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Michel Foucault

History of Madness

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PREFACE TO THE 1961 EDITION

Pascal: 'Men are so necessarily mad, that not being mad would be being mad through another trick that madness played.'¹ And that other text, by Dostoevsky, from *A Writer's Diary*: 'It is not by locking up one's neighbour that one convinces oneself of one's own good sense.'

We need a history of that other trick that madness plays – that other trick through which men, in the gesture of sovereign reason that locks up their neighbour, communicate and recognise each other in the merciless language of non-madness; we need to identify the moment of that expulsion,² before it was definitely established in the reign of truth, before it was brought back to life by the lyricism of protestation. To try to recapture, in history, this degree zero of the history of madness, when it was undifferentiated experience, the still undivided experience of the division itself. To describe, from the origin of its curve, that 'other trick' which, on either side of its movement, allows Reason and Madness to fall away, like things henceforth foreign to each other, deaf to any exchange, almost dead to each other.

It is, no doubt, an uncomfortable region. To pass through it we must renounce the comforts of terminal truths and never allow ourselves to be guided by what we might know of madness. None of the concepts of psychopathology, even and above all in the implicit play of retrospection,

can be allowed to play an organising role. The gesture that divides madness is the constitutive one, not the science that grows up in the calm that returns after the division has been made. The caesura that establishes the distance between reason and non-reason is the origin; the grip in which reason holds non-reason to extract its truth as madness, fault or sickness derives from that, and much further off. We must therefore speak of this primitive debate without supposing a victory, nor the right to victory; we must speak of these repeated gestures in history, leaving in suspense anything that might take on the appearance of an ending, or of rest in truth; and speak of that gesture of severance, the distance taken, the void installed between reason and that which it is not, without ever leaning on the plenitude of what reason pretends to be.

Then, and only then, will that domain be able to appear, where men of madness and men of reason, departing from each other and not yet separate, can open, in a language more original, much rougher and much more matutinal than that of science, the dialogue of their rupture, which proves, in a fleeting fashion, that they are still on speaking terms. There, madness and non-madness, reason and unreason are confusedly implicated in each other, inseparable as they do not yet exist, and existing for each other, in relation to each other, in the exchange that separates them.

In the midst of the serene world of mental illness, modern man no longer communicates with the madman: on the one hand is the man of reason, who delegates madness to the doctor, thereby authorising no relation other than through the abstract universality of illness; and on the other is the man of madness, who only communicates with the other through the intermediary of a reason that is no less abstract, which is order, physical and moral constraint, the anonymous pressure of the group, the demand for conformity. There is no common language: or rather, it no longer exists; the constitution of madness as mental illness, at the end of the eighteenth century, bears witness to a rupture in a dialogue, gives the separation as already enacted, and expels from the memory all those imperfect words, of no fixed syntax, spoken falteringly, in which the exchange between madness and reason was carried out. The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue by reason *about* madness, could only have come into existence in such a silence.

My intention was not to write the history of that language, but rather draw up the archaeology of that silence.

* * *

The Greeks had a relation to a thing they called (hubris). The relation was not solely one of condemnation: the existence of Thrasymachus, or that of Callicles, is proof enough of that, even if their discourse comes down to us already enveloped in the reassuring dialectics of Socrates. But the Greek Logos had no opposite.

European man, since the depths of the Middle Ages, has had a relation to a thing that is confusedly termed Madness, Dementia or Unreason. It is perhaps to that obscure presence that Western Reason owes something of its depth, as with the threat of hubris, the (sophrosyne) of Socratic speechmakers. In any case, the Reason–Unreason relation constitutes for Western culture one of the dimensions of its originality: it accompanied it long before Hieronymus Bosch, and will follow it long after Nietzsche and Artaud.

But what then is this confrontation below the language of reason? Where might this interrogation lead, following not reason in its horizontal becoming, but seeking to retrace in time this constant verticality, which, the length of Western culture, confronts it with what it is not, measuring it with its own extravagance? Towards what region might it take us, which was neither the history of knowledge nor history plain and simple, which was commanded neither by the teleology of the truth nor the rational concatenation of causes, which only have value or meaning beyond the division? A region, no doubt, where it would be a question more of the limits than of the identity of a culture.

We could write a history of *limits* – of those obscure gestures, necessarily forgotten as soon as they are accomplished, through which a culture rejects something which for it will be the Exterior; and throughout its history, this hollowed-out void, this white space by means of which it isolates itself, identifies it as clearly as its values. For those values are received, and maintained in the continuity of history; but in the region of which we would speak, it makes its essential choices, operating the division which gives a culture the face of its positivity: this is the originary thickness in which a culture takes shape. To interrogate a culture about its limit-experiences is to question it at the confines of history about a tear that is something like the very birth of its history.³ There, in a tension that is constantly on the verge of resolution, we find the temporal continuity of a dialectical analysis confronted with the revelation, at the doors of time, of a tragic structure.

At the centre of these limit-experiences of the Western world is the explosion, of course, of the tragic itself – Nietzsche having shown that the tragic structure from which the history of the Western world is made is nothing other than the refusal, the forgetting and the silent collapse of tragedy. Around that experience, which is central as it knots the tragic to the dialectic of history in the very refusal of tragedy by history, many other experiences gravitate. Each one, at the frontiers of our culture, traces a limit that simultaneously signifies an original division.

In the universality of the Western *ratio*, there is this division which is the Orient: the Orient, thought of as the origin, dreamt of as the vertiginous point from which nostalgia and promises of return are born, the Orient offered to the colonising reason of the Occident, but indefinitely inaccessible, for it always remains the limit: the night of the beginning, in which the Occident was formed, but in which it traced a dividing line, the Orient is for the Occident everything that it is not, while remaining the place in which its primitive truth must be sought. What is required is a history of this great divide, all along this Occidental becoming, following it in its continuity and its exchanges, while also allowing it to appear in its tragic hieratism.

Other divisions must also be told: in the luminous unity of appearance, the absolute division of dreams, which man cannot prevent himself from questioning in search of his own truth – be it that of his destiny or that of his heart – but which he only questions beyond an essential refusal that constitutes it and pushes it into the derision of the oneiric. It will also be necessary to write the history of sexual prohibitions, and not simply in terms of ethnology: and speak, in our culture itself, of the continuously mobile and obstinate forms of repression, not to write a chronicle of morality or tolerance, but to reveal, as a limit of our Occidental world and the origin of its morality, the tragic division of the happy world of desire. Finally, and firstly, we must speak of the experience of madness.

The following study will only be the first, and probably the easiest, in this long line of enquiry which, beneath the sun of the great Nietzschean quest, would confront the dialectics of history with the immobile structures of the tragic.

* * *

What then is madness, in its most general but most concrete form, for anyone who immediately challenges any hold that knowledge might have upon it? In all probability, nothing other than *the absence of an œuvre*.

What place could the existence of madness have in becoming? What is its wake? Quite probably very narrow; a few mildly worrying lines, which leave the great reasonable calm of history unchanged. What weight might they have, in the face of the few decisive words that wove the becoming of Western reason, these vain words, these dossiers of indecipherable delirium, juxtaposed by chance to the words of reason in prisons and libraries? Is there any place in the universe of our discourses for the thousands of pages where Thorin, an almost illiterate lackey and 'frenzied madman', transcribed, at the close of the seventeenth century, his fugitive visions and the roaring of his terror?⁴ All that is merely fallen time, the poor presumption of a passage refused by the future, a thing in becoming which is irreparably less than history.

It is that 'less than' that we must investigate, immediately freeing it of any association with the pejorative. From its originary formulation, historical time imposes silence on a thing that we can no longer apprehend, other than by addressing it as void, vanity, nothingness. History is only possible against the backdrop of the absence of history, in the midst of a great space of murmurings, that silence watches like its vocation and its truth: 'I will call desert this castle that you were, night this voice, absence your face.'⁵ An obscure, equivocal region: pure origin, as it is from there that the language of history would be born, slowly conquering so much confusion with the forms of its syntax and the consistency of its vocabulary – and ultimate residue, a sterile beach of words, sand that has run its course and is immediately forgotten, keeping nothing, in its passivity, other than the empty imprints of abstracted figures.

The great *œuvre* of the history of the world is indelibly accompanied by the absence of an *œuvre*, which renews itself at every instant, but which runs unaltered in its inevitable void the length of history: and from before history, as it is already there in the primitive decision, and after it again, as it will triumph in the last word uttered by history. The plenitude of history is only possible in the space, both empty and peopled at the same time, of all the words without language that appear to anyone who lends an ear, as a dull sound from beneath history, the obstinate murmur of a language talking *to itself* – without any speaking subject and without an interlocutor, wrapped up in itself, with a lump in

its throat, collapsing before it ever reaches any formulation and returning without a fuss to the silence that it never shook off. The charred root of meaning.

That is not yet madness, but the first caesura from which the division of madness became possible. That division is its repetition and intensification, its organisation in the tight unity of the present; the perception that Western man has of his own time and space allows a structure of refusal to appear, on the basis of which a discourse is denounced as not being language, a gesture as not being an *œuvre*, a figure as having no rightful place in history. This structure is constitutive of what is sense and nonsense, or rather of that reciprocity through which the one is bound to the other; it alone can account for the general fact that in our culture there can be no reason without madness, even though the rational knowledge that we have of madness reduces it and disarms it by lending it the slender status of pathological accident. *The necessity of madness* throughout the history of the West is linked to that decisive action that extracts a significant language from the background noise and its continuous monotony, a language which is transmitted and culminates in time; it is, in short, linked to *the possibility of history*.

This structure of the experience of madness, which is history through and through, but whose seat is at its margins, where its decisions are made, is the object of this study.

Which means that it is not at all a history of knowledge, but of the rudimentary movements of an experience. A history not of psychiatry, but of madness itself, in all its vivacity, before it is captured by knowledge. We need to strain our ears, and bend down towards this murmuring of the world, and try to perceive so many images that have never been poetry, so many fantasies that have never attained the colours of day. But it is, no doubt, a doubly impossible task, as it would require us to reconstitute the dust of this concrete pain, and those insane words that nothing anchors in time; and above all because that pain and those words only exist, and are only apparent to themselves and to others in the act of division that already denounces and masters them. It is only in the act of separation, and from it, that we can think of them as dust that has not yet been separated. Any perception that aims to apprehend them in their wild state necessarily belongs to a world that has captured them already. The liberty of madness can only be heard from the heights of the fortress in which it is imprisoned. There, freedom 'has only the morose registry of its prisons,

and its wordless experience as a persecuted thing; all we have is its description as an escaped convict'.⁶

To write the history of madness will therefore mean making a structural study of the historical ensemble – notions, institutions, judicial and police measures, scientific concepts – which hold captive a madness whose wild state can never be reconstituted; but in the absence of that inaccessible primitive purity, the structural study must go back to that decision that both bound and separated reason and madness; it must tend to discover the perpetual exchange, the obscure common root, the originary confrontation that gives meaning to the unity and the opposition of sense and senselessness. That will allow that lightning flash decision to appear once more, heterogeneous with the time of history, but ungraspable outside it, which separates the murmur of dark insects from the language of reason and the promises of time.

* * *

Should we be surprised that this structure was above all visible during the 150 years that preceded and prepared the formation of a psychiatry considered by us as positive? The classical age – from Willis to Pinel, from the fury of Oreste to the *Quinta del Sordo* and *Juliette* – covers precisely that period when the exchange between madness and reason modifies its language, in a radical manner. In the history of madness, two events signal this change with singular clarity: in 1657, the founding of the Hôpital Général, and the Great Confinement of the poor; and in 1794, the liberation of the mad in chains at Bicêtre. Between these two singular and symmetrical events, something happened, whose ambiguity has perplexed historians of medicine: blind repression in an absolutist regime, according to some, and, according to others, the progressive discovery, by science and philanthropy, of madness in its positive truth. In fact, beneath these reversible meanings, a structure was taking shape, which did not undo that ambiguity but was decisive for it. This structure explains the passage from the medieval and humanist experience of madness to the experience that is our own, which confines madness in mental illness. In the Middle Ages, and up until the Renaissance, the debate between man and madness was a dramatic debate that confronted man with the dark powers of the world; and the experience of madness was absorbed in images that spoke of the Fall and the End of All Things,

of the Beast, of Metamorphosis, and of all the marvellous secrets of Knowledge. In our time, the experience of madness is made in the calm of a knowledge which, through knowing it too much, passes it over. But in the movement from the one experience to the other, the passage is made through a world without images or positivity, in a sort of silent transparency that allows a great immobile structure to appear, like a wordless institution, a gesture without commentary, an immediate knowledge; this structure is neither that of drama nor of knowledge; it is the point at which history freezes, in the tragic mode that both founds it and calls it into question.

At the centre of this attempt to re-establish the value of the classical experience of madness, in its rights and its becoming, there is therefore a motionless figure to be found: the simple division into daylight and obscurity, shadow and light, dream and waking, the truth of the sun and the power of midnight. An elementary figure, which only accepts time as the indefinite return of a limit.

Another effect of that figure was to lead man into a powerful forgetting; he was to learn to dominate that great division, and bring it down to his own level; and make *in himself* the day and the night, and order the sun of *the truth* to the pale light of *his* truth. Having mastered his madness, and having freed it by capturing it in the goals of his gaze and his morality, having disarmed it by pushing it into a corner of himself finally allowed man to establish that sort of relation to the self that is known as 'psychology'. It had been necessary for Madness to cease being Night, and become a fleeting shadow within consciousness, for man to be able to pretend to grasp *its* truth and untangle it in knowledge.

In the reconstitution of this experience of madness, a history of the conditions of possibility of psychology wrote itself as though of its own accord.

* * *

In the course of writing this book, I sometimes had recourse to material that had been already gathered together by other authors. I did this as little as possible, and only in cases when I was unable to gain access to the document itself. Beyond any reference to a psychiatric 'truth', the aim was to allow these words and texts, which came from beneath the surface of language, and were not produced to accede to language, to speak of

themselves. Perhaps, to my mind, the most important part of this work is the space I have left to the texts of the archives themselves.

For the rest, it was necessary to ensure that I remained in a sort of relativity without recourse, never looking for a way out in any psychological *coup de force*, which might have turned over the cards and denounced some unrecognised truth. It was necessary to speak of madness only through that other 'trick' that allows men to not be mad, and that other trick could only be described, for its part, in the primitive vivacity that engages it in an indefinite debate regarding madness. A language without support was therefore necessary, a language that entered the game, but was to authorise the exchange; a language that constantly corrected itself to proceed, in a continuous movement, to the very bottom. The aim was to keep the *relative* at all costs, and to be *absolutely* understood.

There, in that simple problem of elocution, the greatest difficulty that faced the enterprise hid and expressed itself: it was necessary to bring to the surface of the language of reason a division and a debate that must of necessity remain on the near side of it, as that language only has meaning well beyond them. What was required was therefore a language that was quite neutral (fairly free from scientific terminology, and social or moral options), in order to approach most closely these primitively tangled words, and so that that distance through which modern man shores himself up against madness might be abolished; but a language that remained sufficiently open for the decisive words through which the truth of madness and of reason are constituted to find their place without being betrayed. Of rules and methods, I retained only one, summed up in a text by Char, where the definition of the most pressing and the most contained truth can be read: 'I removed from things the illusion they produce to protect themselves from us, and I left them the part that they concede us.'⁷

* * *

In this task, which was inevitably a slightly solitary one, many came to my assistance and have a right to my gratitude. First of all M. Georges Dumézil, without whom the work would never have been begun – neither begun in the course of a Swedish night, nor finished in the stubborn, bright sun of Polish liberty. I must also thank M. Jean Hyppolite, and above all M. Georges Canguilhem, who read this work in a still unformed state, advised me when things were not simple, saved me from many

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errors, and showed me the value of being heard. My friend Robert Mauzi, a great authority on the eighteenth century, provided much of the knowledge that I was lacking.

I should also name many others who appear not to matter. Yet they know, these friends from Sweden and these Polish friends, that there is something of their presence in these pages. May they pardon me for making such demands on them and their happiness, they who were so close to a work that spoke only of distant sufferings, and the slightly dusty archives of pain.

* * *

‘Companions in pathos, who barely murmur, go with your lamp spent and return the jewels. A new mystery sings in your bones. Cultivate your legitimate strangeness.’⁸

Hamburg, February 5, 1960.