On June 29, 1976, in the courtyard outside the hospital where Michel Foucault died, several hundred people gathered for a memorial service. The grief-stricken voice of Gilles Deleuze could be heard over the hushed crowd:

As for what motivated me, it is quite simple; I would hope that in the eyes of some people it might be sufficient in itself. It was curiosity - the only kind of curiosity, in any case, that is worth acting upon with a degree of obstinacy: not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself. After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself? There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all. ... But then, what is philosophy today - philosophical activity, I mean - if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known?

That is, of course, from the opening pages of The Use of Pleasure, Volume 2 of Foucault's History of Sexuality.¹

None of us who love Foucault's work, I think it is safe to say, are particularly wedded to the mental illness books. Foucault had not found his voice yet. Most striking is the lack of the pizzazz opening — like the ship of fools in The History of Madness, the analysis of Las

¹Thomas R. Flyrm was present at the event and shared this account with me.
Meninas in *The Order of Things*, the drawing and quartering of Damien in *Discipline and Punish*. For some reason my own detachment from those books made it easier to revisit them. What struck me this time through these early texts was that I was witnessing the first of several radical transformations in Foucault’s thought — an abrupt thinking differently.

My undergrad education was rigidly Thomistic. It took me years to free myself from that system — if I have, in fact, been freed. So I have always admired Foucault’s ability to reinvent himself.

Because of that ability I wanted to name my first child after Foucault as a tribute to that gift. The French ‘Michel’ seemed a bit pretentious for a U.S. midwesterner, so we settled on ‘Miles.’ Another gifted with the talent of reinvention — in the world of jazz rather than philosophy.

In this essay I would like to explore the first of many transformations in Foucault’s thinking — at least the first documented transformation — his first attempt to think differently. I should amend that. It was not so much that he attempted to think differently. At least in this earliest transformation of his thought he was forced to think differently by the projectile of his research. After this first rupture in his thought, thinking differently apparently became a habit.

It was in the early 50s. Foucault was awarded his License in Psychology and Diploma in Psychopathology in 1952 from the University of Paris, and immediately judged his own discipline immature. The field of psychology had not yet, according to Foucault, achieved the status of science. Psychology at the time, as Foucault saw it, was dominated by abstract models and had failed to resolve the most basic issues, such as defining mental illness and mental health. An abstract metapathology hovered over mental pathology and organic pathology that tried to apply the same concepts and methods to both. This metapathology had failed to establish the psychosomatic unity of human beings that such an application of identical concepts and methods rests on. While Foucault maintained the “unity of body and mind is in the order of reality,” a unified organic and mental pathology remained “purely mythical.”

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In his first published work, *Mental Illness and Personality* of 1954, he endeavored to make psychology "rigorously scientific" by transforming it into a Marxist science of man. This Marxist science of man he would accomplish employing the pre- or early- behaviorist work of Pavlov, who

saw mental illness resulting from a disturbance of "the internal dialectic of excitation and inhibition." Although his brief dalliance with the French Communist Party had already ended by the time of the publication of *Mental Illness and Personality*, Foucault's first book is a "monument to his Party membership." Pavlov considered himself neither a Marxist nor a materialist; nonetheless, his physiology and the psychology based on it became part of Soviet orthodoxy. The section on Pavlov also contains references to I.P. Razenkov, the vice-president of the Soviet Academy of Medical Sciences. "Ironically," one of Foucault's biographers, David Macey, tells us, "Pavlovianism was first promoted by Trotsky but it became incorporated into a Stalinist version of materialism at the 1930 Soviet Congress for the Study of Human Behavior."

The paradox at the heart of the project is that Foucault seems to admit, in the very first chapter, that there can be no such rigorously scientific psychology. It's like his announcement at the beginning of *The History of Madness* that such a history is impossible. He compares psychology with organic medicine — to his mind a model of rigorous science — and judges psychology as inevitably stopping short. Then, having announced his project of making psychology rigorously scientific, he reformulates his goal: "My aim is to show that mental pathology requires methods of analysis different from those of organic pathology and that it is only by an artifice of language that the same meaning can be attributed to 'illness of the body' and 'illnesses of the mind.'" The human personality cannot be grasped as an organic totality, which was the key to making medicine of the body scientific.

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Hubert Dreyfus calls the project "an unstable combination of Heideggerian existential anthropology and Marxist social history." Didier Eribon refers to the book — less elegantly but perhaps more accurately — as a "mongrel."

That same year Foucault published his lengthy introduction to Ludwig Binswanger's *Dream and Existence* — Foucault’s introduction is twice as long as Binswanger’s essay - where he seems to go back to the notion that rigorously scientific psychology is impossible, and please note the Heideggerian, rather than scientific Marxist language: "This project situates [this study] in opposition to all forms of psychological positivism which think they can exhaust the meaningful content of man in the reductionist concept of homo natura and at the same time relocates it in the context of an ontological reflection which takes for its major theme presence-to-being, existence, Dasein."

Clearly Foucault did not like *Mental Illness and Personality*. In 1962 he published a radically revised version with a new title, *Mental Illness and Psychology*. He completely reworked the entire second half of what is a very short book. He did not like *Mental Illness and Psychology* either. Dreyfus tells us Foucault left a note refusing all reprint rights to *Mental Illness and Personality*, and he tried unsuccessfully to stop any translations of *Mental Illness and Psychology*. 1954's *Mental Illness and Personality* has, in fact, never been translated into English.

What is the problem? Foucault gives us a hint in the early version. By means of an analysis of the contributions and inadequacies of evolutionary psychology, psychology of individual history, and phenomenological psychology, he arrived at a conjunction of mental pathology and sociology. As Foucault put it then, "illness has its reality and its value as illness only at the interior of a culture which recognizes it as such." This first publication is governed by two assumptions: that mental illness, first, is a cultural phenomenon, and secondly, that a society positively expresses itself in the types of pathology it

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7Hubert Dreyfus, "Foreword to the California Edition" of *Mental Illness and Psychology*, p. viii.
10*Maladie mentale et personnalité*, p. 71.
recognizes. How did this occur? In his words, "How did our culture come to give mental illness the meaning of deviancy and to the patient a status that excludes him? And how, despite that fact, does our society express itself in those morbid forms in which it refuses to recognize itself?"  

In the transition from the first version to the second version Foucault's interest moved away from psychology as the study of personality to the study of the historical constitution of homo psychologicus. In between the two versions of Mental Illness he researched the historical constitution of madness resulting in his monumental History of Madness in the Classical Age, which he began calling "my first book." Of course, it was not his first book — it was his third book — but he apparently chose to write the first two out of his will.

Mental Illness and Personality of 1954 manifested Foucault's commitment to transform psychology into a rigorous, Marxist science. Reflection upon man himself must stand at the center of any such science; it must focus upon the psychosomatic totality of human beings. But by 1966, in one of his most famous remarks, he declares man "an invention of recent date" due to be "erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea." By 1976 he objects to Marxism because it shows even the possibility of becoming a science, and he commits himself to revealing "the effects of the centralizing powers which are linked to the institution and functioning of an organized scientific discourse within a society such as ours." He questions the desire for power of anyone who wants to establish a rigorous science. He judges the attempt to think in terms of a totality a hindrance to research and dedicates his own work to what he comes to call local critique. Whatever happened to his pursuit of a rigorous Marxist science of man in his psychosomatic totality? It seems to me it was his reading of Nietzsche and his turn to a genealogy of madness that freed him from the dialectics of Mental Illness and Personality.

Although I am certainly not one to address what this might mean, being ignorant of the subject, David Macey tells us that "the serial and

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11Ibid., p. 75.
12Michel Foucault, The Order of Things, p. 387.
twelve-tone music of Pierre Boulez and Jean Barraque offered Fou-
cault his first escape from the dialectical universe in which he was still 
living, and that its impact on him had been as great as that of 
Nietzsche.”14

Foucault was constantly reading Nietzsche during a two-week va-
cation to Rome in August of 1953. He carried a bilingual edition of 
the Untimely Meditations and read in cafes and on the beaches. We 
don’t know whether Foucault read it at the time, but a passage in The 
Gay Science lays out much of Foucault’s future work. In the passage 
Nietzsche is describing “a task for the industrious.” “So far, all that 
gives color to existence still lacks a history. Where would you find a 
history of love, of avarice, of envy, of conscience, of pious respect for 
tradition, or of cruelty? Even a comparative history of law or at least 
of punishment is so far lacking completely.”15

In 1953 Foucault wrote an essay entitled “Psychology from 1850 to 
1950.” It was not published until 1957. It is basically an academic 
exercise noting trends in the field from John Stuart Mill on. But there 
are a few comments that are revelatory of Foucault’s future direction. 
We have to imagine that while writing this history of psychology he is 
simultaneously embarked on his project to make psychology rigor-
ously scientific, Mental Illness and Personality. But in this obscure little 
essay he identifies the history of psychology as a history of a contra-
diction between the Enlightenment desire to bring psychology into 
line with the natural sciences and the realization that “human reality” 
is simply not part of “natural objectivity.” Human reality must be 
approached by our abandoning our “naturalistic objectivity.” And 
the essay ends with a claim that announces the rupture at this point in 
Foucault’s career: “psychology will be possible only if it marks a re-
turn to man’s conditions of existence and to what is most human in 
man, namely his history.”16

So this Nietzsche-inspired turn to history effected this first radical 
transformation in Foucault’s thought. There are, of course, many 
Nietzsches. When Giulio Preti directly confronted Foucault with 
the question, “Which Nietzsche do you like?” Foucault replied,

14The Lives of Michel Foucault, p. 53.
15Ibid., p. 57.
16Ibid., p. 62.
"Obviously, not the one of Zarathustra, but the one of The Birth of Tragedy, of the Genealogy of Morals." ¹⁷ I interpret this to mean Foucault is not particularly fond of the herald of the Overman and Eternal Return. When pushed by Preti Foucault finally admits that his Nietzsche is the one of the “geneses,” the genealogies.

That answer is fairly obvious. Foucault wrote about his own work as genealogical on numerous occasions, most notably in his landmark essay, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” ¹⁸ But I have always found his reference to The Birth of Tragedy to be intriguing. And I think it is there that we find the key stumbling block to the project of a rigorously scientific psychology.

Foucault characterizes his history of madness project as a study composed “under the sun of the great Nietzschean inquiry.” ¹⁹ I think it is illuminating if we read it under the sun of Nietzsche’s inquiry into the birth and death of tragedy. In an earlier work I read Foucault’s history of madness through the interpretative optic of The Birth of Tragedy and tried to show that the central theme of the history of madness was the moral problematization of madness. According to Foucault, Nietzsche revealed the tragedy of the Western world to be the refusal of the tragic, reducing the tragedy of madness to a moral problem, and Foucault identifies the refusal of the tragic with a refusal of the sacred. The moral problematization of the tragic/sacred corresponds with Nietzsche’s notion of rendering the tragic intelligible. Just as Nietzsche showed how Euripidean dialectics silenced tragedy by reducing tragedy to Doogie Howser morality plays, so Foucault traces the moralization of madness as a secularization of the sacred.

But the silencing of tragedy is never complete. Shortly after rejecting his early mental illness books, Foucault turned to the Dionysian literature of excess. The tragic/sacred continues to manifest itself “in the lightning-flash of works such as those of Holderlin, of Nerval, of Nietzsche, or of Artaud.” ²⁰

¹⁷“Un dibattito Foucault-Preti” in Bimestre 22-23 (1972), p. 2.
“Hölderlin, Nerval, Roussel, and Artaud” — the names become like a chant for Foucault — hold out the promise to man that one day, perhaps, he will be able to be free of all psychology and be ready for the great tragic confrontation with madness.”

In 1962, the same year he published his revised *Mental Illness and Psychology*, Foucault published an introduction to the collected works of Rousseau. He concludes the introduction with a mock dialogue between an unnamed interlocutor and himself. In the last lines Foucault is asked about Rousseau’s “complaint, his sincerity, and his suffering.” Foucault responds: “That is a psychologist’s question. Not mine, consequently.”

He got free of himself. 😊

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21 *Mental Illness and Psychology*, pp. 74-75.