

REVIEW

Michel Foucault, *Le beau danger: Entretien avec Claude Bonnefoy, édition établie et présentée par Philippe Artières* (Paris: Editions EHESS, 2011), ISBN: 978-2-7132-2318-1

In the summer-fall of 1968, Michel Foucault met with literary critic Claude Bonnefoy for a series of conversations (*entretiens*) that were to make the object of a book for the publisher Belfond. The book never materialized. The tapes too have disappeared. All that remains is a typescript of the very first conversation, presumed to be by Bonnefoy, bearing no correction or addition by Foucault (*Beau danger* 12). The typescript, preserved in the archives of the Association pour le Centre Michel Foucault, forms the substance of this little book inaugurating the collection *Audiographie* of the Éditions EHESS.

In size and scope, *Le beau danger* cannot of course rival more ambitious editorial projects like the four-volume collection of *Dits et écrits* (1995), or the ongoing release since 1997 of Foucault's courses at the Collège de France. But what *Le beau danger* lacks in heft, it more than makes up for in provocation and poignancy. For one thing—as Philippe Artières, editor and author of a short but helpful introduction, suggests—it rounds out for us the portrait of a “Foucault parlant” (7), whose spoken interventions seem to have always deliberately complicated the image of the author Foucault. Artières goes so far as to characterize this first conversation with Bonnefoy as paradigmatic for the manner in which Foucault tends to “subvert” (14) the set rules of any oral genre in which he nevertheless agrees to participate. In this case, the subversion would have to do with Foucault's effort to relinquish any power or authority (18) associated with his professional activities (as a philosopher, author, teacher, etc.), by practicing—so Artières believes—“an autobiographic discourse” (19). In this sense, *Le beau danger* would mark the “endangering of Foucault by himself (*la mise en danger de Foucault par lui-même*)” (22).

I could not agree more, though I believe that the stakes are even higher. First, let us note that there are at least two—better yet, three—timelines that come to intersect in this small, fragmentary, yet oddly monumental little book. The first one has to do with the moment, in Foucault's career, when these conversations took place, i.e. after the publication of *Les mots et les choses* (1966) and the completion of his *Archéologie du savoir* (which appeared in 1969, the same year that his lecture on “Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?” was delivered and published)—though it is *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (first published in an abridged form in May 1961) that receives the most attention in this conversation. At this point, Foucault is an established author and proponent of a new method (‘archaeology’) for the historical and systematic study of the human sciences. The second timeline, already invoked, is ours: thanks to the massive

publication, since the 1990s, of documents from the Foucault archives, we now have a better understanding of Foucault's range of pursuits and registers of engagement (written, spoken, but often also taciturn and self-effacing). Yet, when it comes to the translation of his *dits* into *écrits* via print, the risk is that the "speaking Foucault" may appear to us to possess as solidified a character as Foucault the author. This in fact is the vanishing point of this first conversation with Bonnefoy, and the "beau danger" referenced in the title.

To these two timelines, the reader would do well to add a third, as a sort of backdrop that the two interlocutors will have presupposed, if only to bracket it. This third timeline has to do with the larger historical and cultural context. In this first conversation there is no mention of the events of May '68. Perhaps they were brought up later, even though Foucault had not witnessed them directly; after all, the University of Paris VIII (Vincennes) was founded the same year as a direct response to the student protests, and Foucault became the head of the philosophy department there. Or perhaps May '68 was never brought up—we will never know. What we do know is that the topic chosen by Bonnefoy for their conversations—Foucault's relation to writing (25)—, while seemingly abstracted from historical happenings, is very much connected to the cultural moment. *L'écriture* was after all the battle cry for the avant-gardist group Tel Quel and their journal (published by Seuil between 1960 and 1982), just as it was the main operative concept in Derrida's *L'Écriture et la différence* (1967). If at first Foucault seems "very reluctant" (19), as Artières remarks, to speak about writing, perhaps the rift—never quite mended—between him and Derrida had something to do with it. Whatever the case may be, it is against this cultural backdrop that Foucault's search, in this conversation, for a third way between the rock of literary confidences and the hard place of quasi-transcendental performativity becomes visible. As we shall see, he finds this third way in a genealogical discourse (hence the recurrence of terms like *filiation*, *parenté*, etc.) not without similarities to the discourse of an analysand.

Returning now to the title,¹ what exactly is this thrilling, exciting gamble, or risk?² Simply put, it is the gamble of *speaking* about *writing*, of *dire de l'écrire*. The two kinds of engagement with language—speaking and writing—though seemingly continuous with one another, are in fact at odds, and this is the paradox (in the etymological sense of departing from common opinion) that Foucault explores in his conversation with Bonnefoy. Indeed, the relation of speaking to writing as explored here is reminiscent of the 'infinite relation' between the two regimes of seeing and saying in *Les mots et les choses*: "Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say."³ Similarly, *le dit* can cast no direct light on *l'écrit*: any such direct correspondence would be the equivalent of the old belief that light and eye are somehow part of the same organ. They may form a system, but light is not in (or of) the eye any more than writing can take residence in our spoken words.

¹ Chosen (very well) by the editor, I suspect, though there is no information to that effect in the apparatus.

² In French, "un beau danger" has nothing to do with beauty in any conventional sense.

³ M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, no trans. (London: Routledge, 2002), 10.

The way that Foucault puts all of this is simply to say, “writing is quite different from speaking” (57), or “Between the pleasure of writing and the possibility of speaking there is a certain relation of incompatibility. Wherever it is no longer possible to speak, one discovers the secret, difficult, somewhat dangerous charm of writing” (31). Conversely, once the possibility and pleasure of speaking is restored (and there is a very strong sense of *jouissance* in Foucault’s responses), the possibility of writing has to recede. No wonder that the ‘genre’ of the conversation, which in principle codifies this very possibility of speaking, becomes an experimental space for Foucault, where a minimal, diacritical distance can be inserted between *le dit* and *l’écrit*. Thus, what is at stake in these conversations—to which Foucault agreed happily, though not without a sense of trepidation (25-26, 47)—is precisely *not* to continue writing by other means,⁴ *not* to disappear in the impersonality of the author-function. Nor is it to explain his books, or make confidences: Foucault is not interested in the *unsaid* of his own writings (the ‘source’ of their truth, or the ‘origin’ of his oeuvre) any more than in anybody else’s. “Therefore the two of us will have to find some level of language, of discourse, of exchange, or of communication, which is not quite of the order of the oeuvre, nor of explanation, nor yet of confidences” (27).

And yet Foucault’s tone is very intimate throughout. What then is the status, or level of this exchange? Is it, as Artières suggests, that of a “parole autobiographique” (19)? We have good grounds to question this description, given Foucault’s explicit rejection of ‘self-writing’ here. And that not only because he takes the *entretien* to be a spoken genre, or because, as we saw, between speaking and writing falls the shadow, but also because writing is for him a means towards a very specific end, namely the suppression or mortification of the self (58): “One also writes in order to have no face...” (57) *Autobiography*, as an eminently written genre, would not do then for describing Foucault’s experiment in *Le beau danger*, and he explicitly rejects it (33). Just as he rejects the idea of confidences, of publicizing his biographical or literary ‘secrets.’ And yet the tone of many of his responses is rather confessional (“j’avoue” occurs often). But even before explicitly grabbing Foucault’s attention (with the first volume of the *Histoire de la sexualité*, published by Gallimard in 1976), the ‘genre’ of confession—defined later as a technique for the production of truth—is here subtly subverted. For how can we trust that what we are getting is ‘the truth’ about Foucault’s relation to writing after such paradoxical, Cretan-like sum-ups as, “I have always placed myself quite frankly on the side of unreality, of make-believe, of lies, even of con artistry” (47)?

Le beau danger is no autobiographical sally then, and no confession either. What it offers instead is a “quai-récit” (42), as Foucault says, of what writing had been for him until the time of this conversation. What is surprising about this account is that in it Foucault explicitly practices a kind of palinode (29), a retraction technique of sorts, whereby he applies to himself the opposite treatment from the one he had reserved to other authors: he does *not* make abstraction of his own psychology, and does *not* talk of himself as a “pure speaking subject” (29), but rather as a subject with a certain history, a certain legacy, even a certain pathology. In short,

⁴ In this respect *Le beau danger* is at the antipodes from Maurice Blanchot’s *L’Entretien infini* (Gallimard, 1969), which is a writerly exploration of the ethical problem of otherness as it poses itself *in writing*.

the quasi-narrative that we find in *Le beau danger* is genealogical, though more in a Nietzschean than a traditional sense.

The object of Foucault's genealogical account is his relation to writing. Central to this relation is Foucault's "almost moral distrust" (28) of writing understood (in the tradition of Mallarmé) as an intransitive, nearly sacred monument of language (28). In contrast, he admits being a resolutely 'transitive' writer, or—with Roland Barthes' distinction—*écrivain*, someone who writes "to say things" (60), rather than an *écrivain* aiming at an *œuvre*. Foucault traces this quasi-moral distrust of intransitive writing back to the "absolute devalorization" (34) of both speech and writing by the medical milieu in which he grew up: "Writing was simply making wind (*Écrire, c'était faire du vent*)" (31). The prejudice against writing was of a piece with another, inherited from the same milieu, which Foucault refers to almost endearingly as "my disdain, this very archaic, very infantile disdain" (45) for psychiatry; after all, in the medical circles of his childhood, madness was "a fake sickness [...] treated by fake doctors" (43).

Formally, Foucault's genealogical quasi-narrative proceeds by a double inversion (33), even conversion (34): from the "absolute devalorization of language (*parole*)" (34) to learning how to 'see' discourse as the 'invisible visibility' of things (i.e. the main methodological goal of archaeology, in his understanding of the term); and from the twinned "absolute devalorization of madness and psychiatry" (45) to learning how to wield devalorization as a *critical* tool, as "an instrument of knowledge" (45)—in the explicit lineage of Nietzsche (45). Foucault's genealogical account also proceeds by a double lineage, biological and intellectual, clinical and genealogical: on the one hand, the medical rationalism—"whose values [were] opposed to writing" (32)—of his familial milieu, and Nietzschean genealogy on the other, described by Foucault as "another kinship that is weighing on me (*une autre parenté qui m'écrase*)" (41).

Unsurprisingly, this double kinship creates tensions in Foucault's account, which remains rather ambivalent and unstable. For, in claiming the Nietzschean legacy—"for Nietzsche, philosophy was first and foremost diagnostic, it had to do with man insofar as he was sick. In short, for him philosophy was both diagnostic of, and violent therapy for the maladies of culture" (42)—Foucault also needs to be able to claim the ability to intervene *à vif*, as it were, while the patient is still alive. Yet, this is explicitly what Foucault admits not being able to do at the time (and it remains a question to what extent he succeeded later): on his own account, in virtue of his psychology (even psychopathology), his relation to writing was always, in a certain sense, a relation to the death of others (which on p. 36 is said to be the "reverse of the tapestry" of Foucault's writing), to death in general (e.g. p. 58, where writing appears as the "mortification of the self"). Because of this double relation—to writing and/as death—Foucault admits having found it "always difficult to talk about the present" (39). Therefore, when he claims the role of a "diagnostician" (41)⁵—rather than a philosopher, historian, sociologist, etc.—his own project for a genealogy of modernity seems to be endangered by his anatomist's (37) or pathologist's gaze, which requires him to at least assume (37), if not inflict, the death of his patients.

⁵ The concept of critique as a tool for the diagnostic of actuality occupied Foucault until the end. It is explicitly explored in his Berkeley lecture on Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" (1984).

And so we have circled back to the “beau danger” standing as a warning on the title page of this little book where Foucault’s *dits* lie printed, at the mercy of writing’s “posthumous drifting” (39). Indeed, to Bonnefoy’s question as to whether there is any relation (*parenté*) between Foucault’s ‘disappearance’ in his own writing, and the ‘disappearance’ of man at the end of *Les mots et les choses*, Foucault responds in the affirmative, but also warns: “People will make of [the relation between the two disappearances] whatever they want. They will undoubtedly denounce the chimerical character of what I wanted to affirm. Others will perhaps take what I am saying to you right now not as a sincere discourse but rather as a projection onto myself of certain themes more or less theoretical and ideological that I have tried to formulate in my books. It doesn’t matter how this relation (*parenté*) between my book and me, or me and my book, is read. What I know for sure is that my books will be compromised by what I say, and I will be too. This is the exciting risk, the amusing risk of these conversations” (65-66). What is exciting and amusing about *Le beau danger* now as a book is that it will also have to compromise itself.

In sum, like the Doctor’s TARDIS, *Le beau danger* is bigger on the inside. Both Foucault scholars and non-specialists will find it invaluable. For one thing, it is an excellent introduction to Foucault as a live, keen intelligence, unafraid to experiment. Also, few other testimonies about transitive writing—about ‘writing to say things’—come close to the complexity of Foucault’s account, which manages to sound deeply invested (affectively, existentially) and humorously detached, often in the same breath. As a self-styled “surveyor of [critical] distances” (63), Foucault seems closer to Kafka than Rousset. Seen from this side, *Le beau danger* is a safe bet. Yet, Foucault readers, especially those claiming expert knowledge, will often find themselves in jeopardy: for what are we to make of the tension between the two legacies—clinical and critical, to use Deleuze’s pair—claimed here by Foucault? Is this tension merely a portent of the so-called ‘turn’ from an early archaeological phase to a second genealogical period in Foucault’s intellectual career? Or is it internal to Foucauldian genealogy, and characteristic of its tensile strength? Excitingly, it is questions all the way down from here: how to deal with Foucault’s “Cretan” persona? Or is it more of an Outsider?⁶ Is his genealogical account an ancient lie or a modern fiction? Welcome to *Le beau danger* as a book: to read it is to have your assumptions tested.

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⁶ On the contrast between logical paradox (“I lie” said by a Cretan) and fictional statement (“I speak”), see “La pensée du dehors” (1966), in M. Foucault, *Dits et écrits I. 1954-1975*, ed. Daniel Defert, F. Ewald, and J. Lagrange (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 546-567, esp. 546ff.