

Guest Editors' Introduction

LUCIA BOLDRINI AND FLORIAN MUSSGNUG

‘Qui vit sans folie n’est pas si sage qu’il croit’¹

‘I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak’, writes Samuel Beckett in *The Unnameable*, ‘but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter’.² Listening to the voice of folly can be like this: an endless flow of inconsistencies, of contradictions, sayings and unsayings; a tantalizing, mischievous mockery of speech – unable to go on, unable to end. And yet – as this volume shows – we are irresistibly drawn to folly, its promises, its whispers of ‘even more interesting’ things: of how we are split between conscious and unconscious, familiar and unfamiliar, same and other. For psychoanalysis, folly is not only a site of hidden truths; it is also, perhaps more importantly, a source of unconscious freedom, a momentary escape from our obsession with rules and order.³ According to Christopher Bollas, the unconscious self is like a fool who ‘raises potentially endless questions about diverse and disparate issues’ and thereby provides us with a ‘separate sense’, which opens us to others and to our own creative potential.⁴ As Rachel Bowlby elegantly puts it in ‘“Where Ignorance is Bliss”: The Folly of Origins in Gray and Hardy’, folly is a ‘soul-mole’, forever shovelling our secrets out into the light: ‘there’s no possible moment of release or resignation when the mole might stop vainly, interminably working away’ (p. 272). Folly’s subversive, creative soliloquies reveal to us a psychic ‘underground repertoire of secrets’; they challenge our established knowledge and invite us, as Bowlby shows, to endless, titillating games of ‘suppression and confession’ (p. 271). For Anne Duprat, this deep-seated playfulness explains folly’s close relation to fiction: as she explains in ‘*Stultitia loquitur*: Fiction and Folly in Early Modern Literature’, what makes them so alike is their ‘capacity of creating alternative representations of the world – and thus of re-figuring the world depicted by reason or history – [...] but also their paradoxical structure, and hence the

instability of their speech acts, which deny, suspend, or do not seriously guarantee the truth of their statements' (p. 141).

From a different point of view – that of Michel Foucault's momentous *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* – folly is the excluded other, a being without a voice.⁵ If subject formation depends, as Foucault suggests, on the power of normalizing discourse, folly is what is excluded from the 'imprisoning frame' of subjectivity.⁶ Its condition of marginality, however, is an unlikely locus of resistance or transgression: as a meaningless spectre, *déraison* lacks the subversive powers of discursively constituted identity. As Judith Butler explains, 'if we understand power as *forming* the subject [...], as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbour and preserve in the beings that we are'.⁷ According to this theory, folly – the complete absence of discursive power – marks the ultimate boundaries of our existence. It is the ungraspable and irreducible other – defiant of every order of representation – which endlessly resists comprehension and assimilation.

How does literature capture folly's voice – and how does it answer its silence? Isn't the marginality of folly, its unassailable non-assimilability, precisely what gives literature its disruptive force? According to Foucault, modern art is inextricably linked to madness, not as a subject matter, but as a model for the artist's absolute break with social convention. Duprat shows that folly was central to the development of early modern theories of fiction, with all the ambiguities that sustain its structure and endow it with a dangerous potential for heterodoxy, while in 'Literature and the Politics of Madness: On the Twentieth-Century Reception of Friedrich Hölderlin in France and Germany', Shane Weller explains that modern literature and philosophy's fascination with folly – their concern with madness as the reiterated presence of an absence – is nowhere more apparent than in the widespread admiration for Friedrich Hölderlin's self-negating and self-abolishing verse. For Foucault, and for a host of eminent twentieth-century thinkers, Hölderlin exemplifies the artist's deliberate withdrawal from meaning: writing as a final and most extreme form of resistance to nihilism. Hölderlin, 'a decisive figure in the history of madness', thus inaugurates a new epoch in which madness becomes a necessary – but possibly empty – centre to our many debates between literature, aesthetics, philosophy and politics (p. 193).

Several essays in this collection tell us of modern writers and artists who are overcome by the dread of folly evoked in Foucault's history. When Georg Christoph Lichtenberg sets out to write a commentary on William Hogarth's engravings, he is shocked and literally silenced by the artist's depiction of Bedlam. As Friederike Felicitas Günther argues in 'Explanations on the Edge of Reason: Lichtenberg's Difficulties Describing Hogarth's View of Bedlam', the harrowing solitude of the mad and their irredeemable exclusion from society cast a long shadow on Enlightenment dreams of a universal morality based on reason and common sense. More than a century later, Joseph Conrad's Marlow – one of three European travellers discussed in Kai Mikkonen's contribution to this volume – is overwhelmed by the 'great silence' of the impenetrable African forest and almost petrified by the 'vengeful aspect' of this terrifying mask of otherness, whose enigmatic gaze he cannot endure.⁸ For the protagonist of Gogol's 'The Overcoat', Akaky Akakievich, whose life was almost literally lived between the lines of writing that it was his job daily to copy, the new overcoat, obtained with great sacrifice, signals the collapse of the monotony of everyday life and, almost literally, a deviation from 'straight' normality and a descent into delirium.⁹ In his classic study *The Lonely Voice*, Frank O'Connor reads Akaky's parable as representative of the short story's concern, as a genre, with the 'little people', the marginal, the 'submerged population group' that remain unrepresented in mainstream literary forms, such as the epic and its heir, the novel¹⁰ – almost as if the short story, and this story in particular, were the embodiment of what folly, madness, *déraison* signify: the impossibility of being accounted for through the 'straight lines' of rational explanations and social integration. In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Septimus Warren Smith also finds himself forced into silence: he is emarginated, humiliated and confined within inflexible lines – those of modern British social class, of high-handed professionals with their supposedly superior and indisputable knowledge, but also of the trenches in which Septimus was struck by shell-shock and which are, in many ways, the aberrant outcome of modern rationalism. In her analysis of Woolf's Russian models, 'Red Flowers and a Shabby Coat: Russian Literature and the Presentation of "Madness" in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*', Caroline Lusin shows that the representation of madness in *Mrs Dalloway* – a representation that is always linked with social criticism – should not be seen simply as a projection of the author's own biographical experience. Through her interest in foreign literary models Woolf reminds us that 'we all come from under Gogol's overcoat': we are

all, in some ways, affected by delirium and madness, by a sense of our own marginality, which power tries to suppress, but which will not be bent, and which, like Akaky, comes back to haunt the living and to seek redress from them.

And yet, silence and repression are not the most common literary response to the spectacle of folly. Where the rule of reason seeks to banish folly, literature guides us to the uncanny boundaries of the psyche where new powerful fantasies may flourish. Emblematic figures of otherness—monstrous madmen, crafty fools, mythical agents of divine power—turn our attention away from the abstract categories of reason and to the singular other, who responds, in turn, to the singular otherness in each of us. From its earliest beginnings, the Western tradition portrays folly in a double light—as monstrous and divine. Wild satyrs and maenads spread frenzy, disorder and death in Euripides' *The Bacchae*, while Aeschylus' *Oresteia* shows us a terrified Orestes, pursued by the merciless Erinyes, whose duty it is to punish violence with madness. As Vladimir Zorić remarks in his insightful discussion of paranoia and exile in 'The Furies of Orestes: Constructing Persecutory Agency in Narratives of Exile', the threat of punishment and unremitting persecution is real, even where its supernatural executioners seem to arise from the underworlds of the mind: from a contemporary, post-Freudian point of view, Zorić explains, the 'vicious conspiracy of powerful transcendental agents' can be described as a construction of the 'imaginative resources set free by the protagonists' dislocation' (p. 187, p. 184).

Divine intervention can be a source of awe as well as awfulness. In his reflections on 'The Folly of Poetry', Piero Boitani reminds us that for Plato *mania* is a gift of the gods, a frenzy that descends from sublime heights, arousing and inspiring the soul. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates distinguishes between four manifestations of divine *furor*: divination, ritual, amorous folly and—most importantly—*furor poeticus*, 'the madness of those who are possessed by the Muses; which taking hold of a delicate and virgin soul, and there inspiring frenzy, awakens lyrical and all other numbers; with these adorning the myriad actions of ancient heroes for the instruction of posterity'.¹¹ Without such frenzy, Boitani remarks, no poet—from Parmenides to Torquato Tasso—could have gained access to the temple of the Muses: 'If even a Roman senator, a politician and statesman [Horace], knew that poets could only be good if inspired by *furor*, then the madness of poetry must have been common knowledge' (p. 125).

Where poetry truly seeks to give voice to madness, Boitani writes, the reader hears 'unspeakable grief, a soul tortured to the point of no return' (p. 137). *Furor* can easily turn into fury, sheer madness, *mania*, an uncanny excess of language. And if the poet is a vehicle for a power that transcends him (for Tasso, the poet inspired by divine *furor* may 'think and speak in a different mind and a different tongue than his own', p. 136), all poetic writing may be seen as a form of 'speaking in tongues'. In 'Glossolalic Folly', Anne Tomiche reminds us that glossolalia has often been associated with transcendental meaning and the power of revelation precisely because of its lack of (human) meaning. In the nineteenth century, the revelatory folly of 'speaking in tongues' became an object of scientific study, especially in relation to spiritual phenomena and the human mind. But, as Tomiche shows, glossolalia, which is frequently associated with the psychopathology of hysteria, eludes the categories of nineteenth-century psychiatrists and linguists. Scientific reason tries to frame what would escape it, but in so doing it exposes the scientist's hidden desires. Glossolalia can therefore be seen as a 'return' of the body, an emphasis on that which is excluded from linguistic definitions: in twentieth-century literary explorations of glossolalia, linguistic folly acquires a variety of new meanings, which manifest themselves in the rich materiality of language itself and in its 'play between total unintelligibility and full revelation' (p. 174).

Traditional associations of madness with the female body—which underlie nineteenth-century discussions of folly and the typically feminine condition of hysteria—are shown by Laura Jose to operate also in medieval medical texts, where, contrary perhaps to our modern expectations, they reveal 'an intriguing level of gender fluidity' (p. 153). The link between female reproductive sexuality and male rationality, writes Jose in 'Monstrous Conceptions: Sex, Madness and Gender in Medieval Medical Texts', is based on the ability to conceive—children, or thought. Medieval medical texts assume a structural similarity between uterus and brain: if either the female sexual organs or the male mind functions incorrectly, aberrations—monstrous offspring, madness—inevitably ensue. Despite this apparent endorsement of dichotomous gender roles, however, medieval descriptions of the female body and its diseases also convey, implicitly, men's fear of their own mysterious and fragile bodies and their own vulnerability. It is, once again, the encounter with matter—unrepresentable, intractable—that upsets the sense of security apparently grounded in (man's) reason. Folly unsettles the rational mind and threatens any system that is based on

clear distinctions, because – as Günther also observes of Lichtenberg – an exhaustive description of *déraison* would entail the understanding of, the possibility of identification with, and therefore the admission of one's own liability to madness.

If folly cannot be represented by reason, madness and delirium may appear to be superior forms of expression and of perception, precisely because they stand outside normal and normative social practice. Surrealism, as Jacqueline Rattray shows through her 'Analysing Surrealist Madness Through the Poetry of Salvador Dalí', actively explores madness as a state that enables new critical perceptions and that allows the artist to see the insane as marginalized, oppressed victims of society, thereby acquiring a critical social role. In Dalí's writing, a quick succession of bewildering, apparently unrelated images, aims to bring about changes of perception in the reader. Dalí's 'paranoiac-critical' method draws from the delirious imagination in order to provoke a jolt to normal perception: madness is a *method* with a critical function as well as (or even before being) a condition. French Symbolism – the topic of Natasha Grigorian's 'Dreams, Nightmares, and Lunacy in *En rade*: Odilon Redon's Pictorial Inspiration in the Writings of J.-K. Huysmans' – similarly rejects the rational order of bourgeois society by privileging the non-rational world of dream, fantasy and sensation. Unlike Dalí's surrealism, however, the works of J.-K. Huysmans and Odilon Redon convey a melancholic, anguished sense of loss and nostalgia, even where their images suggest violence. While Dalí's surrealism is concerned with the fragmenting of perception, with the body, its secretions, putrefaction, and the bodily effects that such images elicit in the reader, Huysmans and Redon's nightmarish and often grotesque images attribute a deeper, symbolic coherence to lunacy. As Grigorian shows, Huysmans's *En rade* is based on a sequence of intensely symbolic scenes, which celebrate the dreamlike, nostalgic desire for a lost, idealized or impossible dimension, while at the same time assuming the heuristic function of art, its ability to bring the subject closer to an understanding of herself or himself.

In their essays on visual and poetic representations of madness, Günther, Grigorian and Rattray realize what Malcolm Bowie once described as perhaps the most important task of comparative criticism: the study of the creative transaction between different artistic practices 'under the twin signs of dynamism and complexity'.¹² If read in succession, the three essays suggest a progression from the Enlightenment's deep-rooted fears of madness to late-nineteenth-century concerns with

symbolism and with folly as a lost knowledge that can only be evoked through non-rational representation and perception. Finally, in the early twentieth century, the search for a truth beyond reason culminates in the avant-garde's bold display of delirium and paranoia: strategies to unsettle the complacency of bourgeois conventionality. Yet this is only one way of reading the essays in this collection: for Günther, Grigorian and Rattray, but also for Lusin and Mikkonen, madness is what resists the operations of an externally framing and normalizing ideal. It is the menacing or simply pitiful spectacle of a subject excluded from power, or else the romanticized ideal of a rebellious other, which exceeds the bounds of any and all regulatory schemas. But what if power itself turns out to be a collective madness? What if our social regulations, our daily rituals of conformity reveal themselves to be the greatest of follies?

The suspicion of a world based on *déraison* pervades many of the essays in this collection. As Bowlby reminds us, 'it was in the eighteenth century that folly had its verbal heyday, just at the time when tangible, material follies were beginning to pop up on the ground in every odd corner of the well-acred English gentleman's estate' (p. 271). But already the sixteenth century showed more than a passing interest in madness: 'from the mad character (Orlando) through the mad author (Tasso) to the mad reader (Don Quixote)', writes Duprat, 'folly seemed to invade the whole world' (p. 142). And what about the twentieth century? Bank clerks, insurance agents, university professors, 'the great poets of the past century were at best eccentrics', quips Boitani: 'But then, it is not they but the world that has gone mad' (p. 138). In his learned and humorous essay on 'Bibliomania and the Folly of Reading', Bernhard Metz sets out to blur the boundaries between cultural establishment and subversive eccentricity. The bibliomaniac is the scholar's necessary counterpart: his eccentricity embodies our hidden desires and bad habits. 'In a way', Metz admits, 'we're all book fools' (p. 263). Does this mean that folly is little more than a peculiar inclination, an unacknowledged but widespread and irresistible habit? Is Rachel Bowlby right to suggest that there are times when folly is 'at once idiosyncrasy and a universal state. It's the peculiarities and shameful appetites, the childish or animal compulsions that each person is unaware of in themselves, even though they may be adept at spotting them in others' (p. 272)? In the final essay of this volume, 'The New Praise of Folly', Alberto Manguel reaches a different, more sinister conclusion. For the Argentinian writer, true folly is unintelligible, tragic and all-pervasive. It manifests itself in our cruelties and man-made catastrophes, in the unpredictable and

inexplicable force of our greed, our violence and our wilful cruelty. There are deeds that bear no rational explanation, experiences that cannot be told, but only suffered 'in the flesh and in the mind'. And yet, tales must be told about them that allow for a certain, limited understanding. 'Through language at its best, our folly can be trapped in its own doings, made to repeat itself, made to enact its cruelties and catastrophes (and even its glorious deeds) but this time under lucid observation and with protected emotion, beneath the aseptic covering of words, lit by the reading-lamp set over the open book' (p. 325).

In his history of madness, Foucault describes insanity as the 'charred root of meaning'.¹³ Meaning sprouts not only from reason but from folly, even when reason attempts to create a 'scorched earth' around itself to sterilize anything that does not conform to it. Of this charring, this scorching, this attempted *auto-da-fé* that would suppress or contain the heterodoxy of meaning, there are many examples in literature: from *Don Quijote*, where the books that lead to folly are finally burned (with Quijote's return to normality, but also at the cost of his life), to Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*, where it is Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* that suffers this fate during a demonstration. Despite their different historical, national and ideological contexts, both burnings testify to the desire to sterilise any heterodox voices, any perspectives that would introduce a doubt, an alternative, to what is reputed to be true. Even our most intimate and personal beliefs – our family histories and our 'normal' knowledge of origins, 'roots' and backgrounds – depend on such confining gestures: on a repression of the buried secrets and hidden truths, which Bowlby lucidly reveals in her discussion of Thomas Hardy. As the essays in this volume show, folly is a serious disturbance to such established truths, and folly operates to chip away at confinements and orthodoxies, to confuse the lines that would define and delimit any subject. In her discussion of literature, philosophy and madness, Shoshana Felman writes that 'the paradox of madness' is precisely that 'of being literary in philosophy and philosophical in literature'.¹⁴ The root may be charred, but it continues to sprout meaning.

The articles gathered in this double issue of *Comparative Critical Studies* are a selection of the papers that were presented at the BCLA's Eleventh International Conference, 'Folly', held at Goldsmiths University of London, in July 2007. About one hundred and twenty papers were discussed there, tackling topics as diverse as the folly of women, representations of the Ship of Fools, madness in Eastern Europe in the Soviet period, garden follies and mausolea, carnival and violence

in modern Asia, reason and unreason in the Western philosophical tradition, melancholy, laughter and satire. Selecting papers from such a range has been an invidious task, but also one to be envied. Listening to the papers in London last year and reading their elaborated versions thereafter, we have learned a lot, laughed a lot, and gone a little mad. How does one combine such a range of topics with the coherence that is expected from a monograph? More than once, the appeal of academic rigour seemed to fade in comparison with the lively, playful, joyful, adventurous, sometimes bizarre but always enlightening contributions that the topic of folly invited. Fortunately, we could rely on lucid help from the editors of *Comparative Critical Studies*, on guidance from our peer reviewers and, most importantly, from the authors themselves: Boitani's absorbing lecture taught us that poetry and folly are entwined from the start with a touch of the divine, while the love of books (which is not necessarily a love of literature) has more than a touch of madness, as Metz reminds us. After all, Don Quijote's brain was liquified by the sun of La Mancha and his reading of romances. Perhaps, alongside the customary disclaimer that any reference to real people and events is purely coincidental, all books should carry a more general mental health warning: Reader Beware.

NOTES

- 1 La Rochefoucauld, maxim 209, in *Réflexions ou sentences et maximes morales, Réflexions diverses*, presented with their variants by Dominique Secretan (Geneva: Droz, 1967), p. 80.
- 2 Samuel Beckett, *The Beckett Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable* (London: Picador, 1979), p. 267.
- 3 '[Clutter] has the paradoxical implication of being something which may have no intrinsic or discernible order [...]. It invites us, in other words, to do something puzzling, or even uncanny; that is, to make meaning [...] the absence of pattern' (Adam Phillips, *Promises Promises. Essays on Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 60).
- 4 See Christopher Bollas, *Cracking Up. The Work of Unconscious Experience* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 4.
- 5 See Michel Foucault, *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961); translated by Richard Howard as *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London: Tavistock, 1967).
- 6 See Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); translated by Alan Sheridan as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1979).
- 7 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 2, author's italics.

- 8 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1994), pp. 48–49. Quoted in Kai Mikkonen, “‘It is not the fully conscious mind which chooses West Africa in preference to Switzerland’: The Rhetoric of the Mad African Forest in Conrad, Céline and Greene”, p. 303 of this volume.
- 9 ‘Delirium’ derives from the Latin *delirare*, to deviate from a straight line, from the furrow (from *de* + *lira*, ridge between furrows), whence to deviate, to become deranged, crazy or delirious. See *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, edited by C. T. Onions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966); Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1971).
- 10 Frank O’Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (London: Macmillan, 1963).
- 11 Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated and edited by B. Jowett, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, fourth edition, 1953), 254 a, vol. III, p. 151.
- 12 Malcolm Bowie, *Psychoanalysis and the Future of Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 91–92.
- 13 Foucault, *Folie et déraison* (1961), Préface, p. vi (‘racine calciné du sens’). This part of the Preface does not appear in Richard Howard’s 1967 translation, and it is taken from Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, edited by Jean Khalfa, translated by Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).
- 14 Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness (Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis)* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 37.