JASON BAHBAK MOHAGHEGH

# Omnicide

## MANIA, FATALITY, AND THE FUTURE-IN-DELIRIUM

URBANOMIC

sequence

# Foreword:
# In Praise of Abnormal Persistence

Robin Mackay

By what signs shall we recognise the maniac? In the works of Emil Kraepelin, foundational for twentieth-century psychiatry, we encounter a figure whose implacable 'busyness' makes him a 'stranger to fatigue', and in whom an intense 'pressure of activity' (origin unknown) impels a lavish 'flow' of ideas. This condensation of a specific symptomatology for mania (as opposed to its blanket meaning of 'madness') has recently been reformulated in DSM-5, according to which the maniac taps into inexhaustible reservoirs of energy to fuel an unchecked spiritual dilation. Here the condition is said to involve a 'distinct period of abnormally and persistently elevated, expansive, or irritable mood' and 'abnormally and persistently increased goal-directed activity or energy'.[1]

1 J.R. Calabrese, K. Gao, G. Sachs, 'Diagnosing Mania in the Age of DSM-5', *Am J Psychiatry* 171:1 (January 2017).

Indifference to the specific goal toward which such energy may be directed aligns this conception with the new hegemony of psychopharmacology and a return to the disease model of mental illness on the part of the DSM (itself aptly decried as a work of neo-Kraepelinian 'nosologomania'),[2] which now lists the condition only as a subsidiary instance of the bipolar.[3] This shift cancels both the singularity of mania and the plurality of *manias*, along with any existentially meaningful dimension that might be claimed for them. The situation was different when, in the early nineteenth century, Jean-Étienne Esquirol first appropriated the stamp of Greek *mania* to coin a plethora of neologisms, beginning with *lypemania* and *monomania* and fostering yet others including *pyromania*, *kleptomania*, and *megalomania*, in parallel with the *phobias*, *phrenias*, and *thymias* that entered into circulation during the same period.[4]

It is this multiform madness, this plurality of manias, that Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh embraces in *Omnicide*, a fragmentary catalogue of the thousand-and-one species of manic disposition. Indeed, the declension of these 'miniaturist enchantments' is so varied that the book,

2 S. Nassir Ghaemi, 'Nosologomania: DSM and Karl Jaspers' Critique of Kraepelin', *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine* 4:10 (2009).

3 Also a return to Kraepelin's model. See J. Angst, 'Will Mania Survive DSM-5 and ICD-11?', *Int J Bipolar Disord* 3:24 (2015).

4 T. Haustgen, 'Les langues de la psychiatrie, de Pinel au DSM', *Psychiatrie, Sciences humaines, Neurosciences* 14 (2016), 45–57.

though itself abnormally persistent, presents only a partial archive of those listed in its (provisional) *Mania Tabula*. The DSM's mechanism-specific neglect of this variegation, of course, reflects psychiatry's ongoing mission to diagnose, classify, and expel mental infection. Mohaghegh instead asks that we enter into the logic of mania, explore the many forms of extremist compulsion, and even admit that some may already lurk within us awaiting ignition.

Indeed, the first question raised in each of the passages below is the same: *What ignites the mania?* What kind of circumstances provoke an obsessive focus on the most minute object or activity? But a more disturbing question immediately ensues: What could incite such mania to flare up into the lethal conviction that *everything must be annihilated*?

Many are the routes via which the maniac's autohypnosis may arrive at a juncture where they are unveiled to themselves as harbinger and instrument of a new world order, and set about all necessary preparations for a cleansing annihilation. In each case the delirious passage between mania and omnicide is levered open by the mutual reinforcement of a compulsion to clear the way (everything other than the manic object is an obstacle), and a renunciation of consensual reality (the subject sacrifices everything to the cause, including itself, becoming a mere vector of some hostile passion for the real). *Omnicide* examines the potential for every idea, without exception,

to undergo this deadly extrapolation—to be wielded not as truth, but as a nascent compulsion which, at the limit, will command the razing of everything in its path.

In a suggestion rich with overtones of contemporary apocalypticism, Mohaghegh intimates that an alternative to the exhaustion of the West can only be found in such a 'practicum of mania', a practical apprenticeship in madness, a neomagical delirium that draws on the 'inexhaustible reservoirs of fanaticism', transmuting groundlessness from grey affectless postmodern haze into polychrome rapture, turning frustration at the collapse of truth and the proliferation of undecidable fictions into an opportunity to infuse the slightest inclination with the most intense commitment. In something like a kaleidoscopic serial refrain of Nietzsche's eternal return, *Omnicide* tests our ability to withstand resorption into extremes whose virulence we would exclude, but to which we can formulate no effective riposte. For if *nothing is true*, as the maxim of that 'order of free spirits par excellence' would have it, then the conclusion swiftly follows… and once *everything is permitted*, the tactics of willed illusion instigated by Hassan-i Sabbah lead us ineluctably to wonder how visionary unreality is converted into effective force.

It is undoubtedly to such enthusiasms, newly armed with modernity's technical arsenal, that we owe not only the barbarities of contemporary terrorism but the

atrocities of war and the fanatical fervour of causes revolutionary and fascistic alike. The delirium of excess has also exerted a fascination upon many base-materialist students of the peculiar insanity of the West—Nietzsche, Artaud, Bataille—and has been flirted with by thinkers of unreasonable liberation such as Foucault and Deleuze, not to mention being incarnated in a fictional lineage that culminates in the Kurtz-gradient initiated by Conrad and intensified by Coppola. But Mohaghegh sets out to convince us that it is exampled more copiously, more dazzlingly, and with more force in those literary productions wherein the mythical and mystical traditions of the Middle East pass through the defile of global modernity and emerge transformed, still charged with their original fervour but equipped with ominous new armaments. *Omnicide* therefore instigates its discourse on obsession, entrancement, excess, and delirium by entering the chaotic imaginations of the most significant contemporary poetic talents of the region, joining manic trajectories more insinuating and twisted than that straight line into the heart of darkness that is the unrequited death wish of an undead West.[5]

Shaped by the experience of being neither the victor nor the vanquished of modernity, the writers Mohaghegh

5 See J.B. Mohaghegh, *Insurgent, Poet, Mystic, Sectarian: The Four Masks of an Eastern Postmodernism* (New York: SUNY Press, 2015), 238–39.

places in conversation here manifest a stance he has designated as the 'occluded alternative': they are those 'third ones' largely excised from the narrative of world history yet who, having never bowed to colonial subjectivity, persist in developing modes of thought and speech that lie beyond the dialectic of master and slave, the West and its Other. It is in studying this 'zero-world literature' that we encounter, rather than delirium fetishized as fantastic spectacle or limit case, a studious cultivation of mania as pain, pleasure, discipline, and an egress to untold futures.

Following impassioned calls for an appropriate reception of these literary currents still largely alien to the Western critical canon,[6] in this work Mohaghegh uses the question of mania to confront us directly with the singular sensibilities of their greatest proponents. Between these texts he then excavates an elaborate network of subterranean concepts and interpretive chambers in order to discover the byways and burrows by which mania communicates with fatality—like secret passages leading from one of the multitudinous details of a bustling Persian miniature to the blank burning immanence of the desert.

Accordingly, *Omnicide* involves itself deeply with a certain landscape. Or, as Mohaghegh has written, '*moodscapes*, untrustworthy epistemic climates'[7] each with its own 'kind

6 See ibid., and J.B. Mohaghegh, *New Literature and Philosophy of the Middle East: The Chaotic Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

7 Mohaghegh, *Insurgent, Poet, Mystic, Sectarian*, 39.

of temperature, ambience, weather, and mesosphere of the mind/body'.[8] Saturated with poetic images of the blinding sun and its intolerable heat, the coolness of desert nights and their lucid constellations, full of fragmentary stories of restless wandering, trade routes, dusty cities, mud tracks, caves and tunnels, peculiar topographies and cartographies, unexpected passages between one space and another and between the inside and the outside, here we find ourselves in the 'nightmaze' of which Joyce (through Shahrzad) spoke.[9] These are perilous physical and psychic climates in the sense of *klima*, convoluted slopes or dubious inclinations that invite successive slidings toward extinction.[10]

Foremost among these catastrophic protocols is the 'profound Saharan code' of a climate that does not even meet the requirements of being a 'place', a site of possible dwelling or settlement.[11] The desert is where the soul shines, burnished by the body's confrontation with encroaching death, which renders existence luminous for as long as its frail vehicle can withstand. A featureless invitation to

8 Ibid.

9 See L.B. Jamili, 'Shahrzad and the Persian Culture in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*: A Chaotic "Nightmaze"', *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3:19 (November 2013).

10 See the discussions of *klima* in R. Negarestani, 'The Militarization of Peace' and 'Solar Inferno and Earthbound Abyss', in *Abducting the Outside* (Falmouth and New York: Urbanomic/Sequence Press, 2019).

11 See *In the Desert We Visit Death*, interview with Ibrahim al-Koni by Anders Hastrup (Louisiana Channel, produced by Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2014).

abyssal contemplation, it has long been a geographical, metaphysical, mythical, and spiritual topos for the Middle East, its emptiness, its cruelty, and the plenitude of its promise glimpsed only dimly through the colourful caravanserais of the Orientalist canon and the desert islands to which European and American robinsonades chronically return.

The West has generally been more prudent about where it deigns to wander. It was only in later times that the terror of the unnamed wilds, the badlands where indifferent nature reigns supreme and where the logos has no purchase, was supplemented in Judaeo-Christian theology by the idea of wilderness as a space of contemplation and purification outside of the fallen world, a conception that comes to us in diluted form in the romantic landscape. In Middle Eastern thought, an unbroken tradition dedicates itself to contemplation of the desert as an appropriate locus for both fear and exaltation—and as a climate that perpetually ungrounds political life. Fourteenth-century thinker Ibn Khaldun tells of how great dynasties form and cities rise from the sand only for their ways of life to slowly lapse into decadence—upon which nomadic incursions will again overrun sedentary civilisation, closing a cycle traversed in more recent times by Ibrahim al-Koni's 'oasis trilogy'. In other words, what both underlies and undermines (state) history is the desert and its wandering peoples, united in their indifference to all that

seeks to remain and endure, to write itself indelibly in sloping sands.

The protocols of certain strains of Middle-Eastern mysticism seek to engender this same vitalizing chaotic indifference within the soul. Chaos is unbound not only through mental ascesis (spiritual exercises) but by the practice of wandering, an errancy that helps unanchor the spirit. Becoming madmen or outcasts, mystics profess invented religions and doctrines, experimenting with the wildest new beliefs and practices in order to cleanse themselves of all attachment to belief. Geographical and social dislocation, states of exhaustion, exile, solitude, and evacuation serve to loosen the bolts of the mental scaffold.[12] A deserting of others and of oneself, an existential vagrancy, a renunciation of the search for meaning, ground, and home,[13] open up more intense prospects for a desert soul denuded of all that is worldly.

Mohaghegh honours the claim of those modern writers who rediscover such methods, those who 'live apart from the rest, in houses of ruin that mirror their own estrangement from the rigidified cities and their decadent trances'.[14] If the city is the place of man, along with all of the relations and self-relations that keep him woven into

12 Mohaghegh, *New Literature and Philosophy of the Middle East*, 28.

13 In the interview cited above Ibrahim al-Koni recalls that the Tuareg peoples use the same word for 'house' as for 'grave'.

14 Mohaghegh, *New Literature and Philosophy of the Middle East*, xiv.

the fabric of convention, present to himself and others, then these distressed domiciles herald its imminent return to the desert, an apparent void whose plenitude is there to be discovered by those willing to face its cruelty—or who find themselves with no other existential option. And since these writers and their characters have been born into and shaped by modernity only to inexorably fall through the cracks of its grid, each will have their own particular perversion, forming, like those venerable wandering mystics, a solitary sectarianism, a cult of one.

Yet the maniac is never alone for long; their mad intransigence is liable to corrode the sound minds of those around them, as in the case of the mystic whose arbomania is the subject of a Persian tale of the late Middle Ages. Insistent that he is a tree, 'planting' himself in the middle of the desert and refusing to speak, this maniac is discovered by a pair of soldiers who at first ridicule his absurd fancy but then, as all of their provocations meet with no response, begin to doubt their own sanity, ending up in an escalating quarrel that eventually turns violent. Only once they have killed one another does the tree-man leap out of the ground, dancing and singing.... Such epidemic effects can only further fuel the errant maniac's omnicidal design: to fully realise their virtual desertification at any cost.[15]

15 See Negarestani, 'The Militarization of Peace' on desertification and 'die-back'.

With the reader thus fully forewarned of the risk they take when entering such a maniacal multiverse, then *how* are we to read this book (that is, if it's not one of those necronomical tomes which, through its mere presence in a library, triggers the most eldritch inclinations in the casual browser…)? Its author uses theory and word-image to conjure states of the soul, corporeal states of being, and the geopoetical environments to which they belong. In a work that eschews mainstream critical postcolonialist narratives that bemoan and critique orientalist tropes and imaginaries of the Middle East, Mohaghegh's deep knowledge of the region's culture and literature seem paradoxically to intensify their effects, casting the unfamiliar reader into a climate that is far more alien than expected, beyond all exoticist affordances.[16] As he describes in his introduction, each selected fragment is extended and distended using a formidable armamentarium of different techniques; he pulls at the threads of the citations until they come loose, become unrecognisable, form new knots; he compounds their errancies with his own. Not a word is wasted in these divagations, though, even if many strike a note that is puzzling or gnomic. In its exacting yet uncompromisingly torsional relationship to major language, this is a writing that must be attended to with full alertness; it requires an intense concentration while

16 On affordance, see Negarestani, *Abducting the Outside*, passim.

at the same time exerting a hypnotic effect, working by means of ritual incantation and repetition, in an insidious rhythmic poetics that demands submission and elicits abnormal persistence.

Eschewing summary and generalisation, this book plunges us into one unique inhospitable climate after another, each attesting to the omnipresent possibility that even the most whimsical thought, the most fleeting desire, may incubate annihilative spores. A warning, a pleasure, and a discipline, *Omnicide* absorbs the reader into unfamiliar and estranging landscapes whose every minute detail threatens to become an irresistible invitation to all-encompassing oblivion.