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REVIEW

Lisa Downing, *The Cambridge Introduction to Michel Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ISBN: 978-0521682992

Lisa Downing's book on Foucault is part of the Cambridge Introductions to Literature series, which is designed to "introduce students to key topics and authors," according to the back cover. *The Cambridge Introduction to Michel Foucault*, however, not only aims to provide an accessible introduction to readers who approach the theorist for the first time; but is also intended to help more experienced scholars to broaden their understanding of Foucault.

In comparison to other introductions or companion books to Foucault – such as *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, edited by Gary Gutting, (Cambridge University Press, 1994, 2005) – Downing's book strikes one immediately as very *short*. Is it at all possible to account, however briefly, for such a rich and complex body of works as Foucault's, in less than 150 pages? To provide "in-depth critical and contextual perspectives on all of Foucault's major published works," as the back cover claims? Downing proves that it is. Not only does she provide an accessible introduction, with very fine – albeit short – readings of Foucault's texts, but she also offers some insightful points on translation and Foucault's writing on literature. This latter feature is what will make the book of interest also to experienced Foucault scholars.

Downing's book is organised very neatly, along simultaneously chronological and thematic lines. The seven chapters focus on different aspects or bodies of works in Foucault's writing, and in addition we find a preface and an afterword. The first chapter functions as a general introduction to Foucault; his life, texts, contexts. Alongside placing Foucault in a historical and intellectual context, Downing here also elegantly problematises the project she is carrying out, questioning the notion of a unified self and the study of Foucault through biography or influences. She sets out to explore the various sides of Foucault's writing, instead of trying to make these into a unified theory: "Instead of trying to make him remain the same, then, instead of uniting the various Foucauldian voices, I shall provide an introduction to his texts, and to the contexts from which they arise, that is broadly sympathetic to his critique of biographical criticism." (1) Throughout the book, Downing proves sensitive to the disparities, changes and different foci throughout Foucault's works.

Chapters 2 through 6 focus on Foucault's works. For each main work, Downing discusses the text itself and the context in which it was written. She describes its contents, methods and source material, and presents an overall reading of the text. Alongside these fine readings of Foucault's texts, Downing also presents critiques and

comments by Foucault scholars and other theorists to further explore the works discussed. Chapters 2 and 3 present an overview and critical reception of Foucault's early archaeological writings. Under the heading "madness and medicine" are explored *The History of Madness* (abridged as *Madness and Civilization*) and *The Birth of the Clinic*. *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* are explored under the heading "the death of man." Chapter 4 is a less unified chapter, dealing with Foucault's "writing on writing," (54) the issue of authorship and literature. Here are explored Foucault's ideas on aesthetics, language and the author function, formulated in various essays and articles. Chapters 5 and 6 then focus on the middle or genealogical writings. In Chapter 5 on "crime and punishment" Downing fruitfully treats *I, Pierre Rivière*, the research project and publication carried out by Foucault and a team of researchers, as a kind of precursor to the later *Discipline and Punish*. Chapter 6 on *The History of Sexuality* trilogy proves slightly problematic, as the first volume is so different from the second and third. The later or final works by Foucault, in which he elaborates his ideas on subjectivity and the "technologies of the self," are only described briefly. These ideas are significant of a new direction in Foucault's research, and might have been given more space. However, Downing still elegantly treats the possible tension between Foucault's earlier and later works. The concluding chapter examines some of the critical receptions that Foucault's works have received, focusing on his place in feminist theory and his all-important role in the formation of queer theory.

What is missing is an exploration of Foucault's essays and interviews; these are referred to throughout the text, but are not (except in chapter 4 on literature) given major attention. Downing's focus is of course justified – in an introduction to Foucault one must be very selective. All in all, the range of material covered is impressively broad and inclusive in relation to the short length of the guide. The list of further reading is also sparse; the Foucault scholar will be familiar with most of these works. This is of course also understandable, as the book is meant to serve as an introduction to Foucault. The choice of suggestions for further reading is overall inclusive.¹

Despite the introductory nature of Downing's book, I would still like to draw attention to some unique features that will attract also experienced Foucault scholars. These are the issues of translation, which are commented upon throughout the work, and the chapter on literature. Foucault scholars of all degrees of experience are often not sensitive enough to translation issues, literary language and play of words in Foucault's texts. Downing addresses the problem faced by many English-speaking readers of having to read Foucault in sometimes inaccurate translations. Translation changes in the main title, or usages of specific words, are often explained briefly in notes – but not more. Downing skillfully presents some examples of these mistranslations or mis-readings of words and terms that often contain crucial information. She shows, for

¹ Despite her exploration in the concluding chapter of the later Foucault and feminism, Downing sadly fails to mention *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, edited by Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges (Urbana, IL.: University of Illinois Press, 2004), the only feminist reader focusing on Foucault's later works. She also seems to conflate two works by Barry Smart: *Foucault, Marxism, and Critique* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) and *Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock, 1985) are listed as *Michel Foucault: Marxism and Critique* (London: Tavistock, 1985).

instance, how Alan Sheridan's canonical 1977 translation of *Discipline and Punish* (original *Surveiller et Punir*) misses out on the clear focus on seeing that runs through Foucault's works – *Discipline and Punish* in particular. The French verb *surveiller* has no adequate English equivalent, so Sheridan in the end on Foucault's suggestion chose the current English title. As Downing states, what is missing from this translation is "the importance of spectacle and the role of the visual in the operations of power and punishment," an idea that is better carried by the original French word, and which is central to Foucault's analysis of the history of the carceral system. (75) *Surveiller*, Downing states, translates better as conveying most closely, "observation" rather than "surveillance." (75)

Chapter four treats Foucault's place in literature, literary theory and critical theory, and Downing here also shows the importance of considering Foucault's literary style when reading his works. As Downing states, Foucault's writings on literature are a fundamental and significant but unfortunately often overlooked aspect of his corpus: "Literary language is important for Foucault because it is language working at the limits of expression, language that pushes us to witness the shattering of the fiction of the self and the prevalence of historical process and reinvention." (68) She takes the example of *The History of Madness*, in which "the capacity to challenge discourse, the concrete example of literary language and its subject dissolving and dispersing on the page allows Foucault to demonstrate the power of an anti-rational, anti-individualistic impulse." (68) Downing indeed argues that many of Foucault's key concerns and concepts are best articulated when he takes literature as the object of his investigation. (ix) Most will have read Foucault's "What is an Author?" (1969), but not as many will have read his texts on Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot and Roussel. Downing comments on all these, and also explores the importance of the rhetorical qualities of Foucault's own writing – the way in which his form often enacts his meaning.²

The task of providing a short and inclusive reading guide for students, and at the same time to be specific enough to keep the experienced reader's interest, is daunting. Downing manages to accomplish it, providing fine, attentive readings of Foucault's texts at the same time as giving a broader view. With her insistence throughout the book on the agency of the self in Foucault's works (especially in his later period), the common mistake for new readers insensitive to the nuances of Foucault's notions of discourse, of seeing him as denying a subject or agency at all, is prevented. She emphasises this feature throughout. For the specialist waiting to find new angles or readings, Downing's book might not be especially illuminating, but for the first-time reader of Foucault, however, *The Cambridge Introduction to Michel Foucault* provides an excellent introduction to Foucault's theories, offering a broad and very fine overview of his main works while denying any simple or reductive readings of his complex works.

² Many critics overlook the literary style of Foucault's writing. Considering his very peculiar sense of style and rhetoric, it is surprising that to date there has been only one main work focusing on Foucault's writing style: Dan Beer's *Michel Foucault: Form and Power* (Oxford: Legenda, European Humanities Research Centre, University of Oxford, 2002), which analyses the language of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*.

Downing's analysis of translation and literary language in Foucault really deserves a book of its own – let us hope that one will be written soon, perhaps by Downing herself.

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