

In 1978 Italy became the first country to decree the closure of mental institutions by ratifying the Law 180 named after the anti-psychiatrist Franco Basaglia. Forty years earlier, in 1938, Ugo Cerletti, an Italian psychiatrist, invented the electro-convulsive therapy. Italy thus claims two “records” in the history of psychiatry. Different ways to treat the madness are related to different conceptions, narrations and ways of considering the “insane” within the society. The status of the “madman” depends on the circularity between psychiatry, literary *imaginarium*, political thought and public opinion. A “bad alliance” between psychiatry, collective mentality, and politics still remains an open possibility. Such an alliance reinforces the long-settled ideas according to which madness is accompanied by danger, chronicity, inheritance. On these ideas lied the power of asylum institution, conceived as the place of segregation of the sick (in order to safeguard the society) and of their “cure” (yet, such a “cure” was historically characterized by coercive and inhuman therapies like restraint, electroshock, and lobotomy).

A great portion of the Italian twentieth Century narrative about madness refers to the insane asylum, the place that shares both medical and political connotations. Starting from the Sixties onwards, the psychiatric thought supported by the phenomenological school and the anti-psychiatry movement (known in Italy as “democratic psychiatry”) permanently changed the conceptions of madness and therapy, and it finally made the Basaglia Law possible. On one hand, it gave rise to the idea of madness conceived as “human condition”, as “an enigmatic form of *existence*”: such an idea brought about the acceptance of the other and endorsed the re-thinking of the categories of normality and deviance. On the other hand, it gave rise to the conviction that the asylum was not merely an instrument of social exclusion, but rather a producer of madness itself in force of its capability to fix the madness into an incurable condition.

The rupture represented by the Law 180 was not merely medical, but socio-political as well. The scrutiny of Basaglia’s thought enables us to grasp a clear correspondence between mental illness and political conception of normality and deviance: madness, given its intrinsic psychiatric-political status, cannot be thought out of the political regulation of normality, deviance, health, and illness, as already Foucault pointed out.

The aim of the research project is to investigate, forty years after the approval of the Basaglia Law, the connection between medicine (psychiatry), literature and political thought in the Italian cultural landscape. The Italian madness narrative of the last forty years will be taken into account as the main corpus of study. The research, characterized by an interdisciplinary approach, will focus on two complementary aspects. In the first place, the forms of literary representation of mental illness will be analyzed by using both literary studies and psychiatry instruments. We shall compare the literary representations and the ideas elaborated by medical sciences in order to underline the distance between the two. Moreover, we shall explore the influence the literature exerted over psychiatry: whether and how did the literature speed up or slow down the Basaglia reform and, afterwards, support or restrain its actuation. In the second place, by shifting our investigation towards the common ground shared by literary criticism and political philosophy, we shall examine the intrinsically political character of the stories about madness and the social condition of madmen. The adoption of the conceptual history methodology will allow us to individuate the basic concepts of Basaglia’s revolutionary thought and to study their expressive potentiality in the literature of “post-revolutionary” period.

The methodology will enable us to locate the semantics of madness within two great fields embracing both politics, medicine, and literature. These fields can be denominated: critique and cure.

The two approaches to madness as literary subject are seen to be complementary and bring us closer to a deeper comprehension both of madness with regard to its multiplicity and unity, and of interactions between medicine, politics, and literature.

The question of the social image and place of the “madmen” after the abolition of asylums and the question of their rehabilitation, reintegration and acceptance have not been solved so far. To the greatest psychiatric revolution of the last Century did not correspond a significant social and mindset transformation, contrary to what Basaglia hoped for.

The outcomes of the research can favor a conversion of the “vicious circle” between psychiatry and collective imagination into a “virtuous circle”, which could be able to stimulate the dominant mentality to embrace the diversity as a different face of normality and to encourage the social inclusiveness both towards the exception and the norm.