

An Effort for a Psychic Reading of Absurd



Literature

Keywords: neurotic state, double personality, delirium, deviation of logic and discourse, scheme, Don Quixotesque, drama, fantasy, metonymy, short stories, signifier, paradigm, unconscious speech, desire, freedom, writing freely. . .

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Abstract

"Odin Mondvalse", a novelette by Kasem Trebeshina narrates the story and profile of a character that on a first glance appears to be a neurotic going through a diagnosis assignment process. The character manifests double personality and he is ambiguous from a psychological viewpoint. The name Odin Mondvalse, his clinical diagnosis, the psychiatric hospital shall be seen as a consequence, an outcome of the efforts of a "political laboratory" for manipulation of the individual, where systematic rules have been infringed and the defendant, self-named Odin Mondvalse, appears before trial and is declared by the court to be mentally ill. The discourse, deviating from normal logic of perception of things produces absurd. In this respect there is the contribution of the neurotic state, as a psychological state of mind. Consequently, the order of things is disrupted and the artistic play comes to the foreground. The arrests, the accusations, the empirical experience of the author with hospitals, psychiatric commissions have, in my opinion, encouraged him to write "Odin Mondvalse". The work is an "opera aperta", so it has an open plot structure. Surreal time delicately delineates real time, which the readers can perceive gradually as they complete the reading of the storyline and the absent beginning of the story is composed in the same way. The novelette belongs to the surrealist type, under the influence of a Cervantean, Don Quixotesque language style with the marked irony and black humor of "the reason of the unreason". The fictional use of historical characters (which reverses historical facts) aims to create tragicomic effects; their imagined stories are comical and the author consciously gives priority to the delirium producing plays on words. The psychiatry depicted in this novel is a synecdoche, a detail out of the whole, with the whole being socialist realism. (Synecdoche is a figure of speech that Trebeshina widely uses in his work.) The signifiers start to move fluidly in the paradigm, gaining second and third meanings. The metaphors here are contextual metaphors and situations are connected with one – another through the principle of analogy. The metaphors create absurd and phantasmagorical situations which in turn provide arguments and substantiate the modern style of surrealism through the irony, stigmatization, mockery, especially in the dialogues with the slender doctor and the two gentlemen from the Ministry. Seeing it from Lacan's viewpoint, according to which the truth is manifested in the relationship of the individual with the objects of his desire, in Kasem Trebeshina's "Odin Mondvalse", the desired object is freedom (implied key word), love, and life, the freedom to write freely, without hindrances or defined schemes.

Stating that Kasem Trebeshina was the father of surrealism and the absurd in Albanian literature is a historical fact. In a literary absurd system, as socialist realism turned out to be, the writer selected a genre that he is the first to use in Albanian literature, characterized by surrealism and absurd as typical indicators. "Odin Mondvalse" is a novelette, a work that from a psychological viewpoint serves as a defense mechanism (in psychoanalysis the term describes writing that serves as a defense mechanism from reality). In the foreground is the profile of a neurotic going through a diagnosis assignment process, a character of double personality who is ambiguous from a psychological viewpoint. The attempt to perform clinical psychoanalysis is, in fact, in this novelette, actual and literal, since as readers we attempt to analyze an interesting subject, a narrating character that is suspected to have deviations and anomalies of healthy logic of perception of things. The name Odin Mondvalse, the clinical diagnosis, the medical record and the psychiatric hospital shall be seen as a consequence, an outcome of the efforts of a "political laboratory" for manipulation of the individual, where systematic rules have been infringed and the defendant, self-named Odin Mondvalse, appears before trial and is declared by the court to be mentally ill. According to the court verdict, a crime has been committed at some time in the past, which is, in fact, an attempt to fit into a pattern within the scheme the way in which the individual should function and to what should he obey to do in this particular activity referred to. This is the philosophy of this "productive laboratory", which corresponds, in Freudian terms, to the Superego, rules and norms.

It is a pity that, as far as I know, human skin is not good for shoes. They may look pretty when you see them, but they cannot be worn. Maybe human skin would be good for women's purses. Or officials'. Or even official

writers'. And in that regard, your wives and officials should be taught how to use their handbags. (Trebesina, 1992: 115)

In this double personality, the main challenge and difficulty consists in dividing the healthy logic of perception from the other part, the play of insanity, the deviance, thus, to identify the instances of narrative discourse in which logic and the normal order of things applies and those in which this is overthrown and the artistic play begins, helped by the neurotic state and consequently producing absurd. The deviance and the play of insanity brings forth a very significant outcome and is authentically artistic, since it is the central device employed by the author in achieving his artistic and thematic goal through the narrator, Odin. A psychiatric hospital is the perfect circumstance and context for an absurdist and surrealist hero. The neurotic patient, Odin Mondvalsen, is treated as an insane character, he is suspected to be and treated as someone who is not in his right mind (to use informal terms) but this is an artistic play, a deliberate course of action. The patient at hand has an option of "recovering", but in fact, they are wrong (Odin does not change his statement of being of Danish origin, because he wishes to be Danish) and the experiments conducted with this human being in that particular social reality are failed.

The visitors who come to see Odin Mondvalsen in the hospital fail and they also only fail in the end, when they go to see him in the house of Xhevrie's aunt, where he repeats that he is Danish. Under a modern methodical perspective, in her article on "Forms of narration in 'Odin Mondvalsen'", Dhurata Shehri reads this aspect as a variant of the "implied author", where the latter has chosen his variant of self. Shehri emphasizes that: "Consequently, the narrator is the work's protagonist, Odin Mondvalsen, a Dane with a mother born by an Italian father and a French mother as well as a Danish father, who does not want to become king and who does not smoke." (Shehri, 1998: 73).

The hospital and the diagnosis, the medical chart that the doctors try to compile are a result of previous circumstances that have occurred to our patient in the past, supposedly in the Moon. In fact, I am under the impression that the "Moon" possibly stands for Russia, where the author attended his university studies. He then became rebellious in Leningrad, to which Albania reacted through the official institutions of Tirana, committees and secretaries of the party and when a meeting was held, according to testimonies given by Trebesina himself in an interview by Edmond Çali, the Russians stood in his defense. He was later sent in a psychiatric ward (by order of Molotov), a kind of *deus ex machine*, salvation in the final moment to portray him as insane, with a medical chart and the diagnosis "paranoia and psychopathy". Even when Trebesina was arrested in 1953, he again went before a psychiatric commission in Albania. He thus has had his personal experience, a real and empirical occurrence. In my opinion, this served as a trigger in writing "Odin Mondvalsen". This is a rather strong autobiographic parallelism, and the aforementioned interview, Trebesina states: "I was taken to the psychiatric ward and was declared insane... This affected me later, and then later, and then later. I have my own hospital experience. I know hospitals, medical reports, medical charts, I know it all. I have many stories. After the 1950s, I have known them very well from time to time." (Çali, 2006: 36 – 37). And, surprisingly and as an irony of fate, the writer was defended from the witch-hunt by the Russians, which probably served to portray his hero, Mondvalsen, as a foreigner, in this case as Danish.

The time of the happenings which have occurred previously, which is only imagined, is built as an open plot, as an "opera aperta" according to Umberto Eco, not in the end, but in the beginning, creating an effect similar to reading the middle and the end of a plot. Odin Mondvalsen comes from a satellite, from the Moon, after burying his friends and the fiction starts at a certain point, as the continuation of a plot whose beginning is gradually constructed in the course of the reading process. Up to the end of the reading, surreal time slowly uncovers the real time of the line of occurrences: a political crime, a trial, a sentence, detainment, and the terminal, that is the

psychiatric hospital. The reader is free to imagine and compose a personalized beginning for the work and every reader has a personal variant of understanding it.

Playing a dangerous game in front of two officials of the Ministry is an art and simultaneously a strategy for getting away with it, but they leave only after they have become convinced that the individual is at least, not harmful to their system. The psychiatric ward is the consequence of a negative, bitter experience and it is the final destination of mental breakdown. It is the climax in which the nervous system is no longer functioning normally and conforming to the existing reality, due to the excruciation resulting from the absurd circumstances with which Odin has faced previously.

The major metamorphosis in Odin Mondvalsen's brain and psyche has apparently left traces and the psychiatric hospital is the dramatic climax. As Veli Karahoda observes regarding the work's plot and composition in his article "Odin Mondvalsen, the Hero of Absurd", "Odin Mondvalsen's drama is not organized according to the Prustian method; it does not bring a history of search, as something that has been lost cannot be searched; it is also not the drama of existence in search of its own essence as in Poulet. Odin's drama is circular, a drama that has occurred before narration starts." (Karahoda, 1998: 23) The patient's properties and the discourse of a madman as a neurotic patient is a fine stratum that adds to the aesthetics of the work, as it is widely known that the reality disclosed by a madman is not paid attention to and is not taken into account in courts, according to relevant provisions. The narration conforms to surrealist narration, under the influence of what I would call a Cervantean style. In the interview he gave to Edmond Çali, Trebeshina mentions that Cervantes was one of his artistic mentors with his Don Quixote and in turn, his own work bears nuances of resemblance with the famous "reason of the unreason".

The linguistic game flows in absurdist tones, in a social reality that was truly marked by attempts for brainwashing individuals, one of whose elements was, among others, the encouragements of a new model of writing. The traces are in the brain, mind, logic, soul, feelings and they lead to stress depression and even to extremes: psychic neuroses and psychiatric hospitals.

Being the speech of a neurotic patient, the narrative material that flows in a stream of consciousness stems from an unconsciousness that has been liberated inside the consciousness. Classical Freudian theory states that "These drives or wishes strive for instant discharge, regardless of what they will meet with out in the world. They are regulated by the 'primary process', a type of mental functioning whereby energy flows freely by means of certain mechanisms seen to be operative not only in everyday life but also in works of art and literature" (Jefferson and Robey, 1986: 146) Thus, from dream into reality, both of which, in the framework of analysis should be treated as linguistic psychoanalytic material. The author communicates through a linguistic channel that is the work and through the narrator, Odin. The fantasy – the lucid dream (Freudian) – the work are equivalent. The ability to go under Odin's skin is an artistic effect that comes naturally and without strain. Readers feel as if they have really met a person with such drama. This is a characteristic feature of the writer's individuality. In the work, Odin appears rather good-natured and naïve, but drama has captured every feature and element of his story. The novella is entirely written in a modern and postmodern style, considering that, as mentioned above, it contains elements of literary absurd. Some of the arguments for this are the improvisation, guessing, intuition of intertwining wisdom, fantasy with the play of insanity that often displays nuances of black humor. The fictional use of historical characters (which reverses historical facts) aims to create tragicomic effects; their imagined stories are comical and the author consciously gives priority to the delirium producing plays on words. Through Odin, Trebeshina enters and exits the borders of delirium as many times as he chooses to. Together with the device of neurosis, delirium serves as linguistic tools for artistic purposes that produce esthetic effects and pleasure, besides being amusing.

The name Odin Mondvalsen and the statement of affirmation that he is of Danish origin is deliberate and is motivated by simple logic: It is better to be Danish and foreigner and inside a psychiatric ward, but even inside the hospital the eye of the cameras observes everything, probably even the restrooms. The psychiatry depicted in this novel is a synecdoche, a detail out of the whole, with the whole being socialist realism, which Trebeshina widely employs in his work. This is where the logical order of things is disrupted and the chaos of thoughts, concepts, sets in; a cosmogony starts to develop with a different paradigmatic pattern of the language as a result of which meanings become double and then triple and so on. In his article “The Orwellian Vision of Totalitarianism”, Ramadan Musliu argues: “The novelistic action of Trebeshina takes place in a psychiatric hospital. This suffices for the author to employ his method of reverse logic, thus to speak freely on the personal perspective of the individual who is being brainwashed. (Musliu, 1998: 14)

Thus, the novel starts at this point as the continuation of psychological trauma; here also starts the play of the artistic language with the paradigms that fall into varieties, and relationships change meaning and the narration becomes interesting exactly as a result of this metaphorical language. The signifiers start to move fluidly in the paradigm, changing their signification and no longer denoting what they did in their first meaning. This feature of playing with linguistic elements and phrases serves to further emphasize the absurd, the surreal. In his article “The Writer who could not Address to his Contemporaries” Ardian Klosi says that Trebeshina “decides to create a fantastic world and populate it with real characters or create a real world and populate it with phantoms.” (Klosi, 1998: 8)

The novelette starts in the cosmos, in cosmogonic spaces, cosmic bodies: Mars, the Moon spreading like Dantean circles with the Moon and the occurrences in it represent the past, (“there, below” says Mondvalsen, then using the relevant verb tenses) and Mars represents the present where the actual events occur and Odin is arrested. In the interview given to Edmond Çali, the author confirms that: “The visionary is Dante and Michelangelo and the way they compose [...] that is my basis” (Çali, 2006: 7)

In the published part of Trebeshina’s work, which is available to the reader but is a small fraction of the whole, physics and cosmogony are among the author’s artistic system favorite themes. The discourse contains fantastic elements which combine irony, sarcasm, stigmatization, especially in the absurd situation of the communication with the slender doctor and the two gentlemen from the Ministry. In this context, the inverted game takes hold of the novel’s language. The modification of discourse is the one to stigmatize, to point out the ugly, the unjust and to produce comicity, irony.

Examples of absurd, Quixotesque situations in which Odin is involved and where the message is transmitted clearly, which makes doctors doubt if their patient is really sick or is only pretending to be:

1. You might as well take turns, you ride on it first and then it rides on you (the donkey)
2. It won’t get very tired sitting on your back, but its friends might tease it.
3. The others will tell to it that he’s riding on the filthiest race of donkeys of all the planets.

(Trebeshina, 1992: 108)

The discourse is momentous: it is evidently quite simple; very short intertwined subplots are introduced by the narrator and the characters in indirect speech. The plot aims to narrate the real time of the things that have occurred earlier, but time in the novelette remains a mystery, since no dates are mentioned. Philosophical meditations often add interesting nuances in addition to psychological ones; in these cases, there is a need for analyzing the unconsciousness.

According to Jaques Lacan, the structuralist psychoanalyst and linguist, the truth is the element on which the language becomes activated. (Jefferson and Robey, 1986: 145) Similarly with that, Trebeshina weaves the plot

of the novelette around a key axis which is Truth, a component of reality, and composing surrealism upon the truth, which in this case is the raw matter. Seeing it from Lacan's viewpoint, according to which the truth is manifested in the relationship of the individual with the objects of his desire, in Kasem Trebeshina's "Odin Mondvalsen", the desired object is freedom (implied key word), love, life, the freedom to write freely, without hindrances or defined schemes. Lacan evolves further than Saussure, and this is the language which Trebeshina elaborates, a system where the signifier falls into the series from where the signifier has been selected. "Somewhere in the system there is a place for reality", continues he in his theory, and to continue the comparison with the Trebeshinian truth in our case, somewhere in the system where Odin lived, there is a place for truth, the supra-real or surreal with which it is manifested, so the connection is clear.

In Lacan, the subconscious is structured through language. The language in "Odin Mondvalsen" is the narrative form, with the very short intertwined subplots, some narrated by Odin, some by the other patients, telling about pharaohs, kings, Potiphars, the Ancient Egypt. The Self, Odin Mondvalsen in the discourse rhetoric, which in this case is narrated in the first person, has metonymy and metaphor as two integral parts. The metaphor (contextual metaphor) has a central position in the discourse of narration and it is actualized through the concept and process of sublimation (which is a Freudian concept: "As regards metaphor, desire is revealed by the metaphorical substitution for surface meaning of the repressed meaning. The metaphor can be regarded as the symptom which reveals the repressed desire, providing access to the unconscious across the boundary between signifier and signified, (Jefferson and Robey, 1986: 122) where characters, situations, things are connected through the principle of analogy. For example: Odin Mondvalsen foresees like a Greek Delphian oracle the death of his lover, Xhevrie, priory narrating the story of the skeletons of the two black people in the desert. The situations are similar: the tragedy is projected in the mind and imagination. Similarly, the midget riding on the dragonfly (not appropriate to his class) an imaginary phantasmagorical element, in reality foretells an "earthquake", a warning, an unpleasant occurrence. The ironic conversation with the midget riding the dragonfly foregoes the visit of the two men from the Ministry at the house where Odin was staying with his fiancé, Xhevrie. The desires, the truths, realities are presented in the work by metaphorical language; because in the reality of socialist realism, in compliance with the established rules a suppression of language and thoughts exists, situations are substituted metaphorically, and the imagined characters surface, in this case in the narrative discourse, as depicted in the psychoanalytical theory: "In the case of a neurotic, physical symptoms provide clues to transcend from language to daily concerns" (Jefferson and Robey, 1986: 122) Lacan considers these as typical for a neurotic, which in this case corresponds to Odin Mondvalsen, who brings in his daily concerns, his suffering and drama through the discourse of his unconsciousness, the narrative and the novelette, the work.

In the abovementioned interview, Trebeshina affirms that "[...] to me, language is the main character and is the one to provide everything. And language is the greatest thing to have been invented by man. It is through language that man recognizes everything. The language is sublime. The language is a deity, and that is why it must be used in all its nuances, in all its ways." (Çali, 2006: 20)

Conclusions

1. In Trebeshina's novelette "Odin Mondvalsen" a breach of the schemes and rules of socialist realism as a literary method can be noticed. The work shows elements of influence of the surrealist absurd. The hero, Odin Mondvalsen, does not follow the rules in a contentual perspective, which is testified by the absurd consequence of his hospitalization in psychiatric ward. The ward here is a synecdoche, a detail of the whole, with the latter being the socialist realism, with the models that the author was supposed to follow when writing.

2. Odin Mondvalsen is a double character, at times possessing healthy logic and at other times deviating from this logic, disrupting the normal order of things (cosmogony). Consequently, absurd is produced; the language

and discourse are affected resulting often in play on words. The neurotic state serves to the thematic and artistic goal of the author. Neurosis is cured by wisdom and mockery, irony, stigmatization, tools that serve to the artistic goal and produce the aesthetic pleasure and the property of beauty.

3. Trebeshina's "Odin Mondvalsen" is an "opera aperta", an open plot, not in the end, but in the beginning, where, through artistic surreal time the real time and parts of the plot and events that have occurred in the beginning. For example: the political crime that stands in the origin is revealed around the middle of the plot.

4. I am of the opinion that Trebeshina's novelette includes drama, effects of tragicomicity where I perceive the influence of Cervantes, of the Don Quixote type of the "reason of the unreason" type, nonsense in absurd situations, namely referring to all dialogues with the slender doctor and the two gentlemen from the Ministry.

5. The linguistic signifiers of the novelette move fluidly in the paradigm, with the meanings being supplied with additional meanings. Consequently, the dominant figure in the novel is the contextual metaphor (through the principle of analogy), a tool that brings the subconscious on the surface.

6. The desired object (the truth) of Odin is freedom (implied key word), the freedom of writing freely, without hindrances or defined schemes, life with all its beauty, together with love.

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