Tragic Experience and Critical Consciousness: Madness as the Presence of Transgression

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The role of madness has been an unexcavated part in studies of Foucault on transgression, especially with literary studies. This paper considers madness as the presence of transgression, and gives an account of madness from two different perspectives: tragic experience and critical consciousness. Madness as a tragic experience provides Foucault a way of transgressing death which is a limit that cannot be transcended; madness as a critical consciousness helps Foucault conceptualize the relation between reason and madness. The image of madmen in literary works can be recognized as the most typical embodiment of the connection between madness and transgression. Rather than aiming at a detailed explanation of Foucault’s understanding of madness, it attaches vital importance that how madness as a tragic experience and a critical consciousness becomes the presence of transgression.

Keywords: madness, transgression, tragic experience, critical consciousness

Madness is one of the most important concepts during the process of Michel Foucault’s studies on subjectivity as the touchstone, which also becomes a vital research topic among Foucauldian studies. Studies on madness contain an extraordinary variety in disciplinary specialization, including madness in pathology, madness and history, madness in literature. However, the role of madness has been an unexcavated part in studies of Foucault on his concept of transgression, which also a notable dimension connected to literary studies.

According to Foucault, madness, recognized as the beginning of his “history of problematizations”, continuously conflicted with reason in the classical age, which is the major content in Foile et déraison: Histoire de la foile à l’âge classique (Madness and Unreason: The History of Madness in the Classical Age). In this work, Foucault himself also discussed madness in literature as a literary topos, examining characters of madmen in various literary works, for instance, in Shakespeare, Sade and Corneille, with this foundation, it is necessary to analyze the relation between madness and transgression with literary images.

Madness and Literature

Madness was put forward by Foucault in order to illustrate the technologies of “subjection” by which individuals were formed as individuals, through the history of madness from the classical age to 19th century. His studies on the history of madness is “a history both of the way madness is defined and produced within society and of madness itself as an experience with precedes its significations” (During, 1992, p. 30). Foucault
mainly focused on various perspectives on madness, whether it should be seen as a medical disease or a philosophical phenomenon, trying to explain how western culture developed to define madness as the border of the society while patients became an institutionalized subject.

To differentiate madness with mental illness, Foucault pointed that “madness becomes the name for a condition which expresses a basic, not to say cosmic, lack, while mental illness is the term used to describe how society conceives of, and controls, madness” (During, 1992, p. 25), from which he implied that madness defined as mental illness was the symbol of under domination, because “the denouncing of madness became a general form of moral critique” (Foucault, 2006, p. 13) in western culture. Faced with this situation, madness was rectified to be the expression of certain universal truths lacking in the society, which is also the foundation of his discussion on madness and literature.

During Foucault’s literary period, madness was a key concept in his literary thoughts, for the image of madmen is quite hackneyed in literary works, as Foucault himself said,

> If madness drags everyone 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. (Foucault, 2006, p. 13)

In comedy, madness always appears in the figure of the fool with the function of satire and sarcasm, besides, the approach to realize this function is based on the split between madness and reason. “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” (Foucault, 2006, p. 19). Not only the separation between reason and madness, but the comparison between normal men and madmen became the evidence for Foucault to prove that madness was the mask of satire in literary works. On account of the conflict between madness and reason, characters in literary works also form an opposition. The exchange of King Lear himself became a vivid evidence that “there’s nothing surprising about this because King Lear is, without doubt, the very rare, the very solitary portrayal of a fully and completely tragic expression of madness” (Foucault, 2015, p. 10). Behaviors and discourses of the madman made a sharp contrast to those of normal people, which give authors a veiled but sharp way to express their opinions on the society and the human nature.

Thus, madness attaches vital importance to literary works not only in character creating but also in topic expression. Foucault also divided madness into two types: madness as a tragic experience and madness as a critical consciousness, both of which emerge and reveal in literary works. In addition, this kind of literary works was defined by Foucault as an art that “in its effort to master this reason in search of itself, recognizes the presence of madness, its own madness, circumscribes it, invests itself in it and finally triumphs over it” (Foucault, 2006, p. 35). The confrontation between tragic experience and critical consciousness actually promotes the understanding and interpretation of madness during the early Renaissance.

**Tragic Experience: Transgression of Death**

In regard to madness as a tragic experience, a typical feature is that this kind of madness totally rejects reason, trying to double madness. Due to the traits of it, madness as a tragic experience gains literary identification through characters and themes.

The madman in literary works through tragedies always believes in his vain presumption “with an imaginatively transformed version of his own self, where all the qualities, virtues and powers that he lacks
are present” (Foucault, 2006, p. 36), which points out that reason was excluded in his mind. Characters are fully trapped in his own imagination about himself, others and even the society, that is to say, madness usually is created from human beings themselves, hence, madness can be seen as a tragic experience. There is also another tragic madness reveals through themes of literary works, for instance, madness, because of the lack of justice and punishment, which can also be ascribed to the contrast between morality and madness. Among these similar themes, to some degrees, madness becomes a method to justice, because the disorder of the mind lasts the period of chastising, even to the eternity, added more tragic sense. Compared with the lack of justice and punishment, the theme of desperate emotions leads to tragic experience of madness as well. Desperate emotions causing madness includes love and family affection with bad endings, particularly connected to the threaten to death. Logically, the pursuit of love and family affection contains certain thoughts of yearning towards happiness and completeness, however, when this pursuit is associated with death, madness appears. According to Foucault, the pursuit of a died lover gives people a chance to find “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” (Foucault, 2006, p. 37), also families.

Death always lingers about the kind of madness as a tragic experience, in order to prove this, Foucault made Shakespeare’s works as example. Madness as a tragic experience always causes death and murder in Shakespeare’s works, which

... 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. (Foucault, 2006, p. 38)

Undoubtedly, death cannot bring peace or harmony, while madness will still be alive in the society, no matter how long the death ends, madness stays longer and plays the living role in death. As a result, death and madness form a condition which seems that there is a limit between death and madness, but the limit cannot be transcended. Madness as a tragic experience and death turn into a symbiotic relationship, that is, madness continuously tries to transcend the limit of death, while death still insists on confronting with the transcending madness, eventually, the confrontation helps both sides to sustain themselves beings. Therefore, madness as a tragic experience represents the transgression of death.

Transgression, here, gives madness as a tragic experience a second chance to stay alive and maintain vitality, for “transgressive thought occupies the open rather than the closed border at which the Same and the Other interact with and repeat each other” (During, 1993, p. 80). The reason why the theme of death is concerned is that death takes the position of the boundary of self, thus, the reign of death enduringly covers the self, also covers madness as a part of the self. Traditionally speaking, death has always been recognized as a punishment, but within the condition of the self with madness, death as the limit can also be an extrication of the self. Nevertheless, madness still stays and lasts, because of its transgression, it will not disappear along with death, on the contrary, madness as a tragic experience leaves courage and truth to others and the society.

From this perspective, madness as a tragic experience tries to transgress the limit of death, however, it finally cannot success and then comes back to the struggle between madness of self and death in order to defend for itself.
Critical Consciousness: Transgression of Reason

There is also another type of madness, which is no longer tragic but critical, as a critical consciousness. The emergence of madness as a critical consciousness reveals a unique splendor after the shine of madness as a tragic experience. As Foucault said, “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” (Foucault, 2006, p. 27). The conflict between tragic experience and critical consciousness underlies all that was formulated on the concept of madness at the beginning of Renaissance.

The reason why the madness as a critical consciousness appears is that reason begins to intervene. Actually, the madness as a critical consciousness “which identifies madness and designates it against a backdrop of all that is reasonable, ordered and morally wise. This consciousness is wholly invested in its own judgement, even before any concepts have been worked out, and it does not so much define as denounce” (Foucault, 2006, p. 164). Here, madness as a critical consciousness even becomes a form of reason, which is integrated within reason, letting reason to realize itself, in any case, only if madness stays in reason will the madness as a critical consciousness gain its significance and value. In this kind of madness, the critical consciousness is confident that itself is not mad at all, in one sense, although madness is reversibly antagonistic to reason, there contains a completely engagement by reason in the critical consciousness.

The condition of the engagement by reason was based on madness itself, which “is only there, present and designated as an irreputable self-evident truth, as long as the consciousness that designates it has already rejected it, having defined itself in a relation of opposition towards it” (Foucault, 2006, p. 167). Due to the influence of realizing reason, madness gradually focuses on a critical consciousness on whether it maintains reason or not. One of the most typical manifestation shows in tragedies and comedies, for instance, the madmen always carry the responsibility to tell the truth through his murmur and delirium, playing a role of promoting the confession of protagonists or sneering at human nature and injustice of the society. When the madman discovers that his madness just operates as part of the tools of reason, this kind of madness gradually realizes that it might be reason itself, but only a part of. In terms of this view, a madman with madness as a critical consciousness in literary works actually is set for the convenience of reason to create a new type of reason within madness, owing to which, madmen “more than any other are engaged in being and are carriers of its truth” (Foucault, 2006, p. 246). It is universally acknowledged that in literary works,

tragic heroes, unlike the baroque characters who had preceded them, could never be mad, and that inversely madness could never take on the tragic value we have known since Nietzsche and Artaud. In the classical epoch, tragic characters and the mad face each other without any possible dialogue or common language, for the one can only pronounce the decisive language of being, where the truth of light and the depths of night meet in a flash, and the other repeats endlessly an indifferent murmur where the empty chatter of the day is cancelled out by the deceptive lies of the shadows. (Foucault, 2006, p. 246)

Authors take use of this image of madness as not only a comparison but also a mirror to protagonists, through whom protagonists are able to be alert and awaken to the truth, in order to lead readers into a critical thinking about plots and themes of their works trying to express, as a result, madness as a critical consciousness provides others a chance to discover the truth of outside world.

Reason, here, connected with the madness of a critical consciousness manages the formation of a limit, which is continuously transgressed by madness. Through “the blockage of that light of reason which searches
out the shadows of being” (During, 1992, p. 115), madness is trapped and seen as the shadows of being, the part that not be identified nor acknowledged. Transgression as an endless game between its object and the limit, not tries to transcend the limit nor to decompose the limit, on the contrary, the object and the limit maintain their own existence through the confrontation. The limit of reason was transformed from a transcendental critique purposed by Kant into a practical and critical perspective put forward by Foucault, here “Foucault advocates adopting what he calls a critical limit-attitude and engaging in limit-crossing experiences that extend to a whole variety of social and institutional practices” (Sholtz, 2017, p. 251), madness as a critical consciousness obtains a transgressive attitude and engages in reason-crossing experiences. Hence, through the madness as a critical consciousness, reason reappears and performs but still rejects on the stage of subjectivity. Definition of madness was established as the opposite of that of reason, however, in fact, madness and reason exist as hypostatic beings due to the existence of each other, that is to say, madness was seen as unreason which could be regarded as the proper evidence that the inseparability of being of reason and being of madness, while their approach to get along with is transgression.

**Conclusion**

Madness, taken for no matter a tragic experience or a critical consciousness, becomes a part of transgression, one of those represents the transgression of death, while the other stands for the transgression of reason. These two kinds of transgression appear and perform typically in literature, especially in the madmen among tragedies and comedies, who, through their behaviours and speeches, express and sneer mistakes made by human nature or the truth being ignored. Henceforth, it attaches vital importance to the role of madness in studies of Foucault on the concept of transgression, especially with literary studies, for it can be claimed that madness as a tragic experience and a critical consciousness proves to be the presence of transgression.

**References**


