

Metaphoric Recurrences of Dreamlike Imagery in M. Khvylovy's "My Self (Romantica)" and N. Gogol's "Diary of a Madman"

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Abstract

Delusional states such as madness and hallucination are traditionally viewed as mental disorders characterized by a chaotic activity or as an experience in which something is perceived as true but is not real. In a literary discourse, madness and hallucination can be viewed as analogous to metaphoric perception of reality. Primarily, due to the fact that the way protagonists think and see things shifts from accepted societal norms to unaccountable patterns of behavior.

In this article I approach madness and hallucination as dreamlike states of mind and follow George Lakoff's belief that everyday abstract concepts like time, change, causation, and purpose appear to be metaphorical (1). From this point, I explore the narrative of madness and hallucination through the metaphoric recurrences of dreamlike imagery in Nikolai Gogol's "Diary of a Madman" and Mykola Khvylovy's "My Self (Romantica)."

I suggest that both stories present situations of crisis, in which the characters appear on the edge of mental breakdown and thus experience the dreamlike states. Symbolically, the recurrent images that appear in the stories are connected to the idea of nationhood and social pressures within imperial Russia (1835) in "Diary of a Madman" and to the Communist Party ideology during its early rule in Ukraine (approximately 1920s-1930s) in "Myself (Romantica)." Therefore, by depicting the progression of their protagonists' mental disorders, the writers reveal the truth about social and political struggles of their times.

Mental disorders, or psychoses, have strong similarities with dreaming. Some of the peculiarities of psychotic states are hallucinations, loosening of associations, and inconsistency of personal experience. Likewise, dreams can be a kind of delusional thought process during which there is a disconnection with one's state of consciousness. Therefore, "both the psychotic patient and the dreamer are in a state of acceptance of nonsensical experiences as real" (Adaes). In this article I approach mental disorders, such as madness and hallucination, as dreamlike states of mind.

Madness is traditionally viewed as a state of being mentally ill and characterized as a chaotic activity, whereas a hallucination refers to an experience in which something is perceived as true but is not real. In a literary discourse, delusional states can be analyzed through their metaphoric meaning due to metaphor's capacity to determine mental functions, interpret and even transform one's self and one's perception of reality (Borbely 162).

It is crucial to point out that I do not view metaphor as only a matter of language, as it is often considered in classical language theories, but interpret it as a process through which we "conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another" (Lakoff 1). I follow Lakoff's belief that everyday abstract concepts like time, states, change, causation, and purpose appear to be metaphorical (1). From this point of view, I explore the narrative of madness and hallucination through the metaphoric recurrences of dreamlike imagery in Nikolai Gogol's "Diary of a Madman" and Mykola Khvylovy's "My Self (Romantica)." I believe that understanding the features of metaphoric recurrences in literary text can aid in bringing together a narration that might seem at first disorganized.

Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852) was a writer of the Russian Empire. His works often satirized and ridiculed the political injustice of his time. In "Diary of a Madman" (1835), the narrative focuses on the life of a civil servant during the repressive time of Nicholas I. By employing the

format of a diary, Gogol depicts the progression of Poprishchin's (non)madness¹. The protagonist is eager to be recognized by the officials and a young lady he falls in love with, but instead he is humiliated and rejected. It seems that because of his intolerable misery, Poprishchin chooses to create his own reality, in which dogs can speak and write, and where he is the King of Spain. Overall, the story is a satire on the pettiness of the officialdom of the bureaucracy in the 1830s in St. Petersburg.

Mykola Khvylovy (1893-1933) was a Ukrainian writer of the early Communist era (1920s-1930s). After joining the Communist Party in 1919, Khvylovy gradually increased his disappointment and disillusionment with Communism. In his "My Self (Romantica)" (1924) he delineates the conflict "between the communist dream and real life" (Khvylovy 3) which he experienced himself. The character in "My Self (Romantica)" is a *chekist*² who finds himself in a state of internal conflict and struggle. His emotional suffering reveals the ethical ambivalence he faces. His alter ego is complicated and projects the vacillating psychology of the protagonist. In his story *Khvyl'iovyi* presents the notion of guilty conscience through the image of the mother — "a part of my criminal 'self' to which I impart my will," says the *chekist* (39). The reader notices this duality, the internal struggle between following orders to execute hundreds of people and remaining a "human being" (the character ultimately follows the Party's orders). Khvylovy's story emphasizes the psychological suffering of a man who is trapped between his moral beliefs and the merciless ideology he follows. Such a predicament is rendered at times as a hallucination.

Even though Gogol and Khvylovy wrote during different times and addressed the flaws of different ideologies, the commonality in their stories is their usage of dreamlike states in order

¹ I intentionally use the term (non)madness in order to allude to the ambiguity and metaphoric meaning of this state. For society the protagonist is insane, mentally ill. On the contrary, to Poprishchin society is abnormal.

² A member of the Cheka. *Cheka*—the Extraordinary Commission for Protection against Counter-revolution (secret police).

to untangle the truth about the inequalities of society. Hence, in “My Self (Romantica)” I look at the symbolic representation of the image of the mother, whereas in “Diary of a Madman” I examine the metaphoric meaning of madness through Poprishchin’s interaction with dogs. Both images of a madman and a mother appear systematically throughout the texts. The observation of this metaphoric concepts prompts me to mention the technique of defamiliarization as a tool for presenting the deviating behaviours of the protagonists.

The technique of defamiliarization, a term coined by Viktor Shklovskii in 1917, is understood as follows: when something ordinary, or familiar (an object, event, situation) is presented as unfamiliar and strange. Viktor Erlich suggests that defamiliarization is the “deviation from the norm.”³ Namely, Erlich states that the function of the image is not to bring the unfamiliar closer to us, but, on the contrary, to “make strange” the “habitual” by presenting it in a fresh light (Erlich 26).

I argue that Gogol presents madness as something usual and familiar. For example, he delineates the writing and speaking skills of dogs and the protagonist’s announcement that he is a King of Spain as ordinary. In such a way, Gogol defamiliarizes us with the idea of “normality/rationality” of society. Likewise, Khvylovy employs an already familiar and traditional image of Maria⁴ and defamiliarizes the reader by infusing the image with the perpetrator’s subconscious, thus rendering it the role in protagonist’s inner conflict. Consequently, an ordinary image becomes a novel concept: “mother” is perceived as a part of the protagonist’s “criminal self,” his alter ego and his guilty conscience. Through the close reading and comparative analysis

³ “‘Making it strange’ did not necessarily entail substituting the elaborate for the simple; it could mean just as well the reverse – the use of the profane or earthy term instead of the learned or genteel one, provided that the latter represented in the given case the accepted usage. What mattered was not the direction of the ‘semantic shift’, but the very fact that such a shift had occurred, that a deviation from the norm had been made” (Erlich 178).

⁴ This name is often symbolically used in the Ukrainian literature to refer to the biblical Maria.

of the stories, I contend that the recurrent metaphorical nature behind the images of the mother and the doggish lifestyle of a madman brings sense into the insanity and instability of the characters' conscious states.

Accordingly, I analyze two primary ranges of metaphors: death (symbolic and literal) of the mother in "My Self (Romantica)" and private correspondence between dogs in "Diary of a Madman." This allows me to show the progression of the imagery (the mother and the "doggishness"⁵ of the dogs) within the text and explore its metaphoric meaning; that is, analyze the "emergent meaning" of images and examine the devices used to depict the dreamlike characters (e.g., the allusion to the idea of madness and hallucination as a way of revealing the truth and the breaking of silence, the concepts of time and space).

I suggest that both the symbols of mother and dog are connected to the idea of nationhood and social pressures within imperial Russia (1835) in "Diary of a Madman" and to the Communist Party ideology during its early rule in Ukraine (approximately 1920s-1930s). Both stories present situations of crisis, in which the characters appear on the edge of mental breakdown and thus experience the dreamlike states. This confusion with the reality pushes the protagonists to either create their own illusion ("Diary of a Madman") or to "kill" a mother ("My Self (Romantica)" that represents the virtues of love, compassion, kindness, sense of home, safety and sacredness. Moreover, the symbolic and perhaps literal murder of the mother represents the annihilation of the perpetrator's guilt and doubt in regards to the Communist ideology he blindly follows. Finally, I claim that there is a contrast in the transformation of images within the stories: while the "motherly-crying-dyingness" (Kuiken) sequence in "My Self" leads to mother's death, the "doggy-separating-privateness" (Kuiken) in "Diary" causes Poprishchin's madness.

⁵ The terms "doggishness," "motherly-crying-dyingness," "doggy-separating-privateness" was suggested during the class discussions by Donald Kuiken, Professor of Psychology, University of Alberta.

Traces of Reason in Poprishchin's Madness

Written in 1834, "Diary of a Madman" depicts the progression of madness from disorganized behaviour—when Poprishchin does not attend work—to the delusion that he is a new King of Spain. Among the visible signs of his madness are hallucinations (e. g., when dogs speak) and writing disorders (when the dates in Poprishchin's diary are not consistent and often imagined by him).

To Kononen, "madness" can become a "cultural construct that reflects the changing view of a man and the human mind as well as the surrounding reality and its impact on the individual" (80). The scholar points out the metaphorical nature of madness, which consists of different meanings and functions depending on the cultural, social and historical circumstances. In "Diary of a Madman," "madness" is presented as the protest against the reality that the protagonist has to face. Kononen emphasizes a common characteristic of the "mad diarists" which is the "deviation from general norms of thought or behavior" (82). As a result of this anomaly, a conflict between the inner and outer worlds emerges.

Gogol's story reminds me of Derrida's take on madness and reason in his "Cogito and the History of Madness." The latter rejects the totalizing experience of language and meaning, believing that there is always another source of extra connotation which indicates that there is no stability, no established rational system (32-33). The depiction of a madman in "Diary" also proves the instability of reason and the metaphoric nature of madness.

Thus, Poprishchin tries to logically justify some of his experiences which are usually considered abnormal in society. For example, he offers a sensible analysis while discussing the letters of the dogs, commenting on their "extremely uneven style" and "silliness," concluding that

no man could have written them (The Complete Tales 239). Poprishchin becomes more logical as his mind disintegrates, essentially making madness reasonable in Gogol's story. By equating madness with reason, Gogol creates a distorted world that undermines a potentially stable concept of logic in reality.

The liberation of Poprishchin's madness follows his decision to no longer work for the department. It counteracts reason and makes more sense to Poprishchin after he meets "talking dogs." Ironically, the phenomenon of "talking dogs" shocks Poprishchin less than "writing dogs":

"I have been, wow, wow, I have been very ill, wow, wow, wow!" – Oh, so it's you, you little dog!.. I must confess I was very much surprised to hear her [a dog] speaking⁶ like a human being; but afterward, when I thought it all over, I was no longer surprised. A number of similar instances have as a fact occurred. (The Complete Tales 241)

From this moment, Poprishchin's madness starts to progress: "Damn it all! I never in all my life heard of a dog being able to write" (The Complete Tales 241). The protagonist admits that there are some transformations within him, which signify his delusional state: "That amazed me. I must confess that of late I have begun seeing and hearing things such as no one has ever seen or heard before" (The Complete Tales 241).

The repetitive concept of silence throughout the text is important for understanding the progression of madness. The same concept is employed by Khvylovy and is discussed later in the article. For instance, Poprishchin often repeats to himself: "Never mind, never mind, silence!" and tries to subdue his inner voice (The Complete Tales 242). Yet his madness keeps evolving, and he carries on with new ideas. For instance, that dogs are more intelligible and diplomatic than men: "I have long suspected that dogs are far more intelligent than men; I am even convinced that they

⁶ Here and further emphases are mine.

can speak, only there is a certain doggedness about them. They are extremely diplomatic: they notice everything, every step a man takes” (The Complete Tales 245). Poprishchin’s statements that dogs have their private lives and correspondence seem to be nonsense. However, for a madman like Poprishchin it is liberating. By assuming that dogs can speak, he finds his own voice. He is no longer restricted by the political and rational order of society. Therefore, the dogs’ letters are an important evidence of Poprishchin’s relationship with his inner Self and the other—the officialdom during the times of imperial Russia. Through Poprishchin’s reaction to Madgie’s (dog’s) comments, the reader can understand Poprishchin’s perception of the image projected on him by the society:

M.: ...that clerk that sits in Papa’s study. Oh, *ma chère*, if you knew what an ugly fellow that is! He looks like a turtle in a bag...

P.: What clerk is this?

M: He has a very queer surname. He always sits sharpening the quills. The hair on his head is very much like hay. Papa sometimes sends him out instead of a servant...

P.: I do believe the nasty little dog is alluding to me. But my hair isn’t like hay!

M.: Sophie can never help laughing when she sees him.

P.: That’s a lie, you damned little dog! What an evil tongue! As though I didn’t know that that is the result of jealousy! As though I didn’t know whose tricks were at the bottom of that! This is all the doing of the chief of my section. (The Complete Tales 250)

Anger, the sense of inequality, and unfairness upset Poprishchin, and that is when his madness develops further. Poprishchin questions the hierarchical differences among people and expresses his confusion about not knowing who he really is. Through this inquiry the protagonist challenges the reality around him and tries to rebel against the system:

I often tried to discover what all these differences come from. Why am I a titular councillor and on what grounds am I a titular councillor? Perhaps I am not a titular councillor at all? Perhaps I am a count or a general, and only somehow appear to be a titular councillor. Perhaps I don't know myself who I am. How many instances there have been in history: some simple, humble tradesman or peasant, not even a nobleman, is suddenly discovered to be a great gentleman or a baron, or what do you call it... (The Complete Tales 251)

Feeling overwhelmed, he distracts himself with the affairs of Spain: "I spent the whole morning reading the newspaper. Strange things are going on in Spain... How can the throne be vacant?" (The Complete Tales 252). The climax of his madness comes with the great news that he is the King of Spain, which also liberates him from suffering: "This is the day of the greatest public rejoicing! There is a king of Spain! He has been discovered. I am that king. I only heard of it this morning" (The Complete Tales 252). Furthermore, since Poprishchin is considered a "madman," he is free to talk nonsense and ridicule the officialdom:

Our office messenger arrived today to tell me to go to the department, and to say that I had not been there for more than three weeks. However, I did go to the department just for the fun of it. The head of our section thought that I should bow to him and apologize, but I looked at him indifferently, not too angrily and not too graciously...

They thought I should write at the bottom of the paper, So-and-so, head clerk of the table – how else it should be! But in the most important place, where the director of the department signs his name, I wrote "Ferdinand VIII." (The Complete Tales 254)

The narration of madness in "Diary of a Madman" is metaphoric. It becomes a way for the protagonist to escape from the injustices of society, to speak the truth. Yet, sanity cannot be opposed to madness since they complement each other. By talking or seeing nonsense, he or she

who is insane reveals the hostility, aggressiveness, and meanness of society. Therefore, madness becomes a mirror of society. It reflects the struggles and contradictions that are often silenced.

The Internal Struggle: Conscience versus Ideological Fanaticism

In “My Self (Romantica),” the first paragraph alludes to the image of the mother and the feelings it invokes in the protagonist. These metaphoric recurrences repeat throughout the text:

From *distant misty regions (1)*⁷, from the calm lakes of the intangible Commune⁸ there rustles a whisper: *Maria is coming (2)*. I go out into *the boundless fields (1)*, pass over the hilly crests, walk in the place where the tumuli glow, and lean against a solitary desert rock. I look into the distance. Thought after thought, galloping like Amazons, swarms around me. Then *everything disappears (1)*. The mysterious Amazons, swaying rhythmically, fly towards the horned tips of the mountains, and the day darkens. The road speeds on amid the hillocks, an after it—the *silent (3)* steppe. I raise my eyelids and try to *recollect (4)*... in truth, my mother—the prototype incarnate of that extraordinary Maria who stands on the boundaries of ages unknown (2). My mother—simplicity, silent grief, and boundless kindness (2). (*This I well remember*) (4). And both my intolerable suffering and my unbearable torture grow warm in the lamp of *fanaticism* before this wonderful picture of sorrow. (Khvylovy 31)

The character’s memories are represented through a complex metaphor. In order to interpret it, I break it down into four segments. First (1), the concept of time and space, which is “distant” and “boundless;” second (2), the image of the mother. The emergent meaning of this symbol gradually

⁷ Here and further on all the emphases, numerations and highlights of metaphors are mine.

⁸ Khvylovy often uses the image of the “Intangible Commune,” “Distant Commune,” or “Commune beyond the hills,” to convey his dream of an ideal communist state.

unravels by the end of the story. At the beginning, “Maria is coming” reminds of a well-known biblical phrase “Messiah is coming.” Thus, I suggest that in this passage the mother is a representation of the Virgin Mary as Khvylovy says, “the prototype incarnate of that extraordinary Maria who stands on the boundaries of ages unknown” (31). She also exists beyond the understanding of time or space. The third element (3) is silence, which prepares us to tap into something unknown and uninterpretable, something beyond the normal reality we believe to see. Finally, the notion of memory (“I remember,” “I recollect”) (4) connects the image of the mother with a real person that the protagonist recalls from the past. These segments help in depicting the character’s dreamlike state which is defined in the story as a hallucination. This condition awakens a certain part of the subconscious, which is strongly associated with the image of the mother and which the protagonist tries to suppress.

The following passage presents the character’s relationship with his mother. Now her image is less mystical and more personalized. The description of nature and its implicit symbolism strengthens the memory. On the one hand, the author refers to mint (a plant) as if it is an animate being. In Ukrainian, the word “mint” is of feminine gender. The plant itself is believed to have healing and calming properties. Therefore, symbolically, it represents the mother who reaches the lost wonderer and tries to save him. On the other hand, a peaceful picture is interrupted by the roar of the cannonade which warns the protagonist—the mother is just an illusion, service to the Communist Party is real:

Mother says that I, *her rebellious son*, have absolutely *tortured myself to death*. Then I take her lovely head, sprinkled with silvery grey, and rest it on my bosom. Behind the window dewy mornings pass and pearl-drops fall. *Intolerable days* move on. In *the distance, out of the dark forest*, wayfarers trudge, stopping by the blue fountain, where the roads flow in

all directions... But the nights pass, evenings rustle near the poplars, the poplars withdraw into *unknown distance of the path, and following them—ages, years and my turbulent youth*. These are the days before the thunderstorm... And yet, beyond the *cloudy fog* may be heard yet another roar—a dull cannonade. “Terror!” Mother says that she has watered the mint today, and the mint is wilting with sorrow. Mother says: “*A storm is coming up!*” And I see in her eyes two crystal dews. (Khvylovy 32)

This roar wakes him up, and he realizes that he is trapped in a duality: the vision of his mother full of sorrow and the reality of serving *Cheka*. The mood of narration shifts. Instead of dewy mornings, there are now “murky nights” and the dark tribunal of the Commune, which symbolizes the dark part of his soul: “And I realize that I am a *chekist*, but still I remain a human being” (Khvylovy 34).

The protagonist has to fulfil his duties and give orders to execute the betrayers of the Party. However, another part of his Self disturbs him again through the image of his mother, who becomes his conscience, his compassionate and kind Self that he tries to deny: “And at that very moment the picture of my mother suddenly rises before me. ‘To be executed?’ And my mother looks at me calmly, sorrowfully” (Khvylovy 36). He looks for the way out of this confusion, but does not succeed. Gradually the image of the mother awakens the feeling of guilt for all the crimes the *chekist* and fanatics like him committed: “I turn and look at it, and suddenly recall that there are six lives on my conscience. Six on my conscience? No, it is not true. Six hundred, six thousand, six million—numberless hosts are on my conscience!” (Khvylovy 39).

To escape this internal conflict, he returns to the solitary cottage where his mother lives, to the place where the yard smells of mint. His memory of this place triggers a familiar feeling of

calmness and safety. His hallucination evolves—not only does his mother repeat the utterance “my rebellious son,” but now she also touches him with her old palms:

I enter the room, take off my gun and light a candle. “Are you asleep?” But Mother is not asleep. She approaches, takes my weary face in her dry old palms, and rests her head on my breast. Once more she says that I, her rebellious son, have absolutely tortured myself to death. And on my hands I feel the crystal dew, falling from her eyes. (Khvylovy 39)

Through the hallucinatory vision of his mother, he is no longer willing to suffer. Therefore, she needs to face the tribunal and be executed. He decides to get rid of her, the part of his guilty conscience: “She draws me towards the candlelight and looks at my weary face. Then she stops to look sorrowfully at the icon of Maria. I know! My mother is ready to enter a nunnery tomorrow: She cannot stand our horrors, and everything she sees is savage to her” (Khvylovy 39).

His torture dissolves once he repeats to himself that she is not real, just a “phantom,” even though he views her image as the part of his “criminal self.” What the protagonist means by this notion stays open for the reader’s interpretation. It might be the “criminal self” in regards to his service to the Party or “criminal self” in regards to the people he has to execute: “And then, perplexed, I assure myself that it is not true, that there is no mother before me, only a phantom. “A phantom?” and I shudder again. No, that is not true! Here, in this quiet room, my mother is not a phantom but a part of my criminal “self” to which I impart my will” (Khvylovy 39).

A culminating point of the story is when the protagonist brutally orders to execute the theosophists and yet struggles to do the same once his own mother stands before him. Initially, he believes this is just another group of nuns: “I am entering into my role. A mist forms before my eyes, and I am in a state which may be described as an extraordinary ecstasy... I am enjoying the thought that in two hours they [a crowd of nuns] will all be no more” (Khvylovy 44). Without even

turning his head, he already feels the excitement to kill. However, when he turns, he cannot believe his own eyes—his mother stands in front of him:

I turn resolutely and want to say the irrevocable: “To be executed.”

But I turn and see—straight in front of me, my mother, my sorrowing mother with the eyes of Maria.

I dart to one side in anxiety: what is it—hallucination? I dart to the other side in alarm and cry out: “You?”

And from the crowd of women I hear the sorrowful: “Son! My rebellious son!” (Khvylovy 45)

He is in shock and “at the point of collapse.” Here again there is a repetitive hallucinatory state which is enhanced by silence:

I am silent. I stand pale, almost lifeless before the silent group of nuns...

Yes! At last they have seized the other end of my soul! No longer will I go to the outskirts of the city to hide myself, as a criminal. Now I have but one right: never to mention to anyone that my heart is broken in two... I, the head of the somber tribunal of the Commune, am performing my duties with respect to the Revolution. And is it my fault that the picture of my mother does not leave me for a moment during that night? Is it my fault? (Khvylovy 47)

The *chekist* cannot believe he is actually going to execute her. He cries out: “Mother! Come to me. I tell you; for I must kill you!” (Khvylovy 52). He enters his role and experiences an “intolerable

joy” from killing her.⁹ So the choice has been made. He is free from the burden of his conscience. He can finally escape his own ambivalence and find peace by serving the ideals of the Revolution and Party. Symbolically, there is a transition from “silent steppe” to “lifeless steppe” which could signify the death of his ethical beliefs: “I stopped in the midst of the lifeless steppe: there, in the distant unknown, most strangely glowed the peaceful lakes of the Commune beyond the hills (Khvylovy 55).

Overall, the metaphoric recurrences of the imagery—of a mother and a dog—present madness and hallucination in a new way, as well as aid in seeing the writers’ messages: the political reality of the Russian Empire or Ukraine under the rule of the Bolsheviks leaves hardly any freedom of choice to the individual. Therefore, dreamlike experiences fasten transformations within the protagonists. While in “My Self (Romantica)” the hallucinating protagonist has to kill his conscience in the image of his mother, in “Diary of a Madman” Poprishchin goes mad and detaches himself from the society that rejected him.

⁹ And *the sorrowful voice again slashes my brain*. Again I hear my mother say that I (her rebellious son) have completely tortured myself to death.

What is it? Is it really a hallucination? I throw my head back.

Yes, it was a hallucination: I stood long on the deserted edge of the forest, facing my mother and looking at her.

She was silent.

Then, in a daze, enveloped with the flames of an *intolerable joy*, I put my arm around my mother’s neck and pressed my head to my breast. Then I raised my pistol and pressed the barrel to her temple. (Khvylovy 54)

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