

# The Asylum as a Literary Institution



## **THEATERS OF MADNESS**

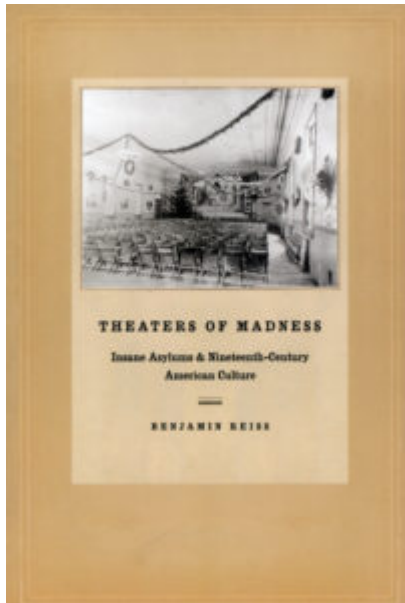
**Insane Asylums & Nineteenth-Century  
American Culture**

---

**BENJAMIN REISS**

Since the sociologist Erving Goffman's 1961 critique of the "total institution," scholars have tended to see insane asylums and many other sorts of institutions that developed in the nineteenth century as disciplinary institutions. Michel Foucault's analysis of the historical emergence of professional psychology and medicine helped to further formalize an instinctive (and well-founded) distrust of institutions, which was perhaps particular to students who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, into a wide-ranging account of the complex ways in which forms of knowledge operate as means of social control. To inhabit a prison or an asylum or a clinic was to become a "subject" of power: to internalize particular norms of rationality and standards of deviance as the very terms of how we know ourselves and to take over from police, doctors, and judges the job of supervising, evaluating, and punishing

one's own conduct. Given the "linguistic turn" in the social sciences and humanities over the past thirty years, which emphasized the symbolic coherence of how people live in a particular time and place, "culture" itself has often appeared in recent academic debates as a sort of totalizing institution.



Benjamin Reiss, *Theaters of Madness: Insane Asylums & Nineteenth-Century American Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 241 pp., paperback, \$20.

Through a series of case studies related to the nineteenth-century asylum, Benjamin Reiss's fascinating *Theaters of Madness* explores the institutional history and meaning of culture: at once "the aggressive reshaping of patients' cultural lives that secured the authority of those in power," recourse to cultural knowledge by inmates navigating their institutional lives, and "the representation of the asylum" by outsiders (17). The first three chapters explore literary life inside the asylum, demonstrating some of the ways in which practices of reading, writing, and performing entered into the meaning and experience of mental health for patients and doctors alike. Patients at the New York State Lunatic Asylum at Utica published a literary journal, the *Opal*, for which they composed anonymous sketches, dialogues, criticism, poetry, and social commentary that emulated the genteel miscellany of the *Knickerbocker*. They attended performances of visiting minstrel troops and performed their own "Ethiopian Extravanzas" in blackface, leaving a stream of writings and criticism in which the social categories of blackness and mental alienation came to resemble each other. Physicians filled pages of the first journal devoted to mental illness, *The American Journal of Insanity*, with case studies of Shakespearean characters to demonstrate how the Bard's truths about human nature anticipated the new "science of mind" that psychiatry was "purporting to turn into its field of expertise" (91).

In interpreting these extraordinary materials, Reiss invites us to think in

fresh ways both about nineteenth-century social reform and its relation to American literary and intellectual history. In the second half of his book, Reiss interprets the meaning and experience of mental illness beyond the asylum walls. In a particularly moving chapter, Reiss explores the case of Jones Very, who soon after hearing Emerson's 1838 Divinity School Address was committed to McLean Hospital. Now known mainly as a religious poet, Very had come to see himself as the second coming of Christ and confronted the Transcendentalist circle with an acutely personal example of the limits of self-reliance. After all, when does writing upon the doorposts "whim," as Emerson put it, become a symptom of madness rather than an assertion of moral autonomy? For Reiss, Very's travails become an opportunity to see the "shared ground of American romanticism and psychiatry, both of which saw themselves as fortifying the self against the threats of modernization and social atomization" (19). Another chapter uses a story by Poe to think capaciously about blind spots of liberalism, reaching back to the origins of the asylum movement in the French Revolution while also looking forward to Peter Weiss's 1964 play *Marat/Sade*. Chapter 6 considers the emergence of captivity narratives in relation to gender roles, focusing on how Elizabeth Packard's exposé of her forced confinement shaped feminist protest against the asylum.

The larger lessons that Reiss draws from his various case studies are ambiguous. Seeking to avoid the abstract master plots about ideology and social control that have dominated scholarly accounts of the asylum, Reiss treats the subjects of his case studies with subtlety and complexity, "as individuals caught up in a system that would erase their particularity in order to return them—paradoxically—to a society that valued individual liberties above all" (17). But so too, Reiss seems finally to view the problem of individual "particularity" within a familiar account of social power. "Packaging the worldview of the elites for an as yet-unreformed population," asylums "adopted the role of a prefecture in a sort of neocolonial cultural warfare" (43). Within the asylum, then, patients "were objects, rather than agents, of their own discourse; they were constructed by what they wrote, rather than the other way around" (49).

All scholars of nineteenth-century America confront this challenge of "particularity"—of interpreting the meaning and status of individuality as it came to be shaped by increasingly complex norms and institutions. During our more recent cultural warfare since the 1960s, most scholars have sought to liberate individuals from the psychic and social damage of conformity, identifying freedom with social difference: opening up the literary canon to previously unheard voices, telling new social histories from the bottom up, understanding the diversity of cultural identities. In the nineteenth century, however, the fight for freedom moved in the reverse direction, towards progressive accounts of both "character" and "culture": to be civilized or sane was to internalize and practice a normative script for autonomy, to become "objects" in the reforms of private and public life. As Reiss observes, the asylum imparted "bourgeois norms of behavior," and was "an institution devoted to the purification and rationalization of culture" (8). But like the common

school, temperance societies, and the lyceum before the Civil War or public libraries, museums, and parks established later in the nineteenth century, asylums were agencies of reform, advancing social progress through the cultivation of moral virtues and rational capacities deemed requisite to self-government in liberal democracy.

So what then can the history of the asylum tell us about meanings and forms of liberal culture? If the literary life of the asylum offered a “rational, polite, elevating model of culture that came from the top down” (7), as Reiss puts it, these literary practices were not particular to the asylum. Indeed, throughout the mid-nineteenth century, once-elite forms of literary leisure were popularized for an expanding middle class, not only in the innumerable literary and library societies, debate clubs and reform associations, lyceums and popular lectures that sprang up in towns and cities across the antebellum United States, but also in the informal habits and networks of sociability shared by friends, family, and neighbors. It was one of the historic innovations of political liberalism in Great Britain and the United States to institutionalize these practices in the interest of expanding philanthropic and governmental commitments to mass education, public health, social welfare, and civic life. Where asylums had essentially been for warehousing the insane, they *became* institutions devoted to “moral treatment,” offering patients and their families the possibility that an ordered environment of intellectual and recreational activities might be conducive to a more “normal” life.

Engaging and thoughtful, *Theaters of Madness* captures the “texture of a time unlike our own” when “the treatment of mental illness was central to national debates about democracy, freedom, and modernity” (2). As treatments for insanity turned away from moral treatment towards medicine, mental health ceased to occupy debates about public welfare. We might also mourn the loss of public commitments to culture made in the nineteenth century—loss of the liberal faith, perhaps, in human perfectibility and the progressive evolution of norms and institutions that can realize freedom as a democratic practice and not simply a right. Our drugs of choice these days tend not to be reading and writing and conversation, after all, but rather alcohol or television or (for those with access to them) antidepressants, treatment spas, and recovery holidays—palliatives and placebos for the ailing souls of modernity.

This article originally appeared in issue 9.3 (April, 2009).

---

Thomas Augst is associate professor of English at New York University. He is the author of *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (2003) and the coeditor, with Kenneth Carpenter, of *Institutions of Reading: The Social Life of Libraries in the United States* (2007). He is currently writing a book about the literature and culture of temperance reform.