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MICHEL FOUCAULT

AESTHETICS, METHOD, AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Edited by
JAMES D. FAUBION

Translated by
ROBERT HURLEY AND OTHERS

ESSENTIAL WORKS OF
FOUCAULT
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This project of a "round table," when it was proposed to me, seemed very interesting but obviously rather imposing. I suggest an expedient: some themes concerning *the techniques of interpretation* of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.

In reality, behind these themes, there is a dream: to be able one day to compile a kind of general corpus, an encyclopedia of all the techniques of interpretation that we have come to know from the Greek grammarians to our own day. I believe that, until now, few chapters of this great corpus of all the techniques of interpretation have been edited.

It seems to me that it would be possible, by way of general introduction to this idea of a history of the techniques of interpretation, to say this: Language—in any case, language in the Indo-European cultures—has always given birth to two kinds of suspicions:

- First of all, the suspicion that language does not mean exactly what it says. The meaning that one grasps, and that is immediately manifest, is perhaps in reality only a lesser meaning that protects, confines, and yet in spite of everything transmits another meaning, the latter being at once the stronger meaning and the "underlying" meaning. This is what the Greeks called *allegoria* and *huponoiia*.

*This essay originally appeared in *Cahiers de Royaumont* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), vol. 4: *Nietzsche*, pp. 183–200. It stems from the July 1964 Royaumont colloquium. This translation, by Jon Anderson and Gary Hentzi, has been slightly amended.

- On the other hand, language gives birth to this other suspicion: It exceeds its merely verbal form in some way, and there are indeed other things in the world which speak and which are not language. After all, it could be that nature, the sea, the rustling of trees, animals, faces, masks, crossed swords, all of these speak; perhaps there is language that articulates itself in a manner that is not verbal. This would be, if you like, very roughly, the Greek's *semainon*.

These two suspicions, which one sees already appearing with the Greeks, have not disappeared, and they are still with us, since we have once again begun to believe, specifically since the nineteenth century, that mute gestures, that illnesses, that all the tumult around us can also speak; and more than ever we are listening in on all this possible language, trying to intercept, beneath the words, a discourse that would be more essential.

I believe that each culture—I mean to say each cultural form in Western civilization—has had its system of interpretation, its techniques, its methods, its own ways of suspecting that language means something other than what it says, and of suspecting that there is language other than in language. It seems, then, that one could inaugurate the enterprise of making the system, or the “table,” as they used to say in the seventeenth century, of all these systems of interpretation.

In order to understand what system of interpretation the nineteenth century founded, and so in turn what system of interpretation we, too, even now are involved in, it seems to me necessary to take a remote reference point, a type of technique that could exist, for example, in the sixteenth century. In that period, what provided a *place* for interpretation, both its general site and the minimal unity that interpretation had to maintain, was resemblance. Whenever things resembled each other, wherever *that* was similar, something wanted to be said and could be deciphered; the important role that resemblance, and all the notions that revolve around it like satellites, played in the cosmology, in the botany, in the zoology, in the philosophy of the sixteenth century is well known. Actually, to twentieth-century eyes, this whole network of similitudes is rather confused and tangled. In fact, the corpus of resemblance in the sixteenth century

was perfectly organized. There were at least five perfectly defined notions:

- The notion of conformability, *convenientia*, which is adjustment (for example, of the soul to the body, or of the animal series to the vegetable series).
- The notion of *sympatheia*, sympathy, which is the identity of accidents in distinct substances.
- The notion of *emulatio*, which is the very curious parallelism of attributes in distinct substances or beings, such that the attributes of one are like the reflections of those of another. (Thus Porta explains that the human face is, with its seven distinguishable parts, the emulation of the sky with its seven planets.)
- The notion of *signatura*, signature, which is, among the visible properties of an individual, the image of an invisible and hidden property.
- And then, of course, the notion of *analogy*, which is the identity of relations between two or more distinct substances.

In this period, then, the theory of the sign and the techniques of interpretation were based on a perfectly clear definition of all the possible types of resemblance, and they formed the basis of two perfectly distinct types of knowledge: *cognitio*, which was the transition, in some lateral fashion, from one resemblance to another; and *divinatio*, which was knowledge in depth, going from a superficial resemblance to a deeper resemblance. All these resemblances manifest the *consensus* of the world that grounds them; they are opposed to the *simulacrum*, the false resemblance, which is based on the dissension between God and the Devil.

If these sixteenth-century techniques of interpretation were left in suspension by the evolution of Western thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, if the Baconian critique, the Cartesian critique of resemblance certainly played a major role in bracketing them, the nineteenth century—and particularly Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—have put us back into the presence of a new possibility of

interpretation; they have founded once again the possibility of a hermeneutic.

The first volume of *Capital*, texts like *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Genealogy of Morals*, and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, put us back into the presence of interpretive techniques. And the shock effect, the kind of wound caused in Western thought by these works, probably comes from what they reconstituted before our eyes, something, moreover, that Marx himself called "hieroglyphs." This has put us into an uncomfortable position, since these techniques of interpretation concern us ourselves, since we, the interpreters, have begun to interpret ourselves by these techniques. With these techniques of interpretation, in turn, we must interrogate those interpreters who were Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx, so that we are perpetually sent back in a perpetual play of mirrors.

Freud says somewhere that there are three great narcissistic wounds in Western culture:¹ the wound inflicted by Copernicus; the one made by Darwin, when he discovered that man descended from the ape; and the wound made by Freud himself, when he in turn discovered that consciousness rests on the unconscious. I wonder whether one could not say that Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx, by involving us in a task of interpretation that always reflects back on itself, have not constituted around us, and for us, these mirrors in which we are given back images whose perennial wounds form our narcissism today. In any case—and it is to this end that I would like to make some suggestions—it seems to me that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud have not in some way multiplied the signs in the Western world. They have not given a new meaning to things that had no meaning. They have in reality changed the nature of the sign and modified the fashion in which the sign can in general be interpreted.

The first question that I wanted to pose is this: Have not Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche profoundly modified the space of distribution in which signs can be signs?

In the period that I have taken as a point of reference, in the sixteenth century, signs were disposed in a homogeneous fashion in a space that was itself homogeneous in all directions. The signs of the earth referred to the sky, but they referred to the subterranean world as well; they referred from man to animal, from animal to plant, and reciprocally. Beginning in the nineteenth century, with Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, signs were ranged in a much more differentiated space, according to a dimension that could be called that of depth

[*profondeur*], as long as this is not taken to mean interiority, but on the contrary exteriority.

I think in particular of the long debate that Nietzsche never ceased to carry on with depth. There is in Nietzsche a critique of ideal depth, of depth of conscience, which he denounces as an invention of philosophers; this depth would be the pure and interior search for truth. Nietzsche shows how it implies resignation, hypocrisy, the mask; so that the interpreter must, when he examines signs in order to denounce them, descend along the vertical line and show that this depth of interiority is in reality something other than what it says. Consequently, it is necessary that the interpreter descend, that he be, as Nietzsche says, "the good excavator of the lower depths."²

But, in reality, when one interprets one can trace this descending line only to restore the glittering exteriority that was covered up and buried. For if the interpreter must go to the bottom himself, like an excavator, the movement of interpretation is, on the contrary, that of a projection [*surplomb*], of a more and more elevated projection, which always leaves depth above it to be displayed in a more and more visible fashion; and depth is now restored as an absolutely superficial secret, in such a way that the flight of the eagle, the ascension of the mountain, all the verticality that is so important in Zarathustra is in the strict sense the reversal of depth, the discovery that depth was only a game and a surface fold. To the extent that the world becomes deeper under our gaze, we perceive that everything which elicited man's depth was only child's play.

I wonder whether this spatiality, this game with depth of Nietzsche's spatiality cannot be compared to the apparently different game that Marx carried on with platitude. The concept of platitude in Marx is very important; at the beginning of *Capital*, he explains how, unlike Perseus, he must plunge into the fog to show that, in fact, there are no monsters or profound enigmas, because everything profound in the conception that the bourgeoisie has of money, capital, value, and so on, is in reality nothing but platitude.

And, of course, it would be necessary to recall the space of interpretation that Freud constituted, not only in the famous topology of consciousness and the unconscious, but equally in the rules that he formulated for psychoanalytic treatment, and the analyst's deciphering of what is said in the course of the spoken "chain." It would be necessary to recall the spatiality, very material after all, to which

Freud attached such importance and which lays out the patient under the overhanging gaze [*regard surplombant*] of the psychoanalyst.

The second theme—which I would like to propose to you is, moreover, somewhat related to the first—is to point out that, beginning with the three men of whom we are now speaking, interpretation has at last become an infinite task.

In truth, it already was in the sixteenth century, but signs referred [*se renvoyaient*] to each other quite simply because resemblance can only be limited. Beginning in the nineteenth century, signs are linked together in an inexhaustible network, itself also infinite, not because they are based on a resemblance without borders but because there is irreducible gaping and openness.

The incompleteness of interpretation, the fact that it is always lacerated and that it remains suspended on its own brink, is found once again, I believe, in a somewhat analogous fashion in Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in the form of the refusal of beginning. Refusal of the “Robinsonade,” said Marx; a distinction, so important in Nietzsche, between the beginning and the origin; and the always-incomplete character of the regressive and analytic process in Freud. It is, above all, in Nietzsche and Freud, moreover, and to a lesser degree in Marx, that one sees delineated this experience, which I believe so important to modern hermeneutics: the farther one goes in interpretation, the closer one comes at the same time to an absolutely dangerous region where interpretation not only will find its point of return but where it will disappear as interpretation, perhaps involving the disappearance of the interpreter himself. The existence that always approached the absolute point of interpretation would be at the same time that of a point of rupture.

It is well known how, in Freud, the discovery of this structurally open, structurally gaping character of interpretation was progressively made. It was made first in a very allusive manner, quite veiled by itself, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, when Freud analyzes his own dreams and invokes reasons of modesty or of nondisclosure of a personal secret in order to interrupt himself.

In the analysis of Dora, the idea appears that interpretation must indeed be halted, not be allowed to go through to the end in consideration of something that will be called “transference” some years later. Furthermore, the inexhaustibility of analysis asserts itself across the entire study of transference in the infinite and infinitely problematic

character of the relationship of analysand to analyst, a relationship that is clearly constitutive for psychoanalysis, which opens the space in which psychoanalysis never ceases to deploy itself without ever being able to complete itself.

In Nietzsche, too, it is clear that interpretation is always incomplete. What is philosophy for him if not a kind of philology continually in suspension, a philology without end, always farther unrolled, a philology that would never be absolutely fixed? Why? As he says in *Beyond Good and Evil*, it is because “to perish from absolute knowledge could well form part of the basis of being.”⁵ And yet he has shown in *Ecce homo* how near he was to this absolute knowledge that forms part of the basis of Being. Likewise, in the course of the autumn of 1888 at Turin.

If in Freud’s correspondence one deciphers his perpetual worries from the moment that he discovered psychoanalysis, one can wonder whether Freud’s experience is not, after all, rather similar to that of Nietzsche. What is in question in the point of rupture of interpretation, in this convergence of interpretation on a point that renders it impossible, could well be something like the experience of madness.

An experience against which Nietzsche fought and by which he was fascinated; an experience against which Freud himself struggled, not without anguish, all of his life. This experience of madness would be the sanction of a movement of interpretation that approaches its center at infinity and that collapses, charred.

This essential incompleteness of interpretation is, I believe, linked to two other principles, also fundamental, which would constitute, with the first two of which I have just spoken, the postulates of modern hermeneutics. First of all, if interpretation can never be completed, this is quite simply because there is nothing to interpret. There is nothing absolutely primary to interpret, for after all everything is already interpretation, each sign is in itself not the thing that offers itself to interpretation but an interpretation of other signs.

There is never, if you like, an *interpretandum* that is not already *interpretans*, so that it is as much a relationship of violence as of elucidation that is established in interpretation. Indeed, interpretation does not clarify a matter to be interpreted, which offers itself passively; it can only seize, and violently, an already-present interpretation, which it must overthrow, upset, shatter with the blows of a hammer.

One sees this already in Marx, who interprets not the history of the relations of production but a relation already offering itself as an interpretation, since it appears as nature. Likewise, Freud interprets not signs but interpretations. Indeed, what does Freud discover beneath symptoms? He does not discover, as is said, "traumas"; he brings to light *phantasms* with their burden of anguish, that is, a kernel that is itself already in its own being an interpretation. Anorexia, for example, does not refer to weaning, as the signifier refers to the signified; rather, anorexia, as a sign, a symptom to be interpreted, refers to phantasms of the bad maternal breast, which is itself an interpretation, which is already in itself a speaking body. This is why Freud has nothing to interpret other than what in the language of his patients is offered to him as symptoms; his interpretation is the interpretation of an interpretation, in the terms in which this interpretation is given. It is well known that Freud invented the "superego" [*surmoi*] the day that a patient said to him: "I feel a dog over me" [*je sens un chien sur moi*"].

In the same manner, Nietzsche seizes interpretations that have already seized each other. For Nietzsche, there is no original signified. Words themselves are nothing but interpretations, throughout their history they interpret before being signs, and ultimately they signify only because they are essentially nothing but interpretations. Witness the famous etymology of *agathos*.⁴ This is also what Nietzsche means when he says that words have always been invented by the ruling classes; they do not denote a signified, they impose an interpretation. Consequently, it is not because there are primary and enigmatic signs that we are now dedicated to the task of interpreting but because there are interpretations, because there is always the great tissue of violent interpretations beneath everything that speaks. It is for this reason that there are signs, signs that prescribe to us the interpretation of their interpretation, that enjoin us to overturn them as signs. In this sense one can say that *allēgoria* and *huponoiā* are at the bottom of language and before it, not just what slipped after the fact from beneath words in order to displace them and make them vibrate but what gave birth to words, what makes them glitter with a luster that is never fixed. This is also why the interpreter, for Nietzsche, is the "authentic one"; he is the "true one," not just because he seizes a sleeping truth in order to proclaim it but because he pronounces the interpretation that all truth functions to cover up. Perhaps this primacy of

interpretation with respect to signs is what is most decisive in modern hermeneutics.

The idea that interpretation precedes the sign implies that the sign is not a simple and benevolent being, as was still the case in the sixteenth century, when the plethora of signs, the fact that things resembled each other, simply proved the benevolence of God and separated the sign from the signifier by only a transparent veil. On the contrary, beginning with the nineteenth century, beginning with Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, it seems to me that the sign becomes malevolent; I mean that there is in the sign an ambiguous and somewhat suspicious form of ill will and "malice" [*malveillance*]. And this is to the extent that the sign is already an interpretation that does not appear as such. Signs are interpretations that try to justify themselves, and not the reverse.

Thus money functions in the way that one sees it defined in the *Critique of Political Economy* and above all in the first volume of *Capital*. Thus symptoms function in Freud. And in Nietzsche, words, justice, binary classifications of Good and Evil, and consequently signs, are masks. In acquiring this new function of covering up interpretation, the sign loses its simple signifying being, which is still possessed in the Renaissance; its own density comes as though to open itself up, and all the negative concepts that had until then remained foreign to the theory of the sign can hurl themselves into the opening. The theory of the sign knew only the transparent and scarcely negative moment of the veil. Now a whole play of negative concepts, of contradictions, of oppositions, in short, the whole play of reactive forces that Deleuze has analyzed so well in his book on Nietzsche will be able to organize itself in the interior of the sign.

"To stand the dialectic back on its feet": if this expression must have a meaning, would it not be precisely to have put back into the density of the sign, into this open space, without end, gaping, into this space without real content or reconciliation, all this play of negativity that the dialectic, at last, had unleashed by giving it a positive meaning?

Finally, the last characteristic of hermeneutics: interpretation finds itself with the obligation to interpret itself to infinity, always to resume. From which, two important consequences. The first is that interpretation will henceforth always be interpretation by "whom?"

One does not interpret what is in the signified, but one interprets after all: *who* posed the interpretation. The basis of interpretation is nothing but the interpreter, and this is perhaps the meaning that Nietzsche gave to the word "psychology." The second consequence is that interpretation must always interpret itself and cannot fail to turn back on itself. In opposition to the time of signs, which is a time of definite terms [*l'échéance*], and in opposition to the time of dialectic, which is linear in spite of everything, there is a time of interpretation, which is circular. This time is obliged to go back over where it has already been, which after all constitutes the only risk that interpretation really runs—but it is a supreme risk, which signs paradoxically cause it to run. The death of interpretation is to believe that there are signs, signs that exist primarily, originally, actually, as coherent, pertinent, and systematic marks.

The life of interpretation, on the contrary, is to believe that there are only interpretations. It seems to me necessary to understand what too many of our contemporaries forget, that hermeneutics and semiology are two fierce enemies. A hermeneutic that in effect falls back on a semiology believes in the absolute existence of signs: it abandons the violence, the incompleteness, the infinity of interpretations in order to enthrone the terror of the index or to suspect language. Here we recognize Marxism after Marx. On the contrary, a hermeneutic that wraps itself in itself enters the domain of languages which do not cease to implicate themselves, that intermediate region of madness and pure language. It is there that we recognize Nietzsche.

NOTES

- 1 See Sigmund Freud, "Eine Schwierigkeit der Psychoanalyse" ["One of the Difficulties of Psychoanalysis" (1917), in *Sigmund Freud; Collected Papers*, ed. Ernest Jones, trans. Joan Riviere, (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), pp. 347–56].
- 2 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Morgenröthe* (Leipzig: Naumann 1881 [*The Dawn of Day*, trans. J. M. Kennedy, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy, vol. 9 (London: Foulis, 1911), p. 230].
- 3 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (Leipzig: Nauman, 1886) (*Beyond Good and Evil*, in *The complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 12, ed. Oscar Levy, trans. Helen Zimmern (London: Foulis; 1911), pp. 53–54].
- 4 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (Leipzig: Naumann, 1887) [*On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1968), pp. 4–5].