

Insanity:

A Fragment.

By Charles Brockden Brown

—He is an unfortunate kinsman of ours (said Mrs. Ellen) who has been for some years, a lunatic. She related his story, on my manifesting a curiosity to know the particulars, at some length. This was the substance of it.

Archibald was a youth of very lively parts. His sensibility had become diseased by an assiduous study of those romancers and poets who make love the basis of their fictions. He had scarcely grown up when he contracted a passion for a woman whose chief merit consisted in her beauty. A new object quickly succeeded. Though he loved for a time, with every appearance of ardour, it was perceived that his affections were easily transferred to a new object, and easily dissolved by absence. Love, however, was his element. He could not exist without it. To sigh, to muse, to frame elegies, was the business of his life. Provided there were some object to receive his amorous devoirs, it seemed nearly indifferent what the real qualifications of the object were. His friends prevailed upon him to put himself under the care of a merchant in Ireland. His situation required that he should qualify himself for some profession, and that of a merchant was chosen by him as liable to the fewest objections. After some time, however, he was brought back to his friends a maniac. A phrenzy at first furious and terrible, subsided into a melancholy harmless to others, but gloomy, silent, and motionless. With scarcely a change of attitude, without opening his lips except to converse on his own misfortunes, on the events that caused his despair, he has remained for some years an example of the fatal effects of addicting the undisciplined mind to books in which nature is so fantastically and egregiously belied. These were the circumstances that produced an effect so mournful

He had scarcely been settled in his new abode at Cork, when he became attached to a daughter of a wealthy family between which and that in which he resided, a rivalry and enmity had long subsisted. His suit was rejected by the parents, whose interest had been engaged for another, but accepted, as usual, by the daughter, who naturally imagined that this was a question on which no one had a right to decide but herself. The parents supplied the place of argument with force. All access to the lady was denied. Commands and menaces proving of no avail, she was condemned to a rigorous confinement. The lover was persuaded by his friends to make a voyage to the West-Indies. There being no room to hope for a change in the determinations of the lady's family, this expedient was chosen as likely to dissolve a connexion, which, while it lasted, could be productive only of mutual distress. The lady's constancy, however, was heroic. She reserved herself for better times, and while she yielded to personal restraints that could not be resisted, she maintained the freedom of her mind. She was insensible to menaces and persuasions; denied ~very personal claim on her obedience; and ridiculed the obligations of filial duty. She vindicated the propriety of her choice, and asserted her independence as a reasonable being. Her family having exhausted the obvious expedients, resorted to more atrocious ones: A plan was devised of decoying the lady into an opinion that her lover was false, that he had made his address to a lady in the island to which he had gone, and was on the point of marriage. Her sagacity was equal to her fortitude, but the craft with which she had to contend, was consummate. She was accordingly deceived, and her courage forsook her, but the resolutions she now formed were evidently different from those which her family expected as the fruit of their

schemes. Misfortune had changed a character of no common excellence. It is the property of injustice to propagate itself, to render those who suffer by it vitious as well as miserable. The lady condescended to artifice, and pretended a cheerful compliance with the wishes of her family. Preparations were making for the nuptial rite. The morning of the important day arrived—when she was found dead in her bed.

It is remarkable that an event which the lady's parents had imposed upon their child without believing it themselves, had really taken place. Absence had produced the usual effect upon the lover. He had seen a new object, that had quickly supplanted the old. His ingenuity furnished an opiate to his conscience. He laid his heart at the feet of his new mistress; the present was accepted, and she gave her own in return, and no very distant day was fixed for ratifying the exchange at the altar. Before it arrived, however, tidings reached him, by what means I shall not mention, of the fate of the Irish lady; of her voluntary death in consequence of the belief of his inconstancy. Of the mistaken grounds of this belief, of the means by which it had been produced he was wholly ignorant. As his inconstancy was real, he supposed that she was apprized of no more than the truth. The effect of this information may be easily conceived. He broke off his present connexion, and immediately embarked for Europe, and having arrived at Cork, proceeded without delay to procure an interview with the lady's family. His purpose was to obtain their assent to a proposal sufficiently singular. It was no other than that the vault in which the lady had been interred, should be opened, and he himself be permitted to take a last view of the corpse. He urged his demand with the energy of phrenzy, and at length succeeded.

The solemn period of midnight was selected; the vault was opened in presence of the desperate lover and some of the family of the deceased. They descended the stair—case, and I almost shudder to describe the object that saluted their sight. They beheld the lady, not decently reposing in her coffin and shrouded with a snow—white mantle, but naked: ghastly, stretched on the floor at the foot of the stair-case, with indubitable tokens of having died a second time, a victim to terror and famine. It is not to be wondered at, that a spectacle like this, plunged the unhappy lover into phrenzy the most outrageous. He was torn from the spot, and speedily delivered to the care of his friends.

This story was told by Mrs. E. circumstantially: and of course with much greater minuteness than it is here related.

And is this all, said I? What is his present condition?

Mr. Ellen took up the tale. Such, said he, are the events which are related by the sufferer. These were the topics of his ravings, and this the eternal theme of his more coherent eloquence, when the first paroxysms of his phrenzy had subsided. Such I say, is his own narrative; but I hardly expect to be believed, when I add, that the whole existed only in his own imagination: that not one of those circumstances which my wife has related ever took place: that the whole is a dream, regarded by him indeed as unquestionable reality, but having not the slightest foundation in truth. The period which he imagines to be filled with those events, was passed by him in performing the duties of his new profession: to which, however, he entertained great disrelish; and in wandering at times of leisure among the wildernesses of a romantick country, attended only by some favourite author, or delivering himself up to the reveries of his fancy. On his return from one of those excursions, which had been longer than usual, the first tokens of insanity were observed. The symptoms rapidly increased, and the consequences were such as have been related.

Indeed, said I, you have good reason for doubting the assent of your hearers to the truth of such a story. Romeo, who seems to resemble your Archibald in some things, was, I thought, the best

specimen of an amorous madman that could be produced, but your enthusiast outstrips Romeo's extravagance by many degrees. Besides, my dear Madam, you seem to assign a strange cause for your kinsman's insanity. I cannot perceive how any course of reading could possibly lead any mind so far astray.

There, William, said Mr. Ellen, I agree with you. I think Sally was wrong in imagining that books of any sort tended in the least to give its peculiar shape to her cousin's insanity.

Well, said the lady, I may be wrong in my *theory*, but of my *facts* I had too many opportunities to know the truth concerning my poor cousin, to have any doubts about *them*.