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### Trapped in Translation

**Madness**, *n.*: *imprudence, delusion, or (wild) foolishness resembling insanity* (OED). In the English language, like many languages, words carry multiple meanings and connotations. However, translations of such words from one language to the next allow for variations in definitions of words with apparently identical meanings. “Madness” in the English language translates as “folie” in French. However, “It should be noted that the French word ‘folie’ is both more inclusive and more common than the English word ‘madness’: ‘Folie’ covers a vast range of meaning going from slight eccentricity to clinical insanity” (Felman 224). Thus, the definition of “folie” remains incomplete when translated as “madness.” Furthermore, “It is perhaps not insignificant...that ‘folie’ in French is feminine: its grammatical gender confers upon it a kind of elusive femininity which is lost, along with its varied connotations, in an English translation” (Felman 225). Despite the variations in definitions, two seemingly congruent words differ in an implication that fails to even exist in the English language: that of gender. Thus, how may English speakers fully comprehend ‘folie,’ or even madness itself, if the English language lacks the ability to fully define it? Similarly, any language of the sane lacks the ability to completely define or translate the language of the mad. In his book *Madness and Civilization*, or *Folie et déraison*, French writer Michel Foucault confronts the issue of language barriers in defining madness and gains support in his theory through the written experiences of Susanna Kaysen in *Girl, Interrupted*.

While a patient at McLean Hospital, Susanna Kaysen experiences many aspects of madness which allow her to identify such language barriers in multiple forms. Because the madwoman understands a language completely contrary to any discourse compatible with the sane mind, many vocal expressions fall unrecognized or misunderstood to foreign ears. Polly, commonly known as the friendly and jovial burn survivor at McLean, attempts to express her compiled mental torment through an outburst of tears one morning. Although the other girls recognize the sobs echoing through the hallways as belonging to Polly, none could interpret their meaning. No one knew why Polly's usual sunshine suddenly disappeared behind gushing tears; "even Lisa didn't know why" (Kaysen 18). Still, when her moans morphed into words, no one knew exactly what raced through Polly's mind as she screamed about her face. Was it horror? shock? confusion? anger? Did Polly understand why and how she possessed such scars? Did she want to change it? Did she want to hide? Her sobs and screams create a vague understanding of her sorrow; however, a complete understanding of her thoughts and emotions remains lost in the translation of her hysterical sobs into sane comprehension. To Foucault, Polly's screams exemplify:

...all those words deprived of language whose muffled rumbling, for an attentive ear, rises up from the depths of history, the obstinate murmur of a language which speaks by itself, uttered by no one and answered by no one, a language which stifles itself, sticks in the throat, collapses before having attained formulation and returns, without incident, to the silence from which it had never been freed. The charred root of meaning (Quoted in Felman 212).

Comparable to the staggered, breathless sobs of a mental patient, the language of the mad remains mostly indecipherable and stuck inside the throats of its creators.

Often, that indefinite language never escapes the madwoman's lips, but rather creates its meaning through silence. While making caramels, Kaysen pours scalding sugar over Georgina's hand and reacts with incessant screaming similar to that of Polly. Georgina, on the other hand, reacts with utter silence. Yet, the silence screams in a language of its own. The nurses casually register such a reaction by noting: "Patient lacked affect after accident;" however, Georgina's silence shows more of a reaction than Kaysen's screams (Kaysen 30). According to Foucault, in the language of madness, "silence was absolute; there was no longer any common language between madness and reason; the language of delirium can be answered only by an absence of language" (Civilization 262). Thus, Georgina's silent reaction in actuality "spoke louder than words," only in a language incomprehensible to the mentally stable spectator.

However, even when speaking in the language of the sane, the madwoman may not truly mean what seems easily understood by the listener. After digging into her hand in a mad search for her bones, Kaysen deliriously asks Valerie: "It'll be okay, won't it?" (104). However, in retrospect, Kaysen admits, "...I hadn't said what I meant. What I meant was that now I was safe, now I was really crazy, and nobody could take me out of there" (104). In this case, not only does a mental patient attempt to relay a message of madness, but also she uses the language of the sane. Yet, the same phrase means two completely different thoughts when translated into the languages of speaker and listener. Kaysen attempts to communicate using a language which, according to Foucault, "...consists of subjecting an utterance, which appears to conform to the accepted code, to another code whose key is contained within that same utterance so that this utterance becomes divided within itself. It says what it says, but it adds a silent surplus that quietly

enunciates what it says according to which code it says what it says” (Absence 294).

Thus, the English words which flow from Kaysen’s lips carry hidden meanings laced within their letters.

Another instance in which Susanna Kaysen pursues communication with the sane also ultimately fails in translation and only provides the sane with a false sense of understanding. During a counseling session at McLean, Kaysen remembers falling asleep in the silence of her therapist’s office. He immediately recognizes Kaysen’s desire for sleep as a form of communication. However, his interpretation of her exhaustion lands far from the truth. “‘You want to sleep with me,’ he crowed;” however, Kaysen simply desires a soundless rest (116). She admits, “It calmed me to sit in his office without having to explain myself” (116). Thus, Kaysen’s ability to fall asleep in her therapist’s office conveys a message about her exhaustion from the ward and her comfort in a place of silence. However, her doctor identifies none of these implications in his translation of her nap. Living the life of a madwoman, unable to express herself and residing in a place of emotional and mental entrapment, Kaysen desires only a refuge where she may compile her own thoughts in her own language without the requirement of expression. Knowing her doctor’s inability to understand her, Kaysen’s frustration increases with his unanswerable questions and she explains, “After all, I already knew what I felt; he was the one who didn’t know” (117). In fact, “Foucault’s main object—and the challenge of his study—is to contend that anthropology, philosophy, **psychology**, **psychiatry**, are built upon a radical misunderstanding of the phenomenon of madness and a deliberate *misapprehension* of its language” (Felman 209 emphasis mine). Thus, even those who

apparently specialize in interpreting the mad fail to understand their means of expression and in turn, only stifle the madwoman's desire to communicate with the sane.

Kaysen's desire to conceal her traits of madness appears as no surprise considering her past experiences with faulty comprehension by the sane. When discussing her plans for the future with her social worker, Kaysen realizes that her thoughts and expectations fall on misunderstanding ears. Upon hearing Kaysen's aspiration for becoming a writer, the social worker responds, "That's a nice hobby, but how are you going to earn a living?" (133). Clearly she misinterprets the career suggestion. In Kaysen's mind, writing provides a way of life; she *is* a writer; writing *is* her future; she must write to survive. Only through writing, her only form of communication with the sane, may Kaysen survive the chaos that separates her from normality. In explaining her feelings about her social worker, Kaysen says, "I didn't like her because she didn't understand that this was *me*, and I was going to be a writer" (133). By not comprehending Kaysen's need for written communication, the social worker refutes the idea that writing may serve as a means for survival. Only Kaysen understands her philosophy on how to live in harmony with her insanity. Similarly, "If one turns now to literature in order to examine the role of madness there, one realizes that the literary madman is most often a disguised philosopher: in literature, the role of madness, then, is eminently philosophical" (Felman 207). Susanna Kaysen attempts to create a stable lifestyle based upon her only ability to filter her madness; however, her philosophy behind her writing loses credibility and recognition in a strict and mentally stable society. Thus, her ability to communicate efficiently remains lost in a sane world.

Due to the madwoman's inability to effectively communicate through vocal means, the insane often resort to physical modes of expression. Common methods for physical communication include eating disorders and wrist-cutting; however, Kaysen employs "wrist-banging" as her method of expression before her confinement at McLean. She explains, "I spent hours in my butterfly chair banging my wrist. I did it in the evenings, like homework" (153). However, physical expression, especially when visible to the common eye, often results in immediate attention from outsiders. This attention proves problematic for the insane since, "Part of the point was that nobody knew about my suffering. If people knew and admired—or abominated—me, something important would be lost" (Kaysen 153). Kaysen, like many mentally unstable people, often finds herself unable to interpret even her own madness. Thus, internalizing and concealing its outward cries becomes a necessity in order to prevent the personal confusion caused by reactions and misinterpretations by others: "I was trying to explain my situation to myself. My situation was that I was in pain and nobody knew it; even I had trouble knowing it. So I told myself, over and over, You are in pain. It was the only way to get through to myself. I was demonstrating externally and irrefutably, an inward condition" (Kaysen 153). However, when the sane involve themselves in the actions of the mad, their intervention may inadvertently suppress the madwoman's attempt to communicate or express her inner turmoil. Not surprisingly, "Foucault...believes the oppressed are 'capable of expressing themselves'—outside the strictures of theory" (Moussa 95). And within that belief, Foucault contends that: "When...the formerly voiceless begin to speak a language of their own making—a counterdiscourse—they have begun to resist the power seeking to oppress them" (89). Thus, Kaysen, like many mad people, attempts to

communicate her insanity while concealing it from the world of the sane in order to prevent the oppression and confusion caused by sane misinterpretation.

In a similar attempt to communicate physically with the surrounding society, Susanna Kaysen contemplates and even attempts suicide. The sane people in her life remain entirely unaware of Susanna's emotional and mental turmoil. Realization sets in only after Kaysen physically cries for help through her consumption of fifty aspirin. However, her physical communication remains incomplete in translation since her sane loved ones permit her confinement for two years as doctors attempt to interpret her self-detrimental actions. Yet, the largest complication in translating Susanna's cry of desperation rests in the creator of the language herself. Not only does her language confuse the sane around her, but also it confuses the sane mind within her. Kaysen describes a debate within herself between desire for life and desire for death. However, she admits that, "Actually, it was only part of myself that I wanted to kill: the part that wanted to kill herself, that dragged me into the suicide debate and made every window, kitchen implement, and subway station a rehearsal for tragedy. I didn't figure this out, though, until after I'd swallowed the fifty aspirin" (37). The most difficult aspect of the madwoman's language resides in the fact that even the mad remain unable to decipher it completely because they maintain a portion of sanity within themselves. When their madness attempts to speak, whether through vocal or physical means, a portion remains lost in translation even in the mind of the creator. If even the mad lack complete understanding of their thoughts, "'What then is madness?' asks Foucault...Unaccomplishment *at work*: active incompleteness of a meaning which ceaselessly transforms itself, offers itself but to be misunderstood, misapprehended"

(Felman 227). Thus, “The entire history of Western culture is revealed to be the story of Reason’s progressive conquest and consequent repression of that which it calls madness” (Felman 209). Since some portion of reason and sanity resides in all people, full interpretation and understanding of a language indecipherable to its own creators seems impossible.

In a similar attempt to convey their language, musicians, artists, and writers encode their thoughts and emotions in their work, and consequently, find themselves confined along with Kaysen. Ray Charles, Kate, James, and Livingston Taylor, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath are all known as great artists of the English language and are all confined, at some point, within the walls of 115 Mill Street. In consideration of this fact, Kaysen ponders to herself, “Did the hospital specialize in poets and singers, or was it that poets and singers specialized in madness?” (48). Instead of specializing in madness, those poets and singers specialize in creating a method of communication between the worlds of the mad and the sane. Feelings of extreme rage, sorrow, or love often require different methods of expression to convey their intricate meanings. Kaysen asks, “What is it about meter and cadence and rhythm that makes their makers mad?”(48). However, the steady rhythm and methodic melody of a song or poem enables the average audience to feel the artist’s message. An artist’s madness creates his work, and without inexplicable thoughts and emotions, such works of genius would never exist. Thus, with the creation of artistic works, Foucault declares that: “Henceforth, and through the mediation of madness, it is the world that becomes culpable in relation to the work of art; it is now arraigned by the work of art, obliged to order itself by its language, compelled by it to a task of recognition, of reparation, to the task of restoring reason *from* that unreason and *to* that

unreason” (Civilization 288). An artist’s work merely attempts to convey a message that remains untranslatable into an official “sane” form of communication.

However, not all communication proves entirely lost. Just as within each madwoman hides a bit of sanity, so too does madness lurk behind the overpowering reason within the sane mind. A favorite song, a touching poem, a work of art that speaks to us—each holds a touch of madness within its mastery. The expressions of thought and emotion imprisoned by the sanity that rules society emerge through artistic creation, and in those creations rests the drop of madness that resides within everyone. Upon her return to the Frick sixteen years after her first encounter the Vermeer, Kaysen confronts the painting that impressed her so long ago. She notices about the girl in the painting:

She had changed a lot in sixteen years. She was no longer urgent. In fact, she was sad. She was young and distracted, and her teacher was bearing down on her, trying to get her to pay attention. But she was looking out, looking for someone who would see her. This time I read the title of the painting: *Girl Interrupted at her Music*. Interrupted at her music: as my life had been, interrupted in the music of being seventeen...(167).

When she first sees the Vermeer in her youth, Susanna Kaysen wavers between her sanity and her madness. However, the painting speaks directly to her confusion and her madness understands the message it conveys. The oppressive world of societal reason “bears down on her,” and, in her urgency for “someone who would see her,” Susanna Kaysen rejects the world of the sane and flees into her incommunicable madness. Understanding of her mad reaction comes only after she confronts the painting years later. Kaysen admits, “I had something to tell her now. ‘I see you,’ I said.” She tells her boyfriend: “Don’t you see, she’s trying to get out” (167). However, never having utilized his ability to communicate through the language of the mad, her boyfriend does not “see.” Thus, art

serves as a messenger between the mad thoughts of the artist and those suppressed thoughts of madness within every person. Foucault asserts that: “This does not mean that madness is the only language common to the work of art and the modern world; but it means that...by the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself” (Civilization288). In this sense, the Vermeer causes Kaysen to question the world of reason with which she feels so uncomfortable, and through its common language, the painting poses a question which seventeen-year-old Kaysen finds impossible to answer in a sane manner. Thus, art communicates with deep, even mad, feelings through a language only the madwoman has the ability to “see.”

However, interpretation even yet remains unclear. Susanna Kaysen never fully understands or defines the root of her madness which separates her from the sane. Similarly, the English speaker never fully understands or successfully defines “madness” in a comprehensive way. The language of madness lurks on the fringes of understanding, just out of reach of sanity’s comprehension. Thus, just as “folie” lacks complete interpretation in English, madness itself lacks interpretation in any sane language. In consideration for Foucault’s work:

The historian’s problem is that of finding a language: a language other than that of reason which masters and represses madness, other than that of science which transforms it into an object with which no dialogue can be engaged, *about* which monologues are vacantly expounded—without ever disclosing the experience and the voice of madness in itself and for itself (Felman 212).

Susanna Kaysen discovers the existence of such a language while confined in McLean Hospital for two influential years of her life. However, the language of the mad still

remains lost in translation into any structured language of sane society, and only some of its creators hold the ability to decode its message in its entirety.

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