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The "bull goose looney" as a Totem Guide for Chief's Writing Himself to Freedom

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This paper examines the institutionalisation of psychiatric treatment in Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. *Taking up the work of Michel Foucault, the paper examines how those suffering from mental illness were classified as disruptive and unfit for society, subsequently labelled mad and institutionalised in facilities more akin to semi-judicial structures than medical facilities. McMurphy, having manipulated a transfer for himself from a state work farm to what he perceives will be the less rigorous confines of a mental institution, epitomises the disruptive presence of the madmen, bringing a world of disorder and chaos to the staff and patients of the mental ward. Self-proclaimed as the head "bull goose looney", McMurphy reflects the counter-culture movements of the 1960s in the United States in his rejection of the rules and regulations imposed upon him by what amounts to a totalitarian system of control. A wild indomitable force of nature, McMurphy becomes a totem for Chief and the other patients, an embodiment of the human spirit the patients have forfeited inside the institutional system.*

Keywords
Institutionalised madness; totalitarianism; storytelling; pseudocouples; autobiographical narrative therapy

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest was published in 1962 amidst an ever-widening and influential counter-culture, finding voice in a broad range of anti-establishment movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Beat Generation, the hippies, "flower power", sexual liberation, drug culture, and the various anti-war, environmental, and student protest movements. The novel also takes place against the backdrop of calls for the deinstitutionalisation of psychiatric treatment, drawing upon Ken Kesey's personal experience working as an orderly at a mental health institution. The central theme of the novel is

grounded in the dehumanisation of the little man inside a totalitarian system of power. The individual, made ill by the conditions of modernity, and unable to conform to the imposition of social rules and expectations, is deemed unfit, alienated from society, isolated and confined to a semi-judicial institution for the mentally impaired. Deprived of fresh air and liberty, for their own good and for the good of society, the individual is made mad as a direct consequence of confinement; thereby, guaranteeing the diagnoses in the esteemed wisdom of the institution. Institutionalised in the madhouse, McMurphy goes so far as to positively petition for the role of lead madman, what he proclaims as the head "bull goose looney". By refusing to conform, McMurphy rekindles in the other patients a semblance of their own essential human spirit, a spirit that is messy, disordered, non-conforming, and beautiful in its own uniqueness and creative potential. The Chief perceives McMurphy as a totem, a sacred spirit being or guide that supports the Chief's rebirth and his passage toward healing; Chief's healing is manifest in the reassertion of his agency through storytelling, as both cathartic autobiography and remembrance of the one man who recognises and acknowledges Chief's very existence.

In a novel that revolves around the little man's struggle against totalitarian oppression, and the redemptive healing power of auto-biographic storytelling, it is revealing to consider the biographical context that gave birth to the novel, and, in similar fashion, to its film adaptation. Ken Kesey was born into a family of dairy farmers, raised in Oregon; returned to Oregon after his time as one of central figures of the west-coast counter-culture movement of the 1960s. Kesey can readily be perceived as an anti-establishment figure, having crossed paths with law-enforcement over his possession of marijuana, and frequently taking off to Mexico to evade authorities; furthermore, his work in a mental facility and his participation in clinical trials of hallucinogenic drugs gave him an insight into the oppressive and unscrupulous character of political and institutional power. Kesey's humble roots reverberate in the novel's depiction of man's struggle to live in his "natural" state, at peace with himself. The novel's film adaptation holds true to the spirit of the novel in its view of totalitarianism and the dehumanising institutionalisation of power, though it departs significantly from the first-person perspective of the Chief, thereby, unfortunately diminishing the therapeutic value to be discovered through the artistic endeavour. It is again revealing to consider the personal experience of the film's Czech-born director, Miloš Forman. Forman was born in 1932 and raised in Czechoslovakia by his uncles and family friends after his parents were both murdered by the Nazi regime: his mother in 1943 at

Auschwitz; his father in 1944 at Mittelbau-Dora. Forman fled Czechoslovakia during the Warsaw-Pact invasion of 1968, immigrating to the United States. Of note, the young Miloš attended boarding school in Central Bohemia, where he shared an early interest in theatre production with his fellow student, Václav Havel, the dissident playwright who would go on to become President of Czechoslovakia following the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, and who would write extensively on the subject of post-totalitarian systems of power in *The Power of the Powerless* (1978). The creative life-force, to be found in the works of Kesey, Forman and Havel, is intimate of the brotherhood of man, an interdependent complementarity that resounds at the heart of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* as the redemptive vital pulse of humanity emerging from beneath a repressive institutionalisation that first defines and consequently guarantees man's illness and insanity.

To begin to understand the figure of man labelled mad, disruptive to order and unfit for society, we must first examine the nature of power at the heart of the institutionalisation of psychiatric treatment into which the madman is thrown and thus defined. The work of Michel Foucault and, to a lesser extent, Stephen Szasz, are invaluable in this endeavour. Szasz draws attention to the creation of European madhouses in the seventeenth century, not as medical or therapeutic facilities, but rather, "as prisonlike structures for the confinement of socially undesirable persons" (126-127). Similarly, Foucault notes that the mental asylum begins in Paris with a decree that founded the Hôpital Général in 1656, as a semi-judicial structure, more so than a medical institution, one with "all the power of authority, of direction, of administration, of commerce, of police, of jurisdiction, of correction and punishment over all the poor of Paris" (39-40). The emphasis on judicial confinement as a tool for maintaining social order meant that a person could be confined due to their failure to participate in the productive service of the social order; it was as if one's unwillingness or inability to participate in the normal functioning of society was a sure sign of mental impairment. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Nurse Ratched explains the judicial system as such to the patients:

> Please understand: We do not impose certain rules and restrictions on you without a great deal of thought about their therapeutic value. A good many of you are in here because you could not adjust to the rules of society in the Outside World, because you refused to face up to them, because you tried to circumvent them and avoid them. (Kesey 113)

From the patient's perspective, the sense of being different and out of tune with society is captured in Harding's explanation to McMurphy of how he landed in the asylum:

> I indulged in certain practices that our society regards as shameful. And I got sick. It wasn't the practices, I don't think, it was the feeling that the great, deadly, pointing forefinger of society was pointing at me – and the great voice of millions chanting, 'Shame. Shame. Shame.' It's society's way of dealing with someone different. (169)

McMurphy questions why he, being "different" and "bugged about one thing or another as far back as he can remember" ... had not been driven crazy (169). Harding tells him that it's the other patients that hold the potential to drive a strong guy like him crazy (170); Harding's implication, that it is confinement and institutionalisation that drives a man crazy, echoes Foucault's observation that "... madmen are the brutal truth of confinement, the passive instrument of all that is worst about it. ... symbolized by the fact ... that a sojourn in a house of correction necessarily leads to madness" (225). Foucault quotes Scipion Pinel, who writes: "I am convinced that these madmen are so intractable only because they have been deprived of air and liberty" (242). Whether or not confinement is the seed of madness, institutionalisation may be seen to exacerbate neuroses that Freud proffered were inherent to cultural modernity.

We find more than a hint of "judicial confinement" in the novel's depiction of the strict temporal and spatial organisation of the ward and its patients. Chief portrays the military precision of the daily routine: "Ten-forty, -forty-five, -fifty, patients shuttle in and out to appointments in ET or OT or PT" (24). Chief further details how the Big Nurse is able to manipulate time: "she takes a notion to hurry things up, she turns the speed up, and those hands whip around that disk like spokes in a wheel. ... and everybody is driven like mad to keep up with that passing of fake time" (45). As a product of human imagination, a disturbance in temporal perception leaves a person disorientated, dehumanised, feeling like a cog in a machine under the control of whoever is pulling the levers. Chief also describes the way social order is regulated spatially on the ward: "Acutes: sit on your side of the day room and wait for cards and Monopoly games to be brought out. Chronics: sit on your side and wait for puzzles from the Red Cross box. Ellis: go to your place at the wall, hands up to receive the nails and pee running down your leg" (22).

Order and control in institutional settings are enacted through formal rules and regulations, as one of the orderlies explains to McMurphy: "It's the only way, you see, for us to maintain order" (30). Yet, rules and regulations play only a minor role in the maintenance of order; for, there is a high degree of self-discipline stemming from the patient's fear that things could be much worse: through further social devaluation and the hands of the nurses, doctors, or the other patients, or the threat of the shock shop, which looms behind the facade of care. Through routinised rituals of treatment, work duties, meals and the administration of medicine, the system of power at work in the mental health institution becomes anonymous. Chief describes the operational efficiency of the ward as such:

> So after the nurse gets her staff, efficiency locks the ward like a watchman's clock. Everything the guys think and say and do is all worked out months in advance, based on the little notes the nurse makes during the day. This is typed and fed into the machine I hear humming behind the steel door in the rear of the Nurses' Station. (21)

Routine dehumanisation leads to the dissolution of social cohesion among the patients and to an equally autonomised survival instinct that leaves the individual indifferent to the concerns of others. This is evident in Chief's recollection of an episode where Pete Mancini "had come to life for maybe a minute to try to tell us something, something none of us cared to listen to or tried to understand" (33). Only a few of the patients are cognisant enough to understand the extent of the suppression being carried out. At the same time, it is problematic to locate power in the hands of any single authoritarian centre. Chief, at one moment, sees the Big Nurse (Ratched) "in the center of this web of wires like a watchful robot, tend her network with mechanical insect skill, know every second which wire runs where and just what current to send up to get the results she wants" (20-21). Later though, recognising that McMurphy is on to it also, Chief contends "that it's not just the Big Nurse by herself, but it's the whole Combine, the nation-wide Combine that's the really big force, and the nurse is just a high-ranking official for them" (109). Chief thinks of the ward as "a factory for the Combine", both a microcosm of what exists in the world, and a place of correction, "for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in the schools and in the churches" (25). Unable to perceive a locus of power, and conditioned into thinking only of oneself in relation to the system, the individual is manipulated into accepting their

alienation as a condition and a sign of their own mental impairment, proof of their failure and inability to fit in. Consequently, the patients acquiesce to treatment as a form of correction, accepting that it is them, and not the system, that is ill. In this light, the patients are encouraged by the doctor to think of their Therapeutic Community as "a democratic ward" in which they might further own up to their illness as part of the healing process:

> [y]ou should feel at ease in your surroundings to the extent you can freely discuss emotional problems in front of patients and staff. Talk, he says, discuss, confess. ... Bring these old sins into the open where they can be washed by the sight of all. And participate in Group Discussion. Help yourself and your friends probe into the secrets of the subconscious. (31)

In *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Carl Jung likened patient confession to that of religious practice, and viewed it as a catharsis or cleansing, without which the individual was shut out "from the living experience of feeling himself a man among men" (35). In this light, the confessional storytelling of the patients may be viewed as a form of disclosure that unveils repressed psychic trauma, thereby clearing the foundations for a reconstitution of identity and re-integration of the individual into social life. Despite the doctor's positively expressed belief in the therapeutic benefits of confession, the patients are not rewarded for speaking openly; instead, they are dehumanised by a totalitarian system that divides patients against one another in order to make them more pliable to control. In the case of Mr. Harding, his efforts to speak openly about his problems with his wife results in the other patients tearing him to shreds with questions, what McMurphy describes as a "peckin' party", which threatens "the whole flock" (35). Chief attests to the harm the pecking does, not just to Harding, but to the entire group: "They've been maneuvered again into grilling one of their friends like he was a criminal and they were all prosecutors and judge and jury. For forty-five minutes they been chopping a man to pieces" (34). The "peckin" results in ostracisation for Harding and a feeling of shame and guilt in the other patients. McMurphy raises the situation with Harding, who initially tries to refute McMurphy's claim, declaring that anything done "by Miss Ratched or the rest of the staff is done solely for therapeutic reasons" (35); Harding adds: "The staff desires our cure as much as we do" (36). Harding's naive acceptance of the coercive practices of the ward reflect the way in which totalitarian systems operate to make

everyone complicit in the operation of the system. As Václav Havel notes of the post-totalitarian system in Czechoslovakia, everyone becomes both "victim and a supporter of the system" (65). Though Harding bends to McMurphy's opinion of events, he suggests that they are all just weak rabbits requiring a "good strong wolf like the nurse to teach us our place" (38). Harding's acquiescence to the hospital's practices resembles a Nietzschean "last-man" herd-mentality that lends support to the system's aim of maintaining normative values of order and control. It is no longer the system that classifies madness, but the individual that blindly commits himself through a Foucauldian self-censorship to the corrective processes of the system. "No shepherd and one herd!" Nietzsche writes. "Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse" (18). McMurphy learns about the "shock shop" and the EST machine, and he understands the fear this induces in the patients, admitting himself: "I damn well don't want to have some old fiend of a nurse after me with three thousand volts" (42). Nevertheless, he is undeterred, happy to be educated in the law of the land, but unwilling to accept the idea that the nurse has them whipped. He proposes a bet that he can "put a betsy bug up that nurse's butt within a week" (44). His intention to disrupt order is the very thing that positions him as a madman in the eyes of the system, justifying his self-proclamation as head "bull goose looney". As an affirmation of free-spiritedness, McMurphy takes the more difficult path prescribed by Nietzsche, the way of the exception, expressing a "will to power" that seeks to overcome the resistance of external conditions placed upon his life and liberty.

There are a number of ways by which McMurphy disturbs order. He brushes his teeth with soap powder merely to highlight the officious nature of ward policy (54); he evades an oppressive Foucauldian biopower by invading forbidden spaces: "… that very hand comes through the [nurses'] station door, scarred and tattooed and the color of raw meat" (48); he (twice) puts his fist through the glass window of the nurses' station as though it wasn't there, destroying the sense of an ever-present surveillance that has always been open to reversal (114, 116); '[h]e walks around with nothing but a towel hanging off his hips' (55); and he sings, in light of which the Chief surmises that "maybe the reason the black boys don't rush into that latrine and put a stop to his singing is because they know he's out of control" (53). Most disturbing of all, and what marks him as mad, is his laugh. Given that the word "laugh" and its many declensions show up more than one-hundred and fifty times in the novel, I think it is worth quoting the following passage at length:

> He stands there waiting, and when nobody makes a move to say anything to him he commences to laugh. Nobody can tell exactly why he laughs; there's nothing funny going on. But it's not the way that Public Relation laughs, it's free and loud and it comes out of his wide grinning mouth and spreads in rings bigger and bigger till it's lapping against the walls all over the ward. Not like that fat Public Relation laugh. This sounds real. I realize all of a sudden it's the first laugh I've heard in years.
> He stands looking at us, rocking back in his boots, and he laughs and laughs. He laces his fingers over his belly without taking his thumbs out of his pockets. I see how big and beat up his hands are. Everybody on the ward, patients, staff, and all, is stunned dumb by him and his laughing. There's no move to stop him, no move to say anything. He laughs till he's finished for a time, and he walks on into the day room. Even when he isn't laughing, that laughing sound hovers around him, the way the sound hovers around a big bell just quit ringing – it's in his eyes, in the way he smiles and swaggers, in the way he talks. (11)

We find the inverse perspective in McMurphy's declaration that he has never seen "a scareder-looking bunch in [his] life" scared even to laugh:

> You know, that's the first thing that got me about this place, that there wasn't anybody laughing. I haven't heard a real laugh since I came through that door, do you know that? Man, when you lose your laugh you lose your footing. A man go around lettin' a woman whup him down till he can't laugh any more, and he loses one of the biggest edges he's got on his side. (41)

"[W]hen the madman laughs", Foucault writes, "he already laughs with the laugh of death; the lunatic, anticipating the macabre, has disarmed it" (16). Nietzsche, too, instructs: "Not by wrath does one kill, but by laughing" (40). As though in recognition of this inherent power, Chief narrates: "I forget sometimes what laughter can do" (55). Laughter is the tool, the instinctive reaction that turns the label of madness, like a mirror, back upon the system. Nietzsche declared laughter as something holy, a way of ridiculing and overcoming one's own deficiencies, a means of shining light upon the ordinariness of man. Nietzsche's Zarathustra declares, "I shall bring your secrets to light; therefore I laugh in your faces with my laughter of the heights" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 99). McMurphy, like Zarathustra, laughs in the face

of the system and at the herd-mentality of the other patients; he refuses to acquiesce to an institutionalisation that denies the individual his life-affirming spirit. Though McMurphy acts in a completely self-centred manner, "keep[ing] an eye out for old Number One" (109), in rejecting the system he takes on the sufferings of others. The patients begin to follow his lead in thinking for themselves, questioning the rules that govern their everyday lives; when McMurphy is around to back them up, "the guys [let] fly at everything that had ever happened on the ward they didn't like" (94). Importantly, they begin to look out for one another, for McMurphy facilitates a social re-connectivity that situates the individual within a collective multiplicity, rather than a homogenised herd-mentality.

Through his laughing, his rule breaking, his reckless bravado, his disruptive presence, Murphy demonstrates a Nietzschean "will to power", as a commitment toward self-mastery and the overcoming of resistance. In a similar light, the figure of the free-spirited artist genius, lionised by Nietzsche, opens up an interpretation of Chief's storytelling project not only through the therapeutic lens of autobiographical confession, but as the reassertion of agency and an imaginative subjectivity no longer willing to accept the constraints of institutional power. For Chief, it is a vital necessity to express his subjective truth, to lay down a record of events as he saw them:

> It's gonna burn me just that way, finally telling about all this, about the hospital, and her [Nurse Ratched], and the guys – and about McMurphy. I been silent so long now it's gonna roar out of me like floodwaters and you think the guy telling this is ranting and raving my God; you think this is too horrible to have really happened, this is too awful to be the truth! But, please. It's still hard for me to have a clear mind thinking on it. But it's the truth even if it didn't happen. (9)

Chief's determination to act and finally tell his tale represents his rebirth from out of a comatose haze. "To act", Hannah Arendt writes, "in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin" (178). Arendt proclaims an intimate connection between action and natality, in that "with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world", charged with the possibility of the "unexpected" and the "infinitely improbable" (178). Where action is inherently connected to natality, Arendt claims it is through speech that the individual actualises "the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among equals" (178). If "writing … holds the threat of a secret",

as Roland Barthes proposes (20), a sense of the uniquely unexpected or the private mysteries of the newcomer, writing's revelation carries the potential to propel the individual into the public sphere, where, as Arendt maintains, the individual may exercise their freedom among equals. Storytelling is thus endowed with the freedom of natality, the beginning of life anew in the social sphere. Chief takes inspiration from McMurphy, the unique and "infinitely improbable" madman, as though perceiving him as a symbolic totem figure, a sacred spirit being that serves as a guide for the individual or tribe. Chief and McMurphy are cojoined by an interdependent complementarity; for, just as McMurphy needs an audience to listen to his rambling yarns, and suckers for his card games, the Chief relies on McMurphy as both actor and audience; they are, in a Beckettian sense, a "pseudocouple" that echo the essential interdependence to be found in socialised performance, reception and the contestation of identity (Barry 123). In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt writes: "No human life, not even the life of the hermit in nature's wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings" (Ch.2 Part 4 loc. 758). While the individual, such as McMurphy, expressly discloses himself through performance, the actor caught up in the moment may never be sure of what is revealed; and so, the actor relies upon an audience to perceive and interpret from an objective distance. In this light, Chief's storytelling functions as a means of remembrance for McMurphy, who as a disruptive force of nature had the power to change lives and re-shape the world around him, but nevertheless relies upon Chief to tell his tale. Though the Chief suffers from ever-pervasive paranoid delusions of the Combine, his silence and withdrawal are as much a product of his own sense of invisibility, of a failure to be seen. As an "Indian", his existence has gone unacknowledged by the white men who come to buy his family's property; on the ward he is ignored and treated as invisible because everyone thinks him deaf and dumb. He lies in bed one night and remembers: "it wasn't me that started acting deaf; it was people that first started acting like I was too dumb to hear or see or say anything at all" (118); it was others that treated him as invisible. It is significant that when Chief speaks to McMurphy for the first time they are lying in their beds in the dark, suggesting that McMurphy doesn't need to physically see the Chief to acknowledge his existence; they are joined by a common humanity, and a connection to an indelible organic state of nature. It is notable, also, that before speaking, it is a laugh that almost gives Chief away, a spirit within, almost too irrepressible to hold back. Having had his existence go unacknowledged for so long, the Chief has

been reduced to no longer recognising himself: "I'm way too little," he tells McMurphy, "I used to be big, but not no more. You're twice the size of me." McMurphy replies: "Hoo boy, you are crazy, aren't you? The first thing I saw when I came in this place was you sitting over in that chair, big as a damn mountain. ... I swear you're the biggest Indian I ever saw" (123). Not only does McMurphy see the Chief bigger than the Chief sees himself, he makes it known that he has seen him from the very first moment he arrived on the ward. Subsequently, McMurphy sets about reshaping the Chief, or rather, having the Chief re-imagine himself the mountain of a man he is.

McMurphy and the Chief represent the wild untamed nature at the heart of man, a chaos against which culture, as represented by the mental institution, seeks to impose an essentially neurotic order. McMurphy is wild and free-spirited, a man who fails to keep passions in check; Chief is indigenous, a man whose life, like that of his ancestors, is indelibly connected to the "Nch'i-Wanna", the Great (Columbia) River. The patients' return to selfhood may be understood as a re-grounding in their natural state; a healing of neurosis via deculturation. This is wonderfully represented in the novel through the fishing trip, as both escape from institutional confinement and a return to nature, to fluidity and non-classification. Michel Foucault writes that "water and madness have long been linked in the dreams of man. ... But water does more than carry off the madman, it purifies" (11). The fishing trip signifies the stripping away of institutional constraints; this liberty of body and spirit is further exemplified in the drunken party that takes place, in which patients are stripped free of inhibitions through a derangement of the senses, as a celebratory recognition and embrace of their own mental impairment. Through the purifying balm of nature, coupled with a drunken abandonment of inhibitions, Chief comes to recognise his own agency as an instrument for resisting the Combine: "We had just unlocked a window and let it in like you let in the fresh air. Maybe the Combine wasn't all-powerful" (168).

As a totem for Chief and the other patients, McMurphy symbolises the embodiment of the human spirit the patients have forfeited inside the institutional system. Following his example, the patients look upon themselves with a renewed sense of dignity and pride in being different. In the end, Chief ensures McMurphy's freedom, as McMurphy had implored them all to reclaim freedom for themselves; with the support and encouragement of his fellow patient, Scanlon, Chief breaks out of the hospital and heads north, returning to nature, thinking of the country and the Columbia Gorge. He leaves behind a story as testimony to his rebirth and the re-emergence of his

subjective voice; he leaves behind. also, a valuable remembrance of McMurphy and the other patients.

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