

Introduction: Literature and Art as Diagnosis and Dissent in the Work of Michel Foucault

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In an interview on *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault identifies a key feature of his own method: namely that of taking up “Don Quixote, Descartes and a decree by Pomponne de Bellièvre about houses of internment in the same stroke” ([1966]1998e: 262). He goes on to say that he is concerned with all that “contains thought in a culture”, be it in philosophy, or a novel, in jurisprudence, in an administrative system, or in a prison (p. 267).

The apparently disparate themes that characterise Foucault’s work emerge partly as a matter of his choice of fields of evidence or reference, which consists not exclusively or even predominantly of established and authoritative scientific, theoretical, or historical literature. The wide range of material and subject matter that engages Foucault’s attention encompasses, for example, botanical gardens, the inscrutable orderings of species in Borges’s Chinese encyclopaedia, agendas relating to executions, the daily regimens of prison and of plague towns. But, importantly, within and between these disparate elements, Foucault uncovers discursive orders and epistemic configurations that govern knowledge systems, practices, and institutions. He writes the history of events as they appear and disappear within these systems, as they become ordered and as they lose their place within the orders that once held them together.

That his investigations do not present a casual stroll through the botanical gardens of discourses, becomes clear when we look at Foucault’s methodological elaborations that explicitly attempt to find the thresholds of discourses that define them, their objects, their domains of application, and most importantly for Foucault, their limits. Displacement, discontinuity, transformation, and transgression, are concepts central to Foucault’s work. They attain their meanings from the exploration of the limits of discourses. It is only in paying careful attention to the threshold positions and the great aesthetic works that so often exemplify them most vividly, that it is possible to uncover both the emergence and the obsolescence of discourses. This is why, most noticeably in Foucault’s archaeological writings, references to works of art, and literature are never far off.

A closer examination of the role of these texts reveals their conceptual and analytic significance. They are not merely fortuitous or decorative references; nor are they deployed illustratively in terms of their contents or their capacity to articulate moral or social criticism. Literature and art

occupy a privileged position in Foucault's work as a result of their capacity to establish both systematic and symptomatic links between knowledge and art.

Attempting to categorise the ways in which Foucault engages with art, literature and music is no easy task, one which cannot hope to adequately describe the extraordinary range or depth of his work with and about literature. However, we suggest here that Foucault values aesthetic work, firstly, because of what we have called its diagnostic power; and secondly, for its capacity not just to argue for, but to instantiate dissent or radical critique.

The first or diagnostic role is best illustrated in "The Order of Things" ([1966]1998e), a role which we hope to show is integral to the archaeological enterprise itself. In this diagnostic role artworks can elucidate the paradigmatic organisation of discourses and *epistemes*. It is this role that three key threshold texts ("texts" in the broader sense) assume in Foucault's "Archaeology of the Human Sciences" – Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, and the writings of the Marquis de Sade. But more importantly, in their exemplary status, these texts reveal not that which is at the heart of each *episteme*, but the cracks, instabilities, and tectonic shifts within and between them – in the periods between the Renaissance, the Classical Age, and Modernity, – exposing their limits and transformations.

Foucault treats Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas*, and the works of the Marquis de Sade, as capturing what is essential in both the *episteme* that precedes and follows them simultaneously. *Don Quixote* instantiates one epistemic configuration, that of Renaissance resemblance and analogy, in the first half of the text and another, that of representation in the *âge classique*, in the second. At the same time, *Don Quixote* is, according to Foucault, the first modern work of literature because in it, language breaks off its "old kinship with things and enters into that lonely sovereignty from which it will reappear, in its separated state, only as literature"([1966]1970: 49).

For Foucault, the epistemic significance of de Sade lies in the extent to which his work marks both the end and continued reign of representational discourse. This inexhaustible body of works manifests a precarious balance between sexuality as something like a will or force arising in modern experience, which is yet subject to the "meticulous ordering of discursive representation" (Foucault [1966]1970: 209). In the writings of de Sade, the design of the text, and the subject matter itself, that of desire emerging as sexuality, is, as it were, captured on the level of the form or style of one epistemic configuration – that of representation – and the content of another – that of the modern *episteme*. De Sade's characters embody the "violence

of desire battering at the limits of representation” (Foucault [1966]1970: 210). Yet the form of this battering is still dominated by the order of classical discourse, in a “glittering table of representation” (p. 210).

Libertinage is, for Foucault, the last instance in the Western world of one who “while yielding to all the fantasies of desire and to each of its furies, can, but also must, illuminate their slightest movement with a lucid and deliberately elucidated representation” ([1966]1970: 209). De Sade is the frontier man precisely because of his simultaneous embodiment of and resistance to, representation (Foucault [1966]1970: 211).

But more than elucidating the limits and transformation of *epistemes*, these threshold texts figure a role for literature that it only comes to fully occupy within aesthetic modernism. It is within aesthetic modernism that the second category of the role accorded by Foucault to literature and art unfolds. The second category of the role of art, literature, and music in Foucault’s work is presented in some twenty, mostly shorter, essays or interviews mostly from the 1960s, now collected in the second volume of *Essential Works of Michel Foucault* entitled *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, edited by James D. Faubion. In the essays collected in this volume, Foucault devotes attention to texts that display a diagnostic capacity similar to that of the texts highlighted in *The Order of Things*. But an additional dimension comes to the fore in these essays on selected texts of aesthetic modernism: it is their capacity not just to transgress prevailing orders of knowledge and discourse, but to embody dissent – particularly on the level of form – that Foucault most admires.

Three articles in this edition examine the aspect of Foucault’s work on art and literature that we have called diagnostic. But they do so in significantly different ways.

Two articles concern themselves with Foucault’s renowned analysis, in *The Order of Things*, of Velázquez’s painting *Las Meninas*. Yvette Greslé points to Foucault’s reading of the painting, drawing out its diagnostic capacity in relation to the classical *episteme*. At the same time, she demonstrates its novelty in comparing it to key art-historical writings ranging from those of more conservative art historian Kenneth Clark to those of the “new art history”, itself drawing from theoretical developments centred on the work of Barthes, Derrida and Foucault. Her article pays particular attention to an essay by Svetlana Alpers, herself an important new art historian. Sira Dambe’s article, on the other hand, discusses Foucault’s reading of the work in terms of its capacity to both elucidate and undo the principles of the classical *episteme*. She raises the issue of the fractured presence/absence of sovereign power in Velázquez’s painting, which informs Foucault’s problematics of power, otherwise widely believed to be

absent from Foucault's archaeology of the human sciences, and perhaps from all his archaeological work.

While setting the scene for a representation of classical representation, Velázquez's famous painting in fact presents the impossibility of representation, signalled by the absent presence played out in the relationship between the King and the artist. In a further displacement, Dambe argues, the artist looks at himself through the lens of the viewer, turning the artist into his own onlooker, who likewise turns out to be an absent subject held only in the gaze of some of the figures in the paintings, foreshadowing the disappearance of the figure of man from the order of knowledge in modernity.

Susan van Zyl's paper also engages with the diagnostic role of art and literature in Foucault's work in analysing the late work of Foucault through the story of Budlender, demographer, statistician, "homo calculator", protagonist of "Villa Toscana" in Ivan Vladislavić's novel *The Exploded View* (2004). In a reverse move from the traditional literary-critical practice that "applies" concepts drawn from theory to literary texts, van Zyl, in a way reminiscent of Foucault himself, instantiates the literary text to elucidate theoretical work. The theoretical work in this case concerns the distinction between modes of fashioning subjectivity – between an individualising technology of the self, and a political technology of individuals. In confounding this distinction, Vladislavić's text disconcertingly confronts the inability, at the level of the subject, to correlate a heightened individualism with totalising bio-political policies. While the demand for this correlation is gaining increasing purchase in contemporary political rationality, this correlation, she argues, founders on the disjunction between the ethical injunction to self-government, and the political government of subjects.

The second role that we identify for the aesthetic in Foucault's work – that of dissent – concerns the relation between writing (or signification) and knowledge, as an extension of the diagnostic relation of art to the orders of knowledge. The relationship between writing and knowledge assumes a privileged place, one that will, in aesthetic modernity, rupture that relation itself in embodying it in its pure form – as radical critique.

In a short interview entitled, in translation, "A Swimmer between Two Words" ([1966]1998d), addressed to the question of what André Breton and surrealism mean to the philosophy of the 60s, Foucault attributes the significance of Breton to the fact that he established "clear communication between two figures which had long been estranged, writing and knowledge" (Foucault [1966]1998d: 172).

This intermingling of writing and knowledge is a distinctive aspect of French thought of the period. Literary critics and theorists would perhaps

associate its first expression with Roland Barthes's groundbreaking early work *Critique et vérité* (1966) which fundamentally challenges the division of roles assigned to literary critics or historians on the one hand, and creative writers on the other: not only were increasing numbers of writers working in both arenas, but more importantly, both categories of writing were displaying an awareness of discourse – which suggests that there should be anything but writing.

Foucault's work on Literature, too, is the product of that intermingling of writing and knowledge. Literature and art are valued not merely for the uses offered by their contents, or the functions assigned to them, of offering moral or social lessons or criticism; more importantly, they instantiate radically alternative forms of writing – those that escape the grips of discourse and representation. The hope that Foucault holds out for Literature could be said to mark one of its finest hours.

As we have indicated, Foucault arrives at this transgressive role for Literature from two angles: that of Literature's relation to discourse, and that of Literature's location in and emergence from modernity. Foucault's archaeologies themselves are testimony to two ways in which signifying systems may be expressed: the first one, discourse, is for him the object of theorisation; and the second one might be called language itself, or "pure language", which holds the capacity for radical critique.

A good starting point for coming to grips with Foucault's ambivalent relation to discourse could be his inaugural lecture presented at the Collège de France in 1970, translated as *The Order of Discourse* ([1970]1981: 48). In this lecture, Foucault identifies the ways in which discourse is constrained and controlled; in spelling this out, he also indicates what it would take to exceed or transcend the constraints incurred in the very process of its ordering. For Foucault, discourse becomes ordered by forces both internal and external to itself. It must be "controlled, selected and organized" by a number of procedures to ward off its powers and its dangers, in order to gain mastery over its "ponderous, formidable materiality" ([1970]1981: 52).

In the main body of the lecture, Foucault gives us a map of exactly how discourses are constrained by both the (exterior) principles of exclusion (prohibition, division and rejection, and the will to truth) and (interior) principles of inclusion (commentary, the author and the disciplines), as well as by the category neither interior nor exterior (those qualified to speak), which produces and controls discourse. Discourse then is the result of a set of operations which limits or closes down the open-ended meanings or forms that signifying material practices could produce.

So from the start, Foucault has been intimately engaged with discourses, and with the questions of how they work, how they are regulated, and how

they are produced by power. As a result of this understanding of discourse's connection with or answerability to power, Foucault upholds the notion that in a different context, the material of discourse could function outside of and beyond these constraints and controls, to provide sites for radical dissent and critique.

To express it in terms that Foucault himself would no doubt not be happy with, there is the ideological version of regulated language and representation for sure, but there is also something else. And it is this mysterious something else that he finds primarily in modernist works of art, literature and music, which engages him unreservedly.

To locate the possibilities of Writing over discourse historically, we can once again turn to Foucault's 1966 interview on André Breton and surrealism ("A Swimmer between Two Words"). Here Foucault locates the place of Literature historically, and looks for the conditions of possibility of language as Writing in an epistemic shift. What makes Writing possible and valued is the possibility of a radical break with language as "mere" representation, or with what it names. In this essay, Foucault argues that up to the end of the nineteenth century [in other archaeological writings, we would find him locating this break at the beginning of the nineteenth century], language and writing were "transparent instruments in which the world was reflected, decomposed and recomposed: in any case writing and discourse formed part of the world" ([1966]1998d: 173).

In his groundbreaking essay "The Thought of the Outside" ([1966]1998c), Foucault elaborates his understanding of the changing role of language in even more explicit terms. The capacity for language to emerge as Literature arises with a change in the status of language, within an order of knowledge in the nineteenth century. Language no longer acts in the form of representation dominated by the signified, but instead appears as a "leave-taking from what it names" (Foucault [1966]1998b: 151). In the process, language begins to exist in an alternative form: that of the logic of the signifier, of the material properties that are ignored or left behind when its dominant function is that of transparent representation. Literature emerges as a form of writing which no longer belongs to the "order of discourse" and becomes the manifestation of language "in its thickness" (Foucault [1966]1998e: 265).

The manifestation of language at a privileged site of Literature and Writing, is widely associated with Mallarmé. As Blanchot points out in his essay entitled "Mallarmé and Literary Space", this mode of language is only possible where words do not "have to indicate objects or speak in somebody's name, but are their own end" (1982: 113-114).

This is where Foucault's third group of texts is located, those which, as Ulrike Kistner argues in her article on Foucault's Hölderlin, can no longer,

strictly speaking, be termed “threshold texts” – namely those of Hölderlin, Nerval, Nietzsche, Artaud, and Mallarmé.

The writings of de Sade and those of Hölderlin both emerge from the evanescence of the gods attendant on the dispersal of the classical unity representation, precipitating empty profanations that “no longer [recognize] any meaning in the sacred”.

It can be said without extending the point too far that Sade and Hölderlin simultaneously introduce into our thinking “the experience of the outside” – the former by laying desire bare in the infinite murmur of discourse, the latter by discovering that the gods had wandered off through a rift in language as it was in the process of losing its bearings.

(Foucault [1966]1998c: 150)

While Foucault recognises the same conditions for their “experience of the outside”, he assesses their work differently. De Sade’s writings contain the form of desire in the mode of the tableaux of the *âge classique*, and thereby hand it over, as it were, to disciplinary regimes. Hölderlin’s writing, in contrast, as the article by Ulrike Kistner demonstrates, derives from the *aphanisis* of the gods. His poetry constitutes a form of writing that can sustain a dialogue with madness, as a matter of the split of language with itself, and its consequent dispersal.

The writings of Hölderlin, Nerval, Nietzsche, and Artaud are located in the division of the great divide, instituted in the *âge classique*, between reason and madness. Their writings work to install the psychoanalytically defined symptom at the heart of writing itself. Writing in modernity emulates the psychoanalytic symptom, in inserting itself between things and representations, interrupting their relationship from within.

This mode of writing can arise in the modern *episteme* only because of and with a change in the status of language. Language loses its role as anchor of representation and as object of knowledge, and attains its own mode of being in forms of intransitive writing. Foucault finds in these texts traces of an understanding of language that is not revelatory of truth, and does not sustain forms of regulation; he finds in the poetic language of aesthetic modernism the possibility of “finally liberating our language”, suggesting a peculiar capacity of art to think – where it does not “express” itself as thought.

Today’s task would then be to direct our “attention to this non-discursive language, this language which, for almost two centuries, has stubbornly maintained its disruptive existence in our culture” (Foucault [1963]1998a: 76).

The power of language that Foucault evokes – not as representation or as truth, but as “naked experience” – poses a threat to the “self-evidence of the

I think” and with it, to the entire philosophic tradition based upon a phenomenological understanding of the subject. The poetic language that Foucault celebrates in what we have identified as the third group of texts severs the thread that ties it to the subject.

Foucault opens one of his most widely quoted essays “What is an Author?” (1969) acknowledging the significance of Beckett’s question: “‘What does it matter who is speaking’, someone said, ‘what does it matter who is speaking?’” (Foucault [1969]1998: 205). Foucault’s engagement with questions of literature is associated with the implicit critique of what we would now call “identity” or “self”-writing, and the notion of language as personal “expression” that goes with it (see Gutting 2005: 14). Writing, he claims, is one of the sites where the self is lost.

With the currently widespread valorisation of the individual voice, to which questions of agency seem intimately connected, advocating the idea of the “death of the author” and the disappearance of the speaking subject seems almost suspect. Yet for Foucault, indifference to who is speaking is one of the fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing (*écriture*) ([1969]1998f: 206). In a world where one is “thrifty with both resources and riches, but also with discourses and significations” ([1969]1998f: 221), the author is an ideological product, a figure “by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” ([1969]1998f: 222). Extolling the author as a genius is a trick, because in reality the author functions in exactly the opposite way – as a principle of constraint which limits and controls those polysemous texts which Foucault hopes will one day no longer function under authorial control.

In expunging content, subjectivity, and discourse from modernist writing, Foucault, in the fashion of the third group of texts cited by him in *The Order of Things* (certainly those of Hölderlin and Mallarmé), became fundamentally preoccupied with questions of the formal a priori. In this quest, drawn out systematically in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), he was inspired by the radical formalism of the music and the mathematical-musicological conceptualisations of Pierre Boulez, in so far as they were inassimilable to discourse. As Mary Rörich argues in her article “Passing through the Screen: Pierre Boulez and Michel Foucault”, Foucault celebrated Boulez’s formalism as the relocation of the possibility of thought. Rörich discovers an atonal logic in Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge*, in its foregrounding of the statement modelled on the series, and its realisation of a “diagonal function”.

This stance, considered more widely, has variously earned Foucault the epithet of formalist (which he did not reject) or “structuralism” (which he did reject). While Foucault unabashedly upheld his preoccupation with the formal as a matter of his allegiance and affinity with aesthetic modernism,

happily “deserted by discourse”, he emphatically rejects structuralism’s transcendentalist gestures (Blanchot 1987: 71).

But whatever his relation to structuralism, there is no doubt that Foucault seeks to find, be it in theoretical positions or literary works, signs of the emergence of a new (or at least different) relationship to authorship

In an essay on the work of Jules Verne entitled “Behind the Fable” ([1966]1998b), Foucault values Verne’s work because it embodies an unusual and destabilising practice of both authorial voice and voice with texts. Much of the essay is devoted to identifying and classifying the voices behind the fable that Foucault sees jostling with each other in their attempt to recount the content of the work. What Foucault admires is the presence of countless unindividuated, singular and talkative spirits that introduce into the narrative a set of changes and redirections that drive the plot continually off course. In their propensity to disrupt knowledge and the fable, Foucault finds in Verne’s “games of fiction” rejoinders with the role of language in aesthetic modernism. It is a use of language that does not emanate from a speaking subject; nor is it directed to a single reader, but instead locates its truth in a multiplicity of unrelated, unowned, unauthored words.

Narrative discontinuities in Verne’s novels are layered in accordance with what Foucault terms degrees of exteriority. Behind the main characters, we have voices that distract the main character, that refer to other works, that contest the narrative itself, pointing to its improbabilities and to the problems that it must itself resolve. But what interests Foucault most, is the deepest layer, the most exterior voice, that of scientific or technical discourse. The “anonymous immigrant” discourses are, he says, located furthest behind the fable. The inability to appropriate that voice, the presence of eruptive autonomous murmurs and fragments, seems to account for the fact that in Jules Verne’s works, the scientist is on the fringe, a pure intermediary, a person characterised by more than the proverbial distractedness of the scientist ([1966]1998b: 141-142). It is this smooth sheet of discourse without a speaking subject that engages Foucault most strongly.

Foucault’s preoccupation, but, crucially, often in negative terms, with traditional understandings of authorship, identity and self-expression, could be seen as forming the background to Anthea Garman’s paper which analyses Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull* in the light of Foucault’s work on confession and the role of the public intellectual. On the level of method, Garman’s article relates to what we have described as the diagnostic aspect of the relationship between literature and knowledge. On the level of content, Garman draws on Foucault’s reflections on technologies of the self to suggest that the revitalisation of confession represented by the worldwide emergence of truth commissions and the associated public acclaim for Krog as “confessing intellectual” should not be approached uncritically.

But, finally, to return to the central questions and preoccupations of this edition: what kind of attention ought Foucault's work on the aesthetic receive? Foucault's writings on art, literature, and music have traditionally been assigned to a definite time period. From the second half of the 1960s, one of his biographers, David Macey, notes Foucault was "writing much less on literary issues and concentrating more and more on historical and philosophical topics", the literary references in *The Order of Things* notwithstanding (Macey 1993: 181). He concludes the chapter on this "phase" of Foucault's intellectual concerns with the observation that "his passion for modernist literature never again reached the peak it had between 1962 and 1966" (Macey 1993: 181). Foucault himself retrospectively called "all that relentless theorisation of writing we saw in the 1960s" a "swan song" (Macey 1993: 182). His biographer is then (perhaps with his subject) tempted to see the emergence of the politicised Foucault with the metamorphosis of the literary Foucault (Macey 1993: 182).

To dispel the notion that the important role that literature, art and music played in Foucault's work is confined to a specific part of his career, that of the nineteen sixties, it is instructive to look at one of his last, some might say one of his most interesting, shorter essays entitled "What Is Enlightenment?", written in 1984. Here Foucault refers to the Enlightenment as an attitude to modernity, and chooses, after due acknowledgement to Kant, to give much of the credit to Baudelaire. The attitude of modernity, Foucault argues with Baudelaire, is characterised by the attribution of high value to the present as indissociable from "a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying but by grasping it in what it is" (Foucault [1984]2003: 50). Baudelairian modernity is thus "an exercise in which extreme attention to what is real is confronted with a practice of a liberty that simultaneously respects this reality and violates it" (Foucault [1984]2003: 50).

In a manner different from the concern with "identity" tied to "personal expression", (or confession for that matter) Foucault describes modern man, with Baudelaire, not as one who sets out "to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth"; on the contrary, "he is the man who tries to invent himself". Modernity does not "liberate man in his own being; it compels him to face the task of producing itself". The point is not only that Foucault chooses Baudelaire, the poet, to act as his example, to act as the embodiment of a particular attitude to modernity. Rather, as he says, this "transfiguring play of freedom with reality, this aesthetic elaboration of the self" does not belong in society itself or the body politic, but can only be produced in that other, "different place, which Baudelaire calls art" (Foucault [1984]2003: 51).

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