

## Derrida, Foucault and “Madness, the Absence of an *Œuvre*”

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### Abstract

This article argues that Foucault's 1964 paper “La folie, l'absence d'œuvre” ought to be understood as a response to Derrida's 1963 paper “Cogito et histoire de la folie”. I clarify the chronology of the exchange between these two thinkers and follow commentators Bennington and Flynn in emphasising themes other than the status of madness in Descartes. I undertake a thematic investigation of Foucault's 1961 characterisation of madness as the absence of an *œuvre* and the role of this characterisation in Derrida's 1963 paper. Then I turn to an investigation of Foucault's substantial change in position on these key themes with his 1964 paper. I argue that Foucault seeks to minimise the initial importance he attributed to his characterisation of madness as the absence of an *œuvre*, altering his understanding of the relation between madness and language as well as shifting the event that silences madness from Descartes to Freud. Derrida's reconsideration of Foucault's *Folie et déraison* in 1991 treats Freud as the new locus of the exchange. This is an implicit recognition by Derrida of Foucault's “La folie, l'absence d'œuvre” and confirmation of its place within the exchange.

**Keywords:** Derrida, Foucault, Cogito, Silence, History, Madness

### 1. Introduction

Michel Foucault published the major thesis from his doctoral studies in 1961 under the title *Folie et Dérison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. In 1963 Jacques Derrida presented a paper at the *Collège Philosophique* titled “Cogito et histoire de la folie” that took Foucault's 1961 text as its point of departure (Derrida 1978, 36). Derrida notes in the opening lines of his paper that he had “the good fortune to study under

Michel Foucault” (Derrida 1978, 36) and he is known to have sent a letter formally inviting Foucault to attend the presentation (Foucault 1994, 25).<sup>2</sup>

There has been some confusion concerning the initial publication of Derrida's “Cogito et histoire de la folie.” It was published in the 1967 collection *L'Écriture et la différence* where a note mistakenly states that “Cogito et histoire de la folie” was originally published “in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 1964, nos. 3 and 4” (Derrida 1978, 445n; Derrida 1964).<sup>3</sup> The paper was actually first published in 1963 in the fourth issue of *Revue de Métaphysique et de morale*. Derrida then had to wait until the next issue of the journal, the first of 1964, in order to publish a number of additional notes for the paper – “A propos de ‘Cogito et histoire de la folie’” – as correspondence to the journal. Derrida's “Cogito et histoire de la folie” first became available in English as “Cogito and the History of Madness” (henceforth CHM) when *L'Écriture et la différence* was translated by Alan Bass in 1978 as *Writing and Difference*.

Derrida stated in a footnote to the initial 1963 publication that “[w]ith the exception of several notes and a short passage (in brackets), this paper is the reproduction of a lecture given 4 March 1963 at the Collège Philosophique” (Derrida 1978, 389n).<sup>4</sup> Derrida refers to material inserted between square brackets for the 1963 publication that expands on the problematic of whether the Greeks had a relation to madness.<sup>5</sup> When the paper was reproduced in *L'Écriture et la différence* this note was no longer accurate in stating that the paper remained the same as the one pronounced at the *Collège Philosophique* apart from this addition. It was subject to an additional revision between its initial publication in 1963 and its subsequent publication in 1967.

The revision of “Cogito et histoire de la folie” between 1963/4 and 1967 ought to be of some scholarly interest because it involves the question of Derrida's early writing of *différance* with an 'a'. Schultz and Fried, in their annotated bibliography of Derrida's work, refer to “Cogito et histoire de la folie” as the place where Derrida first writes *différance* with an 'a' (Schultz and Fried 1992, 12). The sentence referred to by Schultz and Fried is where Derrida writes that “[t]he economy of this

writing is a regulated relationship between that which exceeds and the exceeded totality: the *différance* of the absolute excess" (Derrida 1978, 75).<sup>6</sup> This statement is missing from the initial journal publication (Derrida 1963, 493) and must have been added during Derrida's revision between 1963 and 1967. It is therefore unclear whether Derrida first wrote *différance* with an 'a' in "Cogito et histoire de la folie."

In 1964, Foucault was approached with a proposal to republish his 1961 book in a popular edition. Against Foucault's wishes, this publication was to be "d'une édition très abrégée" (Foucault 1994, I, 26)<sup>7</sup> retitled *Histoire de la folie*. This severely abridged 1964 edition was the basis for Richard Howard's translation of Foucault's text into English, published as *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* in 1967 (Foucault 1967). Among the many sections excised in the 1964 abridgement is the passage on Descartes to which Derrida had explicitly referred in his 1963 paper. The original 1961 Preface – where Derrida had, in Jean Khalfa's words, "concentrated his more general attack" (Khalfa 2006, xxiii) – was cut to one third of its former size. This abridgement of the 1961 Preface removes some of the lines to which Derrida refers in "Cogito et histoire de la folie" but some of the assertions that are most important to Derrida's argumentation were retained. Particularly, Foucault's statement of intent to give a history of madness and to return to the originary division between reason and madness (Foucault 1964b, xi-xiii).

Foucault also published a short article in 1964 titled "La folie, l'absence d'œuvre." (Foucault 1964a) Foucault will later state that this article was intended to "expand on a phrase I ventured rather blindly: 'madness, the absence of an *œuvre*'" (Foucault 2006e, xxxix). Khalfa states that it is in this article that Foucault "reformulates and develops some of the themes of the first Preface" (Khalfa 2006, xxiii).

Foucault published in 1972 a new edition of his 1961 text under the title *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. This text is commonly referred to as the second edition of Foucault's text, but such a characterisation ignores the abridged 1964 edition. The 1972 text is also commonly referred to as an unabridged edition. While it is true that Foucault almost

completely restores the material omitted from the 1964 edition for the 1972 edition, the single exception to this restoration is that the original 1961 Preface, having already been reduced by two thirds for the 1964 edition, is now removed completely for the 1972 edition. The omitted 1961 Preface is replaced with a short new 1972 Preface.

Foucault added two appendices to the 1972 edition. One of these is the 1964 article “La folie, l'absence d'œuvre.” The reformulation of material from the original 1961 preface in “La folie, l'absence d'œuvre” therefore replaces the original preface material entirely in the 1972 edition. The second appendix added is “Mon corps, ce papier, ce feu.”<sup>8</sup> Foucault describes “Mon corps, ce papier, ce feu” as “where I try to address a remarkable criticism by Derrida” (Foucault 2006e, xxxix). Foucault responds to Derrida on the matter of Descartes in “Mon corps, ce papier, ce feu” and this means that the passage on Descartes omitted from the 1964 edition is restored to the 1972 edition alongside a new defence of that passage against Derrida.<sup>9</sup>

Geoffrey Bennington translated “Mon corps, ce papier, ce feu” into English in 1979 as “My Body, this Paper, This Fire,” (Foucault 2006c) shortly after the 1978 translation of Derrida's “Cogito et histoire de la folie.” Foucault's defence of the original passage on Descartes against Derrida was therefore made available in English many years before the original passage to which Derrida had actually referred.

The 1972 edition was eventually translated into English in 2006 by Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa, and published as the *History of Madness*.<sup>10</sup> This is the first complete edition of the text to appear in English. It is actually more complete than the 1972 edition upon which it is based as it also includes the original 1961 preface. The event of its publication is the first time that the unabridged 1961 preface and the original 1961 passage on Descartes have appeared in English. It is also the first time that Foucault's 1964 paper and 1972 appendix “La folie, l'absence d'œuvre” has been translated; “Madness, the Absence of an *Œuvre*” (Foucault 2006b, 541-9, henceforth MAO).

Derrida presented once more on Foucault's 1961 text at a conference marking the thirtieth anniversary of its original publication in 1991. Derrida's paper was published in a collection of papers from that conference in 1992 as "Être juste avec Freud: l'histoire de la folie à l'âge psychanalytique." (Derrida 1992) The paper was then translated into English by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas and published in 1994 as "To Do Justice to Freud: The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis." (Derrida 1994)

## 2. "La folie, l'absence d'œuvre"

The exchange between Derrida and Foucault has attracted a considerable amount of commentary and attention (See Bennington 1979; Boyne 1990; Brague 2002; Cook 1990; D'Amico 1984; Felman 1975; Flaherty 1986; Flynn 1989; Frank 1989; Harrison 2007; Kates 2005; Norris 1987, 213-223; Spivak 1976, lx-lxii; Switzer 2010; Wood 2009, 46-59; Žižek 2007).<sup>11</sup> While Foucault's original characterisation of madness as the absence of an *œuvre* in the 1961 Preface has received some attention (See Bennington 1979; Flynn 1989), the commentary on the exchange has been almost completely silent on MAO.

Only Shoshana Felman's article "Madness and Philosophy or Literature's Reason" refers to MAO in the context of a consideration of the exchange between Derrida and Foucault (Felman 1975, 224). Felman quotes one brief statement from MAO in order to illustrate Foucault's literary understanding of madness but does not undertake an exposition of the paper or comment generally on the relation of this paper to the exchange.

Foucault and Derrida never explicitly identified MAO as an important part of their exchange. Foucault does not refer to Derrida in MAO and describes "Mon corps, ce papier, ce feu" as where he responds to Derrida (Foucault 1972, „Préface”). Foucault's response to Derrida in "Mon corps, ce papier, ce feu" is largely restricted to the question over the status of madness in Descartes. This has been noted by Bennington (1979, 5-7) and Flynn (1989, 201).

Flynn writes that “[t]he basis of Derrida's critique of Foucault is hardly the pedantic concern that Descartes's First Meditation may have been misread in a passage that occupies less than 4 pages of a 673-page book” (Flynn 1989, 201).<sup>12</sup> Flynn's point here is somewhat overstated because Derrida does contest the question of madness in Descartes but he is correct to highlight the limitations of a sole emphasis on this aspect of the argumentation. Derrida spends the first half of CHM – some twenty pages – opening a number of questions over Foucault's intentions and methodology before broaching the specifics of Foucault's interpretation of the status of madness in Descartes.

Derrida relies on material from Foucault's 1961 preface in this first half of CHM, as Khalfa correctly points out (Khalifa 2006, xxiii). Khalfa also notes that Foucault reformulates themes from the 1961 Preface in MAO (Khalifa 2006, xxiii) but it does not seem to occur to him that these points might be combined into the question that I intend to raise here. The question of whether Foucault's MAO ought to be considered some kind of reaction or response to Derrida's CHM.

Having already situated MAO within a clarified chronology of the exchange between Derrida and Foucault, I now propose to undertake a thematic consideration of Foucault's 1961 characterisation of madness as the absence of an *œuvre* and examine the role it plays for Derrida's argumentation in CHM. On the basis of this thematic exploration it becomes possible to show that Foucault not only addresses the same thematic concerns in MAO as those raised by Derrida in the first half of CHM but also that (a) Foucault alters his 1961 position on the question of how madness relates to language, and (b) dramatically shifts his emphasis from Descartes to Freud.

### **3. Foucault's initial characterisation of madness as the absence of an *œuvre* and Derrida's interest in this**

In the original 1961 preface Foucault poses the question: “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?” Foucault answers by asserting

that madness is "[i]n all probability, nothing other than *the absence of an oeuvre*" (Foucault 2006d, xxxi). These statements are omitted in the abridgement of the preface for the 1964 edition but it is in relation to this that Derrida states in "Cogito and the History of Madness" that "madness is what by essence cannot be said: it is the 'absence of the work,' as Foucault profoundly says" (Derrida 1978, CHM 51).<sup>13</sup> Derrida accepts Foucault's assertion that madness is the absence of an *oeuvre* and recognises it as "a fundamental motif of Foucault's book." (Derrida 1978, CHM 65).

Foucault's assertion that madness is the absence of an *oeuvre* is associated with a number of arguments in Foucault's text and Derrida does not treat of them all equally. Madness as the absence of an *oeuvre* is (1) the historical identification of those who could not work among the incarcerated poor during the great confinement; (2) the absence of a body of work representing madness as madness; (3) that which makes history possible.

(1) The assertion that madness is the absence of an *oeuvre* refers to how madness emerged as a way of characterising the poor who could not work during the great confinement. Foucault states of the mad that:

Like the poor, they were subject to the rule of compulsory labour, indeed in many cases the singularity of their condition became perceptible against the uniformity of this constraint. In the workshops where they were expected to blend in with the others, they often signalled themselves through their inability to work and to follow the rhythms of collective life. (Foucault 2006a, 71)

For Foucault, madness initially emerges historically as a characterisation of the poor who could not work or who produce nothing. The term madness is first deployed historically as the recognition of the absence of an *oeuvre* in this sense.<sup>14</sup> Derrida pays no obvious attention to this aspect of Foucault's assertion except insofar as the inability of the mad to engage in physical labour might be linked to the inability of the mad to create a written *oeuvre*. Such a link can be identified in Derrida's opening allusion to Hegel in CHM in which he undertakes a textual reformulation of the master slave dialectic. In Derrida's reformulation, the work that fosters the development of the

disciple's self-consciousness is the task of beginning to speak and the production of the text.

(2) Madness as the absence of an *œuvre* also refers to the absence of a body of work representing madness as madness. Foucault states:

There is no common language: or rather, it no longer exists; the constitution of madness as mental illness, at the end of the eighteenth century, bears witness to a rupture in a dialogue, gives the separation as already enacted, and expels from the memory all those imperfect words, of no fixed syntax, spoken falteringly, in which the exchange between madness and reason was carried out. The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue by reason *about* madness, could only have come into existence in such a silence. My intention was not to write the history of that language, but rather draw up the archaeology of that silence. (Foucault 2006d, xxviii)

Here Foucault argues that there was a prelapsarian time before discourse was divided into mad discourse on one hand and reasonable discourse on the other. The mad discourse is silenced and in this silence arises a monologue by reason about madness; a monologue that attempts to define and categorise madness, but in applying such *reasonable ways of knowing* never understands madness madly. For Foucault this is related to the constitution of madness as madness because “[t]he gesture that divides madness is the constitutive one”. (Foucault 2006d, xxviii) The silence that results from this division is madness as the absence of an *œuvre*.

Derrida accepts Foucault's assertion, but uses it to problematise the possibility of Foucault's text. Derrida argues that:

Foucault has attempted – and this is the greatest merit, but also the very infeasibility of his book – to write a history of madness *itself*. *Itself*. Of madness itself. That is, by letting madness speak for itself. Foucault wanted madness to be the *subject* of his book in every sense of the word: its theme and its first-person narrator, it's author, madness speaking about itself. Foucault wanted to write a history of madness *itself*, that is madness speaking on the basis of its own experience and under its own authority, and not a history of madness described from within the language of reason. (Derrida 1978, CHM 39)

Derrida identifies Foucault's ambition to let madness speak for itself as the desire to give madness an *œuvre*. Foucault's



assertion that madness is the absence of an *œuvre* then becomes a pivotal point, because Foucault's work will either actually be a work and hence a work of reason that fails to allow madness speak for itself, or will fail in such a drastic manner that it cannot be considered a work at all.

Foucault's intention is to create a work of madness without falling into the trap that Derrida argues it necessarily leads to. Foucault believes that it is possible to avoid this trap by returning to:

[A] language more original, much rougher and 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 non-reason are confusedly implicated in each other, inseparable as they do not yet exist, and existing for each other. (Foucault 2006d, xxviii)

Foucault believes that it is in this undivided language, where madness and reason are not yet separated, that his 1961 text is written. The ability to characterise language in this way is therefore very important for Foucault.

Derrida challenges Foucault's ability to utilise such an undivided language. Derrida argues that:

The misfortune of the mad, the interminable misfortune of their silence, is that their best spokesmen are those who betray them best; which is to say that when one attempts to convey their silence itself, one has already passed over to the side of the enemy, the side of order, even if one fights against order from within it. (Derrida 1978, CHM 42)

Derrida concludes that Foucault's attempt to create a work, especially a history, without a rational is ultimately naïve. Derrida asks rhetorically: "is not an archaeology, even of silence, a logic, that is, an organized language, a project, an order, a sentence, a syntax, a work?" (Derrida 1978, CHM 41) Derrida argues that "the work starts with the most elementary discourse" (Derrida 1978, CHM 65). Derrida's argument is that a rationality of some kind is intrinsic to language itself. He argues that *FD* cannot be a work of madness as Foucault desires, but is instead yet another work of reason. This is the core political charge of Derrida's CHM: that Foucault is only imprisoning madness in a more subtle way by denouncing its

imprisonment in a work that is itself inescapably reasonable, even if it is only separated from madness “by the ‘transparent sheet’ of which Joyce speaks” (Derrida 1978, CHM 66) when Joyce writes of *Ulysses* that “[i]n any event this book was terribly daring. A transparent sheet separates it from madness.” (Derrida 1978, CHM 36).

With this in mind, Derrida asks the cutting question of Foucault's text, “[w]ould not the archaeology of silence [i.e. of madness] be the most efficacious and subtle restoration, the repetition, in the most irreducibly ambiguous meaning of the word, of the act perpetrated against madness – and be so at the very moment when this act is denounced?” (Derrida 1978, CHM 41). This is the most embarrassing question that Derrida asks of Foucault in CHM because it deflates the moral tone and liberatory aspirations of *FD*. Foucault sought to emancipate madness, but Derrida argues that all he can do is denounce the crime of its incarceration while repeating it.

Derrida argues that Foucault's naivety in believing that it is possible to escape the ordered nature of language effectively causes his project to default to a situation in which Foucault can be said to have created a non-work of madness: “Foucault's determination to avoid this trap is constant. It is the most audacious and seductive aspect of his venture, producing its admirable tension. But it is also, with all seriousness, the *maddest* aspect of his project.” (Derrida 1978, CHM 40) For Derrida, Foucault's text can only be considered a work of madness because the work is unaware of its own impossibility. Foucault's work could not have been mad if it knowingly deployed a strategy of impossibility. It is only because Foucault does not realise that his project must fail so that it can, somewhat paradoxically, succeed. Derrida informs Foucault that he has only succeeded in spite of himself.<sup>15</sup>

(3) For Foucault, the absence of an *œuvre* is also what must be considered in order to come to terms with the full truth of our society. He argues that:

[T]hose obscure gestures [...] 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. [...] To interrogate a culture about its limit-experience is to question it at the confines of

history about a tear that is something like the very birth of its history. (Foucault 2006d, xxix)

Here Foucault claims that what a society forces outside of itself creates the exterior that defines the interior of that society as much as what that society claims to stand for. This point is further developed by Foucault when he writes that:

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 ... The charred root of meaning. (Foucault 2006d, xxxii)<sup>16</sup>

Foucault argues that the work of society, its history, is linked to its non-work, its non-history. Foucault wishes to consider society from both sides of the delimitation that makes it the society that it is, with the intention of coming to a more profound understanding of it than would otherwise be possible. Though such an understanding would be more profound than a consideration of society that only operates on the reasonable side of that limit, Foucault argues that it is actually necessary to understanding in general:

*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*. (Foucault 2006d, xxxii)

Foucault holds that it is necessary for understanding in general to understand the absence of an *œuvre*. It has become a matter of the possibility and constitution of meaning in general and as such, that is to say of the transcendental in a Husserlian sense.

Derrida is aware of implicit problems for Foucault's project in this understanding of the absent *œuvre* as that which makes history possible. Derrida argues that if this separation between madness and reason is a condition of "the historicity of history" (Derrida 1978, CHM 51), then the event of the separation of madness and reason – what Foucault considers the birth of history – cannot itself be an historical event. This

runs contrary to Foucault's attempt to historicise this event in his 1961 text such as when, for example, he refers to the separation of madness and reason taking place during a particular time frame: “[a]fter defusing its violence, the Renaissance had liberated the voice of Madness. The age of reason, in a strange takeover, was then to reduce it to silence” (Foucault 2006a, 44). Derrida's point here is somewhat confusing. He may appear to be arguing that the separation of madness and reason is pre-historical but this is not the case.

Archaeology can give a history of a time before historical records by examining, for example, remains from the neolithic period. This might lead one to conclude that it is possible to give an account of a pre-historical event. Such a conclusion would fail to realise that the term pre-historical implies temporality in a historical sense. To attempt to talk of the pre-historical is to historicise history itself and this is, inevitably, a historical gesture. Derrida is not arguing that the birth of history is pre-historical (a historical understanding) but rather that the birth of history is irrecoverable to any historical gesture. It is not a matter of history but of historicity; of history *qua* history, of the historicalness of history, of that which makes history as such possible but is not itself historical.

Derrida states that “Like nonmeaning, silence is the work's profound limit and resource.” (Derrida 1978, CHM 66) This resonates positively with Foucault's assertion that madness is the absence of an *œuvre* that necessarily accompanies the actual *œuvre*. It is relatively straightforward to understand that silence is the limit of the work when this is understood to mean that silence is the limit of language. For Derrida, this silence would not only be the absence of speech but also the absence of the written mark. It is not itself a mark, but nevertheless this non-mark still produces a difference between the marking of language and the non-marking of non-language.

Silence produces the limits of the work and hence defines and determines the specificity of the work as the work it actually is. It operates at every level of a text – every grapheme takes shape in ink against the blankness of the page and Foucault's work takes shape against the absence of an *œuvre*. Derrida therefore recognises the importance of Foucault's point

that the “great *œuvre* of the history of the world is indelibly accompanied by the absence of an *œuvre*, which renews itself at every instant” (Foucault 2006d, xxxii) Derrida's concludes that madness is not excluded from the cogito in the name of reason because madness is what exceeds the form of any ordered determination of the cogito. The blankness of the page will always exceed whatever is written upon it, making what is written possible but never exhausting itself in the taking place of writing. Silence is the condition of possibility for the work but it is not a resource.

This sense of madness as the absence of an *œuvre* is very close to what Derrida will come to term *différance*. The proximity of Derrida's consideration of madness as the absence of an *œuvre* to *différance* is evidenced by Derrida's revision of “Cogito et histoire de la folie” to include this term for its 1967 republication in *L'Écriture et la différence*. It is also evidenced in the prominence given to the motif of silence in Derrida's discussion of *différance* in *La voix et le phénomène*.<sup>17</sup> Having established the role of Foucault's 1961 characterisation of madness as the absence of an *œuvre* in relation to Derrida's 1963 argumentation, I now move to consider Foucault's reformulation of these themes in his 1964 paper.

#### 4. Foucault's 1964 paper “Madness, the Absence of an *Œuvre*”

Foucault's MAO departs from his 1961 text substantially in relation to the themes considered in the previous section. There is also a shift in style and methodology away from history, marked by the adoption of a prophetic tone. Foucault offers a new schematisation of how madness relates to language, one that is markedly different from his earlier statements. Finally, the matter of the strange violent event that was said in 1961 to have taken place at the end of the renaissance and the beginning of the classical age is shifted from Descartes to Freud with dramatic implications.

Foucault's 1961 discussion of madness as the absence of an *œuvre* discusses the significance of this phrase in relation to

history but he discusses madness as the absence of an *œuvre* without mentioning history in MAO:

[A] prodigious *reserve* of meaning. But 'reserve' here should be understood less as a stock than as a figure that contains and suspends meaning, which furnishes a void where all that is proposed is the still unaccomplished possibility that a certain meaning might appear there, or a second, or a third, and so on to infinity. (Foucault 2006b, MAO 547)

Instead of a history there is now prophecy. The still unaccomplished possibility; the *not yet said* of madness; the messianic promise of a future meaning.

Foucault opens MAO with the future oriented statement that “[o]ne day, perhaps, we will no longer know what madness was. Its form will have closed up on itself, and the traces it will have left will no longer be intelligible” (Foucault 2006b, MAO 541). This quotation implies that madness is presently still intelligible in some way, or at least potentially intelligible, because there may come a time when it will no longer be so. And yet madness cannot have been absolutely silenced by a historical event, as claimed in the 1961 preface, if it is still potentially intelligible today.

Potential intelligibility implies potential communicability, and therefore language in the broadest sense – and madness cannot then be silence and the absence of an *œuvre*. The exclusion and silencing of madness is no longer to be considered a historical event at the end of the seventeenth century but rather a threatening future possibility. It also suggests that it is possible to escape the relationship to madness that Foucault insists our putatively reasonable society is currently incapable of escaping. Would this not constitute another mysterious event of comparable importance to that which originally silenced madness but left our society in a relationship with this silence, this exclusion? Something must surely change in order for our society to be able to escape the already inescapable relationship to that which it already so vehemently denies.

Foucault continues his 1964 article by stating that “To the ignorant glance, will those traces be anything more than simple black marks?” (Foucault 2006b, MAO 541). Foucault here argues that the meaning of black marks will be missed.

These black marks appear to be an allusion to writing but perhaps a writing that is not recognised as such. A language that is no longer recognised as significant. There is again an orientation towards the future in Foucault's question here. If making broad philosophical claims concerning the empirical past has become a problem for Foucault's project, then his project will abandon history to dispute the future.

Foucault's characterisation of madness as black marks that cannot be understood by an ignorant glance implies that madness is still a language even if it is not understood as such. Rather than madness being excluded from language, madness is now a language that is no longer recognised as meaningful. Madness is no longer simply reduced to silence by a historical event. It is now as if society simply stopped caring to listen.

Foucault makes a distinction in MAO between the prohibition of acts and prohibitions within language:

The systems that forbidden acts obey are familiar [...] But the organisation of prohibitions in language is still little understood. The two systems of restriction are not superimposed the one on the other, as though one were merely the verbal version of the other [...] One day it will be necessary to study the field of prohibitions in language in all its autonomy. (Foucault 2006b, MAO 545)

This distinction is not a dichotomy. Foucault states that madness "long occupied an undecided region, which is difficult for us to define, between the prohibition of action and that of language" (Foucault 2006b, MAO 545-6). Focusing on language allows Foucault to discern four codes of prohibition within language:

[1] First of all, at the border between taboo and impossibility, we should identify the laws that govern the linguistic code (the things that are called, so clearly, *language faults*); [2] and then, within the code, and among the words or existing expressions, those whose articulation is forbidden (the religious, sexual, magic series of *blasphemous words*); [3] then the statements that are authorised by the code, licit in the act of speech, but whose meaning is intolerable for the culture in question at a given moment: here a metaphorical detour is no longer possible, for it is the meaning itself which is the object of *ensorship*. [4] Finally, there is a fourth form of excluded language: this consists of submitting speech that apparently conforms to the recognised code to a different code, whose key is contained within that speech itself, so that the speech is doubled

inside itself; it says what it says, but it adds a mute surplus that silently states what it says and the code according to which it is said. This is not a question of coded language, but of a language that is structurally esoteric. Which is to say that it does not communicate, while hiding it, a forbidden meaning; it sets itself up from the very first instant in an essential fold of speech. (Foucault 2006b, MAO 545 numbering added)

Foucault then states that “[i]n Western history, the experience of madness has shifted along this scale” (Foucault 2006b, MAO 545).

The first three of these codes of prohibition are relatively straightforward and Foucault gives examples of how madness is subject to each:

[M]adness is the excluded language – [1] the one which against the code of language pronounces words without meaning (the 'insane', the 'imbeciles', the 'demented'), [2] or the one which pronounces sacred words (the 'violent', the 'frenzied'), [3] or the one which puts forbidden meanings into circulation ('libertines', the 'obstinate'). (Foucault 2006b, MAO 546 [numbers added])

Of the fourth code of prohibition in language Foucault states that this “modification only really came about with Freud” (Foucault 2006b, MAO 546). Foucault therefore associates this code of prohibition with the development of psychoanalysis, and this may allow one to begin to understand the otherwise mysterious character of this fourth code of language prohibition.

Foucault explains that this psychoanalytic modification of language prohibition:

[A]ppeared as speech wrapped up in itself, saying, below everything that it says, something else, for which it is at the same time the only possible code: an esoteric language perhaps, since its language is contained inside a speech that ultimately says nothing other than this implication. (Foucault 2006b, MAO 546)

Madness is therefore speech that “says nothing other than this implication” of something else, that is itself not actually said. Mad speech says nothing other than carrying the unspoken implication that the speaker is mad.

This ability of mad speech to say nothing other than this mute implication of madness, regardless of what is actually said, makes madness for Foucault:



[A] prodigious *reserve* of meaning. But 'reserve' here should be understood less as a stock than as a figure that contains and suspends meaning, which furnishes a void where all that is proposed is the still unaccomplished possibility that a certain meaning might appear there, or a second, or a third, and so on to infinity. (Foucault 2006b, MAO 547)

Madness is conveyed mutely by implication, but it never plainly reveals itself regardless of what is actually said. Madness is *never yet said* and in this there is a messianic promise that it might be revealed in future – “the still unaccomplished possibility that a certain meaning might appear” – yet any actual revelation will not be madness itself, which still cannot itself be said as long as this code remains in effect.

The fourth code of language prohibition thus takes on the whole significance of madness as the absence of an *œuvre*. Foucault writes that:

Since Freud, Western madness has become a non-language because it has become a double language (a language which only exists in this speech, a speech that says nothing but its language) – i.e. a matrix of the language which, strictly speaking, says nothing. A fold of the spoken which is an absence of work.

One day, it will have to be acknowledged that Freud did not make *speak* a madness that had genuinely been a language for centuries (a language that was excluded, garrulous inanity, speech which ran indefinitely outside the reflective silence of reason); what he did was silence the unreasonable Logos; he dried it out; he forced its words back to their source, all the way back to that blank region of auto-implication where nothing is said. (Foucault 2006b, MAO 547)

Foucault's strategy in MAO is therefore to create a distinction between the prohibition of acts and prohibitions in language, while arguing that madness is located in a region difficult to define between these two kinds of prohibitions; then he briefly describes four kinds of prohibition in language, while arguing that madness has shifted through these as a scale; then he links the fourth type of prohibition in language to Freud, and finally proffers this code of prohibition as the meaning of madness as the absence of an *œuvre*.

Foucault's strategy in reformulating this key phrase – remember that he stated in the 1961 preface “What then is madness... In all probability, nothing other than *the absence of an œuvre*” (Foucault 2006d, xxxi) – is to marginalise its

centrality to his understanding of madness. The absence of an *œuvre* is no longer the answer to the question “What then is madness” (Foucault 2006d, xxxi), but only a subset of a greater subset of the answer to this question. Moreover, Foucault attempts to transform the phrase from a key tenet of his own project – the answer to the question “[w]hat is madness ... for anyone who immediately challenges any hold that knowledge might have upon it?” (Foucault 2006d, xxxi) – to a phrase that merely describes what Freud has done to madness.

In *Folie et déraison*, Foucault writes that “[a]fter defusing its violence, the Renaissance had liberated the voice of Madness. The age of reason, in a strange act of force, was then to reduce it to silence.” (Foucault 2006a, 44) Whereas in MAO Foucault writes that (repeating this quotation):

Freud did not make *speak* a madness that had genuinely been a language for centuries (a language that was excluded, garrulous inanity, speech which ran indefinitely outside the reflective silence of reason); what he did was silence the unreasonable Logos; he dried it out; he forced its words back to their source, all the way back to that blank region of auto-implication where nothing is said. (Foucault 2006b, MAO 547)

Freud finally dries madness out by making the unconscious nothing of madness meaningful through psychoanalysis. Madness therefore appears to be a language for Foucault in 1964 *until* Freud silences it. Foucault states that up to this point madness was a language in spite of it being 'excluded' and considered 'garrulous inanity'. The prohibition of madness takes place *within* language until Freud.

Foucault held in 1961 that there was a division within a prelapsarian discourse that created reason and madness through the exclusion of madness from language, but in 1964 Foucault maintains that the prohibitions of madness in language does not exclude madness from language but rather makes madness subject to a code of operation *within* language. In the fourth case of language prohibition, Foucault argues that Freud discovers madness as “the irruptive figure of a signifier that is *absolutely unlike* the others.” (Foucault 2006b, MAO 546) A signifier is still a sign, even if it is absolutely unlike all the others. Even if madness is not this strange signifier itself

but the difference between this signifier and all others – madness is still manifesting at this signifier and it is not clear how this manifestation of meaning in association with a signifier could be sharply distinguished from ordinary associations of meaning with a signifier. Foucault therefore withdraws substantially from his claim that madness was silenced and excommunicated from language and that madness is the absence of an *œuvre*.

Historically, madness is no longer silenced for Foucault at the end of the Renaissance and the start of the classical age – a silencing associated with Descartes and the incarceration of the poor in the Great Confinement – but is instead silenced by Freud in the nineteenth century. If Freud is now responsible for the “[t]he caesura that establishes the distance between reason and non-reason” (Foucault 2006d, xxviii), then Foucault may find himself in the unenviable position of having engaged in the historical study of the wrong historical period in *Folie et déraison* or, if Freud is to be considered the culmination of the caesura rather than the caesura itself, with an *event*, if this word is still appropriate, that appears to last for centuries across hundreds of incidents. No longer really an event but an eventually. A difference weakened by the scale of centuries on which it must be grasped.

## 5. Working silence

Should “La folie, l'absence d'œuvre” be considered part of the exchange between Derrida and Foucault? It has been necessary to open this question in the midst of an uncertain silence. A silence that has never been decisively broken by either Foucault or Derrida. There is a temptation to defer to these figures and their silence on this matter. To merely trace the possibility of a certain trajectory; remark the importance of an apparent absence or narrate a history destined to remain suspended. Perhaps such a temptation will always remain but through my labour I have at least come to know my own mind on this matter.

In this paper I have shown that Foucault's “La folie, l'absence d'œuvre” ought to be understood as part of the

exchange with Derrida. I have shown that it fits within a clarified chronology of the exchange with Derrida and that the title of this 1964 paper is important in a number of ways for Foucault's 1961 book *Folie et déraison* (Foucault 1961) and Derrida's 1963 paper "Cogito et histoire de la folie." (Derrida 1963) I have argued that MAO represents a change in position by Foucault on many of the key themes addressed by Derrida. Namely, that Foucault sets out to minimise the previous importance of his initial characterisation of madness as the absence of an *œuvre* and substantially alters his position on the relation between madness and language. Foucault dramatically shifts the locus of the exchange from Descartes to Freud with MAO and it is in relation to Freud that Derrida re-approaches Foucault's *Folie et déraison* in 1991 with "Etre juste avec Freud: l'histoire de la folie à l'âge psychanalytique." In doing so Derrida appears to silently recognise "La folie, l'absence d'œuvre" as a silent response by Foucault to "Cogito et histoire de la folie" and implicitly confirm its place within the exchange.

In any case, I am about to be evicted. I feel the silence coming for my last word.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper has been prepared for publication while in receipt of funding from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

<sup>2</sup> "Derrida avait invité Foucault dans une lettre de 3 février" (Foucault 1994, 25).

<sup>3</sup> Alan Bass makes a faithful translation from *L'Écriture et la différence* of this erroneous note (Derrida 1978, 437n).

<sup>4</sup> This note originally appeared in the very first publication in 1963 in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* (Derrida 1963, 460n). The note is then reproduced in 1967 in *L'Écriture et la différence* (Derrida 1967a, 51n). There are slight changes to this note between the 1963 and the 1967 versions but the material quoted remains the same so I have simply used the Alan Bass translation.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault had denied that the Greeks had a relationship to madness where as Derrida maintains that this cannot have been the case. Remi Brague affirms Derrida against Foucault to argue that the Greeks had a relationship to madness (Brague 2002, 112). If the Greeks had a relationship to madness then this relationship would pre-date the violent event at the beginning of the classical age that is taken by Derrida to be the constitution of madness as such for Foucault. Derrida allows that reason exists in particular ways in

particular historical periods but he does not allow reason to be reduced or limited to a particular historical example (this is in keeping with the Husserlian resistance to psychologism and historicism of which Derrida was well aware).

<sup>6</sup> This statement appears in the 1967 edition as: "L'économie de cette écriture est un rapport réglé entre l'excédant et la totalité excédée: la *différence* de l'excès absolu" (Derrida 1967a, 96).

<sup>7</sup> Also note: "Foucault déchantait lorsque l'éditeur refusa de republier l'édition intégrale" (Foucault 1994, I, 26).

<sup>8</sup> *Dits et écrits* states that the first version of "Mon corps, ce papier, ce feu" titled "Michel Foucault Derrida e no kaino" or "Réponse à Derrida" was published as an article in the Japanese journal *Paideia* in 1972 (Foucault 1994, I, 281). The "Michel Foucault Derrida e no kaino (Réponse à Derrida)" appears in French in volume II of *Dits et écrits* (Foucault 1994, II, 281-295).

<sup>9</sup> In 1976 a slightly different edition of Foucault's 1972 edition is published under the same title: *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. The 1976 edition removes the two appendices, "La folie, l'absence d'œuvre" and "Mon corps, ce papier, ce feu," added to the 1972 edition and the brief comments Foucault makes about these appendices in the 1972 preface. Scholars might consider it safe to ignore this publication as it adds nothing new to the text but the same rule would have applied to the 1964 edition and the dissemination of that version has had a marked influence on the historical reception of Foucault's text and the exchange with Derrida.

<sup>10</sup> The choice of title for the translation is slightly confusing as *History of Madness* would be the most direct translation of the title of the abridged 1964 edition *Histoire de la folie* whereas the 2006 translation is based on the 1972 edition with the longer title *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. The cause is likely that what Foucault terms the classical age is not the Greek and Roman period that this phrase connotes for English speaking readers but the period following the Renaissance.

<sup>11</sup> My thanks to Timothy Mooney for bringing Manfred Frank's comments on this matter to my attention.

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps Flynn is reacting against Flaherty's consideration of the exchange between Derrida and Foucault in terms of a disagreement over how to read Descartes (Flaherty 1986).

<sup>13</sup> I have been tempted to consider Foucault's 1964 abridgement of *Folie et déraison* as part of his reaction to Derrida's CHM. The case for such an interpretation would have to be made on the basis of Foucault's rather precise removal of his discussion of Descartes at the start of the second chapter and removal of the rhetorical question and answer concerning the characterisation of madness as the absence of an *œuvre* from the 1961 Preface and Foucault's subsequent reformulation of these respective themes in MAO and "Mon corps, ce papier, ce feu." Against such an interpretation would be the fact that the abridgement was reluctantly undertaken by Foucault in order to prepare a popular edition for his editors (see note 6) and the relevant materials were removed alongside many of no relevance to Derrida's argumentation.

<sup>14</sup> This sense of madness as the absence of an *œuvre* is interesting because a group of people with this ambiguous relationship to the means of production

who are clearly subject to political and juridical power marks a potential point of departure from Marx in Foucault's early work.

<sup>15</sup> This is why Foucault's work is only separated from madness by a transparent sheet for Derrida (cf. Wood 2009, 47).

<sup>16</sup> Note that in the Alan Bass translation Derrida quotes the last part of this passage as "The calcinated root of meaning" (Derrida 1978, 41).

<sup>17</sup> I am thinking especially of the discussion of *différance* in the chapter titled "La voix qui garde le silence" (Derrida 1967b, 78-97).

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