

REVIEW ESSAY

New Books "By" Foucault

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Speech Begins After Death

After the publication of *Dits et Ecrits* in 1994 (partly translated into English as *Essential Writings*, volumes 1-3), and the now almost complete publication of the lecture courses at the Collège de France, one might wonder whether anything significant in the Foucauldian corpus remains to come to light. In the future, will the Foucault publishing industry be destined to scraping the bottom of the barrel? These questions are raised by the publication of these two volumes that bring together a range of Foucault's previously unavailable output from the 1960's. The first book, *Speech Begins After Death*,¹ comprises an unfinished interview from 1968 between Foucault and the literary critic Claude Bonnefoy. While it is a slim volume, and the interview is incomplete, there are some tantalising insights into Foucault's relation to writing and to scholarly research. The second book, *Language, Madness, and Desire: On Literature*,² comprises the transcripts of two radio broadcasts and four lectures, delivered in France, Belgium, and the US between 1963 and 1970. These texts offer a flavour of Foucault's mode of engagement with literature throughout the 1960s. Both books are translations of volumes recently published in French and edited by Philippe Artières and other members of the Centre Michel Foucault. And both books, as I indicated, raise the question of how far we should go in publishing every last transcript and lecture delivered by Foucault in the course of almost three decades. But before we try to answer that question, let's look in detail at the two volumes.

In 1968, Claude Bonnefoy approached Foucault with the idea of conducting a series of interviews, or conversations, that would diverge from the usual model of interviews with famous authors. They would not have as their aim the explanation or elaboration of what had already been written; rather they would explore Foucault's relation to writing itself. They would go behind the scenes, as it were, to lay bare the springs, motivations, and impediments of Foucault's act of writing. The conversations were to be conducted over multiple sessions during the year and were to be published as a book. What happened next is a little bit unclear. Certainly some conversations were recorded. This book consists of a transcript that was established by Bonnefoy but remained uncorrected by Foucault himself. All recordings of the

¹ Michel Foucault, *Speech Begins After Death; In Conversation with Claude Bonnefoy*, edited by Philippe Artières, translated by Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2013).

² Michel Foucault, *Language, Madness, and Desire: On Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

original conversations have now been lost. However, the first of several quibbles I have with this publication is the inconsistency in the story the notes and introduction tell us about the nature of the published fragment. The fly leaf of the dust jacket proclaims: "The project was abandoned but a typescript of the first interview survived and is published here [...]." "So, this is the text of the first conversation? However, an Editor's Note states, "This interview was conducted in the spring and autumn of 1968." So, this is not the first interview, it is two (or more?) sessions. Finally, in Philippe Artières' Introduction we read: "Over the course of the ten meetings that took place, Foucault engaged in a new kind of speech [...]" (16). So, is the typescript a record of ten meetings? Or two meetings? Or only the first meeting? These are minor reservations, but it is a little frustrating that the editors were not clearer about the text they published.

So far as the content of the discussion is concerned, however, the only frustration is that we could not have heard more. Foucault exhibits a mixture of reticence at the self-exposure and excitement at the experiment in which he and Bonnefoy are engaged. It is the first time, he says, that he has agreed to reveal some of the "back of the tapestry." He seems to have an almost Wizard of Oz fear that this will unravel the cool, analytic exterior of his works. Focusing on this behind-the-scenes activity is, therefore, dangerous: hence, the French title of the book, *Le beau danger* (the beautiful/fine danger).³

And what is revealed? Principally two things. First, the story of his transformation from a person who was an unwilling and ungifted writer into a person who needed to write every day as a form of "absolution" for his existence (64). Second, his characterisation of his writing as a form of diagnosis, a surgical revelation of the invisible that was only partially hidden below the surface. Both of these elements are connected, behind the tapestry, to Foucault's childhood in provincial France, in a family in which several key members (including his father) were surgeons. In fact, his father was a third-generation surgeon, while his maternal grandfather was also a surgeon.⁴ Regarding the first story, Foucault points out that in this milieu, the written word—and even the spoken word—was given little value. Instead, the silent observation of symptoms, followed by precise and decisive intervention, is what mattered. Foucault reports that even his handwriting was very poor when he was a schoolboy—a fact that no doubt resonated with him as he wrote about de la Salle's writing system in *Discipline and Punish*.⁵ The decisive shift in his relation to writing occurred when he was living in Sweden in the late 1950s, after he had turned 30. There he had the experience of living in a society in which he had no facility in the two spoken languages (Swedish and English). Hence, "because the possibility of speaking had been denied me, I discovered the pleasure of writing" (32). In the course of the subsequent dozen or so years (up to the time of this interview), Foucault developed a strong, apparently highly disciplined, relation to writing.

³ Speaking of translation issues, my second quibble is that the phrase "back of the tapestry" (40), when it appears in the editor's Introduction, is translated as "the wrong side of the carpet" (16). This is an unfortunate inconsistency on the part of the translator.

⁴ Daniel Defert, "Chronology," in C. Falzon, T. O'Leary, and J. Sawicki (eds.), Timothy O'Leary (trans.), *A Companion to Foucault* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 11.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by A. Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 152.

Even though he says that for him writing doesn't have the "sacred" aspect it has had for many writers since Mallarmé (I will return to this issue below), it nonetheless became an essential, apparently daily, practice. As noted above, he speaks of the daily obligation to write and the fact that for him the only pleasure of writing is the (negative?) pleasure of fulfilling that obligation, of justifying his own existence (64). We thus see Foucault transformed from the schoolboy with the poor handwriting into the daily practitioner of the art of absorbing all of daily life "into that small rectangle of paper" (66).

The second revelation of this interview is the extent to which Foucault's own understanding of the nature of his scholarship, as a form of diagnosis, hearkens back not only to Nietzsche, but to his family background, growing up surrounded by surgeons. He explains that he never attacks people in print, because for him writing is "an extremely gentle activity [...] velvet [...] a velvety writing" (38). Nevertheless, he acknowledges that his writing can be "dry and mordant" and he goes on to consider the possibility that he has "transformed the scalpel into a pen" (39). Now, for him, writing is intimately connected with death. It is not that his pen/scalpel kills, but that he only wields it after death has occurred (hence the title of this translation). So, perhaps the apt metaphor is not diagnosis, but autopsy: "I'm in the position of an anatomist who performs an autopsy" (40). And what does this anatomist want to reveal? "I'm simply trying to make apparent what is very immediately present and at the same time invisible [...]. To grasp that invisibility, that invisible of the too visible" (71).

Perhaps the most striking feature of all this discussion is not so much the revelations of the personal background of elements of Foucault's work, but the way in which *writing* is thematised. This is very much a part of his thinking in the 1960s, as the second book under consideration also clearly demonstrates. But at the heart of this theme there seems to be a contradiction, or at least a subtle tension. On the one hand, Foucault insists that when he writes he is not an "author" engaged in building up an *oeuvre* (rather clumsily translated here as "a body of work" (75)). His writing is "transitive," it is not of the Mallarmean variety; he has no time for the "sacred side of writing" (28). Writing, for him, is a pragmatic means to a practical end. But, on the other hand, the very focus on writing itself, on the act of filling that "small rectangle of paper," (68) strikes a discordant note at times. This is particularly so in the discussion of his work as diagnosis. Here, writing is presented as the act that opens up a distance from the present, thus facilitating the unveiling of that "invisible of the too visible" (71). But, couldn't it just as easily—and perhaps more accurately—be said that this is what genealogy does, or critical scholarship, or historico-philosophy? Why is *writing* the focus? Perhaps the answer here is to simply say that there are many aspects to a project such as Foucault's; there are many elements that must come together for his works to have the effect they have. The archival research is essential; the critical orientation no less so; but the form of the writing itself also plays a key role. If, as Foucault says, his constant aim is "to give density and thickness to what we don't experience as transparency," (71) then it follows that the mode of expression—the writing—plays a crucial role in imparting that "density and thickness." Who could forget, for example, the essay on Velasquez's *Las Meninas* that opens *The Order of Things*; or the equally stunning opening passages of *Discipline and Punish*?

Writing was important for Foucault, therefore, in two complementary senses. Since it is one of the primary modes of production of intellectual work, it is a practice that demands to

be questioned and probed by all scholars. But, secondly, Foucault was fascinated with the modes of literary language, in particular as they relate to questions about madness. And it is this set of concerns that are the focus of the second book under consideration here: *Language, Madness, and Desire: On Literature*. However, if the first book suffered from being a rather slight edition of a fragment of an interview, this book suffers from being a melange of, arguably, minor texts.

Language, Madness, and Desire

The first section of the book comprises the transcripts of two radio broadcasts that Foucault made in 1963 for an RTF France III programme called *The Use of Speech*. They are the second and fifth of a series of five broadcasts on the subject of madness and language. The first of these, "The Silence of the Mad," surveys literary representations of madness, from Shakespeare to Diderot, and uses actors to read selected passages. The second broadcast, "Mad Language," explores the contemporary fascination with mad speech, especially in the context of literature: why are "we" now so interested in all those mad words? The second section of the book comprises two lectures delivered in Brussels in 1964 on the theme "Language and Literature." The first of these, "What is Literature?," suggests that literature is of very recent date: having emerged from a realignment of different forms of language in the nineteenth century, and especially with a new role for "the book." Sade and Mallarmé are variously identified as the first signs of this shift. The second of these lectures, "What is the Language of Literature?," focuses on a more recent development: the changing nature and function of criticism in this new literary eco-system. Why does literature give rise to criticism, more "today" than ever? The third section of the book comprises two lectures Foucault delivered in 1970 at SUNY Buffalo on the subject of Sade. The first of these, "Why Did Sade Write?," returns to the question of the relation between the writer and the practice of writing. As we will see below, one of the functions of writing in Sade is, quite simply, masturbation. The second lecture, "Theoretical Discourses and Erotic Scenes," attempts to explain the interrelation between these two modes of writing in Sade and what that tells us about the relation between desire and truth.

Overall, this book provides a sample of work that conveys both the style and some of the central themes of Foucault's work in the 1960s. The style of writing (and thinking) tends towards the baroque, the convoluted, and occasionally the obscure. There is a strong concern with identifying sharply delineated turning points, which sometimes issues in bold, yet hard to verify claims. Such as, for example, the claim that "literature began the day something we might call the volume of the book was substituted for the space of rhetoric"; and that day, to be precise, was the day of "Mallarmé's book" (63). Foucault is, presumably, referring to *Un coup de dés* from 1897. Would it be impolite to compare the claim that literature begins in 1897, with the earlier suggestion from the same lecture that Sade (1740-1814) "is the paradigm of literature"? (53). In any case, this conveys some of the style of these texts. So far as themes are concerned, Foucault's focus is on the ways in which language has been problematised in successive waves since the nineteenth century emergence of literature. And this concern with literature brings with it, in turn, a concern with the relation between literary writing and madness. How do works by writers such as Sade, Rousset, Artaud function as literature,

rather than as a mere record of some kind of madness or excess? As he said in the second radio broadcast re-printed here, "our age" discovered that madness and literature have a "common trunk" in signs: "both of them [...] played with signs, played with *those* signs that play with us" (38). It is this mutual play that Foucault wants to explore and expose.

In the two lectures on Sade, delivered in Buffalo, New York in 1970, Foucault expands upon this theme of playing with the signs that play with us, through a close reading of Sade. Coming after the many broad, sweeping statements of the earlier chapters, it is refreshing to see Foucault approach a very general question—what is the relation between writing, truth, and desire?—through a sustained, meticulous reading of a particular text. The second of these lectures gives a painstaking analysis of the role of the "theoretical" passages in Sade's writing, in particular his major novel *The New Justine* (published in 1797). In the first lecture, which I will discuss here, Foucault addresses the question "Why did Sade write?" This is of particular interest here, since we have already looked at Foucault's answer to that question in relation to his own writing. Foucault's starting point is the observation that Sade sets all of his writing under the sign of truth: from the first line, Sade insists that no matter how repugnant the incidents in the novel are, he must recount them because they are true. But what does this mean? Any reader of Sade quickly realises that verisimilitude is not his aim, so what kind of truth is he aiming for?

The first clue offered by Foucault is the set of instructions given by Juliette to a young protégé who has not yet completed her apprenticeship in perversion (cited, 103-04). It is, Foucault says, the only place in the novels where the function of writing is addressed. And what is its function? To heighten sexual fantasy, to bring it to ever higher forms of excess, to prepare the libertine for the enactment of his or her own most extreme sexual practice. And this use of writing, Foucault speculates, is probably also the use Sade himself made of it, during a lifetime in which he wrote thousands upon thousands of pages, most of which have been lost. It is a "method of masturbation," a description of "the writing of his solitary frenzy" (104-05). But if, for Sade, writing is the mere recording of sexual fantasies, then what relation does it have to truth?

It is here that Foucault offers his analysis of the truth-function of writing in Sade: he identifies four functions of writing which he then relates to truth in three ways. First, writing abolishes the barrier between reality and imagination. Acknowledging his own use of a Freudian vocabulary, Foucault says it creates "a world entirely governed by the pleasure principle" (108). Second, writing abolishes time, in the sense that it facilitates the endless repetition of desire: its function is to "erase the limitations of time and free repetition for itself." Third, writing facilitates excess: it "enable[s] the imagination to exceed its own limits" (109). The fourth step, in the instructions given by Juliette, is to enact the fantasy. And of course, that is what Sade's characters actually do: they don't just write their sexual fantasies, they actually carry them out. And, for what its worth, that is also what Sade did in his own life. But here Foucault seems to fudge the issue. He says that really what the writing shows is that now there is no difference between doing it and not doing it. Writing allows the individual to reach "the most deviant point of all singularity," a point at which she will achieve "the maximum excess possible," the maximum "irregularity." But it also removes "the limit between the

criminal and the non-criminal," (111) thereby removing the last constraint that could be placed on desire.

Now, what does this all have to do with truth? Well, according to Foucault, since the reality principle has been transcended, this implies that every fantasy is true. It is true because the imagination guarantees its own truth, no longer needing to rely on the reality of an outside world. Second, desire will always be true because it becomes infinitely repeatable and can never be found to be false in the future. And third, because the limit between the licit and the illicit has been abolished, desire can always be "adequate to its own irregularity" (113). Through writing, nothing can challenge or limit desire, it has become "a truth without any possible external challenge" (113). Sade's writing, therefore, neither aims for verisimilitude, nor does it try to convince the reader of the truth of any particular theory or proposition. Rather, it is simply "desire become truth" (114). It is "truth that has taken the form of desire, of repetitive desire, unlimited desire, desire without law, without restriction, without an exterior" (114).

Thinking about this analysis in relation to what Foucault says about his own practice of writing, it is clear that these two writers write for very different reasons. The most significant contrast is in the way writing connects with the world. I have already said that Foucault seems to fudge the issue of that connection in Sade's practice; his analysis discounts the moment when the fictional character, or the real author, will "do" what they have been fantasising. But Foucault's own practice of writing is, as he says, "transitive," by which he presumably means it is about something, something other than itself; he wants it to "do" something. Hence, he is a "writer" not an "author."⁶ So, while Sade and Foucault share a fundamental orientation towards truth, their use of writing is different. For Sade, if we accept Foucault's analysis, the writing of desire aims to free desire from its traditional subordination to truth. Sade's writing is, we might say, a daily practice, a laborious and repetitive effort to lift this yoke.

Foucault also engages in a daily practice of writing. However, in his case one imagines not the "solitary frenzy" of Sade but the cool analysis of the anatomist. For him, writing has a diagnostic role, on two levels. First, the process of writing helps him to work out what it is that he wanted to say. Like a "sculptor of old," writing helps him to see what is in "the block of marble."⁷ Second, writing has the function of "distancing and measuring distance" (74). Foucault confesses to the difficulty of speaking about the present; for him, there needs to be an "infinitesimal shift" towards speaking of the dead. This allows one to "say absolutely serene things, completely analytic and anatomical" (44). So, beginning with the decision to address one's present concerns not directly, but through the archive and the library, one then uses writing as a means of "incision" that reveals a certain truth. It is interesting that this interview, which was conducted during the tumultuous events of 1968, shows Foucault at the cusp of his own more sustained engagement with present social and political realities. But the technique of distancing, via the library and the archive, was to remain a constant feature of his writing and his work.

⁶ Foucault, *Speech Begins at Death*, 70.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

The 1960s were a long time ago. The writings, talks, and discussions collected in these two books are imbued with the sensibility of that time. They show Foucault's fascination with the literary concerns that dominated the post-War generation of writers, critics, and scholars: the themes of excess, desire, madness, and the irreducible importance of language to human experience. They illustrate his mastery of a kind of baroque style of thought and expression, a style he was to gradually shed in later years. And, in the case of the discussions with Claude Bonnefoy, they make available previously unavailable insights into Foucault's relation to his own scholarship, as writing. But they also, especially in the case of the second book under consideration, raise a question about where one should draw the line in publishing Foucault's minor works. It is well known that Foucault's will contained the injunction "no posthumous publications." One wonders how he would view the fact that more than thirty years after his death new books "by" Foucault continue to be published. Not that his feelings about the matter should necessarily concern us; after all, the author is dead in more senses than one. And yet, by adding more and more of such books to Foucault's oeuvre, we risk changing that oeuvre in ways that don't necessarily add to its value.

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