



ANNA OVASKA

Shattering Minds

Experiences of Mental Illness in Modernist Finnish Literature

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Helsinki, Finland May 2023

1. Introduction

My God, my God, am I going insane? Everything is muddled, I cannot arrange events in my mind.

– Helvi Hämäläinen, *Kaunis sielu*¹

I didn't have any kind of illness, it was otherwise hard. I wonder if other people feel the way I do, I thought then.

– Jorma Korpela, *Tohtori Finckelman*²

I was afraid that she had lost her sanity. I was afraid that also my own thoughts had lost their everything.

– Timo K. Mukka, *Tabu*³

Maria has gone away, I have gone away. The others have come.

– Maria Vaara, *Likaiset legendat*⁴

This book grew out of my interest in literary representations of unusual and unsettling experiences that are often interpreted (either by the experiencers themselves, by other fictional characters, or by readers) as signs of “mental illness” or “madness.” The four narrators of Finnish modernist novels discussed in this book bring forth diverse experiences of shattering, distress, confusion, alienation, and pain. They offer descriptions of hallucinations and delusions, as well as portrayals of a loss of borders between the self, the world, and others. The narrators also often try to “diagnose” themselves, although this task usually proves difficult, and they try to make sense of their experiences by giving them a narrative form.

Another starting point for this book was the sense of “access” to other minds afforded by literary narratives. There is a shared understanding that stories in general, and first-person narrated texts in particular, are able to generate strong feelings of being and interacting with other human beings.⁵ Literary works, in their descriptive detail and affective power, are some of the most powerful ways of evoking and inviting reflection on subjective experiences, also ones that may be unsettling for those experiencing or witnessing them. In addition to the experiences of shattering and distress evoked in literature, this book focuses on the ways literary language and narrative form can convey experiences and bring readers close to the minds of others—even feel that we are “inside” another person’s experiential world.

Particularly modernist literature is filled with evocative portrayals of shattering and distress that seem to capture the lived meaning of such experiences. This has been noted, for example, by phenomenologist and psychologist Louis Sass in his book *Madness and Modernism* (1992). According to Sass, there is an affinity between experiences of “madness” and modernist art: for example, an acute sense of self-consciousness and self-awareness (“hyperreflexivity”, as he calls it) combined with experiences of alienation from the shared world and detachment from oneself.⁶

It is not surprising that psychologists, psychoanalysts, medical practitioners, sociologists, and other researchers interested in the margins of being have been looking to literary fiction for insight.⁷ In the past 20 years interdisciplinary fields of research like medical and health humanities, narrative medicine, and madness studies have further developed these connections between the medical sciences, humanities, and social sciences and paid special attention to the ways different forms of knowledge about illness and health are entangled.⁸ Fictional and autobiographical narratives of (mental) illness are used, for example, in medical education: to bring focus to the patients’ perspectives and experiences and to resist biomedical reductionism. However, there is a growing awareness that literature cannot be seen as a mere tool for enhancing healthcare. Literature shapes the way we understand—the way we *read*—ourselves, others, and the world. Cultural artefacts like literary narratives participate in the construction of social reality and knowledge. Furthermore, many literary scholars have emphasized the need to analyze the distinctive features of literary and narrative discourses and the specific techniques authors use to evoke minds and experiences and to affect their audiences (see, e.g., Cohn 1978; 1999; Wood 1994; 2013). Literature is a valuable source of understanding about our being in the world and with others, but it creates its own techniques and realm of aesthetic meaning, which deserve further investigation.

To discuss how literature represents, enacts, and reconfigures unusual and unsettling experiences and how readers engage with them, I bring narrative theory into conversation with philosophical, feminist, and cultural perspectives on the mind and mental illness. Drawing from phenomenological and embodied cognitive theories about the mind, body, illness, self, and intersubjectivity as well as narratological research on fictional minds and text-reader interaction, I develop theory and analyses about the narrative construction and reading of shattering minds and experiential worlds. The book poses a series of questions about how fictional representations of mental illness work and how we approach them: What techniques do literary texts use to create shattering minds and experiential worlds? How are readers invited to engage with such minds and worlds? What kind of power relations are involved in narrating and reading about experiences that are distressing and painful? How do literary texts construct knowledge and understanding about mental illness?

The focus of analysis is on four modernist and late modernist novels—Helvi Hämäläinen’s *Kaunis sielu* (1928/2001), Jorma Korpela’s *Tohtori Finckelman* (1952), Timo K. Mukka’s *Tabu* (1965) and Maria Vaara’s *Likaiset legendat* (1974)—which each pay special attention to the margins of

subjectivity and strive to turn experiences of illness, distress, and shattering into words, stories, and storyworlds. The four novels offer particularly compelling portrayals of mental distress from a first-person perspective: they invite reflection on the possibilities of literature to convey subjective experiences as well as on the cultural meanings of mental illness.⁹ The works also offer a temporally wide-ranging overview of Finnish modernist prose: the analyses shed light on how Finnish modernist writers used the technique of first-person narration and offer new readings of Finnish modernist novels written from the late 1920s to the early 1970s, some of which have not been extensively studied before.

One of my tasks when reading the novels and writing about them has been to create interpretations that do not reduce the experiences portrayed in them to diagnostic or psychiatric categories. The notions of “mental illness” and “madness” are understood here as value-laden and culture-specific interpretive tools that are used to categorize and label a great variety of experiences and behaviors that feel strange or unsettling for those experiencing or perceiving them (see Abbott 2018, 18).¹⁰ This is not to say that mental illnesses or psychiatric disabilities are not real. In real life, diagnoses and labels are needed to provide people with the right kind of treatment, and for many practical reasons, for example to ensure disability allowance. At the same time, diagnoses create what philosopher Ian Hacking (1998; 1999) has called “looping effects”: being diagnosed, for example, with schizophrenia, affects how a person understands themselves and how they experience the world. A correct diagnosis—a “correct interpretation”—can help a person to make sense of their experiences and to cope with distress and disability. But many diagnoses still carry negative social and cultural meanings—stigmas—and in the worst cases, they may become self-fulfilling prophecies that hinder recovery. As such, diagnostic labels are linked to restrictive and oppressive cultural narratives about psychiatric disability. Because fictional works employ, repeat, and reconfigure categories and narratives of mental illness, they may shape not only readers’ conceptions thereof, but even the experiences that readers who suffer from psychiatric disabilities have: our self-understanding and identity.

Another reason to maintain a critical distance to diagnostic interpretations is connected to literature as a form of art. The objects of this study are artificial constructions: the characters and their minds are fictional, and they are brought to life in the experiences of each individual reader. Instead of diagnosing fictional narrators or characters, or answering questions about how psychiatric disabilities are or should be labeled or categorized, I ask what functions the experiences of shattering and distress, and interpreting them as “madness” or “mental illness,” have in the texts, and what kind of cultural work they do: How do the texts guide our reading and interpretation and why do we read the way we do? How do they affect our perception and understanding of the mind and mental illness?

Fictional representations of mental illness often purposely call their readers to reflect upon the causes of the characters’ experiences and to try to fit them into different diagnostic categories—as if the literary characters were actual people (and as if readers were doctors or psychiatrists). However,

this investigative and diagnostic work is constantly interrupted, as we will see. Literary narratives often fight against the human need to classify and label, even though they also employ our habit of attributing mental states and experiences to other people. The analyzed novels direct their readers to pay attention to the experiences of shattering and distress, not just as symptoms of some mental illness or disorder that must be diagnosed, but as meaningful in their own right. Most importantly, the novels invite the readers to reflect on our ways of reading and approaching unsettling experiences.

The analyses conducted in this study show how fictional portrayals of mental illness both use and challenge our cultural and scientific understanding of what is considered pathological or “abnormal,” as well as common diagnostic labels such as “schizophrenia.” They renegotiate the scope of “normal” and question the ways we understand the mind and consciousness. The modernist texts, for example, problematize the dominant cultural narrative according to which mental illness is something that is “inside the head.” Instead of presenting minds and illness as disembodied or disengaged from the world, the texts conceive them as bodily and embedded in the world, enacted in intersubjective relations with other people, and entangled in socio-cultural norms and narratives that shape identity, gender, and sexuality. As such, the novels have ethical and political significance. Furthermore, and just as importantly, they guide their readers to pay attention to the narrative techniques and aesthetic forms: to the way stories can evoke experiences and how representations create meaning. In other words, they remind us of the narrative and artistic construction of the experiences they portray. The novels are thus simultaneously lifelike and metafictional: both experiential and aware of their own fictionality. They invite their readers to imagine ways of honoring unusual and unsettling experiences without stigmatizing them and to acknowledge the complexity of experiences and knowledge constructed through narratives.

As narrative scholars Käte Hamburger and Dorrit Cohn have famously argued, narrative fiction is a distinctive form of art because of its ability to provide a sense of access into minds other than one’s own (Hamburger 1973, 83; Cohn 1978, 4–6). In *Transparent Minds*, Cohn writes that:

[N]arrative fiction is the only literary genre, as well as the only kind of narrative, in which *the unspoken thoughts, feelings, perceptions of a person other than the speaker can be portrayed*. (Cohn 1978, 7, emphasis mine.)¹¹

Cohn refers to the “magical power” authors have: the way they can reveal the experiential worlds of their characters and make readers feel *as if* they entered the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of another human being. In third-person narration the uncanniness of this power is at its height: narrative techniques like psycho-narration (thought report) and narrated monologue (free indirect discourse) invite readers to encounter experiences that are invisible to an outside observer and that can be unconscious, unspeakable, or on the edge of verbalization even for the characters themselves (Cohn 1978, 103; also Palmer 2004, 75–86).¹² First-person narrators, in turn, invite readers inside their *own* lives: as monologists, diarists and memoirists they

reveal their past and present experiences to their readers and persuade us to adapt to their perspective of the world. Yet although first-person narration is lifelike in this sense, first-person narrators often break the “mimetic code”—what is plausible or possible to do or know in real life—in many ways. They, for example, have knowledge that would be impossible to have in reality or they narrate what is happening to them simultaneously with the events. As such, first-person narrators often point toward their own fictionality and constructedness. (See Cohn 1978, 209–215; also Phelan 2005; 2013.)¹³

First-person narration also reveals and takes advantage of the doubled nature of the speaking subject. First-person narrators are always looking at themselves as if from the “outside”: there is a constant gap between narration and experience, between the narrating I and the experiencing I. Such narrators are often painfully familiar with the insufficiency of language and narration. They are faced with a lack of words to describe their experiences and with a lack of self-knowledge, and they thematize this in their narration. An important characteristic of the narrators of their own lives is that they are often unreliable. As narratologist Greta Olson (2003) notes, unreliable narrators can be either “untrustworthy” or “fallible.” Whereas untrustworthy narrators try to purposefully deceive their audiences (for example, to show themselves in a better light), fallible ones make mistakes in their perceptions and judgments about themselves and the world around them without realizing it (see also Cohn 1978, 144; Palmer 2004, 125). When encountering unreliable narrators, it becomes the readers’ task to detect this unreliability and to construct what “actually” happens in the story, using clues provided by the text and its implied author (see Nünning 2005; 2008; Phelan 2005). The doubledness, untrustworthiness and fallibility are all features of the first-person perspective that authors use for aesthetic and political purposes, as we will see.

The reader’s position, when reading a first-person narrator’s account of themselves, is also doubled in its own way: a reader, an I, is faced with another I. Phenomenologist Georges Poulet has described the experience of reading fiction even as an experience of becoming “invaded” by another mind:

Because of the strange invasion of my person by the thought of another, I am a self that is granted the experience of thinking thoughts foreign to him. I am the subject of thoughts other than my own. My consciousness behaves as though it were a consciousness of another. (Poulet 1969, 56.)

A reader becomes a subject of “alien” thoughts. This kind of readerly experience, although extreme, may arise in any narrative situation (whether the text is narrated in first, second, or third-person), but it appears pronounced when engaging with first-person narrators or “figural” third-person narrators who adapt to the character’s perspective¹⁴—and it becomes particularly interesting when talking about experiences such as hallucinations, alienation, estrangement, and other ways of being in which the connection between the self and the world has become altered. The experience of reading can even resemble hallucinating, with the important difference that it happens inside an “aes-

thetic frame,” in the safe space provided by the aesthetic work where readers know that fiction is fiction, no matter how lifelike or vivid it may appear.¹⁵

The fictional works discussed in this book invite readers to imagine thoughts, feelings, and perceptions other than their own. They can evoke what trauma historian Dominic LaCapra has called “empathic unsettlement”:

a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place. (LaCapra 1999, 699.)

Fictional texts can make us attentive to the experiences of others. They can push us to imagine the experiences of others while understanding the difference between the self and the other—what Emmanuel Lévinas (1969) described as the “otherness” of the other. While we can never step outside of our own bodies and our own perspectives and feel what another person is feeling, it is possible to recognize the experiences of another and listen to them carefully. As noted earlier, fiction can also modify the way we perceive unusual experiences and the borders between “normal” and “abnormal.” Fictional stories are able to challenge our dominant cultural narratives and folk psychological notions of mental illness. They do this by exploring experiences of shattering and distress in an artful form. At the same time, fictional narratives are artistic constructions that have aesthetic meanings. Fiction evokes particular aesthetic experiences: a sense of lifelikeness and reality but also, as narratologist James Phelan puts it, a “thematic, ethical and affective significance and force which real-world experience does not have” (Phelan 2013, 171).

The following chapters are guided by two main theoretical and methodological goals. First, my aim is to bring together “psychological” and “metafictional” perspectives on fictional representations of shattering minds: to analyze their lifelikeness and constructedness side by side. Second, I supplement these perspectives with close reading, which pays attention to the cultural work that narratives do in the world and to the ways both the narrative texts and the interpretations we make of them are shaped by cultural and political structures. The analyses thus combine narratological insights about fictional minds and consciousness presentation with politically oriented and feminist approaches to narrative forms and ways of reading.

In Chapter 2, I discuss in more detail the modernist representations of shattering and distress. I focus on the ways modernist texts construct the mind and mental illness as embodied and shaped by the social and material environment. The chapter also elaborates on the interaction between the reader and the text, especially on the affective and reflective engagements, diagnostic efforts and failures, and empathic unsettlement invited by the modernist novels. Chapters 3 to 6 proceed from close readings of the fictional minds in each novel to explorations of the interpretive paths that the texts offer. I look at how readers are faced with the ambiguity of the texts and directed to oscillate between different, sometimes contradicting frames of reading and interpreting the narrators’ “madness.” In Chapter 3, I investigate the transgressive, norm-breaking, and queer fictional mind that

is created in Hämäläinen's *Kaunis sielu*. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on two very different kinds of stories about sexual abuse and trauma: Korpela's *Tohtori Finckelman* (chapter 4) and Mukka's *Tabu* (chapter 5). Although the first novel is narrated by a possible perpetrator and the second by a victim of abuse, both bring forth questions about narrators' unreliability, narration of traumatizing events, and ethics of reading. In Chapter 6, I explore the representation and meanings of psychosis in Maria Vaara's autofictional work *Likaiset legendat*. Finally, in the concluding chapter, I return to the questions about the forms of reflection, understanding, and knowledge created through fictional portrayals of shattering minds.

2. Shattering Minds and Worlds of Fiction

But he [Septimus] would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more.

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds. A child cried. Rightly away a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion ---

“Septimus!” Said Rezia. He started violently. People must notice. (Woolf 2004, 18.)

Virginia Woolf’s famous portrayal of Septimus Warren Smith’s experiences in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) offers an interesting viewing point for the modernist representations of mental illness. Through Septimus’s character, Woolf created a seminal representation of trauma and loss of borders between the self and the world, which reveals features that are also important in the Finnish modernist texts. In the passage quoted above, Woolf constructs the experiential world of Septimus, a young First World War veteran suffering from what would today be likely identified as post-traumatic stress disorder. The narrator renders Septimus’s thoughts through narrated monologue in which the voices and perspectives of Septimus and the narrator are entangled. The passage focuses on the way Septimus experiences his body as merging with his environment, moving and thinking with the world, and feeling nature around him (the trees, leaves, and sparrows) as part of his body. The borders between himself and the world are breaking down, and the world takes on a curious meaning, creating something similar to what phenomenological psychiatry has called a “delusional atmosphere”: a strange, enigmatic atmosphere that sets in before psychotic hallucinations or delusions take hold (see Jaspers 1963, 98; Sass 1994, 44–45).

At the beginning of the passage, the experience is framed as “madness,” but this is done through negation—“he would not go mad”—leaving room for other interpretations. The main reason why readers are likely to interpret Septimus’s experiences as symptoms of a mental illness (and not, for instance,

through a religious frame, which the text also offers) is that soon after this passage the experiences become disturbing and painful: he goes through distressing hallucinations, which take him back to the death of his officer in the war. However, the focus of Woolf's narration is not on finding a diagnostic label for Septimus, but rather on the *way* he experiences the world after a series of traumatic events. As David Herman (2011b, 244) emphasizes, "Woolf uses Septimus not just to thematize mental disability but to enact the way the world is experienced by someone suffering from psychotic delusions."¹⁶ More important than any diagnosis are the experiences themselves and their articulation through narrative means: Woolf shows how the world becomes strange and unsettling as a result of trauma.

Modernist Minds

Interest in unsettling and strange experiences is often seen as one dominant strand of modernist literature and thought. This attentiveness to the margins of being connects with the modernist writers' more general thematic and formal concern on the "individual, subjective consciousness," as Randal Stevenson (1992, 2) puts it. Likewise, David Herman (2011b, 243) writes that "despite their surface differences," modernist writers shared a common project: "the project of foregrounding [...] the domain of the mental, including sense impressions, emotions, memories, associative thought patterns and so on." Modernists all around the world focused on moments and situations in which the borders between the self, the world, and others become fragile and subjectivity becomes precarious, and they sought to communicate to their readers experiences like hallucinations, delusions, and feelings of alienation and distress.

The theme of mental illness and the focus on experiences of "shattering" offered many writers a chance to explore the relations of the mind, the body, language, and the world and to develop new techniques for representing the individual consciousness and the subject's perspective on the world. Furthermore, these investigations were responses to the changing social reality, structures of power, scientific advancements, and the destructive wars of the twentieth century. This can be seen in the work of numerous modernist writers and their followers, from Virginia Woolf to Albert Camus, Franz Kafka to Vladimir Nabokov, and from Charlotte Perkins Gilman to Janet Frame and Sylvia Plath, and the authors discussed here—Hämäläinen, Korpela, Mukka, and Vaara—participate in these modernist thematic discussions and formal experimentations from a Nordic perspective.

In *Kaunis sielu*, Hämäläinen creates a first-person narrator, a monologist who is constantly, obsessively, reflecting on her mental states, bodily experiences, and the world around her—bringing forth an experience that Sass (1994; 1998) has called "hyperreflexivity." The narrator fears that she is going insane, but also goes through feelings of pleasure and wonder engaging with her environment. The novel is examined more closely in Chapter 3, but let us take a brief look at one passage here, since it demonstrates some recurrent features of modernist explorations of (shattering) minds. Namely,

Shattering Minds is the first broad study on representations of mental illness in modernist Finnish literature. Through four case studies, it shows how in modernist texts mental suffering is not understood as something that is “inside” a person’s mind. Rather, experiences of illness are entangled with social and material environments, interactions with other people, and cultural norms and narratives that shape, for example, subjectivity, gender, and sexuality.

The study brings forth narrative strategies through which literary representations of shattering seek to affect their readers: What kinds of interpretive paths are invited in the texts? How are readers guided to go through embodied experiences of distress? How do the texts invite critical reflection on cultural and social perceptions of mental illnesses?



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