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TRANSLATION

Foucault: The Materiality of a Working Life
An interview with Daniel Defert by Alain Brossat, assisted by Philippe Chevallier[1]

An athlete's life

Alain Brossat: I've wanted for a long time to ask you about what one might call the materiality of Foucault's work. What I am wondering about is basically something quite simple: in the making of a body of work like Foucault's, there is a dimension which is almost athletic, which implies a strict organization of time, with a commitment to a regime of daily life. It seems to me that there is a whole unexplored zone which lies between on the one hand the stories told by biographies, which are structured by an order of events, the succession of chapters in a life, and on the other hand what one can learn from studying and analysing the texts, the books, and the other publications. There is a whole middle area in between, which consists of this temporality of work, of self-imposed disciplines of research and the habits that provide its structure. Because I think that Foucault was a person of discipline and habits.

Daniel Defert: Absolutely! He said once to me in a phrase which I remember well, "Intellectual work doesn't have enough materiality. One has to construct that materiality by working to a strict schedule, one has to work the same hours every day, just like one would in a factory."

AB: Starting early in the morning...

DD: Probably not before 9a.m, actually. But in fact it is very difficult to talk about his work, since a very large part of it was done in the library, surrounded by other people. I couldn't say whether

[1] Interview with Alain Brossat and Philippe Chevallier, conducted in the apartment of Daniel Defert, 28th November 2015. Translated by Colin Gordon. The original French text is now published on-line in *materiali foucaltiani* as "Foucault: Matérialité d'un travail. Entretien avec Daniel Defert par Alain Brossat, avec le concours de Philippe Chevallier." Available at:
http://www.materialifoucaultiani.org/en/component/content/article/239-foucaultn-materialite-dun-travail-entretien-avec-daniel-defert.html

all his time in the library was spent reading, or if he also wrote things there, apart from just taking notes. He generally left the house around 8:30 so as to get the the library around 9, and he usually left the library in the late afternoon, around 5:30 or 6. From then on, he would be meeting with people, either here or in town. This was the time of the day for his social and political life, meeting people, and then dinner—generally with people he knew well, his closer friends—Pierre Cabat, Mathieu Lindon, Hervé Guibert, Thierry Voeltzel for instance—usually three or four people. These evenings among friends seldom continued beyond 10pm, and they were usually followed by a hour of reading—not the things people tend to imagine, the latest publications, the literary avant-garde—no, he would read Chateaubriand's *Memoirs From Beyond the Grave*, and everything by Thomas Mann, Gogol or Kafka, and then at 11, sleep.

AB: Did the work stop over the weekend?

DD: No no, weekends didn't exist! We would go to see art exhibitions on the Saturday afternoon, certainly, but the very notion of the weekend didn't exist... Especially a public holiday, a Christmas day without writing, that was impossible! Foucault rarely put dates on his writings, but he would have been quite capable of putting "December 25th" on something, that being a day when, as he said, "nothing has happened for several thousand years."[2]

AB: And holidays?

DD: Three days of holiday would be enough to set off a neurosis! Foucault could accept leaving his work, as long as it was to work somewhere else, to go and give some lectures somewhere and use that as the opportunity to rework something he had done in Paris. Stopping work for a holiday, that was just not thinkable. I remember how after I had taken the written part of the *agrégation* exams, I wanted a rest before preparing for the oral. So we went to Le Touquet. We were due to spend three days there. From day two, I could see that it was just not possible: that made two days he hadn't been able to work, that wasn't bearable, we had to go back... And so we only went on a very few holiday trips together. Four days in the Mississippi valley, I think—but the car had to be full of books, and his comments on the Faulknerian landscape were full of invention (he was very fond of Faulkner). Most of the biographers never speak about Foucault's work. They talks about the books he wrote or, as with James Miller, give the impression that he led a life of leisure, which is clearly absurd—it would take something major to keep him from his work... The time for amusements and diversions came, for him, between 6 and 10pm, during the hours of sociability, it wasn't allowed to encroach on the hours of work.

AB: Would you say he had a horror of 'leisure'?

[2] A remark Foucault made when he was visited by the novelist Jacques Almira (Prix Médicis, 1975), at his home on Christmas Day.

DD: Not exactly. He went to the theatre, the cinema, to concerts—but that would still be an activity: because he would talk about it, he could give an analysis, provide a critique, while he was still walking out of the theatre. One sensed he had been following everything in an active way—so it was leisure in the sense of *otium* rather than *farniente*: non-work activity, not idling.

AB: Did he mainly go to see things by people in his circle of connections, by artists he knew well?

DD: We got quite regularly invited to things. That's one of the advantages of the French intellectual scene: you could go to the theatre several times a week, as an invited guest. What we saw were mainly things that were being promoted: the avant-garde theatre of the period, the Autumn Festival—Michel Guy[3] was a good friend, and we didn't miss going to much in that festival. Then there were concerts. We would go out two or three times a week.

AB: How did you choose what to see?

DD: We would only see things that were innovative or committed in an aesthetic, intellectual, or political sense. We hardly ever went to the *Comédie Française*, we never went together to the Opera—unless Pierre Boulez was directing *Wozzeck,* or *Lulu* in his completed version.[4] We didn't go to traditional things, but we would go to the Théâtre des Amandiers, to see Chéreau's productions...

AB: What did he think about television? Did you have a set in the apartment?

DD: We got one rather late. And I think he bought it for me. We had started to live completely together, in these two connected apartments [in rue de Vaugirard], in 1970—previously I had had a flat next to his, in rue de Grenelle. And the TV, I think he gave it to me and it was in my place—a very ordinary little TV in black and white.

AB: What did Foucault watch? The news?

DD: We got to like the news bulletins with Christine Ockrent, we were big fans of hers, first of all when she was a reporter, during Giscard's government, and then when she presented the 8pm news, from 1981. We didn't miss the 8pm news, it became a habit. Before that, there had been "*Le*

[3] Michel Guy (1927-1990), a patron of the arts and cultural administrator, was commissioned by President Georges Pompidou to found the Paris Autumn Festival in 1972. He became Culture Minister in the first government of Jacques Chirac (1974-1976).

[4] The two operas by Alban Berg, directed by Boulez respectively in 1963 and 1979 at the Opéra de Paris.

Pain Noir [Black Bread]," a hugely successful series,[5] which was set in 19th century working class life—the streets in Paris were empty when the episodes were on TV. We watched it with passionate enthusiasm, and then we started reading Maurice Clavel's TV criticism.[6] That was a whole period when TV became interesting—and Foucault thought that French TV was much more interesting than in many other countries, even if we had started rather late.

AB: What were Foucault's relations with popular culture?

DD: He was impressed by the rock phenomenon: Woodstock, the underground culture. I took him to see David Bowie at the *Auteuil Hippodrome* in 1983 and he was enthusiastic. He gave an interview very early on to *Actuel*, a fanzine that was read by lycée students but detested by the Maoists.[7] In Brazil, he was moved to see how even the youngest kid would be carrying a musical instrument. He debated this new culture with Pierre Boulez.[8] But all the same it was the serious, classical and contemporary music that he listened to. He had once been with Jean Barraqué to some classes given by Oliver Messiaen.

AB: He wasn't interested in pop singers?

DD: What singers did he like? He liked to listen to Julien Clerc, and to see him perform, for sure. Julien Clerc invited him to take part in a TV programme, and, even though Foucault refused, he was touched by the invitation. He also mentions Charles Trenet, but that was on Japanese radio[9]; that was the kind of detail that was expected from a French person giving an interview in Japan! Of course we went to Montand's come-back concert at the Olympia, in 1982, but that was as invited guests, as friends. Ingrid Caven, the same: she was married to Fassbinder and Foucault was a keen follower of the new German cinema. Fassbinder came here with Daniel Schmid, who was a close friend and came to visit us almost every week.

AB: Did Foucault have any particular views on mass culture, given that was something which

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[5] *Le Pain Noir,* a series directed by Serge Moati based on the novel by Georges-Emmanuel Clancier, broadcast from 1974 to 1975 on channel 2 of the ORTF, and then on Antenne2.

[6] In *Le Nouvel Observateur*, where Maurice Clavel, a friend of Michel Foucault,wrote the TV column from 1967 until his death in 1979.

[7] "Par-delà le bien et le mal (discussion with lycée students), Actuel, no. 14 (Novermber 1971)," in D. Defert, F. Ewald (eds.), *Dits et Écrits, vol. 1: 1954-1975* (Paris: Gallimard), 1091-1104; M. Foucault, D. Bouchard, and S. Simon (trans.), *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 218-233.

[8] "Michel Foucault/Pierre Boulez: la musique contemporaine et le public," *CNAC Magazine*, no. 15 (1983)," in D. Defert, F. Ewald (eds.), *Dits et Écrits, 2: 1976-1988* (Paris: Gallimard), 1307-1314.

[9] 1978, unpublished interview.

concerned intellectuals a lot in the 60s and after, that kind of Adorno-inspired critique of popular culture which was current at that time?

DD: I'm not sure that he had a spontaneous interest in those questions, but he was very much sought after by Dario Fo. We saw him several times when he came to perform in Paris. We were invited to his shows and we certainly had dinner together. Even if he doesn't quite fit into the category "popular culture," we also certainly met with Carmelo Bene, who was a close friend of his French translator, Jean-Paul Manganaro, and also a close friend of Deleuze. There were a whole lot of theatre people we met at that time, for instance the Living Theatre, Judith Malina and Julian Beck, who when they came to Paris spent almost a whole day with us here. There was a time towards the mid 70s when all kinds of creative people were renewing the arts with elements of popular culture—with an interest especially in the body—and that may have been what drew them to talk to Foucault... Genet often came too, in the 70s, because he wanted to mobilise intellectuals to help get George Jackson out of prison. Catherine von Bülow, who worked at the Gallimard publishing house, brought Genet here, and as we were concerned about prisons at the time, we campaigned with them. And then there came the Union de la Gauche, and Genet took a stance in favour of the alliance with the Communist Party. We were reluctant to support that. In fact, Genet had a particular objective: at the time, the USSR was supporting the Palestinians. So Genet took his distance from us, while moving closer to the CP.

In fact all of this was always a matter of personal connections. There were other channels of mediation apart from popular culture. We were very close for instance to Ariane Mnouchkine and we must have seen her productions of *1789* and *1793*[10] three or four times: for Mnouchkine, the French Revolution was our *Iliad* and *Odyssey*... We became friends with Ariane, she came here. For instance, we thought up the *"Manif des Mendiants [Beggars' Protest]"* with her here.

AB: The "*Manif des Mendiants"*?

DD: Yes, this was when the Culture minister under Pompidou, Maurice Druon, said he was fed up with artists who had a begging bowl in one hand and a Molotov cocktail in the other... Ariane Mnouchkine was so appalled by this declaration that she came to discuss it with us. She talked about it with us here, and it was maybe with us here that she first conceived her project for a protest where artists in mourning dress would conduct the burial ceremony of freedom of expression.

AB: Could one say that Foucault had a politics of friendship?

DD: Yes, absolutely. In the first place he had a practice of friendship. I think that was one of the strongest values in his life: a friendship linked to concrete forms of solidarity, not tied to an

[10] Produced at the Cartoucherie in 1970 and 1972 respectively.

exclusively political commitment. Take Georges Dumézil, for instance: I would have a lot of trouble situating him on the right or the left, he was a bit beyond all that. He wasn't a leftist, but when his brother-in-law became a minister under Mitterrand, he was delighted... He was a Christian ex-monarchist who would say that if the University was in a bad way it was because of 'that blockhead Henri IV,' meaning that if Henri IV had chosen to remain a Protestant, we could have had a proper German-style university! Or again Canguilhem, or Hippolyte: for Foucault these were really relationships not just of admiration, but of fidelity. As soon as he was in an academic post somewhere, Foucault would invite them to come and speak. I would say he kept the same friends all his life. He wasn't someone who broke with people. There were people he came to see less often, or even not to see at all, but those were people he had got involved with through more recent political causes. The people he had ties of friendship with from his young days were people he stayed close to for his whole life.

AB: He didn't fall out with people for political reasons? Yet with Deleuze there does seem to have been something like this.

DD: There wasn't a falling out with Deleuze. The contacts got more distant, but I think I had something to do with this... I distrusted Deleuze. His cutting irony frightened me. I was ill at ease with him, and moreover I told him so. After Foucault's death, he was so wonderful, such a true friend, that I felt ashamed of having mistrusted him, and I told him this... It also seems to me that the work Deleuze did in collaboration with Guattari didn't terribly appeal to Foucault. Guattari was very much involved with things like German and Italian left-wing activism, which Foucault didn't care for (he suspected those groups were manipulated by Moscow), and the same went for Guattari's theories of molar machines... Deleuze's collaboration with Guattari may have caused a distance between him and Foucault. But when Foucault got sick, he immediately asked to see Deleuze. I called Deleuze, who was very affected, but the visit didn't happen because of the doctors, who invented all kinds of medical pretexts—in reality this was because they were afraid to have anyone coming to the hospital, they were afraid of information getting out, quite simply.... It was the same with Barthes, there was never any break between them. They saw each other less, but wanted to meet again, I think—which indeed did happen: Foucault, who had got Barthes elected to the Collège de France, went to visit him in hospital.

AB: There were people who Foucault didn't like and he didn't make much effort to hide it: one can read the signs of this in *Dits et Ecrits*.

DD: Yes, of course... I would say that Foucault was a sincerely modest person, but I think he had a limited regard for more people than he chose to show.

AB: Sometimes you see it in *Dits et Ecrits*: in some of his argumentative encounters, there are sudden flashes of temper which deliberately go a little beyond the norms of academic politeness.

DD: The fact was that he didn't like lies. He considered that to be entirely normal for people to disagree with him, that was part of the general rule of intellectual life, but for someone to say he had said something which he hadn't, or to say he hadn't spoken about something when he had: that was something he couldn't stand...

AB: Notably in the case of some communists...

DD: …who did ideological readings of his texts. I can remember an exchange of letters which lasted quite a long time with the then editor of [the Communist Party theory journal] *La pensée*, in which Foucault deliberately replicated all the ritual communist vocabulary of abuse, like 'lewd vipers [*viperes lubriques*],' etc. "We will be happy to publish your reply, but you must take out that bit," the editor would reply. Yes, Foucault could be a polemicist.

AB: While also saying that he never went in for polemics....

An economy of time

AB: You mentioned the importance for Foucault of discipline and fixed hours, but could there be exceptions, for a particular reason, to see someone important who was just passing through Paris, for instance?

DD: For sure. Foucault wasn't rigid, but in reality those occasions were not so frequent. On the whole things followed the habits which I mentioned. If he didn't go to the *Bibliothèque nationale*, he got down to work at home, in a kimono. The table over there [pointing to a teak table laden with books and papers] is where he wrote *History of Madness*—because he kept the working furniture that he had in Uppsala, like that chair [**AB**: the one I am sitting in now]. *Discipline and Punish* was written on that white table [**pointing to it**], and then rewritten on that other one over there [**pointing to the first table**].

AB: Was he someone who had his rituals for writing, did he have a fetishist side in his work?

DD: I'm not sure... what are you thinking of?

AB: When one writes, one always has little compulsions... For myself, I can't start to write something without a certain number of ritual actions, aligning objects on my desk in a certain precise way as though I were trying to banish some evil spirit...

DD: Apart from his habit of finishing all his books at the family house in Vendeuvre,[11] I can't see

[11] Vendeuvre-du-Poitou, where the Foucault family had a house, « Le Piroir », where his mother lived and where Foucault stayed every summer.

that he did. But I always kept myself from making a record of that kind of detail. Sometimes when we met particular people I thought it would be worth making some notes, for instance of his discussions with Habermas. I did that after some of my own meetings with people who were less significant, like Gabriel Marcel, who was my neighbour, or Raymond Aron, who I talked to about May 68 right in the middle of the events. But I didn't want to do that sort of thing with Foucault, I didn't want to play the "little lady."[12] And then I began to think about it more after he died, when I became aware once more of the scale of what he had produced. Seeing someone working is one thing, seeing the result is another. The lectures that have been published since—which for the most part I went to—turned out to be real books, with the logic of books—though really I had always known that. I went to Martial Gueroult's lectures at Saint-Cloud: well, a series of Gueroult lectures would not have made a book. In one hour he could hardly get through commenting on three lines of Spinoza, whereas each year Foucault, in thirteen weeks, would take you through the discovery and exploration of a whole new problematic.

In short, I watched Foucault working without trying to understand how he worked. It's only in retrospect that I have been struck by the multiplicity of themes he covered and their secret coherence over time: the return of the same questions at different moments, with the new displacement given to them by each phase of his work. There is a phrase that struck me, I think it's in the first lecture series on the prisons; Foucault says that to have a penitentiary system, you need three things: a repressive state, a repressive society, and a punitive technology. Well, the lecture course of 1971-72, *Penal theories and institutions*, describes the birth of the repressive state; *The Punitive Society* follows the year after (1972-3), and then you have *Discipline and Punish* (1975) with the Panoptic model. So the three required conditions are set out in the first year, as if he already had all the architecture of his project, even while he is still looking for it.... I think there were a certain number of fundamental questions which were posed in the 1950s and which from then on are constantly deepened and shifted, like Wagnerian leitmotifs. I think that this body of work is very tightly focussed on a few major themes, and very coherent, contrary to the perception of it which people often have: I am thinking for instance of the introductory chapter by Gary Gutting.[13]

Philippe Chevallier: People talk too much about "Foucault against Foucault."

DD: I was reading recently the reviews of the new *Pléiade edition*: people always put the emphasis on his work's multiple forms, its breaks, its new beginnings... That's true, but what also strikes me is the rigour that there is in the continuing return and renewal of the same areas of philosophical questioning.

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[12] Maria van Rysselberghe, the confidente of André Gide, was nicknamed "la petite dame," in allusion to her "Notebooks of the petite dame," posthumously published in the *Cahiers André Gide*.

[13] Gary Gutting, "Introduction: Michel Foucault, A User's Manual," in G. Gutting (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

AB: At the same time, he could drop a whole area of work if it no longer mattered for him... And that is after all a striking quality because if you allow yourself to feel completely tied and honour-bound to a previously announced programme of work, you may risk becoming the slave of something you have stopped wanting to do—and stopped for what may well be good reasons...

DD: That isn't quite what I was meaning. It's true that he wasn't faithful to a programme—programmes are for circuses! So when he announces in *La volonté de savoir* a series of works on sexuality, for him the subject is already exhausted even before they have been written. No, what I meant was the recurrence and re-excavation of the same problematics. This is fidelity to oneself, not to a published programme.

AB: Did he write his books by hand or on the typewriter?

DD: By hand. He sometimes rewrote on the typewriter the short pieces or articles he needed to send to people—but the first draft was always thought out and written by hand. I don't think he ever composed anything at all on the typewriter. The articles on Iran were handwritten, but as they were for the Italians,[14] he typed them before sending. One can always recognise his typing. He didn't have anyone to type his texts. Only towards the end, from 1978, there was Françoise-Edmonde Morin who acted as his secretary at the Collège de France. There was so much mail that he couldn't reply, so he gave her the letters and told her roughly how to reply: "say that I am ill"; she could even do a copy of his signature, which I can recognise.... But otherwise, Foucault is someone who did everything himself, by hand. It's hard to imagine... There was no Internet; the citations all had to be checked in the library...

AB: Did he isolate himself physically, to do his writing?

DD: He did his writing at home. He refused invitations to stay in houses of friends that were considered to be quiet places for working. What struck me was that he could always be interrupted. It didn't annoy him. Flaubert said about George Sand that you could interrupt her at any point in her work and she would always start it again in complete continuity, that nothing had ever distracted her from that. Well, if I could risk a daring comparison, I would say it was like that with Foucault. At the same time, I would say he was quite single-minded: if he was following an idea, it would absorb him completely. If I interrupted him, he seemed available to talk about something else. And then, after a moment, I would expressly turn the talk to what I knew was his obsession of the moment, and he didn't see that one had changed the subject, he would go straight back into it. During the whole conversation, in fact, he had been continuing to work on his idea... That was how he could seem so available.

[14] His articles on Iran (1978-1979) were commissioned for the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*.

AB: He didn't lose any time.

DD: He had a sense of time *accurate to the second*. I myself have always been a bit out with my punctuality, and I was so fed up with his sense of exact timing that I gave him a watch that only had the hands, no numbers or divisions by the minute! If I asked him the time he would always say 13:14 or 13:16, never 'about quarter past.' When he got back off a plane flight, from Brazil or Japan, the first thing I would always ask him was 'what's the time?' He was never a minute out... After his death, I couldn't help myself thinking that he had always known his life would be short, because in his daily existence there was never a wasted minute. I never knew anyone who had such an exact sense of time. And yet he was someone who was extraordinarily easy to live with...

AB: Because he was in his work.

DD: Because he was in his work and I didn't disturb him in his work! Yes, I'm sure that was the case... I think he needed a certain affective, exterior stability. But from the moment he had a reasonably secure frame, yes he was in his work.

AB: Without needing to be alone.

DD: No.

AB: He didn't need solitary breaks...

DD: No, he was pretty sociable, but with the same group of friends, like Hervé Guibert or Mathieu Lindon, who didn't ask about his work, and that was what he liked... It was he who asked them about their work rather than the opposite. He helped them to reflect about their own work.

AB: How did he find his way about in his papers? Was he organized or disorganized?

DD: He was certainly organized. He created some disorganization later on: for each book, his notes would range over a considerable number of sources that he used for it. But each time he accumulated a collection of notes and excerpts on a topic, the same documentation could later come to serve another aspect of his research. One set of papers could get taken out of one pile and put in another... Similarly with the lecture series: it wasn't practicable to put the effort he did into his Collège de France courses and then write wholly different sets of lectures for the States. So in this case it has less to do with re-utilisations of the same documents than with different perspectives on the same problem. That is why people are having difficulty now with some of the boxes of archives deposited at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* where the files are not totally

chronological, where the same material reappears in different places, and one doesn't know whether to put things back in their original order, or try to conserve the trace of these creative re-utilisations.

AB: Did Foucault answer the phone when he was working at home?

DD: Yes, but very few people had his real home number. In fact he always had several, but there was just one that he would always answer. There had to be numbers in the phone book, otherwise people would try to find them out... Deleuze always listed his phone number under the name of Fanny, his wife, which gave a little bit of protection. The number which Foucault answered wasn't in the phone book, and when people told me they had his number I would ask them which, because that allowed me to know which circle they belonged to. There needed to be these precautions so that he could continue to work in peace.

AB: But if someone in the 'inner circle' had the right number, was it felt to be OK to interrupt him for a good reason or a good cause, some militant campaign issue for instance?

DD: The inner circle respected his hours. But his flat was literally under siege from phone calls. That was something you can't imagine. Really at one point the phone would ring every ten minutes, sometimes for a petition, a request for support, a book preface, and so on. It was really unbearable, to the extent that at a certain point I began answering callers with the formula: "OK Sir, your call number is 135 and when we get to your turn, we'll call you back!" One day I had in the house a friend who spoke Dutch, and a phone call came from someone in Holland who wanted Foucault to supervise his thesis—now Foucault always refused to supervise theses, but this was after the big success of *The Order of Things,* and Foucault's mounting reputation generated more of these requests. So I asked this student a few questions and then, playing a little trick on him, I said, "I have here the secretary who deals with Dutch theses, I will pass you over to him..." What I didn't anticipate was that this student was at the Sorbonne, and went round telling everyone: "Foucault has got to be incredibly pretentious: he has a different secretary for every language!" He told that to Maurice de Gandillac and that went all the rounds of the Sorbonne! When he got home, Foucault wasn't very pleased with my little joke...

PC: But he could also respond positively to requests from people he didn't know. I am thinking of Jean Danet, who was doing research at the time on rural economic law, in Nantes. He wrote one day to Foucault and Foucault replied saying, come and see me!

DD: But Jean Danet was someone interesting. I always remember the first conversation I listened to between him and Foucault, it caught my attention. It was about the status of norms, not in a moral sense, but in the sense in which, in our societies, the norm more and more replaces law [*droit*] in its traditional fields of application, whether in European law or agricultural law. And if

this was a question of the role of norms in an area that Foucault was just then discovering, that could interest him even more. Conversely, you can see at once when a guy is not interesting, that shows in the kind of questions they ask... I remember a journalist who came to interview him and his opening line was "Monsieur Foucault, I would like to know why so many structuralists are interested in medicine." Foucault pretended to be intrigued by this: "Ah really, so many structuralists are interested in medicine, I didn't know that? Can you name any of them?" "Errm, no, I have to say I can't think of one." "OK Monsieur, in this case our interview is terminated!" The guy must have overheard someone taking about Foucault and medicine... Stupidity is usually easy to detect.

But I think Foucault was highly sensitive to the ethical, and not only to the intellectual quality of people, that is something which always struck me. He didn't only hang out with intellectuals. He was able to hear in other people their human, ethical qualities. He could immediately perceive the level of this kind of sensibility in the other person. He could tell the difference between people who had some business motive for contacting him and people who were looking for discussion. And I think someone like Jean Danet, or someone like the lawyer Christian Revon, wanted a discussion. But you would need to have experienced the tone which some people used to use: "Foucault, this publisher has rejected my manuscript, can you [*tu*] do something about it?" —with the immediate use of the intimate "*tu*" form, and so on.

AB: That was a tone that was typical of the period.

DD: Yes, but not necessarily something very sympathetic... I have deposited in the IMEC archives—a little maliciously—the letters that were sent to Foucault from France and America. At this period Foucault didn't reply to letters any more, it was Françoise-Edmonde Morin who dealt with them. The French letters were invariably requests for some kind of support: requests for help with publishers, with the press, with professors, etc. The American ones were different: they were invitations to take part in debates, to give lectures, etc.

AB: At the same time, when one is very involved in a political field, one can't always easily discriminate between people who have some human quality and those who have less, or none... When you are in politics, you have to engage with people even where there is no natural affinity...

DD: Sure, and it was a period when most relations were political. The salons of that period were the streets, which meant that you didn't necessarily see the same people again, or if you did it was to plan another protest... But that was nothing like the style of sociability of a political party. It's true there was a kind of sociability then which I don't experience today.

AB: A political sociability which has disappeared...

DD: There was friendship, but there was also that kind of aggressiveness linked to some kind of

fantasy: people imagined that Foucault exercised considerable power—I saw this talking with people in my university [*Paris Vincennes*/ *St Denis*] —who thought it would be enough for him to show a manuscript to an editor for it to be published... But Foucault would never have endorsed something which wasn't worth publishing. He would never have said to an editor, "You are to publish this piece because I want you to." If it was no good, he wouldn't do anything. It was when he saw something interesting in a manuscript that he might help to get it published. But people imagined that everything was a matter of desire and power**.** At Vincennes, they still had a pre-Foucauldian notion of power!

The voluntarism of thought

AB: I would like to talk about Foucault's relation to fatigue. Producing a body of work like his must have been tiring, to say the least... Was he a voluntarist about this, did he try to ignore his fatigue or did he manage it in a careful way?

DD: I would find that hard to say. But in fact I think he was not someone who tired easily. At any rate, he showed very little sign of it. When I compiled my chronology for *Dits et Ecrits*, it made me think; "Good grief, he was in Japan the day before, and the next day, or the day after, he gives this lecture in Paris..." I think he was someone who had acquired very early on a great degree of self-mastery. Actually, when he was very ill, I saw traits of character appearing in him which I didn't recognise from before. He had told me about the work of Jackson,[15] the psychologist, who talks about layers of reflexes, where each layer is controlled by another one, with the idea that when some reflexes disappear, other, more archaic ones come to the surface. So I came to imagine that some things which appeared during the course of his illness were maybe archaic elements, and I wondered if he hadn't had to overcome a whole series of more spontaneous reactions which had never been apparent to me before, even a sort of ego that I had never previously seen signs of. I can remember a scene when I brought back from Berkeley the first version of the book by Dreyfus and Rabinow[16]: Dreyfus had written a very Heideggerian commentary on *The Order of Things* and, as they were in disagreement about it, they had given me the text to get Foucault's opinion. Foucault didn't much like reading what people wrote about him—in general, even, he didn't read it at all. So he asked me to tell him a bit of what Dreyfus and Rabinow were saying, and, at various points as I was summarising the book to him, he would comment: "Ah, really, Dreyfus says that, what an interesting Heideggerian critique, etc." and about Rabinow, "this is terribly interesting of course, he tells people what is in my books." But I have to say that ironic sallies like these were exceptional.

AB: Did Foucault have moments when fatigue would slacken or weaken his thinking?

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[15] John Hughlings Jackson (1835-1911), British neurologist.

[16] Hubert L. Dreyfus, and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

DD: He was very voluntarist, and also very polite. Of course when people annoyed him, he made it clear and tended to avoid them subsequently... But in any event, he would never go beyond certain limits—at 10:30pm, he would withdraw. I know that he went through periods of great distress, but he never showed them. There were periods when I didn't come home in a calm frame of mind, because I didn't know if I would find him alive... But for the most of the time, I wasn't aware of these inner conflicts. I only learned about them afterwards, through letters where he would talk about a difficult period he had just been through.

AB: When someone works with such intensity, the body has to keep up. How well did his body keep up with Foucault?

DD: In the first place, he was someone who looked after his body. He took exercise. For instance when he was in Tunisia he swam a lot, practically every day. But even in the last year, when he was very weak, he went—I think this was late April or early May 1984—to Vendeuvre. His nephew Denis wanted to help to get his bag out of the car and was surprised by its weight. Michel said to him, "Ah yes, those are my dumbbells." Meaning that right then he was still exercising with the dumbbells every morning...

AB: That was his exercise: the dumbbells…

DD: And press-ups, for sure.

AB: And walking?

DD: Not regularly. For a long time he travelled about by bike, for instance to go to the *Bibliothèque Nationale* at the rue de Richelieu. When we were in Tunisia we walked quite a lot, but not regularly. You can say that he looked after his body. Otherwise, he didn't drink, and he ate very little. He had a very sober diet, which helped to avoid drowsiness and lethargy... Besides, I believe at midday he didn't eat lunch, or at the *BN* at most he just had a coffee.

AB: I find it hard to understand this sort of split picture of what you describe as a kind of inexhaustible energy, someone which doesn't get tired, is never ill...

DD: He started to get ill in 1982.

AB: But before then, he was never ill... One the one hand, then, this awesome energy which seems to be the trait of someone totally committed to his work, his programme, who doesn't suffer from any particular mood swings: and on the other, what you said just now, "there were times when I wasn't always in a calm frame of mind coming home"... I have trouble making those two parts of the picture fit together... Because he didn't give the impression of being prone to melancholy.

DD: No but he had an immediate relation to death, which was at once permanent and serene. It's hard to talk about all this, for reasons partly of discretion, partly of respect. There were moments when I felt he was at close quarters with death. But it wasn't a sad feeling, even if he was quite sensitive to the aggressiveness—of which there was a lot—the jealousy, the meanness of the intellectual and university milieu. There was the big moment of public recognition after *The Order of Things.* That was a period where we experienced great happiness. There was the success of this book, and he saw my happiness at his success... But that was equally a moment of terrible polemic. He was being constantly attacked. There wasn't an intellectual journal that didn't get involved, and that lasted up to 1968. He couldn't cope with it and he left for Tunisia to get away from that. He didn't want to talk about it. He could have stayed in Paris and gone out to dine every night, but he decided to leave and put up with a difficult life in Tunis. He lived like an ascetic, slept on a tatami under a white vault, below the cemetery of Sidi Bou Said—probably in the Bey's former stables. It was a completely other life. Intellectually he was in a degree of solitude. And when he wrote *The Archaeology of Knowledge* there, a book which is a bit of a pain—a book which I love, but which is really heavy, methodological, severe, difficult, unglamorous—he really seems to be trying to say goodbye to success. When he came back to France, it was for the founding of Vincennes University and to live once again in an extremely polemical environment, between the Communists and the *gauchistes*, with daily battles, open meetings riven with violence... As he had been in the PC,[17] he knew the Communists and knew equally all the people in the psychology department.[18] He knew them both as psychologists and as communists: two good reasons to beware of them! So this founding time at Vincennes was a difficult period. This was this time when we were living in the rue Doctor Finlay and it's true that there, when I came home at night, I was never sure of finding him alive. I have a memory from that period of incredible stress.... but in his lectures of that time, nothing of that is apparent.

AB: In Foucault's public discourse at that time, in his participation in debates, one doesn't feel that fragility, one doesn't have the impression of someone vulnerable, someone who can be hurt by conflict, on the contrary one feels in the presence of someone who even takes a relish in the conflict, who knows how to hold his own.

DD: He knows how to hold his own, but he doesn't enjoy it. He preferred to be liked. Marie-Claude Mauriac,[19] who is the great-niece of Proust, thought there was a great analogy of character between Foucault and Proust, even aside from their medical family background. The scene of the

[17] Foucault was a member of the Communist Party from 1950 until 1952.

[18] The members of the department had been his contemporaries at the l'Institut de psychologie de Paris, where Foucault took his Diploma in Psychopathology in 1952.

[19] The wife of Claude Mauriac, the writer and journalist, Foucault's political ally in several causes.

goodnight kiss,[20] I think that is very fundamental also in the life of Foucault. His mother, who certainly loved him very much, was a rather cold woman and I even found this extraordinary phrase in his journal of the year 68, where he writes that the phase of depression he is going through is linked to his father's death, ten years before.... Now, he never, never talked to me about his father, except at the end of his life, and then in positive terms. His father was a very violent person. The relations between his parents were probably sometimes difficult, hence, I suspect, his horror of conflicts. So when there were conflicts, he endured them, but he protected himself from them very "violently." But not because he liked polemic, but really to keep it at a distance, I think. His father was tormented by anxiety, like a good many surgeons who can only operate by resorting to powerful stimulants. It seems to me a profession which is terribly prone to severe anxiety symptoms. Foucault didn't want to practice it but he makes many allusions to his father when he talks about his relation to writing: the scalpel and the pen, etc.[21]

PC: His writing is very finely chiselled, very carefully worked. Looking in the archives at the early drafts of his texts, one can see what a huge effort of writing and rewriting must have gone into completing the finished work.

AB: That brings us back to the famous theory of the three drafts of each work...[22]

DD: … which could well have been many more, three was the minimum. In fact there is the writing of the book and the writing of the chapter. I think that in the writing of the books there are indeed three main layers, but each part of the book could have been rewritten a great many times. In the first place, he didn't like crossing out. I was struck to find on the reverse of the notes of the lecture courses there were manuscript pages that came from elsewhere, which he had started to cross through and then abandoned because he didn't like to work on a manuscript with erasures. He rewrote everything, rather than have a draft with deletions. His manuscripts are very neat, very tidy. Even with the lectures, one has the impression that it has been written all at once, but very often there are two or even three versions of a lecture.

PC: All this is of course also telling us something about a certain practice of thought...

DD: We need to get back to this question of work. Basically when you see someone working, you don't know how they work. You see them read or write, you don't see them think. So, looking at the reading notes that Foucault was taking when he was looking for the historical point of emergence of a new concept (for example, the modes of empirical description), I imagined he was

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[20] The famous opening scene of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Volume 1: *Swann's Way*.

[21] "I imagine my pen-nib has some inherited vestige of the scalpel," in *Le Beau Danger, Entretien avec Claude Bonnefoy* (Paris: éditions de l'EHESS, 2011), 35.

[22] Daniel Defert, "Je crois au temps… Interview with Guillaume Bellon," *Recto/Verso*, no. 1 (Juin, 2007). Available online at: http://revuerectoverso.com/IMG/pdf/DanielDefert.pdf.

plotting a kind of Gaussian curve showing the appearance and then disappearance of a concept across the history of several disciplines. I imagined Foucault practising a very empirical mode of reading, a sort of statistical survey. But François Ewald convinced me that that wasn't how it happened, that the development of the concept precedes the readings, that everything is constructed beforehand—even if we don't have an explicit trace of this. When Foucault starts to take notes, copies out quotations, things are already constructed. What one is seeing is not a statistical sampling process: he already knows what he is looking for in his corpus, which he must by then have already thoroughly mastered... I can also remember the phrase he liked to use when he was heading off to the the *Bibliothèque Nationale*; "I'm going to check whether people at that date were saying what they should have been saying!" So there is a dimension here in the construction of his thought for which we have no visible trace. In reality, the fragments that we have called Foucault's 'intellectual journal' comprise beginnings of articles, draft plans for a piece of writing: the thought has already been elaborated. But how Foucault got to that point I have no idea. I can bear witness to the quantity of work he put in, talk about his regular habits, but as for saying how the work of thought was performed—on that, I can say nothing.

AB: Was he generally happy with his books when he had finished them and sent them to the publisher, saying, you know, I do think I made a breakthrough there; or was it more a matter of saying, OK, that's not exactly it, but it's time to get it off my hands....?

DD: In any case, whether he was happy or not, the next day he would already have started the next book, which was the critique of the one he had just finished....

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