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ARTICLE

Foucault, Experience, Literature

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A book is produced, a minuscule event, a small malleable object... (Foucault).¹

A book is a grain of sand... (Calvino).²

What most threatens reading is this: the reader's reality, his personality, his immodesty, his stubborn insistence upon remaining himself in the face of what he reads (Blanchot).³

The very general question that I want to address here is, 'what can literature do?'⁴ If a book is a minuscule event, a small object, a mere grain of sand, how can it be said to do anything at all? In one of several interviews in which he discusses his dissatisfaction with the philosophical milieu of his student days, which was dominated by Marxism, phenomenology and existentialism, Foucault makes the following startling claim: "for me the break was first Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a breathtaking performance."⁵ My aim in this paper is to lay the groundwork for understanding how it is possible for a work of literature to have such an effect – that is, to force us to think otherwise. Is it really possible for works of literature to change the people who read them? Or, to give this question a slightly different focus, are people capable of changing themselves through their reading of literature? Let me

¹ Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, trans. J. Murphy & J. Khalfa (London: Routledge, 2006) [*Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, 2nd edition, Gallimard, Paris, 1972 (references here are to the Gallimard edition of 2001)]. Henceforth, *HM*, with English and French page numbers given in the text: *HM*, xxxvii [9]. My translation varies occasionally from the published version.

² Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature*, (San Diego, CA: Harvest Books, 1987), p.87.

³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. A.Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, , 1982), p.198.

⁴ I would like thank several people for helping me to clarify my thinking about this question: Timothy Rayner, who read the paper with great care and attention; the members of the School of Philosophy, UNSW, Sydney at which I spent part of my sabbatical in 2006; and the anonymous referees for *Foucault Studies*..

⁵ "Interview with Michel Foucault," conducted by Charles Ruas, in Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth* (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), p.176.

say first of all, that I will be answering this question in the affirmative – that is, I will be arguing that literature can indeed have this kind of effect.

It would, however, be futile to answer this question in the affirmative if we could not say something about *how* literature can effect such changes, and it is this *how* which will be my focus here. Starting from the recognition that the work of literature can only be fully understood as occurring in the interaction between a reader and a text, we will have to address both sides of this dyad. My question then becomes: What is it, in the forms of the human subject, on the one hand, and in the forms and modes of literature, on the other hand, that makes it possible for the latter to act upon the former with a transformative effect? In this paper, due to limitations of space, I will focus primarily on the former aspect: the forms of human subjectivity and their essential historicity. But, ultimately, we will see that a Foucauldian approach to this question necessarily draws in the idea of fiction and the fictive, which will allow us to build a bridge to the question of literature itself. The approach I am taking here, however, first of all requires a detailed excavation of the development of the notion of experience in Foucault's work, from his earliest to his latest.

I Foucault's Archaeology of Experience

Among the central concepts of Foucault's thought – power, knowledge, truth, critique – there is one which has received less attention than it deserves: experience.⁶ This concept runs through Foucault's works from the earliest to the latest in a way that rarely draws attention to itself, but occasionally bursts out in such resonant phrases as "limit-experience" and "experience-book." In an interview given in 1978,⁷ for example, Foucault gives an account of his entire philosophical development in terms of this concept. There were certain works, he says, by Bataille, Blanchot, Nietzsche, that opened up for him the possibility of philosophy as a "limit experience" – an experience which tears us away from ourselves and leaves us no longer the same as before (*EMF*, 241 [43]). Such books, which he also wishes to write

⁶ Two notable exceptions are: Timothy Rayner, "Between fiction and reflection: Foucault and the experience book," *Continental Philosophy Review*, no.36, 2003, pp.27-43; and, Gary Gutting, "Foucault's Philosophy of Experience," *boundary 2*, vol.29, no.2, 2002, pp. 69-85. But, see also the chapter on Bataille, Blanchot and Foucault, in Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, , 2006), chap. 9.

⁷ "Interview with Michel Foucault," in *Michel Foucault: Essential Works, Vol. 3; Power* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 2000). This collection, henceforth, *EW3*. "Entretien avec Michel Foucault" in, *Dits et écrits: IV*, D. Defert and F.Ewald (eds.) (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). This collection, henceforth, *DEIV*. This interview, henceforth, *EMF* with English and [French] page numbers given in the text. Unfortunately the English translation of this interview can be misleading in places.

himself, he calls “experience books” rather than “truth books”; and they are experimental (*expérience* also means experiment) in the sense that they put the author and the reader to the test of their own limits (*EMF*, 246 [47]). Hence, his books on madness, the prison and sexuality not only examine our forms of knowledge and our practices, they also try to transform them. But running alongside this dazzling use of the concept is a more mundane sense in which experience is taken to mean the general, dominant background structures of thought, action and feeling that prevail in a given culture at a given time. Hence, for example, the extensive discussion, in *History of Madness*, of “the classical experience of madness,” or the identification of a “modern experience of sexuality,” in *History of Sexuality*, volume 2. In that book, experience is finally presented as the historical mode in which being is given to us as “something that can and must be thought,”⁸ while, in his very last lecture at the Collège de France, Foucault can still speak in terms of the Christian experience and the modern European experience of philosophy.⁹ Experience is then, a limit-transcending, challenging event, but also the dominant historical structure which is to be challenged. These two senses of experience, in all their apparent contradictoriness, will be my focus here.

Let us begin with the Preface to the first edition of *History of Madness*, where Foucault quotes, without attribution, a passage that comes from one of René Char’s prose poems, ending with the sentence “*Développez votre étrangeté légitime*” (develop your legitimate strangeness/foreignness).¹⁰ This imperative could stand as an epigraph to Foucault’s entire work, a series of books that in their effort to “think otherwise” (*penser autrement*) (*UP*, 9 [15]) constantly explore whatever is foreign to our ways of thinking and acting. The work on madness, in particular, sets out to explore the original gesture by which madness and unreason were expelled from the rational experience of the modern West – the division in which they became what is most strange, foreign and excluded for reason.¹¹ When the book was re-published in 1972, however, Foucault removed the original Preface and wrote a new one. In the new Preface, he steps back from the role of authorial voice, resisting what he sees as the temptation to impose a law of interpretation on the work. After all, a book, he

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, volume II, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988) [*Histoire de la sexualité*, 2, *L’usage des plaisirs*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984]. Henceforth, *UP*, with English and [French] page numbers given in the text. *UP*, 6-7 [13].

⁹ Lecture of March 28th 1984; unpublished, but recordings available at Fonds Michel Foucault, l’IMEC, Caen.

¹⁰ The original Preface is included in the English translation (op. cit.); the French is in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1954-1988: I, 1954-1969*, D. Defert and F. Ewald (eds.), Paris: Gallimard, 1994. Henceforth, *HMP*, with English and [French] page numbers given in the text. This citation, *HMP*, xxxvi [167]. For Foucault’s source, see René Char, *Fureur et mystère*, Paris: Gallimard, 1967, p.71.

¹¹ It is no surprise to find that the group of poems from which the Char quotation comes is called *Partage Formel* (Formal Division).

says, may indeed be “a minuscule event” (*HM*, xxxvii [9]), but it is an event that is followed by a proliferating series of simulacra – interpretations, quotations, commentaries – which an author cannot and should not try to limit. Making a curious distinction, Foucault says he would not want a book to claim for itself the status of text, to which criticism would like to reduce it. He would like it to present itself, instead, as “discourse,” by which he means “at the same time battle and weapon, strategy and blow... irregular encounter and repeatable scene” (*HM*, xxxviii [10]). What then is the series of events in which this book on madness is inscribed? To what battle and struggle does it contribute? One way to answer these questions is to begin with the centrality of the notion of experience that structures and animates Foucault’s approach to madness.

At the centre of this book, as the original Preface shows, there are two notions of experience. On the one hand, there is the idea of a “limit-experience,” a foundational gesture by which a culture excludes that which will function as its outside (*HMP*, xxix [161]) – in this case, the exclusion of madness and unreason by reason. Hence, it is a question in this book of going back to the “*degré zéro*” (*HMP*, xxvii [159]) of the history of madness, where reason and unreason are still undifferentiated, not yet divided, to a time before this exclusion.¹² Foucault suggests that one could do a series of histories of these limit-experiences, which might include the construction of the Orient as other to the West, the fundamental division between reason and dream, and the institution of sexual prohibitions. To this list we could add the original division, represented for us by Plato, between the discourse of reason and the language of poetry. It is worth noting that this 1961-vintage “limit-experience” is not the same as the one Foucault appeals to in the 1978 interview that I quoted in relation to the “experience-book.”¹³ In that interview, a “limit-experience” is an extreme experience which transgresses the limits of a culture – an experience, that is, of the sort that Bataille both describes and conjures – whereas here it is the experience in which a culture actually creates those limits. Once again, we see that the tension between the senses of experience has reproduced itself, but this time *within* one of its forms. However, let us remain for the moment within the context of *History of Madness*. In order to understand the form of limit-experience which divides reason from madness, it is necessary to turn to what Foucault calls “the classical experience of madness.” In this phrase, which recurs throughout the book, “experience” is taken as arising from the whole set of the dominant ways of seeing, thinking about, and acting towards madness – ways which include systems of

¹² It is worth noting that Foucault is not here looking for access to madness in some sort of pure state. Indeed, he explicitly states later in the same Preface that its “wild state” and “primitive purity” will always remain inaccessible (*HMP*, xxxiii [164]). However, one might object that he, nonetheless, seems to assume that there *is* such a state, although we cannot access it.

¹³ See note 6 above.

thought, institutions and the legal apparatus (“notions, institutions, judicial and police measures, scientific concepts”) (*HMP*, xxxiii [164]).

The first point to note about this second use of the concept is that Foucault never gives an explicit definition of experience, he never tells us exactly what the term covers. Early in the book we read phrases such as “all the major experiences of the Renaissance” (*HM*, 8 [21]),¹⁴ “the Western experience of madness” (*HM*, 16[34]), “the experience of madness in the fifteenth century” (*HM*, 24 [43]), and of course the ubiquitous “classical experience of madness” (*HM*, 15 [32]), but experience itself is never defined. Nevertheless, it is possible to piece together Foucault’s understanding of this concept. In the first place, it involves the way in which a given object is *seen* and *conceptualised* in a given culture. For example, at the beginning of the Renaissance, Foucault tells us, there was a confrontation between two possible forms of the experience of madness – a “tragic” and a “critical” experience (*HM*, 26 [45]). And these two forms, we are told, are the basis of “everything that could be felt (*éprouvé*) and formulated (*formulé*) about madness at the beginning of the Renaissance” (*HM*, 27 [46]). Later, speaking of the great enclosure of unreason, he says that it is this “mode of perception” which must be interrogated in order to understand the classical age’s “form of sensibility to madness” (*HM*, 54 [80]). The practice of internment, he suggests, partly explains “the mode in which madness was perceived, and lived, by the classical age” (*HM*, 55 [80]). Out of this practice, a “new sensibility” (*sensibilité*) towards madness is born (*HM*, 62 [89]), a new object is created, and the many ways of engaging with unreason are organised around a form of “perception” (*HM*, 101 [140]). A final example: “classicism felt (*éprouvé*) a delicacy in front of the inhuman which the Renaissance had never felt (*ressentie*)” (*HM*, 143 [192]). The first aspect of any experience, then, will be the forms of perception or sensibility which it makes possible – or even necessary. A given structure of experience makes possible and gives rise to certain ways of sensing, seeing, feeling an object.

But these forms of perception are not the only components of a structure of experience. Despite Foucault’s apparent focus on phenomena of perception and (individual) consciousness, it must be emphasised that the experience of madness is not just a form of sensibility. It also comprises both the institutional practices of internment and the forms of knowledge which develop within and bolster those institutions. In an interview given shortly after the original publication, Foucault makes the following claim, which could serve as a summary of the book: “Madness only exists in a society, it does not exist outside the forms of sensibility which isolate it and the forms of repulsion which exclude or capture it” (*DEI*, 169).¹⁵ These forms of repulsion, which both exclude and capture, may be taken to comprise what Foucault would later call the power/knowledge aspects of the relation to madness. There is,

¹⁴ The English version, inexplicably, translates Foucault’s “*toutes*” with “many.”

¹⁵ This interview, published in *Le Monde* in 1961, is untranslated.

for instance, a certain “practice and concrete awareness (*conscience*) in classicism” which is part of its distinctive experience of madness (*HM*, 158 [211]). Indeed, this experience is “expressed” in the “practice of internment” (*HM*, 137 [185]). In the classical age, then, the forms of repulsion comprised the great hospitals (such as Bicêtre in Paris and Bethlehem in London), combined with the modes of knowledge which tried to explain madness, for example, in terms of a purely negative absence of reason.

To speak of “the classical experience of madness” is, then, to speak of the forms of consciousness, sensibility, practical engagement and scientific knowledge which take “madness” as their object. And even though Foucault was later to admit that his use of the term experience was “very inconstant” [*très flottant*] in *History of Madness*,¹⁶ it is nevertheless a concept that recurs with a certain regularity throughout the rest of his work. So, for example, in *The Order of Things*, we are told that his aim is to show what becomes of the “experience of order” between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. His question here is how did the “experience of language” – a “global, cultural experience” – of the late Renaissance give way to a new experience in the classical age?¹⁷ It would be wrong to suggest, however, that the history of Foucault’s use of the concept is entirely seamless. It is clear, for example, that after the late 1960s, and up until the late 1970s, he was less and less willing to characterise his work in terms of an investigation of experience. We can surmise that this was a result of his increasing dissatisfaction with the fluidity of the concept, but also of the fact that the concept, with its connotations of individual psychology, clashed with his new focus on bodies, resistance and power. We can note, for example, his comment in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that *History of Madness* had given too great a role to an inchoate notion of experience – one that was in danger of re-introducing “an anonymous and general subject of history.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, by the late 1970s, accompanying the final twist in Foucault’s trajectory, the concept of experience had returned. Now it was no longer quite as inconstant as it had been before, a change largely the result of the increased complexity of his methodology as a whole. Summarising briefly, we could say that Foucault’s approach to any question will now contain three moments, each representing a particular phase his work has gone through. So, in a field such as sexuality, he will first consider the forms of knowledge (*savoir*) and discourse which

¹⁶ “Preface to *The History of Sexuality*, Volume II,” in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin Books, 1991). For the French text, see, Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, IV, op. cit. Henceforth, *PHS*, with English and [French] page numbers given in the text. *PHS*, 336 [581].

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1982) [*Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966]. Henceforth, *OT*, with English and [French] page numbers given in the text. *OT*, 45-46 [56].

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1989), p.18. Note, however, that “*expérience*” is misleadingly translated as “experiment.”

are generated around sexual behaviour (roughly corresponding to his work in the 1960s); secondly, he will consider the forms of power that take hold of our behaviour (roughly corresponding to his work in the 1970s); and thirdly, a moment that is added only in the early 1980s, he will consider the modes of relation to self which our sexuality promotes and builds on. It need hardly be pointed out that even though this first, second and third followed that sequence in his own development, once all three approaches become available they are inextricably linked and have no chronological hierarchy. As Foucault points out in a late interview (*RM*), "these three domains of experience can only be understood one in relation to the others and cannot be understood one without the others."¹⁹ Indeed, if the second phase does not so much add power to knowledge as introduce a new concept – power-knowledge – we could say that the final phase introduces another new concept – power-knowledge-the self. What is important for us, however, is that this new tripartite concept can in fact be given a simpler name – experience.

II The Transformation of Experience

Foucault begins to be explicit about the centrality of the idea of experience from the late 1970s; initially in an interview conducted in 1978, but first published in 1980 (*EMF*), and later in the various versions of the Preface to the second volume of the *History of Sexuality*.²⁰ In the 1978 interview, the interviewer presses him to clarify his relation to the entire constellation of French intellectual life after WWII, from Marxism and phenomenology to existentialism and literary modernism. What emerges most clearly from his responses is the sense that, at least at this stage in his thought, Foucault takes a certain notion of experience as the guiding thread linking multiple aspects of his intellectual, and personal, trajectory. We have already seen how this interview prioritises what he calls the "limit-experiences," which for him are represented by Bataille and Blanchot – those experiences that serve to "tear the subject away from itself" and ensure that the subject will not remain as it was before (*EMF*, 241 [43]). And we also saw that he wishes his own books to have this kind of effect, both for himself and for his readers – he wants them to be "experience-books" rather than "truth-books" or "demonstration-books" (*EMF*, 246 [47]).

This interview also gives us a way of understanding how these limit-experiences relate to the other kind of limit-experience, those which, as we saw, represent a foundational gesture by which a culture excludes that which will function as its outside – for example, madness (*HMP*, xxix [161]). Foucault speaks of these moments of rupture, or division, as giving rise to a certain experience in which a subject emerges as a concomitant to a field of objects. Thus, the process by which

¹⁹ "The Return of Morality", in L. Kritzman (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.243 [*DEIV*, 697].

²⁰ Details below.

the object “madness” emerges in the late nineteenth century also involves the process of emergence of a subject capable of knowing madness (*EMF*, 254 [55]). This qualifies as a kind of limit-experience because it involves a transformation in a form of subjectivity, through the constitution of a field of truth. However, what is important for Foucault is that a book which uncovers this history should itself provide an experience which, in its own way, is also a limit-experience. Hence,

the experience through which we manage to grasp in an intelligible way certain mechanisms (for example, imprisonment, penalty, etc.) and the way in which we manage to detach ourselves from them by perceiving them otherwise, should be one and the same thing. This is really the heart of what I do” (*EMF*, 244 [46], modified).

What we find, then, is that Foucault uses the concept of limit-experience on, as it were, both sides of the analysis: it is both the object of the historical research, and in a different sense its objective. As he admits: “it’s always a question of limit-experiences and the history of truth. I’m imprisoned, enmeshed in that tangle of problems” (*EMF*, 257 [57]). Alongside the many attempts Foucault made to characterise his own work (in terms of knowledge, power/ knowledge, or knowledge-power- subject), we can place this as an additional and perhaps useful formula: his work continuously strives to understand and disentangle the connections between forms of experience and forms of knowledge, between subjectivity and truth. And this is an entanglement that he continues to explore up until and including his last works.

In the earliest version of the Preface to the second volume of the *History of Sexuality*,²¹ Foucault explains the relation between his new interest in subjectivity and his earlier focus on discourse and power, in terms of a general project of the critical history of thought. This would mean the history of the forms of objectivation, subjectivation and coercion which, at a certain time, for a particular set of people, constitute what he calls, “the historical *a priori* of a possible experience” (*F*, 460 [632]). Adopting the perspective of *History of Madness*, for example, we could say that for certain people in the eighteenth century the experience of madness was made possible by a historically specific combination of forms of objectivation, subjectivation and coercion. These forms, these structures of experience, determined the way that crazy, irrational people were seen, conceptualised and related to, by those who considered themselves to be sane and rational. In the second version of this Preface,²² Foucault explains that to treat sexuality as a historically singular form of experience means to treat it as “the correlation of a domain of knowledge, a type

²¹ The dictionary entry titled “Foucault” that Foucault himself published under the name Maurice Florence is, according to the editors of *DE*, based on an early version of this Preface. See the introductory note in *DEIV*, 631; and in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol. 2*, James Faubion (ed.), (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000), p.459. Henceforth, *EW2*. This article, henceforth *F*, with English and [French] page numbers given in the text.

²² “Preface to the *History of Sexuality*, Volume II,” *PHS*, cited above.

of normativity and a mode of relation to self" (*PHS*, 333 [579]). In order to carry out a critical history of this "complex experience" (*ibid.*), however, he must have the methodological tools for investigating each of these areas, and it is for this reason that, in the early 1980s, he tries to work out a way of understanding the third domain – that of the self and its relations. It is interesting to note that in this Preface, referring back to his earliest work, he mentions his dissatisfaction with the method of existential psychology (represented for him by his work on Binswanger²³) – a dissatisfaction that arose, he now says, from that method's "theoretical insufficiency in the elaboration of the notion of experience" (*PHS*, 334 [579]). One of the key differences then, between what we could call Foucault's pre-critical and his critical phases is precisely the working out of a sufficiently complex notion of experience.

A key part of this notion is, as we have seen, the idea that our experience – in the everyday sense of the term – is determined by forms of knowledge, power and relation to the self which are historically singular.²⁴ And now we can add that these forms, as a whole, constitute what Foucault calls thought – that is, the critical history of thought simply *is* the history of the forms, or structures of our experience. Indeed, thought, on this account, is what constitutes the human being as a subject.

By 'thought', I mean that which institutes, in diverse possible forms, the game of truth and falsehood and which, consequently, constitutes the human being as a subject of knowledge; that which founds the acceptance or the refusal of the rule and constitutes the human being as a social and juridical subject; that which institutes the relation to self and to others, and constitutes the human being as ethical subject. (*PHS*, 334 [579]).

Thought is, therefore, at the basis of the constitution of the human being as a subject in the three domains of knowledge, power and the self – which are, as we have seen, the three fundamental domains, or axes, of experience. Of course, on this account, thought is not something to be sought exclusively in the theoretical formulations of philosophy or science. It can, rather, be found in every manner of speaking, doing and conducting oneself. It can be considered, in fact, Foucault says, as "the very form of action" itself (*PHS*, 335 [580]). As we can see, Foucault is now working with a multi-layered notion of experience; and it is one which is not accessed through individual awareness, but through an analysis of what he now calls "practices." We can study the forms of experience, he says, through an analysis of practices – as long as we understand practices as "systems of action ... inhabited by forms of thought" (*ibid.*). And this is precisely what he does in his histories of madness, the prison and sexuality.

²³ See Foucault's "Introduction" to Ludwig Binswanger, *Le rêve et l'existence* (Paris: Desclée, 1954).

²⁴ This may offer a way of differentiating Foucault's account of experience from that of phenomenology. This is not the place to address that issue, but see Gutting's article (in n.6 above) for a sketch of the issues involved.

The Kantian echoes of this critical project have no doubt been resonating clearly: Foucault was awoken from the slumber of existential psychology by his encounter with Nietzsche, and emerged into a critical phase in which he sought the *a priori* of experience. However, it was not the Kantian *a priori*, but the historical *a priori* that he sought; and not all possible experience, but historically singular experience. Foucault's project then, differs fundamentally from that of Kant not just because of this historicising of both the *a priori* and experience (and of course of the knowing subject), but also because it sets itself the task not of identifying unbreakable limits of reason, but of identifying singularities and working towards their transformation. Which is to say that it is critical in the Nietzschean, not the Kantian sense. What this means for experience is that the critical project aims not simply to understand the historical grounds of our experience, but to see to what extent it would be possible to change that experience – to transform it, through a critical work of thought upon itself. In the final version of the Preface to the second volume of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault situates this project in the context of a possible history of truth – a history of the “games of truth, the games of the true and the false, through which being is constituted historically as experience; that is, as something that can and must be thought” (*UP*, 6-7 [13]).²⁵ It is these games of truth, and through them, these historically singular forms of experience which can – perhaps – be transformed.

Now that we have reached this idea of the transformation of experience, let us return to the ambiguity within Foucault's use of the term. On the one hand, as we have just seen, experience is the general, dominant form in which being is given to an historical period as something that can be thought. On the other hand, experience is something that is capable of tearing us away from ourselves and changing the way that we think and act. Throughout his work, and his life, Foucault valorised those experiences which take us to the limits of our forms of subjectivity. This was the attraction of writers such as Bataille, Blanchot and Nietzsche in the 1960s; it was the attraction of the sado-masochistic practices which he discussed in interviews in the early 1980s; and it was also the attraction of his more sedate engagement with the Stoics and the Cynics of late antiquity. There was no point, he believed, in writing a book unless it was an experience which in some way changed oneself. As he says, at the end of the early version of the Preface to the *History of Sexuality*, “the pain and the pleasure of the book is to be an experience” (*PHS*, 339 [584]). But how is it possible for experience to be both the general dominant background *and* the external force which intervenes to change that background?

This problem, which can be related to the problem of explaining historical change, is one which, in different forms, animated Foucault's entire theoretical trajectory. And it is a problem of which he was well aware. Let us look at one

²⁵ Note that the French could be translated as “through which being constitutes *itself* historically as experience” (“à travers lesquels l'être se constitue historiquement comme expérience”).

example, from *The Order of Things*, where he raises the question of the legitimacy of establishing discontinuities and periods in a history of thought. How can we justify defining the limits of an age for which we claim a certain coherence and unity – such as the classical age for instance? Isn't this simply setting an arbitrary limit in "a constantly mobile whole" (*OT*, 55 [64])? And, having established this continuity, how can we then explain the collapse or disappearance of this coherent system? If this age contains within itself a principle of coherence, then from where would come "the foreign element [*l'élément étranger*]" which undermines it (*OT*, 56 [64])? "How," Foucault asks, "can a thought melt away before anything other than itself?" (*ibid.*) How can we explain the fact that "within the space of a few years a culture sometimes ceases to think as it had been thinking up till then and begins to think other things in a new way"? (*ibid.*) The best answer that Foucault can give is to say that this kind of discontinuity begins "with an erosion from outside" (*ibid.*), an erosion which is made possible by the way in which thought continuously "contrives to escape itself" (*ibid.*). The task of investigating these modes of escape, however, is one which Foucault says he is not yet prepared to undertake. For the moment, he says, we will simply have to accept the posited discontinuities – in all their obviousness and their obscurity.

Even though, in this context, Foucault backs away from further consideration of this outside of thought, in another sense we can say that all of his work was an attempt to investigate the way that thought "contrives to escape itself" through contact with such an outside. And at every renewed turn of that effort, the guiding thread was the idea of the strange, the foreign, the alien and the question of its provenance and its effects. Summarising briefly, once again, we could say that each of the three periods into which we can divide Foucault's work carry with them a different conception of the outside.²⁶ In the 1960s, that conception is bound up with his engagement with literature and, in particular, with the ideas of transgression and the outside which he gets from Bataille and Blanchot. In a series of essays published in literary journals at this time, Foucault demonstrated the influence that, for example, Blanchot's "thought of the outside" had on the development of his own approach to this set of questions.²⁷ In particular, Blanchot's literary-critical writing allowed him to formulate the connection between a certain crisis of subjectivity and

²⁶ For a similar categorisation of Foucault's approach to the 'outside' see, Judith Revel, "La naissance littéraire du biopolitique," in Philippe Artières (ed.), *Michel Foucault, la littérature et les arts*, Paris: Editions Kimé, 2004).

²⁷ See, for example, "A Preface to Transgression," on Bataille, and "The Thought of the Outside," on Blanchot, both in *EW2* and *DEI*.

the experience of an outside that comes to us in a subjectless language.²⁸ In the 1970s, with the turn to politics and the question of power, we could say that the outside of thought, the engine or motor of change, is conceptualised as resistance that, perhaps, has its source in the forces of the body. While in the 1980s, with the final turn, the outside becomes, in a strange way, the inside of subjectivity itself; in other words, the potential for change emerges out of a folding back of the self upon itself.

One of the constant elements in this development is the way that the term “*étrange*” (strange/foreign) keeps reappearing in all its forms. We have already seen the line from René Char that Foucault includes in the first Preface to *History of Madness* – “*Développez votre étrangeté légitime.*” Several years later he turns this around, in a display of ironic self-deprecation, while responding to critics of *The Order of Things*. In response to their criticism he speaks of his sense of his own “*bizarrierie* [bizarreness]” – and what he calls his “*étrangeté si peu légitime* [his so little legitimate strangeness]” (*DEI*, 674).²⁹ In *The Order of Things* itself, he speaks of literature as a form of discourse which is, since the sixteenth century, “most foreign” to western culture (*OT*, 49 [59]); and speaking of the figures of the madman and the poet, he says that they find their “power of foreignness [*leur pouvoir d'étrangeté*]” at the limits, the exterior boundaries of our culture (*OT*, 55 [64]). Much later, in the early 1980s, he can say that the whole – and only – point in writing a book, or doing philosophy, is precisely to introduce an element of the foreign into our ways of thinking. What would be the point in writing a book, he asks, if it did not allow the person who wrote it to “establish with himself a strange and new relation?” (*PHS*, 339 [584]). Indeed, according to the final volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, it is the task of philosophy to see to what extent it can think otherwise, by “the exercise which it makes of a knowledge which is foreign to it” (*UP*, 9 [15]).

Returning to the question of how experience can be both accepted background and transformative force, we can now say that this possibility always arises out of something that functions as an outside. There is nothing constant or universal about this outside, however, since it is always relative to the dominant forms of a given regime of thought and practice. We have seen that for Foucault the locus of the outside changes as his general methodology develops. In the 1960s it is something which is experienced and conveyed through certain works of literature, and also in the foundational gestures of exclusion, while by the 1980s it is something which

²⁸ I do not have space here to do justice to this element in Foucault’s 1960’s engagement with literature, but see my much more detailed exposition in “Foucault’s Turn From Literature,” *Continental Philosophy Review*, forthcoming. I would just point out that the approach I am developing in this paper owes less to Foucault’s explicitly literary writings of the 1960s than to his later elaboration of a theory of experience (although of course there are many necessary connections between the two).

²⁹ See English translation (which varies from mine): “Politics and the Study of Discourse,” in G. Burchell, C. Gordon and P. Miller (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (New York: Hemel Hempstead, Prentice-Hall, 1991), p.53.

makes itself felt, for example, in the cultivation of transformative techniques of the self. At this stage Foucault has, apparently, left behind his interest in – and his faith in – literature as one of the ways in which thought “contrives to escape itself.” In his late work, his experience books are no longer by Beckett, Blanchot or Bataille, but by Seneca, Diogenes and Plato. And they are also, of course, his own books – especially *History of Madness, Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*. We must, however, resist the temptation to see this shift as a progressive development which would leave behind each earlier phase. Rather, there is nothing to stop us from maintaining all three levels simultaneously, so that the work of transforming experience may, at different times and in different ways, be effected through works of literature, through a resistance whose source is in the body, and through a re-elaboration of relations to the self. For us, it would then become possible to combine Foucault’s conceptualisation of the foreign, or the outside, of thought with his notion of experience and its possible transformation, and to use this framework as a way of understanding one of the effects of which literature is capable.

III Fiction, Experience, Experiment

Foucault’s analysis of experience gives us a way of answering the first part of my question, relating to the conditions of possibility of the transformation of experience, but it also gives us a way of beginning to answer the second part, relating to the capacity of literature to act as an experience-transformer. It does this, as we will see, through the role which it gives to fiction and the fictive, a notion which may ultimately help us to determine the distinctive mode of action of literature which makes such transformation possible. Even though I have no wish to formulate a general definition of literature here, one which would safely include and exclude all those works which are or are not worthy of that title, it may still be possible to give a minimal, preliminary account of what these forms all share. And that, we could simply say, is a particular use of language that is fictive in nature. To say that this use of language is fictive, however, is not to say that it has no rapport with the world we live in, or for that matter with truth. In an early essay on some members of the *Tel quel* group, for example, Foucault rejects the easy option of understanding fiction in terms of an opposition between the real and the unreal, reality and the imaginary.³⁰ He urges us instead to think of the fictive as arising from a certain kind of distance – not the distance between language and things, but a distance within language itself. The fictive, in this sense, would be the capacity of language to, as Foucault says, bring us into contact with “that which does not exist, in so far as it is” (*DEI*, 280).

³⁰ Michel Foucault, “Distance, Aspect, Origine,” in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1954-1988: I, 1954-1969*, D. Defert and F. Ewald (eds.) (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 281. Henceforth, *DEI*. This essay has not been translated into English.

And, according to Foucault, any use of language which speaks of this distance, and explores it – whether it is prose, poetry, novel or “reflection” (presumably including philosophy) – is a language of fiction (*DEI*, 280-1).

It might help if we situate this formulation in relation to a much later discussion of the role of the intellectual – from an interview in 1983. Here Foucault suggests that the task of the philosopher-historian is to carry out a diagnosis of the present by focusing on the “lines of fragility” which make possible “virtual fractures” in our contemporary reality. By following these lines we would be able to grasp those elements of our present which are open to change. The role of the intellectual then would be to “say that which is, in making it appear as that which may not be, or may not be as it is.”³¹ This is an interesting echo and reversal of the earlier characterisation of fiction: fiction says that which is not, insofar as it is; while the intellectual says that which is, insofar as (potentially) it is not. But, of course, this is not so much a reversal as an alternative expression of the same suggestion: that fiction (in the broadest possible sense) relates to reality by opening up virtual spaces which allow us to engage in a potentially transformative relation with the world; to bring about that which does not exist and to transform that which does exist. The insight Foucault is expressing in the 1960s essay is that this possibility, the possibility of bridging the distance between that which is and that which may be, is given for us in the very nature of language.

There is no doubt that Foucault understood his own works of “reflection,” that is to say his works of historico-philosophy, as operating within this field of the fictive. In a discussion of his *History of Sexuality, volume I*, for example, he responds to a question about the dramatic nature of his works by saying, “I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions.”³² A fiction, however, is not necessarily outside of truth. It is possible for fiction to induce effects of truth, just as it is possible for a discourse of truth to fabricate, or to fiction, something. Since fiction is not defined in opposition to truth, therefore, Foucault’s statement cannot be taken as an admission of historical inaccuracy. It is, rather, a claim about the creative or productive power of the book in the context of a particular historical moment. This book, in fact all his books, are fictions in the sense that they intervene in a given situation in order to bring about – or, to fiction – a transformation. “One ‘fictions’ history starting from a political reality which makes it true, one ‘fictions’ a politics which does not yet exist starting from a historical truth” (*ibid.*).

We must think of fiction, therefore, in the same way we think of *poesis*, that is, as a fundamentally productive engagement in the world. To fiction is to fabricate, to produce, to bring into existence. The distinctive feature of Foucault’s histories, the

³¹ “Structuralism and Post-structuralism,” in *EW2*, p. 450 (*DEIV*, 449).

³² “The History of Sexuality,” Colin Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, p.193 [Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1954-1988: III, 1976-1979*, D. Defert and F. Ewald (eds.) (Paris, Gallimard, 1994), p.236. Henceforth, *DEIII*.

feature which gives them their transformative power, is the fact that they are not only descriptions of the past, but attempts to modify the present through a transformation, or a fictioning, of experience. And all experience is, at a certain level, related to the fictive. In a discussion of *History of Madness*, in the context of his idea of an experience-book, Foucault underlines again the importance for him of inducing an experience in the reader that would have a transformative effect. This effect, however, must be based on historically accurate research. "It cannot," as he says, "exactly be a novel" (*EMF*, 243 [45]). But what matters most is not the series of true, or historically verifiable, findings; it is, rather, the experience which the book makes possible. And this experience is neither true nor false; like every other experience, it is a fiction. "An experience", Foucault says, "is always a fiction; it is something which one fabricates for oneself, which doesn't exist before and which happens to exist after" (*ibid.*, modified). Nevertheless, this fabricated experience maintains a complex set of relations with the truth of historical research. The experience that the book makes possible is founded on the truth of its findings, but the experience itself is a new creation which may even, up to a certain point, destroy the truth on which it is based. It is not surprising then, that Foucault admits that "the problem of the truth of what I say is, for me, a very difficult problem, and even the central problem" (*EMF*, 242 [44]).

But what of this idea that every experience is a kind of fiction, or is something that we fabricate for ourselves? How can we make sense of this suggestion? It might help here if we begin by recalling some of the semantic richness of the term "experience," in both the French and the English languages. We have already seen that in French the term *expérience* can mean both experience and experiment and this is a possibility which, as Raymond Williams points out,³³ also existed in English at least until the end of the eighteenth century. The term "experience," at that time, "became not only a conscious test or trial but a consciousness of what has been tested or tried, and thence a consciousness of an effect or state."³⁴ And this is a consciousness that emerges, as the Latin root of the word indicates, from an openness to the world, an openness which is inherently dangerous. In Latin, *expereri* (to try, or to test) is linked to the word for danger – *periculum*.³⁵ Experience, therefore, in both of its senses, is something that emerges from a necessarily perilous encounter with the world – or with the strange and the foreign. One philosopher who mobilises this way of conceiving experience is John Dewey. Briefly, for Dewey experience is not something that simply happens to us, it is not something in which we are merely passive recipients. It is also a form of activity. In its broadest sense, it is the interaction of an organism with its environment. The central idea here is that experience is a matter of doing and undergoing. In experience, Dewey says, "the self

³³ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976), p.99.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ See the excellent discussion of these issues in Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience, op. cit.*, pp. 9-11.

acts, as well as undergoes, and its undergoings are not impressions stamped upon an inert wax but depend upon the way the organism reacts and responds."³⁶ The organism, therefore, "is a force, not a transparency" (ibid.).³⁷ If the organism, or the individual, is a force rather than a passive recording surface, then we can say that every experience is a fiction in the sense that something new is fabricated, that something new emerges from the interaction between organism and world.

In fact, the idea that experience is an activity of the individual, rather than something that happens to the individual, is already contained within the structures of the French language – in a way which is not the case in English. In French, to have an experience is *faire une expérience* (literally, to *make* an experience). In a similar way, just as in English we would say that we have a dream, in French one makes a dream (*j'ai fait un rêve*). In the case of experience, what this means is that whenever we read in English of Foucault discussing having an experience, more often than not in French he is using the phrase *faire une expérience*. The significance of this difference is that this is a phrase that could, almost as easily, be translated into English as "doing an experiment." In Foucault's use of the term, therefore, the idea that experience is an active and experimental engagement is never far from the surface.³⁸ We can see now how it is possible to link up the idea of fiction, in its broadest sense, with the idea of experience. We can do this through the concept of experiment, which is the element that they have in common. So, when Foucault says that all his works are fictions, we can understand him as saying that they are fictions because they are experimental and, conversely, they are experimental precisely because they are fictions.

It should also be possible now to distinguish clearly between the two senses in which Foucault has been using the term experience. We can distinguish between, on the one hand, something that we can call "everyday" or "background" experience and, on the other hand, something that we can call "transformative" experience. In *History of Madness*, for example, we could say that Foucault described aspects of the everyday experience of madness in the classical age, whereas in the last volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, he explored the everyday experience of sexuality in the ancient world. However, we have to bear in mind that this everyday experience incorporates a wide range of elements (epistemological, normative, etc.) of which any given individual may be unaware. It is not everyday, therefore, in the sense of being

³⁶ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigree Books, 1980), p. 246.

³⁷ I discuss these parallels in "Foucault, Dewey and the Experience of Literature," *New Literary History*, vol.36, no. 4, 2005, pp. 543-557.

³⁸ Let me give one example of how this semantic richness is lost in translation. In the interview I have been quoting from, Foucault says, "Mon problème est de faire moi-même, et d'inviter les autres à faire avec moi...une expérience de ce que nous sommes...une expérience de notre modernité telle que nous en sortions transformés" (*EMF*, 242 [44]). The English translation, however, reduces this sense of engaging in a transformative experiment by speaking simply of "sharing an experience." This translation also commits the error of translating the first "faire moi-même" as "construct myself."

commonly understood, but in the sense that it forms a constant, albeit constantly changing, background to our ways of perceiving, understanding and acting in the world. This form of experience is what Foucault finally speaks of in terms of the three axes of knowledge, power and the self. On the other hand, the category of transformative experiences would comprise not only the Bataillean limit-experiences of the 1960s, and the more sedate experiences provided by Foucault's own books, understood as experience-books, but also the sorts of experiences that many works of literature open up for their readers. These are experiences which stop us in our tracks and make it more difficult for us to continue to think and act as we had done before. In other words, they make it more difficult for us to carry on unthinkingly in the forms of our everyday experience.

But what about the relation between these two forms of experience? How do transformative experiences act upon everyday experience? Let us start by observing that when I speak of everyday experience I am speaking of experience in general, which is, in some sense, always singular, whereas in speaking of transformative experiences I am obliged to speak of experiences in the plural. What this indicates is that transformative experiences are discrete, punctual events which intervene in and interrupt the forms of everyday experience which are more fluid and continuous.³⁹ However, they are not just high points, or moments of intensity, in the everyday flow; rather, or in addition, they are events which leave the background experience transformed. If we call this kind of experience transformative, then, it is because it tends to transform our everyday experience by bringing about a shift, or a re-configuration, along the three axes of knowledge, power and the self. In other words, a transformative experience, whether it comes in the form of a work of philosophy, fiction, or history – or in any of its other multiple possible forms – will leave the individual no longer the same as before.

IV Towards Literature

At the beginning of this paper, I said that the question I wanted to address is, "what is it that makes it possible for works of literature to act upon the forms of the human subject and experience with a transformative effect?" The first part of my answer was to point out that these forms of human subjectivity and experience are built up historically in such a way that they are in a constant state of change and modification. The second part of my answer, which I will sketch now, is to suggest that literature can contribute to this process of transformation through its fictive nature which both resonates with the productive, creative nature of all experience,

³⁹ It would be interesting to compare this account with the distinction Dewey makes between ordinary experience and *an* experience; and also with the distinction common in German philosophy between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. Such a comparison is, however, beyond the scope of the present paper.

and introduces something that can function as an outside in relation to the everyday experience of a reader. It is important to point out, however, that literature, like philosophy, is not always or necessarily on the side of transformative as opposed to everyday experience. It is just as likely, in fact much more likely, that what we call literature will bolster and reinforce accepted modes of experience and thought, than that it will undermine and transform them. These works are always tentative and experimental in nature; there is no guaranteed way to transform everyday experience, just as there is no way to accurately predict the effect or potential of any such work. And it is equally important to remember that such modifications are always small, fragile and uncertain, especially, we must admit, those which literature is capable of effecting.

In order to sketch this answer I want to return to Beckett; not to *Waiting for Godot*, which was so important for Foucault, but to his novel *The Unnamable* (1958), the third in a trilogy that included *Molloy* (1955) and *Malone Dies* (1956).⁴⁰ What can we say about the effect of these novels? What kinds of transformation are they capable of effecting? One of their potential effects, I would say, is to make it more difficult for readers to carry on with a certain understanding of themselves as centers of rationality, language and experience. Speaking very schematically, we could say that the everyday experience of self which the books undermine is based upon the Cartesian *cogito*. Descartes can doubt everything, except his own existence as a thinking, and therefore rational, being. But Beckett can doubt even that. And in fact what his books make possible, through the fictional world they create, is for the reader to share in an experiment in which this conception of the self is put to the test and, perhaps momentarily, exploded. In a discussion of the art of the novel, Milan Kundera makes the point that a fictional character is not an imitation of a living being, but “an imaginary being. An experimental self.”⁴¹ We should not see this being as primarily an alter-ego for the author, but more as an experimental self for any reader of the work. With regard to Beckett’s novels, however, we can say that his characters are experimental in a double sense: not only are they an experiment that the author sets up and allows the reader to participate in, but they continuously engage in experimentation on themselves. At times this can appear to be similar to the thought experiments that philosophers – such as Descartes or Husserl – use, but Beckett’s characters typically move in a contrary direction, that is, not through doubt to a new foundation for certainty, but from certainty, through doubt, to a splintering of the self and its hold on the world.

Early in *The Unnamable*, for example, the narrator (if we can call him that) begins a process which seems to be decidedly Cartesian: “I, of whom I know nothing, I know my eyes are open...” (*U*, 304). But this one certainty will not be allowed to

⁴⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 1991).

⁴¹ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p.34.

form the basis for any other knowledge. How does he know his eyes are open? "Because of the tears that pour from them unceasingly" (ibid.). He continues:

Ah yes, I am truly bathed in tears. They gather in my beard and from there, when it can hold no more – no, no beard, no hair either, it is a great smooth ball I carry on my shoulders, featureless, but for the eyes, of which only the sockets remain. And were it not for the distant testimony of my palms, my soles, which I have not yet been able to quash, I would gladly give myself the shape, if not the consistency, of an egg, with two holes no matter where to prevent it from bursting (*U*, 305).

It is important to notice that the process by which the speaker gives himself a form here is essentially fictive in nature. He does not ascertain his shape through introspection or self-examination, rather he gives himself a shape, he fictions himself, through his own speech. "I would gladly give myself the shape...of an egg," he says, and later even the tear-filled eyes will be transformed. "I'll dry these streaming sockets too, bung them up, there, it's done, no more tears, I'm a big talking ball, talking about things that do not exist, or that exist perhaps, impossible to know, beside the point" (*U*, 305). Whether or not such things exist is beside the point, because, nonetheless, they are there for us, the readers of the novel. They attest, as Foucault would say, to the power of language to convey "that which does not exist, in so far as it is" (*DEI*, 280).

Blanchot, in the epigraph I have used for this paper, decries the reader's "stubborn insistence upon remaining himself in the face of what he reads." But Beckett's work matches this with his own stubborn insistence upon engaging in an experimental disaggregation of his characters. The transformative experience this makes possible for the reader is for them, too, to lose their heads, to see if they could not also do without these organs, "all the things that stick out" – "why should I have a sex, who have no longer a nose" (*U*, 305). After all, why do we need organs? What is their function? As the speaker asks a little later about the mouth, "Would it not be better if I were simply to keep on saying babababa, for example, while waiting to ascertain the true function of this venerable organ?" (*U*, 308). In this way, the novel opens up the individual as an embodied, thinking, speaking being and stubbornly insists that the reader no longer remain herself in the face of what she reads. And this, to borrow Foucault's words, would be the pleasure and the pain of the book. My suggestion, then, is that if we situate ourselves in the perspective of Foucault's late work, drawing upon the analysis of the notion of experience which I have outlined here, we will be able to give an effective account of how literature can bring about a transformation of experience. My claim is that works of literature are capable, not so much (or, not only) of expressing an experience, but of transforming an experience. And they do this by experimentally intervening in and modifying our modes of thought – where thought is understood in the very broad sense outlined above. In other words, we can understand works of literature as experimental, transformative

interventions in the reader's everyday experience – where everyday experience is understood along the three axes that Foucault's account lays open.

This way of formulating the effect of literature, however, raises a number of important questions that we have not yet addressed . As we know, Foucault's analysis of experience involves separating (at least in theory) three aspects or axes: knowledge, power, the self. The first question that may arise, therefore, is whether we should say that this tripartite experience is transformed only if all three of the axes are modified. In other words, can we speak of transformation occurring if only one of the three is affected? In the first place, we have to remember that Foucault's approach to individual and social change has always recognised both the necessity and the value of partial, non-totalising practices, and there is no reason to suppose his attitude to literature would be any different. We can safely suggest, therefore, for a work such as Beckett's *The Unnamable* to be effective in these Foucauldian terms, we would not necessarily be required to modify our experience along all three axes. But that still leaves the question of whether works of literature are only, or particularly suited to having an effect on a single axis – which would, presumably, be the axis of the self or ethics. Following this line of thought, we might suggest, for example, that a work such as Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) had a profound transformative effect on our experience at the level of knowledge, whereas a work such as Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879) was (and continues to be) more capable of effecting an ethical transformation. Would this imply that ethics is the domain in which literature is most likely to be effective – or even the domain in which it is exclusively capable of having an effect? There is no doubt that these are attractive, and in a way, easy conclusions to draw. But the problem is that they too easily compartmentalize the three axes of which Foucault speaks. Can we really say, for instance, which axis was most affected by Darwin's work? Did it not profoundly alter our self-understanding in terms of science, religion, and ethics – in fact all three axes of our experience? And, similarly, could we not say that the value of Dostoevsky's work comes from his insight into human behaviour – and the knowledge we gain from that – as much as from its ability to modify our relation to ourselves? Going further, we could in fact argue that it modifies our relation to ourselves precisely insofar as it modifies what we take to be facts about human behavior. What this implies for the case of literature is the extreme difficulty, if not the impossibility, of clearly delimiting the axis along which an effect takes place, given the reverberating consequences of such effects along the other axes. In other words, to be brief, we have to take seriously Foucault's insistence that these three axes are intimately intertwined and that they "can only be understood one in relation to the others and cannot be understood one without the others."⁴²

⁴² "The Return of Morality" (*DEIV*, 69) 7, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

However, at least in the context of this paper, it is not necessary to give a final account of the complexities of these relations. Instead, it would be better to maintain an openness to the multiple effects of which literature may be capable. All we need to conclude for now is that the schema I have outlined here gives us a way of understanding the idea we started from; that certain works of literature can compel us to think otherwise. Because, while it is true that works of literature are, in a fundamental way, products of their time, this idea must be balanced with the insistence that they can act, in the manner of an experiment, both within their time and against their time. These minuscule events, these grains of sand, are not without their multiple, strange effects.