Michel Foucault and Christian Scholarship

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A study of Michel Foucault broaches some issues raised for Christian scholars by the postmodern upheaval in literary criticism. Few other postmodern writers have covered so much, influenced so many, and disturbed us so often, as the philosophic historian Michel Foucault, a protean figure who writes on everything from philosophy, epistemology, and language to justice, medicine, and psychology. Although Foucault well represents postmodernism's de-centered, constructivist historicism, these very qualities make him difficult to grasp. With each new subject he changes; one moment he appears idealist, the next positivist (Gutting, 28, 30; 63). In addition, Foucault's "thought comes clothed in a rhetoric apparently designed to frustrate summary, paraphrase, economical quotation ... or ... traditional critical terminology" (White, 104). The befuddled reader should not, however, misinterpret such multi-faceted indeterminacy as self-contradiction. Foucault remains "consistent to the consequences of his analysis" even when, perhaps especially when, he proves so "frustratingly elusive"(Dreyfus and Rabinow, xxvi)[1].

Foucault himself invites us to approach him not by attempting to derive a unified world view from the specific and varied content of his books, but rather by taking from his method what can serve our own needs and interests. "If one or two of these 'gadgets' of approach or method ... can be of service to you, then I shall be delighted. If you find the need to transform my tools or use others then show me what they are, because it may be of benefit to me" ("Questions on Geography", 65). Foucault's "method" is not an organized, teleologically motivated approach or a rigid conceptual framework into which all data is forced, regardless of fit. Instead, in *The Discourse on Language*, one of his earliest works, he recommends four strategies or principles – *reversal*, *discontinuity*,

specificity and *exteriority* – maneuvers that remain consistent throughout his otherwise disparate work (229).

For the Christian literary scholar, focusing on Foucault's method establishes a productive perspective because he principally influences literary theory through the kind of history he writes, his method of analysis. In addition it is the implications of his method that present the greatest challenges for Christians. Rather than write traditional histories about wars, treaties, and political maneuverings, Foucault examines knowledge as an historical event, created by power and creating power in return. Foucault even refuses to call his books histories, instead naming his initial studies *archeologies*, his middle works *genealogies* and his two final books *problematizations*.

Foucault consistently examines the *archive* or *discursive practice,* what counts as knowledge at a particular period. He defines the discursive practice as the rules and prior practices that produce the concepts on whose basis people label things as "scientific", "moral", "literary", etc. In the initial *archeologies*[2] Foucault examines how discourse shapes practice[3]; in the subsequent *genealogies*[4] he investigates how discourse and practice shape each other[5] (Prado, 24). In both, he concentrates on how power in its general manifestations (discourse and practice) shapes subjects while in the final problematizations[6] he examines how subjects can shape and adapt the power that also shapes them.

Although even Foucault's method lacks systematic rigidity, four essential elements recur in his approach: nominalism, a novel definition of historical event, spatialization of thought, and a unique view of power(Gutting, 28)[7]. As a nominalist, Foucault asserts that thought allows us to perceive reality in a particular shape, rather than reality imposing its pre-existent form on thought. Foucault's de-centered, particularistic world steadfastly opposes essences, natures, and other totalizing categories. He invites us to "question those ready-made syntheses, those groupings that we normally accept before any examination, those links whose validity is recognized from the outset" (*The Archeology of Knowledge,* 22).[8] Foucault rejects the idea that our thoughts are grounded and validated by a reality transcending and preceding them.

Our conceptual categories determine how we perceive reality yet our systems are ultimately arbitrary, flawed by overlapping and vast omissions, and thus distorted. Foucault savors a Borges passage listing animals as "(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, ... (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush" and so on (*The Order of Things*, xv). To explore the unseen side of things,

our conceptual gaps, Foucault uses the strategy of *reversal*, purposefully reversing an unquestioned view and thus unearthing what has been left out, ignored, glossed over in any particular discourse.

The discursive practice varies over time and represents a fact requiring discovery not a sign inviting explanation. Thus madness, discussed in *Madness and Civilization* and sexuality[9], the topic of Foucault's last three works, are variable historical constructs, not ahistorical, scientific givens; they do not spring from some universal human nature but arise from a complex web of power relations and knowledge[10]. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault reveals *man*, a prototype applicable to all human beings, as "only a recent invention, ... a new wrinkle in our knowledge [who] will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form" (xxiii). Likewise the author, a being constructed in an age of censorship, simply functions to neutralize textual contradictions and limit the meaning of otherwise indeterminate language. Eventually this concept too will have served its purpose and will be supplanted by another thought, another term ("What is an Author?",982 ff.).

Foucault's method also involves a unique *definition of historical event* to include discourse and knowledge. "An event," says Foucault "... is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" [11], 154). Discourses constitute historical events for Foucault, not truth statements or intentional acts; established opinions point to no fact other than the fact of their own existence[12]. No discourse provides a privileged, ahistorical description of reality.

Foucault studies how concepts make reality visible and intelligible. He also examines the structures that group concepts and statements thematically, that mark certain ones as serious, that empower some people to speak seriously and that assess the credibility of statements. He attempts to uncover the practices that "render intelligible an otherwise heterogeneous collection of events" (Gutting, 39).

Foucault concentrates on moments when a new conceptual framework, a new discourse, suddenly displaces an old one[13]. In *The Order of Things*, for example, Foucault examines the conceptual changes that took place between 1750 and 1800 when 'biology' replaced 'natural philosophy', 'political economy' replaced 'wealth', and 'philology' replaced 'general grammar' as objects of study, thought, and discussion. These shifts represented not the culmination of gradual intellectual progress, but rather a jolt, a wrenching, a major gap or *discontinuity*. This discontinuity is not

immediately apparent because people working within a new discourse often rewrite history from their perspective, teasing out those elements which help establish continuity and non-contradiction for their discourse, thus justifying the illusion that their discourse does indeed provide a privileged view of essential reality. "It is no longer a question," urges Foucault, "of judging the past in the name of a truth that only we can possess in the present" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", 164). Recognizing that those working in present perspectives falsely read back into past events principles of continuity and non-contradiction, Foucault strives to re-establish the discontinuities and gaps of history.

A basic, positive assumption about all discourse, continuity dominates our thinking. We take for granted continuity within an author's work, continuity between our thought and reality, continuity of historical development. Even when we look at historical ruptures, we secretly hunt for continuity as we take pains to elaborate the underlying reasons for some shift or other. Since searches for the hidden meaning of events usually disguise attempts to reassert continuity and coherence, Foucault refuses to hazard theories about why changes occur, being content instead to simply describe the changes, the gaps, the discontinuities – in history, in text, in self[14].

The third characteristic of his method, *spatialization of thought*, counters the teleological view of history as moving towards a particular goal or moment[15]. Rather than tracing imagined temporal continuities, Foucault examines the spatial dispersion of established systems of knowledge in all their complexity and *specificity*, mapping their connections to other systems and their internal logic, helping us experience the seamlessness of other discourses, other conceptual systems[16]. History becomes the ebb and flow within a vast network of relations between power and knowledge.

The profound interpenetration of discourse and practice, of knowledge and power helps explain Foucault's self-conscious elusiveness. Understanding "the pervasiveness, dispersion, intricacy, contingency and layering of our social practices" Foucault realizes "that any attempt to sum up what is going on is bound to be a potentially dangerous distortion" (Dreyfus and Rabinow, xvi). Foucault instead proposes a spatial mapping of knowledge, especially in its relationship to speech and action, much like de Saussure's proposed mapping of a language where individual elements have meaning not through some inherent essence as much as in a spatialized distinction from other elements.

Foucault thus pushes us to beware of two temporal fallacies. He teaches us to avoid the teleology of the moment, the assumption that history has been developing in a regular pattern to arrive at a specific point in time (the present moment, or some future imagined point, or even some specific historical event). "[We] should avoid thinking of emergence," warns Foucault "as the final term of an historical development" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", 148). He also criticizes the worship of originary perfection, the assumption, made from our current vantage point, within current thought and concepts, that things were somehow truer, more ideal at a specific moment of history, at some point of time that we imagine as the source of a doctrine or movement whose hypothetical original purity has now been lost. The suggestion that history involves a *progressive* degeneration from original purity is as skewed as the idea of history as a *progressive* development towards a goal. Both assume that history moves in a linear, gradual, monolithic way and both reread the past in the light of the concepts, needs, and goals of the present. Christians, for example, engage in this fallacy when they imagine in the early Church a purity, sinlessness, and clarity of focus absent in the modern Church – thus forgetting Judas, Peter's betrayal, Ananias, Sephira, the Church squabbles that occasioned Paul's letters, and the multiple rifts and issues of the early Church.[17]

Power, the fourth crucial component of Foucault's vision, finds a unique definition in his thought. We do not *possess* power, like some inert object; rather we *exercise* it by thinking, speaking, writing, and interacting. As the "relational environment in which actions take place, and so ... the sum of influences on actions" (Prado, 66), Foucauldian power is a shifting, multiplicitous network. This web results from an accumulation of power relations, the individual relations of domination and control present in major institutions and structures, but also in the simplest exchanges between individuals. Occurring whenever there is some inequality between persons, power relations permeate all aspects of life.

Foucault perceives power relations as positive, creative, historically situated and omnipresent in our divisions of true and false, in our discernment of good and evil, in our judgment and control of others and ourselves. Truth and knowledge thus become highest order values (rather than realities), values that express the power relations implicit in an established but transient practice (Prado, 44). Foucault concentrates on power in its spatial dispersion rather than in some hypothetical temporal progress, thus presenting a world in which multiple and often

contradictory power relations operate simultaneously, living in a dynamic state of tension and affected by random chance.

Because such a widely dispersed web of individual relations generates the system of power/knowledge, individual intention becomes lost, irrelevant, as statements enter the vast network of current discourse. Even the inevitable resistance to power becomes absorbed into the power/knowledge system and often becomes part of the very complex which resisting individuals intended to combat. Thus Foucault recommends *exteriority*, the focus on the exterior of discourse rather than on some imagined deeper, secretly intentional meaning. Foucault rejects truth as some systematically disguised individual or group intention, hidden below the surface of events, an intention which, when discovered, will unlock the secret meaning of reality[18].

This leads Foucault to *problematizations*, the concentration on particular problems or historical case studies, rather than more ambitious and fictional portraits of "historical periods". For Foucault, one should never distort the complexity of an issue in order to lead back to some fictive unity.

> The freeing of difference requires ... thought of the multiple ... that is not limited or confined by the constraints of similarity.... What is the answer to the question? The problem. How is the problem resolved? By displacing the question.... We must think problematically rather than question and answer dialectically. ("Theatrum Philosophicum"[19] 185-186)

Foucault's work constitutes an alternative to history as the search for essential beginnings, a denial of history as a consolidated teleological sequence of events and the deeper denial of any readily apparent guiding hand or set of principles behind the historical scene. Foucault includes the random and accidental, no longer dismissed as unessential because so inconvenient. There exist no master narratives, no historical subject, no privileged discourse, no objective point of view. We must abandon hope of ever seeing "the big picture", the whole truth, and remain content to recognize multiple axes of meaning forming a "polyhedron of intelligibility" (Gutting, 38).

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The project of creating a space where Foucault and Christian thinkers can interact poses such evident risks and difficulties that one can rightly wonder what would warrant such an enterprise. It would be easy to join the ranks of Christian commentators such as Albert Mohler, Jr., Stanley Grenz, John Sims, William Placher, John Cox, and Gene Veith in rejecting Foucault as a nihilist for whom "nothing can be defended as good or true" (Placher, 92), in branding him a hopeless relativist (Dockery 73, 93, 326) who undermines the individual human self (Veith, 77) and in decrying his view of a power-dominated world that reduces human interactions to a system of "mutual predation" (Walhout, 262). Although we should not casually dismiss the conflicts between Foucault and Christian faith, Christians have much to gain by grappling with Foucault's thought, not only in spite of but even *because of* the problems that his thought creates. Given the restricted space of this article and its purpose as a very general introduction to Foucault, I will limit myself to considering a few directions of possible productive interaction.

First, Foucault may provide a conceptual language that Christians can appropriate in order to talk about their faith. Christian academics wanting to speak of God in a language that might be comprehensible to postmoderns may find in Foucault an unexpected ally and a resource rich in potential. For example, Foucault's definition of power as the relational environment in which actions take place, as actions acting upon actions, facilitates communicating one evangelical understanding of the interrelationship between God's power and human response; this interrelationship appears more problematic if we conceptualize power traditionally, purely as constraining force.

Foucault's definition of power helps point us in the direction of what Randy Maddox calls *responsible grace*. God's power expresses itself not in an act of force but in the relational gifts of prevenient, convicting, saving and purifying grace, gifts that empower individuals to respond in ways which, without grace, would be beyond them. Foucault's view that "a power-produced subject" "define[s] [his] subjectivity ... through internalization of the truths and knowledge power produces" (Prado, 69) posits a process that can be used to talk of how the Holy Spirit slowly shapes and forms us into the image of Jesus Christ, shaping not only our behavior, but also our knowledge of ourselves, our definitions of ourselves and even our criteria of self-assessment.

Foucault's view of the revolutionary changes in the power/knowledge web occasioned by conceptual ruptures and discontinuities provides a way to speak of the overwhelming significance of Jesus' ministry. Jesus did

not engage in the same discourse of might and domination that helped shape the Roman world. Had He been the military Messiah the Jews expected, He would have been a threat to Roman power, but He would not have been a threat to the *idea* that military power was an essential organizing social force. His discourse of willing servanthood, triumphant obedience, and divine presence set in motion a counter-culture that eventually conquered the Roman Empire from within.

This is not to say that Foucault's thought is biblical or that Foucault in any way favors Christian faith. Foucault can, however, provide us with a "box of tools"[20] with which to work with faith in a postmodern world. Foucault, of course, would be the first to warn us that conceptual "gadgets" and "tools" are not nearly as innocent or limited in their ideological baggage as those unassuming names imply. It is true, however, that mental gadgets, when applied to a radically different project, can be transformed by their new context and develop new meaning.[21] But Christians need always remember that a borrowed conceptual tool can reconfigure thought as easily as thought can reshape the tool.

A second locus of productive possible interaction between Foucault and Christians resides in various crucial questions raised by Foucault. His careful studies of the intimate connections between concepts, discourse, and culture have significant implications for all foreign language professors, Christian or not. His examination of how language and discourse arise from the culture that surrounds them and how they help sustain that very culture invites us to think in new ways about the languages and cultures we study. Foucault's persistent nominalism changes our view of the other. Other ages and cultures do not use our concepts nor our intellectual paradigms and their ideas fit into a sociopolitical and linguistic framework so radically different from ours that the two align imperfectly, at best. Nor can we assume that other cultures and ages are linear, unified and one-directional. Foucault opens us up to study a richer relationship between language and culture, to view any culture as a set of overlapping, contradictory and discontinuous mini-cultures, and to delve into the complex interaction between our own personal cultures and our readings of the foreign language and culture we study.

Foucault's search for the voices suppressed in traditional accounts of a culture or a historical moment offers intriguing opportunities and challenges to Christian academics. Just as Jesus brought the Kingdom of God to all, and welcomed even those the Jewish world devalued, so we

can attempt speaking for some of the hitherto silent individuals whose lives are subsumed in stories, ostensibly of the universal human heart, that are actually the stories of their oppressors. This approach promises to reconstitute life in more of its three dimensionality, its complexity, its self-contradictions and ambivalence and to allow the Christian critic to follow Jesus' model by reclaiming the humanity of those implicitly labeled *other*. In addition we are challenged to define our Christianity in ways that do not exclude or diminish women, people of color, the poor and other marginals who were part of Jesus' ministry but are not always integrated into white, middle class American Christianity.

This particular intersection of Foucault and Christianity immediately raises several issues. Are all voices to be validated or only certain voices and if so, what are the power interests explicit in the exclusion of some voices? Should Christian scholars automatically champion the oppressed, the powerless, the silenced? And if we choose to blend this liberation theology and literary criticism, what happens when we have succeeded in making suppressed voices recognized, powerful, articulate; will they become the enemy, the new power structure who solidifies its position by suppressing yet other voices? Can we even avoid this dilemma and take refuge in an apolitical stance towards literary criticism without, in fact, automatically siding for traditional power interests?

Foucault also makes us question what terms we should use when talking of literature, always reminding us that terminology is laden with significance. Should we speak of *works*, implying consistency and veiled authorial presence, or of *texts*, malleable and disconnected? Will we talk of *authors*, individuals with presumed psychic unity and intention, or of *scriptors*, more impersonal, less humanized; or should we opt for a middle position with *fictive author* or *author function*? Do we continue to speak of *individuals* with all their implicit self-contained integrity or do we deal in *subjectivities* or *human subjects*, with all their suggestion of illusory self-awareness and relational definition? Should we discuss *statements*, *opinions* and *ideas* with all their implicit attachment to specific speakers and intentions or can we talk of *discourse*, that more anonymous language divorced from any individual speaker? Do we continue to *take* critical *positions*, implying stability and solidity or do we instead *adopt* critical *postures*, suggesting temporary façade, situational expediency? Will we *hold* a critical *view* or *offer* a critical *reading*?

Can we speak of *authors, works, ideas and individuals* without suggesting that we read the texts of history and the history of texts as linear and uncomplicated? Can we really sail effortlessly through the

critical task as though no one had mapped out the numerous shoals and reefs beneath the deceptively smooth surface of traditional literary terminology? Yet can we speak of *scriptors, texts, discourse* and *subjectivities* without implying a wholehearted embracing of postmodernism's moral relativism and counter-cultural political agenda? Should we be searching for terms that provide alternatives to both the traditional and postmodern extremes? Foucault points us to these questions and helps us see their crucial nature and the power interests served by the currently available answers.

Foucault also raises other questions that are of real importance to Christians. He repeatedly asks how we can act in our world, upon our world, without being swept up into its régime of disciplinary power. Christians also are concerned with how to act in and upon the world without being absorbed into its dominant values. Granted, Foucault and Christians might define the dominant values they wish to resist very differently; but Foucault nonetheless maps out some of the issues inherent in trying to be simultaneously among and apart from.

In the context of this struggle, Foucault elucidates the issues accompanying self-identification, issues of no small importance for this journal or its probable subscribers. Foucault calls us to articulate the space from which we speak, to name the concepts that automatically limit and shape our thought. He calls us to a heightened reflexivity about our assumptions, our contextual space; he invites us to intentionally situate ourselves politically, racially, economically, theologically, and morally as an act of critical integrity.

This task, however, is neither easy nor safe. No matter how it is done or not done, self-definition places the subject in a dilemma, particularly the subject who speaks from a place other than that of the dominant culture. If we do not speak as *Christian* academics, if we speak using only the language of current, non-Christian academia, if we do our scholarship as academics but not overtly as Christians, then our Christianity becomes invisible, tacitly subsumed in the dominant discourse of the non-Christian academic power structure. If we do locate ourselves as Christians, if we do overtly Christian scholarship[22] but only speak using the specific discourse of the Christian or evangelical sub-culture, we automatically reinforce the dominant academic view of Christianity as *other* and risk marginalizing ourselves as Christian academics. If a professor attempts to speak and write like a Christian, he may feel forced to define himself in terms that reinforce the division between Christian and non-Christian, that solidify the gap separating him from his non-Christian

colleagues. So the Christian (like the person of color or the feminist) seems forced to choose between *invisibility* within a dominant culture that denies his reality, or a valorization of his own specificity that always risks increasing *marginalization*.

A frequent postmodern solution to this dilemma of self-definition is to avoid self-definition in any global way, to avoid using totalizing terms. Instead one locates his particular interests, concerns, investments in specific issues, never reducing the complexity of his involvements. Self-definition is done to such detailed specificity that one can not easily be moved into some *other* category. For us as Christian scholars, however, this solution alone will not solve the problem because specific self-definition may involve the use of religious terms that can immediately alienate and estrange. Not alienating a non-Christian audience and yet speaking as a Christian academic can perhaps be accomplished if one expresses faith in a language that the postmodern academic world can understand, in a language that can serve as a bridge rather than a barrier. As we have seen earlier, however, such an enterprise is neither easy nor tame; it would involve using postmodern concepts and conceptual tools are always double-edged.

In addition to offering us a language for communicating our faith and raising issues relevant to Christian scholars, Foucault's work provides a third potential benefit. Foucault's sustained "hermeneutics of suspicion" invites us to keep uncomfortable questions open, to resist the desire to close off too quickly a question, a doubt, an uncertainty, a fear, a dilemma. This invitation is open to Christian and non-Christian alike, but I believe it has particular advantages for the Christian. [23]

Foucault encourages us to allow discordant ideas to exist in a mutually contradictory space in our minds, to leave uncomfortable dissonances unresolved, to not rush too quickly to answer or suppress uncomfortable or threatening thoughts, thoughts that Foucault himself sometimes stimulates. One such uncomfortably open question is what does it mean to be a Christian academic? What is meant by "Christian" and how exactly is "Christian" scholarship different from non-Christian scholarship? How can we define "Christian" without recourse to the vocabulary of essences and absolute natures that Foucault urges us to distrust and beneath which lurk vested power interests? Is Christian scholarship "Christian" because it always deals with issues of God, Scripture or Church? Does such a narrow definition effectively segregate Christians from the rest of life, confining them to a restricted register of interests and issues, a restriction that may possibly be yet another form of marginalization? But if Christian

scholarship is not concerned with God, Scripture or Church, what then *does* it mean to do "Christian" scholarship?

Another nagging question Foucault raises is that of moral relativism. Foucault's typically postmodern denial of one truth, one master narrative, one privileged discourse seems radically opposed to Christ as the truth and the way, to the master narrative written by God Himself, and to Scripture as a privileged discourse. Foucault, however, does not openly assert that truth and reality do not exist but rather that human beings have no direct access to that truth and reality, that reality and truth are always mediated by language, the conceptual system that empowers yet limits our thought and that is so culture-specific.

Although this epistemological relativism is not inconsistent with Christian belief, in those who follow Foucault it quickly elides into a moral relativism. Indeed, if Foucault does not himself assert moral relativism, it may only be because he does not believe that he can assert any moral claims or rules that should be applied to all. His concerns are always personal, immediate, specific to him and whatever issue he is considering. Foucault's particularistic, if not overtly relativistic, approach to morality would undermine the Christian experience as a communal one based on moral absolutes. Foucault's focus on the individual and specific may lead to a system where individuals become disconnected moral atoms, unable to form any community deeper than the momentary alliance.

The other possibility, of course, is to use Foucault's comprehension of the constructed nature of our concepts and experience to define Christianity exclusively as a communal, creedal experience, a sub-culture that helps construct the individual. Defining Christianity in this way tends to elide the individual's unique relation to God, to make this experience invisible, to segregate it as personal and interior. Personal faith experience and communal creed are conflated and the former disappears. We return to a system that totalizes individuals and specificities while another piece of the self becomes dictated by outside power interests.

For evangelical Christians who live an individual relationship to God in the context of a creedal community and with the purpose of serving the world around them, both extremes are uncomfortable. There appears no obvious, intellectually honest and comfortable way to connect individual and community without doing an injustice to one side or the other. What Foucault points to is the need to articulate a theory that allows for an individual, personalized, experiential faith within a communal context. What is salutary here is also what challenges us most. Reminding us not to

close issues too glibly, not to assert too categorically a reductive identity, not to fill in too quickly the uncomfortable spaces created by questions, Foucault helps us create an inner space where our faith can grow and develop. He offers us a dark night of the mind, if not the soul, a potential source of deeper and richer faith.

I do not wish to imply that Foucault and Christianity are an easy fit or that Foucault has a hidden Christian character. His rejection of Christianity[24] and of Christian truth claims place him in direct opposition to basic doctrine. And how is a Christian to accept a de-centered view of history, a history where no movements, no issues have clearly delineated beginnings or ends or centers? What would such a history do to Creation, the incarnation, the crucifixion and the final judgment? Can these be understood in ways that still permit a de-centered epistemological relativism? And can a Christian have faith in a transcendent God and yet also accept the epistemological relativism that Foucault offers? What is the relation between moral relativism, epistemological relativism (conjugated over time and space), and a God who is *the Truth*?

At what point does agreeing to examine only small corners of influence, tiny movements and resistances, currents and counter-currents, without ever venturing a broader view that might risk reductionism – at what point does this careful epistemological relativism push us towards an inevitable moral relativism? If the Christian literary critic agrees to move from the consideration of History to that of "histories", accumulating the small connections that allow us to detect "the sheer intricacy and unavoidability of exchanges between culture and power" (Veeser, xi), has he given away too much, has he diminished literature[25], has he undermined objective meaning and thus the reality of God's truth?

Foucault certainly provides no clear answer. He never attempts to leave us with a clear, well-delineated, neatly organized, smoothly packaged view of reality. But he does teach us humility about how little we can assert with certainty. He reminds us to stop assessing the past in the light of present truths that had no part in the past. He warns us away from ambitious projects tracing historical continuities, projects that assume "that words [keep] their meaning, that desires still [point] in a single direction, and that ideas [retain] their logic" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", 139).

The Christian Foucauldian may hope to restore mystery, strangeness and richness to God's created world by refusing to reduce the complexity and contradictions of text and history to any simple formula, by asking questions more than providing answers, by opening new discourses, new

avenues of exploration. She may welcome Foucault's encouragement to think more strategically about the real dilemmas of critical stance and personal/communal identity facing us. She may heed his urging by deciding to work for small victories, in small arenas, to take little steps, to engage in the gradual building of bridges, the slow construction of connections, the patient elaboration of sites of conjunction and convergence with the world of our non-Christian colleagues. This journal promises to be one such step.

NOTES

[1] Because Foucault tries to deal with each issue, each event, in its unique specificity, his writings differ greatly from one book to the next, from one topic to another. This variability stems, however, from a *consistent* determination to not reduce human complexity by the application of unified theoretical systems.

[2] These would include *Madness and Civilization, The Archeology of Knowledge, The Discourse on Language,* and much of *The Order of Things.*

[3] In *The Discourse on Language* Foucault refers to archeologies as "the 'critical' group which sets the reversal-principle to work" . These archeologies examine statements, trying to show "how they are formed, in answer to which needs, how they are modified and displaced, which constraints they have effectively exercised, to what extent they have been worked on." (231)

[4] These constitute many of Foucault's best known books: *The Order of Things* (in part); *The Birth of the Clinic; Language, Counter-Memory, Practice; Discipline and Punish;* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume I.*

[5] In contrast to archeologies, genealogies examine "how series of discourse are formed through, in spite of, or with the aid of ... systems of constraint: what were the specific norms for each, and what were their conditions of appearance, growth and variation." (*The Discourse on Language*, 232). Foucault also contrasts archeology and genealogy methodologically. The former applies the reversal-principle while the

latter applies the other three principles (discontinuity, specificity, and exteriority) (231).

[6] The most important examples of problematizations are *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2 (The Use of Pleasure); The History of Sexuality, Volume 3 (The Care of the Self)* and the collection of essays and interviews *Power/Knowledge*.

[7] To imply in this brief summary that Foucault can somehow be reduced to this method immediately distorts him. "Each of his books is determined by concerns and approaches specific to it and should not be understood as developing or deploying a theory or a method that is a general instrument of intellectual progress." (Gutting, 2) Nonetheless, these elements are recurring motifs, played with multiple variations throughout Foucault's work and thus constitute a good way to introduce his thought.

[8] As an example of how we must question the concepts whose inherent essential reality we take for granted, Foucault notes that "after all, 'literature' and 'politics' are recent categories which can be applied to medieval culture, or even classical culture, only by a retrospective hypothesis, and by an interplay of formal analogies or semantic resemblances; but neither literature, nor politics, nor philosophy and the sciences articulated the field of discourse, in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, as they did in the nineteenth century" (*The Archeology of Knowledge*, 22).

[9] Foucault's interest in sexuality stems, I believe, not only from a wish to valorize his personal sexual orientation, but from the same source as his interest in politics, from his belief that language is intimately connected to desire and power. "In appearance, speech may well be of little account, but the prohibitions surrounding it soon reveal its links with *desire* and *power*. ... [S]peech is not merely the medium which manifests – or dissembles – desire; it is also *the object of desire*. Similarly, ... speech is no mere verbalisation of conflicts and systems of domination, ... it is *the very object of man's conflicts*." [italics mine] (*The Discourse on Language*, 216).

[10] In *Madness and Civilization* Foucault shows that the segregation of the insane and the elaboration of the concept of madness stem not from an

increasingly well-reasoned and caring social consciousness but from the need, once leprosy virtually disappeared from Europe, to find a new scapegoat for the moral values previously attached to the leper. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume I,* Foucault reverses the traditional view of modern times as liberating sexuality from the rigid taboos of the Victorian era. Instead he notes that the Victorian era is characterized by a profusion of discourse relating to sexuality; sexuality becomes a way of increasing a disciplinary knowledge and control of the individual. The modern era, far from liberating us from the Victorian, is merely continuing the disciplinary practices set in motion in the nineteenth century, moving from control by focused repression to control by focused stimulation. Likewise in *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault shows that the disappearance of public torture and the incarceration of criminals for the purpose of rehabilitation are not the culmination of an increasingly rational and humane consciousness; instead they serve the interests of a state no longer identified with the person of the King, but instead conceived as an abstract entity.

[11] This article is included in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice.*

[12] "From this point of view, there is no such thing as a latent statement [i.e. a secret meaning hidden beneath a statement]: for what one is concerned with is the *fact of language*" [italics and brackets mine](*The Archeology of Knowledge*, 109).

[13] In *The Archeology of Knowledge,* Foucault attaches his work to the model of Georges Canguilhem whose analyses "show that the history of a concept is not wholly and entirely that of its progressive refinement, its continuously increasing rationality, its abstraction gradient, but that of its successive rules of use, that of the many theoretical contexts in which it developed and matured." Foucault's work, like Canguilhem's, strives to include "the *displacements* and *transformations* of concepts" (4).

[14] In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault notes that "one does not subject the multiplicity of statements to the coherence of concepts, and this coherence to the silent recollection of a meta-historical ideality; one establishes the inverse series: one replaces the pure aims of non-contradiction in a complex network of conceptual compatibility and incompatibility " (62).

[15] Thus, in "Prison Talk", Foucault states: "I adopt the methodical precaution and the radical but unaggressive skepticism which make it a principle not to regard the point in time where we are now standing as the outcome of a teleological progression which it would be one's business to reconstruct historically, that skepticism regarding ourselves and what we are, our here and now, which prevents one from assuming that what we have is better than – or more than – in the past. This doesn't mean not attempting to reconstruct generative processes, but that we must do this without imposing on them a positivity or a valorisation." (*Power/Knowledge*, 49-50).

[16] Thus, in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault notes that in the new type of history he wishes to write, "[t]he unity of discourses on madness would not be based upon the existence of the object 'madness', or the constitution of a single horizon of objectivity; it would be the interplay of the rules that make possible the appearance of objects during a given period of time. ...[It would be] the interplay of the rules that define the transformations of these different objects, their non-identity through time, the break produced in them, the internal discontinuity that suspends their permanence. Paradoxically, to define a group of statements in terms of its individuality would be *to define the dispersion of these objects, to grasp all the interstices that separate them, to measure the distances that reign between them* – in other words, to formulate their law of division" [italics mine] (32-33).

[17] The Fall need not necessarily be put in question by this view. Foucault would not necessarily deny a movement from good to bad. He calls in question the assertion of a uniform, consistent direction to history. He also suggests that those who assert that a particular moment in history was an example of some original perfection (true Christianity, true Marxism, real community, etc.) misread history for a purpose. The construction of this "pure origin" is often a way of validating a specific agenda or project which is presented, of course, as merely being a return to a lost pure origin when in fact it is really the desire to move in a new direction.

[18] "[D]iscourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may

be determined. It is a space of exteriority in which a network of distinct sites is deployed. ...: [I]t is neither by recourse to a transcendental subject nor by recourse to a psychological subjectivity that the regulation of its enunciations should be defined" (*The Archeology of Knowledge*, 55).

[19] This article is included in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice.*

[20] Deleuze uses this felicitous expression in "Intellectuals and Power", an interview with Foucault provided in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (208). Foucault himself speaks of using "tools" ("Intellectuals and Power", 208) and "gadgets" ("Questions on Geography", 65; in *Power/Knowledge*).

[21] Foucault notes in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2* that one can not equate Christian concerns over sexual morality with pagan concerns over sexual morality. These apparently identical concerns mean very different things when placed in different contexts (20-21).

[22] I do not mean to slip effortlessly over this term as though its meaning were self-evident. On the contrary, what such scholarship means and how it would be configured are precisely what Foucault helps us realize is a major issue.

[23] That Foucault should be of particular benefit to Christians is ironic, for Foucault perceives Christianity as an enemy to responsible thought. Although he mostly criticizes traditional Christian discourse which he sees as a fundamental tool in the alienated relationship of self to self that modern disciplinary régimes generate and that help sustain those power systems, some of his criticisms apply to evangelical Christianity as well. And in any case we can not simply narrow our definition of "true Christianity" to distance ourselves from the real-life versions of Christianity that surround us. Foucault denounces the mental fabrication of a "real Marxism" or "real Christianity". Such an idealized entity has no real, lived out example and is often posited to distance ourselves from the actual human interactions generated by a theory.

[24] Often moral relativism or a certain variety thereof is more strongly pronounced in those who see themselves as Foucault's followers. Certain the elision from epistemological to moral relativism is an issue always

implicit in Foucault's method and always therefore a source of questions and issues for the Christian scholar.

[25] John Cox seems to feel so when he criticizes Louis Montrose's New Historicist article on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for revealing in the play a semi-allegory about Queen Elizabeth I and her holding power as an unattached woman in a world dominated by men. Surely, there is more to the play than just this, Cox muses (Walhout, 263). He misses the point. Foucault does not invite us to be reductive, but additive. Montrose adds to our comprehension of the complicated echoes which the work could have evoked for its audience and thus restores complexity to the multi-layered relation between text and world.

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