



Madness in Lacan and Foucault

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This paper highlights certain affinities between the work of Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault. It takes as a starting point the notion of madness articulated in Jacques Lacan's "Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse", the speech he gave in Rome in 1966 that marked his break with the *Société psychanalytique de Paris* and his creation of the *Société Française de Psychanalyse*. This will be compared with the notion of madness developed in the first appendix to Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la Folie* that was published in 1972 and is titled "La folie, l'absence d'oeuvre". Both texts describe madness as a particular form of language, and both understand madness to be historically determined. In Lacan's text I will highlight an implicit historical narrative that (at least superficially) resembles Foucault's. In Foucault's text I will trace the usage of a distinction between speech and language that both echoes Lacan's and suggests a reading of Lacan's esoteric and playful uses of language.

At the end of the second section of Lacan's Rome discourse, "Symbol and Language as Structure and Limit of the Psychoanalytic Field", the function of analysis is defined as the recognition in speech of the subject's desire. Different forms of madness are presented as paradoxes that obstruct the function of analysis while at the same time providing analysis with its *raison d'être*. Lacan writes:

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In madness, of whatever nature, we must recognize on the one hand the negative freedom of a kind of speech that has given up trying to gain recognition, which is what we call an obstacle to transference; and, on the other, the singular formation of a delusion which - whether fabular, fantastical, or cosmological, or rather interpretative, demanding, or idealist - objectifies the subject in a language devoid of dialectic.¹

It must be noted that in French madness and alienation are synonymous: to be alienated (“aliéné”) is also to be mad (“fou”). Neither Foucault nor Lacan’s concepts of madness can be understood without this linguistic coincidence of alienation and madness. On the one hand, madness is speech that refuses recognition and transference and that therefore does not try to find its confirmation in the other, and on the other hand madness is the formation of a delusion that traps the subject and prevents the possibility of change. The footnote attached to this passage complicates it considerably by introducing the possibility of socially-sanctioned delusions: “Aphorism of Lichtenberg’s: ‘A madman who imagines himself a prince differs from the prince who is in fact a prince only because the former is a negative prince, while the latter is a negative madman. Considered without their sign, they are alike.’”² Here and elsewhere Lacan hints at the historical indeterminacy of madness: the existence of the prince is defined by paranoia and a constant suspicion of the possibility of usurpation. He worries that he is mad much like the madman imagines himself to be a prince. Madness is always defined in relation to a particular society that cannot itself be presumed to be sane. Such passages softly echo the more explicit and radical thesis of Foucault’s *History of Madness*.

For Lacan madness is characterized by an absence of speech, which is to say that the mad subject does not speak but is spoken.³ The mad subject speaks, but he does not assume his language nor does he seek through it recognition of others. At this point Lacan’s discourse shifts from psychological to more general historical reflections. Alienated speech comes to characterize the modern historical epoch that Lacan describes as “scientific”. Although he does not explicitly reference Foucault, it is worth noting that the establishment of cartesian science

(and, with it, the establishment of a rational subject that thinks and therefore has being) is, according to Foucault, the intellectual expression of the exclusion of madness that characterizes l'age classique and is politically realized in "L'enfermement": the rounding up of madmen, libertines, vagabonds and other ostensibly dangerous subjects in the first psychiatric institutions. The age of reason is established through the exclusion of the mad from the very notion of being. For the Cartesian subject, Foucault writes, "it is essentially impossible to be mad, not for the object of thought, but for the subject that thinks."⁴

Lacan's introduction of the third paradox of madness gives way to cultural criticism that echoes Foucault's thesis:

The third paradox of the relation of language to speech is that of the subject who loses his meaning in the objectification of discourse. However metaphysical its definition may seem, we cannot ignore its presence in the foreground of our experience. For this is the most profound alienation of the subject in our scientific civilization, and it is this alienation that we encounter first when the subject begins to talk to us about himself.⁵

This passage contains a critique of modernity. The modern subject does not say "ce suis-je" as one did in Villon's era; rather he says "c'est moi". "The me [moi] of modern man... has taken on its form in the dialectical impasse of the beautiful soul who does not recognize his very reason for being in the disorder he denounces in the world."⁶ In his work the modern subject forgets his subjectivity, and in his leisure he forgets his death.⁷

Lacan's repetition of the word "science" to describe the larger system that gives the modern subject an alienated meaning is curious, especially because Lacan attempts to establish the scientificity of psychoanalysis on the basis of structural linguistics. The comparison of the following two passages underscores this ambivalence: (1): "If psychoanalysis can

become a science ... and if it is not to degenerate in its technique ... we must rediscover the meaning of its experience,"⁸ and (2):

Communication can be validly established for [the modern subject] in science's collective undertaking and in the tasks science ordains in our universal civilization; this communication will be effective within the enormous objectification constituted by this science, and it will allow him to forget his subjectivity.⁹

Lacan attempts to formalize psychoanalysis as a science by drawing on recent discoveries in various fields, particularly structural linguistics, and yet he claims that the scientific state of civilization has objectified speech. This apparent contradiction is resolved if one understands that Lacan hopes to formalize a science of alienation and true speech. To this end, he must observe the conditions of modern life that alienate subjects from their speech. The foundation of his science is the living word, and it is always threatened by exhaustion and ossification. He writes:

How, indeed, could speech exhaust the meaning of speech ... if not in the act that engenders it? Thus Goethe's reversal of its presence at the origin, "In the beginning was the act," is itself reversed in its turn: it was certainly the Word that was in the beginning, and we live in its creation, but it is our mental action that continues this creation by constantly renewing it.¹⁰

Psychoanalysis is the practice of renewing the possibility of non-alienated speech. It endeavors to keep speech alive with spirit despite its inherent tendency towards death and meaninglessness. Psychoanalysis works against the deadening effects of a scientific civilization that assigns a utilitarian function to the subject in relation to rational goals and thus reduces its

inner life to irrelevance.

Conventional psychoanalysis, however, has obscured the centrality of speech by relying on its conceptual foundations. It has become “a wall of language that blocks speech.”¹¹ “[W]ith the mythical manipulations of our doctrine, we bring [the analysand] yet another opportunity to become alienated, in the decomposed trinity of the ego, the superego, and the id, for example.”¹² The “mythical manipulations” of psychoanalysis ironically take the scientificity of its conceptual vocabulary for granted. The Freudian triad becomes a “decomposed trinity” when it is invested with the power of a universal paradigm that is detached from the particularity of analysis as a spoken practice. As opposed to treating the analysand’s alienation, it gives the analysand another vocabulary for forgetting himself and neglecting the specificity of his situation. Lacan’s metaphor registers a paradox: once science is taken for granted it resembles religion. Lacan’s speech attempts to establish psychoanalysis as a science by unsettling a facile belief in its fundamental concepts that has led to a degeneration of its technique. The

degeneration of psychoanalytic technique against which Lacan protests is its objectification as an immutable, codified doctrine of established categories. By unsettling psychoanalytic concepts, he returns the practice to the domain of the signified, which is not determined by meanings but rather by effects.

Lacan’s critical references to an alienated, scientific civilization connect Foucault’s historical critique of Descartes with Lacan’s playful reworking of “cogito ergo sum” in “L’instance de la lettre dans l’inconscient.” Whereas Foucault critiques Descartes at the level of the signified (which is to say: he criticizes the regime of knowledge that Descartes’ text gives rise to that excludes madness from being), Lacan playfully subverts the assumed self-presence of the cartesian subject. He writes:

... I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking. These words

render palpable to an attentive ear with what elusive ambiguity the ring of meaning flees from our grasp along the verbal string. What we must say is: I am not, where I am the plaything of my thought; I think about what I am where I do not think I am thinking.¹³

In juxtaposition to the cartesian subject who locates his being in his thought, Lacan's turns of phrase suggest that neither thinking nor being are identical to themselves. They are not self-conscious states, thus thinking occurs where the subject is not, and the subject is where it is not thinking. To say that these words render palpable "with what elusive ambiguity the ring of meaning flees from our grasp along the verbal string" is to foreground the role of the signifier in the creation (and crucially: not the representation or the transmission) of meaning. Lacan overturns the Saussurien priority of the signified over the signifier by placing the signifier over the bar separating it from the signified, and thus liberating it from the function of representing the signified. He writes that we must jettison the illusion "that the signifier serves the function of representing the signified, or better, that the signifier has to justify its existence in terms of any signification whatsoever."¹⁴

It is precisely in this sense that Lacan's body of work resembles what Foucault in his appendix to *History of Madness* defines as modern literature. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Foucault argues that madness begins to decouple itself from mental illness by entering and speaking through literature. Before reconstructing Foucault's historical argument, the following passage will be used to read Lacan:

At the close of the nineteenth century (at the time of the discovery of psychoanalysis, or thereabouts), [literature] had become a speech that inscribed inside itself the principle of its own decoding; or in any case, it supposed, beneath each of its sentences, each of its words, the sovereign power to modify the values and meanings of the language to which

despite everything (and in fact) it belonged; it suspended the reign of language in the present of a gesture of writing.¹⁵

“Language” here refers to the domain of the signified: that of values and meanings. “Speech” here refers to the signifier. Lacan’s speech suspends the reign of the signifier (of “language”) in a gesture of writing that supposes the power to modify the meanings and values of psychoanalytic doctrine. Although the Rome speech no doubt belongs to psychoanalysis, it radically suspends its categories and presents psychoanalysis as a science of the effects of the signifier as opposed to an ossified body of knowledge. This is why in his introduction Lacan refers to his style as an ironic one “suitable to a radical questioning of the foundations of our discipline.”¹⁶

Foucault’s historical argument will now be briefly outlined. The classical age of cartesian science defined itself through its political and intellectual exclusion of madness. For Foucault this exclusion of madness persists in the modern period through the language of “mental illness” that domesticates madness as an aberration that the progress of medical science can treat. Foucault criticizes “the effort made by the modern world to only talk about madness in the serene terms and objectives of mental illness, and thus to obliterate its pathetic values.”¹⁷ Shoshanna Felman lucidly summarizes this critique in the following terms:

Madness, which is not mental illness, which is not an object, is nothing other than ‘this lyrical explosion’ and the excess of these pathetic values; this wrenching capacity of suffering, of vertigo and emotion, this powerless power of literary fascination: madness, for Foucault, signifies nothing other than pathos itself; the notion of madness is thus itself a metaphor for pathos: for the unthought vestiges of thought, for its literary surplus.¹⁸

Madness, as opposed to mental illness, is not a problem that medical science can claim to treat. In his appendix Foucault argues that madness has entered literature and thus distanced itself from mental illness.

A foucaultian reading of Lacan provides an explanation for the formidable resistance that the latter's work has always provoked. Foucault speaks of a structurally esoteric language that "no culture can accept immediately. Such speech is transgressive, not in its meaning, not in its verbal matter, but in its *play*."¹⁹ This type of language produces an "obscure and central liberation of speech at the heart of itself, its uncontrollable flight to a region that is always dark..."²⁰ Like Lacan's slippery, literary texts, Foucault writes that the "the language of [modern] literature is not defined by what it says, nor by the structures that make it signify something, but that it has a being, and that it is about that being that it should be questioned."²¹ To understand Lacan one cannot take the process of meaning-making for granted. One cannot assume that his words merely transmit meanings. His constant puns foreground the gap between signifier and signified that always enables words to be read otherwise. His texts are neither defined by what they say nor by the structures that make them signify something; they are instead defined by a being that incessantly draws attention to language's capacity to slip into the gap between word and meaning and thus to give rise to unintended or unexpected meanings.

Whereas madness for Lacan designates the alienated emptiness of speech, for Foucault madness designates language that exceeds its meaning. It is a metaphor for pathos, for the unthought vestiges of thought, its literary surplus. In this foucauldian sense, Lacan's texts continue the mad project of modern literature otherwise, as a science that attempts to free speech from signification.

To conclude, I will suggest that Lacan, like Shoshana Felman has written of Foucault, can be read as a late-romantic. Felman writes of Foucault that he appears to us, in a way, as the 'last' romantic, it is that he marks in modern discourse the

moment of a prise de conscience where a philosophical project takes over a poetic one. *Folie et Dérison, Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* is in fact the culmination of a certain practice of romantic language.²²

The following short fragment (115 of Friedrich Schlegel's *Fragments critiques*) will suffice as a definition for Romanticism: "The entire history of modern poetry is a comment on a brief text of philosophy: all art must become science, and all science art; poetry and philosophy must be reunited."²³ Lacan proposes a science of the living word, of the poetic capacity of language to produce meaning (and not merely transmit or represent it), and of what he calls "true speech." Whereas both thinkers can be described as (post)structuralists, Lacan's commitment to demonstrating the scientificity of his discourse is much more pronounced (see, for example, his equations). The poetic nature of his work can nonetheless be described as intransigent. Perhaps even more Foucault, Lacan is the 20th century thinker who deserves the title of last romantic.

Notes

¹ Lacan, Jacques, and Bruce Fink. *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006. Print. Page 231.

² Ibid, p. 266

³ Ibid, p. 232

⁴ Foucault, Michel. *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. Éditions Gallimard, 1972. "C'est une impossibilité d'être fou, essentielle, non à l'objet de la pensée, mais au sujet qui pense." P. 27

⁵ Ibid, p. 233

⁶ Ibid, p. 233

⁷ Ibid, p. 233

⁸ Ibid, p. 221

⁹ Ibid, p. 233

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 225

¹¹ Ibid, p. 233

¹² Ibid, p. 233

¹³ Ibid, p. 430

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 416

¹⁵ Foucault, Michel. "Madness, the absence of an œuvre." In *History of Madness*, edited by J. Khalfa, 541-549. Routledge, 2006. Online:

<https://foucault.info/documents/foucault.historyOfMadness>

¹⁶ Fink and Lacan, p. 198

¹⁷ "l'effort que fait le monde moderne pour ne parler de la folie que dans les termes sereins et objectifs de la maladie mentale, et *pour en oblitérer les valeurs pathétiques*." Foucault, *Histoire de la folie*, p. 182

¹⁸ "La folie, qui n'est pas maladie mentale, qui n'est pas objet, n'est rien d'autre que cet

‘éclatement lyrique’ et l’excès de ces ‘valeurs pathétiques’ ; cette capacité de déchirement, de souffrance, de vertige et d’émotion, cette impuissante puissance de fascination littéraire : la folie, pour Foucault, ne signifie rien d’autre que *le pathos lui-même* ; la notion de folie est alors elle-même une *métaphore du pathos* : du reste impensé de la pensée, de son excédent littéraire.”, Felman, Shoshana. *La folie et la chose littéraire*. French Edition, Éditions Du Seuil, p.

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¹⁹ Foucault, “Madness, the absence of an oeuvre.”

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² “Si doc Michel Foucault nous paraît aujourd’hui, en quelque sorte, le ‘dernier’ romantique, c’est qu’il marque dans le discours moderne le moment d’une prise de conscience ou un projet philosophique prend la relève d’un projet poétique. *Folie et Dérison, Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* est en fait l’aboutissement théorique d’une certaine praxis du langage romantique.”, Felman, p. 45

²³ “L’histoire tout entière de la poésie moderne est un commentaire suivi du bref texte de la philosophie : tout art doit devenir science, et toute science devenir art ; poésie et philosophie doivent être réunies.” Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe et Jean-Luc Nancy. *L’absolu littéraire: théorie de la littérature du premier romantisme allemand*. Éditions Du Seuil, 2013. p. 95.

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