversed.

Once again we have a difficult father / son relationship as the main theme: the father worries over his son Harry, who will not talk to him or to anybody, staying locked in his room for most of the time. Harry, recently graduated from High School, jobless, and awaiting draft-call, has cowered into ill-humored introversion, as a consequence of a great existential fear, anchored on the on-going Vietnam War, but extending toward the world in general, a fear which becomes even more oppressive since he is incapable of revealing it, despite his father's insistent entreaties. As in "The Letter", the war is the primal cause of the state of anguish and isolation that will eventually lead to madness; in "The Letter", Ralph tells Newman about his son having fought at Iwo Jima and himself in both great wars and later asks him, referring to his father, "What war was he in?" (RH 106), taking for granted that one must fight in a war in order to go insane. In "My Son the Murderer", Harry is panic-stricken about the war: "It's a big burning war on a small screen. It rains bombs and the flames go higher. Sometimes I lean forward and touch the war with the flat of my hand. I wait for my hand to die." (RH 156). Later on there is a hint that he has written to the draft-board, probably refusing to go. Harry's essential fear, however, which is driving him mad, is due not so much to the war as to the self-retreat behind which he is hiding from the world: his thoughts and fears are just as inexpressible as Teddy's blank letter, and, at the same time, probably just as important.

Like Newman's father at the beginning of "The Letter", Harry feels systematically irritated by everything his father says or does throughout the story; more specifically, "he feels his father's concern only as another oppression" (Solotaroff: 126). This is more obvious in the second story where the father / son relationship is described more extensively. Both Newman and Harry's father try to communicate with their respective father and son by drawing them out from two worlds which they consider destructive: the world of unreality and the world of

blind despair - both similar insofar as they negate rationality- but the latter resist ferociously, asserting their identities precisely within these subjective world-views and therefore hindering communication. Nevertheless, Malamud's point, which is particularly apparent in "The Letter", is that the sane characters, Newman and Harry's father, are even more to blame in their failure to achieve communication than their insane counterparts, since their attempts in this respect only serve to further oppress these.

The third story concerning the relationship between madness and the problem of communication is "Notes from a Lady at a Dinner Party", which is, in comparison with the previous ones, much more light-hearted. As Robert Solotaroff points out, Adler is "far from being the usual yearning or sorrowing Malamud protagonist" (i.e. such as Harry or Newman's father), but "an overweight, successful architect in his early thirties ..." (Solotaroff: 127). Adler is invited to a dinner party offered by his former teacher, Clem Harris and his young wife, Karla. During dinner, while making adequate social conversation, Karla starts passing notes to Adler secretly, with the apparent purpose of seducing him; Adler, aroused by Karla's attractions, plays the game along with her, writing notes back. At one point, she asks him to come upstairs to see the babies, while Harris is on the phone, and there, privately, they kiss passionately and Karla suggests that they might be able to meet later. Adler agrees, with mixed feelings of excitement and remorse. When they come down again, Karla continues passing him notes, until he realizes that for her it's an obsession rather than a game: "She'll write them for ever, he thought (...) If not to me, then to the next one who comes into the house who's done something she wishes she had." (RH 152). At this point Adler already suspects that he is not the particular object of her desire, but simply the means to reveal her condition of dissatisfaction, anxiety and despair. But in contrast to the previous stories, Karla's insanity doesn't really become clear until the end, in the scene around the last note, where Karla has written to Adler, "Darling, I can't meet you, I am six months' pregnant" (RH 152), a scene which is very significant for a number of factors. Firstly, the fact that Clem Harris returns the note to Adler without unfolding and reading it -after it has accidentally fallen on the floor in view of everyone- reveals that Harris is aware of his wife's psychotic behavior, having experienced it before; by returning the note, unread, to his former student, he saves Karla, Adler and himself from a terribly embarrassing scene. Secondly, the content of the note clearly reveals Karla's insanity: the excuse is obviously false (since a six-month pregnancy would be noticeable) and confirms Adler's suspicions that she did not really want to seduce him. On the other hand, it proves her insane obsession with children, of which Malamud has given us a glimpse before, during the visit upstairs: "My lovely little babies. My babies, my babies" (RH 146), and which is again confirmed in the last sentence of the story: "She ran up to her babies in the nursery." (RH 153). Karla's obsessive affection toward her babies and her invented pregnancy are proof of her unhappy marriage to a much older man, about which she has hinted before to Adler, a marriage she holds her husband responsible for: "Clem married me when I was very young." (RH 146).

This condition has driven her to a peculiar sort of schizophrenia, in which she has developed a duplicity in character which uses two different means of expression: oral and written. While

she is perfectly able to maintain a "social front" in the presence of guests making polite conversation, she expresses her true self at the same time through notes, addressed to male guests who, unlike her, have succeeded in life. When Adler warns her upstairs about the danger of the notes, she replies: "... I've always written notes to people. You have to let me be who I am." (RH 149). The contents of certain notes, questions of a general and pseudo-philosophic nature, reveal Karla's lack of self-assurance and feeling of uncertainty, while the rest of the notes are lead-ons to keep Adler interested. The pattern of dual communication is finally broken at the very end of the story, in which Karla, from the stairs, chants "Love, marriage, happiness" (RH 153) as Adler is about to leave. The statement is the first oral instance of Karla's dissatisfaction; in itself, it conveys no meaning, but should be interpreted as her inability to relate three concepts which are, in conventional terms, always closely related. Karla's dual personality is thus resumed in this final paradoxical statement, which contains, at the same time, a general affirmation and a specific denial.

Plot-wise and stylistically, the two stories concerning madness in the *Uncollected Stories* volume could not differ more from each other. Nonetheless, "A Confession of Murder" and "In Kew Gardens" have much in common as regards perception problems in madness. In these two stories Malamud puts more emphasis on the conflicts between fantasy and reality within the human mind than on the aspect of communication problems: this can be easily proven by the fact that these stories concern primarily only one character, unlike the ones in *Rembrandt's Hat*, where a dual relationship is established (father / son, hostess / guest).

"A Confession of Murder" features Edward Farr, a man in his late twenties who, at the beginning of the story, has apparently just murdered his father. The story narrates, from Farr's point of view, his doings immediately after committing the crime: hiding the murder weapon -a sash weight- in the cellar, his encounter with a bum by the docks, a visit to the tavern where he meets an old girl friend, his attempt to get confession at a Catholic Church and finally, his confession of murder at the police station. The cleverness of the story lies precisely in the likelihood of Farr's actions following the passionate murder; it is difficult to imagine at the outset that the murder has been imagined by Farr, and that for him, the need to believe in his father's murder is more important than the execution of the deed itself, which he is unable to attempt in reality. There are certain clues, however, which can make the alert reader suspect there is something unlikely about the story: the first of these is the fact that Farr, on his way to the cellar, forgets the murderous sash weight on the window ledge in the stairway, after he has been dreamily gazing towards the ocean. Although this seems peculiar, it is nevertheless true that after a murder of this kind, which makes a great impression on the mind, a loss of bearings or of memory is not unlikely. A second clue is given when Farr is hiding the sash weight in the cellar; he suddenly hears footsteps and is

> ... stricken at the thought that it was not a stranger but his father, miraculously recovered from his wound, who sought him there, as he had in the past, shouting in drunken rage against his son, stalking him in the dark, threatening to beat his head off with his belt buckle if he did not reveal himself. (US 172).

Farr's fear is more justified in the light of the fact that he has not really murdered his father, yet the passage also serves to reveal the motive for the crime, his father's terrible cruelty, thus seeming to prove its truth. As with the first clue, here there is also an ambivalent interpretation. Farr's encounter with the vagabond in the docks also symbolically represents the confusion between the real and the unreal: after declaring his starvation, the stranger says to Farr "You wouldn't know it from the look of me ... but I'm a gentleman at heart" (US 173), and holds out his hand in greeting. Farr, confused, hands him some coins, thinking the man is expecting a charity, and the stranger throws them into the sea, aggravated by this insult to his pride. The episode is relevant in view of the ending of the story, since when the detective finally uncovers Farr's lie about the murder, the latter cannot stand the destruction of his illusion, also an insult to his own pride, and after socking him on the jaw, he runs down to the street and tosses the coins into the air, echoing the stranger's gesture of defiance.

Another example of the strange juxtaposition between the real and the fictitious is furnished in the episode describing Farr's and detective Wolff's arrival in the former's home. Farr is afraid to open the door to his father's bedroom and we, as readers, understand this as the logical fear of the parricide, who after the crime, is afraid to witness his evil deed. Yet when Farr opens the door, they hear the father's mumble "Murder ... terrible, terrible" (US 186). Surprisingly for us, Farr's father is alive and well, yet he is having a nightmare which oddly coincides with his son's wishful fantasies.

Malamud's main intention throughout the whole story is to create an atmosphere of uncertainty wherein fantasy and reality blend strangely, not only within the deranged Farr's mind, but also on the outside, operating as a coherent background to the protagonist's schizophrenia and pervading the whole plot. There is one last image which illustrates well this reality / fantasy ambivalence:

> 'Do you see this sash weight?' Wolff asked Farr.
>
> 'I do,' he said, with eyes shut" (US 190)

Indeed, for Farr, the sash weight which he sees in his mind, the one with which he has murdered his father, is more real than the one Wolff now holds out toward him, which he refuses to see with his eyes because it has no significance.

"In Kew Gardens" is one of Malamud's most experimental stories. It focuses on certain aspects of the life of Virginia Woolf, alternating fragments taken from Quentin Bell's autobiography with others of his own invention. Of the borrowed fragments, "Malamud tried to capture only negative states, like Woolf's frigidity, hallucinations, or negative acts, like her suicide attempts or her being obscenely pawed by George Duckworth, the half-brother ..." (Solotaroff: 115).

In summary, all the events in Woolf's life related to her alleged madness. The main interest of the story, which relates it to "A Confession of Murder", is the peculiar blend of the fantastic and the real: the fantastic elements in the story are quotes or events taken directly or

indirectly from Woolf's own fiction (there are also some quotes from other authors), as well as certain recurrent images invented by Malamud. All these fantastic elements are intertwined with actual facts in Woolf's life, as occurs, for example, with the association between Warren Septimus Smith's suicide and her own failed attempt:

> When Julia, the mother, died, the goat (Virginia Woolf) threw herself out of a first-story window and lay in the ground with Warren Septimus Smith. 'He did not want to die till the very last minute.' Neither had she. (US 254-5).

In true life, it was her father's death in 1904, that caused Woolf the second breakdown, yet Malamud turns it into her mother's death in order to create the recurrent image of the abusive King Edward, who represents another character in Woolf's fiction: the cruel Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, whose wife's death causes him such great woe. In fact both King Edward in this story and Mr. Ramsay in Woolf's novel represent Virginia's father, so Malamud is entering, with this image, the domain of metanarrative. The king, who appears three times in the story, is once associated to a bird who is "screeching in Greek" (US 255) a clear reference to Woolf's insane belief that birds talked in ancient Greek during her moments of depression; on the other two occasions the king appears cursing Virginia, also combined with classical or mythological images.

The association between the real and the fictional is even extended, in a way, to the narrative technique, since although the story is told in third person, there are occasional remarks by Woolf in first person. This technique of multiple perspective, imitating that of Virginia Woolf herself, can be interpreted as a further resource employed by Malamud to enhance the impression of duplicity, contrasting and juxtaposing two different viewpoints, that of the narrator and that of the character.

The common nexus that links "In Kew Gardens" to "A Confession of Murder" is the fact that both stories dwell upon the ambivalence of reality and fiction, built around the theme of madness. However, in "A Confession of Murder" this is done exclusively from the protagonist's point of view, whereas in the later story, Malamud has further developed this theme, turning the whole of the story into an experimental exercise, in which not only the themes but also the style and the narrative technique contribute to this idea.

I hope this paper will contribute to a better understanding of two of the most basic ideas in Malamud's narrative: the conflicts involved in communication and perception, which in this case have been studied within the particular and peculiar context of madness, but which extend far beyond it, and ultimately contribute to explain the isolationism of the human inner self, an issue which concerned Bernard Malamud greatly and which he depicts so diversely and so well in his fiction.

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