

Passing through the Screen: Pierre Boulez and Michel Foucault¹

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Summary

In this paper I examine Foucault's little essay, "Pierre Boulez: Passing through the Screen", in which he looks back from the vantage point of the 1980s at Boulez's music of the 1950s and his contribution to the project of aesthetic modernism. Before making a fairly detailed reading of the paper, I examine Boulez's role in the twentieth-century serial tradition inaugurated by Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern. Foucault's reading of Boulez focuses initially on the composer's radical break with the past; I suggest that Foucault was in a certain sense talking about his own break with a philosophical tradition founded in experience and conventional meaning. Boulez's experiment in the scientific and formal, I continue, had much in common with the methodologies from the history of science that were to become central to Foucault's thinking. Departing briefly from Foucault's essay, I argue that Gilles Deleuze fully understood why Foucault considered the project of serial music an important model; in fact Deleuze's notion of an "atonal logic" shows how the bodies of statements (*énoncé*) in different *epistemes* have the same relationship to each other as do different manifestations of the series in a serial composition. Returning to Foucault's commentary on Boulez, I briefly examine important settings of Char and Mallarmé, showing how they share features of a Foucauldian analysis: conjunctions between words, image and music are never subordinated to conventional meaning but are "justified only by the new necessity they have established". Finally I look at Boulez as a conductor and interpreter who approaches the past in music with a belief that what he is doing in the present can change it; again the project seems Foucauldian. In conclusion I reflect that both Boulez and Foucault were similarly and at the same time creative and analytical in their work, able always to use thought in order to be able to think differently.

Opsomming

In hierdie referaat ondersoek ek Foucault se klein essay "Pierre Boulez: Passing through the Screen", waarin hy terugskouend uit 'n tagtigeroogpunt na Boulez se musiek van die vyftigerjare en sy bydrae tot die projek van estetiese modernisme kyk. Voordat ek 'n taamlik deeglike lesing van die essay doen, ondersoek ek Boulez se rol in die twintigste-eeuse seriële musiektradisie wat deur Arnold Schoenberg en Anton Webern ingelui is. Foucault se lesing van Boulez fokus aanvanklik op die komponis se radikale wegbreking van die verlede; ek voer aan dat Foucault hier in 'n sekere sin verwys na sy eie wegbreking van 'n filosofiese tradisie wat gegrond was

1. My thanks to Peter Delaporte for the many hours spent talking about aesthetic modernism and the respective projects of Boulez and Foucault. This paper could not have been written without his many insights and suggestions.

in ervaring en konvensionele betekenis. Voorts voer ek aan dat Boulez se eksperiment in die wetenskaplike en formele heelwat gemeen gehad het met die metodologieë uit die geskiedenis van die wetenskap, wat later die kern van Foucault se denkwyse sou vorm. Ek dwaal kortliks af van Foucault se essay wanneer ek aanvoer dat Gilles Deleuze ten volle begryp het waarom Foucault die projek van seriële musiek as belangrike model beskou het; trouens, Deleuze se opvatting van 'n "atonale logika" toon aan hoe die groepe stellings (*énoncé*) in verskillende *episteme* in dieselfde verhouding tot mekaar staan as verskillende manifestasies van die series in 'n seriële komposisie. Wanneer ek terugkeer na Foucault se kommentaar oor Boulez, ondersoek ek kortliks belangrike toonsettings van Char en Mallarmé en toon ek aan hoe hulle sekere kenmerke van 'n Foucauldiaanse analise deel: verbindings tussen woorde, beeld en musiek word nooit ondergeskik gestel aan konvensionele betekenis nie maar word "slegs geregverdig deur die nuwe noodwendigheid wat hulle daargestel het". Vervolgens kyk ek na Boulez as dirigent en vertolker wat die verlede in die musiek benader in die mening dat wat hy in die hede doen dié verlede kan verander; die projek lyk nogmaals Foucauldiaans. Ten slotte besin ek oor die feit dat sowel Boulez as Foucault ewe en terselfdertyd skeppend en analities was in hulle werk, wat hulle telkens in staat gestel het om denke aan te wend om anders te kon dink.

1 Introduction

In an interview with Paolo Caruso in 1967, Michel Foucault remarked that becoming acquainted with the music of Pierre Boulez and Jean Barraqué in Paris in the early 1950s had as much impact on him as his discovery of Nietzsche (Macey 1993: 53). This may seem to be an exaggeration: the influence of Nietzsche is everywhere present in Foucault and frequently talked about; neither Boulez nor music features in any obvious way in his oeuvre and, aside from the odd anecdotal reference, it is left to Gilles Deleuze to unpack what Foucault might perhaps have meant by this extraordinary statement. That said, the two occasional pieces (written in the early 1980s and thus long after the majority of his aesthetic writings) in which Foucault talks about Boulez and the project of the French avant-garde, speak of his deep admiration for a musician who was uncompromising in his search for the new. In the first, titled "The Imagination of the Nineteenth Century", Foucault discusses Boulez as an interpreter of Wagner's *Ring* cycle; in the second, "Pierre Boulez, Passing through the Screen", he examines what is generally considered the composer's most prolific and significant creative phase, in the decade-and-a-half following the Second World War. Foucault seems, in his reflections, to be reminded of his own career as a young intellectual, and to be suggesting that Boulez gave him the courage to make his own radical move away from the phenomenological philosophical tradition that prevailed in France at the time.

This paper is based on a reading of and elaboration on “Pierre Boulez: Passing through the Screen”; reference is also made to “The Imagination of the Nineteenth Century” so as to assimilate Boulez as conductor and interpreter to his position as avant-garde composer. It begins with a brief section documenting the relationship between Foucault and Boulez. It then sets out the context within which Boulez advanced the project of aesthetic modernism in music, as well as what was at stake in this project. Foucault’s reading of Boulez’s formalism (and formalism in general) is the subject of a subsequent section and reveals that Foucault is also reflecting on his own intellectual position in the 1950s and 1960s. This section is thus a commentary on the ways in which Foucault himself is inscribed in his thinking and writing about the composer. Deleuze’s fascinating refraction of Foucault’s concept of the “statement” (*énoncé*) back onto the Boulezian notion of a “polyphony of polyphonies” is the subject of a subsequent discussion. Boulez’s setting of avant-garde French texts, particularly the poems of Char and Mallarmé, forms the next discursive node in the paper, and of course provokes discussion of the Mallarméan project not only in Boulezian but also in Foucauldian terms. A shorter section reflects on Boulez’s career as an interpreter and conductor as a kind of Foucauldian archaeological enterprise. In conclusion it is asserted that the two figures represent comparable positions in relation to twentieth-century thought and practice.

2 Foucault and Boulez: 1951–1983

Foucault met Boulez (b. 1925) in Paris in 1951, where the latter (although only in his mid-twenties) was already recognised as the most important force in contemporary French music. Foucault never got to know Boulez well, but he continued to follow his progress with interest. It was also in the circle around Boulez, incidentally, that Foucault met the young composer Jean Barraqué, with whom he engaged in a “passionately stormy affair” for two or three years during the later 1950s (Macey 1993: 31).

Further meetings between Boulez and Foucault may have taken place during the time of the “Croissant affair”. In the autumn of 1977 both men signed a petition protesting the refusal of the French government to give political asylum to Klaus Croissant, one of the principal defence lawyers in West Germany of members of the *Rote Armee Fraktion*, better known as the “Baader-Meinhof Gang”. Foucault was far more active in his public engagement with the event than Boulez, and was injured by riot police forming part of a “symbolic human chain” outside the Santé Prison the night that Croissant was to be turned over to German custody. This was by no

means the end of his involvement (Macey 1993: 392-396). Boulez and Foucault had also met on several occasions during the previous year, when Foucault proposed Boulez for election to the Collège de France, apparently much to the latter's surprise (p. 398). A few years later Boulez invited Foucault (and also Gilles Deleuze and Roland Barthes) to take part in a public debate at the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM), of which he was founder and director. Foucault apparently said little, preferring to answer questions; however, he did note that the Parisian intelligentsia, his colleagues and students included, rarely took any interest in contemporary music, suggesting a puzzling "anomaly between their philosophical and musical tastes" (p. 399). In 1983, Boulez invited Foucault to revisit this conversation, and this version has been published.² Foucault also became an avid fan of Boulez's reading of Wagner's *Ring* cycle, made famous in the 1976 Bayreuth centenary production of Patrice Chéreau and available on recording and video after the six-year cycle of the production.

3 Pierre Boulez and Aesthetic Modernism

Boulez has, throughout his long and in many ways surprising career, played an extremely significant role in French musical culture. From the late 1940s to the early 1960s, he was known primarily as a composer of avant-garde music. Although he continued to compose, he subsequently also engaged in an international career as a conductor, becoming the most influential post-War French performer of not only the twentieth-century, but later, perhaps surprisingly, also the nineteenth-century musical repertoire. Between 1976 and 1992 he conceptualised and directed the most sophisticated experiment in the institutionalisation of the modernist musical project in the world, namely the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM). At the Institute, lavishly housed in the Georges Pompidou Centre, contemporary musical composition and performance is put into contact with the most sophisticated technological means, cementing the relationship between art and science inaugurated by modernism. It is thus home not only to musicians but to teams of computer scientists and researchers along the full continuum of the sonic arts.

Boulez is, however, still remembered chiefly for his public and irrevocable break with the established language of Western music. He was

2. See Michel Foucault and Pierre Boulez, "La Musique contemporaine et le public", *CNAC Magazine* 15, May-June 1983, 1.10; in translation in *Perspectives of New Music* (see References).

determined to find a way of ordering the materials of sound that cut away from established procedure and conventional meaning, and he felt impelled to resist the pressures of memory and history: “It is not enough to deface the Mona Lisa because that does not kill the Mona Lisa The more I grow the more I detach myself from other composers, not only from the distant past but also from the recent past and even from the present” (Boulez quoted by Peyser 1976: 20).³ Reflecting on his early creative ventures, the composer later remarked: “[I]t was like Descartes’s *Cogito, ergo sum*. I momentarily suppressed inheritance. I started off from the fact that I was thinking, and went on to see how one might construct a musical language from scratch” (Boulez quoted in Heyworth 1986: 13).

Although Boulez liked to present himself as standing alone, the sole instigator of a completely new musical language, he did of course have precursors. The composers of the Second Viennese School – Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg and Anton Webern – inaugurated the modernist project in music in the early decades of the century by dislodging the privileges of tonality within the traditional Western chromatic scale. The tonal system, which has underpinned Western classical music since the late Renaissance, is based on a hierarchical seven-note scale through which relationships of tension and release can be expressed at the micro and the macro level, thus guaranteeing formal coherence. It was the dominance of these relationships and the way they had become the vehicle for content – the thematic, the representational, the sensuous and the expressive – against which Schoenberg rebelled.

After experimenting with a language intended to “emancipate the dissonance” and reinvest the established language with meaning, Schoenberg later devised an apparently arbitrary (in terms of the “natural” properties of pitch) and formalist way of ordering and equalising the intervallic content of a composition. According to his celebrated “Twelve-

3. Boulez’s aggressive relation to history is further borne out by statements such as the following:

The strongest civilizations are those without memory – those capable of complete forgetfulness. They are strong enough to destroy because they know they can replace what is destroyed. Today our musical civilization is not strong; it shows clear signs of withering.

(Boulez quoted by Peyser 1976: 19)

The more I grow the more I detach myself from other composers, not only from the distant past but also from the recent past and even from the present (ibid.).

I shall be the first composer in history not to have a biography (ibid.).

Tone Method”, the twelve notes of the chromatic scale could be arranged in any order, provided each kept its original place in subsequent statements, so as to preserve its equality; in addition, this row could be stated in its original form, its inversion, its retrograde and its retrograde inversion.⁴

The pitch content of these twelve-tone or “serial” pieces was thus constructed according to a variety of precompositionally determined mathematical permutations which theoretically ensured not only pitch equivalence but a change in overall architectural conception, from one of teleology and dialectic to one of perpetual variation. To use Ernst Krenek’s analogy, in serial music the surface becomes less like the narrative event of a thunderstorm and more like the contemplation of a part of the starry night sky.⁵

In fact, Schoenberg and Berg remained psychologically and structurally bound by the thinking of tonal music, despite their revolutionary treatment of pitch.⁶ It was Anton Webern who moved truly into the serial realm, in which the event of the row (often reduced to its greatest abstraction and its least point of identity) becomes the generator of a network of relationships, displayed through elliptic and extraordinary dispensations across vividly

4. On announcing his invention, Arnold Schoenberg wrote triumphantly: “I have discovered something that will assure supremacy for German music for the next hundred years” (quoted by Austin 1966: 294-295).

5. Ernst Krenek was a student of Schoenberg’s in Germany and later America, and himself initially a serial composer and theorist.

6. Boulez’s essay “Schoenberg is Dead”, written after the composer’s death in 1951, was received with outrage; however it is correct in its analysis of Schoenberg’s method as being still tied to tonal habits and structures:

Moreover, the confusion between theme and series in Schoenberg’s serial works is sufficiently expressive of his inability to envisage the world of sound brought into being by serialism. For him dodecaphony is nothing more than a rigorous means for controlling chromaticism; beyond its role as regulator, the serial phenomenon passed largely unnoticed by Schoenberg.

What then was his main ambition once a chromatic synthesis – or safety net – had been established by serialism? To create works of the same nature as those of the old sound-world which he had only just abandoned, works in which the new technique would “prove itself”. But how could the new technique be properly tested if one took now trouble to find specifically serial structures? And by structure I mean everything from the generating of the component materials right up to the global architecture of the work. In a word, Schoenberg never concerned himself with the logical connection between serial forms as such and derived structure.

(Boulez [1952]1991: 212)

distinctive instrumental and dynamic ranges. Thus, admittedly via an abstract assimilation of the forms of the pre-high-tonal polyphonists of the late Renaissance, Webern shows how the serial (diagonal) function poses radical structuring and morphological possibilities.

It was at this point, and inspired by Webern's tiny opus (his entire oeuvre is recorded on only four CDs), that the architects of high modernism in the Second World War period (Stockhausen and Kagel in Germany, Boulez in France, Nono and Berio in Italy), expanded the serial idea. Such serial operations as Schoenberg, Berg and Webern had exercised on melody, harmony and polyphony (all dimensions of pitch) were now applied also to rhythm and the full range of secondary musical parameters (dynamics, attack, texture), and even groups of notes and sections, tempo, spatial relationships, noise and so on. The great works of the 1950s are empirical explorations of the serial idea, despite their "theoretical" character. Not unlike Foucault's interviews and forays into journalism, they are invariably launched by a lengthy and complex polemic which becomes part of its documentation.⁷ Boulez's quest in particular was for a logical necessity that, even allowing for music's privileged relation to the formal,⁸ completely expunged content and subjectivity, history and experience. His complex world of sound and mathematical relationships ventured far beyond the perceptual logic of the enculturated ear into a space where precompositional decision-making – strategy – determined every level and dimension of the visual and sounding score.

In his famous series of lectures presented at Darmstadt (the post-World War-Two "home" of the musical avant-garde) between 1959 and 1961,⁹ Boulez advocates Rougier's

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7. The periodical, *Die Reihe*, became the place where detailed analyses (often by the composers themselves) of serial works and the concepts which underlay them were published.
 8. The question of music's inherently anti-representational status and its use of the devices of representation in an illusionistic way have occupied theorists within and also outside the discipline over the centuries. Within the Western canon, it is particularly the system of tonality that is examined for its denotative value, and hence its ability to produce affect and be structured in epic forms. And it is precisely this exemplifying, denotative system – functional harmony – that serialists wanted to cut away from. In his works of the 1950s, Boulez was trying to rid his music of (the illusion of) anecdote, narrative, epic form.
 9. These lectures were published as *Penser la musique aujourd'hui* in 1963 and translated into English in 1971 under the title *Boulez on Music Today*.

construction of purely formal theories, which are both networks of relationships and tables of the deductions which have been made. Hence, a single form may apply to diverse material, to groups of differing objects, provided only that these objects respect the same relationships among themselves as those present among the undefined symbols of the theory.

(Boulez [1963]1971: 30)

Boulez asserts: “I feel that such a statement is fundamental to contemporary musical thought ...” (ibid.).

The result was a music that is very difficult to penetrate and generally quite alienating, as Foucault himself admits. Boulez was unperturbed by this opacity both of method and of musical surface; he was interested only in an audience that would take the trouble to understand, if not the actual operations structuring his music, at least his radical formalist intentions and, later, the relationship of necessity between sonic material and its structuring potential.

In fact, neither Boulez nor Stockhausen maintained as radical a multi-serial position for long, although formalist principles and operations continued to mark their future thinking and writing. Writing only a few years after his most stringently composed works, Boulez condemns music and methods of analysis that are “reflections of a void, timetables of trains which will never leave” ([1963]1971: 17).¹⁰ The first book of *Structures*

10. Amplifying this image of sterility, he continues later in this first Darmstadt lecture:

When the serial principle was first applied to all the components of sound, we were thrown bodily, or rather headlong, into a cauldron of figures, recklessly mixing mathematics and elementary arithmetic Moreover, by dint of “preorganisation” and “precontrol” of the material, total absurdity was let loose; numerous distributions-tables necessitated almost as many correction-tables, and hence a *ballistics* of notes; to produce valid results, everything had to be rectified! In fact the basic “magic squares” were related to an ideal material ... without any thought of contingencies – donkey work – of any kind: rhythmic organisation disregarded realisable metric relationships, structures of timbres scorned the registers and dynamics of instruments, dynamic principles paid no heed to balance, groups of pitches were unrelated to harmonic considerations or to the limits of tessitura. Each system, carefully worked out in its own terms, could only cohabit with the others through a miraculous coincidence. The works of this period also show an extreme inflexibility in all their aspects; elements in the “magic squares” which the composer, with his magic wand, forgot at the birth of the work, react violently against the foreign and hostile order forced upon them; they get their own revenge: the work

(1952), he told Célestin Deliège, was “what Barthes might call a reduction of style to the degree zero” (Deliège & Boulez [1975]1976: 55). But even while acknowledging the need for some “intuitive” or “irrational” decision-making at a local level, Boulez still argued for a rigorous logic and even automatism in the design of the larger structures of music. He believed that it was vital that the composer impose on himself a situation where he could be influenced by history, memory, taste or anything that was available to him: “There is also the disadvantage ... of restricting the work to the limits of the composer’s creative imagination – a paralysing restriction, for I feel that it is essential to preserve the potential of the *unknown* that a masterpiece contains” (Boulez [1963]1971: 18).

4 “Deserted by Discourse”: Introductory Remarks on “Boulez, Passing through the Screen”

What excited Foucault about Boulez’s music of the 1950s was its utter refusal to compromise, its radical formalism and its inassimilability to discourse. In the introductory remarks on “Pierre Boulez: Passing through the Screen”, he writes that it was by chance (presumably the result of his friendship with Barraqué) that he was allowed a “glimpse into” the world of the musical avant-garde: “I had the strange feeling of witnessing something I was incapable of being contemporaneous with” (Foucault [1982]1998: 241). While abstract painting was the topic of a great deal of discussion, he observes, and had been assimilated to “aesthetics, philosophy, reflection, taste – and politics,¹¹ ... music was deserted by discourses from the outside

does not achieve a conclusively coherent organisation; it sounds bad and its aggressiveness is not always intentional.

(Boulez [1963]1971: 25)

11. Like his mentors Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, Foucault was much more comfortable talking about literature and painting, and more easily able to locate them in modernity. Perhaps because painting always retains the taint of representation, it is more easily read through other discourses. The paintings of Braque, Picasso, Mondrian, Klee and others, for all their apparent rejection of the Western classical language of painting, are never abstract in the way that music is; even in the absence of instantly recognisable representations, twentieth-century modernist painting still has virtual pictorial spaces, virtual images and a vast history and laboratory of illusion that cannot ultimately be expunged. Music, on the other hand, in its inherently non-representational status and privileged relation to mathematical

.... Silence protected [it] ... preserving its insolence” (ibid.). Music, Foucault, seems to imply, could only make its disruptive move into a world ordered by a different and external set of operations and criteria while it remained in a kind of quarantine, left unexplained in any cultural sense.

Besides recognising the revelatory status and transformational power of Boulez’s ultra-serial music, Foucault seems also to have envied its protected transgressiveness: “What was doubtless one of the great transformations of twentieth-century art remained out of reach for those forms of reflection,

procedure, occupies a place closer to pure thought, if more elusive in its sensual realisation than the other arts.

Interestingly, if not surprisingly, Boulez looked to the modernist painters of the previous generation – Cézanne, Kandinsky, Mondrian and Klee – as inspiration for his own move into the unknown: “[H]istory had been liquidated by them and one had to think of oneself” (Boulez quoted by Peyser 1976: 27). Kandinsky mirrored Schoenberg (or vice versa) in his quest for the spiritual beyond the limits of traditional representation (Boulez [1981]1986: 344). Cézanne’s works recalled Alban Berg in their complexity and detail (Peyser 1976: 50). However, it was Paul Klee who was closest to Boulez’s own project, and endlessly fascinating in his Webern-like concentration of gesture. Boulez’s original intention was to give the title “At the Edge of Fertile Land” to the first (rigorously formal) book of his two-piano work *Structures*. He writes:

This painting is mainly constructed of horizontal lines with a few oblique ones, so that it is very restricted in its invention. The first *Structure* was quite consciously composed in an analogous way ... I wanted to use the potential of a given material to find out how far automatism, in musical relationships would go, with individual invention appearing only in some very simple forms of disposition – in the manner of densities, for example.

(Deliège & Boulez [1975]1976: 55 quoted in Griffiths 1995: 38)

If Boulez found the abstract painters inspirational, their work is nevertheless representative of a very different genre with different internal laws. More easily assimilated into discourse, as Foucault points out, twentieth-century art and music differ in another respect too. Whereas the former seems, if anything, to make its sheer craft, its construction, more available to the viewer, the operations of serialism take place below the surface and are usually inaudible. In his published conversation with Boulez (based on the IRCAM public debate), Foucault comments:

[P]ainting, since Cézanne, has tended to make itself transparent to the very act of painting [sic]: the act is made visible, insistent, definitively present in the picture, whether it be by the use of elementary signs, or by trace of its own dynamic. Contemporary music on the contrary offers to its hearing only the outer surfaces of its composition.

(Foucault & Boulez 1985: 6)

which had established their quarters all around us, places where we risked picking up our habits” (ibid.). Here he is clearly thinking about his own position as a young intellectual and philosopher, trained in a certain tradition with its particular “habits” and constraints. Looking back from the vantage point of the early 1980s and reflecting upon an extraordinary moment in the history of contemporary music, he is perhaps remembering the intensity of his own feeling of estrangement: “[T]hrough my having pieced together ... what was happening in Boulez’s camp”, he writes, “enabled me to feel like a stranger in the world of thought where I had been trained, to which I still belonged and which was still compelling for me and for many others” (ibid.).

It is indeed true that Foucault in the late 1950s and early 1960s had reached an impasse in his career. He felt imprisoned by the nature of current philosophical discourse in Europe and most particularly in France; where his own future lay was not entirely clear to him. His intellectual life had been largely formed in the discursive spaces around conventional meaning, what he terms “the privileges of meaning, of the lived-through [*du vécu*], the sensuous [*du charnel*], of foundational experience [*de l’expérience originnaire*], subjective contents or social significations” (Foucault [1982] 1998: 242). He was already rethinking, even if privately, his own position in relation to the philosophical canon and most particularly the phenomenology of his predecessors and mentors, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Foucault’s radical break with a philosophy of consciousness is prefigured in an array of related aesthetic events, most of them constituted in the privileging of signifier over signified, formal over experiential. They range, famously, from Picasso’s proposal of cubism (via Corbusier) and the Bauhaus artefacts to the works of Klee and, in music, Schoenberg, Webern and Boulez. One might argue that it is these migrations of models within our experience and thought that make Foucault’s own work possible: the archaeology and *episteme* are ways of acknowledging them.

At much the same time that Foucault was discovering Boulez he was also uncovering the crucial distinction between a philosophy of consciousness and a philosophy of concept. He writes, in his essay “Life, Experience, Science” (a modified version of the introduction to the English translation of Canguilhem’s *The Normal and the Pathological* (1985), of the important “dividing line ... that separates a philosophy of experience, of meaning, of the subject, and a philosophy of knowledge, of rationality, and of the concept” (Foucault [1985]1998: 466). On one side he places Sartre and Merleau-Ponty; on the other, Jean Cavailles, Gaston Bachelard, Alexandre Koyré, and Georges Canguilhem. Methodologies from the history of science, and particularly those of Canguilhem, provided valuable models for

him in his own field; Boulez's extreme engagement with the formal and scientific (as well as his total rupture with the romantic past) may have prompted Foucault's own exploration of a position which disengaged conventional meaning in order to foreground conceptual operations. Perhaps as radical a move as he intended making required that he, like Boulez, imagine himself in a position "deserted by discourses", a stranger in the midst of accepted practices and theories of culture.

5 The Formal: "A Locus for Thought"

The role of the formal in Foucault's work invites comment here, as do his various reflections on formalism in the twentieth century. He observes in his paper on Boulez that to believe "a culture ... more attached to its values than to its forms" is "to ignore the fact that people cling to ways of seeing, saying, doing and thinking, more than to what is seen, to what is thought, said, or done" ([1982]1998: 242). In an interview with Gérard Raulet in 1983 he contended that formalism in contemporary linguistic and cultural practices had been "as important in its way as romanticism or even positivism was during the nineteenth century" ([1983]1998: 435 – this is the Foucault Structuralism and Post-structuralism paper in Faubion – Raulet is not given as an author in the collection); a history of the formal would reveal it "as a power of transformation ... a force for innovation and a locus for thought" ([1982]1998: 242); it represented for him a crucial way of cutting away "the privileges of meaning" (ibid.).

Although Foucault subsequently became deeply ambivalent about the claims and practices of structuralism (a "minor episode" within the larger formalist project, in his view ([1983]1998: 435)), the formal as "a locus for thought" and transformational tool not only suggested to him ways of disengaging meaning but of exploring the unexpected intersections between the discourses and practices of Western culture. The formal was, for him, a way of reading history and experience differently; of shadowing and tracking culture, and interrogating its subject-based understanding of itself. It is the "forms of rationality" in a particular *episteme* that allow "subjects to speak the truth about themselves" ([1983]1998: 444); his overarching conceptual project is thus "an analysis of the relations between forms of reflexivity – a relation of self to self – and, hence, of relations between forms of reflexivity and the discourse of truth, forms of rationality and effects of knowledge (*connaissance*)" (ibid.). Foucault is not interested in contents per se, but in the structures that make these contents possible, much as Boulez is interested in the almost automatic procedures of serialism rather than their effects.

6 The Diagonal Dimension: Series and Statement (énoncé)

The extent to which Foucault modelled his own radical break with the continuities of historicism on Boulez's break with tonality has perhaps only been taken sufficiently seriously by Gilles Deleuze, Foucault's friend, fellow philosopher and also admirer of Boulez and the IRCAM project. (He was a frequent visitor to IRCAM.) In his occasional comments on the matter, Foucault is explicit that the technique of serial music remains opaque to him; its value lies in its experiential proof of a state of discourse beyond the pretensions that its usual logical and sentential characterisations contain – an experience of a diagonal dimension that challenges the twentieth-century claim of logic or grammar to be the foundations of thought, experience and meaning. Thus Deleuze launches an explication of Foucault's most important epistemological work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, on the notion of an "atonal logic", invoking the concept of the series and its realisation of a "diagonal function" to help explain the enigmatic and crucial notion of the "statement" (*énoncé*).

In his Darmstadt lectures, Boulez analyses the conditions of possibility, dimensions and formal relationships of the series, as rigorously as Foucault analyses the statement in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. His aim is to solve questions of morphology, structure and large-scale form in the "new" musical work; in other words, he launches an analytical project as substantial as Foucault's own epistemology. The series is a generator of a "polyphony of polyphonies" and "a diagonal function" (in oblique and unassimilable relation to the "exhaustive" functions of "vertical" harmony and "lateral" melody at the base of musical analysis from Rameau to Schenker), in Boulez's and now generally accepted theoretical terms. The world of the series escapes the so-called "laws of nature" (Boulez [1963]1971: 31), which in fact "symbolise the routines resulting from experience" to set up what Boulez calls a "logically organised *consciousness*, which avoids slipping into the anecdotal" (p. 33) and operates primarily "in terms of relationships and functions" (p. 32).

Deleuze might well have referred to Boulez's Darmstadt lectures in implying the analogy between the Foucauldian statement and the concept of the Boulezian set. Just as the forms of a set in a serial composition can operate via "quasi-mathematical structures" in a diagonal "polyphony of polyphonies", so statements (shaping what is thinkable and conceivable) in different *epistemes* are "linked to a mobile diagonal line that allows us, within this space, to make a direct study of the same set at different levels, as well as to choose some sets on the same level while disregarding others (which in their turn might presuppose another diagonal line)" (Deleuze

1988: 3). While different *epistemes* may seem totally incommensurate, in other words, they are nevertheless made up of the same body of statements.

It is possible similarly to compare the notion of collateral space in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* with the precompositional dimension in serial composition (the ultimate guarantee that form expunges and replaces content):

The question of knowing whether the space defines the group, or, conversely, whether the group of statements defines the space, is immaterial. There is no homogeneous space that remains unlocalized: the two elements merge at the level of the rules of formation.

(Deleuze 1988: 5)¹²

This apparent mapping of a serial/atonal logic onto Foucault's *Archaeology* could be extended even further. Suffice it to say that Deleuze fully understood the extraordinary impact and liberating force that the serial adventure had on Foucault;¹³ most specifically that it had suggested to him

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12. It is possible also within this context to make an analogy between the "homogeneous space" of propositions and the "language" of tonality:

Propositions refer vertically to axioms on a higher level which in turn determine certain constant and intrinsic factors and define a homogeneous system. The establishment of such homogeneous systems is indeed one of the conditions of linguistics.

(Deleuze 1988: 5)

In serial logic tonality is replaced as an organisational principle by precompositional activity and the homogeneous space in which harmony operates (and which gives it its identity) is replaced by a multiple polyphonic web (in which identity is carried in the tiniest detail) where notions of vertical and horizontal give way to a multidimensional spatiality.

13. It is interesting to note that Deleuze himself was fascinated by the Boulezian notion of striated time and writes about it at length in *A Thousand Plateaus*. It is thus abundantly clear that he was well acquainted with the Darmstadt lectures and equipped to apply them to the Foucauldian project. He also recognised the particular nature of the Boulezian interpretative (archaeological/historical) project, again introducing the concept of the diagonal dimension:

When Boulez casts himself in the role of historian of music, he does so in order to show how a musician, in a very different manner in each case, invents a kind of diagonal running between the harmonic vertical and the melodic horizon. And in each case it is a different diagonal, a different technique, a creation. Moving along this transversal line, which is really a line of deterritorialization, there is a *sound block* that no longer has a point

the possibility of viewing and experiencing a discourse beyond its customary logical (deductive, vertical) and its sequential (narrative) or horizontal dimensions; in breaking with these dimensions, it was possible to experience the (musical) statement in its “neutral material dispersion”.¹⁴

Deleuze concludes his discussion of the Foucauldian statement and its forms by quoting Boulez’s comment on Webern and suggesting that it applies equally well to Foucault: “He created a new dimension, which we might call a diagonal dimension, a sort of distribution of points, graphs, groups or figures that no longer act simply as an abstract framework but actually exist in space” (Boulez quoted in Deleuze 1988: 22).

7 Formalism, Music and Text in the Boulezian Repertoire

For Foucault, Boulez’s formalism represented not only the way to replace existing and overworked paradigms of thought, but a way to connect moments of disruption across time and across apparently different aesthetics. In “Passing through the Screen” he refers specifically to Boulez’s settings of poems by René Char, Henri Michaux and Stéphane Mallarmé, works that Boulez restructures in his own terms and that are defined by formalist operations that could only have been conceived within the serial modality.

Avant-garde French literature, the literature with which both Foucault and Boulez identified and about which Foucault frequently wrote, often represents or at least simulates a formalist position. Even in an earlier century and era, poets like Mallarmé, Char, Michaux and even Baudelaire – whether symbolists, surrealists, expressionists and/or aesthetic modernists by definition – queried the status of language and its subordination to meaning. They were highly conscious of the power of the formal as a means of countering “habits” of experience; they disengaged meaning to engage

of origin since it is always and already in the middle of the line; and no longer has horizontal and vertical coordinates, since it is in “nonpulsed time”: a deterritorialized rhythmic block that has abandoned points, coordinates, and measure, like a drunken boat that melds with the line or draws a plane of consistency. Speeds and slowness inject themselves into musical form, sometimes impelling it to proliferation, linear microproliferations, and sometimes to extinction, sonorous abolition, involution, or both at once

(Deleuze [1980]1993: 296)

14. See Introduction and Chapters 1-3 of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* ([1969]1972).

pure literariness, freeing words and syllables, sounds and associations from the contents assigned to them by the past. Like the music of the 1950s serialists, the literary works of the French avant-garde are hermetic, to be deciphered through internal codes and operations, to be opened not via received language and meaning but via new orderings and significances.

In his major text-centred works of the 1950s and 1960s Boulez identifies these writers; in fact, as Foucault puts it, he proceeds “in a straight line” to them, “without any detour or mediation”, not because they share “a universalising aesthetic” or “an ideal kinship”, but because he was drawn by “the necessity of a conjuncture” (Foucault [1982]1998: 242-243). Thus Boulez’s method of approaching the works of Mallarmé, Char, Michaux and later e.e. cummings shares features with a Foucauldian analysis: poem and music appear as contingent events that slam into each other, creating new ways of proceeding, event by event, particular to particular. Composer and poet come across each other in the dark of a permanent underground; dark because the assigned light of culture (defined by experience, meaning, content) is deliberately snuffed out to show up something brighter and more intense. (“It is not the ascent toward the highest place, it is not access to the most enveloping viewpoint, that gives the most light. The bright light comes laterally, from the breaching of a compartment, the piercing of a wall, two intensities brought together, a distance crossed at one stroke” (ibid.).)

7.1 Boulez – Char: “In Art as in Thought, Encounters Are Justified Only by the New Necessity They Have Established”

In his explorations of the poetry of René Char (late 40s and 50s) and Stéphane Mallarmé (late 50s and early 60s), Boulez makes no attempt to “set” the texts in the traditional sense of the word. Instead, he places text and music in a relationship of commentary, elaboration and analysis in which each medium takes the other apart.

What attracted Boulez to Char was “the clipped violence of his style, the unequalled paroxysm, the purity” (Boulez quoted by Griffiths 1995: 16); what he identified as Char’s “power to sum up his world in an extremely concise form of expression, to exteriorise it and to fling it far away from him” (Deliège & Boulez [1975]1976: 44). This eviscerated meaning placed second to literary device, Boulez believed, had enormous implications for the musical setting of texts, creating a space where “music does not distend time but can be grafted onto it” (Deliège & Boulez [1975]1976: 44).

In his masterwork *Le marteau sans maître* (The Hammer without a Master) (1954), Boulez treats the “abruptly obscure” (Griffiths 1995: 79)

images of Char's "verbal archipelago" (Stacey 1987: 54)¹⁵ as both "centre and absence" of the whole body of sound (Boulez [1966]1991: 40),¹⁶ "'centre' because everything in the music is derived from the words, and 'absence' because the process of musical composition has completely consumed them" (Griffiths 1995: 79). The result is "a whole web of relationships ... including, among others, the affective relationships, but also the entire mechanism of the poem, from its pure sound to its intelligible organisation" (Boulez [1966]1991: 40). The dominating image of a civilisation marching to its doom "like a hammer without a master" is initially conjured wordlessly in a rapid passage of notes, whose eerie weightlessness is constituted not only in registration but in the choice of predominantly percussive and plucked ("non-Western") timbres; this flurry of pitches hurtles into an exaggerated pause, creating a trope that recurs in the movement and is hinted at in later related movements. Like subsequent sonic imprints it becomes "the seed of an elaborate musical form – a form in which purely instrumental movements would be necessary, and not merely as interludes" (Griffiths 1995: 79). Thus the three individual cycles, each of which is "irrigated" by one of Char's poems, interlock, interrupting each other and breaking up the overall musical continuity. The work as a whole represents Boulez's increasing fascination with the "notion of a discontinuous time achieved thanks to structures which will become entangled" (ibid.).

Although *Le marteau* is a product of Boulez's decision to mediate automatism with moments of irrationality, it clearly inhabits a serial world, characterised by a formalist way of thinking and a refusal to see conjunctions between words, images and music as subordinated to conventional meanings. Words and sounds together create a new necessity; a new point of contact between discourses. Brought together in an act that sometimes imposes outside operations, they meet, take each other apart, coalesce. In

15. Char's notion of a "verbal archipelago" compares the images of a poem to the islands of an archipelago;

it is possible to go from one island to another in any sequence and, each time, to accumulate a different set of experiences. The reader is a traveler among images; he may take any route and any conclusion is valid. The idea of the archipelago can be applied to poems, as well as to images or individual words.

(Stacey 1987: 54)

16. The notion of "centre and absence" occurs in various analytical comments that Boulez made on his works from the second half of the 1950s. He acknowledges the origins of the phrase in Michaux's poem, "Entre centre et absence" (Boulez [1966]1991: 40).

retrospect their conjunction seems inevitable; yet they do not lose their individual sharpness for a “general meaning”. Foucault observes: “In art as in thought, encounters are justified only by the new necessity they have established” ([1982]1998: 243). As in Foucault’s own analyses of discourses, power and the subject, the experiment seems justified by the result.

7.2 Boulez – Mallarmé – Foucault: Not “Monuments” but “Intensities”

Boulez:

What attracted me in Mallarmé, at the stage I had reached at that time, was the extraordinary formal density of his poems. Not only is the content truly extraordinary – the poems possess a mythology that is very much their own – but never has the French language been taken so far in the matter of syntax.

(Boulez in Deliège & Boulez [1975]1976: 94)

Foucault:

The great task to which Mallarmé dedicated himself, right up to his death, is the one that dominates us now; in its stammerings, it embraces all our current efforts to confine the fragmented being of language once more within a perhaps impossible unity. Mallarmé’s project – that of enclosing all possible discourse within the fragile density of the word, within that slim, material black line traced by ink on paper – is fundamentally a reply to the question imposed upon philosophy by Nietzsche To the Nietzschean question: “Who is speaking?”, Mallarmé replies ... by saying that what is speaking is, in its solitude, in its fragile vibration, in its nothingness, the word itself – not the meaning of the word, but its enigmatic and precarious being.

(Foucault [1966]1970: 306)

In his famous analysis of the Mallarméan project in *The Order of Things*, Foucault acknowledges Mallarmé’s crucial role in literary modernity. By rethinking language outside of meaning, grammar, sense and its habitual links to the world and to experience, Mallarmé’s poetry represents the birth of Literature beyond language and therefore the prospect of a return to language. (“Who speaks?” – “It is the word that speaks.”) It is exactly this prospect of a return to (musical) language that motivated Boulez’s formalist project and that attracted him to the Mallarméan endeavour in Literature nearly a century before. No less than four of Boulez’s works, both texted and textless, engage with (or reveal similarities to) Mallarméan principles, starting with *Livre pour quatuor* (1948-1949), continuing with the Third

Piano Sonata (1956-1957) and second book of *Structures* (1956-1961) and culminating in *Pli selon pli: Portrait de Mallarmé* (written between 1957-1962). Célestin Deliège comments:

Other poets (Char, Michaux, cummings) have “coloured” his work; other authors (Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Artaud) have on occasions deeply influenced the content. But, at the very moment when these writers are present in Boulez’s work via the text or through another occurrence that is highly significant on the immanent level of aesthetic results ..., it is still the Mallarméan principle that is the most active.

(Deliège in Glock 1986: 101)

The Third Piano Sonata has close conceptual links with Mallarmé’s last poem to be published, *Un coup de dés* (A Throw of the Dice), which represented the culmination of many of the writer’s poetic theories (Stacey 1987: 78) and also his preoccupation (like other French Symbolists) with emulating the condition of music. In *Un coup de dés* Mallarmé creates a graphic (musical) score “in which the placing of the words on the paper and the size of the lettering indicate to the reader the dynamic level and pitch at which the words should be spoken (Stacey 1987: 78). Mallarmé’s project, to reclaim for literature certain aspects of music (the “musication” of language), is outlined in an extended preface to the poem:

If the “transpositions to the Book of the Symphony” can be worked at and achieved, it is undeniably not from basic sonorities on the brass, the strings, the woodwind, but from the intellectual word at its apex, that Music, with fullness and clarity, as the entirety of relationships existing in everything, must result.

(quoted in Deliège in Glock 1986: 106)¹⁷

Boulez, in his turn, reclaims for music certain aspects of the word and its non-linear structures. In “Current Trends”, written in 1954, the composer demands “for music the right to parentheses and italics ... a concept of discontinuous time made up of structures which interlock instead of remaining in airtight compartments” (1991: 19);¹⁸ in “Alea” (1957) he

17. Various other appropriations from music as sound and also visual event occur as part of the poem and its typographical layout, including the “chordal” presentation of themes on the page; i.e., the reader can look at the ideas not only consecutively but simultaneously (Stacey 1987: 78).

18. [M]usic at the present time unquestioningly possesses a larger repertory of possibilities and a vocabulary that is once again capable of universal concepts and universal comprehension. No doubt there are many

argues for the qualified use of chance in composition, allowing for “mobile elements capable of adapting to fixed structures” (1991: 33-34). In “Sonate, que me veux-tu?”, an essay in which he acknowledges the extensive literary affiliations of the Third Piano Sonata,¹⁹ he documents his response to

improvements still to be made and it will take time for the language to become flexible and generally acceptable. Even so, all the essential discoveries have been made; there is no longer any questioning of direction and there is even a certain margin of security in the field of terminology, stylistically speaking. There is, however, one major task ahead – the total rethinking of the notion of form. It is quite clear that with a vocabulary in which periodicity and symmetry are of diminishing importance and a morphology that is in constant evolution, formal criteria based on repetition of material are no longer applicable, since they have lost their strength and their cohesive power. This is the task that is plainly becoming increasingly urgent – restoring the parity between the formal powers of music and its morphology and syntax. Fluidity of form must be integrated with fluidity of syntax (Boulez [1981]1986: 144).

19. In addition to Mallarmé, Boulez refers also to James Joyce and Franz Kafka. Of Joyce he writes:

It is not only that the organization of the narrative has been revolutionized. The novel observes itself *qua* novel, as it were, reflects on itself and is aware that it is a novel – hence the logic and coherence of the writer’s prodigious technique, perpetually on the alert and generating universes that themselves expand. In the same way, music, as I see it, is not exclusively concerned with “expression”, but must also be aware of itself and become the object of its own reflection. For me this is one of the primary essentials of the language of poetry, and has been since Mallarmé, with whom poetry became an object in itself, justified in the first place by poetic research, in the true sense.

(Boulez [1981]1986: 144)

Boulez’s terming of the Third Piano Sonata and all works after that as “works in progress” also comes from Joyce, although various commentators consider this a strategy on Boulez’s part to prevent public critique of his music; the work, even when published, is not yet complete. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, in his introduction to *Orientations*, a compilation of Boulez’s essays, writes:

There are very clear references ... to the different problems at the root of these unfinished works, chiefly among them being the crisis in the language of music after total serialism had proved a dead end (1949-1952) and the lack of technical means for adapting the actual sound material (whether electro-acoustic or instrumental) to Boulez’s demands as a composer. The diagnosis was clear as long ago as 1954: “Get rid of a number of prejudices about a Natural Order; rethink our ideas about

Mallarmé's notes on his projected *Livre*: "I found that all my ideas and the objectives I had set myself after *Le coup de dés* were identical with those that Mallarmé had pursued and formulated but never had time to explore to the full" (Boulez [1981]1986: 147).

Mallarmé's *Livre* is made of loose leaves which could be read successively or independently, and reassembled and reconstructed in any order. Again Foucault characterises this strategy memorably, writing of Mallarmé that he "was constantly effacing himself from his own language, to the point of not wishing to figure in it except as an executant in a pure ceremony of the Book in which the discourse would compose itself" ([1966]1970: 306). Boulez's Third Piano Sonata emulates Mallarmé's proposed *Livre* by opening the sequence of performance to the vicissitudes of an unbound dossier.²⁰

[T]he essentially literary nature of [Boulez's] approach is revealed by the layouts of the two printed formants, *Trope* and *Constellation-Miroir*. The former is a ring-bound sheaf of four items to be played in various possible orders – a "Texte" which is the subject of a "Parenthèse", "Commentaire" and "Glose", while *Constellation-Miroir* (... the retrograde of a notional

acoustics in the light of recent experiments; face the problems arising from electro-acoustics and electronic techniques – that is what we now need to do" (*Relevés d'apprenti*, p. 185). And that, in fact, was to be the programme of IRCAM, though not until exactly twenty years later. In the meantime Boulez became a conductor.

(Nattiez in Boulez [1981]1986: 15-16)

Boulez refers to Kafka less frequently than Joyce or Mallarmé, but he does compare his own attempts to introduce discontinuity into the musical work via the notion of a "labyrinth" or "maze" with "Kafka's procedure in his short story 'The Burrow'" (Boulez [1981]1986: 145).

20. Nevertheless Deliège points out that "despite their parallelism the Mallarmé phenomenon and the Boulez phenomenon are independent of each other" (in Glock 1986) when it comes to the question of the mobility of the text. This could only have been the case given that

Boulez found himself faced with a historical predicament where the message lacked an internal direction imposed by a gravitational centre connected with language, thus implying that the ways of linking the parts of the discourse were becoming optional and introduced from outside, whereas Mallarmé deliberately and *a priori* wanted a mobility that was not directly justified by language itself but which, through typographical artifice and actions directed towards form and context, he had created *ex nihilo*.

(Deliège in Glock 1986: 104)

Constellation) sprinkles fragments over several large pages, and so recalls the appearance of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dès*

(Griffiths 1995: 106)

Like Mallarmé, Boulez captures (musical) language, attempting to reach it and animate it in advance of its content, meaning and logical, sensible form; in Deleuzian terms, he plucks it diagonally away from its false embodiments in melody and harmony so as to allow it to scintillate for a moment in another condition, another mode of being, as the *énoncé*. As a device for eliciting the statement, the Sonata No. 3 sets out the scheme of actions that we associate with language in advance of language itself: the fabric of the piece is formed from a collision of chance and rhetoric, determined by Boulez in such a way that whatever music occurs within the structural framework, it is unable to reassemble itself into the anecdotal, the expressive or the indicative.

Boulez's large work for soprano and orchestra, *Pli selon pli*, is a gigantic and complex tribute to (and portrait of) Mallarmé, based on three existing pieces – *Improvisations sur Mallarmé* – preceded and followed by two new movements. These outer edifices symbolise the birth and death of a poet (Mallarmé and Verlaine respectively) “and stand too for the birth and death inherent in art: the birth of the creative impulse, and its death to the artist once it has been expressed” (Griffiths 1995: 109). All the poems with the exception of “Don du poème” are sonnets and Boulez uses them as structural grids (as he does their syllabic symmetries) on which to hook his serialist procedure and mobile performance choices; “if we take into account the perfect, closed structure of the sonnet as such”, he writes, “we find that the musical form is already determined” (Boulez [1981]1986: 175).

Although more conventional in its actual setting of words than *Le marteau sans maître*, the work once again approaches the notion of text as “centre and absence”. The first movement uses only the first line of “Don du poème” (one of Mallarmé's first published poems), placing it right at the beginning of the work; the last movement sets only the last line of the poet's epitaph for Verlaine, “Tombeau” (A Late Poem), placing it at the very end of the piece and hence the work as a whole. Of the three improvisations,²¹ two are settings of complete poems. Boulez writes that “[t]he first and last pieces are ... entirely independent of the poem, which appears only in the form of quotation” ([1981]1986: 174).

21. These movements are improvisations “only for Boulez himself as composer and, in their fluidity of tempo, as conductor”, according to Paul Griffiths (1995: 109). It might be more accurate to call them variants rather than improvisations.

The title *Pli selon pli* comes from Mallarmé's sonnet, "Remémoration d'amis belges", although he does not set the poem itself. Boulez writes in his note to the Columbia recording of the work:

The title ... indicates the meaning and direction of the work. In the poem in question, the words "pli selon pli" are used by the poet to describe the way in which the mist, as it disperses, gradually reveals the architecture of the city of Bruges. In a similar manner, the development of the five pieces reveals, "fold upon fold" a portrait of Mallarmé himself.

(Boulez [1981]1986: 176)

Pli selon pli thus emerges not only as an extrapolation or transcription of the Third Piano Sonata but an exercise in setting the original *Trois improvisations sur Mallarmé* in its own commentary: it is an "unfolding" through the adding of panels so as to exemplify the action of folding that Mallarmé makes into the armature of his poem and his "design" for the *Livre*.²² Boulez uses this action to invent forms that can literally and metaphorically create variation by folding. As is the case with *Le marteau sans maître*, text and music operate in a relationship of commentary and analysis to each other, a kind of "grafting" onto the literary form of the sonnet, "of a proliferation of music sprouting from an equally strict form". "[T]his enabled me", writes Boulez, "to transcribe into musical terms forms that I had never thought of and which are derived from the literary forms he himself used" (Boulez quoted in Deliège & Boulez [1975]1976: 94).

The result is perhaps best understood as a kind of Foucauldian archaeology in that it shows the common conditions of possibility used by Mallarmé to generate words and by Boulez to generate notes; music and text endlessly but obliquely explicate each other. Boulez treats his chosen texts not as "monuments", but as "intensities", as Foucault observes, "points on the other side of the screen" through which he punches his own intensity.

When he focused closely on a given work, rediscovering its dynamic principle, on the basis of a decomposition that was as subtle as possible, [Boulez] was not trying to make a monument; he was attempting to traverse it, to "pass through" it, to undo it with an action such that the present itself might move as a result (Foucault [1982]1998: 243).

22. Mallarmé found the intellectual provenance for his concept of the fold in Leibniz. Boulez observes, in writing about *Pli selon pli*, that Mallarmé, in his notes for the *Livre* project, called "the process from book to album an 'unfolding' and the reverse process a 'folding up'" (Boulez [1981]1986: 147). Deleuze, presumably following on Boulez and Mallarmé, has written extensively on the notions of folding and unfolding.

Mallarmé's project (embodying his critique, the relation of words to things) was utopian in its attempt to map the limits of language from within, excluding subjectivity and experience, and proposing rhetoric as a guiding form before content; it was a project that was not – and could not be – realised in an age in which language and thought remained inconceivable outside the register of signs, forms and history. Boulez reactivated this project almost a century later, proposing it in radically formalist musical terms: where Mallarmé proposed the spatialisation of language, Boulez proposed the spatialisation of time sequence. *Pli selon pli*, and also the Third Piano Sonata perhaps thus capture some aspect of the condition of language of which Mallarmé dreamed and which Foucault later predicted but could not characterise after the disappearance of man.

8 Passing (Punching) through a Screen

The metaphor “passing [or punching] through a screen” (borrowed from Jean Genet's play *Les paravents*) (Foucault [1982]1998: 244) inhabits Boulez's Mallarméan settings vividly. However, Foucault doubtless intended it to operate across the broader sphere of Boulez's work not only in composition but in interpreting and conducting an orchestral repertoire that had also become stifled by overdetermined habits and meanings. Boulez only embarked on a career as a professional conductor in the years after he had written the body of works by which he is now best known. Only once he had broken entirely with content in his own compositional project could he go back to interrogate the works of the past – Debussy, Ravel and later Wagner – and interpret them in relation to constructivist principles, elevating them to the modern.

Seeing works from the musical canon, as he did his chosen texts, not as monuments but as “points of intensity that were also objects ‘to consider’” ([1982]1998: 244), points on the other side of the screen, he discovered in them glimmerings of his own project. In Debussy he found an ability “to reject any formal organization that pre-exists the work in hand” and an “elliptical pulverization of the language” ([1966]1991: 215-216). Wagner in time yielded up to him a labyrinth of formalist relationships.

In his little essay on the 1976 Chéreau/Boulez interpretation of Wagner's *Ring* cycle Foucault identifies Boulez as “the strictest and most creative heir of the Vienna School” ([1980]1998: 236), and as an archaeologist who “rediscovered the meaning of Wagner's “music drama” by looking through the eyes of the music of the entire nineteenth century” (ibid.). Boulez is, says Foucault, “a conductor who analyzes, who dissects every moment with a scalpel ... and who in every instant unfolds the increasingly complex

dynamic of the work” (ibid.); he rediscovers behind its entrenched extramusical meaning the essentially formalist function of the Wagnerian leitmotif, moulding it as “ a flexible, ambiguous, proliferating structure, a developmental principle of a tonal world” (ibid.): Boulez, in his reading of Wagner, is able to bypass the web of accumulated meanings that have accrued to the epic *Ring* cycle and discover it once more in its syntactic density and complexity.

Boulez, like Foucault and Nietzsche, never assumed unities in culture or history, preferring to believe that each artwork introduced its own radically intrinsic order into the historical dimension – thus making an historical order that consists of these incommensurable dimensions. When he did confront the past in music, it was always with a belief that what he was doing in the present could change the past. The notion of “the fixed module” was, says Foucault in “Passing through the Screen”, an illusion for Boulez; in his formalist operations, as a composer and an interpreter, he puts past and present “in perpetual motion relative to each other” ([1982]1998: 245), as he does poem and text. His intention is to disrupt the past in view of his own practice, and perpetually to interrogate it and bring it into the present. In the act of recreating Wagner’s *Ring*, Foucault writes, “it was as if Boulez was retracing his own itinerary. And also the whole movement of a century of modern music ...” ([1982]1998: 237).

Again the model is strongly Foucauldian. Foucault’s own project was to rewrite the past differently, then to come back to the present to interrogate it more deeply; “punching through the screen” of conventional meaning and experience, dispersed language and subjectivity, so as to be able to discover the forms of rationality that have produced present conditions of “labour, life and language”.

9 Conclusion: “The Strength for Breaking the Rules with the Act That Brings Them into Play” – Boulez and Foucault

At the heart of Foucault’s essay on Boulez is his admiration for the composer’s radical formalism, his ability to annihilate the prevailing linguistic and experiential structures in music in a defiant yet utopian act of anarchism. And yet, while Boulez remains deeply concerned with formal procedure, Foucault concludes, he does not insist that his is a method, a way of doing things, an explication. Boulez’s work, like Foucault’s own, is at the same time creative and analytical: “[W]hat he expected of thought was precisely that it always enable him to do something different from what he was doing” ([1982]1998: 244). “What is the role of thought, then, in what

one does”, Foucault asks, “if it is to be neither a mere *savoir-faire* nor pure theory?” His immediate and unequivocal answer: “Boulez shows what it is – to supply the strength for breaking the rules with the act that brings them into play” (ibid.).

The strength with which Foucault credits Boulez in his ability to work and make decisions between the defined positions of *savoir* and pure theory ([1982]1998: 244), is precisely the strength that enabled Foucault himself to see the inevitability of his own path in an account of the history of knowledge.

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