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**“Just Fooling Around: Madness, Folly, and Artistic Creativity”**

I have been developing an interest in fools and folly both in religion and art, especially narrative art, particularly the important role the fool came to play in the Renaissance and the philosophical and theological ideas that emerged out of this, preeminently the idea of the wisdom of the fool. The features of the fool, their child-like simplicity and empty-headedness, the natural, even sometimes base inclination that showed an affinity for material reality, and especially the propensity towards comedy and play have made me think the fool might be a good analogy for the artist.

With this in the back of my mind, when I came across Jacques Maritain’s discussion of the artist and madness in his *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* it immediately struck a cord. And since it immediately precedes his thesis statement about the book I thought looking into this would be a good way to not only reflect on some of the key ideas in Maritain, including beauty, contemplation, symbolism, and especially knowledge through connaturality, that intimate union between the knower and the known, but to develop these further.

At least since Plato a connection between the artist and madness has been made.

However, in recent centuries this has focused especially on psychological disorders.<sup>1</sup> While such

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<sup>1</sup> While Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, in their exhaustive study of the way artists have been thought of in the West, are absolutely correct that the idea of the mad artist “is compounded of many heterogeneous elements rather than restricted to the belief that genius is mentally ill,” including Plato’s idea of divine madness as well as a more general sense of “eccentric behavior” (*Born Under Saturn* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1963), 101), it is the view of madness as mental illness that has arisen to be the dominant perspective associating madness and artistic creativity. However, this has hardly gone unopposed and the question has been and continues to be debated. See Wittkower, 98–102 for some of the competing perspectives as well as the more recent studies of Becker, Ludwig, Nettle and Rothenberg listed in the bibliography.

studies are not unimportant, my concern is that they can lead to a one-sided, rather dark view of a self-absorbed artistic “genius.” Ultimately this distracts from the real subject of art, which is the world around us in its diverse beauty. Maritain, in his discussion of madness, tries to recover the Platonic idea of divine madness or “madness from above.” Maritain’s sense that the madness of the artist is more defined by its opposition to purely speculative ways of dealing with reality rather than being psychological maladjustment points to a healthier view of artistic creativity. My paper aims to build off of this insight and I argue that a better way to think of the artist is not in terms of madness but in terms of foolishness. The artist’s closest analog is not the mad person but the fool. In fact, the artist is not merely *like* a fool but the artist *is* a fool.

I work towards this tentative conclusion in the paper through three sections. First, I look closer at what is involved in Maritain’s view of the mad artist by placing it in dialogue with Plato, who he builds off of, and Schopenhauer, who has some very interesting similarities to Maritain. For all three, the association of creativity with literal madness is only an analogy (and the two have no direct connection). In the second part, I will propose that in contrast to Plato’s view of divine madness (which Schopenhauer and Maritain employ), there is a general form of madness in modern society which is its opposite, the result of the subjective turn toward the self in philosophy and psychology that leads to an obsession with the self (this madness is different from but not unconnected to mental illness). In the third part I consider how viewing the artist as a fool provides a response to this particular madness, a response that goes beyond simply returning to Plato’s divine madness as a dialectical alternative. The progression of the sections, then, is from exposition to critique to constructive proposal.

## **Maritain Plato, and Schopenhauer on Artistic Madness**

Maritain, Plato, and Schopenhauer all appeal to the analogy of madness in their understanding of artistic creativity as a kind of inspiration. They roughly share the same view that what the artist experiences is reality at its deepest level, the world of Ideas for Plato, the Will for Schopenhauer, and Beauty for Maritain. The key features of this experience include at least four elements: first, that it comes from outside the self; next, it draws one away from practical, daily life; third, it has nothing to do with formal artistic technique in the sense that technique is only secondary, the means to communicate the more significant experience; and last, the artist's experience has the *appearance* of madness. Literal madness in its most general form can be understood as a breakdown in one's relationship to reality and it is this appearance of a separation from reality in the creative act that elicits the analogy with madness. However, while there is this similarity between madness and artistic creativity, none of the three thinkers equates the two. I will now fill in these general comments by focusing on each separately.

Plato's primary discussion of creativity and madness is in the two dialogues the *Ion* and the *Phaedrus*. I will limit my comments to the later. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates is in dialogue with the title character on the subject of love as a kind of madness and whether this makes it good or bad. In this context, Socrates speaks of two kinds of madness, one evil, literal insanity, the other good because it "comes as a gift from heaven," from outside the self, and it "is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings."<sup>2</sup> This "madness from above" is experienced in four phenomena: prophecy, sin purification rites, poetry, and love.<sup>3</sup> The reason such divine madness is a blessing relates to Plato's metaphysics which are later expressed in the dialogue in the myth

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<sup>2</sup> *Phaedrus and the Seventh and Eighth Letters*, trans. Walter Hamilton (Hamondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), 45.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 46–49.

of the chariot. This myth tells the story of how humans fell from the world of the pure Forms, where the gods dwell, into material bodies where through cycles of reincarnation they try to return to their origin. Divine madness, coming from outside the self and experienced in the encounter with Beauty, reminds the individual of this original state and draws them back towards it. It is this drawing away that detaches the lover from daily, practical concerns. As Josef Pieper notes in his commentary on this dialogue, “The primordial condition, being at the same time the true goal and end of human existence, constitutes the object of man’s *remembrance* as well as his *longing*. However, both remembrance and longing can unfold only if man, be it ever so briefly, leaves behind the busyness of his activities and steps outside the concerns of his workaday world.”<sup>4</sup> And it is this disregard for daily life that then exposes the lover to the charge of insanity. “Because he [the lover] stands apart from the common objects of human ambition and applies himself to the divine, he is reproached by most men for being out of his wits; they do not realize that he is in fact possessed by a god.”<sup>5</sup> So for Plato, the lover is mad only in appearance, not literally, and if one could see the source of their inspiration, they would appear totally sane.

As noted, for Plato poetry is only one context in which this divine madness appears.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it is not the most important. But what was said above, that the lover only *appears* as mad, equally applies to the artist.<sup>7</sup> But speaking directly concerning the artist, Plato notes that the fact that this madness comes from outside the artist makes technique secondary and the

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<sup>4</sup> Josef Pieper, “*Divine Madness*”: *Plato’s Case Against Secular Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 42, emphasis original.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 55–6.

<sup>6</sup> At least in the *Phaedrus*, when Plato refers to poetry it is specifically to verbal arts such as lyric or epic poetry. The question of to what extent Plato’s discussions of poetry can be more broadly applied to the other modern fine arts cannot be gone into here, but Maritain argues for this. See *Poetry and Creative Intuition* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), 88–9.

<sup>7</sup> As the Wittkowers note, it would be left to Italian Renaissance philosopher Ficino to connect this Platonic madness with mental instability by combining Plato with Aristotle’s writings on melancholy. See *Born Under Saturn*, 103.

primary task of the artist goes beyond this. “But if a man comes to the door of poetry untouched by the madness of the Muses, believing that technique alone will make him a good poet, he and his sane compositions never reach perfections, but are utterly eclipsed by the performances of the inspired madman.”<sup>8</sup> While this gives the impression of a lofty occupation for the artist, it should be noted that later in the dialogue when Plato rehearses the myth of the fall of humans into bodies and describes the social ladder of re-ascent he only gives the poet sixth place behind the philosopher, ruler/warrior, manager, athlete/doctor, and the fortune teller,<sup>9</sup> which shows his bias against material being, his well known criticism of the poet in the *Republic*. It is in Maritain and Schopenhauer that the artist is given a much higher status as the revealer of the transcendent.

Maritain explicitly builds off of Plato’s idea of “madness from above.” Like Plato, technique is not sufficient to ensure a perfect work. Maritain, like many other philosophers, makes a strong distinction between what he terms the useful and fine arts. The useful arts serve a purpose and have definite rules and techniques that can be taught and repeated with no difficulty. The fine arts, in contrast, are their own end and the “rules” are endless because the creative work must adapt itself “with respect to the beauty participated in; and beauty is infinite.”<sup>10</sup>

While Maritain calls the artist mad, he is emphatic that this artistic madness “comes from the free and intuitive creativity of the intellect and imagination starting in the spiritual unconscious, above logical reason, and has nothing to do, except accidentally, with psychological unbalance or ‘mental disease.’”<sup>11</sup> What gives the appearance of madness in the artist is that they obey “an all-conquering instinct which is free from and extraneous to logical

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>10</sup> *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, 56.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 84, n.12.

and conceptual reason.”<sup>12</sup> But this does not mean it is *against* reason or detached from lived reality as insanity would be. Since creativity comes from this unconscious place beyond conceptual reason, which is primarily employed for practical, daily life tasks, Maritain comments that such an experience is “a privilege of those souls in which the margin of dreaming activity and introverted natural spirituality, unemployed for the business of human life, is particularly large.”<sup>13</sup> This neglect of daily life and useful, speculative knowledge and reason can appear as madness since it is “abnormal,” deviating from the way things usually operate in the world.

Where Maritain departs from Plato is on the question of the source of this creative inspiration, and this forms the foundation for his entire book: “I think that what we have to do is to make the Platonic Muse descend into the soul of man, where she is no longer Muse but creative intuition; and Platonic inspiration descend into the intellect united with imagination, where inspiration from above the soul becomes inspiration from above conceptual reason, that is, poetic experience.”<sup>14</sup> While not denying the spiritual, this move by Maritain makes Plato’s idea of inspired madness more palatable to the modern mind. And while such a quote may appear to make the entire creative act reside in the human mind alone, for Maritain there is still a sense of inspiration coming from without because of his dynamic view of the subject’s relation to reality around it. Later in his book, Maritain makes it clear that for him the subject only realizes itself through the objects that surround it and that the whole point of his idea of connatural knowledge is that the subject only knows itself through a connatural experience with what is outside of the self and then expresses this experience in a made object.<sup>15</sup> So while artistic inspiration is in the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 114–115.

preconscious activity of the intellect, it is activated by the subject encountering objects that it connaturally identifies with and in this sense, inspiration comes from outside the self. This emphasis on the material object encountered by the self is another difference between Plato and Maritain and is evident in the place both give to the arts: for Plato they are very low while for Maritain they are very high. This issue of the value of the material will become important later in the discussion of the fool.

Schopenhauer, in his *The World as Will and Representation*, like Maritain, builds off of Plato. Most basic to his philosophy is the idea of Will which Lucian Krukowski notes can be compared with Plato's Forms since both "function as the underlying principles of their respective cosmologies."<sup>16</sup> But a difference between the two is that Schopenhauer, like Maritain, gives art a much more important role in his schema than Plato does. For Schopenhauer art has a symbolic function in that it "plucks the object of its contemplation from the stream of the world's course, and holds it isolated before it. This particular thing, which in that stream was an infinitesimal part, becomes for art the representative of the whole, an equivalent of the infinitely many in space and time."<sup>17</sup> This contemplative stance of the whole that art gives is, for Schopenhauer, one of the best means (besides philosophy) to break out of the endless cycle of individual will with its frustrated desire and suffering and to grasp the reality in the Will itself. Art, then, contrasts with science which is active and operates according to "the principle of sufficient reason," or we could say, speculative knowledge. Thus we find a pre-echo of Maritain in Schopenhauer.

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<sup>16</sup> *Aesthetic Legacies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 54.

<sup>17</sup> *The World as Will and Representation*, in *Continental Aesthetics*, edited by Richard Kearney and David Rasmussen (Oxford; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 54.

Like Plato and Maritain, although even more explicitly, Schopenhauer sees the artist as being drawn out of the self by something outside of the self to the point that practical, daily life is neglected. Also, the artist does not stop with the experience but must hold it throughout the creative process which ends in the material product. These points are well expressed together in the following extended quote:

Only through the pure contemplation described above, which becomes absorbed entirely in the object, are the Ideas comprehended; and the nature of *genius* consists precisely in the preeminent ability for such contemplation. Now as this demands a complete forgetting of our own person and of its relations and connexions, the *gift of genius* is nothing but the most complete *objectivity*, i.e., the objective tendency of the mind, as opposed to the subjective directed to our own person, i.e., to the will. ... In other words, genius is the ability to leave entirely out of our sight our own interest, our willing, and our aims, and consequently to discard entirely our own personality for a time, in order to remain *pure knowing subject*, the clear eye of the world; and this not merely for moments, but with the necessary continuity and conscious thought to enable us to repeat by deliberate art what has been apprehended, and ‘what in wavering apparition gleams fix in its place with thoughts that stand for ever!’ [Goethe] ... the ordinary man does not linger long over the mere perception, does not fix his eye on an object for long, but, in everything that presents itself to him, quickly looks merely for the concept under which it is to be brought, just as the lazy man looks for a chair, which then no longer interests him. Therefore he is very soon finished with everything, with works of art, with beautiful natural objects, and with that contemplation of life in all its scenes which is really of significance everywhere. He does not linger; he seeks only his way in life, or at most all that might at any time become his way. Thus he makes topographical notes in the widest sense, but on the consideration of life itself as such he wastes no time. On the other hand, the man of genius, whose power of knowledge is, through its excess, withdrawn for a part of his time from the service of his will, dwells on the consideration of life itself, strives to grasp the Idea of each thing, not in its relations to other things. In doing this, he frequently neglects a consideration of his own path in life, and therefore often pursues this with insufficient skill.<sup>18</sup>

It is this break in the artist from the normal, instrumental “relations to other things,” the neglect of normal, practical life, that makes the artist appear mad. The association of madness (as insanity) with artistic creativity is something Schopenhauer is very sensitive to. However, like Maritain, he concludes that it is because of their lack of concern with practical and abstract knowledge that the genius can come across as irrational, indeed imprudent. “But the cause of this is not weakness of the faculty of reason” rather it is because the focus is so much on perception

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 54–6, emphasis original.

that concepts are ignored and thus the artist *appears* as irrational.<sup>19</sup> It is in this focus on perception, on the immediate subject at hand, that Schopenhauer finds the relevance of the analogy of madness with creativity, indeed why the artist is often called mad: “Just this is his point of contact with the genius; for he too leaves out of sight knowledge of the connexion [sic.] of things.... The individual object of his contemplation, or the present which he apprehends with excessive vividness, appears in so strong a light that the remaining links of the chain, so to speak, to which they belong, withdraw into obscurity, and this gives us phenomena that have long been recognized as akin to those of madness.”<sup>20</sup> But the significant difference between the two is that for the mad person the focus on the present leads to the exclusion of the reality, losing the connection with practical life, while for the artist the focus on the present leads to a grasp of the whole of reality that underlies the particulars of practical, daily life.

To this point, we have considered how three different thinkers have in similar ways thought of the relationship of the artist with madness, that it is marked by a loss of the self in a present experience that comes from outside the self, that it pulls them away from daily, practical life and departs from the discursive reason it is based on, that it does not depend primarily on a learned, pre-set technique, and that this overall experience exposes the artist to the accusation of madness. But all three conclude it is very different from madness as mental illness.

Before moving on to redefine artistic madness as foolishness and in order to set up why such a redefinition would be helpful, I want to put forth and consider the possibility that while numerous mental illnesses exist today and wreck havoc on individual lives and in their relationships with others, there is a more general madness in the modern world to which the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 59.

artist, rather than being mad, sanely responds. This madness is the modern anthropology of the autonomous, rational, self-creating self, the legacy of the Renaissance and Enlightenment.

### **Modern Madness**

In discussing madness or mental illness, it is important to note that it is not simply a loss of the ability to reason. Insane people can be very reasonable and can think clearly on many subjects or in particular contexts. What lies at the root of such conditions is a basic loss of connection with reality in some particular part. It is useful here to return to Schopenhauer's discussion of madness. In considering what it is that really makes somebody mad, he notes, "For the most part, mad people do not generally err in the knowledge of what is immediately *present*; but their mad talk relates always to what is *absent*, and *past*, and only through these to its connexion [sic.] with what is present. Therefore, it seems to me that their malady specially concerns the *memory*. ... [It is] a case of the thread of memory being broken, its continuous connexion being abolished, and of the impossibility of a uniformly coherent recollection of the past."<sup>21</sup> I would suggest a reading of this quote as providing an explanation for a particular kind of madness that has arisen from the extreme turn towards the individual subject in the modern era in philosophy and psychology, supported by the efficiency of science and technology and their emphasis on discursive, practical reason and technique, a madness that, through its focus on a particular kind of "present," that of the momentary self, has led to a break with the past and a break with reality itself.

In his book *The Religion of Reality*, Didier Maleuvre does an excellent job of tracing out the evolution of this loss of reality through excessive attention to the self. He argues that since

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 58, emphasis original.

the Renaissance, through Descartes, Kant, and up the present, the subjectivist turn in philosophy, while giving the appearance of being an objective analysis of the self, is equally aesthetic. The thinkers don't just describe the self but they create the ideal self, as humans wish they could be, autonomous, self-creating, and apart from the ravages of the material world. For Maleuvre, this amounts to a kind of idolatry, placing the self at the center of reality rather than incorporating the self into the greater reality that transcends it.<sup>22</sup> And while he notes that there are contemporary critiques of "the rosy notion of a perfectly self-transparent ego," "the man on the street goes about his business with vigorous Cartesian confidence. The process of individualizing human destiny shows no sign of losing steam."<sup>23</sup> As the self turns progressively inward, gaining strength as the center of gravity, reality outside the self fades and loses its weight.

Maleuvre notes two factors besides philosophy that have aided in this exaltation of the self. These are science and technology on the one hand, and economics and the general pace of modern life on the other.<sup>24</sup> First, scientific and technological proficiency, also gaining steam since the sixteenth-century, have largely stripped natural reality of much of its power and mystery and increased human confidence in their own powers, particularly speculative knowledge gained through discursive reason, the engine that drives the sciences. Related to this progress of science is the exponential increase in the pace of modern life which is connected to the rise of free-market economies where value is placed on the efficient and new which drives consumerist culture faster and faster and deeper inward as the self tries to recreate itself over and

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<sup>22</sup> See *The Religion of Reality* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2006), 2–4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 133–4.

over.<sup>25</sup> Age, experience, durability, and their connection with tradition and the past become obsolete. This progressive gathering of philosophical anthropology, science, and economics has combined to cut off the individual from the past, from memory, and only to focus the consumer on the recreation of the self in the present moment which, by Schopenhauer's definition, is madness.<sup>26</sup>

That madness does not depend on a loss of one's ability to reason is evident by observing that in the development of this modern, egocentric madness discursive reason has continued operating unaffected in the individual, thinking subject. While speculative knowledge has a valuable role to play in human knowing, in the modern setting it has been given the place of privilege as the final judge of what is true and real, placed in service of an ideal, autonomous self that is separate from reality and can understand and control it. What makes it madness is that the self places itself at the center of reality and speculative knowledge becomes merely the means to orient all things to the self and make all things, including nature and others, useful to the self and in the end the self is cut off from reality, from any past and tradition that could give it grounding and it is suspended in the ever-new present of whatever the self desires at this moment.

This kind of madness ironically reverses the traits of artistic madness noted in Plato, Maritain, and Schopenhaer. Rather than an outside influence coming to the self, the self merely turns in on itself. Rather than detaching the self from daily, practical life, the mundane becomes the sole arena in which the self operates, striving for pragmatic self-sufficiency and comfort. Rather than disregarding technique as only a means to expression and no guarantee in itself, in

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<sup>25</sup> The rise of media technologies, especially Facebook, can be seen at the latest evolution in this cult of the self that dissolves material reality into a world of screens and links, a kind of de-incarnation.

<sup>26</sup> Maleuvre does not, to my knowledge, ever make this explicit connection of seeing modern egocentricism as a kind of madness.

the modern situation technique is the only thing that matters, careful quantification guaranteeing predictable results. Granted, this kind of madness is not a clinical mental illness that can be treated with pills, but it has in common with such ailments the fact that there is a break from reality. And the fact that it can be separated from mental illness makes it even more difficult to diagnose and treat, because it denies its condition by turning back to discursive reason and arguing, reasonably and based on hard facts, that the self should be the center of everything.<sup>27</sup> This is not to deny that people engage in activities where they connect with and show concern for something outside the self, be it a pet, the ecosystem, social justice, or spirituality, among many options, rather it is a matter of where final authority lies. The modern age grounds itself in the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, photocopied and handed out to each person as a template: *I hold these truths to be self-evident.*

What is a possible alternative to this condition? Maleuvre asks: “What perfection greater than personal sovereignty, individual autonomy, and mental self-possession lies in store for us beyond the self? The answer is attunement with reality, with the total existence of the world.”<sup>28</sup> Such a reorientation involves a turning of the self outward, a focusing of one’s attention on the particular uniqueness of all that is outside the self and how things at each moment strike the self. It is this particular kind of attention that is central to Maritain’s theory of poetry and creative intuition: “In other words, the primary requirement of poetry, which is the obscure knowing, by the poet, of his own subjectivity, is inseparable from, is one with another requirement—the grasping, by the poet, of the objective reality of the outer and inner world: not by means of

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<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the greatest symptom of this madness is the split-personality of modern society which on one hand has a basic optimism concerning knowing how things “really are” via science and a confidence in improving things via technology but on the other hand philosophically maintains a happy, agnostic nihilism over any stability of interpretations or meaning in reality beyond the self.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 133.

concepts and conceptual knowledge, but by means of an obscure knowledge...through affective union.”<sup>29</sup> The irony in this is that the self is actually fully realized in this encounter that is beyond the self. This, in short, is why I think the artist can best be called a fool, because they operate based on the paradoxical wisdom of the fool that the self is realized only by an emptying of the self, that to become wise you must become a fool, that the way up is the way down. In this value of descent or kenosis it differs from Platonic madness because it places emphasis on material reality and particularity. It differs from artistic madness as mental illness in saying that rather than breaking from reality and merely disappearing into the dream of the self’s expression, it makes the self dumb, nothing, rather than everything, and connects the self to reality in its fullness. And in as much as it goes against the modern madness and its ethos just discussed above by denying the primacy of the subjective self, it will appear as a kind of literal madness, as a break from reality, since it deviates from the current majority view of reality.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Artist as Fool**

The points observed in Plato, Maritain, and Schopenhauer’s version of the artist’s madness, that it is based on something that comes from outside the self, that it draws the self out of daily, practical life, and that technique is secondary, are all present in the character of the fool. But rather than merely being another name for “madness from above,” the idea of the fool adds

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<sup>29</sup> *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, 114–115.

<sup>30</sup> It is also worth considering if there is a connection between the rise in the view of the artist as mentally ill, especially in the Romantic era, and the rise of the anthropocentric philosophy supported by modern industrial science and economics, that as the world lost its objective, organic enchantment artists turned inward as an alternative, accepting their exile from the world, that if humans are now cut off from reality it is the artist’s job to go the furthest, to be the spokesperson for all, literally the maddest. As Maleuvre notes, “The notion that the real world, the *res ultima*, was beyond our reach inspired the romantic readers of Kant like Hölderlin, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Nerval to regard mankind as irrevocably exiled from the world” (138). What is interesting is that all four of these writers suffered from mental illness to varying degrees.

important new elements of its own namely emptiness, naturalness, a focus on matter that leads to an attitude of play, comedy, and hope.

When I speak of the idea of the fool, I am referring to the rich thinking that has grown up around the concept over time, especially in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, culminating in the sixteenth century with Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly* and Shakespeare's great fools, by which point the fool had become a complex character that could be a rhetorical device to reflect on human nature.

What is it that distinguishes the fool from the ordinary person? Walter Kaiser comments that "whoever is called foolish, whether the lover, the dupe, the sinner, or the theatrical clown, is called so because he acts like a man deprived of his wits—like a natural fool."<sup>31</sup> The "natural" fool, one who was born without certain mental abilities, was the starting place for reflection on the fool and only in light of society's view of this kind of person can the artificial fool, the wise person who acts the fool, be understood. As Kaiser notes, in the Middle Ages there was an ambivalence in attitudes toward such individuals who, rather than being isolated from general social life, as in the nineteenth-century, were kept a part of daily life. "For the stupidity of his words and deeds he was often derided; for his inability to behave and understand like other people he was sometimes pitied; and occasionally, because he was thought to be under the special protection of God, he was venerated. For all three reasons he was tolerated."<sup>32</sup> He notes that regarding natural fools "their heads seemed as empty as a pair of bellows, and accordingly the Latin word for bellows the name *fool* or *fou* was coined for them."<sup>33</sup> Here is a basic and

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<sup>31</sup> *Praisers of Folly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

significant difference between folly and madness (as mental illness or the modern madness describe above). The difference is a matter of what is in one's head: the mad person has too much in their head and is only turned within on the subjective self; the fool simply has nothing and is thus open to reality in its fullness.

The emptiness of the fool expressed itself in a very basic naturalness. That the natural fool was called natural points to the fact that not only were they this way by nature, but that in many ways they acted closer to nature, simply following their natural appetites, eating when they wanted to, not controlling their emotions, and, most significantly, ignoring social customs for the simple fact that they were beyond their mental powers. Quite simply, the natural fool "lives in the fullness of that moment, for he is not intelligent enough to remember the past or to anticipate the future...."<sup>34</sup> The natural fool, then, stood in contrast to the mature, social human who had learned the codes of behavior, rules of conduct, and how to control the self in certain situations for their own advantage and as well as the greater social harmony.

This position of natural simplicity free of social restraints was the fertile place that gave rise to the multiple meanings folly came to represent, as well as the emergence of the artificial fool as one who feigned folly. Barbara Swain notes at least four kinds of people the term fool could be applied to, all with a certain overlap: first was that natural fool lacking knowledge or reason; second was the one who acts contrary to wisdom, performing an action that subverts the health of society or the individual, the typical distinction between wisdom and folly; next, one who performs light entertainment that distracts from daily life, for example the court jester; and last "...the innocent, unworldly, spiritual man whose simplicity, candor and honesty perhaps lay

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 6. Here again we see Schopenhauer's definition of madness as a break from the past.

him open to the scornful patronage of his neighbors and whose happiness seems to lie in some experience outside the common objectives of the group around him.”<sup>35</sup>

It is in the merging of these meanings that the fool takes on its most nuanced form as a figure of wisdom in contrast to the folly of the world, one who has realized a higher truth that ironically lies in the simplicity of the natural fool. And this is where the artificial fool becomes important because they are the ones who realize this deeper wisdom of simplicity and they become the active messengers of trying to persuade others of this paradoxical wisdom.

Here is where the artist as fool becomes most apparent, for the artist, like the natural fool, simply opens themselves up to reality in its fullness, but like the artificial fool this is an attitude that, at least for most artists, is something that must be learned, the need for a progressive emptying of the self to attain true knowledge of the self by means of the real encounter with what is outside the self. And it is precisely this position that places the artist at odds with modern society, just like the fool, in their radical turning away from the autonomous self. As Maleuvre notes, compared to “the common man” who is distracted from reality, focusing on things only in relation to the self, “the artist has a tactile affinity for sensible reality. He does not rush from a thing to its significance. Instead he agrees to make himself *stupid* for the sake of reality (Latin *stupere*, ‘to be astonished’). Only through this act of self-humbling can he behold colors, pigments, words, marble, or sounds not the way others do, as signposts, but in themselves.”<sup>36</sup>

Like the natural fool, the artist simply takes life as it comes.

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<sup>35</sup> Barbara Swain, *Fools and Folly During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 5.

<sup>36</sup> *The Religion of Reality*, 199, emphasis original.

Maleuvre's mention of the "tactile affinity for sensible reality" connects to another aspect of the fool and that is, rather than flying off into the ether of abstract concepts, moving from the particular quickly to the general, they stay at the surface, focusing on the particular *material* thing. It is in this common focus on simple matter that the fool especially goes beyond the artistic madness of Plato and Schopenhauer with their idealist tendencies and shows its essentially comic, playful nature.<sup>37</sup>

Pratfalls, it is said, are the essence of the comic. . . . The knockabout stumble, the unwanted fall, gives consciousness an intimation of its demise. It is a reminder of the weight and authority of matter over spirit. To lose one's footing, to trip, to blunder into awkward places—these clownish intrusions of the physical into the psychical are also part of the artist's workday. For making art requires a willingness to go wrong, to botch and bumble. Attachment to the polished dooms an artist. A flawless exterior bespeaks timidity, playing it safe, oratorical incuriosity. It is art. . . . petrified by the fear of causing displeasure. Shying away from risk, the second-rate artist misses out on the adventure of reality. He loves his brushes more than he loves reality. Not so with the courageous artist. Out of love for reality, the latter happily dons the fool's cap and agrees to go out and bungle and stray. . . . This is the artist's trial: to concede to being the least able of all artists, to forget his stock-in-trade, to be the untutored idiot."<sup>38</sup>

In this emptying of the artist who is open to and fascinated by each particular, material thing, we also see a new twist on why technique is secondary if not irrelevant: technique is based on habit and becomes part of the self and too strong of a commitment to it imposes the self and obstructs the artist from really capturing reality in their medium. The artist must be willing to have the humility of Cézanne: "With my tube of paint, my brushes in my hand, I am nothing but a painter, the last of the painters, a child. . . . I forget everything I know."<sup>39</sup>

Based on these initial observations of the artist as fool we can note two rehabilitative benefits provided by viewing the artist as fool rather than mad person (whether mentally ill)

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<sup>37</sup> Maritain is much closer to this more incarnate approach.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 271.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Ibid. It is worth noting that Maleuvre insightfully notes that total surrender to technique, for example in Seurat, can also be a kind of self-humbling (see 275). Cézanne's mention of being a child points to another connection with the fool that cannot be pursued here, its connection to childishness and innocence.

or the modern madness as traced out above). On the one hand there is an epistemological benefit: whereas the mad person is turned in towards the self and doubts, or at the very least ignores the possibility of real knowledge of something outside the self, the artist affirms that it is the reality outside the self that is the greatest, indeed infinite, object of knowledge. There is also an ethical benefit: for the mad person reality is turned away from in favor of the self but the fool moves out toward material reality in all its diversity and affirms creation's goodness (this also is a critique of ideal Platonic madness).

In their affirmation of material reality's basic goodness, the artist as fool is optimistic and this opens out towards hope, the very thing lacking in modern madness. In this, art proves itself to be primarily comic. Tragedy is largely closed in, a subjective meditation on human problems, the subjective self, worrying about why everything in the cosmos is against *me*; it is egocentric. But the fool as artist moves out of the self and is at home in the sea-change of life.

Finally, there is one more benefit from shifting the focus from the artist as mad to the artist as fool, perhaps the most important. In Plato, Schopenhauer, and Maritain, we saw that madness was used merely as an analogy for the artist. The two are similar, united by their common focus on the particular present that leads to a disconnection from reality, but they are not the same and it is not desirable for the artist to become mad. In contrast, the fool is more than analogy. In the wisdom of the fool, a wisdom which advocates emptying the self, approaching reality naturally and valuing material reality in its infinite diversity, the artist has a model they actually attempt to live into; the artist must strive to become a fool and thereby to gain the self and the world.

In conclusion, I would simply like to give two examples of the foolish artist, of individuals who indeed became fools in their relation to society and thereby produced art of enduring beauty. In this way perhaps the discussion above can be concretely illustrated. One is the nineteenth-century British Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, the other the eighteenth-century Japanese Buddhist monk Ryokan.

Ryokan, whose name itself means “great fool,” was a monk who lived a wandering life of poverty and who was famous for his poetry and calligraphy. A description of him in an early poetry anthology edited by his friend Suzuki Bundai sums him up well:

Worldly people call him different things: fool, wise man, idiot, man of the Way. He never flatters the rich and important, nor disdains the poor and humble. He isn't happy when he gets things or sad when he loses them. He just goes along, natural, relaxed, a man who has transcended the dust of the world. He is always accompanied by children and, when he is out begging, can be found playing with them in the shade of trees and in the fields, tugging at blades of grass, sumo wrestling, and bouncing balls.<sup>40</sup>

A perfect poem that captures this foolish spirit and its love for reality is “The Ball”:

In my sleeve is a ball of colored silk thread  
 worth a thousand pieces of gold  
 I'm a great player—the best there is!  
 Do you want to know my secret?  
 It's this:  
 One! two! three! four! five! six! seven!

My lower robe is too short, my upper robe too long  
 But my stride is high-spirited and energetic  
 The moment the children in the street see me  
 They clap their hands and, all together,  
 break into the ball-playing song.

Retiring and awkward, careless and lazy  
 I lack what it takes to succeed in this world  
 My begging bowl comes with me wherever I go  
 My begging bag, too, makes a perfect companion  
 Arriving here at the temple gate  
 I run into the children  
 There's nothing like this life of mine  
 Just passing the days, soaring calm and free

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Peter Haskell, “Ryokan of Mount Kagumi,” in *Great Fool: Zen Master Ryokan*, trans. and ed. Ryuichi Abe and Peter Haskell, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), 3.

Hair wild and unkempt, ears sticking out  
 My threadbare robe trembles like swirling fog  
 At twilight I make my way home from town  
 As the children tug at me from every side

Every day, day after day  
 I spend at my ease playing with the children  
 In the sleeves of my robe, two or three balls  
 A useless fellow, yes  
 But I know how to make myself drunk  
 sipping my fill of the peaceful springtime<sup>41</sup>

Concerning Hopkins, equally amusing stories can be cited about his foolishness such as the following comment by a gardener at one of the places he was staying: “I saw him the other day in the garden turning round and round and looking at a piece of glass in the path. I took him for a natural [idiot].”<sup>42</sup> And an excellent poem for capturing his foolish, loving attention to reality is “God’s Grandeur”:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
 It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
 Crushed. Why do men then no not reck his rod?  
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
 And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
 And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil  
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.  
 And for all this, nature is never spent;  
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
 And though the last lights off the black West went  
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.<sup>43</sup>

Such statements by two great fools are certainly proof that they have found the path to the greatest form of sanity, reality itself in its fullness with themselves contently part of it.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 134–5.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Joseph J. Feeney, *The Playfulness of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 15.

<sup>43</sup> Accessed May 16, 2011, <http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/hopkins/section1.rhtml>

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