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### The Stones of Madness and the City of Madness

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#### Abstract

The pre-modern existential metaphor of mental healthcare is analyzed through two relevant works of art, one by Hieronymus Bosch and another by Pieter Brueghel the Elder.

**Keywords:** madness, medicine, alchemy, spagira, Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Brueghel the Elder

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The mystery of human madness is perhaps still far from being completely solved still in the twenty-first century, with the new drugs available and the current science, often that veil remains that cloaks the demons of the Id and the most hidden and profound states of psyche.

Perhaps never as in these days affected by the so-called Covid 19 pandemic, the theme of madness had been so present in the world, cohabiting with a virus, but always present with the same humanity, so much so as to be a frequent theme in the art of every era and culture. We have therefore chosen two examples, similar to each other in terms of place and period, but different enough to see the sides of that coin which is mental insanity in the long autumn of the Middle Ages and, if you like, in what for us was the golden Renaissance, but which in Northern Europe took on darker and more disturbing tones.

The first work we will see is *The Stone of Madness*, by Hieronymus Bosch.

The fascination exerted by Bosch’s mysteriously simple works and life has always led those who paid attention to his paintings to try to enter and interpret the

fantastic worlds that are depicted in them. What probably turned out to be manifest or in any case intelligible at various levels to the Flemish painter’s contemporaries, has become increasingly obscure with the progress of the centuries and so we have come to see in these plates, from time to time, the action of a madman, of an erotomaniac, of a demonic cultist, of an *ante litteram* drug addict or of a heretic, and to finally interpret them, on the basis of the current psychoanalytic discipline.

Others, more wisely, have intuited the existence of various types of messages ranging from magical to alchemical, often hidden under the guise of the religious and moral imagery typical of the time. We wish to remember that Bosch is remembered above all as a “painter of devils” by his contemporary admirers who immediately recognize him as the initiate who is able to see with a “second sight” the supernatural creatures belonging to Heaven, the Underworld and those Intermediate Worlds. They recognized in this way, even within a hermetic Christian discourse, the existence of beings that do not belong either to the Kingdom of Light or to that of Darkness or even of the Elementals, of which Paracelsus will then treat. The alchemical aspect, on the

other hand, is undoubtedly less evident to the profane eye, hidden in symbols and forms, in its crystalline or siliceous structures, tools or biomechanical buildings: one would say today that undoubtedly these images refer to ampoules, stills and flasks or to the Fulcanelian athanor. The alchemical process, *Opus*, in Bosch's paintings is to be found in the reading and deciphering of many tables as long as it is possible to understand the "code" hidden therein. In a certain sense he pictorially anticipates the "occult" method of Michel de Nostredame that will follow him years later, with his *Centuries*.

However, there is a painting in particular, a work considered youthful by some critics, which behind the veil of irony and moralizing allegory hides some messages of alchemical or spagyric origin. The painting in question is known as *The Extraction of the Stone of Madness* and was previously attributed to the private property of the Bishop of Utrecht. This fact once again demonstrates how almost all of Hieronymus's patronage was strictly religious and prelatial, albeit in the context of that particular Catholicism typical of Northern Europe which would later flow into the Lutheran Reformation. So from this we can already assume that the bishop was interested in a type of "hermetic" readings that were considered perfectly legitimate within an exoteric orthodoxy; a fact that leads us to exclude—as already claimed elsewhere and not only by me—that Bosch has never been in the "smell of heresy" and therefore close to suspicious groups such as the "Brothers of the Free Spirit" or the sect of the "Adamites".

The tondo that encloses the actual painting is not, however, a religious work, but depicts a moment in the action of three men and a woman, perhaps a nun. The central character is a monk, presumably an Augustinian judging by the habit. The black frame around the central circle is decorated with gothic letters and arabesques that refer to the illuminated manuscripts of international gothic, in a precious gold color that reads: "Meester snynt die Keye ras / Myne name is lubbert das", i.e., "Maestro, quarry out the stones, my name is Lubbert Das". The vulgate sees in this "Lubbert Das" the equivalent of "fool", of "simpleton" who is deceived by the "surgeon-magician" who extracts the then well-known "stone of madness" from his forehead and which literally means "castrated dachshund". This is precisely the common and immediate explanation of the painting, based on the simple allegory of the sin of a fool who deceives another like him.

In fact, at the time when Hieronymus lived, in Flanders, it was common practice to witness this intervention carried out by wandering healers on some mentally-ill patients, who had an elusive "stone of madness" extracted from their foreheads. Probably this surgical operation was only simulated, little more than a clever sleight of hand, as is still the case in many aboriginal populations by shamans and medicine men.

Now, instead, let's try to see why it is possible to attempt a reading of the painting that leads back to the alchemical doctrine or, perhaps better in this case, to its spagyric declination. First of all, let's look at the table in detail (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** *The extraction of the stone of madness*, Hieronymus Bosch, around 1494, Oil on wood, 48 × 35 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

An autumnal landscape, between low slopes and woods of lime trees in a row, the gothic spires of some churches and the ramparts of a fortress stand out against the blue distance of the background, in the foreground, on a clearing of grass main scene where four

characters act. The first from the left for the observer is the mysterious healer dressed in a long old pink tunic; a simple clay pitcher hangs from his black leather belt. The surgeon wears a hood of the brown color of the earth, on whose right shoulder stands an enameled coat of arms depicting a black bird on a gold field. From the lapels of the tunic and from the hood, a tight scarlet red dress emerges. Finally, a funnel is placed on the doctor's head which is the object that is the most incomprehensible and has always directed critics towards an ironic reading of the whole image. The surgeon is intent on incising with a scalpel the receding hairline of what would appear to be an old drunkard with a red nose from too much drinking, dressed in a white shirt and tunic and with red stockings and black shoes. The patient, from whose head the "stone of madness" is extracted, is tied tightly to the high back of a chair with a white linen sash and his civilian belt, complete with pouch and kidney dagger, which hangs inert from an armrest. The bench then, on the bottom, shows a special cavity where a pair of shoes are contained, perhaps wooden clogs that could belong to the doctor himself. To give comfort to the patient, whose symbolic name we have seen to be Lubbert Das, a monk in a black habit is placed with an exhortative attitude. He holds in his left hand a pewter jug with a lever lid. The religious man leans his left elbow, almost indolently, on a round table with a decidedly curious shape. The top of the table would appear to be of polished gray stone and so is its base, both joined in a vertical by a single leg carved in wood with a motif of acanthus or perhaps vine leaves. The remains of a flower lie abandoned on the shelf, probably the rest of a previous operation. Finally, on the right, a female figure dressed in a white bonnet and the wimple of the nuns and a long brown habit that almost blends into the ground leans on the table, as if attending interested but not too much in what is happening. Almost bored, the nun carries the other object hovering over her head which, together with the funnel on the doctor's head, literally drove scholars crazy: a closed red book. A swollen pouch hangs from the nun's cord, also red like her petticoat.

The "surgeon" is therefore the myste, the trickster, the "doctor of the soul" who is called to intervene with his science in bringing back to normality, therefore to bring back the Order from the Chaos of madness, a madman. He is therefore the Spagira who acts in practice, highlighted in this by the color of his robe which

brings together all the other three colors. Red and white, respectively symbolic colors of *Rubedo* and *Albedo*, have merged into the antique pink of her surcoat, while *Nigredo* has remained in the belt.

The Raw Material is the brown hood that hides the upper parts. It is there that the noble seal stands out, qualifying him as a doctor accredited to the ducal court. In fact, the coat of arms is crowned with silver, but depicts a raven—the alchemical symbol of one of the phases of the *Opus*—on a gold field that does not require further explanation. The symbolism of the crow, an animal sacred to Apollo, is also linked to the solitude necessary for the one who—like the healer—has chosen to live on a higher plane of being, but is also linked to the virtue of hope. Its black color is alchemically linked to the night of the *Opus* and the earth and therefore to all those operations of fertilization and germination of the alchemical procedure. Moreover, living in the airspace, the crow is also associated to all those demiurgic operations due to the celestial powers. Since he is a bird he is—like Odin's two ravens or Badb in Ireland—he is also a heavenly messenger and therefore possesses magical and divinatory abilities. The crow and the doctor are therefore the same entity in several respects.

The scarlet red, hidden by the overcoat with fur cuffs, recalls the royal nature of which the doctor is invested, his *Ars regia* is also so because it is recognized by his sovereign. We come now to the mysterious funnel. An ancient instrument, in the Middle Ages the upside down funnel is a symbol commonly used to identify madness; the fact that the surgeon wears it accredits him as a doctor specialized in this type of treatment, but the funnel is also an essential tool for the alchemical and spagyric operation, furthermore placed in this way recreates the typical pointy headdress of the Magician and like a spire it reconnect to the sky. We do not know if the doctor has bare feet in contact with the ground, but the shoes left under the chair would make us suppose, thus confirming his nature as a medium between the higher and the earthly states. Finally, earth and water are present in the symbol of the clay jug hanging from its belt.

The surgical procedure is applied to the other protagonist of the event: the "madman" known as Lubbert Das, a sort of Bertoldo or Zanni from the Netherlands. He is certainly the simpleton of the country, but he is also "The Fool" of the Tarot, a card that has no number. He is the one who sees other realities beyond human



ones and is always wandering from place to place. We recall that the Fool, from the remotest antiquity up to the threshold of the Modern Age, before psychoanalysis intervened, was cloaked in a sacred aura and therefore of respect, being sometimes touched by a god, or else being a mystic or a hermit or a traveling musician.

Every initiate can therefore appear insane to ordinary men as even evangelically human wisdom is madness in the eyes of God and *vice versa*.

Lubbert Das, tied by his own sash to the chair, carries all three colors of the *Opus* on himself. The red breeches also symbolize—just like in the Tarot blade of the same name—not only the alchemical stage of *Rubedo* but also Strength and Action. They are the perennial fire that always pushes him to go and move. The body covered in white is the *Albedo* but it is also the “purity” due to its non-evil madness. Finally appears the *Nigredo*, abandoned on the chair, represented by the belt with dagger and pouch, in continuation with the same one worn by the doctor and shoes.

In this case the Fool, the one who makes fun of the rules, is stopped and forced in a place: his Chaos is brought back to Order by the sharp knife of the surgeon-spagira.

What the surgeon extracts from Lubbert’s flesh and blood is that natural formation which was known—as we have already written—by the singular name of “stone of madness”, but in this particular painting it appears as two small flowers.

The symbolism of the stone is well known, as well as the properties of many “stones” naturally produced by some organisms and to which magical or otherwise extraordinary properties have been attributed since the most remote antiquity and especially in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. They are called *bezoars* in ancient lapidaries and grimoires and are found in animals or even humans. In this case, the stone is also the soul which, transmuted, healed, rises towards God, and this is why it has become a flower and is also the link between man and the Divine. In this case it becomes the seal that allows the madman to open the “doors of perception” and in fact it seems to be located in the same place occupied by the pineal gland or the so-called “third eye”. Meister Eckhart teaches that “the stone is synonymous with knowledge” and while it not only becomes the Philosopher’s Stone for alchemists, for Ramon Llull it is a symbol of the regeneration of the soul through the redemption of divine grace.

Thus, if on the one hand the healing operation carried out by the doctor restores the Cosmos by bringing the Fool back to “reason”, at the same time it closes a passage between the worlds and returns the medium - which is represented by the Stone—to its kingdom of origin in the form of a flower. Lubbert Das is thus cured and will no longer upset human rules with the irruption of an uncontrolled supernatural power.

However, he, who is happy to be crazy, is convinced to undergo this rebalancing operation, by a monk, or rather by the “reason” of religion which naturally cannot allow deviations. The Augustinian friar with his black habit is therefore easily identifiable with the dark and nocturnal aspect, with the *Nigredo* but also with the uniformity to the ecclesiastical teaching and scholastic doctrine that is the doctrinal backbone. He only wishes to bring Lubbert Das back to the bosom of the mother Church so that he no longer disturbs the people by remembering that other realities exist. In his hand, the friar holds a metal flask with a lid, in contrast to the earthenware jug which, on the other hand, is without a stopper, tied to the waist of the surgeon. The metal here is opposed to the worked earth, and is sealed, thus preserving something that must not be left free to flow arbitrarily. Perhaps in this pewter jug they go to macerate the flowers that were stones; or perhaps also in it there is something that has an anesthetizing function for the patient, perhaps a product of alcoholic distillation—or “quintessence” if you prefer. The comfort expressed by the monk is therefore in support of the work of the Spagira.

The table is the apparently most alien element to all this *en plein air* action, but it is at the same time the most indicative for a hermetic reading of the painting. The table consists of two circular discs connected by a vertical element. The axial symbolism represented by the single leg of the table is easily understandable: a wooden beam carved in the form of Greek leaves reconverted to Gothic ones. Therefore, it reconnects not only to the myth of the tree of knowledge and that of life, but to the whole vegetable world from which Spagira takes part of its creations. This wooden axis is one with the landscape and joins together the two disks of cut and smoothed stone which are presumably Heaven and Earth or in any case two planes of being, two worlds. As we have already seen, what appear to be residual flowers abandoned on the tabletop could be what remains

of previous surgeries or even flowers used for the preparation of other spagyric and colloidal solutions.

The nun, in her detached attitude, almost bored by an operation that she has probably seen many times and about which she seems not to care too much, was exploited by the surgeon or the friar as a piece of furniture on which to place a book. In fact, this is not placed on the table top as it would be logical, but it has been placed on the head of the nun, as if it did not exist or was nothing more than a non-indispensable, non-vital element. This female figure does not perform any function neither of aid to the doctor as a nurse, nor of religious aid to the monk with his prayers. The brown color of her habit also refers to the earth element and replaces the friar's black at a lower level. The nun, therefore, is the feminine, prosaic, material element that is not interested in understanding what is happening around and in front of her, and this is the reason for the scarlet-colored book placed on her head, where she cannot read and, being immobile, not even feel it. The knowledge contained in the book is precluded to this woman withdrawn exclusively on her own thoughts. The book, the pewter jug and the funnel are positioned on the same horizontal line and are therefore three symbolic elements, three of the tools necessary for the whole operation. Without the book, however, closed by a gold clasp, from which wisdom knowledge was learned, the metals of the funnel and jug could not be used.

The closed book, alchemically, is also the Virgin Matter which keeps its secret as a mineral substance in its raw state is kept in the mine.

Finally, but not to be forgotten as secondary or irrelevant, the decorative scrolls of the words in Gothic letters placed on the black background are directly related to other similar ones designed in the same period by Leonardo da Vinci and then by Albrecht Dürer. Their symbolic geometric interweaving find their origin in the mystical decorations of the Sufis and in the fantastic ones of the Celtic populations. They offer a completely original synthesis between North, South, East and West merged in the decoration of the Gothic beyond the Alps and in its illuminated manuscripts.

The second work we wish to analyze is *The Healing of Madness*, by Pieter Brueghel the Elder.

This is not a paint. It is rather an engraving known as *The Witch of Mallegghem* which—as can be read in the lower margin of the sheet—promises healing to the citizens of Mallegghem:

“Ghy lieden van Mallegghem wilt nu wel syn gesint / Ick VrouwHexe wil hier oock wel worden bemint / Om v te genesen ben ickgecomen hier / Tuwen dienste met myn onder meesten fier. / Compt vry den meesten met den minsten sonder verbeyen / Hebdyde wesp int hooft, oft loteren v de keyen”, which translated would sound like “Oh people of Mallegghem, be happy! / I, lady witch, want to be venerated by you too. / To cure you I



Figure 2: *The witch of Mallegghem*, Pieter Brueghel the Elder, Engraving and etching, 1559 by Johann Theodor De Bry.

have come here / at your service, with my assistant. / Hurry up, all of you, / the nobles with the last ones, / since your head is full of wasps and sprouting stones.”

Hence the theme of the “stones of madness” already seen in Bosch returns, while the city of Mallegghem would be nothing more than an imaginary inhabited center that takes its name from the same madness, since in the Flemish language of the sixteenth century, the word *mal* precisely means crazy, while *ghem* would indicate a place. We could therefore translate Mallegghem, (possibly today’s Maldegem, located on the border between Belgium and Holland), as “The city of Madness”.

The scene drawn by Brueghel therefore takes place outdoors, near the wheel of a water mill, a symbol of the eternal cycle of life, of the succession of births and deaths, of years and days. At a short distance from the mill, at the edge of a wood, stands a crazy conical construction that once again reminds us of the buildings in the woods, just as the monstrous creatures that creep into the crowd are similar to Hieronymus’s crickets.

In the center, on the right, appears the witch with her disheveled hair, carrying a viola da gamba on her left shoulder and at the same time holding a box containing numerous unidentified ampoules under her right arm. Perhaps these are medicaments, potions or elixirs of spagyric origin.

The musical instrument, a viol, is carried upside down, as if to indicate a possible subversion of the *Armonia Mundi*. The witch is therefore perhaps the only wise man in a country of madmen who carry out the most absurd actions and who are also easy prey for the many charlatans who sell them the most improbable medicines. While a madman is transported to the place where the disturbing stone is removed from his skull, the same one robs his Cyrene, taking the money from his purse. He is followed by a man, certainly a soldier, who still wears parts of an armor.

Another sorceress spills the contents of a jug onto the head of a patient, from whom a stone has just been extracted by her sister hag who is showing to bystanders what she has just removed, in proof of her ability as a curator. In the meanwhile a person who could be her assistant lights the scene with a blind lantern. This character, however, might be not human: her familiar demon could hide under his guise.

All this happens when, half-hidden under the plank, an accomplice with his lips tightened by a heavy

padlock, takes new stones from a basket to be passed as a result of the operations and on his right sleeve the emblem of the ancient can be clearly observed “Mother of the madmen of Dijon”.

Finally, on the right of the engraving, a crowd of individuals suffering from the dark evil of madness, each with their own stone, throng, waiting for their turn to be cured.

On the left side of the table instead, some cheerful wives with strange cloaks, curious, examine some jars perhaps containing potions placed on a table, next to which there are strange jars and other tubes made from guts joined together. A sort of falcate halberd rests on the edge of the table together with a bone-handled knife. Meanwhile, a perched owl observes the viewer, seated on a corner of the building inside which are shelves, pottery and other madmen. On one of these jars we read “Honich”, i.e., “honey” and on the other “Sever”, which means “vinegar”, as if to indicate once again the duplicity and the extremes of the world, which in fact turns out to be so “bittersweet”.

Finally, on the lower right corner, contained within the Cosmic Egg, the patient and the surgeon once again perform their surgical ritual of extracting the stone of madness, this time multiplied in a cascade of spherules that they trickle out of the egg itself, disappearing into the street.

Therefore, the Mystery remains and persists also in this work by Brueghel, offering us innumerable ideas for multiple interpretations and keys for investigating and reading it on several levels. Perhaps, it is suggesting that the care for what rational men consider madness, could not be the best way to the Knowledge of the Universe, as the wise never have dreams as beautiful as the those of the fool.