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Notes on Foucault's *History of Madness*

What is it that Foucault is doing in the *History of Madness* — philosophy or history (or neither or both)? How is the possibility of any such project threatened (or enabled) by the figure of madness or skepticism as "interior to reason" (35)? What kind of method is adequate to these questions?

I think there is some truth to Jean Khalfa's statement in the first line of his introduction to the 2006 edition that "Foucault's *History of Madness* has yet to be read" (xiii). In my view, what makes the work so remarkable is the presence already of themes that would be elaborated in much more detail by Foucault, and then in turn by different strands of his reception — confinement, governmentality, and biopolitics; social deviancy and the history of sexuality; subjectification and histories of the self; and archaeology/genealogy, the question of method, that is what makes possible such investigations to start with, to name a few such strands. What makes this text so difficult to write about is that it contains so many Foucaults, probably more than even he knew at the time of writing. What makes it worth reading, for me, is that it provokes me to reflect on the ways in which Foucault has had a constitutive influence on the work I, like many others, aspire to today.

To give just one example, Foucault writes in the preface to the 1961 edition the following:

> 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. (xxx)

We could say that this history was produced, about two decades later, by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. What does it mean to say that? What kind of reception, or reworking, of

Foucault is undertaken by Said? This is not the place to treat this question at length, but I would venture to say at least that the American reception of Foucault in the 1970s especially by literary critics like Edward Said, Hayden White, etc. reads Foucault against himself as an anti-realist, by focusing excessively on the structuralist elements of Foucault's work — for instance, making his "discourse" into "text," such that White can consider history "purely as formal verbal structures" (*Metahistory*, p. 4) — without adequately reckoning with the relationship of discourse with reality (which is to say, the traces of phenomenology and Kant in Foucault).

Now, Foucault does speak of his book in the 1972 preface as "nothing other than the sentences of which it is made," an "object-event" that is just one of many "flickering simulacra" (xxxviii). Yet I would insist that there remains something excessive in the work, something in the method and the text that is more than just text, though certainly less than positivistic history (whether social or intellectual). There are questions here of Foucault's own development and of the swirling translations of Foucault across disciplines and languages that I will not treat. Instead, I want to indicate a little of *why* and *how* I take the *History of Madness* to be saying something about history not just as a series of texts but also as things and people who lived (and loved, and died, and thought) in the past. This reading highlights the ethical and political stakes of Foucault's project. One direction in which the *History of Madness* is developed (especially through the great success of *Les mots et les choses*, *The Order of Things*) is as a story of discourses and only discourses; by contrast, Foucault's own development of it, after his visit to Iran and in his work on the ancients, makes central one's ethical relationships, not least with oneself. I want to show how these threads are already present in three brief moments of the *History of Madness*: (1) the debate with Derrida; (2) the question of method; and (3) the emphasis on the limits that in Nietzsche's view are necessary for life to obtain at all. (As he writes in *On the Uses and*

Disadvantages of History for Life, "a living thing can be healthy, strong and fruitful only when bounded by a horizon … just as not only light but darkness too is essential for the life of everything organic" [trans. Hollingdale, pp. 62–63].) In so reading Foucault I may be guilty of the sin of presentism, but so be it.

I.

One important site for contestation is Foucault's heated debate with Derrida. This debate focuses on the first few pages of the second chapter of *History of Madness*, "The Great Confinement," in which Foucault writes about Descartes and makes a provocative link between his exclusion of madness from reason, and thus the foundation of Cartesian philosophy, and the contemporaneous confinement of the mad in 17th-century France. Specifically, Descartes refuses to consider the possibility that he himself is mad, excluding it a priori from his meditations, instead moving quickly to consider the possibility that he is dreaming. Descartes writes in justification: "I would be equally mad if I took anything from them [*viz*. the insane] as a model for myself."

Derrida makes two objections to Foucault's reading. First, he says that the experience of madness isn't excluded by Descartes but rather dealt with by the treatment of dreams, what Derrida calls "the hyperbolic exasperation of the hypothesis of madness" (thus, as Foucault says, madness is "neglected for a better, more radical example"; *My Body, This Paper, This Fire*, p. 556). But the second objection is much more serious. What is at stake for Derrida in the "hyperbolic audacity of the Cartesian Cogito" 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." Descartes' move to exclude madness *a priori* is not (just) historically situated but in fact the necessary condition of all

narratives of totality, whether histories of phenomena or philosophical stories about the nature and meaning of being.

One could read the *History of Madness* as a history (which it is, as the abundant anecdotes and rich descriptions of architecture, literature, and visual art indicate) or as a philosophy (whether a metaphysical work about the stages of consciousness/spirit as it comes to exclude unreason, that is as a Hegelian story of secularization, of rationalization, of *Bildung*, or a phenomenological work about the "undifferentiated experience" of madness that precedes its manifestation in the world, as Being precedes the many beings we observe the world) — in either case, to be saying something at all, Derrida would have it, means repeating or surreptitiously assuming the Cartesian move to exclude the possibility of one's own madness. In my reading, this is an argument that hinges on philosophy's ever-present foe, skepticism, the impossibility of knowledge at all.

If one accepts the necessity of Descartes' *a priori* exclusion of madness, then one has two options: either you claim to make that move and create a narrative premised on totality, whether a phenomenology or a history — but that narrative would by necessity exclude madness in its very constitution — or you become a skeptic and accept that your narrative, your discourse, is just a text, with no connection to reality whatsoever. Many historians and philosophers will accept the former conclusion, unwilling to give up a secure connection to reality, with various contortions involved to avoid unsavory implications of Descartes' philosophy. I think Derrida will take the latter option, and by extension this is I think what we see in the reception of Foucault read as part of "French theory" especially by American literary theorists in the 1970s and 1980s: everything is text, and there is nothing outside of text (but we then have to somehow deal with the prejudices of Descartes, not least his neglect of materiality and the body!).

II.

I think Foucault accepts neither option. He is certainly not a positivist in the traditional sense, although the "positive" plays an important role in his work, yet he is not a skeptic. Then, what is he? This is the question of method: what is it, in the end, that Foucault is doing in his work? I think Foucault could not have answered that at the outset of the book, although hints are present throughout, and his mind changed over the coming decades, as the different prefaces and the many allusions in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* indicate.

Thus, I think it is fair to turn to Agamben for the answer. Agamben makes three useful comparisons. First, he indicates that the "figure" — e.g. the Ship of Fools — that Foucault invokes can usefully be compared with Kuhn's paradigms: "it is a singular object that, standing equally for all others of the same class, defines the intelligibility of the group of which it is a part and which, at the same time, it constitutes" (*The Signature of All Things*, p. 17). Yet this leaves open the question of precise relation of the example, the particular, to the group, the universal. (Something Kuhn struggled to articulate himself, and in the end perhaps can only ever be indicated itself through examples, as the method is itself a paradigm; Kuhn and Foucault have, after all, themselves become founding figures of a certain sort of "normal science.")

Agamben's most useful move is to the *Prior Analytics*. He reminds us that Aristotle distinguished between three forms of argument: the syllogism (that is, deduction) is the movement from the whole to the part (ὡς ὅλον πρὸς μέρος); induction, by contrast, is the movement from the part to the whole (ὡς μέρος πρὸς ὅλον). Both of these forms of argument are premised on and constitutive of reason. Thus, as Bertrand Russell said, if we accept Hume's skeptical argument about the impossibility of induction, "there is no intellectual difference between sanity and insanity" (*A History of Western Philosophy*, p. 699).

Again, Foucault refuses to choose between these two poles. Agamben says he does so by going with Aristotle's third option, which he contrasts with both induction and deduction:

> Φανερὸν οὖν ὅτι τὸ παράδειγμά ἐστιν οὔτε ὡς μέρος πρὸς ὅλον οὔτε ὡς ὅλον πρὸς μέρος, ἀλλ᾽ ὡς μέρος πρὸς μέρος, ὅταν ἄμφω μὲν ᾖ ὑπὸ ταὐτό, γνώριμον δὲ θάτερον.
>
> Thus it is evident that an example represents the relation, not of part to whole or of whole to part, but of one part to another, where both are subordinate to the same general term, and one of them is known. (*Prior Analytics* 69a13–15)

"The paradigm," Agamben says in his commentary, "is defined by a third and paradoxical type of movement, which goes from the particular to the particular. The example constitutes a peculiar form of knowledge that does not proceed by articulating together the universal and the particular, but seems to dwell on the plane of the latter." The Ship of Fools is neither a particular example of a universal (e.g. some pre-existing "undifferentiated experience" of madness) nor a particular from which we can generate knowledge about the universal (e.g. as it might constitute a discourse).

So then, what are we doing? Are we simply *describing* a sequence of figures — as Wittgenstein suggests that when done right "philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything" (*Philosophical Investigations*, §126)? I think not. Working with examples is not quite skepticism, the impossibility of knowledge *tout court*; after all, you can come to know many particular things. But it is a sort of quietism. Quietism usefully deflates philosophy's and science's ambitions of totality, no doubt. Yet I am convinced of the urgency of nonetheless rendering some sort of judgment, or put otherwise the possibility of some sort of conversation *across* particulars, some sort of movement between paradigms. (Without the violence that attends many a paradigm shift or regime change.) Agamben reminds us that a rule or *regula* was not originally a set of principles one is forced to follow, but rather a means by which we come to live in common, a *κοινός βίος*: "*regula* simply means *conversatio fratrum*, the monks' way of life in a given monastery. It is

often identified with the founder's way of living envisaged as *forma vitae* — that is, as an example to be followed. … At least until Saint Benedict, the rule does not indicate a general norm but the living community (*koinos bios*, *cenobio*) that results from an example and in which the life of each monk tends at the limit to become paradigmatic." (p. 21–22)

Put differently, this question is asked by Kant with respect to judgments of the beautiful: how can we make judgments of particular things without subsuming them under the universal? (The political/ethical reading of Kant's third critique is precisely the project pursued by Hannah Arendt in the last volume of *The Life of the Mind*, her last great work left incomplete at the time of her death.) As Agamben puts it: "nowhere, perhaps, is the paradoxical relation between paradigms and generality as forcefully formulated as in *The Critique of Judgment*, where Kant conceives of the necessity of the aesthetic judgment in the form of an example for which it is impossible to state the rule" (p. 20). For Kant, the beautiful object (unlike the merely aesthetically pleasing object) is necessarily thought of as beautiful by everybody confronted by it ("it has a necessary reflection to satisfaction"). However, this necessity is neither theoretical (i.e. a priori like the categories) nor practical (i.e. due to an objective law like the categorical imperative): "rather, as a necessity that is thought in an aesthetic judgment, it can only be called *exemplary*, i.e., a necessity of the assent of *all* to a judgment that is regarded as an example of a universal rule that one cannot produce" (*AA* 5: 237). Thus, the example or paradigm does maintain a relationship with the rule, but not one of theoretical or practical necessity — not one of deduction from a universal rule or of induction from experiences such as "a complete unanimity in judgments about the beauty of a certain object)."

Agamben goes on to write: "We can therefore say, joining Aristotle's observations with those of Kant, that a paradigm entails a movement that goes from singularity to singularity and, without ever leaving singularity, transforms every singular case into an

exemplar of a general rule that can never be stated a priori" (p. 22). Agamben elucidates the shape of this movement with reference to Heidegger. (The movement within and beyond phenomenology to some sort of "groundless ground," in Levinas' words an "anarchical *archē*," is another shared characteristic between Agamben/Foucault and Arendt/Levinas.) Agamben notes: "in the paradigm, intelligibility does not precede the phenomenon; it stands, so to speak, 'beside' it (*para*)." Of course, the *para* has a strange relationship to temporality: in some sense the rule, even if fully lived and embodied and thus not possibly abstracted from the example, must stand apart and thus before the paradigm. But Agamben says: "The phenomenon, exposed in the medium of its knowability, shows the whole of which it is the paradigm. With regard to phenomena, this is not a presupposition (a 'hypothesis'): as a 'non-presupposed principle,' it stands neither in the past nor in the present but in their exemplary constellation." (p. 28) Or, as Agamben says in the conclusion:

> 4. The paradigmatic group is never presupposed by the paradigms; rather, it is immanent in them.
>
> 5. In the paradigm, there is no origin or *archē*; every phenomenon is the origin, every image archaic.
>
> 6. The historicity of the paradigm lies neither in diachrony nor in synchrony but in a crossing of the two. (p. 31)

To put it in terms of Foucault and Foucault's reception: the paradigm, e.g. the Ship of Fools, is neither the before of phenomenology and induction nor the after of logical positivism and deduction.

This long elaboration of Foucault's method offers a genuine solution, in my view, to Derrida's challenge. I believe I could have shown many of the points Agamben made through a patient reading of many of the figures in *History of Madness*; after all, each figure is a paradigm (in the sense of an example) in which the paradigm (in this sense of a method) is immanent; but Agamben's reading is much more elegant and succinct, and I think greatly aligns with what one comes to feel in reading Foucault's *History of Madness*.

III.

However, there is one point on which I want to return to Foucault's own words: the question of history, which is the question of limits (this is the Nietzschean insight), which is the question of self-making. Foucault writes in the preface to the 1961 edition the following:

> 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. (xxix)

One way of reading this passage (as I suggested earlier) is for the very Nietzschean insight that it is *limit-experiences* that constitute the very birth of history. Nietzsche writes in *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* that history is not constituted by remembering but by forgetting: in Jim Porter's words, "history is how we forget the past" ("Horizons of History in Nietzsche," p. 261). Those who are happiest are those who forget everything: like the cattle grazing in the field, "they do not know what is meant by yesterday or today, they leap about, eat, rest, digest, leap about again, and so from morn till night and from day to day, fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure, and thus neither melancholy nor bored" (trans. Hollingdale, p. 60). Porter helpfully notes the many synonyms of "limit" or "horizon" that Nietzsche uses in this essay and writes that "historical consciousness in general is the result of one such set of horizons: it frames our sense of the present by cordoning off and delimiting the events of the past. What falls outside this horizon is forgotten." More generally, Nietzsche is advancing a core claim that I see Foucault to also be making in this passage from the preface to the *History of Madness*: in Porter's words, "underlying his claim about history is a basic claim about human thought and awareness and

its need for containment, boundaries, and other kinds of limits in order to operate, and indeed in order for human life to obtain at all, never mind flourish." It is impossible to live without constraints: "The unhistorical is like an atmosphere within which alone life can germinate and with the destruction of which it must vanish" (Nietzsche, trans. Hollingdale, p. 63–4). Or, we might say, it is impossible to think and to write without limits on our knowledge.

The core insight I take to be shared by Foucault (as in a certain reading, e.g. by Stanley Cavell, of Wittgenstein) is that limits are not *constraints* on our freedom but *constitute* it. It is not a problem in any way that we "cannot" go beyond paradigms, figures, examples. The allure of philosophy, like science, of reaching an Archimedean point, a final ground, a "view from nowhere," is misguided. But that does not mean simply that we should be content with knowing nothing (Derrida), or knowing very little, just about the particulars and ordinary experiences we happen to be able to speak too (some readings of Wittgenstein). Rather, it is these limits of understanding that are *constitutive* of our knowledge as of our freedom to think and act. Our constitution, what Kant called the conditions of possibility that structure thought and what Cavell called "the specific plight of mind and circumstance within which a human being gives voice to his condition," is not something to be overcome but something that makes it possible for human life to obtain at all.