You road that I enter upon and look around, I believe you are not all that is here, I believe that much unseen is also here.

Walt Whitman, Song of the Open Road (1856)

The Foucault fix

Foucault opens his famous work on insanity in the age of reason, *Madness and Civilization*, with a figure that appears at once stark and mysterious. It is the ship of fools (*Narrenschiff*), ‘a strange “drunken boat” that glides along the calm rivers of the Rhineland and the Flemish canals’ (Foucault, 1988: 7). The literature of the late fifteenth century was alive with ‘romantic and satiric vessels’, Foucault points out. But amongst all these imaginary craft the ship of fools also had a ‘real existence’ (1988: 8; cf. Scull, 1993: 6–7). Quite frequently, and especially in Germany, municipal authorities would hand over their madmen to ‘boatmen’ with instructions to remove them from the city. ‘Often the cities of Europe must have seen these “ships of fools” approaching their harbours’ (1988: 8).

But what was the meaning of this practice of using ships to ferry away the mad? Foucault insists it was more than a ‘general means of extradition’; this was a highly symbolic act that had everything to do with the way madness was coming to haunt the imagination of the Renaissance.

[The ship of fools] made [...] [the madman] a prisoner of his own departure. But water adds to this the dark mass of its own values; it carries off, but it does more: it purifies. Navigation delivers man to the uncertainty of fate; on water, each of us is in the hands of his own destiny; every embarkation is, potentially, the last [...] The madman’s
voyage is at once a rigorous division and an absolute Passage [...] Confined on the ship, from which there is no escape, the madman is delivered to the river with its thousand arms, the sea with its thousand roads, to that great uncertainty external to everything. He is the prisoner in the midst of what is the freest, the openest of routes: bound fast at the infinite crossroads. He is the Passenger par excellence: that is, the prisoner of the passage (Foucault, 1988: 11).

As Madness and Civilization unfolds Foucault will leave behind this strange ship, returning to dry land and the cartographies of power for which he is best known. Hence the chapter on the ship of fools is followed by Foucault’s account of the ‘great confinement’, and we encounter a landscape of power that is being transformed by the emergence of houses of correction, houses of charity and early hospitals that, along with other measures, served as ‘the densest symbol of that “police” which conceived of itself as the civil equivalent of religion for the edification of a perfect city’ (Foucault, 1988: 63).

This move from the ominous ship to terra firma is echoed by a similar move in Security, Territory, Population where Foucault sketches a genealogy of police. There, we move from the road to the city and its institutions of control. In these lectures Foucault observes that as a rationality of government, police emerged only gradually. Its origins lie partly in a sprawling mass of ordinances pertaining to urban regulation dating from the Middle Ages. It was only in the eighteenth century that details of these ordinances were systematically collected and assembled into large compendia.

But there is a second line of descent by which the governmentality of police is traceable.

The other institution that is [...] a preliminary to police, is not urban regulation but the mounted constabulary, the maréchaussée, that is to say, the armed force that royal power was forced to deploy in the fifteenth century in order to avoid the consequences and disorders following war, and essentially the dissolution of armies at the end of wars. Freed soldiers, soldiers who had often not been paid, disbanded, made up a floating mass of individuals who were of course dedicated to every kind of illegality: violence, delinquency, crime, theft, and murder. The maréchaussée was responsible for controlling and repressing all these people on the road (Foucault, 2007: 335–6).

That is about as much as Foucault, at least in these lectures, offers us on the theme of the road and its dedicated forms of authority. Yet it would