

MADNESS AND SOCIETY\*

In the West the traditional approach to the study of systems of thought has consisted in focusing only on positive phenomena. During the past few years, however, in ethnology, Lévi-Strauss has explored a method that makes it possible to reveal the negative structure in any society or culture. For example, he has demonstrated that if incest is prohibited within a culture this is not due to the affirmation of a certain type of values; it is because there is a checkerboard, as it were, with barely perceptible gray or light blue squares that define a culture's mode of existence. It is the weave [*trame*] of these squares that I wanted to apply to the study of systems of thought. Thus for me it was a matter not of knowing what is affirmed and valorized in a society or a system of thought but of studying what is rejected and excluded. I merely used a method of working that was already recognized in ethnology.

Madness has always been excluded. Now, during the last fifty years in what are called the "advanced countries," comparative ethnologists and psychiatrists have attempted, first of all, to determine whether the madness that was encountered in their countries—that is, mental disorders such as obsessional neurosis, paranoia, schizophrenia—also existed in so-called primitive societies. They have tried to find out, second, whether those primitive societies did not assign a different status to the mentally disturbed than the one

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seen in their own countries. Whereas in their society the mad were excluded, didn't primitive societies attribute a positive value to them? For example, aren't the shamans in Siberia or North America mental cases? Third, they asked themselves whether certain societies were not ill themselves. For example, Ruth Benedict concluded that the entire Kwakiutl tribe exhibited a paranoiac character.

In speaking to you today, I would like to take an opposite approach to the one taken by these researchers. I would like first to look at the status of the mentally disturbed in primitive societies; second, to see how the matter stands in our industrial societies; third, to reflect on the mutation that occurred in the nineteenth century; and finally, by way of conclusion, to demonstrate that the position the madman is in has not fundamentally changed in modern industrial society.

Roughly, the areas of human activity can be divided into these four categories:

- labor, or economic production;
- sexuality, family; that is, reproduction of society;
- language, speech;
- ludic activities such as games and festivals.

In all societies there are persons who have behaviors different from others that do not conform to the commonly defined rules in these four areas—in short, what are called “marginal individuals.” Already in the ordinary population, the relationship to labor varies according to gender and age. In many societies, if the political and ecclesiastical leaders happen to control the labor of others or serve as intermediaries with supernatural power, they do not work directly themselves and are not involved in the production cycle.

There are also persons who are outside the second cycle of social reproduction. Celibates constitute an example, and one sees many of these, among religious devotees in particular. Moreover, among the Indians of North America, we know that there exist homosexuals and transvestites: it has to be said that they occupy a marginal position in social reproduction.

Third, in discourse as well, there are persons who escape the norm. The words they employ have different meanings. In the case of a

prophet, words with a symbolic meaning could one day reveal their hidden truth. The words that poets use are of an aesthetic order and also escape the norm.

Fourth, in all societies there are persons excluded from the games and festivals. Sometimes they are excluded because they are considered dangerous; other times they are themselves the object of a festival. Like the scapegoat among the Hebrews, it may happen that someone is sacrificed after taking responsibility for the others' crime; while the ceremony of his exclusion takes place, the people stage a festival.

In all these cases, those who are excluded differ from one area to another, but it may happen that the same person is excluded in every area. I am thinking of the madman. In every society, or almost, the madman is excluded in all things and, depending on the case, he is given a religious, magical, ludic, or pathological status.

For example, in a primitive tribe of Australia, the madman is regarded as an individual to be feared by the society, a man endowed with a supernatural force. In other instances, certain madmen become victims of society. In any case, they are people who have behaviors that are different from the others, in labor, in the family, in discourse, and in games.

What I would now like to address is the fact that in our industrial societies madmen are similarly excluded from ordinary society by an isomorphic system of exclusion and are assigned a marginal condition.

First, as far as labor is concerned, even in our day the first criterion for determining madness in an individual consists in showing that he is unfit for work. Freud said correctly that the madman (he was talking mainly about neurotics) was a person who could neither work nor love. I will come back to the verb "love," but there is a profound truth in this idea of Freud's. In Europe in the Middle Ages, the existence of madmen was accepted. Sometimes they would get excited and unstable, or they would turn out to be lazy, but they were allowed to wander around. Now, beginning in the seventeenth century, roughly, industrial society was formed and the existence of such persons was no longer tolerated. In response to the requirements of industrial society, large establishments for confining them were created almost simultaneously in France and in England. It was not just madmen who

were put there, but also the unemployed, sick people, old people, all those who were unable to work.

According to the traditional account of historians, it was at the end of the eighteenth century—that is in 1793 in France—that Philippe Pinel freed madmen from their chains, and it was at about the same time in England that Samuel Tuke, a Quaker, created a psychiatric hospital. It is thought that madmen were treated as criminals until then, and that Pinel and Tuke labeled them “ill” for the first time. But I am obliged to say that this account is erroneous. In the first place, it is not true that before the Revolution madmen were regarded as criminals; second, it is a misconception to think that madmen were freed of their former status.

This second idea probably constitutes a greater misconception than the first. In general, in primitive society and modern society alike, in the Middle Ages as well as in the twentieth century, what might be called a “universal status” was given to madmen. The only difference is that, from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, the right to demand the confinement of a madman belonged to the family: it was the family, first of all, that excluded madmen. Now, starting in the nineteenth century, this prerogative was gradually lost to the family and granted to physicians. In order to confine a madman, a medical certificate was required; once confined, the madman was deprived of all responsibility and any rights as a family member—he even lost his citizenship and was the object of a judicial interdiction. It could be said that law prevailed over medicine in endowing madmen with a marginal status.

Second, there is one fact to note in regard to sexuality and the family system. When one consults European documents up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, sexual practices such as masturbation, homosexuality, and nymphomania are not at all treated as belonging to the domain of psychiatry. It was from the beginning of the nineteenth century that these sexual anomalies were identified with madness and considered as disturbances manifested by an individual who was incapable of adapting to the European bourgeois family. The idea that the main cause of madness resided in sexual anomaly was reinforced when Beyle described creeping paralysis and demonstrated that it was due to syphilis. When Freud considered disturbance of the libido as a cause or an expression of madness, this exerted the same type of influence.

Third, the madman's status with respect to language was curious in Europe. On the one hand, the speech of madmen was rejected as being worthless, and, on the other, it was never completely nullified. We may say that the fool was, in a sense, the institutionalization of the speech of madness. Without any relation to morality and politics, and, moreover, under the cover of irresponsibility, he told, in a symbolic form, the truth that ordinary men could not state.

To take a second example, up to the nineteenth century, literature was highly institutionalized for buttressing the social ethic and for entertaining people. Now, in our day, literature has completely rid itself of all that and has become totally anarchic. This suggests a curious affinity between literature and madness. Literary language is not constrained by the rules of everyday language. For example, it is not subject to the severe rule of constant truth-telling, any more than the teller is under the obligation to always remain sincere in what he thinks and feels. In short, unlike the words of politics or the sciences, those of literature occupy a marginal position with respect to everyday language.

As regards European literature, literary language became especially marginal during these three periods:

1. In the sixteenth century it became more marginal than it was in the Middle Ages: the epics and the chivalrous novels were destructive and contentious with respect to society. That is true of Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly*, the work of Tasso, or Elizabethan drama. In France, there is even a literature of madness that appeared. The Duke de Bouillon went so far as to have the text of a madman printed at his own expense, and the French took pleasure in reading it.
2. The second period goes from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century. As to literature by madmen, one notes the publication of the poetry of Hölderlin and Blake, and, later, the work of Raymond Roussel. This last writer entered a psychiatric hospital for obsessional neurosis in order to be treated by the eminent psychiatrist Pierre Janet, but he ended up committing suicide. It is significant that a contemporary author such as Alain Robbe-Grillet took Raymond Roussel as his starting point, dedicating his first book to him.<sup>1</sup> For his part, Antonin Artaud was a schizophrenic: it was he who, after the weakening of surrealism, created a breakthrough in the poetic world, opening up new vistas. For that matter, one has only to consider Nietzsche or Baudelaire to affirm that one

must imitate madness or actually become mad in order to establish new fields in literature.

3. These days, people are paying more and more attention to the relationship between literature and madness. All things considered, madness and literature are marginal in relation to everyday language, and they are looking for the secret of general literary production in a model which is madness.

Finally, let us reflect on the situation the madman is in with respect to games in an industrial society. In the traditional European theater—I imagine the same thing is true in Japan—the fool assumed a central role, from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century. The madman made the spectators laugh, for he saw what the other actors did not see, and he revealed the ending of the plot before they did. That is, he is an individual who reveals the truth with spirit. Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a good example. The king is a victim of his own fantasy, but at the same time he is someone who tells the truth. In other words, in the theater the madman is a character who expresses with his body the truth that the other actors and spectators are not aware of, a character through whom the truth appears.

Further, in the Middle Ages there were many festivals, but among them there was only one that was not religious. It is called the Festival of Folly. In this festival, the social and traditional roles were completely reversed: a poor man played the role of a rich man, a weak man that of a powerful one. The sexes were inverted, the sexual prohibitions nullified. On the occasion of this holiday, the lower class had the right to say what they wanted to the bishop or the mayor. In general, it was insults . . . In short, during this festival all the social, linguistic, and familial institutions were overturned and called back in question. In church, an irreverent layman celebrated mass, after which he would bring in a donkey whose braying was perceived as a mockery of the litany of mass. In sum, it was a counterholiday in relation to Sunday, Christmas or Easter, one that escaped from the habitual circuit of ordinary festivals.

In our time, the politico-religious meaning of festivals has been lost; instead, we resort to alcohol or drugs as a way of contesting the social order, and we have thus created a kind of artificial madness. Basically, it is an imitation of madness, and it can be seen as an attempt to set society ablaze by creating the same state as madness.

I am absolutely not a structuralist. Structuralism is only a means of analysis. For example, how have the conditions under which the madman lives changed from Middle Ages to the present day? What were the conditions necessary for that change? I merely make use of the structuralist method to analyze all that.

In the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance madmen were permitted to exist in the midst of society. What is called the "village idiot" did not get married, did not participate in games, and he was fed and supported by others. He would roam from town to town, sometimes he would enter the army, he would become a peddler; but when he became too worked up and dangerous, the others would construct a little house outside town where they would temporarily confine him. Arab society is still tolerant toward madmen. In the seventeenth century European society became intolerant toward them. The cause of this, as I said, is that industrial society began to take form. I also told how, from before 1650 to 1750, in cities such as Hamburg, Lyon, and Paris, large-sized institutions were created for interning not only madmen but old people, the sick, the unemployed, idlers, prostitutes — all those who found themselves outside the social order. Capitalist industrial society could not tolerate the existence of groups of vagabonds. Out of a Parisian population numbering a half-million inhabitants, six thousand were confined. In these establishments there was no therapeutic intention; everyone was subjected to forced labor. In 1665 the police were reorganized in Paris; it was then that a grid of squares for social conditioning [*formation*] was constituted. The police kept constant watch over the confined vagabonds.

The irony is that work therapy is frequently practiced in modern psychiatric hospitals. The logic underlying this practice is obvious. If incapacity for work is the first criterion of madness, one has only to teach the patients to work in the hospital to cure them of their madness.

Now, why did the situation of madmen change from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century? It is said that Pinel liberated the madmen in 1793, but those he liberated were only sick people, old people, idlers, prostitutes; he left the madmen in the institutions. This took place when it did because, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the speed of industrial development accelerated, and, in accordance with the first principle of capi-

talism, the hordes of unemployed proletarians were regarded as a reserve army of labor power. For that reason, those who did not work but were able to work were let out of the establishments. But there, too, a second process of selection took effect: not only those who were unwilling to work, but those who did not have the ability to work, namely the mad, were left in the establishments and regarded as patients whose troubles had characterological or psychological causes.

Thus what had previously been a confinement institution became a psychiatric hospital, a treatment organization. In the years that followed, hospitals were set in place: (1) to confine those who were unable to work for physical reasons; (2) to confine those who could not work for nonphysical reasons. In this way, mental disorders had become the object of medicine and a social category called "psychiatry" was born.

I am not trying to deny the validity of psychiatry, but this medicalization of the madman occurred quite late historically, and it does not seem to me that this result exerted a profound influence on his status. Furthermore, if this medicalization occurred, it was, as I said earlier, essentially for economic and social reasons: that was how the madman was made identical to the mentally ill individual and an entity called "mental illness" was discovered and developed. Psychiatric hospitals were created as something symmetrical to hospitals for physical illnesses. It could be said that the madman is an avatar of our capitalist societies, and it seems that, at bottom, the status of the madman does not vary at all between primitive societies and advanced societies. This only demonstrates the primitivism of our societies.

Today, in sum, I wanted to show the traumatizing quality that our societies still possess. If something has slightly revalorized the status of the madman, it would be the emergence of psychoanalysis and the psychotropic drugs. But that breakthrough has only just begun; our society still excludes madmen. As to whether this is the case only in capitalist societies, and as to how things are in socialist societies, my sociological knowledge is not adequate for making a judgment.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Un Régicide* (Paris: Minuit, 1948).