History of Madness

Praise for this new edition:

'One of the major works of the twentieth century is finally available in English. This comprehensive translation finally overcomes one of the great divisions within the world of reason; an occasion to revisit *Madness and Civilization* as it was written.' **Paul Rabinow, University of California, Berkeley**

'With this beautiful and moving book, Michel Foucault transformed our understanding of the processes that had made psychiatry possible – the process which had brought its object, mental illness, into existence, and which inscribed it into our modern imagination as pathology, negativity, incompetence and deficiency. In studying the history of madness in this way, Foucault also taught us crucial lessons about the assembling of what we have come to call ‘civilization’. Now, at last, English speaking readers can have access to the depth of scholarship that underpinned Foucault's analysis: I have no doubt that this long awaited translation will have a transformative effect on a new generation of readers.' **Nikolas Rose, London School of Economics**

Reviews of the original French edition:

'A thick manuscript arrived: a philosophy thesis on the relations between madness and unreason in the classical age, by an author I did not know. I was dazzled when I read it.' **Philippe Ariès**

'This magnificent book . . . requires a mind that is capable of being in turn a historian, a philosopher, a psychologist, and a sociologist . . . never simply one of these . . . This is not a method that could be offered as an example; it is not within the reach of just anybody. Something more than talent is necessary.' **Fernand Braudel, Annales**
This is quite an exceptional book of very high calibre - brilliantly written, intellectually rigorous, and with a thesis that thoroughly shakes the assumptions of traditional psychiatry.
Michel Foucault

History of Madness

Edited by Jean Khalfa
Translated by Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa
Biography of Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault was born in Poitiers on 15 June 1926, the son of a doctor. He finished his secondary education in Paris at the Lycée Henry IV in 1946 and went on to study philosophy at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure, attending in particular the lectures of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and working with Jean Hyppolite, on Hegel, and with Louis Althusser. Despite suffering from sporadic bouts of depression and a suicide attempt in 1948, Foucault secured degrees in philosophy in 1948 and in psychology in 1950. He passed his agrégation in philosophy in 1951. He joined the French Communist Party in 1950 and quit in 1952.

Lecturing at the École Normale Supérieure and working as a psychologist at the Hôpital Sainte-Anne, in the early 1950s, he became dissatisfied with the confines of French academic life and held diplomatic and academic posts in Sweden (where he met and worked with Georges Dumézil), Poland and Germany, whilst working on his thesis Folie et Déraison: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique. Initially rejected by Gallimard, it was published in 1961 by the great historian Philippe Ariès at Librairie Plon, the publisher of Claude Lévi-Strauss. It was hailed as ‘magnificent’ by Fernand Braudel. Several other now famous works followed, including The Birth of the Clinic, The Order of Things, and The Archaeology of Knowledge. In 1968, Foucault was appointed to a chair at the new, experimental, University of Vincennes and, in 1970, was elected to a prestigious chair at the Collège de France where he taught the History of Systems of Thought.

While producing a very large and influential body of research during the 1960s and 1970s, Foucault threw himself into political and social activism. He campaigned in particular on behalf of homosexuals and for prison reform. In 1975 he published one of his most famous works, Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison. Foucault travelled to North America in the late 1970s and early 1980s, teaching annually at the University of California at Berkeley. Freely experimenting with LSD and the liberal sexual environment, he lived what he termed ‘limit experiences’. During that period, in addition to many articles (published posthumously in four volumes), he wrote the three volumes of his History of Sexuality.

Fatally ill with AIDS, Michel Foucault died in Paris on 25 June 1984 in the Salpêtrière Hospital at the age of fifty-seven. After his death, the French prime
minister issued a tribute and memorial homages featured on the front pages of all the national press. In his obituary, Georges Dumézil wrote, ‘Foucault’s intelligence literally knew no limits.’
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Thank goodness this enormous book is finally available in English. A masterpiece needs no foreword, so I shall hardly go beyond the title. The original one is a bit like Alice’s Cheshire Cat, of which nothing is left but the grin. It starts out as *Madness and Unreason: History of Madness in the Classical Age*, and fades away so that we are left with our present *History of Madness*. I shall go through the steps. It is a gradual disappearing act, and I shall point you in the direction of the disappeared ‘unreason’, not to explain it, but to encourage you to notice it. In the tale of the titles and of unreason, there are all the signs of Foucault changing his mind about madness.

The exact title in 1961 was *Folie et Déraison. Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*. Very often only the first word of a French title is capitalised. In 1961 the second noun, *déraison*, was also given a capital letter. Daniel Defert, Foucault’s longtime intellectual colleague, companion, and posthumous editor, laid emphasis on the exact title of the original. He does so in his incredibly valuable date list, far richer than any ordinary chronology, at the beginning of *Dits et écrits*, the collection of Foucault’s published essays, interviews, speeches and prefaces.

‘Unreason’ was right up there alongside ‘Madness’. The big book of 1961 was severely abridged, and appeared as a paperback in 1964. Half of the first preface was suppressed. On the cover we see only *Histoire de la folie*. On the title page the full 1961 title appears in block letters, but with *Folie et Déraison* in smaller print than the subtitle. Fading, like the cat. This version
was translated into many languages, while only an Italian publisher did the unabridged book. For the 1965 English version, Foucault restored a little material that he had cut from the 1964 French abridgement. For a moment, a flicker more of the cat’s face came back. For here are the most vivid assertions about Unreason to be found in the entire work. They will hardly make sense out of context, so I refer you to the pages in question which were suppressed and then restored (pp. 225–250). You will find sentences like this: ‘How can we avoid summing up this experience by the single word Unreason? By that we mean all that for which reason is at once nearest and most distant, fullest and most empty.’

In 1972 Foucault published a second edition of the entire book, plus three appendices, but with a substitute preface. The French title had become what was formerly the subtitle, History of Madness in the Classical Age.

What is the déraison that dropped from the title but was still all over the text? Unreason is not identical to madness but something that contrasts with it. For example,

\[
\text{in the anxiety of the second half of the eighteenth century, the fear of madness grew at the same rate as the dread of unreason, and for that reason the twin obsessions constantly lent each other mutual support.} \\
(\text{p. 362})
\]

Later we read that since the end of the eighteenth century ‘the life of unreason’ no longer manifests itself except in the flashes of lightning found in works like those of ‘Hölderlin, Nerval, Nietzsche and Artaud’ which resisted ‘through their own strength that gigantic moral imprisonment’. Standard French history and iconography of psychiatry represents Pinel casting off the chains of madmen soon after the Bastille had fallen, so that is a story of liberating the mad. Here we are told that the new ‘moral’ treatment of insanity was also the imprisonment of unreason that had flashed so openly on the canvasses of Hieronymus Bosch.

Casual reference books diagnose Hölderlin as a schizophrenic poet, Nietzsche as a philosopher suffering from dementia caused by terminal syphilis, and Artaud as a bipolar (manic-depressive) playwright. Nerval killed himself: we say suicide is caused by severe depressive illness. It is a central thesis of this book that, far from these being inevitable ways of conceiving of four very strange men, it requires a specific organization of
thought to categorise them – and so many other people – in terms of mental disorder. Foucault does not pander to the thought that genius and mental disturbance are of a piece. The art of these men, as he shouts at the end of the book, is the exact opposite of insanity: ‘Where there is an œuvre, there is no madness’ (p. 577).

Alongside madness there is also unreason. It had much fuller play in the Renaissance, an unreason that Foucault evokes by the ship of fools and the paintings of Bosch, especially The Temptation of Saint Anthony. (Foucault is marvellous with paintings: look how much he draws from Goya at the end of the book, and one knows the tour de force on Velasquez that open The Order of Things.) He even says that in the early days of confining the mad, the experience of unreason smothered something else, the consciousness of madness (p. 362).

But then two distinct obsessions emerged, he tells us, madness and unreason. The fear of one and the dread of the other were tamed in the asylum. The life of unreason could break through the resulting silence only in the voices of those who were classified among the mad but who, through their art, rose above madness to act as standards to which the sane and classifying world is unable to answer.

A romantic fantasy lurks here, the purity of the possessed, those who not only speak the truth in paradox, like the fools in Shakespeare, but who are also themselves the truth.

The fantasy leaps out at you from the 1961 preface, in words suppressed in 1964: ‘a madness whose wild state can never be reconstituted; but in the absence of that inaccessible primitive purity . . .’ (p. xxxiii). There it is: the inaccessible primitive purity. That is what made the book so attractive to the British anti-psychiatric movement. So much is clear from the end of David Cooper’s preface to the English (as opposed to the American edition) version of 1967 – and it was Cooper who had coined the neologism ‘anti-psychiatry’ in 1962.

By 1964, half the preface was cut, and by 1972 it had all gone. In a new, splendidly brief, and seemingly transparent preface, Michel Foucault speaks, as was then his wont, of a book being an event, which if it lives, lives through repeated doublings and simulacra. It has its own life, free of the author.

Doublings: I suggest that you hold in your hands two distinct books. The main text of each is the same. It is all too easy to compare these two books to the two Don Quixote invented by Borges, the one written by
Cervantes, the other, identical in words, written much later by an imagined Pierre Menard. Despite the words being the same, so much has happened that the meaning is different.\footnote{The 1961 preface promised an archaeology of a silence – and not an archaeology of psychiatry, that ‘monologue of reason about madness’. What Foucault named ‘archaeology’ shows, in part, how a discourse becomes possible. He did not show how the psychiatric monologue became possible: he merely recorded that it came into being.}

One of these books is governed by an idea of déraison, in which there lurks a dream of madness in the wild, as something prediscursive, inaccessible, pure. The other book is what the first became, stripped of romantic illusion.

The 1961 preface promised an archaeology of a silence – and not an archaeology of psychiatry, that ‘monologue of reason about madness’. What Foucault named ‘archaeology’ shows, in part, how a discourse becomes possible. He did not show how the psychiatric monologue became possible: he merely recorded that it came into being.

The silence was silence about unreason. That causes us difficulty. Unreason is still a word, but it is no longer part of daily language. Much the same goes for French déraison (p. 156). From the very first paragraph of this foreword you will have been wondering what it means. Rightly so. Madness is the visible grin, unreason the cat that has faded away.

‘Archaeology of a silence’ – that is from the part of the 1961 preface that remained in 1964, but then disappeared. Once Foucault’s idea of archaeology had matured, it appears that an archaeology can only be of what is said. If so, the second book (of the two identical texts) is no longer an archaeology of silence. It is the work of an author who is no longer obsessed by the fear of madness and dread of unreason. He has made peace with both, and has moved on to the greatest of his archaeologies, The Order of Things (1966).
INTRODUCTION

Jean Khalfa

Foucault’s History of Madness has yet to be read. Madness and Civilisation, the English translation of Histoire de la Folie, was based on an abridged French edition from which roughly 300 pages had been removed, together with most of the scholarly apparatus (about 800 footnotes and the bibliography). Most interpretations and criticisms made of the book in the English-speaking world were therefore based on a partial perspective. Additionally, because of the historical circumstances of its appearance, the book was largely confined to debates surrounding the anti-psychiatric movement: the Introduction to the English edition was written by David Cooper, and the reader’s note R.D. Laing had written for Routledge (reproduced here) was used for the back cover. It is true that Foucault did not mark his distance from such readings, perhaps because his desire was, he said,

that this object-event, almost imperceptible among so many others, should recopy, fragment, repeat, simulate and replicate itself, and finally disappear without the person who happened to produce it ever being able to claim the right to be its master, and impose what he wished to say, or say what he wanted it to be.

(1972 Preface)

Rereading it today, and in the way it requests that historical events should
be understood, that is by referring them to the conditions of their genesis and not to their aftermath, it appears much more complex than these readings implied.

First, it is without doubt an analysis of the history of madness considered as a cultural, legal, political, philosophical and then medical construct, from the Renaissance to the beginning of the nineteenth century. But it is also a reflection on the notion of history and on the methodology of the historian, a reflection influenced by Nietzsche’s criticism of historical teleologies. The book, from this point of view, shows how a non-teleological approach to historical phenomena can denaturalise what is to us most familiar by unearthing its long forgotten and often unpalatable origins through the study of forgotten archives, traces of a reality often very removed from what was to become the dominant narrative. From a philosophical point of view, this book is the moment when Foucault’s thought starts to look beyond phenomenology and towards structuralism, moving from a theory of forms of consciousness to a description of historical systems of thoughts. Most of its vocabulary is phenomenological and its avowed object is a particular experience, that of the other as mad: ‘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’ (1961 Preface). Yet the idea is that specific structures of power determine this experience differently at different moments. Finally this book also marks the rejection of a particular conception of philosophy as irreducible to the material circumstances of its production. This is what is at stake in the violent debate with Derrida on Descartes’ exclusion of the insane (Foucault’s texts on this topic are reproduced in the appendices to the present edition).

MADNESS

As a history, the thesis of this book is that whether madness is described as a religious or philosophical phenomenon (an experience of inspiration, a loss of mind, etc.), or as an objective medical essence (as in all the classifications of types of madness that have been developed by psychiatry), these conceptions are not discoveries but historical constructions of meaning. When comparing the conceptions of madness prevailing in different civilisations, Foucault realised that there could be a history of madness itself, in other words that it was a ‘phenomenon of civilisation, as variable, as
floating as any other phenomenon of culture’ and, as a consequence, that ‘curing the mad is not the only possible reaction to the phenomenon of madness’. There is a moment in history when madness started to be perceived as a disease, as an object of scientific inquiry and if this transformation is interesting from the point of view of the history of psychiatry and of medicine in general, it is perhaps more important in what it tells us about what must have changed in a society as a whole for such a transformation to occur. In other words, Foucault does not look at madness from the point of view of the classical historian of a scientific discipline, here psychiatry, who would trace the development of a science from inchoate early notions towards its modern, rational state. Rather he is interested in decisions, limits and exclusions which took place at particular points in time and indicate shifts in the way certain phenomena were experienced. These shifts often coincided or overlapped with other transformations coming from different parts of a society, but made their way into ruptures of which we are no longer aware precisely because what they excluded (an earlier experience of madness) has disappeared. So the history of madness is not the history of a disease (of what we now consider to be such, of its treatments and of the institutions developed to deal with it). Rather, and in order to grasp what is no longer directly accessible, it is the history of the gesture of partage, division, separation, through each of its moments, incarnations or figures, to use the Hegelian vocabulary so present throughout the book (and still so dominant in French philosophy at the time of its writing), to describe a process of division through which a reality splits into radically different parts until a new realisation takes place, a synthesis which in itself is a new reality.

Foucault distinguishes three periods in the separation between madness and reason (or in the construction of madness as unreason, as the title of the first French edition, of 1961, made clear: Folie et Dénaisson. Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique). First, the Renaissance when the conversation between reason and madness which dominated in the Middle Ages is subtly transformed into a reflection on wisdom; then the radical separation of reason and madness in what he calls the Classical Age, that is, roughly, the seventeenth century and a large part of the eighteenth, when most of the social institutions of confinement are created – a period he calls tragic because it stages a contradiction without any hope of a reconciliation; and finally the modern experience of madness where madness is now perceived as factual or positive, an object of science, as a disease or a series of diseases, a
period which starts at the end of the eighteenth century and which, Foucault indicates, has already been transformed in some respects by a new, literary experience of madness, obvious in late romantic works (Nerval) and in some of the avant-garde of the twentieth century (Roussel, Artaud).

The main thesis of the book, as a work of history, is that the passage from one phase to the other is not a progression from obscure or inhuman conceptions to a final understanding of the truth about madness (as a disease, the object of a medicine of the soul, a ‘psychiatry’). In fact each phase reflects for Foucault a different mode of production of society itself through a different system of exclusion. Thus, for him, the modern medical positivism which developed from the end of the eighteenth century is based on an attempt at objectifying madness which, when looked at in detail, in particular in the institutions it accompanies, is a new mode of social control. This is not to say that for Foucault the construction of modern Western society could be conceived simply as based on an exclusion of madness. He will later on consider many other types of ruptures and exclusions. But studying madness allows one to recognise deeper and much larger transformations.

In the first phase, the Renaissance, Foucault focuses initially on the works of artists, to show that madness was perceived as a sort of knowledge, akin to some religious experience, that of a possible chaos of the world, obvious in particular in depictions of the apocalypse. The mad would be those who have the tragic experience of possible worlds which constantly menace the real one and of the essential frailty of human institutions. Able to perceive forces which, from the inside, threaten the great organisation of the world and of humanity, the mad seem to reveal and belong to the limits of our world. This experience is what the proliferation of images relating to madness during the Renaissance attempts to convey. But at the same time Foucault notes that another form of consciousness of madness seems to emerge, in texts this time, and it is no longer tragic but critical. The role of madness is to indicate a discrepancy between what men are and what they pretend to be, a great theme in humanist writing, for example Montaigne, Rabelais or Erasmus. Wise is the man who can see that there is a madness in all claims by reason to have found an absolute truth. From a Christian point of view, human reason is madness compared to the reason of God, but divine reason appears as madness to human reason. So here there is still a presence of
unreason within reason, but both are looked at from a superior point of view, that of a wisdom which would understand the limits of reason, while earlier madness was experienced, so to speak, from the inside. A first, embryonic division between two forms of experience of madness has thus occurred.  

The classical experience of madness (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) is very different. Now madness is perceived as unreason, that is, the absolute opposite of reason. This is the time when the mad are locked up instead of being sent out of the cities to live at their limits, when the movement towards the exclusion of the irrational by society meets ‘le grand renfermement’, the moment when, from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, places of confinement are created all over Europe. Foucault insists that these institutions were not perceived as medical establishments and that what happened inside them was unrelated to the medical knowledge and practices of the time. In them the mad were locked up with the blasphemous and the unemployed, with prostitutes and other deviants, and were considered as having freely chosen the path of mistake, against truth and reason. The perspective was ethical, not medical: they were made to reverse this choice by a meticulously described system of physical constraints and rewards. But, as in the first phase, in the Renaissance, alongside these institutional developments, another movement occurs. While for the powers which had organised their internment the mad were guilty because they had made the choice to reject nature, for medical doctors, madness was becoming a natural object: the mad were no longer perceived as an aberration but as a phenomenon worthy of scientific study. Foucault envisages several reasons for this development but an important one, important precisely in that it gives its full role to the contingent in history, is that the mad, because they were now locked up, could precisely be an object of observation (which of course raises the question: why did they become the object of the medical gaze while prostitutes, vagrants, etc. became the object of other disciplines in the making, for instance sociology or criminology).

The division or partage between reason and madness has clearly taken place, there is no longer a surface of contact between them as there was during the Renaissance and this division parallels the social division instituted by the house of confinement. Of course there are many ways to interpret the social causes of this great movement of confinement of all those who did not work: regulation of the number of the unemployed and
of prices (the workhouses where people were barely paid served to keep prices down); getting rid of undesirable characters through means that side-stepped the normal judiciary procedures (internment could be decreed by royal lettres de cachet and the Hôpital Général, an institutional space of legal exception, was beyond the reach of judicial authorities); fulfilment of the charitable purposes of the church, etc. Such explanations of confinement by its social function are true for Foucault who declared that social sensibility to madness changed as a function of the rise of mercantilism and the bourgeois family, but they refer to specific decisions which always presuppose a specific form of awareness or the experience of the other and of a group as un-reasonable, as fundamentally alien to the norm. Here however, what really interests Foucault is that the act of exclusion is in fact contemporary to or even predates and in a sense produces the alienation. Suddenly a new figure becomes perceptible and this perception will in turn have new effects.

The third, modern phase emerges at the end of the eighteenth century with the end of the Hôpitaux Généraux and the creation of institutions exclusively dedicated to the care of the mad. Madness has now become the exclusive object of a medical perception.

The lunatic asylum or psychiatric hospital is the result of a synthesis between the newly perceived need to cure the mad whom their family cannot afford to treat at home and the old need to protect society. But this synthesis of a space of cure and a place of exclusion is soon forgotten in its historical origin and becomes perceived as natural: the mad are now locked up in order to be cured. At first, internment was perceived confusedly as a reflection of the nature of madness viewed as a loss of the natural freedom of man. Now it is the only space where the necessary treatments to protect this freedom and restore it can be administered. Madness, which has been alienated by society, is now defined as psychological alienation, an alienation of the self from itself and the space of confinement a space where the self can gather itself again. So in important respects, for Foucault, the medical liberation of the mad by ‘philanthropists’, for instance Tuke in England and Pinel in France, famous for having removed their chains, this sudden and ‘real’ understanding of madness, is a myth, based, like all myths, on the forgetting of historical origins. The transformation of the exclusion space into a medical space made it possible for madness to become an object of scientific observation and experimentation. To objectify the mad was to master them, since they were defined as the
product of natural causalities, and in practice it clearly became a new way of exerting a power upon them (of which the invention of the straitjacket is a model, analysed in depth by Foucault). In the end the asylum, where man could be systematically perceived and studied, was one of the birthplaces of the idea of the ‘human sciences’. But Foucault’s target here is not scientific truth in itself but the claims to scientifi city of disciplines which take as natural an object that they have in fact shaped in ways and for reasons that are often largely exterior to the object itself. In that, his approach is similar to that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his criticism of behaviourism as a false science in The Structure of Behaviour, or to that of Georges Canguilhem in his studies on the construction of scientific concepts.4

HISTORY

Foucault describes the book as a ‘history of the conditions of possibility of psychology’: the first dimension of the History of Madness was to trace the origins of our conception of human beings as psychological subjects from the moment when a radical separation between madness and reason had taken place, the classical age, and when the possibility of a science of this new object appears. This clearly shows the aims of the particular brand of historiography that Foucault named, in this book, the ‘archaeology of knowledge’. What we spontaneously see as the final elimination of archaic and largely incomprehensible visions of the mad by the modern medical truth was not the fruit of a linear progress. Rather, it resulted from a complex series of transformations where the evolution of structures of social control gave rise to new forms of consciousness which in turn produced new structures of control. So, however Hegelian the vocabulary (and however prophetic or apocalyptic the tone sometimes is), Foucault constantly rejected the idea that the trajectory of madness was determined from the beginning and attempted to avoid the illusions born from a retrospective gaze which necessarily naturalises the present.5

But in addition to this historical analysis of madness and its institutions, and to a reflection on Western historiography, the book also contains the germs of a reflection on history in general. The reason is that the exclusion of madness coincided for Foucault with the birth of a certain conception of historical time as unified, directed and meaningful, as opposed to the chaotic violence, the monotonous repetition of a meaningless fury,
the paradoxical ‘tale told by an idiot’. The history of madness was thus also implicitly a history of the conditions of the possibility of history taken in this sense. It saw in the exclusion of the mad through the construction of madness as unreason one of these conditions, a dimension particularly emphasised in the first preface:

\[ \text{The necessity of madness} \] 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.

PHILOSOPHY

A third dimension of this book is that it marks the passage between two philosophical perspectives. The vocabulary of the phenomenological approach is still common here, in particular in the first preface and what is at stake is described as a particular experience (this word is perhaps the most common in the book). But there are several experiences or forms of experience of madness and they are historically very different even though they interfere and overlap. They are not used as indicators of the structures of a transcendental subjectivity but, rather, described as historically constructed, as forms of culture. In fact, when reading the book closely it is soon obvious that the means through which these ‘experiences’ are accessed by Foucault, the archives, the different types of documents which form the material of the historical inquiry become its real object. When he mentions an experience, he never does anything other than to point to a difference in historical configurations of practices, beliefs and institutions. Thus, when writing about ‘the two major forms of the experiences of madness that were juxtaposed throughout the classical age [and] both follow their own chronological index’, he notes that ‘the formulations that justify confinement are not presentiments of our [modern] diseases, but represent instead an experience of madness that intersects with our pathological analyses, but which could never coincide with them in any coherent manner’. The purpose of history is therefore no longer to extract the real meaning of documents which would have so far remained obscure (here, to decipher, behind the crude descriptions of the registers of confinement, archaic ways of seeing the reality analysed by modern
taxonomies of mental diseases) but to see rather how those specific
descriptions articulate with certain norms or principles (in particular
moral and religious) of their time. Rather than simply seeking to identify
an obsessional neurosis behind the description of the ‘deranged mind
inventing its own devotion’, the aim is to understand the moral order
against which this disturbance is perceived as madness. The Introduction
to Foucault’s major methodological text, The Archaeology of Knowledge,
noted that the passage to an archaeological analysis applied to the history of
ideas, thought or science, ‘has broken up the long series formed by the
progress of consciousness, or the teleology of reason, or the evolution of
human thought’:

Thus, in place of the continuous chronology of reason, which was
invariably traced back to some inaccessible origin, its founding open-
ing, there have appeared scales that are sometimes very brief, distinct
from one another, irreducible to a single law, scales that bear a type
of history peculiar to each one, and which cannot be reduced to the
general model of a consciousness that acquires, progresses and
remembers.

(p. 8)

A spectacular consequence of this shift from an analysis of experience to
an analysis of structures and practices is the connection established by
Foucault at the beginning of the second chapter of the first part of the
History of Madness, between the refusal by Descartes to consider the possibil-
ity of his own madness as a legitimate reason for doubting the reality of
the world and of his own existence, and the invention of vast houses of
confinement roughly at the same time. These would be two aspects of the
same ‘event’. One of the questions Descartes asks, in his systematic
exploration of the reasons for scepticism, is: how do I know that I am not
mad? But instead of examining the question, Descartes dismisses it in an
exclamation all the more astonishing when coming from a philosopher
who defined the two causes of error as prejudice and precipitation: ‘But
such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took
anything from them as a model for myself’ (Metaphysical Meditations, 1641.
The French translation, reviewed and approved by Descartes, is even
stronger. It can in turn be translated as: ‘I would be equally mad if I took
anything from them as a model for myself’). Foucault seems to have been
the first modern reader of Descartes to note this gap in an otherwise watertight argument. He sees the a priori exclusion of madness from the process of thought, where the mad, as in-sane, are characterised solely by what they lack, as symptomatic of the parallel formation of modern rationalism and of institutions of confinement, both forming the two sides of what he calls ‘the classical event’.

This connection established between the detail of an argument within the canonical exposition of Descartes’ philosophy – an extraordinarily methodical and meticulous metaphysical meditation, and a large-scale historical-social transformation, drew the attention of Jacques Derrida who published in 1964 a critique of Madness and Unreason, under the title ‘Cogito and history of madness’, initiating a violent debate which led Foucault to clarify his basic assumptions. In substance Derrida raised two objections.

First, he rejected Foucault’s reading. If Descartes moves so quickly from the argument of madness to the argument of the dream – an essential moment in the consideration of sceptical arguments since the experience of the dream shows that there is no criterion we could use, ‘within’ the field of consciousness, to assert the reality of an existence ‘exterior’ to this field – it is because the experience of the dream is common and perhaps universal, as opposed to the experience of madness. The voice which excludes the mad from the field of rational inquiry would thus not be that of the philosopher but of the layman, in the hypothetical dialogue which would be contained in this ‘meditation’. This man would never consider as serious the argument of madness but would easily be shaken, as any philosophy teacher knows, by the argument of the dream. So, for Derrida, the strength of madness as a radical questioning of beliefs in whatever exists, in its proximity therefore to the sceptical moment of philosophy, is here, in Descartes, triumphant in the hyperbole of the dream itself. Far from indicating a gesture of exclusion, the substitution of the argument of the dream, claims Derrida, is the ‘hyperbolic exasperation of the hypothesis of madness’.

The second important point of Derrida’s critique is of a much more general nature. He sees in what he calls ‘the hyperbolic audacity of the Cartesian Cogito, its mad audacity’, a fundamental move, which is the essence of philosophical thought itself. ‘It is the [. . .] point of certainty from which the possibility of Foucault’s narration, as well as of the narration of the totality, [in fact] the project of thinking this totality by
escaping it, is embedded.' That audacity in Descartes comes from beyond Descartes, and it should not be pinned down to any particular moment in history because it is the condition, says Derrida, of all histories or all narration. This audacity is Philosophy or, more precisely, the initial excess or extravagance of the philosophical gesture when it questions the totality of what exists, and therefore can ask the question of the nature and meaning of being (whatever the answer is, theological or not). By doing that, he adds, this initial gesture opens up a space at the same time for madness and for reason, and also for history, as history is always a meaning imposed onto the infinite multiplicity of the real. In other words, what Foucault attributes to a moment in time (the division reason/unreason, the idea of history as a meaningful whole) is in fact the initial philosophical gesture, without which Foucault could not have written his book, for this gesture of freedom which questions the totality of being as such, as in the first of Descartes’ *Metaphysical Meditation*, is in excess of, or takes place before a discursive practice has started, before a book has been written to answer it, and therefore cannot be totally reduced to the historical conditions under which books are written or thoughts expressed. Ignoring that would be a sign on the part of Foucault of what Derrida calls a ‘historicist totalitarianism’, which would reduce all thought to the conditions of its production and would therefore *ipso facto* endanger its own claim to truthfulness.9

Foucault, responded in 1972, in the second edition of the book, by then called *History of Madness*, in two ways. First he removed the Preface of 1961, on which Derrida had concentrated his more general attack, and second he added to the book an important appendix, ‘My body, this paper, this fire’, which is a systematic rebuttal of Derrida’s argument, so violent in tone that the two writers stopped communicating for ten years. We publish here both prefaces and this text together with a second appendix Foucault inserted in the 1972 edition (at the insistence of Gilles Deleuze), which reformulates and develops some of the themes of the first Preface: ‘Madness, the absence of an œuvre’. This text was originally published in May 1964. The present edition also contains an earlier and different version of Foucault’s answer to Derrida, published in the Japanese journal *Paideia* in February 1972.

There is little doubt that on the textual analysis of Descartes Foucault has no difficulty countering Derrida’s argument. The meditation as a type of discursive practice is radically different from the dialogue and it is only
through distortions of the text that Derrida can claim otherwise.\textsuperscript{10} In particular he does not see that in the movement of the meditation, the very act of thinking about the dream, the particular steps of this thought as events within the meditative process, are an essential element in blurring the border between dream and reality and operate a transformation of the meditating subject himself. In other words Derrida fails to see that in Descartes’ text meditation is action as much as demonstration (as the Cogito itself will again demonstrate in the Second Meditation). Hence the violent conclusion:

it was not at all on account of their inattentiveness that classical scholars omitted, before Derrida and like him, this passage from Descartes. It is part of a system, a system of which Derrida is today the most decisive representative, in its final explosion: a reduction of discursive practices to textual traces; the elision of events that are produced there, leaving only the marks for a reading; the invention of voices behind the text, so as not to have to examine the modes of implication of the subject in discourses; the assignation of the originary as said and not-said in the text in order to avoid replacing discursive practices in the field of transformation where they are carried out.

Foucault goes on to say that the very statement of an a priori irreducibility of the opening of a critical (philosophical) thought to the historical conditions of its emergence is itself a discursive practice, reducible to the conditions of its emergence:

I would say that it is a historically well-determined little pedagogy, which manifests itself here in a very visible manner. A pedagogy which teaches the student that there is nothing outside the text, but that in it, in its interstices, in its blanks and silences, the reserve of the origin reigns; that it is never necessary to look beyond it, but that here, not in the words of course, but in words as crossings-out, in their \textit{lattice}, what is said is ‘the meaning of being’. A pedagogy that inversely gives to the voice of the masters that unlimited sovereignty that allows it to indefinitely re-say the text.

In its defence of the methods of the new historiography of ideas, with its insistence on ‘thresholds, mutations, independent systems, and limited
series’, The Archaeology of Knowledge explains the violence of Foucault’s reaction and the importance of Descartes in this debate:

If the history of thought could remain the locus of uninterrupted continuities, if it could endlessly forge connections that no analysis could undo without abstraction, if it could weave around everything that men say and do, obscure synthesis that anticipate for him, prepare him, and lead him endlessly towards his future, it would provide a privileged shelter for the sovereignty of consciousness.

(p. 12)

But then Foucault’s answer does not explain in this book how it is possible for a thought that claims to be doing an archaeology of systems of thoughts, which thus must study accurately the conditions of its own production and the constraints that bear on its own exercise, a thought therefore that can neither postulate for itself an absolute origin (say in the act of institution of a ratio), nor a detachment from its own time – how it is possible for such a thought to explain the freedom within which it operates and the truthfulness of the structures it constructs when studying history. Must philosophy postulate the transcendence of thought to history? This is the question of this book since as a history of modern conceptions of madness it also opens up the possibility of a history of forms of rationality. One could read a large part of Foucault’s later work as an attempt to address this question.
Pascal: ‘Men are so necessarily mad, that not being mad would be being mad through another trick that madness played.’ 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, 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 falteringlly, 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.

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The Greeks had a relation to a thing they called ὑβρίς (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 σωφροσύνη (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. 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.

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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? 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.’ 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.

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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 gaols 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.

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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.’

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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
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.

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‘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.’

I really ought to write a new preface for this book, which is old already. But the idea I find rather unattractive. For whatever I tried to do, I would always end up trying to justify it for what it was, and reinsert it, insofar as such a thing might be possible, in what is going on today. Perhaps that would be possible, perhaps not, I might do it with varying degrees of success, but it would not be an honest course of action. And above all, that wouldn’t be in keeping with what should be, regarding a book, the preserve of the person who wrote it. A book is produced, it is a minuscule event, an object that fits into the hand. But at that moment, it takes its place in an incessant game of repetitions, for its doubles, both near and far, start to multiply; each reading gives it for an instant an impalpable, unique body; fragments of it pass into circulation and are passed off as the real thing, purporting to contain the book in its entirety, and the book itself sometimes ends up taking refuge in such summaries; commentaries double the text still further, creating even more discourses where, it is claimed, the book is itself at last, avowing all that it refused to say, delivering itself from all that which it so loudly pretended to be. A reissue in another place and in another time is yet another of these doubles, something which is neither totally an illusion, nor totally an identical object.

The temptation is great for the person who wrote the book to lay down the law regarding these flickering simulacra, and prescribe a form
for them, to give them the ballast of an identity, imposing a unique mark that would give them all a certain constant value. ‘I am the author: look at my face or my profile; this is what all these doubled figures that are going to circulate under my name should look like; those who stray from it are worthless; and it is from their degree of resemblance that you should measure the value of the others. I am the name, the law, the soul, the secret, and the balance in which these doubles should be weighed.’ So speaks the Preface, the first act in which the monarchy of the author is established, a declaration of tyranny: my intention should be your precept; you must bend your reading, your analyses, your criticisms to what I was trying to do, and take note of my modesty: when I speak of the limits of my enterprise, I mean to set a boundary for your freedom, and if I claim that I feel I was not up to the task, it is because I don’t want to leave you the privilege of substituting my book with the fantasy of a different one, close to it, but more beautiful than the book itself. I am the monarch of the things that I have said, and I keep an eminent sovereignty over them; that of my intention, and the meaning that I wished to give to them.

My desire is that a book, at least for the person who wrote it, should be nothing other than the sentences of which it is made; that it should not be doubled by that first simulacrum of itself which is a preface, whose intention is to lay down the law for all the simulacra which are to be formed in the future on its basis. My desire is that this object-event, almost imperceptible among so many others, should recopy, fragment, repeat, simulate and replicate itself, and finally disappear without the person who happened to produce it ever being able to claim the right to be its master, and impose what he wished to say, or say what he wanted it to be. In short, my desire is that a book should not create of its own accord that status of text to which teaching and criticism will all too probably reduce it, but that it should have the easy confidence to present itself as discourse: as both battle and weapon, strategy and shock, struggle and trophy or wound, conjuncture and vestige, strange meeting and repeatable scene.

For these reasons, when I was asked to write a new preface for this book, which is being reissued, I could only answer that the previous one should be removed. That would be the honest course. We should not try to justify the old book, nor reinsert it into the present; the series of events to which it belongs, and which are its true law, are far from being over. As
for novelty, we should not pretend to discover in it a secret reserve or a richness that initially escaped detection; its only novelty is the things that have been said about it, and the events in which it has been caught up.

I will add only two texts: one, already published, where I expand on a phrase I ventured rather blindly: ‘madness, the absence of an œuvre’; the other, unpublished in France, where I try to address a remarkable criticism by Derrida.

‘But you have just written a preface.’
‘At least it’s short.’

Michel Foucault
Part One
At the end of the Middle Ages, leprosy disappeared from the Western world. At the edges of the community, at town gates, large, barren, uninhabitable areas appeared, where the disease no longer reigned but its ghost still hovered. For centuries, these spaces would belong to the domain of the inhuman. From the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, by means of strange incantations, they conjured up a new incarnation of evil, another grinning mask of fear, home to the constantly renewed magic of purification and exclusion.

From the High Middle Ages until the end of the crusades, leprosaria had sprung up and multiplied across the surface of Europe. The exact figure is unknown, but according to Mathieu Paris, there were some 19,000 of these cities of the damned spread throughout Christendom. In the years leading up to 1266, when Louis XIII ordered a set of statutes to be drawn up for the lazars, there were more than 2,000 such institutions in France. They numbered forty-three in one diocese in Paris alone, and Bourg-la-Reine, Corbeil, Saint-Valère, and the sinister Champ Pourri (Rotten Row) all figure on the list. Charenton, a name that would resonate down the centuries, is there too. The two largest houses – Saint-Germain and Saint-Lazare – were on the immediate outskirts of Paris, and their names too will crop up in the history of another sickness. From the turn of the fifteenth century, a new emptiness appears: Saint-Germain
becomes a home for young offenders the following century, and before Saint Vincent, Saint-Lazare counted only one leper, ‘Le Sieur Langlois, a practitioner in the civil court’. The leprosarium in Nancy, which had been one of the largest in Europe, had only four inmates during the regency of Marie de Médicis. The Mémoires of Catel recount that there were twenty-nine hospitals in Toulouse at the end of the medieval period, seven of which were leprosaria, but at the end of the seventeenth century the number had shrunk to three – Saint-Cyprien, Arnaud Bernard and Saint-Michel. Festivities were widespread to celebrate the disappearance of leprosy: in 1635 for instance, the inhabitants of Reims processed solemnly to thank God for delivering their town from its plight.

By that time, the French crown had already been reorganising the immense land bank that the leper houses represented for more than a century. François I had ordered a census and an inventory of all such institutions on 19 December 1543 ‘to put an end to the great disorder apparent in leper houses’, and in his turn Henri IV decreed in 1606 that the accounts of such institutions be revised ‘and that revenue accruing from this review be used for the upkeep of poor gentlemen and invalid soldiers’. Another such overview was ordered on 24 October 1612, with the idea that this time the surplus revenue be used to feed the poor.

In fact the leprosaria question wouldn’t be settled in France before the close of the seventeenth century, and the economic importance of the question would be at the base of many a conflict. In 1677, there were still forty-four leprosaria in the province of Dauphiné alone. On 20 February 1672 Louis XIV transferred control of all military and hospital orders to the orders of Saint Lazare and Mont Carmel, which were entrusted with the administration of all the remaining leprosaria in the kingdom. Twenty years later the 1672 edict was revoked and, by means of series of measures that came into force from March 1693 to July 1695, the goods of the leper houses were redistributed among other hospitals and institutions for the succouring of the afflicted. The few lepers who still inhabited the 1,200 leprosaria that remained were grouped together in Saint-Mesmin near Orleans. These new orders were first brought into force in Paris where Parliament transferred the revenue in question to the Hôpital Général, and the example was soon being followed in the provinces. In Toulouse, all leprosy possessions were redirected to the hospital for Incurables in 1696, revenue from Beaulieu in Normandy was transferred to the main hospital in Caen, and in Voley, the money was transferred to
the Sainte-Foy hospital. Together with Saint-Mesmin, only Les Ganets near Bordeaux retained its former status.

For their million-and-a-half inhabitants in the twelfth century, England and Scotland had opened 220 leper houses. But even by the fourteenth century they were beginning to empty: when Richard III ordered an inquiry into the state of Ripon hospital in 1342, it emerged that there were no more lepers, and the foundation was charged with the care of the poor instead. By 1434, in the hospital founded in the late twelfth century by Archbishop Puisel, there were only two remaining beds reserved for lepers, and they were often unoccupied. In 1348 the great leper house of Saint-Alban had only three inhabitants; Romanall hospital in Kent was abandoned twenty-four years later as no more lepers could be found. In Chatham, the Saint Bartholomew leper house founded in 1078 had been one of the biggest in the country: by the time of Queen Elizabeth it had only two inmates, and it was finally closed altogether in 1627.

The same regression of the disease was witnessed in Germany, although there the process was slightly slower. As in England, the Reformation hastened the transfer of control of the leper houses to local city authorities, who converted them into houses for the poor or hospitals, as was the case in Leipzig, Munich and Hamburg. In 1542, all possessions of the leper houses of Schleswig-Holstein were handed over to hospitals. In Stuttgart, a magistrate’s report indicated in 1589 that no leper had been recorded in the city’s lazaret house for more than fifty years. In Lipplingen, the lazaret house was soon peopled with the insane and the incurably ill.

This strange disappearance was probably not the long-sought-after result of obscure medical practices, but rather a spontaneous result of segregation, and the consequence, with the coming of the end of the crusades, of cutting the cord that led to the main source of infection in the Middle East. Leprosy retreated, and the lowly spaces set aside for it, together with the rituals that had grown up not to suppress it but to keep it at a sacred distance, suddenly had no purpose. But what lasted longer than leprosy, and persisted for years after the lazaret houses had been emptied, were the values and images attached to the leper, and the importance for society of this insistent, fearsome figure, who was carefully excluded only after a magic circle had been drawn around him.

If lepers were socially excluded and removed from the community of the visible church, their existence still made God manifest, as they showed
both his anger and his bounty: ‘Dearly beloved’, says a ritual from a church in Vienne in the south of France, ‘it has pleased God to afflict you with this disease, and the Lord is gracious for bringing punishment upon you for the evil that you have done in this world.’ The leper was then dragged out of the church by the priest and his acolytes gressu retrogrado but he was assured that he was God’s witness: ‘however removed from the church and the company of the saints, you are never separated from the grace of God’. Brueghel’s lepers watch from afar, but forever, as Christ climbs Mount Calvary accompanied by a whole people. Hieratic witnesses of evil, their salvation is assured by their exclusion: in a strange reversal quite opposed to merit and prayers, they are saved by the hand that is not offered. The sinner who abandons the leper to his fate thereby opens the door to his salvation. ’Thus be patient in your sickness, for the Lord does not underestimate your ills, nor separate you from his company. If you have patience, so shall you be saved, like the leper who died outside the door of the rich man, and was carried straight up to Heaven.’ Abandonment is his salvation, and exclusion offers an unusual form of communion.

Once leprosy had gone, and the figure of the leper was no more than a distant memory, these structures still remained. The game of exclusion would be played again, often in these same places, in an oddly similar fashion two or three centuries later. The role of the leper was to be played by the poor and by the vagrant, by prisoners and by the ‘alienated’, and the sort of salvation at stake for both parties in this game of exclusion is the matter of this study. The forms this exclusion took would continue, in a radically different culture and with a new meaning, but remaining essentially the major form of a rigorous division, at the same time social exclusion and spiritual reintegration.

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But let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

The role that leprosy had played was first taken by venereal disease. Such diseases were the natural heir to leprosy in the late fifteenth century, and the disease was treated in several leper hospitals. Under François I, an attempt was made to confine it to the hospital of the Parish of Saint-Eustache, and then in the parish of Saint-Nicolas, both of which had served as lazar houses. Twice more, under Charles VIII and again in 1559, various
buildings and outhouses at Saint-Germain-des-Prés previously used for lepers were converted for venereal diseases. Soon the disease was so common that the construction of special buildings was being considered ‘in certain spacious areas surrounding towns and suburbs, segregated from passers-by’. A new leprosy was born, which took the place of the former, but not without difficulty or conflicts. For these new lepers too struck fear into the hearts of the old.

Lepers were far from overjoyed at being forced to share their space with these newcomers to the world of horror: ‘Est mirabilis contagiosa et nimis formidanda infirmitas, quam etiam detestantur leprosi et ea infectos secum habitate non permittant’ (‘This astonishing and contagious disease is much to be feared: even the lepers themselves reject it in horror, and refuse to permit those who have contracted the disease to keep their company’). But despite their longstanding right to stay in these segregated areas, there were too few of them to make their voices heard, and the venereal, more or less everywhere, had soon taken their place.

Yet in the classical age it was not venereal diseases that would take over the role that leprosy had played in medieval culture. Despite these initial measures of exclusion, venereal disease was soon classed as simply another disease once more, and despite the reservations of the population sufferers were soon being treated in hospitals. They were taken in at the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris, and despite several attempts to expel them, they soon blended in with the other sick. In Germany, special houses were built for them not to ensure their exclusion, but so that appropriate treatment could be given, and the Fuggers in Augsburg set up two such hospitals. The city of Nuremberg appointed a special physician who claimed to able to ‘control the French malady’. The major difference with leprosy was that venereal diseases became a medical affair very early on, to be dealt with by doctors. Treatments sprang up on all sides: the order of Saint-Côme followed the Arab example and used mercury, whereas in the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris treatment relied mainly on theriac, the classical world’s cure for snakebite. Then came the great vogue for gaiac, more precious than American gold, if Ulrich von Hutten and Fracastor’s Syphilidis are to be believed. Sweat cures were practised everywhere. In the course of the sixteenth century, venereal diseases took their place among other ills requiring medical treatment. The place of venereal diseases was fixed in a whole network of moral judgements, but that horizon brought only minor modifications to the essentially medical apprehension of the disease.
PART ONE

Curiously, it was only under the influence of the world of confinement in the seventeenth century that venereal disease became detached to some extent from this medical context, and like madness entered a space of social and moral exclusion. It is not in venereal disease that the true heir of leprosy should be sought, but in a highly complex phenomenon that medicine would take far longer to appropriate.

That phenomenon is madness. But only after a long latency period of almost two centuries did that new obsession take the place of the fear that leprosy had instilled in the masses, and elicit similar reactions of division, exclusion and purification, which are akin to madness itself. But before madness was brought under control towards the mid-seventeenth century, and before ancient rituals were resuscitated in its honour, it was linked obstinately to many of the major experiences of the Renaissance.

A brief overview of this presence and some of the essential figures is now in order.

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The simplest of these figures is also the most symbolic.

A new object made its appearance in the imaginary landscape of the Renaissance, and it was not long before it occupied a privileged place there; this was the Ship of Fools, a strange drunken boat that wound its way down the wide, slow-moving rivers of the Rhineland and round the canals of Flanders.

This Narrenschiiff was clearly a literary invention, and was probably borrowed from the ancient cycle of the Argonauts that had recently been given a new lease of life among mythological themes, and in the states of Burgundy at least now had an institutional function. Such ships were a literary commonplace, with a crew of imaginary heroes, moral models or carefully defined social types set out on a great symbolic voyage that brought them, if not fortune, at the very least, the figure of their destiny or of their truth. Symphorien Champier for example composed successively a Ship of Princes and Battles of the Nobility in 1502 and a Ship of Virtuous Ladies the following year; there is also a Ship of Health, together with Jacop Van Oestvoren’s Blauwe Schute of 1413, Brant’s Narrenschiiff of 1497 and Josse Bade’s Stultiferae naviculae scaphae fataurarum mulierum of 1498. Naturally, Bosch’s painting belongs to this same oneiric flotilla.
But among these satirical and novelistic ships, the Narrenschiff alone had a genuine existence, for they really did exist, these boats that drifted from one town to another with their senseless cargo. An itinerant existence was often the lot of the mad. It was common practice for towns to banish them from inside the city walls, leaving them to run wild in the distant countryside or entrusting them to the care of travelling merchants or pilgrims. The custom was most common in Germany. In Nuremberg during the first half of the fourteenth century the presence of sixty-two madmen was recorded, and thirty-one were chased out of town. There were twenty-one more enforced departures over the fifty years that followed, and this was merely for madmen arrested by the municipal authorities. They were often entrusted to the care of the river boatmen. In Frankfurt in 1399, boatmen were given the task of ridding the city of a madman who walked around naked, and in the earliest years of the following century a criminal madman was expelled in the same manner from Mainz. Sometimes the boatmen put these difficult passengers back ashore earlier than they had promised: one Frankfurt blacksmith returned twice from being expelled in such manner, before being definitively escorted to Kreuznach. The arrival in the great cities of Europe of these ships of fools must have been quite a common sight.

It is hard to pin down the precise meaning of the practice. It is tempting to think of it as a general means of expulsion used by the municipalities to punish vagabondage among the mad, but that hypothesis doesn’t quite fit the facts as this was a fate that only befell certain madmen, as some were treated in hospitals, even before the construction of special houses for the insane began. In the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris they had specifically allocated bunks in some dormitories reserved for them, and in most of the great cities of Europe throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance there was always a special place reserved for the detention of the insane, like the Melun Châtelet or the famous Tour aux Fous in Caen. In Germany there were countless Narrtürme, like the gates of Lübeck or the Hamburg Jungpfer. So the mad were not systematically run out of town. It could be argued that only foreign madmen were expelled, and that each town only took responsibility for its own citizens who had lost their wits, and indeed in the accounts of various medieval cities there are records of funds put aside for the mad, and donations made in favour of the insane. But the problem is not so simple, for there were centres where the insane, more numerous than elsewhere, were certainly not indigenous. To the fore
here were centres of pilgrimage like Saint-Mathurin de Larchant, Saint-Hildevert de Gournay, Besançon and Gheel; such trips were organised and even paid for by cities and hospitals. And it may be that these ships of fools, which haunted the imagination of the Early Renaissance, were in fact ships of pilgrimage, highly symbolic ships filled with the senseless in search of their reason; some went down the rivers of the Rhineland towards Belgium and Gheel, while others went up the Rhine to Besançon and the Jura.

But there were other towns, like Nuremberg, which were certainly not places of pilgrimage, yet which contained a higher than average number of madmen, far more than the city itself could have furnished. These madmen were lodged and paid for out of the city coffers, but were not cared for: they were simply thrown into prison. It may be the case that in some big cities – where there were markets and many people who came and went – the mad were brought in considerable numbers by merchants and river boatmen, and that there they were ‘forgotten’, thereby cleansing their home town of their presence. Perhaps these places of ‘counter-pilgrimage’ became confused with places where the insane really were taken as pilgrims. The concern with cure and exclusion fused within the sacred space of the miraculous. It is possible that the town of Gheel developed in this manner – a place of pilgrimage that became a place of confinement, a holy land where madness awaited its deliverance, but where it seems that man enacted the ancient ritual of division.

This constant circulation of the insane, the gesture of banishment and enforced embarkation, was not merely aimed at social utility, or the safety of citizens. Its meanings were closer to rituals, and their trace is still discernible. So it was for instance that the insane were barred entry to churches, while ecclesiastical law allowed them to partake of the sacraments. The church took no sanctions against priests who lost their reason, but in Nuremberg in 1421 a mad priest was expelled with particular solemnity, as though the impurity was multiplied by the sacred nature of the character, yet the town paid the money that was to serve for his viaticum. On occasions, the insane were publicly whipped, and in a sort of simulated hunt were chased out of town while being beaten with sticks. All of which indicates that the departure of the mad belonged with other rituals of exile.

So the ship of fools was heavily loaded with meaning, and clearly carried a great social force. On the one hand, it had incontestably practical
functions, as entrusting a madman to the care of boatmen meant that he would no longer roam around the city walls, and ensured that he would travel far and be a prisoner of his own departure. But there was more: water brought its own dark symbolic charge, carrying away, but purifying too. Navigation brought man face to face with the uncertainty of destiny, where each is left to himself and every departure might always be the last. The madman on his crazy boat sets sail for the other world, and it is from the other world that he comes when he disembarks. This enforced navigation is both rigorous division and absolute Passage, serving to underline in real and imaginary terms the liminal situation of the mad in medieval society. It was a highly symbolic role, made clear by the mental geography involved, where the madman was confined at the gates of the cities. His exclusion was his confinement, and if he had no prison other than the threshold itself he was still detained at this place of passage. In a highly symbolic position he is placed on the inside of the outside, or vice versa. A posture that is still his today, if we admit that what was once the visible fortress of social order is now the castle of our own consciousness.

Water and navigation had that role to play. Locked in the ship from which he could not escape, the madman was handed over to the thousand-armed river, to the sea where all paths cross, and the great uncertainty that surrounds all things. A prisoner in the midst of the ultimate freedom, on the most open road of all, chained solidly to the infinite crossroads. He is the Passenger par excellence, the prisoner of the passage. It is not known where he will land, and when he lands, he knows not whence he came. His truth and his home are the barren wasteland between two lands that can never be his own. Perhaps this ritual lies at the origin of the imaginary kinship common throughout the culture of the West. Or perhaps it was this kinship that called for and then fixed the ritual of embarkation whose origins are lost in the mists of civilisation. But one thing is certain: the link between water and madness is deeply rooted in the dream of the Western man.

In the medieval romance of Tristan et Iseut, Tristan is put ashore by the boatmen on the coast of Cornwall, disguised as a madman. On his arrival at the castle of King Mark, he is recognised by no one, and no one knows where he has come from. But his conversation is too strange, distant and familiar, and he is too aware of the well-kept secrets of this world not to have come from another very close by. He is not from dry land, with its solid cities, but from the unceasing restlessness of the sea, whose unknown
paths reveal such strange truths, that fantastic plain, the flipside of the world. Iseut is the first to realise that this madman is a son of the sea, and that he’s been put ashore by unrepentant sailors, making him a harbinger of bad luck: ‘Damn the sailors who brought this madman, would that they had thrown him in the sea!’ she cries. The theme reappears many times throughout the ages. For the mystics of the fifteenth century, it was the idea of the soul as bark, tossed on the sea of infinite desires, surrounded by sterile attachments and ignorance on all sides, and distracted by the meretricious sparkles of knowledge, in the midst of the great unreason of the world – a boat at the mercy of the great madness of the sea, unless he drops anchor on the solid ground of faith, or spreads its spiritual sails so that so that the breath of God might bring it home to port. In the late sixteenth century, De Lancre blamed the demoniacal calling of a whole people on the sea; the uncertain furrow of the wake, the exclusive trust placed in the stars, the secret knowledge that passed from mariner to mariner, the distance from women and the ceaselessly shifting plain of the surface of the sea made men lose faith in god, and cast off the shackles of their attachment to their homeland, thereby opening the door to the Devil and the ocean of his ruses. The classical era was content to blame the English melancholy on the influence of a marine climate: the cold, wet, fickle weather and the fine droplets of water that entered the vessels and the fibres of the human body made a body lose its firmness, predisposing it to madness. And finally, ignoring the huge literary tradition that stretches from Ophelia to the Lorelei, it is perhaps enough to quote the anthropo-cosmological analyses of Heinroth, where madness is the manifestation in man of an obscure, aquatic element, a dark, disordered, shifting chaos, the germ and death of all things as opposed to the luminous, adult stability of the mind.

So the ship of fools resonates in the Western imagination with immemorial motifs. But why then, towards the fifteenth century, do we get this sudden formulation of the theme in literature and iconography? What made the silhouette of the ship of fools and its mad cargo loom so large against familiar landscapes? Why, from the old alliance of water and madness, was this ship born, and what made it appear at that very moment?

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The ship is a symbol of a sudden unease that appears on the horizon of European culture towards the end of the Middle Ages. Madness and the
figure of the madman take on a new importance for the ambiguousness of
their role: they are both threat and derision, the vertiginous unreason of
the world, and the shallow ridiculousness of men.

The first thing of interest is a literature of stories and morality tales. Its
origins, no doubt, were far distant, but at the end of the Middle Ages it
became a considerable mass: a long series of ‘follies’ which as in the past
stigmatised vices or faults but blamed them not on pride, a lack of charity
or the neglect of Christian virtues but on a great unreason which could be
blamed on no one in particular but which dragged everyone along in its
wake in a sort of tacit agreement. The denouncing of madness became a
general form of moral critique. In farces and soties, the character of the
Fool, Idiot or Simpleton took on an ever-greater importance. He was no
longer familiar and ridiculous, but exterior to the action, and took
centre stage as the harbinger of truth, playing the complementary, inverse
role of the figure of the fool in tales and satires. If madness drags every-
one into a blindness where all bearings are lost, then the madman by
contrast brings everyone back to their own truth: in comedy, where
everyone deceives someone else and lies to themselves, he is a comedy of
the second degree, a deception that is itself deceptive. Reasoning has no
place in his sottish language, but his words bring a reason that comically
undoes the comedy. To lovers he speaks of love, he teaches the truth
about life to the young, and the sad reality of things to the proud, the
insolent, and those who bear false witness. Even the old feasts of fools, so
popular in Flanders and northern Europe, became theatrical events, and
were organised into social and moral criticism, whatever they may have
contained of spontaneous religious parody.

In high culture too Folly was at work, at the heart of reason and truth. In
Van Oestvoren’s Blauwe Schute and Brant’s Narrenschiff madness takes all man-
kind aboard the foolish ship and whisks it off on a communal odyssey.
The evil reign of madness is railed against by Murner in Narrenbeschwörung,
and madness joins forces with love in Corroz’s satire Contre Fol Amour, and
competes with love in a rhetorical joust to see who came first, and who
makes the other possible and dictates his conduct at will, as in Louise
Labé’s Débat de folie et d’amour. Madness too made an appearance in the
academic arena, becoming a self-reflexive object of discourse. Madness
was denounced and defended, and proclaimed to be nearer to happi-
ness and truth than reason itself. Wimpfeling wrote Monopolium Philoso-
phorum, and Judocus Gallus brought out Monopolium et societas, vulgo des
Lichtschißs. Against the backdrop of these serious games, two great humanist texts stand out: Flayder’s *Moria Rediviva* of 1527, and Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly* from 1509. Facing this sea of words, with their tireless dialectics and their endless variations and repetitions, stands a long dynasty of images, from Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Cure of Madness* and *The Ship of Fools* to Brueghel’s *Mad Meg*. Engravings and woodcuts show what literature and the theatre have already taken up: the interwoven themes of the Festival and the Dance of the Mad. From the fifteenth century onwards, the face of madness never ceased to haunt the imagination of the West.

The succession of dates speaks for itself. The Dance of Death in the Innocents’ cemetery in Paris probably dates from the early years of the fifteenth century, while the example in the Chaise-Dieu was probably made around 1460, and in 1485 Guyot Marchand published his *Danse macabre*. There is no doubt that this sixty-year period was dominated by grinning death’s head imagery. In 1492, Brant wrote the *Narranschiff*, and five years later it was translated into Latin. At the very end of the century Bosch painted his *Ship of Fools*. The *Praise of Folly* is from 1509, and the order of succession is clear.

Up until the end of the fifteenth century, or perhaps slightly beyond it, the death theme reigns supreme. The end of mankind and the end of time are seen in war and the plagues. Hanging over human existence is an order and an end that no man can escape, a menacing presence from within the world itself. Suddenly, as the century drew to a close, that great uncertainty spun on its axis, and the derision of madness took over from the seriousness of death. From the knowledge of that fatal necessity that reduces man to dust we pass to a contemptuous contemplation of the nothingness that is life itself. The fear before the absolute limit of death becomes interiorised in a continual process of ironisation. Fear was disarmed in advance, made derisory by being tamed and rendered banal, and constantly paraded in the spectacle of life. Suddenly, it was there to be discerned in the mannerisms, failings and vices of normal people. Death as the destruction of all things no longer had meaning when life was revealed to be a fatuous sequence of empty words, the hollow jingle of a jester’s cap and bells. The death’s head showed itself to be a vessel already empty, for madness was the being-already-there of death. Death’s conquered presence, sketched out in these everyday signs, showed not only that its reign had already begun, but also that its prize was a meagre one. Death unmasked the mask of life, and nothing more: to show the skull beneath the skin it had no
need to remove beauty or truth, but merely to remove the plaster or the
tawdry clothes. The carnival mask and the cadaver share the same fixed
smile. But the laugh of madness is an anticipation of the rictus grin of
death, and the fool, that harbinger of the macabre, draws death’s sting. In
the High Renaissance, the cries of Mad Meg conquer the Triumph of Death
that decorates the Late Medieval walls of the Camposanto in Pisa.

The substitution of the theme of madness for that of death is not the
sign of a rupture, but rather of a new twist within the same preoccupation.
It is still the nothingness of existence that is at stake, but this nothingness
is no longer experienced as an end exterior to being, a threat and a
conclusion: it is felt from within, as a continuous and unchanging form of
life. Whereas previously the madness of men had been their incapacity to
see that the end of life was always near, and it had therefore been necessary
to call them back to the path of wisdom by means of the spectacle of
death, now wisdom meant denouncing folly wherever it was to be found,
and teaching men that they were already no more than the legions of the
dead, and that if the end of life was approaching, it was merely a reminder
that a universal madness would soon unite with death. This much was
prophesied by poets like Eustache Deschamps:

We are cowardly, ill-formed and weak
Aged, envious and evil-spoken.
I see only fools and sots
Truly the end is nigh
All goes ill.54

The terms of the argument were therefore now reversed. It was no longer
the end of time and the end of the world that would demonstrate that it
was madness not to have worried about such things. Rather, the rise of
madness, its insidious, creeping presence showed that the final catastrophe
was always near: the madness of men brought it nigh and made it a
foregone conclusion.

The bond between madness and nothingness was tied so tight in the
fifteenth century that it would last for a very long time indeed, so much so
that it will still be found at the heart of the experience of madness in the
classical age.55

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In various guises, in literary forms and visual representations, this experience of the senseless seems extremely coherent. Text and painting constantly answer each other and swap roles, now as commentary, now as illustration. The Narrentanz or dance of fools is a theme found time and again in popular balls, theatrical performances and engravings, and the last part of the Praise of Folly is built on the model of a long dance where the professions and orders file past and form the eternal round of unreason. It is likely that in the Lisbon Temptation, many of the fantastical figures who cover the canvas are borrowed from traditional masques, and some of them may even be transposed from the Malleus Maleficarum. Bosch’s Ship of Fools is a direct transposition of Brant’s Narrenschiﬀ, whose title it bears, and it seems to illustrate in precise fashion the 27th canto, which stigmatises potatores et edaces – drunkards and gluttons. It has even been suggested that Bosch’s painting was originally part of a whole series of pictures illustrating the principal cantos of Brant’s poem.

In fact we should not be taken in by this continuity in themes, nor should we suppose more than history allows. It would no longer be possible to do an analysis of the subject along the lines of those done by Emile Mâle for previous ages, particularly where the theme of death is concerned. The beautiful unity between word and image, between that which was ﬁgured in language and said by plastic means, was beginning to disappear, and they no longer shared a single, unique signiﬁcation that was immediately discernible. Although it was still the case that the voca- tion of the Image was essentially to say, and its role was to transmit something that was consubstantial with language, the time had nonetheless come when it no longer said exactly the same thing. By its own means painting was beginning the long process of experimentation that would take it ever further from language, regardless of the superﬁcial identity of a theme. Language and ﬁgure still illustrate the same fable of madness in the moral world, but they are beginning to take different directions, indicating, through a crack that was still barely perceptible, the great divide that was yet to come in the Western experience of madness.

The rise of madness on the Renaissance horizon is ﬁrst noticeable in this decay of Gothic symbolism, as though a network of tightly ordered spiritual signiﬁcations was beginning to become undone, revealing ﬁgures with meanings only perceptible as insane. Gothic forms lived on, but little by little they fell silent, ceasing to speak, to recall or instruct. The forms remained familiar, but all understanding was lost, leaving
nothing but a fantastical presence; and freed from the wisdom and morality it was intended to transmit, the image began to gravitate around its own insanity.

Paradoxically, this liberation was the fruit of a luxuriant growth in meanings, a multiplication of signification, as the web of connections between objects became ever more complex. Meaning created links so numerous, so rich and involved that only esoteric knowledge could possibly have the necessary key. Objects became so weighed down with attributes, connections and associations that they lost their own original face. Meaning was no longer read in an immediate perception, and accordingly objects ceased to speak directly: between the knowledge that animated the figures of objects and the forms they were transformed into, a divide began to appear, opening the way for a symbolism more often associated with the world of dreams. One book demonstrates well this mad proliferation of meanings at the end of the Gothic age: the Speculum humanae salvationis or Mirror of Human Salvation, which together with the traditional symbolism of the Church Fathers draws up a whole network of connections between the Old and New Testaments, not so much of the order of prophecy as of a world of imaginary equivalence.59 The Passion of Christ is no longer simply prefigured by the sacrifice of Abraham, but calls up all the prestige of torture and innumerable dreams associated therewith, so that Tubal, the blacksmith, and Isaiah’s wheel take their place around the cross, going beyond all the lessons about sacrifice to form a fantastical tableau of pain and relentlessly tortured bodies. The image becomes overburdened with supplementary meanings, and constrained to deliver them up. But dreams, senselessness and unreason could slip all too easily into this excess of meaning. Symbolic figures easily became nightmarish silhouettes. A case in point was the traditional German image of wisdom as long-necked bird that circulated widely in engravings. The bird’s thoughts, which start in its heart and finish in its head, travel slowly up the neck and thus have all the time necessary to be carefully considered and judged.60 But the symbol became too heavily charged with meaning as its values were emphasized. The long path of reflection became a still where arcane thoughts were concentrated into a quintessence of knowledge. The neck, which in early versions simply belonged to a Gutemensch, became infinitely lengthened to symbolize not only wisdom but the real mediations of learning, and the symbolic man became a fantastical bird whose long neck folds round on itself repeatedly – a senseless being
halfway between animal and object, glorying more in imaginative possibilities than in any rigorous meaning. Symbolic wisdom wound up a prisoner of the madness of dreams.

The world of images therefore underwent a fundamental change. The obligation for multiple meanings freed it from rigorous order. The profusion of diverse meanings lurking beneath the surface of the image meant that its visible face became ever more enigmatic. Its power was no longer that of instruction but more of fascination. This is well demonstrated by the changes undergone in the representation of the gryllos, a familiar figure in the Middle Ages in English psalters and in Chartres and Bourges. It originally taught how in men ruled by their desires the soul became a prisoner of the beast. These grotesque faces found on the bellies of monsters belonged to the world of the grand platonic metaphor, denouncing the abasement of the spirit in the madness of sin. But in the fifteenth century, the gryllos, a symbol of human madness, became a preponderant figure in the innumerable Temptations. The hermit’s tranquillity is assailed not by objects of desire but by demented forms locked into their own secrets, who have risen up from dream and sit on the surface of a world, silent and furtive. In the Lisbon Temptation facing Saint Anthony sits one such figure born of madness, its solitude, its penitence, and its deprivation: a thin smile spreads across its disembodied face, the pure presence of worry in the guise of an agile grimace. This nightmarish silhouette is both the subject and the object of the temptation, captivating the hermit’s glance: both of them are prisoners of a mirroring interrogative process, where response is indefinitely suspended, in a silence broken only by the restive growl of the monsters that surround them. The gryllos no longer recalls, even in a satirical mode, the spiritual vocation of man forgotten in the madness of desire. The gryllos is madness made Temptation: all that there is in him of the impossible, fantastical and inhuman, all that indicates that which goes against nature or the seething mass of a senseless presence immanent in the earth is the source of his strange power. For men of the fifteenth century, the fearsome freedom of dreams and the fantasies born of madness held a power of attraction stronger than the pull of the desires of mortal flesh.

The strange fascination that lurks in these images of madness can be explained in a number of ways.

First of all, men seemed to discover in these fantastical figures one of the secret vocations of their nature. In the thought of the Middle Ages, the
legions of the animals that Adam had named once and for all had symbolic human values. But in the early Renaissance, that process of signification underwent a reversal. The beasts were let loose, and they made their escape from the world of legend or moral instruction and took on a fantastical life of their own. In an astonishing reversal, it was mankind that began to feel itself the object of the animals’ gaze, as they took control and showed him his own truth. Impossible animals, the fruit of mad imaginings, became the secret nature of man, and in images of the Last Judgement, when man appears in the hideous nudity of his fallen state, he has taken on the monstrous face of a delirious animal. Screech owls with toad-like bodies mingle with the naked bodies of the damned in Thierry Bouts’ Hell, the work of Stefan Lochner pullulates with winged insects, cat-headed butterflies and sphinxes with mayfly wingcases, and birds with handed wings that instil panic, while in Grünewald’s Temptation there prowls a beast of prey with gnarled, knotty claws. The animal realm has moved out of range of all domesticating human symbolism, and while it fascinates mankind with its disorder, its fury and its plethora of monstrous impossibilities, it also serves to reveal the dark rage and sterile folly that lurks in the heart of mankind.

At the opposite pole to this nature of darkness, madness also exerts a fascination because it is knowledge. And that is because these absurd figures are in reality the elements that make up a difficult, hermetic, esoteric knowledge. These strange forms belong from the outset to the great secret, and Saint Anthony is tempted by them because he has fallen prey not to the violence of desire but rather to the far more insidious vice of curiosity, tempted by the lure of this knowledge which is just beyond his reach, offered and withdrawn at the same instant by the smile on the face of the gryllos. His instinctive pulling backward is the movement that prevents him from stepping over the line into the territory of forbidden knowledge, for he already knows, as Jérôme Cardan was later to say, that ‘wisdom, like all precious materials, must be ripped from the entrails of the earth’ – and that desire is what his Temptation is. This is the inaccessible, fearsome knowledge that the madman, in his innocent foolishness, already possesses. While men of reason and wisdom see only fragmentary figures that are all the more frightening for their incompleteness, the madman sees a whole, unbroken sphere. For him, the crystal ball empty for others is filled with invisible knowledge. In Brueghel’s Flemish Proverbs, the sick man who attempts to enter the crystal ball is an object of ridicule, but it is the same iridescent bubble of infinite knowledge that
swings around on that derisory but infinitely precious lantern slung over the shoulder of Mad Meg. And the same ball figures on the reverse of the Garden of Earthly Delights. The tree, another symbol of knowledge (like the forbidden fruit tree, the tree of promised immortality or the tree of sin) once planted in the middle of the earthly paradise, is uprooted and forms the mast of the ship of fools, as can be seen in the engraving that illustrates Josse Bade’s Stultiferae Naviculae, and doubtless it is the same tree that sways around above Bosch’s Ship of Fools.

So what, precisely, is the knowledge that madness brings? Most probably, as it is forbidden knowledge, it predicts both the reign of Satan and the end of the world, ultimate happiness and supreme punishment, omnipotence on earth and the descent into hell. The Ship of Fools passes through a landscape of delights where all is offered to desire, a paradise regained of sorts, as men once more become strangers to necessity and want, yet without a return to a state of innocence. This false happiness is the diabolical triumph of the Antichrist, the End that is ever nigh. True, there was little new in the apocalyptic dreams of the fifteenth century, and yet these images are of a different nature from all that went before. In the vaguely fantastical iconography of the fourteenth century, where castles could be knocked down like houses of cards, and the beast was always the traditional dragon that the Virgin could keep at a safe distance, the coming of the kingdom of God was always visible. But the following century brought a vision of the world where knowledge and wisdom were destroyed. This was the great Sabbath of nature, where the mountains were washed away, bones poked up from graves and the earth vomited up its dead; the stars fell from the sky, the earth caught fire and all life died away as the reign of death began. This end was neither a passing moment nor a promise, but the coming of a night in which the ancient season of the world finally passed away. The four horsemen of the apocalypse in the Dürrer engraving have indeed been sent by God, but they are no angels of Triumph or reconciliation, nor heralds of serene justice; they are blood-thirsty warriors out for mad vengeance. The world is sliding into universal Fury, and the victor will be neither God nor the Devil, but Madness itself.

The fantastic images that madness inspired were no fugitive appearance that quickly vanished from the surface of things: man was fascinated by madness on all sides. By a strange paradox, that which was born of the most singular delirium was already hidden, like a secret inaccessible truth, buried in the bowels of the earth. When the arbitrary nature of madness
was exhibited, man encountered the sombre necessity of the world: the animal that haunted nightmares and visions born of ascetic deprivation was man’s own nature, revealed in the unpitying truth of hell. The vain images of blind foolishness turned out to be the truth of the world, and in this grand disorder, this mad universe, the cruelty that lay in the day of judgement began to appear. These mad images are an expression of hidden Renaissance worries about the menacing secrets of the world, and it was those fears that gave the fantastic images such coherence and lent them such power.

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During this same period, literary, philosophical and moral aspects of madness were in an altogether different vein.

The Middle Ages had placed madness or folly in its hierarchy of vices. From the thirteenth century onwards it was common to see Folly enlisted in the wicked soldiery of the Psychomachia.65 In Paris and Amiens, madness is there among the twelve evil soldiers who fight against their anti-thesis for dominion over the human soul: Faith and Idolatry, Hope and Despair, Charity and Avarice, Chastity and Lust, Prudence and Folly, Patience and Anger, Sweetness and Harshness, Concord and Discord, Obedience and Rebelliousness, Perseverance and Inconstancy Fortitude and Cowardice, Humility and Pride. During the Renaissance, Folly left that modest place and took centre stage. In the work of Hugues de Saint-Victor, the genealogical tree of vices, that of old Adam, had pride as its root,66 but now it was Madness that led the joyful choir of human weaknesses. The uncontested leader, Madness, leads the troupe, naming her partners and ordering the dance:

This one – you see how she raises her eyebrows – is obviously Philautia (Self-love). The one you see here, with smiling eyes and clapping hands, is Kolakia (Flattery). This one, dosing and half asleep, is Lethe (Forgetfulness). This one, leaning on her elbows with her hands clasped, is Misoponia (Laziness). This one, wreathed with roses and drenched with sweet-smelling lotions, is Hedone (Pleasure). This one, with the restless glance and the rolling eyes, is Anoia (Madness). This one, with the smooth complexion and the plump, well-rounded figure, is Tryphe (Luxury). You also see two Gods among the girls: one is called Comos (Rowdiness), the other Negretont Hypnon (Sweet sleep).67
Madness now has an absolute privilege, and reigns over all the negative aspects of the human character. It also controls indirectly all the possible aspirations to good, the ambition that creates wise politicians, the greed that causes wealth to grow, and the indiscreet curiosity that fires the research of philosophers and men of science. Louise Labé repeats it after Erasmus, and Mercury implores the Gods on her behalf: ‘Don’t let this beautiful Lady who has given you such pleasure slip away.’

But this new dominion has little in common with the dark kingdom mentioned above, which linked madness to the powerful tragic forces that controlled the world.

This literary Folly is an attraction, but hardly a fascination. It governs all that is facile, joyous or light-hearted in the world. It is a madness that causes men to make merry and rejoice, just as it gave the classical gods ‘Spirit and Youthfulness, Bacchus, Silenus and that quiet guardian of gardens.’ Madness was a shiny, reflective surface, with no dark secrets lurking below.

Undoubtedly, it did have links with some of the darker byways of knowledge. The first canto of Brant’s Narrenschiff tells of books and bookmen, and in the engraving that illustrates the passage in the Latin edition of 1497, perched on his throne and surrounded by books, a Master with his doctoral bonnet can be seen, and behind his hat is a fool’s cap sown with bells. In his great dance of the mad, Erasmus reserved pride of place for the learned. After the grammarians come the poets, the rhetoricians and the writers; then the lawyers and the philosophers ‘venerable with their beards and robes’, followed at last by a hurried multitude of theologians. But if knowledge is important for madness, it is not because madness might hold some vital secrets: on the contrary, it is the punishment for useless, unregulated knowledge. If it is the truth about knowledge, then all it reveals is that knowledge is derisory, and that rather than addressing the great book of experience, learning has become lost in the dust of books and in sterile discussions, knowledge made mad by an excess of false science.

O vos doctores, qui grandia nomina fertis,
Respice antiquos patris, jurisque peritos.
Non in candidulis pensebant dogmata libris,
Arte sed ingenua sitibundum pectus alebant.

(Oh ye men of science, who bear great names,
Look back at the ancient fathers, learned in law.)
They did not weigh dogmas in shining white books,
But fed their thirsty hearts with natural skill.)

As in the theme so long familiar in popular satire, madness appears here as
the comic punishment of knowledge and its ignorant presumption.

For in a general manner madness here is not linked to the world and its
subterranean forms, but rather to man and his frailties, his dreams and
illusions. The dark cosmic forces at work in madness that are so apparent
in the work of Bosch are absent in Erasmus. Madness no longer lies in wait
for man at every crossroads; rather, it slips into him, or is in fact a subtle
relationship that man has with himself. In Erasmus, the mythological per-
sonification of Madness is no more than literary artifice. Here, rather than
madness, there are only follies, human forms of madness: ‘I considered
that as many statues have been set up for me as there are men who display,
sometimes unwillingly, a living image of me.’\(^{72}\) When he turns his
attention to even the wisest and best-governed cities, ‘wherever you look
they abound in so many forms of folly, and they think up so many new
ones from day to day, a thousand Democritus’s would not be enough to
laugh at them.’\(^{73}\) Madness is only in each man, as it lies in the attachments
that men have to themselves, and the illusions that they entertain about
themselves. Philautia or self-love is the first among the figures that Folly
leads on its dance, but that is because these two forms are linked to
each other above all others; an attachment to oneself is the first sign of
madness, and it is through that attachment to oneself that man takes error
for truth, lies for reality, violence and ugliness for beauty and justice:

One man who is uglier than any monkey is quite confident that he is as
handsome as Nereus. Another, as soon as he can draw three lines with a
compass, immediately thinks he is another Euclid. Another, who sounds
like an ass playing a harp, and who sings no better than the bird that
gives the hen uxorious nips, still thinks he is another Hermogenes.\(^{74}\)

In this imaginary adhesion to the self, madness is born like a mirage. From
now on, the symbol of madness was to be a mirror, which reflected
nothing real, but secretly showed the presumptuous dreams of all who
gazed into it to contemplate themselves. Madness here was not about truth
or the world, but rather about man and the truth about himself that he can
perceive.

In that respect, madness now opens out onto an entirely moral universe.
Evil was no longer a punishment or the end of time, but merely a fault or flaw. In Brant’s poem, 116 cantos are devoted to drawing a portrait of the insane cargo aboard the boat. There are misers, liars, drunkards, those given to debauchery or disorder, adulterers, and those who read scripture awry. In his Latin preface, Brant’s translator Locher outlined the project that lay behind the work, and the desire to show ‘quae mala, quae bona sint; quid vitia, quo virtus, quo ferat error’ (what evil there may be, what good; what vices; whither virtue, whither vices might lead), and this by berating, in the measure appropriate to the evil in each case, ‘impios, superbos, avaros, luxuriosos, lascivos, delicates, iracundos, gulosos, edaces, invidos, veneficos, fidefrasos’ (the unholy, the proud, the greedy, the extravagant, the debauched, the voluptuous, the quick-tempered, the gluttonous, the voracious, the envious, the poisoners, the faith-breakers) – in short, every possible irregularity invented by man himself.

In the domain of literature and philosophy, the experience of madness in the fifteenth century takes on above all the appearance of a moral satire. There is little there to recall the overwhelming threat of invasion that haunted the imagination of the painters. On the contrary, care was taken to neutralise that threat: literature and philosophy are quite simply talking of a different experience. Erasmus turns attention away from that madness ‘sent up from the underworld by the avenging Furies whenever they dart forth their serpents’, for the Folly that he set out to praise was of a different order. His concern is with the ‘most desirable’ form that ‘occurs whenever a certain pleasant mental distraction relieves the heart from its anxieties and cares and at the same time soothes with the balm of manifold pleasures’. A world of calm, without secret, that is easily mastered and fully displays its naïve reductions to the eyes of the wise, who keep their distance easily through laughter. Whereas Bosch, Brueghel and Dürer were earthly spectators pulled into the madness that they saw seething around them, Erasmus observes it from a distance that ensures that he is never drawn in. Like an Olympian God he observes it from on high, and if he sings its praises, it is because his laughter is the inexhaustible good humour of the gods themselves. For the madness of man is a sight for divine eyes:

In brief, if you could look down from the moon, as Menippus once did, and see the innumerable broils of mortals, you would think you were looking at a great cloud of flies or gnats quarrelling among themselves,
warring, plotting, plundering, playing, frisking, being born, declining, dying. It is downright incredible what tumults, what tragedies can be stirred up by such a tiny creature, so frail and short-lived.\textsuperscript{77}

Madness is no longer the familiar strangeness of the world, but a spectacle well known to the observer from outside; not a figure of the \textit{cosmos}, but merely of the order of the \textit{aevum}.

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That then, somewhat hastily reconstructed, is the schema of the opposition between the cosmic experience of madness in the proximity of fascinating forms, and a critical experience of the same madness, as seen from across the unbridgeable gap of irony. Doubtless, in reality, the opposition was neither as clear-cut nor as immediately discernible. For a long time the two threads were intertwined, and there were constant exchanges between them.

The theme of the end of the world, and of the great final violence, was also a part of the critical experience of madness such as it was formulated in literature. Ronsard speaks of the struggles of these last days, in the void left by the departure of Reason:

\begin{quote}
Justice and Reason have flown back up to Heaven 
And in their place, alas, reign brigandage 
Hatred, rancour, blood and carnage.\textsuperscript{78}
\end{quote}

Towards the end of Brant’s poem, an entire chapter is taken over with the apocalyptic theme of the Antichrist; a terrible storm carries away the ship of fools on a senseless course that is identical to the End of the World.\textsuperscript{79} Conversely, many figures of moral rhetoric are illustrated in a direct manner in the cosmic images of madness: Bosch’s famous doctor is far more insane than the patient he is attempting to cure, and his false knowledge does nothing more than reveal the worst excesses of a madness immediately apparent to all but himself. For his contemporaries and for the generations that followed, Bosch was above all a moralist, and his work was a series of moral lessons. His figures were born of this world, but they demonstrated the monstrous contents of the human heart. ‘The difference between the paintings of this man and those of others is that others usually portray man as he appears from the outside: Bosch alone dares
paint them as they are within,’ said Joseph de Siguença.80 And it was that
unsettling irony, that desire of wisdom to denounce all folly, that the same
early seventeenth-century commentator saw in almost all of Bosch’s paint-
ings, in the clear symbolism of the burning torch (the never-sleeping vigil
of contemplative thought) and the owl, whose strange, fixed stare ‘keeps
watch in the calm and the silence of the night, consuming oil, not wine’.81

Despite these crossovers, the division is nonetheless made, and from
now on the gap between these two radically different visions of madness
will not cease to widen. The paths taken by the figure of the cosmic vision
and the incisive movement that is moral reflection, between the tragic and
the critical elements, now constantly diverge, creating a gap in the fabric of
the experience of madness that will never be repaired. On the one side
is the ship of fools, where mad faces slowly slip away into the night of the
world, in landscapes that speak of strange alchemies of knowledge, of
the dark menace of bestiality, and the end of time. On the other is the ship
of fools that is merely there for the instruction of the wise, an exemplary,
didactic odyssey whose purpose is to highlight faults in the human
character.

Bosch, Brueghel, Thierry Bouts and Dürer line up beside their silent
images. For madness unleashes its fury in the space of pure vision. Fantasies
and threats, the fleeting fragments of dreams and the secret destiny of the
world, where madness has a primitive, prophetic force, revealing that the
dream-like is real and that a thin surface of illusion opens onto bottomless
depths, and that the glittering surface of images opens the way to worry-
ing figures that shine forever in the darkness. The inverse revelation, no
less painful, is that the reality of the world will one day be absorbed into
the fantastic Image, at that delirious moment between being and nothing-
ness which is pure destruction. When at last the world will be no more,
but night and silence have not yet closed over, and all will flame up in a
blinding flash, in the extremity of disorder that will precede the ordered
monotony of the end of all things. The truth of the world resides in that
last fleeting image. This weave of experience and secrecy, of immediate
images and hidden enigmas, is unfurled in fifteenth-century painting as the
tragic madness of the world.

By contrast, in Brant, Erasmus and the whole humanist tradition, mad-
ness is confined to the universe of discourse. There it becomes ever more
refined, more subtle, and is slowly disarmed. It changes scale: born in the
hearts of men, it rules and disrupts their conduct; when it rules cities,
the calm truth of things and nature herself are unaware of its existence. It disappears fast when essential issues like life and death or justice and truth appear. It may hold every man in its control, but its reign is narrow and relative as its mediocre truth is constantly unmasked by the penetrating gaze of the savant. For such men of science, it becomes a mere object, and in the worst possible manner, as it often winds up an object of ridicule: they tamed it by the act of praising it. Even if madness was wiser than science, it would still find itself obliged to bow down before wisdom itself, the condition of its being. Now and then it might have the last word, but it never was the last word about the truth of the world, for its self-justificatory discourse is bound up with a critical consciousness of man.

This conflict between critical consciousness and tragic experience underlies all that was felt and formulated on the theme of madness at the beginning of the Renaissance. But it was short-lived, and a century later, this grandiose structure, which at the beginning of the sixteenth century was so evident and clear-cut, had almost entirely disappeared. Disappearance is perhaps not the best term to describe exactly what happened. Rather, it is a question of the ever-increasing importance that the Renaissance accorded to one of the elements in the system – the vision of madness as an experience within the domain of language, where man was confronted with his moral truth, the laws of human nature and human truth. In short, the critical consciousness of madness was increasingly brought out into the light, while its more tragic components retreated ever further into the shadows, soon to almost vanish entirely. Only much later can a trace of the tragic element be again discerned, and a few pages in Sade and the work of Goya bear witness to the fact that this disappearance was merely an eclipse; the dark, tragic experience lived on in dreams and in the dark night of thoughts, and what happened in the sixteenth century was not a radical destruction but a mere occultation. The cosmic, tragic experience of madness was hidden by the exclusive privileges of a critical consciousness. For that reason the experience of the classical age, and by extension the modern experience of madness, cannot be considered as a total figure, which would thus finally reach its positive truth. It is rather a fragmentary figure that is erroneously taken as complete, an ensemble unbalanced by all that it lacks, or rather all that obscures it. Behind the critical consciousness of madness in all its philosophical, scientific, moral and medicinal guises lurks a second, tragic consciousness of madness, which has never really gone away.
It is that tragic consciousness that is visible in the last words of Nietzsche and the last visions of Van Gogh. It is that same element that Freud began to perceive at the furthest point of his journey, the great wound that he tried to symbolise in the mythological struggle between the libido and the death instinct. And it is that same consciousness that finds expression in the work of Antonin Artaud. If the thinkers of the twentieth century paid more attention, they would find in Artaud’s work one of the most pertinent questions of the age, and whose clutches are the most difficult to escape. Artaud never ceased to claim that Western culture lost its tragic focus the moment it finally forgot what he termed the great solar madness of the world, the violent ceremonies which enacted the life and death of ‘the great Fire Satan’.

It is only by examining such extreme discoveries that we can finally come to understand that the experience of madness common since the sixteenth century owes its particular face, and the origin of its meaning, to that absence, to that dark night and all that fills it. The linearity that led rationalist thought to consider madness as a form of mental illness must be reinterpreted in a vertical dimension. Only then does it become apparent that each of its incarnations is a more complete, but more perilous masking of tragic experience – an experience that it nonetheless failed to obliterate. When constraints were at their most oppressive, an explosion was necessary, and that is what we have seen since Nietzsche.

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But how did this pride of place awarded to critical reflection come into being in the sixteenth century? How did it end up being the case that madness was appropriated by reason, so much so that at the dawn of the classical age all the tragic images previously associated with madness suddenly passed into shadow? How ended the movement that caused Artaud to write: ‘the Renaissance of the sixteenth century made a clean break with a reality that had laws both natural and superhuman, and the Renaissance humanism that resulted was not an expansion but a restriction for mankind’?84

A brief résumé of this evolution is perhaps in order, for a clear understanding of what the classical age did to madness.

1 Madness becomes a form related to reason, or more precisely madness and reason enter into a perpetually reversible relationship which
implies that all madness has its own reason by which it is judged and mastered, and all reason has its madness in which it finds its own derisory truth. Each is a measure of the other, and in this movement of reciprocal reference, each rejects the other but is logically dependent upon it.

In the sixteenth century, this tight-knit dialectic gave a new lease of life to the old Christian theme of the world being madness in the eyes of God. Man believes that he sees clearly, and that he is the measure of all things, while the knowledge that he thinks he has of the world locks him into his complacency: ‘If, at midday, we either look down to the ground, or on the surrounding objects which lie open to our view, we think ourselves endowed with a very strong and piercing eyesight’, but then if we turn our eyes towards the sun, we are obliged to confess that ‘our acuteness in discerning terrestrial objects is mere dimness when applied to the sun’. Yet this almost Platonic conversion towards the sun of being does not reveal truth and the foundation of appearances: it merely lays bare the abyss of our own unreason:

But should we once begin to raise our thoughts to God . . . what strangely imposed upon us under the name of wisdom will disgust by its extreme folly; and what presented the appearance of virtuous energy will be condemned as the most miserable impotence.85

Rising up in spirit towards God and sounding the bottomless depths into which we find ourselves plunged are one and the same, and in Calvin’s experience madness is the measure of man when he is compared to the boundless reason of God.

In its finitude, man’s spirit is less a shaft of the great light than a fragment of shadow. The partial and transitory truth of appearances is not available to his limited intelligence; his madness discovers but the reverse of things, their dark side, the immediate contradiction of their truth. In his journey to God, man must do more than surpass himself – he must rip himself away from his essential weakness, and in one bound cross from the things of this world to their divine essence, for whatever transpires of truth in appearances is not its reflection but a cruel contradiction: ‘Everything has two faces,’ says Sébastien Franck,

for God is resolved to oppose himself to this world, leaving appearances here and keeping the truth and essence of things to himself. For that
reason things are the opposite of the way they appear in this world: an open Silenus.86

The abyss of folly into which men are plunged is such that the appearance of truth that men find there is in fact its complete opposite. But there was more: the contradiction between truth and appearances was present in appearance itself, for if appearance was coherent with itself, at least it would be an allusion to the truth, or some form of hollow echo. So it was rather within things themselves that this reversal was to be found, a reversal that henceforth was to be without a clear direction or pre-established end. The movement was not to be from an appearance towards truth, but towards another one, which negates it, and then towards all that denied or contested that negation, so that the process could never come to an end. Before that great moment of conversion that Calvin and Franck expect, Erasmus finds himself trapped by the myriad tiny conversions that appearances provide him with on their own level. Silenus opened up is not a symbol of the truth that God has removed, but much more and much less – a symbol, on an earthly level, of things themselves, an indication of the contradictions that deprive us, perhaps for all eternity, of the simple path towards truth. All human affairs, he says,

like the Sileni of Alcibiades, have two aspects quite different from each other. Hence, what appears ‘at first blush’ (as they say) to be death will, if you examine it more closely, turn out to be life; conversely, life will turn out to be death, beauty will become ugliness; riches will turn to poverty; notoriety will become fame, learning will be ignorance . . . in brief, you will find everything reversed if you open the Silenus.87

All is plunged into immediate contradiction, and man is urged to embrace only his own madness: when measured against the truth of essences and God, human order is nothing but madness.88

And in this human order, the movement through which man tries to break free of his earthly bonds becomes just another form of madness. In the sixteenth century, more so than at any other moment, Paul’s second epistle to the Corinthians shone with incomparable prestige: ‘I speak as a fool.’89 The renunciation of the world becomes an act of folly, like the total abandonment of the self to the obscure will of God, a mad quest that seemingly has no end, as the mystics had long acknowledged. Tauler
wrote of this path, where the madness of the world is renounced for
darker and more desolate follies: ‘The small vessel leads to the larger,
and as man finds himself in a state of desolation, anguished sentiments,
temptations, images and misery in all forms rise up within him.’
Nicholas of Cusa describes a similar experience: ‘When man abandons the
realm of the senses, his soul falls prey to a kind of dementia.’ Marching
towards God, man is more open than ever to madness, and that haven of
truth towards which grace will give him the final push, what else could it
be for him than an abyss of unreason? The wisdom of God, when man is
blinded by it, is not a reason that has long been concealed by a veil, but
depth without measure. There the secret is still fully secret and contradic-
tion contradicts itself, for at the heart of its all surpassing comprehen-
sion is this wisdom that seems vertiginous folly: ‘Lord, thy counsels are as a
great deep.’ What Erasmus glimpsed from afar when he dryly noted that
God had hidden salvation even from the eyes of the wise and saved the
world through folly, Nicholas of Cusa had explored all along, losing
the weak reason of man, which is but folly, in the abysmal madness of the
wisdom of God:

It is unutterable in any language, unintelligible to every intellect, and
immeasurable by every measure. It cannot be limited by any limit, nor
bounded by any boundary. No proportion is proportionate to it. No
comparison can be compared to it, nor can it be conformed to any
confirmation. It cannot be formed by any formation, and it cannot be
moved by any motion . . . because it cannot be expressed in any speech,
no limit to such modes of expression can be grasped. This is because
that Wisdom by which, in which and from which all things exist is
unthinkable in any thought.

So closed a great circle. Compared to Wisdom, the reason of man is
nothing but folly: compared to the shallow wisdom of men, the Reason
of God is caught up in the essential movement of Madness. On the great
scale of things, all things are Madness; on the small scale, the whole itself
is madness. Which means that if madness can only exist in reference to
some form of reason, the whole truth of reason is to allow a form of
unreason to appear and to oppose it, only to disappear in turn in a madness
that engulfs all. In one sense, madness is nothing at all, the madness of
men, a nothingness faced with the supreme form of reason that alone
delineates being; and the abyss of fundamental madness, nothing, as it is
such only for the fragile reason of men. But reason is nothing, as the
reason in whose name the folly of human reason is denounced, when it is
finally glimpsed, reveals itself to be nothing other than a vertiginous
chasm where reason itself must remain silent.

And so, under the powerful influence of Christian thought, the great
peril faced by the fifteenth century was kept at bay. Madness was no longer
a dark power that threatened to undo the world, revealing fantastical
seductions, and no longer showed, in the twilight of Time, the violence of
bestiality, or the great struggle between Knowledge and Interdiction. It is
captured instead in the indefinite cycle that attaches it to reason; they
deny and affirm each other. Madness is robbed of its absolute existence in
the night of the world, and now only exists in relation to reason, and this
mutual process of redemption is the undoing of both.

2 Madness then becomes a form of reason. It becomes integral to it,
forming either part of its secret strength, one of the moments of its
manifestation, or a paradoxical form where reason becomes conscious of
itself. In either case madness only has meaning or value in relation to the
field of reason.

The natural, original distemper of Man is presumption. Man is the most
blighted and frail of all creatures and, moreover, the most given to pride.
This creature knows and sees that he is lodged down here, among the
mire and shit of the world, bound and nailed to the deadest, most
stagnant part of the universe, in the lowest storey of the building, the
farthest from the vault of heaven; his characteristics place him in the
third and lowest category of animate creatures, yet, in thought, he sets
himself above the circle of the Moon, bringing the very heavens under
his feet. The vanity of this same thought makes him equal himself
to God.94

Such is the worst madness of man: the inability to recognise the misery of
his confinement, the weakness that prevents him from ascending to the
true and the good, and not knowing which part of madness is his own.
His turning his back on unreason is a sure sign of his condition, in that it
prevents him from ever using his reason in a reasonable manner. For if
reason does exist, it lies precisely in the acceptance of the unbroken circle
joining wisdom and folly, in the clear consciousness of their reciprocity
and the impossibility of dividing them. True reason is not free of the contamination of madness, but on the contrary, it borrows some of the trails first carved out by madness.

Be present, then, you daughters of Jove, for a bit, while I show that no one can reach the heights of wisdom, and the very ‘inner sanctum’, as they themselves say, ‘of happiness’, except with the guidance of Folly.95

But such a path, even when it fails to reach any final wisdom, and when the promised citadel reveals itself to be nothing more than a mirage or a new incarnation of folly, remains the path to wisdom when those who follow it are well aware that it leads to madness. The vain spectacle, the frivolous sounds and the maelstrom of noise and colour that make up the world is only ever the world of madness, and that must be accepted. This artificiality of the world must be welcomed, in the knowledge that that shallowness belongs not only to the spectacle but to the spectator as well, and that to appreciate it what is required is not the serious ear reserved for the truth, but that more light-hearted form of attention more usually reserved for a fairground spectacle or a circus act, blending irony, complicity, a readiness to learn and the secret knowledge that does not allow itself to be taken in:

give me your attention – not the kind you give to godly preachers, but rather the kind you give to pitchmen, low comedians and jokesters – in short lend me your ears, just as my protégé Midas did long ago to Pan.96

Here, in the midst of that colourful, noisy immediacy, in that easy acceptance which is also an imperceptible refusal, the essence of wisdom is to be found more surely than in any lengthy search for the hidden truth. Subtly, through the welcome it reserves for it, wisdom invests madness, besieges it, becomes conscious of it and is able to situate it.

Where else could it be found, other than within reason itself, as one of its forms, and perhaps even one of its resources? For there is no doubt that between certain forms of madness and certain forms of reason, the resemblances are manifold. And worrying: how can a distinction be made between a wise act carried out by a madman, and a senseless act of folly carried out by a man usually in full possession of his wits? ‘Wisdom and folly are surprisingly close. It’s but a half turn from the one to the other.
That much can be discerned from the actions of men who have lost their wits. Such a resemblance, despite the fact that it sows confusion among reasonable men, serves reason itself. And by dragging into its movement the great violence that madness brings, reason can attain the greatest heights. Visiting Tasso in his delirium, Montaigne felt that disappointment even more than pity, but the most powerful emotion he experienced was admiration. ‘Is there anyone who does not know how imperceptible are the divisions separating madness from the spiritual alacrity of a soul set free, or from actions arising from supreme and extraordinary virtue?’ Montaigne experiences a paradoxical admiration, for in the depths of that madness, reason finds the strangest resources. For if Tasso, ‘fashioned in the pure poetry of the atmosphere of antiquity, who showed more judgment and genius than any other Italian for many a long year’, now finds himself ‘in so wretched a state, surviving himself’, it was also because

his agile and lively mind has overthrown him; the light has made him blind; his reason’s grasp was so precise and so intense that it has left him quite irrational; his quest for knowledge, eager and exacting, has led to his becoming like a dumb beast; his rare aptitude for the activities of the soul has left him with no activity . . . and no soul.

If madness comes to sanction the efforts of reason, it is because madness was already part of those efforts: the liveliness of images, the violence of passion, the great retreating of the spirit into itself are all part of madness, but are also the most powerful, and therefore the most dangerous, tools that reason can use. There is no reason so strong that it does not put itself at risk in venturing into madness to carry out its task to the full: ‘there is no great spirit who is not tempered by a touch of madness . . . many wise men and countless brave poets have ventured into madness, and some have become lost there’. Madness is a hard but essential moment in the labour of reason. Through it, and through its apparent victories, reason makes itself manifest and triumphs. Madness, for reason, was nothing more than a secret life and a source of strength.

Little by little, madness finds itself disarmed and the same steps are displaced: invested by reason, it is as though it is welcomed in and planted within it. Such was the ambiguous role of sceptical thought, or rather of a form of reason that was vividly conscious of the forms that limited it and the forces that contradicted it: it discovered madness as one of its own
figures – one way of warding off anything that may have formed an exterior power, irreducible hostility or a sign of transcendence; while by the same token placing madness at the heart of its work and indicating it to be an essential moment in its own nature. Beyond Montaigne and Charron, in that same movement of the insertion of madness into the nature of reason itself, the outline of the thought of Pascal begins to become discernible: 'Men are so necessarily mad, that not being mad would be being mad through another trick that madness played.'¹⁰¹ That thought is the distillation of the long process of reflection that began with Erasmus: the discovery of a form of madness immanent within reason; and from there a process of doubling – on the one hand a ‘mad madness’ that turns its back on the madness that properly belongs to reason, and which through that rejection, redoubles its power, and through that redoubling falls into the simplest, most hermetic and most immediate forms of madness; and on the other hand a ‘wise madness’ which welcomes the madness of reason, listens to it, recognises its right of abode and allows itself to be penetrated by all its vivid power, thereby protecting itself from madness in a manner far more effective than any obstinate refusal, which is condemned to failure in advance.

Now the truth of madness is at one with the victory of reason and its definitive mastery, for the truth of madness is to be interior to reason, to be one of its figures, a strength and a momentary need to ascertain itself.

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Perhaps that provides one explanation for its multiple presence in the literature of the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century, an art which, in its effort to master this reason in search of itself, recognises the presence of madness, its own madness, circumscribes it, invests itself in it and finally triumphs over it. These are the games of a Baroque age.

But in art as in thought, a whole process is accomplished which will also lead to the confirmation of the tragic experience of madness inside a critical consciousness. But let us ignore that for a moment, and concentrate instead on the indifference that is apparent in figures in Don Quixote, as well as in the novels of Scudéry, King Lear, and in the theatre of Rotrou or Tristan l’Hermite.
Foremost among these and most durable (the eighteenth century still recognised its traces) was madness through literary identification. Its features were fixed once and for all by Cervantes, but the theme was taken up time and again. There were direct adaptations (Guérin de Bouscal’s Don Quichotte first played in 1639; two years later the same author brought out Le Gouvernement de Sancho Pança), reinterpretations of a particular episode (Pichou’s Les Folies de Cardenio are a variation on the theme of the Ragged Knight of the Sierra Morena), or in less direct fashion, satires on fantastical novels (as in the Julie d’Arviane episode in Subligny’s La Fausse Clélie). From writer to reader, the chimera pass, but the fantasy of the one becomes the phantasm of the other, and the writer’s ruse is naively taken up as a figure of the real. On the surface, such novels are nothing more than a gentle critique of the fantastical novel form; but on a deeper level they bear witness to a more profound preoccupation with the links in a work of art between the real and the imaginary, and perhaps too between the fantastical imaginings of a creative mind at work and the fascination inside delirium. ‘We owe the invention of the arts to deranged imaginations: the Caprice of Painters, Poets and Musicians is only a name moderated in civility to express their Madness.’ A madness where the values of another age, another art and another morality are all called into question, but also where all the forms of human imagination, even the most distant ones, are reflected in a glass darkly, strangely transformed into a common hallucination.

Hard on the heels of this first form comes the madness of vain presumption. Here the madman identifies not with a literary model, but with an imaginatively transformed version of his own self, where all the qualities, virtues and powers that he lacks are present. He is the inheritor of Erasmus’ Philautia. Poor, he finds himself rich, ugly, he sees himself as beautiful, and with his feet in chains he believes himself to be the all-powerful. One example is Cervantes’ Osuna graduate, who took himself for Neptune. It is also the destiny of the seven characters in Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin’s Les Visionnaires, of Chateaufort in Cyrano de Bergerac’s Le Pédant joué and of M. de Richesource in Saint-Evremond’s Sir Politick. A vast form of madness, with as many faces as there are characters, ambitions or necessary illusions in the world. Even at its limits, it is the least extreme form of madness, for in every man’s heart this madness is the imaginary relation that man has with his own self. The most ordinary faults are born out of this form of madness, and it is the first and ultimate object of any form of moral criticism.
It is also to that moral universe that the Madness of just punishment belongs. This form of madness chastises the disorder of the heart with disorder of the spirit. But it has other powers: the punishment it inflicts multiplies of its own accord, in that as it progresses it reveals the truth. The justice of this form of madness lies precisely in its capacity to unveil the truth. Its truthfulness lies in the fact that in the vain delirium of his hallucinations, the guilty party already feels what will be for all eternity the pain of his punishment. In Corneille's Mérite, Eraste already sees himself pursued by the Furies and condemned by Minos. Truthfulness also lies in the fact that the crime that was hidden from all becomes apparent in the night of this strange punishment. Madness, through the senseless words that are not mastered, speaks its own meaning through the strange visions revealing the hidden truth: the cries of madness speak for the conscience. So the delirium of Lady Macbeth reveals to those who ‘have known what [they] should not’ words long uttered only to ‘deaf pillows’.106

The last form of madness is the madness of desperate passion. Love disappointed in its excess, or more commonly a love undone by the inevitability of death, leads inexorably towards dementia. So long as it had an object, mad love was still more love than madness, but left to its own devices it continues in a delirious void. The punishment, perhaps, of a passion too given to its own violence, but a punishment that is also a calming of the pains of love, peopling the irreparable absence with imaginary presences, or finding the disappearing form in the paradox of innocent joys or the heroism of senseless pursuits. If this form of madness leads to death, it is to a death where lovers will be reunited for all eternity. This madness is the last song of Ophelia, Ariste’s delirium in La Folie du sage, and above all the bittersweet dementia of King Lear.

The madness to be found in the work of Shakespeare leads to death and murder, while the forms we see in Cervantes are linked rather to presumption or the compensations of the imagination. But they are the high models that imitators inflect and weaken. Both in all probability still bear witness to the tragic experience of madness born in the fifteenth century more than they reflect the critical or moral experience of unreason that is nonetheless a product of their era. Through time, they connect with a kind of madness that is in the process of disappearing, and which will live on only under the cover of darkness. But a comparison between their work and what it maintains and the new forms to be found in their contemporaries or their imitators will show what is
happening in this early part of the seventeenth century, in the literary experience of madness.

In Cervantes and Shakespeare, madness occupies an extreme position in that it is invariably without issue. There is no going back to truth or reason. It opens only onto a tear in the fabric of the world, and therefore onto death. Madness, in its empty words, is not vanity: the void that fills it is ‘disease beyond my practice’ as the doctor says of Lady Macbeth, and it is already the plenitude that death brings, a madness that does not need a doctor, but divine forgiveness. The sweet joy that Ophelia finds at the end has little to do with happiness, and her senseless song is as near the essential as ‘the cry of women’ announcing in the corridors of Macbeth’s castle that the queen is dead. The death of Don Quixote takes place in an atmosphere of calm, where links with reason and truth have at last been renewed. The Don’s madness has become aware of itself at a stroke, and falls away as stupidity before his very eyes. But the onlookers are unconvinced: ‘they were certain that he was in the grip of some new madness’. This indefinitely reversible ambiguity can only be decided by death. Madness dissipated blends seamlessly into the imminence of the end: ‘one of the signs that he was really dying was the ease with which he had turned from a madman into a sane man’. But death brings no peace, and madness will triumph again, a truth derisory in its eternity, beyond the end of a life delivered from madness only by its own ending. The senselessness of his life pursues him, and ironically he is immortalised only by his madness, which becomes his imperishable life in death:

This is a doughty knight’s repose;
So high his matchless courage rose
That as it’s plain enough to see,
He granted death no victory,
Not even when in death’s last throes.

But early on, madness leaves these extreme regions where Cervantes and Shakespeare had placed it, and in the literature of the early seventeenth century its preferred place is median, forming the core of the action rather than an ending, and is an adventure rather than the ultimate imminence. Displaced in the structures of novels and plays, it now allows both a manifestation of truth and a calm return to reason.
Henceforth it is no longer to be considered in its tragic reality, as the absolute tear in the fabric of this world that opens on to the other, but simply in the irony of the illusions it brings. Madness is no longer a genuine punishment, but an image of a punishment, and therefore a false one: it can only be linked to what is a crime in appearance, or the illusion of a death. Ariste, in *La Folie du sage*, goes mad on hearing the news of his daughter’s death, but only because she is not really dead; and when Eraste, in *Mélie*, is pursued by the Furies and dragged before Minos, it is for a double crime that he could have committed, that he would have wanted to commit, but which in fact resulted in no blood being shed. Madness is stripped of its dramatic seriousness, and is no longer a punishment or cause of despair other than as error. Its dramatic function only survives as a false drama, a chimerical form where faults are merely supposed, murders are illusory and disappearances lead inevitably to reunions.

Yet despite this absence of seriousness it is still essential – even more essential than before, in that it brings illusion to its limits, and it is from there that the process of illusion is undone. In the madness to which the error of their ways confines them, characters pick up the thread in spite of themselves. In accusing themselves, they begin to speak the truth regardless of their intentions. Again in *Mélie*, all the clever ploys the hero uses to deceive his companions turn against him, and he is the first victim in that he genuinely believes himself to be guilty of the murder of his rival and his mistress. But in his delirium, he accuses himself of having invented a whole lovers’ correspondence, and the truth emerges in and through the madness brought on by the illusion of an ending, a madness which in fact undoes the real imbroglio of which it is both the cause and the effect. In other words, madness is the false punishment for a false ending, but through its own virtues it also reveals the real problem, which can then be brought to a proper conclusion. It covers the secret machinations of truth under the veil of error. It is to this ambiguous yet central function of madness that the author of *L’Ospital des fous* is referring when he shows two lovers who feign madness to throw off their pursuers, taking refuge amongst a group of mad people. In a simulated fit of madness the young girl, dressed as a boy, pretends to believe that she really is a girl – which of course, in fact, she is – thereby asserting, by the process in which two ruses cancel each other out, the truth that will indeed triumph in the end.

Madness is the purest and most complete form of *quid pro quo*: it takes the false for the true, death for life, man for woman, a lover for the Furies, and
the victim for Minos. But it is also the most rigorously necessary form of quid pro quo within the dramatic structure, for it has no need of an external element to reach its final conclusion. All that needs to be done is to push the illusion until it reaches the truth. At the heart of the structure, in its mechanical centre, it is at once a feigned conclusion that holds within it the promise of a new beginning, and an initiation to what will be recognized as reconciliation with truth and reason. It marks the vanishing point where the tragic destinies of the characters apparently converge, and where the real lines leading to a happy ending all have their origins. Equilibrium begins in madness, but madness hides that equilibrium in a cloud of illusion and feigned disorder, camouflaging the rigour of the architecture beneath a cleverly arranged violent disorder. This unexpected vivacity, this wind of madness that suddenly shakes gestures or words, breaks the mood or blows through the curtains when the fabric is in fact stretched tight, is a typical instance of the Baroque trompe-l’œil. Madness is the great trompe-l’œil in the tragic-comic structure of pre-classical literature.110

Georges de Scudéry was well aware of this, as he shows in the Comédie des comédiens, where by turning the theatre into a theatre he situates his play inside the illusions of madness. One section of the cast is to take the role of spectators, while the remainder play the actors. One side must then pretend to take the set for reality, and acting for real life, while acting on a set that is real enough, and the other must pretend to act and imitate players, being in fact nothing other than actors playing roles. In this double game every element is doubled, leading to a constant process of exchange between reality and illusion, which is also the dramatic sense of madness. ‘I don’t know’, says Mondory in the prologue to Scudéry’s play,

what extravagance has taken hold of my companions today, but it is so powerful that I am forced to believe that some spell has robbed them of their wits, and the worst of it is that they’re trying to make me and you lose our reason too. They’re trying to convince me that I’m not in a theatre, but that this is the city of Lyon, that there’s an inn over there and a tennis court here, and that some actors, who aren’t us but whom we nevertheless are, are in the middle of playing a pastoral.111

In this extravaganza, theatre develops its truth, which is to be an illusion. And that, strictly speaking, is what madness is.

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And so the classical experience of madness comes into being. The great threat that appeared on the horizon in the fifteenth century begins to fade, and the dark power that lurked in the paintings of Bosch begins to lose its violence. The forms live on, now transparent and docile, forming part of the great cortège of reason. Madness has ceased to be an eschatological figure at the edge of the world of mankind and of death, and that darkness into which man stared and made out impossible forms has slowly begun to retreat. A great forgetting falls on the world that was criss-crossed by the free slavery of the ship of fools, and madness is no longer a strange passage from here to the hereafter, no more that fugitive and absolute limit. The ship of fools is solidly anchored in the world of people and things, berthed at the quay. No longer a boat at all, but a hospital.

Scarcely a century after the fashion for those ships, the literary theme of the ‘Hospital for the Mad’ is born. There each empty head, bound and classified by the true reason of men, speaks of contradiction and irony, in the double language of Wisdom:

the hospital for the incurably mad, where, point by point, all possible types of madness and all the maladies of the spirit are carefully mapped out, in both men and women, an enterprise that is both amusing and useful, and forms the only path to the acquisition of true wisdom.”

There each form of madness has its place ready and waiting, its sign and its protective god. For frenzy and ranting madness, there is the fool strapped to the chair under the watchful eye of Minerva; for the sombre melancholics who haunt the countryside like hungry lone wolves there is Jupiter, the master of animal metamorphoses, and then there are the ‘drunkard madmen’, ‘madmen with no memory or understanding’, ‘drowsy or half-dead madmen’ and ‘stale or empty-headed madmen’ . . .

A whole world of disorder, where every man has his place, and the Praise of Reason is sung in the manner of Erasmus. Already, in these primitive hospitals, embarkation has given way to confinement.

Tamed, madness still keeps up the appearance of its rule. It has become part of the measures of reason, and of the labour of truth. It plays on the surface of things in the glittering light of day, on all games of appearance, on the equivocation between the real and the illusory, and on the constantly broken and mended thread of the weave that unites and separates
truth and appearance. It hides and shows, speaks truth and lies, and is both shadow and light. A central yet indulgent figure, it flickers and shimmers, an already precarious figure of this baroque age.

And it constantly returns, in both fiction and writing for the theatre. The figure of the madman really does stalk through the streets, and François Colletet came across it again and again:

I see in that avenue
An innocent followed by children
. . . Let us admire the wretch
This poor madman, what could he
Want with so many rags?
I have seen so many of these gruff madmen
Singing their foul ditties in the streets . . .113

Madness becomes a familiar silhouette on the social landscape. There was a new, intense pleasure to be had from these brotherhoods of fools, their parties, meetings and speeches. A burning issue of the day was the case of Nicolas Joubert, better known as Angoulevent, who declared himself the Prince of Fools, only to find that his title was contested by Valenti Le Comte and Jacques Resneau. Pamphlets, passionate defences and law cases followed: his lawyer certified him to be ‘an empty head, a hollowed-out pumpkin free of all common sense, a reed, a dismembered brain without a single spring or wheel in place’.114 Bluet d’Arbères, who took the name Comte de Permission, was protected by some of the most noble families in France, such as the Créquis, the Lesdiguières, the Bouillons and the Nemours, and in 1602 he published (or had published for him) works where he claimed to be unable to either read or write, and has never learned but found himself filled with ‘inspiration from God and the Angels’.115 Pierre Dupuis, who is mentioned by Régnier in his sixth satire,116 is in the words of Brascambille ‘an arch-madman in a long coat’;117 and he himself in his Remontrance sur le réveil de Maitre Guillaume declares that his spirit is so elevated, it is ‘in the antichamber of the third degree of the moon’. There are many similar figures in Régnier’s fourteenth satire.

The world of the early seventeenth century is strangely hospitable to madness. Madness is there, in the hearts of men and at the heart of things, an ironic sign blurring the distinction between the real and the
chimerical, but with barely a memory of the great tragic threat. More a cause of hesitation than genuine confusion, a derisory agitation in society, mobility of reason. But new demands are being born:

Hundreds of times I walked out with my lantern
Into the full midday sun...