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**MODERN GREEK STUDIES ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND (MGSAANZ)**

**ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑ ΝΕΟΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΩΝ ΣΠΟΥΔΩΝ ΑΥΣΤΡΑΛΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΝΕΑΣ ΖΗΛΑΝΔΙΑΣ**

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**MODERN GREEK STUDIES  
(AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND)**

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This issue is dedicated to Véronica and Andras.*

ANDREW MELLAS  
The University of Sydney

MANIC EROTICISM AND SEXUAL MELANCHOLIA:  
ROMOS PHILYRAS AND THE AESTHETICS  
OF MADNESS

I

Romos Philyras appears early in the twentieth century as one of Greece's most promising and yet most tragic poets. In the shadow of Kostas Palamas, the preeminent figure of the era, Philyras develops as a poet whose writing exhibits a marked aloofness from – if not indifference to – his surrounding social climate, preferring an idealism permeated by nature and erotic passion. The fantastical becomes for him a semantic space and, indeed, a type of refuge. Georgios Phteres characterised him as a “Don Quixote with a Pegasus”, a “Don Juan of the erotic vision... a tragically sensual man who is never satisfied”.<sup>1</sup> Kostas Varnales considered Philyras to be one of the greatest lyrical poets of modern Greece following Solomos. He also was thought to be, thought of himself as – and certainly was – mad.

In 1929 a succession of articles, written by Philyras as journal entries of his life in the mental ward, are published in the newspaper *Kathemerine*. Together, under the title: Η Ζωή μου στο Δρομοκαΐτειο, they constitute the poet's own narrativised history of his madness. Philyras is by no means the first to have left an *apologia* or diary of his madness: numerous testaments by insane people have been recently collected in Dale Peterson's *A Mad People's History of Madness*.<sup>2</sup> However, the majority of the accounts collected in this anthology come across as howls of protest; Philyras' does not.<sup>3</sup> Nor does it appear as a document of self-vindication.<sup>4</sup> It is rather a spiritual and metaphysical autobiography that communicates the poet's death, his cosmic funeral and subsequent restitution.

Philyras sees his arrival at the *Dromokaiteion* as akin to reaching the doorsteps of Hades. His fellow inmates appear to be leading a posthumous existence – they are already dead and yet ‘undead’. His new environment is depicted as if it were some mythological underworld. The nurses with their very eyes exercise a gaze equivalent to an autopsy on the poet and the doctors appear as white-winged angels who will judge to which purgatorial sphere or to which hell he is to be appointed. The words of an ancient Gnostic text describe this universe with an eerie relevance to Philyras' plight: “...the body is ‘the dark prison, the living death, the sense-endowed corpse, the grave thou bearest about with thee, the grave which thou carriest around with thee, the thievish companion who hateth thee in loving thee, and envieth

thee in hating thee.”<sup>5</sup> Philyras has emotionally disconnected himself from the rest of the world in such a complete way that all sense of empathy and social matrix has been abandoned in favor of an utterly subjective realm.

A somber transformation begins as the poet enters the asylum – he is baptised anew and yet the imagery is not one of immersion in any liquid:

Ὅταν μπήκα στο Δρομοκαΐτειον την πρώτη βραδιά, αισθάνθηκα αμέσως... την πλήξη με τα μαύρα της φτερά να με σκεπάζει ολόκληρο, σύγκορμο και σύμψυχο.<sup>6</sup>

The process, however, is still incomplete because, as the poet confesses, despite his insanity he nonetheless maintains a semblance of reason and this belittles him. His ardent wish is to surrender himself completely to madness, to flee the supposed sanctuary of sanity and to experiment with a new realm of existence. Madness becomes a desperate expression of Philyras’ radical need to escape the normalising bonds of society and to deconstruct the alienating structures that have hitherto dictated his existence. Alluding to madness in the middle of a discourse on orgasmic politics, David Cooper astutely observes that madness is “a renewal of oneself in a way that breaks all the obsessive rules... a deconstitution of oneself with the implicit promise of a return to a more fully realised world.”<sup>7</sup>

For Philyras, madness does not endeavor to destroy all external realities, rather, it seeks to re-order them. His fascination with death and descending into the underworld discloses the theme implicit: Philyras is experiencing himself in exile, in a state of existential wandering. Unlike Sylvia Plath’s poetry, which is inhabited by symbols and gods of death, Philyras does not present us with a myth of primordial atavism; his is a descent into the self with the hope of imaginative re-creation and not a paradigm of anarchy and destruction.<sup>8</sup> It is the dissolution of the Lacanian subject, its utter differentiation from the Other and the re-articulation of subjectivity not through the other and via language, but through an autonomous subject.<sup>9</sup> Madness becomes a descent into the regions of the ego, the ascending of a differentiated order of reality whereby the subject craves not dialogue, not interaction with the golden lights of Athens twinkling on the distant horizon, but the freedom of being able to speak with one’s self: ὁ τρελός δέν ξέρει, δέν ἀκούει, δέν βλέπει παρά μόνον τόν ἑαυτόν του’.

“Madness... is the moment of pure subjectivity.”<sup>10</sup> The language of madness, delirium and monologue is nothing more than language’s disassociation from the oppressive structures of rationalising dialogue and the social paradigm of familial configurations. It is a movement away from the framework of ‘familialism’ and towards an autonomous existence.<sup>11</sup> Philyras’ wish for nonbeing is a desire to rescind the social contract that signifies his consent to participate in a community, in a world of communal relationships. One does not require psychiatric attention for illusory experiences as these have shared histories that have unconsciously been validated by common historical experience but *delusions* are another matter

entirely; delusions are bereft of any existential essence within societal parameters: “Locked into internal words that completely remove them from the consensual processes of civil society (the reality of consensually validated *illusions*), the self has no opportunity for shared forms of relatedness.”<sup>12</sup> In what is a characteristic example of Philyras’ self-awareness, he touches on this very theme in the early pages of his autobiography:

Ἔ“Ο,τι χαρακτηρίζει τήν τρέλα εἶναι ἕνας ἀπόλυτος καί ἀθῶος ἐγωισμός πού αἰχμαλωτίζει ἀδιέξοδα τήν ψυχή μέσα εἰς τόν ἴλιγγον τῶν ὑποκειμενικῶν παραισθήσεων τῆς.<sup>13</sup>

For Philyras, it is not dreams that are structured like the unconscious but language itself: “ἜΩ θεῖοι, μοναδικοί μονόλογοι, ντελίρια, πόνοι καί καγχασμοὶ τῶν ἀνευθύνων”<sup>14</sup>, exclaims the poet with such a spirit of amazement that one might be forgiven for thinking that Philyras is beholding a constellation of stars. The madness expressed in Philyras’ poetic language is unruly. The measured proportion and the seriousness of order which are the characteristics of the social sphere no longer hold any power. The outside world’s mission to subordinate everything to a regime of reason and familial structures is subverted. We exist and function within the context of a language that is our own invention but which, at the same time, controls us – whereas Philyras is master and overlord of his language.

Philyras’ is a language of irreconcilability; it is the refusal of submission to any preexisting scheme of logic for it does not fear its exclusion from the collective consciousness of society and the history of reason but seeks self-identification. Indeed, logic, if anything, is a stifling factor in terms of his language and self: “Καλοπροαίρετοι γιατροί μου”, he exclaims, “ἄν ἐπιμένετε νά μέ γιατρέψετε ἀπό κάτι, γιατρέψτε με ἀπό τή λογική”.<sup>15</sup> The absence of logic implies the annulment of all the alienated forms of existence that have been imposed on the poet. And yet, his language does not result in the destruction of reason – madness is never opposed to reason, instead, it takes reason to its limits and beyond. Philyras seeks to return to a point of undifferentiated unity where madness and reason have not yet become mutually exclusive but are still entwined in an inscrutable union. His declaration: “Ἐκεῖ, πού μεγαλεπήβολος θύελλα μυκᾶται, γαληνεύει κατευνασμένος ὁ πουνέντης”<sup>16</sup> suggests that in madness equilibrium is subtly established, but it masks that equilibrium beneath the illusion of disorder.

It does not follow logically that a person would, as Philyras did, adopt self-incarceration in a mental asylum as a positive life choice. The only possible rational explanation for his going to the *Dromokateion* is to be cured of his lunacy and yet, he does not want to be healed of any ailment; he does not perceive insanity to be a disease: “Νά μᾶς γιατρέψουν! Πρῶτον πού δέν εἶναι τόσο εὔκολον. Καί ἔπειτα εἶναι ἀπαραίτητο...”<sup>17</sup> Curing madness entails a real effort to find an attachment to a sense of place and an active participation in the public

world of intersubjectivity.<sup>18</sup> Yet such a plan of action would negate all that the inhabitants of the mental asylum have struggled so hard to accomplish. Philyras has entered this other world of the *Dromokaiteion* in order to cast off the illusion of autonomy, the false sanity that the womb of society bestows on us gradually through the institutions we identify with during maturation – institutions that trick us with the lure of counterfeit values and manufactured attitudes. According to R. D. Laing, madness is creative and, far from being a disease, it is a source of healing.<sup>19</sup>

The romanticisation of madness has no place in modern society and certainly the medieval conception of madness as a different form of being and knowing is categorically incompatible with the modern domination of Reason and familial social structures of integration.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps that is the significance of the thoughts so often expressed in Philyras' early poems – thoughts of transcending reality, of escaping this tangible existence and acquiring a disembodied freedom. The longing for an incorporeal state of being is an expression of a desire to divest oneself of the internalised forces of 'otherness' and the subsequent restructuring of a less alienated ontology.<sup>21</sup> In Lacanian terminology, the subject becomes the Other – it does not merely borrow its identity from it – and the result is a reappropriation of the 'Symbolic Order'.<sup>22</sup> Not unlike Hamlet, Philyras has entered into the adventure of desire but is not playing by the rules; instead of honouring Lacan's chief doctrine – desire is always a desire for the Other – he deliberately loses the way of his desire and embarks on a quest of individual subjectivity.<sup>23</sup> Philyras desires desire.

Throughout his autobiographical confession we consistently observe that Philyras feels naked and insignificant before the mental patients. His poetry means nothing, his prior social status does not become a shield to protect and comfort him and he truly feels inadequate and humbled before the superior grandeur of the others.<sup>24</sup> The idea that madness endows a human being with powers of extraordinary perception is not a revolutionary one. It goes back all the way to ancient Greece where it was regarded as holy, as the touch of the gods. Plato's dramatic descriptions of prophetic and inspired madness are most illustrative: "Whoever comes to the doors of poetry without the madness of the muses, persuaded that he will be a good enough poet through skill, is himself unfulfilled, and the sane man's poetry is eclipsed by that of the sane".<sup>25</sup>

By the time of Hippocrates' treatise *The Sacred Disease*, most bodily illnesses were easily explainable in terms of material events or fluidic imbalances in the body, however madness and other cases of abnormal behavior were still regarded as a result of divine activity or even alien possession.<sup>26</sup> It was not until the Hippocratic rationalism of the majority of the passages in the *Corpus Hippocraticum* – where a slightly variant phrase ("disease called sacred") is employed – that a physiological rather than supernatural origin of epilepsy was propounded.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Hippocrates' school of thought was intriguingly the minority on the issue

which points to a commonly held perception of the sacredness of madness whereas, over twenty centuries later, the discourse of reason has dispelled any such reverence for those who are mad.

## II

The Age of Reason was a catastrophe for the insane who were customarily chained and subjected to any number of monstrous torments. Madmen stood as the antithesis of bourgeois values and undermined authority and so in order to punish this sin of idleness and to exile this form of social uselessness, the practice of confinement became the ethical model of authoritarianism which founded “the myth of social happiness”.<sup>28</sup> Hence the mad supplanted lepers – who validated the order of things by negating it – as societal scapegoats. No longer could rational society rely on the ancient gods who evolved out of mankind’s projection of their struggle to control restless passions and unexpected impulses. When myths become devices of self-fulfillment it is a retrogression in the eyes of rationalising discourse. Madness becomes a “glorified scandal”<sup>29</sup> a spectacle that is beheld by society in order to appease its own irrational drives. Ironically, it is Philyras who has become the common object of contempt in the society of lunatics in which he is seeking citizenship: “Εἶμαι ὁ ἀποδιοπομπαῖος, τὸ πρόβατο τὸ ἀπολωλὸς, τὸ ἀντικείμενο τῆς παγκοίνου περιφρονήσεως...”<sup>30</sup>

The threat madness poses to the discourse of reason entails the erection of a wall between those who are deemed insane and the rest of humanity. The result is an enforced segregation in order to deal with a realm extending beyond the limits that the veiled dictatorship of Reason can impose on human beings; madness is a territory that escapes the control of the political status quo. Madness as a disease becomes an invention we “choose to conjure up... in order to evade a certain moment of our own existence – the moment of disturbance, of penetrating vision into the depths of ourselves, that we prefer to externalise into others”.<sup>31</sup> Psychiatry becomes a reduction of the infinite spectrum of human behavior into logically arranged models of illness thus presupposing the requirement of conformity for the proper functioning of the civil system.

Philyras heroically – or, one might say, *anti-heroically* – resolves to no longer lead a life of quiet desperation amongst the shadows cast by the landmarks of civilisation. Realising it is a fool’s prerogative to utter truths no one else would dare speak, his vision becomes that of a prophetic frenzy exemplified in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”; his deviant behaviour is of the kind which repels and yet fascinates mankind, a behaviour Dostoevsky and Kafka so memorably encapsulated in their novels; and in the tradition of Shakespeare’s fools – Falstaff and Feste immediately come to mind – “he stands center stage as the guardian of truth”, unafraid to remove mankind’s garments of reason and disrobe the folly within.<sup>32</sup>

At the end of his monumental history of madness, Foucault makes the bold statement that “[t]here is no madness except as the final instant of the work of art; *where there is a work of art, there is no madness*”.<sup>33</sup> To adequately reply to this assertion, we need a wider context. Is madness truly a break with the sphere of art? Does madness result in a poetry of ‘disconnectedness’? Foucault’s fundamental problem as a historian is finding a language – a language other than reason which subdues and tames madness, or science which objectifies it and thus precludes the possibility of dialogue – which permits madness a voice. In the preface of the original edition Foucault makes an important pledge:

*The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason about madness, could only be founded on such a silence. I did not want to write the history of that language but rather the archaeology of that silence.*

*... The object, that is, is to write not a history of knowledge, but the rudimentary movements of an experience. A history, not of psychiatry, but of madness itself, before it has been captured by knowledge.*<sup>34</sup>

How can Foucault speak about the language of madness when it speaks of its own accord? Foucault’s task is a paradox from the outset. The difficulty of seeking to evoke the silence of madness and the problems such an endeavour entails resulted in an interesting exchange between Derrida and Foucault. Rather than presenting madness as the radically unthinkable Other of reason, Derrida seeks to turn it into one of any number of cases of sensory error:

*But first of all, is there a history of silence? Further, is not an archaeology, even of silence, a logic, that is, an organised language, a project, an order, a sentence, a syntax, a work? Would not the archaeology of silence be the most efficacious and subtle restoration, the repetition, in the most irreducibly ambiguous meaning of the word, of the act perpetrated against madness – and be so at the very moment when this act is denounced?*<sup>35</sup>

Derrida’s principal criticism is that in attempting to write the history of the dialectic of reason and madness, of how this hitherto unity was rendered asunder, Foucault’s gamble could easily perpetuate the division and thus inadvertently insert itself into this determinate relation. The only other option, however, is to “hypostatise ‘madness’ as an indeterminate conceptual absolute, something like ‘negativity,’ and so make impossible, precisely, a *history* of madness”.<sup>36</sup>

A point where one would be inclined to think that Foucault, Derrida and Philyras converge is the idea that poetry – and all literature for that matter – becomes a type of common ground, an intersection of delirium and reason, of madness and thought. Madness has an existence not only in a clinical and psychiatrically compartmentalised form but, more intriguingly, inside of literature. Derrida makes the perspicacious observation that literature achieves an essential displacement of madness metonymically, metaphorically, allusively: “I mean that the silence of madness is not *said*, cannot be said in the logos of this book, but is

indirectly, metaphorically, made present by its pathos”.<sup>37</sup> Philyras’ writing is precisely this; a creative rearrangement of semantics, a reconfiguration of logic and a reappraisal of reality:

*‘Αλλά τί νοιάζει τό πουλί ή μόρα, όταν ξέρει πώς ἔχει φτερά καί μπορεί νά πετάξεις. Χτυπά ή μοίρα σάν καταπέλτης ἀλλά ὠστόσο ἐπάνω ἀπό τά συντρίμια πού σωριάζει ὁ χαλασμός, θεῖο ἀηδόνι ὁ ποιητής κελαηδεῖ τίς χαμένες ἐλπίδες, τούς ἀνείπωτους καημούς πού δέν εἶδαν τό φῶς, εἰδύλλια δροσερά καί νοσταλγικά πού δέν πήρανε σάρκα, εὐχυμες, θερμές καί ὠραίες στιγμές πού ποτέ δέν τίς ἔζησε.’*<sup>38</sup>

Philyras’ vision, his position within the dialectic of madness and literature is not summed up by what he says *per se*, but the place *from* which he says it.

In the *Dromokaiteion* reason and life are not negated, indeed the converse holds true – the mad appear to suffer from an excess of life and reason imparts an unexplored freedom:

*“Ἐδῶ τουλάχιστον γινόμαστε καί θεοί; πλάθει ή φαντασία μας κοσμογονίες καί σάν κεραυνοί σχίζουσι τό διάστημα οἱ ἐγκεφαλικές συμπίεσεις πού ὑποβάλλουσι τήν συντέλεια, τήν δεύτερη παρουσία. Ἐδῶ ἀγαποῦμε – ἀλίμονο – πιότερο τή ζωή.”*<sup>39</sup>

Madness does not cast a murky cloud over the intellect; it endows it with abundant lucidity. Indeed, madness also becomes an excess of remembrance for Philyras. His autobiography is a memory without a referent, a memory not so much of what is external – an event or a factual detail – but of what is internal: desires, emotions and an restless imagination.<sup>40</sup> All that he sees is filtered through the unfathomable depths of his soul and thus what he presents us with is a re-imagining of events. Madness does not engender delusion or bewilderment but circumvents the obsessional rules of social routine and allows Philyras to die and be reborn with the inferred promise of a more fully realised world:

*“Ἡ ψυχή μου ξανανθίζει σάν ἄνθος σέ μαραμένο κλαδί... Τί σημασία ἔχει τό σήμερα καί τό αὔριο, ὅταν μπορούμε νά ζοῦμε ἀκόμη τό ὄνειρο, καί γευθοῦμε σάν ἄλλοτε τήν ἱερή συγκίνηση τῆς στιγμῆς.”*<sup>41</sup>

Philyras’ madness becomes the illusion that something can be recovered from time, a belief in the likelihood of eternity. The passing of time and the threat of melancholy teaches us to savour all the more the ephemeral joys and fleeting beauty.

Whereas the political world – in the wider sense of the word *polis* – is a collaborative universe of associations and relationships, we see the world of the *Dromokaiteion* is anything but this paradigm. A vast array of specters, phantoms and demons invoke an entropic pull on the patients. Their delusions become tantamount to the insidious song of the Sirens which disguises its madness with seductive sounds. The structure, then, of the asylum is one of individuals who have been seduced by subjectivity, a gathering of autonomous beings who are unable to reach beyond their inner worlds and forge relations of trust amongst each other:

*“Όλες οί έφιαλτικές μορφές πού όνειρεύθη ή ανθρώπινη φαντασία, όλα τά τερατώδη σχεδιαγράμματα του άυτοσχεδιασμού τυφλά και ψηλαφητά, ή ζωή, προτού κυριαρχήσει ή άρμονία, σαλεύουν και άναδεύονται στό σκοτάδι.”<sup>42</sup>*

It is into this vast darkness of spiritual entities and spectral beings, of phantom-like substances of imposture and parody that each of the inhabitants of the *Dromokaiteion* tap into and begin to siphon their respective worlds. Psychosis destroys moral and linguistic connections, projecting its own form of knowledge and hence massacres the intersubjective and historical self, transforming human existence into a grotesque play involving inanimate, non-human figures.<sup>43</sup>

That is why Philyras is unable to communicate with anyone else in the asylum and why their worlds cannot be accessed by him. Vicarious introspection is an impossibility in such an empathy-absent environment. And so we have a man who believes he is a billionaire, a Padishah who believes he owns a harem in which there are thirteen thousand odalisques, and a zealot who believes he is receiving phosphorescent letters – scrunched up old pieces of paper – from God. The self becomes a multitude; an identity shattered and fragmented: “Γιατί ή ζωή μου δέν ήταν μία. Κανείς δέν ξέρει τί έκανε ό Ρώμος μοναχός του. Έκει έξω ένιωσα για πρώτη φορά νά γίνομαι όργανον και θύμα παραισθήσεων.”<sup>44</sup> In madness you construct your own universe and, being the omnipotent creator that you are, in it, you make yourself disappear and appear as you please:

The problem actually seems to be that rather than “seeing what isn’t there” the organism is seeing what *is* there – but no one else does, hence no semantic sign exists to depict the entity and therefore the organism cannot continue an empathic relationship with the members of his society.<sup>45</sup>

Philyras’ life experience becomes nothing more than a series of unshared realities. The communal world and its accoutrements are done away with and, divested of empathic connections, Philyras clothes himself with loneliness and invites a vast silence to dwell between himself and others.

### III

Another mad writer, Friedrich Hölderlin was described by Maurice Blanchot as possessing a madness which was mysterious because it achieved its greatest simplicity and clarity in its deepest insanity. Similarly, Philyras’ language is enriched by his madness insofar as it takes on a fluidity: it flows in multiple directions and becomes ceaselessly restless. What we see unfold before us is a frenzy of language that is rampant in its purest forces. Again, it is not a language that is incoherent or unintelligible; for reason knows only too well how to compose and

arrange things in reverse order. The poet is not playing with disorder; he is revealing to us a language that has not yet passed through the filter of rationality:

*Γδυνόσουνα. Κλειστά τά παράθυρά σου, ή γρίλλια καί ό ρόζ ό μπερτές.*

*Καί έγδυνόσουνα. Κι έγτερουγίζαν γύρω σου χιλιάδες έγρωτες μέ μικρά φτερά καί έγβλεπα πέταλα ρόδων νά σκορπιούνται στά λευκά σου σεντόνια καί τόν έαυτό μου ανάποδα στό προσκέφαλό σου νά μετρώ τά σχέδια ώσπου νά ρθεις. <sup>†</sup>Ηρθες Ας παίξει ή μουσική τό έμβατήριον τών μεγάλων έμπνεύσεων, άς άνακρούσει τό μίσος αύτάν πού μένουν άπ έξω.*

*Καί έγδυνόσουνα. Καί άρχισε γύρω ό χορός τών επίπλων. Καί ό καθρέπτης, έραστής τής ντουλάπας, χρόνια κολλημένος μαζί της, έμιλούσε στην ψιλόλιγνη σιφονιέρα, κι αύτή, μέ τό στόμα της τό έπάνω συρτάρι της άνοιχτό, έγχασκε. Και ή κουνοπιέρα κυματιστή έγκανε ύποκλίσεις στό σκαμνάκι τής τουαλέτας καί ή τουαλέτα έγφηνγε, γλυστρούσε, έγρυβόντανε, έγύριζε πίσω μεθυσμένη από τήν τζάζ τών σαρακιών.*

*<sup>†</sup>Ω... Ας σταματήσει ό χορός τών επίπλων. Ας γονατίσουν όλα στό πέραςμα του τελευταίου Ένός. Καθρέπτης, τουαλέτες, κρεβάτια άς γονατίσουν. Περνάει τών επίπλων ό Βασιλεύς.<sup>46</sup>*

In the passage, Philyras' voice is set free from ordinary patterns of speech and conventional forms of meaning. There is an utter interchangeability of ideas; objectivity is absent and subjectivity reigns supreme. As David Cooper perspicaciously remarks: "Madness exists as the delusion that consists in really uttering an unsayable truth in an unspeakable situation".<sup>47</sup> There is in the excerpt a constant image of someone undressing. Who is undressing? It is Philyras himself. He is gradually letting go of any control he exerts over his language and yet it never becomes out of control, so to speak. His words are dancing in the midst of enunciation and act until the moment is achieved where the madness in his language becomes pure act.<sup>48</sup> A man can always be mad but thought, by definition, is the accomplishment of reason and therefore is denied access to the language of madness: "Madness is the dream of an imagination overwrought in solitude".<sup>49</sup>

Philyras professes to being the 'King of the Furniture' and it is here, in the poets' seemingly laughable aesthetics of furniture, that a statement by Cooper begins to ring true: "*All madmen are political dissidents. Each of our madnesses is political dissidence*".<sup>50</sup> The madman is obliged to enter the field of reason after having paid the toll of anonymity; it is only when one disguises their folly with the mask of obscurity that the political safeguards of a society will relent. Buying furniture attests to adhering to an unwritten social contract; consenting to live in a politically governed zone and therefore abide by its precepts. What is furniture if not illustrative of a politics of ordered neatness, the most basic vestments of civilisation, the historically-validated building-blocks of decorous society. Furniture is indicative of a public space bringing people together and thus engendering common meanings. In Philyras' delirium, however, furniture is

transplanted into a space of absence, a space entirely devoid not of meaning but bereft of sociopolitically-orientated meaning; Philyras ‘re-animates’ furniture into a politics of the self.

Whenever we arrange furniture we unconsciously – or perhaps consciously – comply with certain implicit rules. Tables go with chairs, the fridge belongs in the kitchen, the lamps are usually in the bedroom and so on and so forth. When we invite friends over this configuration can easily become disordered and so, after they leave, we promptly return things to their ‘proper place’. Posing the question of why the new arrangement of household objects is not satisfactory can elicit a number of responses. Yet it is inevitable that a majority of answers will be demonstrative of the notion that furniture and the relation of each piece of furniture to another represents our arrangement of the world we inhabit: “Rooms and their furnishings, like language and our concepts, are things we live amongst. They change with time, need, desire and whim. They both reflect and shape our beliefs and desires”.<sup>51</sup> By re-arranging the furniture, Philyras disrupts the order imposed on them, destabilises and revokes the fundamental assumptions of civilisation; Philyras is not simply re-arranging household items – he re-arranges language, he re-animates reality itself.<sup>52</sup>

The poet casts off his cloak of alienation – that is, the alienated structures of existence – and moves towards autonomy. This is how he relates his cosmic funeral:

*Κι ἐγδυνόσουνα. Καί ἐφοροῦσες ἐσύ ἀραχνοῦφαντο νυχτικό κι ἐγὼ ἀπ’ ἔξω τὰ  
σάβανα μου. Ἡ κάμαρά σου εὐγενικιά, χαριτωμένη, μικρή, ἀρωματική κι ἀπ’ ἔξω  
ἀπέραντος μαῦρος ὁ δρόμος. Τώρα κάτσε ἐσύ καί κοιμήσου, ἐγὼ τραβῶ. Ἡ  
μουσική ἄς προηγηθεῖ. Ἄγνωστοι κόσμοι, πεθασμένοι ἀστέρες, πλανήτες μέ χρυσές  
οὐρές, ἄς μποῦν μπροστά.*

*Ὁ γαλαξίας ἄς ἀκολουθεῖ σά χρυσή διαδήλωση. Ἐπειτα ἄς παραταχθοῦν τὰ  
ἐξαπτέρυγα τῶν ἐρώτων. Ἐπειτα ὁ ἵππος μου ὁ πολεμικός.*

*Καί ἔπειτα ἐγὼ, νεκρός.<sup>53</sup>*

Philyras’ mythical death achieves a resymbolisation of his experience. Delirium becomes the ultimate and indeed consummate signifier in his madness insofar as it assumes the role of an organising principle. Language is the proverbial *alpha* and *omega* of madness and madness the fulfillment of language: “Delirium is the dream of waking persons”.<sup>54</sup>

#### IV

Philyras’ manic eroticism, his sexual melancholia, in short, his madness is manifested in his language. Fluid, capricious and untainted by the filter of rationalism, his language is an undiluted outpouring of his poetic soul. Philyras rejected out of hand the ideal of poetic perfection, feeling that an unyielding revisionism is akin to raping a poem and stealing its

magical innocence. His writing constitutes an event of pure subjectivity, an action that heroically defies the oppressive, rationalising structures and paradigms of society. That is why it is in his later poetry and, most astonishingly, in his writings while in the *Dromokaiteion*, where his madness is fully realised, that we witness the crystallisation of his poetic vision.

The poet's madness unsettles the decisions language has made for us, he alters the pre-existing common codes of communication that are imposed on us from without because he yearns for the freedom to speak. It is this precisely that his madness achieves: the translation of language into a configuration of pure subjectivity. This is the significance behind his animation and re-arrangement of the furniture in his delirium. The pressure of reality was invariably the determining factor in the artistic character of our poet. And it is this pressure that awakened within Philyras the deepening need for words to express his feelings, the synapses of his soul. It is his desire for expression that made him search out the sound and power of a language he was given and, inevitably, re-created:

It is not an artifice that the mind has added to human nature. The mind has added nothing to human nature. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live.<sup>55</sup>

Ἔτσι καί μέξ στά στήθεια μου σά Γίγαντες παλεύουν  
 ἡ φλόγα μέ τή σκέψη μου σέ θλιβερό σκοπό  
 κι ὠιμέ δέν ξέρω τί ἔχουνε, δέν ξέρω τί γυρεύουν.  
 Νά μέ συντρίψουνε θέλουνε, δέν ξέρω καί πονῶ.<sup>56</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Γ. Φτέρης, 'Ο Φιλύρας, 'Το Βήμα', 5.8.1951, quoted by Τάσος Κορφής (1978) *Ματιές σέ Ποιητές τοῦ Μεσοπολέμου*, Αθήνα: PROSPEROS, s. 30.
- 2 Peterson, Dale (ed.) (1982) *A Mad People's History of Madness*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- 3 One could provide an endless list of such documents but here are a few to begin with: Peggy S. Buck (1978) *I'm Depressed – Are You Listening, Lord?*, Valley Forge, Judson Press; Pawel Cienin (1972) *Fragments From the Diary of a Madman*, London: Gryf; Percy Knauth (1956) *A Season in Hell*, New York: Harper.
- 4 Again a brief list: Harry Feldman (1960) *In a Forest Dark*, New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons; Charles F. Hellmuth (1977) *Maniac: Anatomy of a Mental Illness*, Philadelphia: Dorrance; Raya Eskola Tew (1978) *How Not to Kill a Cockroach*, New York: Vantage; Vaslav Nijinsky ([1995] 1999) *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*. Fitzlyon, Kyril (transl.), Acocella, Joan (ed.). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

- 5 R. Bultmann (1956) *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting*, London: Thames & Hudson, quoted by: James M. Glass (1989) *Private Terror / Public Life. Psychosis and the Politics of Community*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 102.
- 6 Ρώμος Φιλύρας, *Η Ζωή Μου Στο Δρομοκαΐτειον, στο βιβλίο του Τάσου Κόρφη, Ρώμος Φιλύρας. Συμβολή Στή Μελέτη Τῆς Ζῆς Κáι Τοῦ Ἔργου Του*, Ἀθήνα: PROSPEROS, s. 104.
- 7 David Cooper (1978) *The Language of Madness*, London: Allen Lane, p. 51.
- 8 For an illuminating discussion on the suicidal tendencies and death gods of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton see Lillian Feder (1977) “Myths of Madness in Twentieth Century Literature: Dionysus, The Maniai, and Hades” 1 (1) *Psychocultural Review* 131-51.
- 9 “I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object. What is realised in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming.”; Jacques Lacan ([1977] 2001) *Écrits: A Selection*. Sheridan, Alan (transl.), London: Routledge, p. 94. In Lacan’s linguistic self-conscious reasoning – complex and recondite as always – the tense of ‘I’ is always in a process of deferred becoming since it can only know itself in terms of the other who offers an unknown response. What Philyras does is accelerate the process to the point of stepping outside the ‘subject of desire’ restriction and asserting autonomous control over its expression of subjectivity (‘I’).
- 10 Michel Foucault ([1961] 1999) *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Routledge, p. 175.
- 11 see note 7, p. 22.
- 12 James M. Glass (1989) *Private Terror / Public Life. Psychosis and the Politics of Community*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press. p. 122.
- 13 see note 6, p. 110.
- 14 see note 6, p. 116.
- 15 see note 6, p. 121.
- 16 Κώστας Βάρναλης (1958) “*Ἀνθρωποι - Ζώντανοί - Ἀληθινοί*,” ἔκδ. Κέδρος, σ. 247.
- 17 see note 6, p. 120.
- 18 It is a point of contention whether Philyras’ madness was an ailment of physical rather than psychogenic origin, especially in the light of his incident with the stone in his childhood (see chapter 1). Although I believe that the ‘stone of madness’ served as a catalyst of sorts, because of Philyras’ acute awareness of his situation and his bouts of introspection, I cannot agree with the notion that his madness is purely physiological if only because he is in such awesome control of his delirium and reason is not absent from his monologue. For a discussion on psychosis/neurosis see Philip K. Dick ([1964] 1995) “Drugs, Hallucinations and the Quest for Reality” in Lawrence Sutin (ed.) *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick. Selected Literary and Philosophical Writings*, New York: Vintage Books, p. 168.
- 19 see R.D. Laing ([1959] 1973) *The Divided Self. An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, p. 94, where he conceives of the descent into madness as a struggle for liberation from the false consciousness of society, as a desire for a rebirth of the true self. His thesis is that mental illness is merely a convenient set of letter-boxes into which we ‘pigeon-hole’ people whose ideas and behaviour deviate from the norms of society.
- 20 see note 7, p. 155.
- 21 see note 7, p. 40.
- 22 “Desire is that which is manifested in the interval that demand hollows within itself, in as much as

the subject, in articulating the signifying chain, brings to light the want-to-be, together with the appeal to receive the complement from the Other, if the Other, the locus of speech, is also the locus of this want, or lack.”; Jacques Lacan ([1977] 2001) *Écrits: A Selection*. Sheridan, Alan (trans.), London: Routledge, p. 291. The subject, which seeks to find a place in the Imaginary is beset upon by the Symbolic – the common realm of signification shared by all subjects – and thus is most likely to enter into a distinctly social field of intersubjectivity. Psychosis is what happens when the subject dislodges and falls into the Real – that is, outside the domain of signification – where psychic energy remains unsymbolised; see note 6, pp. 91-93.

- 23 Jacques Lacan [1959] “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet” in Shoshana Felman (ed.) ([1977] 1982) *Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, p. 12.
- 24 see note 6, p. 106.
- 25 Plato’s Phaedrus
- 26 see note 2, p. 3.
- 27 Jacques Jouanna ([1992] 1999) *Hippocrates*, DeBevoise, M. B. (trans.), Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, pp. 67, 144, 182.
- 28 see note 10, p. 63.
- 29 see note 10, p. 70.
- 30 see note 6, p. 127.
- 31 David Cooper’s introduction to Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*, see note 10, p. viii.
- 32 see note 10, p. 14. Philyras’ words on the issue possess a poignant tone of lamentation: “I came here too. Locked up here all alone I saw life like a tragic game of Fate. Withdrawn from worldly things, hurt and laughed at by all. Life tricks us – Wilde said it too from the tragic prison of Reading – with vain cheerless forms, deceptive unkind beauties, momentary pleasures, doll-like fame and glory” (own translation), see note 6, p.113.
- 33 see note 10, pp. 288-89.
- 34 *Histoire de la folie*, Preface to the original edition (Plon, 1961), quoted in Shoshana Felman ([1978] 1985) *Writing and Madness (Literature / Philosophy / Psychoanalysis)*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 41. The translation is by Martha Noel Evans in collaboration with Felman.
- 35 Jacques Derrida ([1967] 2001) “Cogito and the History of Madness” in Bass, Alan (trans.) *Writing and Difference*, London: Routledge Classics, p. 41.
- 36 John Frow (1985) “Foucault and Derrida”, 5(1) *Raritan. A Quarterly Review* 32-33.
- 37 see note 35, p. 44.
- 38 see note 6, p. 122.
- 39 see note 6, p. 114.
- 40 Shoshana Felman ([1978] 1985) *Writing and Madness (Literature / Philosophy / Psychoanalysis)*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 81.
- 41 see note 6, p. 122.
- 42 see note 6, p. 106.
- 43 see note 12, p. 34.
- 44 see note 6, p. 114.
- 45 Philip K. Dick ([1964] 1995) “Drugs, Hallucinations and the Quest for Reality” in Sutin, Lawrence (ed.) *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick. Selected Literary and Philosophical Writings*, New York: Vintage Books, p. 173.

- 46 see note 6, pp. 131-32.
- 47 see note 7, p. 149.
- 48 see note 7, p. 20.
- 49 see note 40, p. 80.
- 50 see note 7, p. 134. The italics, incidentally, are not mine.
- 51 Eva Feder Kittay ([1987] 1995) “Metaphor as Rearranging the Furniture of the Mind: A Reply to Donald Davidson’s ‘What Metaphors Mean’” in Zdravko Radman (ed.) *From a Metaphorical Point of View. A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Cognitive Content of Metaphor*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, p. 114.
- 52 A comment by Glass offers an insightful opportunity for digression: “...the language of persons excluded by the society, produces a symbology that comments on such political concepts as community, citizenship, and participation... on the nature of the self’s alienation and the power of delusion in eroding human connections... the language of metaphor, as it appears in narrative storytelling, may be a revealing political language, a source of political knowledge, and a commentary on the structure of rationality.” in James M. Glass (1989) *Private Terror / Public Life. Psychosis and the Politics of Community*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 193. Hence Cooper’s comment concerning madmen as political iconoclasts (see note 7, p. 134).
- 53 see note 6, p. 132.
- 54 Francois Boissier de Sauvages (1772) *Nosologie méthodique*, quoted in Michel Foucault ([1961] 1999) *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Routledge, p. 103.
- 55 Wallace Stevens ([1941] 1960) “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” in Allen Tate (ed.) (1960) *The Language of Poetry*, New York: Russell & Russell, p. 125.
- 56 R. Philyras, poem of 1903, quoted without reference in Κόρφης, Τάσος (1992), See note 6, p. 11.

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