

Madness, the Absence of Work

Michel Foucault

Translated by Peter Stastny and Deniz Şengel

Perhaps some day we will no longer really know what madness was. Its face will have closed upon itself, no longer allowing us to decipher the traces it may have left behind. Will these traces themselves have become anything to the unknowing gaze but simple black marks? Or will they at the most have become part of the configurations that we others now cannot sketch but that in the future would constitute the indispensable grids through which we and our culture become legible? Artaud will belong to the foundation of our language, not to its rupture; the neuroses will belong among the constitutive forms (and not the deviations) of our society. Everything we experience today in the mode of a limit, or as foreign, or as intolerable will have returned to the serenity of the positive. And whatever currently designates this exteriority to us may well one day designate us.

Only the enigma of this exteriority will remain. What was, then, this strange demarcation, one will ask, that was at work from the heart of the Middle Ages until the twentieth century and possibly beyond? Why did Western culture cast from its field that in which it might just as well have recognized itself, where in fact it had recognized itself obliquely? Why has it formulated so clearly since the nineteenth century, but in a way already since the classical age, that madness was the truth of the human laid bare while nevertheless placing it in a space, neutralized and pale, where it was as it were canceled? What was the point of collecting the

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Critical Inquiry 21 (Winter 1995)

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texts of Nerval or Artaud? Why discover oneself in their utterances and not in themselves?

So the sharp image of reason will wither in flames. The familiar game of mirroring the other side of ourselves in madness and of eavesdropping from our listening posts on voices that, coming from very far, tell us more nearly what we are—this game with its rules, its strategies, its contrivances, its tricks, its tolerated illegalities will once and for all have become nothing but a complex ritual whose significations will have been reduced to ashes. Something like the great ceremonies of barter and combat in archaic societies. Something like the ambiguous attention Greek reason paid to its oracles. Or like the latter's twin institution, starting with the fourteenth century A.D., of the practices and trials of witchcraft. Nothing will remain in the hands of cultural historians except the codified methods of confinement, the techniques of medicine, and, on the other hand, the sudden, irruptive inclusion in our language of the speech of the excluded.

What will the technical support for this radical change be? The possibility that medicine may master mental illness just like other organic ailments? Precise pharmacological control of all mental symptoms? Or a more or less rigorous definition of behavioral deviations for each of which society might be at leisure to anticipate the most convenient method of neutralization? Or still other modes of intervention, perhaps none of which will in fact suppress mental illness but which will all have the purpose of eliminating the very face of madness from our culture?

I know well that by proposing this latter hypothesis I am contesting something that is ordinarily accepted: that the advances of medicine could indeed succeed in eradicating mental illness just as they have done away with leprosy and tuberculosis but that the one thing to remain is the relationship of humankind to its ghosts, to its impossible, to its bodiless pain, to its carcass of the night; that once pathology is removed from circulation, the dark link of the human to madness will become the ageless memory of an evil that has been effaced as a form of illness but persists as misfortune. To tell the truth, this idea assumes as inalterable what is undoubtedly most precarious, even more precarious than the constants

Michel Foucault (1926–1984) held the chair of the History of Systems of Thought at the Collège de France. Four volumes of his writings, entitled *Dits et écrits*, have recently been published. **Peter Stastny** is an associate professor of psychiatry at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. He is currently editing a book on social relationships and recovery. **Deniz Şengel** is a Ph.D. candidate in comparative literature at New York University and reader in cultural studies at Bosphorus University.

of pathology: the relationship of a culture to the very thing it excludes or, more precisely, the relationship of our culture to this truth about itself, far away and inverted, which it discovers over and over in madness.

That which will not take long to die, that which is already dying in us (and whose very death bears our current language) is *homo dialecticus*—the being of departure, of return, and of time; the animal that loses its truth only in order to find it again, illuminated; the self-estranged who once again recovers the unity of the self-same. This figure has been the master subject and the object slave of all the discourses concerning the human, in particular human alienation, which have persisted for quite some time. And fortunately it is dying beneath the babble of these discourses.

So that it will no longer be known how humanity had been able to place this figure of itself at a distance; how it could have let pass from the other side of the limit even that which belonged to it and which it resembled? No thought will be able to contemplate this movement from which until all too recently the West took its liberties. It is this relationship to madness (and not some knowledge about mental illness or some position taken on human alienation) that will be lost forever. The only thing that will be known is that we others, five-century-old Westerners, had been those people upon the face of the earth who, among many other fundamental traits, had borne the strangest trait of them all: we maintained a profound, passionate relationship to mental illness, perhaps difficult to formulate for ourselves but impenetrable to anyone else, in which we confronted dangers most vivid to us as well as what was perhaps the truth closest to us. It will not be said that we were *at a distance* from madness but *within distance* of it. The Greeks, similarly, were not distanced from ὕβρις [hubris] because they condemned it; they were rather within reach of this excess located at the heart of the distance where they kept it.

Those who will no longer be what we are will face the task of contemplating this enigma (somewhat as we do today when we try to grasp how Athena could have fallen in love with and detached herself from the irrationality of Alcibiades). How could humans search for their truth, their essential speech, and their signs in the face of a peril that made them tremble and from which they were compelled to avert their eyes once they had caught sight of it? And this will appear even more strange to them than asking death the truth of humanity, for death says what will happen to everyone. Madness, in turn, is the rarer danger, a chance that weighs little compared to the obsessions it has engendered and the questions it has been asked. How could it be, in a culture, that such a slight contingency held such great power of revelation and terror?

Those who will be looking at us over their shoulder will certainly not have many clues at their disposal to answer this question. Only a few charred signs: the endlessly examined, centuries-old fear of seeing the level of madness rise and submerge the world; the rituals of excluding

and including the mad; and, since the nineteenth century, the alert ear bent on overhearing something in madness that could tell the truth about the human; the same impatience with which the utterances of madness are rejected and collected, the hesitation in recognizing their emptiness or their meaningfulness.

And all the rest—this unique movement by which we come to meet madness while distancing ourselves from it; this terrifying recognition; this desire to establish the limit yet at once to compensate for it through the framework of a unitary meaning—all this will be reduced to silence, just as the Greek trilogy *μανία*, *ὑβρις*, *ἀλογία* [mania, hubris, alogia] or the posture of shamanic deviation in some primitive societies are mute to us today.

We are now at that point in time, in that fold of time, where a certain technical control of illness conceals rather than points to the movement that closes the experience of madness upon itself. But it is precisely this fold, too, that allows us to disentangle two different configurations that remained bound up with one another for centuries. Mental illness and madness, merged with and mistaken for each other from the seventeenth century on, are now becoming separated under our very eyes or, rather, in our language.

To say that madness is disappearing today means that its implication both in psychiatric knowledge and thought of an anthropological kind is coming undone. But this is not to say that the general form of transgression, whose visible face madness has been for centuries, is also disappearing. Nor does it mean that this transgression is not giving rise to a new experience even as we are asking ourselves what madness is.

There is not a single culture in the world where everything is permitted. And we have known for a long time that humanity does not start out from freedom but from limitation and the line not to be crossed. We know the systems of rules with which forbidden acts are to comply; we have been able to discern the rules of the incest taboo in every culture. But we still do not know much about the organization of the prohibitions in language. It seems that these two systems of restriction do not overlap as if one were nothing but the verbal version of the other; what is not allowed to appear at the level of the word is not necessarily what is forbidden in the realm of deed. The Zuni narrate incest between brother and sister, which they outlaw, and the Greeks tell the legend of Oedipus. On the other hand, the Code of 1808 abolished extant criminal laws against sodomy, but the language of the nineteenth century was much more intolerant of homosexuality, at least of its male manifestation, than had been that of preceding eras. And it is likely that the psychological concepts of compensation and symbolic expression cannot in the least explain such phenomena.

The domain of the prohibitions in language should in itself be stud-

ied some day. It is today undoubtedly too early to know just how to carry out such an analysis. Should we employ the categories that are presently admitted into language? Should we first identify, regarding the limits of the forbidden and the impossible, the laws that are relevant to the linguistic code (what we so clearly refer to as *linguistic errors*); and then, within this code and among extant words or expressions, locate those that are affected by the rule forbidding the utterance of certain words or expressions (the entire religious, sexual, magical series of *blasphemous words*); and then, among those words and expressions that may be uttered, identify which ones are permitted by the code, permitted in the act of speech, but whose meaning is not tolerated by the culture in question at a given time. At this point, the metaphoric detour would no longer be possible, since it is the meaning itself that is the object of *censorship*. Finally, there is a fourth form of language that is excluded; it consists of subjecting an utterance, which appears to conform to the accepted code, to another code whose key is contained within that same utterance so that this utterance becomes divided within itself. It says what it says, but it adds a silent surplus that quietly enunciates what it says and according to which code it says what it says. This is not the case of an encoded language but of one that is structurally esoteric. That is to say, it does not communicate a forbidden meaning by concealing its meaning; it positions itself from the start in an essential fold of the utterance. A fold that hollows it out from within and perhaps to infinity. Therefore it matters little what is said in such a language and what meaning is being delivered there. It is this obscure and central liberation at the very heart of the utterance, its uncontrollable flight toward a source that is always without light, that no culture can readily accept. Such utterance is transgressive not in its meaning, not in its verbal property, but in its *play*.

It is quite likely that any culture, whatever it may be, knows, practices, and tolerates (to a certain extent) but equally represses and excludes these four types of forbidden language.

In Western history, the experience of madness has been displaced along this vector. In fact, it has long occupied an indeterminate area, difficult for us to specify, between the prohibition directed at action and that directed at language. Hence the exemplary importance of the pair *furor-inanitas*, which had practically organized the world of madness along the registers of deed and word up to the end of the Renaissance. The period of confinement (the general hospitals, Charenton, Saint-Lazare, established in the seventeenth century) marks a displacement of madness toward the realm of the insane; with forbidden acts, madness now maintains hardly more than a moral kinship (primarily, it stays attached to sexual prohibitions), but it is included in the universe of the prohibitions of language. Classical confinement envelopes, along with madness, the libertinism of thought and of speech, the obstinacy within impiety or heterodoxy, blasphemy, sorcery, alchemy—in short, everything that charac-

terizes the *spoken* and forbidden world of unreason; madness is language that is excluded—those who, against the code of language, pronounce words without meaning (the “insane,” the “imbeciles,” the “demented”), or those who utter sanctified words (the “violent ones,” the “furious”), or yet still, those who bring forth forbidden meanings (the “libertines,” the “headstrong”). Pinel’s reform is a conspicuous completion rather than a modification of this repression of madness as forbidden language.

The latter does not actually occur until Freud, when the experience of madness becomes displaced toward the last type of language prohibition of which we spoke earlier. Madness, then, ceases to be a linguistic error, a spoken blasphemy, or an intolerable meaning (and in that sense psychoanalysis actually constitutes the great catalogue of prohibitions as defined by Freud himself). Madness appears as an utterance wrapped up in itself, articulating something else beneath what it says, of which it is at the same time the only possible code—an esoteric language, if you will, since it confines its linguistic code within an utterance that ultimately does not articulate anything other than this implication.

Therefore Freud’s work ought to be taken for what it is; it does not discover that madness is apprehended in a web of significations it shares with everyday language, thereby granting the license to speak of it in the common platitudes of a psychological vocabulary. It dislodges the European experience of madness in order to situate it in this perilous region, still transgressive (therefore still forbidden but in a rather peculiar fashion), which is the region of languages that implicate themselves; that is to say, they enunciate in their utterances the linguistic code in which they enunciate those utterances. Freud did not discover the lost identity of a meaning; he carved out the disruptive image of a signifier that is *absolutely not* like the others. This should have sufficed to shield his work from all psychologizing interpretations wherein our half of the century has buried it in the (derisive) name of the “human sciences” and their asexual union.

And, for the same reason, madness has appeared not like the ruse of a hidden signification but like a prodigious *reserve* of meaning. We still have to grasp how fitting this word *reserve* is. Much more than a mere supply, it is a figure that retains and suspends meaning, laying out an emptiness where nothing is proposed but the yet-incomplete possibility that some meaning or another may come to lodge there, or still a third, and this may perhaps continue to infinity. Madness opens up a lacunar reserve that designates and exposes that chasm where linguistic code and utterance become entangled, shaping each other and speaking of nothing but their still silent rapport. Since Freud, Western madness has become a nonlanguage as it turned into a double language (a linguistic code that does not exist except in this utterance, an utterance that does not say anything other than its linguistic code)—that is to say, a matrix of a language that, in a strict sense, does not say anything. A fold of the spoken that is an absence of work.

One day we ought to do the justice to Freud of acknowledging that he did not make a madness *speak* that had been for centuries precisely a language (excluded language, babbling inanity, speech circulating indefinitely outside of the pondered silence of reason); to the contrary, he exhausted its meaningless logos; he dried it out; he returned its words to their source—to that blank region of self-implication where nothing is said.

What is occurring today still appears to us in an uncertain light, yet we are able to take note of a strange movement in our language. Literature itself (undoubtedly since Mallarmé) is in the midst of becoming in its turn, step by step, a language of which the utterance enunciates—at the same time and in the same movement that it says whatever it says—the linguistic code that renders it intelligible as utterance. Before Mallarmé, writing consisted of establishing one's utterance within a given linguistic code, as if the work of that language were of the same nature as that of the rest of language, close to the familiar signs (and they were certainly majestic) of rhetoric, of the subject, or of images. By the end of the nineteenth century (around the time of the discovery of psychoanalysis, when there was certainly no dearth of discoveries), literature had become utterance that inscribed in itself its own principle of decipherment. Or, in any case, it implied, in every sentence and in every word, the power to modify in sovereign fashion the values and significations of the linguistic code to which in spite of everything (and in fact) it belonged; it suspended the reign of that code in one actual gesture of writing.

Hence the necessity of secondary languages (what is called, in brief, criticism). Today, they no longer function as external supplements to literature (judgments, mediations, stepping-stones that were deemed useful links between a work indexed to the psychological enigma of its creation and the act of its consumption in reading). At the heart of literature, they now partake of the void that literature installs within its own language; they constitute the necessary movement—albeit one that by necessity will remain incomplete—by which the utterance is returned to its linguistic code, and by which the code is founded upon the utterance. Hence, too, that strange proximity between madness and literature, which ought not be taken in the sense of a relation of common psychological parentage now finally exposed. Once uncovered as a language silenced by its superposition upon itself, madness neither manifests nor narrates the birth of a work (or of something which, by genius or by chance, could have become a work); it outlines an empty form from where this work comes, in other words, the place from where it never ceases to be absent, where it will never be found because it had never been located there to begin with. There, in that pale region, in that essential hiding place, the twinlike incompatibility of the work and of madness

becomes unveiled; this is the blind spot of the possibility of each to become the other and of their mutual exclusion.

But since Raymond Roussel, since Artaud, it is also the place from where the language of literature comes. But it does not come from there as if from something that might have borne the task of enunciating. It is time to recognize that the language of literature is not defined by what it says, nor by the structures that render it significant. Rather, it has a being, and it is about this being that it ought to be questioned. What, in fact, is this being? Undoubtedly something connected to self-implication, to the double and the void that expands within it. In this sense, the being of literature, as it has been produced from Mallarmé to today, obtains the region where, since Freud, the experience of madness figures.

In the eyes of some unknown future culture—one possibly already quite near—we shall be those that have come closest to those two sentences never really pronounced, those two sentences equally contradictory and impossible as the famous “I am lying” and both pointing to the same empty self-reference: “I am writing” and “I am delirious.” We shall thus figure next to countless other cultures that placed the “I am mad” near an “I am an animal,” or “I am a god,” or “I am a sign,” or yet near an “I am a truth” as was the case in the entire nineteenth century up to Freud. And if that culture should have a feeling for history, it will in effect remember that Nietzsche, becoming mad, had proclaimed (in 1887) that he was the truth (why I am so wise, why I have known of it so long, why I write such great books, why I am fate); and that less than fifty years later, on the eve of his suicide, Roussel would write in *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres*, the systematically divided account of his madness and his procedures of writing. And they will be astonished, no doubt, that we were capable of identifying such a strange kinship between what, for a long time, was dreaded like a scream and what, for a long time, was considered a song.

But it is quite possible that precisely this transformation will not seem to merit any astonishment. It is we today who are astonished to see two languages communicate with each other (that of madness and that of literature) whose incompatibility has been established by our history. Since the seventeenth century, madness and mental illness have occupied the same space in the realm of forbidden languages (in general, the realm of the insane). Entering another domain of excluded language (a language that is circumscribed, consecrated, dreaded, erected, and elevated far above itself, whose reference is but a self-reference within that useless and transgressive fold we call literature), madness dissolves its kinship, ancient or recent according to the chosen scale, to mental illness.

The latter will no doubt enter into a technical space of ever increasing control. In the hospitals, pharmacology has already transformed the

wards of the agitated into vast, tepid aquariums. But underneath these transformations and for reasons that will seem strange to them (at least according to our current views), a *dénouement* is already in process: madness and mental illness are undoing their affiliation to the same anthropological unit. This unity itself is disappearing along with the human as a transitory postulate. Madness, the lyrical halo of illness, continues to extinguish itself. And at a distance from pathology, from the vicinity where language folds in upon itself still saying nothing, an experience is about to be born where our thought is headed. This imminence, already visible but absolutely empty, remains to be named.