Aesthetic Investigations and Foucauldian Practices

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Abstract
In the years since Foucault’s death in 1984, his works have gained an ever-widening circle of adherents and, more importantly, have been the basis for innumerable critical studies in fields as far ranging as sociobiology and legal ethics. Foucault’s enormous intellectual range and ability to traverse disciplines have made him especially useful to cultural studies. Within cultural studies, concepts such as the panopticon, the episteme, and the specific intellectual have been readily adopted; however, cultural studies practitioners often fail to grasp the specificity of Foucault’s critical interventions or their internal complexity. In the following essay, I look first at how a few critics have employed Foucault in their work. I then turn to a text Foucault himself edited and taught, I Pierre Riviere, in hopes of locating a core of residual energy that cannot be readily pressed into the service of an overarching theory or method. In sum, this essay suggests that while we may readily accept Foucault’s influence and usefulness for different fields, we should not overlook the specific context in which Foucault’s own work occurs or, more generally, overlook a resistance in post-structuralism to being transformed into a systematic and coherent enterprise.

Keywords
aesthetic, history, Foucault, I Pierre Riviere, Nietzsche, cultural studies

In the 1990’s, the diminishing prestige of post-structuralism in English departments coupled with the rising star of cultural studies provoked some critics to deliberate on whether “theory” had lost its edge, and if so, why. Theory, of course, is still done; however, it tends to be subsumed within a more capacious rubric, such as New Historicism or gender studies, as if detached from such materialist concerns it would simply dry up and float away. Recent assessments of the post-structuralist legacy in the U.S. by critics have focused on the ideological pitfalls in their own discipline, English literature, as it responds to this apparent drying up of theoretical discourse. Paul Bove, for example, in The Wake of Theory (1992), laments the paltry dividends theory offered
literature departments—or the world for that matter—when measured against the intensity of its most radical formulations. Richard Rorty, in extolling a “private” language of poets and theorists precisely for having no possible relation to the world they wish to describe, tacitly acknowledges the failure of French post-structuralism to address real-world concerns. For Rorty, Derrida’s thought does not contribute to an understanding of society or provide a moral agenda, but resides within its own singular and idiosyncratic poetic landscape. As he puts it: “Ironist theorists like Hegel, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault seem to me invaluable in our attempt to form a private self-image, but pretty much useless when it comes to politics” (Rorty 83). Other elegant post-mortems have come from Geoffrey Bennington and John Ellis.¹

Cultural studies, as Anthony Easthope notes in Literary into Cultural Studies (1991), represent an ongoing change in value: the new media of television, film, and popular music supplant canonical literature, while multiculturalism, feminism, and a still latent Marxism undermine a humanist tradition now seen as based on patriarchy and misogyny. This is a stereotype, of course. Yet it is undeniably true that the customary distinction between high and low culture that maintained in the days, say, of Lionel Trilling and Edmund Wilson, no longer applies to a post-modern milieu of cyberspace and long-distance learning. English professors are seen as either technicians or service workers, depending on which paradigm one chooses. Though Easthope does not directly address the waning of theory, we do see that the loss of literary prestige influences the impact of literary theory: “The high culture/popular culture opposition was founded in a conception of value: while literary value is present in the canonical work, it is absent from the texts of popular culture” (42). This assumption no longer holds water.

If “pure” theory is slowly giving way to cultural studies, one could not thereby conclude that theory has been wholly excised from English departments. If anything, its influence has seeped into all corners of the academy, particular in relation to putatively non-literary areas of concern. In short, one is expected to know theory and to have read

theory—if not to practice it. In cultural studies, the one figure one should know is Michel Foucault. Foucault’s reinvention within cultural studies was not prophesied by Lawrence Kritzman, who gave outlet to this eloquent tribute at the end of his introduction to the book of essays and interviews, *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture* (1982): “Michel Foucault’s death in 1984 at the age of fifty-eight created an enormous void in the French intellectual scene” (ix). Even more pointed is the following comment: “But Foucault is now gone. France suffers from the passivity of its intellectuals and faces a horizon of despair” (xxv). At an MLA convention a few years back, Kritzman could not point to any new cultural or intellectual vistas in France, instead suggesting that the country had succumbed to a comfortable egalitarianism (read: mediocrity) much like the U.S. and a headlong pursuit of unvarnished consumption. And yet Foucault, and to almost as great an extent Walter Benjamin, live on in ever changing contexts: in media studies, in feminism, in various other domains.

One reason for Foucault’s importance is that cultural studies demands a theoretical scaffolding to bolster its interdisciplinary activities and that Foucault provides it. In “What Is an Author?”, Foucault writes of the disappearing subject as an absent content within a still contoured space. In examining a writer’s legacy, we must therefore “reexamine the empty space left by the author’s disappearance; we should attentively observe, along its gaps and fault lines, its new demarcations, and the reapportionment of this void” (121). When the empirical self dies, the process of assembling a singular, homogenous, master-text begins. Foucault goes on to question the totalizing conclusiveness of this finished corpus, and the presumed finality it brings. Foucault suggests that a collection of singular writings can never be reduced to a totalized body of work and, lacking such a corpus, the task of the critic must be to trace the contours of this vanished subject. To render this thought into layman’s terms, the varied and at times questionable use of Foucault by later critics may not necessarily be a bad thing. It would be a mistake, however, for such critics to presume a single center from which a dominant system could be extracted.

Unfortunately, some cultural studies critics tend to reduce Foucault’s work to a

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2 Both Derrida and Foucault are influenced by Nietzsche, a writer whose “corpus” does not yield (although Heidegger disagrees) a single coherent philosophy.
series of master-tropes in hopes of securing a coherent model to support their own work. In the following essay, I wish to briefly look at how a few critics in the cultural studies camp have situated Foucault and then suggest how Foucault’s own work, in one respect, eludes the very relevant discourses he helped authorize and through which he is sanctified today. The critics I have chosen to examine are symptomatic of a tendency to make Foucault relevant, and while this in itself might be a worthy effort, it risks minimizing the truly interesting and unusual aspects of Foucault’s work.

I. Specters of Foucault

Ideology. Foucault does not often use this freighted term. In fact, one could trace through this absence the path of his contention with Althusser, his contemporary. Foucault instead speaks of discourse. In later work, Foucault developed the idea of the “specific intellectual” to define the new role of opposition in the modern information society. Unlike Sartre’s model of resistance, the “specific intellectual” accepts the conditions imposed by the society and by the institutions in which he/she is engaged. It has proved a useful term for cultural studies. Tony Bennett introduces the Foucauldian model in his essay “Useful Culture” in order to disembarrass aging leftist critics of their nostalgia, their desire to return to a “moment of pure politics—a return to 1968—in whose name any traffic with the government can be written off as a sell-out” (67). Skeptical of the romantic nostalgia which drives Raymond Williams’s “oversentimental attachment to the patriarchal forms of Welsh working-class culture” (69), Bennett eschews all overtly humanistic Marxist rhetoric in favor of a more particularized view of modern culture. Bennett, a sympathetic affiliate of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, prefers the correlative term “cultural technician” as a means of problematizing the Marxist’s resistance to the idea that power only functions within institutions, and not outside them. The “cultural technician” does not try to escape power, but to accept the role of power in and outside of cultural institutions. No “pure,” unincorporated space exists outside the corporate machines of destruction.

I interpret Bennett’s critique and appropriation of Foucault as a strategic move
within an ongoing critique of the Marxist tradition. He is interested in Foucault not because he wishes to validate discursive practices, but to force left leaning intellectuals to cease clinging to the illusory belief in a point de resistance outside institutional power. Bennet believes the savvy cultural theorist should disembarass him/herself from a meager idealism, claiming that false ideologies (and all ideologies are false by Marxist definition) can be dispelled through the proper intervention and, as Foucault did with Sartre, banish the myth of the intellectual who is “engaged in the struggle for consciousness by means of techniques of cultural commentary” (82). The new “technician,” and here Bennett employs a Brechtian term to designate someone who tinkers with the internal workings of the institution, is absorbed in the process of analyzing the process by which cultural products, such as art, recreation, and so forth, are arranged for public consumption, offered through ideological training as “education,” and used to form national prerogatives.

Bennet’s “cultural technician” extends Foucault’s “specific intellectual” to the institutionalized sphere of culture and, in so doing, critiques the humanistic based Marxism of Williams and Hoggart. What makes Bennett, a British critic with roots in the Birmingham school, simpatico with American cultural studies lies in his claim for the equalizing power of non-literary, non-canonical culture. According to Bennett, we must study the role cultural works play in public consumption, their function within mass culture, and avoid taking refuge in an ideal of high art. This leveling of the aesthetic, a view Walter Benjamin also professed, stands as a practice, if not avowed tenet, of academic cultural studies today, and has in the American context pitted the standard-bearers of literary culture against the presumed destroyers of aesthetic culture.

John Murphy, in Postmodern Social Analysis and Criticism (1989), also cites the “specific intellectual” to argue that the intellectual in society cannot escape the pervasiveness of power as it circulates throughout every stratum of society. Rather than tinkering with the social and cultural engine as Bennett argues, Murphy suggests that we develop a social and political ethics for daily life, an ethics which entails learning a new language as well as confronting our reality. As he notes, “persons must learn to dwell comfortably, yet critically, within their linguistic reality” (124). The notion of
finding comfort amidst the chaotic disparity and flux of modern life, and amid the
wreck of transcendental ideals, produces the odd desire for comfort against the
backdrop of a postmodern world of uncertainty and doubt.

Unfortunately, Murphy’s analysis falls back upon a monolithic definition of
“post-modern” and, to this extent, one could take issue with Murphy’s reliance upon the
“specific intellectual” to overcome theoretical and political flux. If post-structuralism
confronts the reader with disconcerting suggestions about the nature of the world (the
instability of metaphysical categories, the absence of a sovereign self, the limitations to
action), it does not stand to reason that a grand affirmation of uncertainty would affect
in any way the “real” inequity and abuse in the physical world. Murphy’s exuberant
appropriation of the post-modern lexicon is a linguistic salve for post-modern
depression. The irony is that Murphy presumes that his analysis does indeed hold true
for the world, his job being to take the theoretical, and thus abstracted forms of theory,
and hold them accountable. And yet, metaphysical comfort is little comfort at all. We
might further note, via the opening provided by Foucault, that Murphy, in his paean to
post-modern flux, virtually ignores the issue of resistance in Foucault: that space which
operates, not simply within language, but in and around the discursive practices which
constitute the subject.

Another borrowed term from the Foucault lexicon is the “panopticon,” initially
employed by Foucault in his landmark work *Discipline and Punish* (1977), and here we
see the tendency of cultural critics to strip terms of their historical context. Mark Poster,
for example, in his essay “Foucault and Databases,” argues that dominant assumptions
held to be true regarding the potential of databases rest on a patent misunderstanding of
the implications of such machinery for organizing human behavior. Instead, Poster
contends that, in modern society, the database constitutes an incredible extension of the
unrealized powers of Bentham’s design; that it is, in fact, a “superpanopticon” (in
contrast to the Benthamite “panopticon” outlined and explained in depth in Foucault’s
work). The commodification of information, the unimpeded access by commercial
enterprises to the “private” life of the individual, the attendant difficulty of protecting
the privacy of information along with the specious claims made on behalf of the
liberating potential of the database open up an area of debate which, in Poster’s discussion, radically reshapes the notion of the “free” individual. Poster’s importation of the panoptic surveillance apparatus into the information age widens the opening introduced in Foucault’s study of the prison system. The “superpanopticon” is a far more efficient means of harnessing the population, isolating deviants, and guiding popular taste. Like Murphy and Bennett’s “specific intellectual,” Poster challenges the traditional view of the individual as a “free” person outside of institutional control:

Today’s circuits of communication and the databases they generate constitute a Superpanopticon, a system of surveillance without walls, windows, towers or guards. The quantitative advance in the technologies of surveillance result in a qualitative change in the microphysics of power. Technological change, however, is only part of the process. Social security cards, driver’s licenses, credit cards, library cards, and the like—the individual must apply for them, have them ready at all times, use them continuously. Each transaction is recorded, encoded, and added to the data-base. (112)

Spotting deviants, motivating consumption, and guiding popular taste are all within the purview of the machine.

While agreeing with Poster’s basic argument, I would point to differences between his work and Foucault’s precursor text. One immediate difference between Bentham’s prison and the database, besides the obvious historical and structural differences, is that the superpanopticon functions solely through sheer quantification and organization of information, whereas the panopticon correlates with contemporary modes of instruction. For Foucault, the impact of the surveillance apparatus on the school, the hospital, and the barracks is embedded in a principle which, although generalizable, has its specific location and discursive singularity. Bentham’s machine reverses the traditional structure of the dungeon, whose function is to enclose, deprive of light, and hide. It preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Secondly, what Poster doesn’t emphasize, is that the most striking aspect of Bentham’s machine is its simplicity. (At one point Foucault writes that “hierarchized, continuous, and functional surveillance may not be one of the great ‘technical’ inventions of the eighteenth century, but its insidious extension owed its importance to the mechanisms of power that it brought with it”
[176].) Bentham himself understood, though never realizing his scheme, that a revolutionary principle could be embodied in a simple design. Technology presents itself, not as an ever expanding, endlessly diversifying mode of organizing resources and materials for human use, but as the discovery of a simple tool used for complex ends.

The panopticon is thus an ideal model for Foucault; it is “based on a principle,” but its technical limitations are obvious. And it is, he suggests in Discipline and Punish, a generalizable model of functioning” (205). The technological advances described by Poster extrapolate from the original model. Though Bentham’s machine was never actually built, Foucault quotes Bentham to demonstrate how the technology emerges as an outcome of what appear on the surface to be relatively simple transformations in organizational structures. Marching in unison, a correct posture in school, the segregation of hospital patients are all manifestations of a new formation of knowledge/power. It stands at a specific temporal point within the evolution of knowledge-power. Mark Edmundson’s in Literature Against Philosophy: Plato to Derrida (1995), suggests that the importance of the panopticon lies in helping us understand our own age of cyberspace and information systems, but in doing so, he reduces Bentham’s machine to a “tenuous” metaphor and ignores the strategic role of the panopticon within a specific historical discourse. I am reluctant, though, to lose the historical context in Foucault’s work by extrapolating, as Poster does, from the machine to the omnipresent surveillance techniques of the database.

Edmundson’s reading is symptomatic of a tendency to extrapolate concrete particularities and refer to them as metaphors. Homi Bhabha, by contrast, critiques Foucault’s entire theoretical project. In his reading of The Order of Things (1970), Bhabha argues that the representation of the episteme, as it is organized through sudden discontinuous breaks or “ruptures,” is itself disrupted by the intrusion of the post-colonial narrative at the point where the argument would like to expand into an “unproblematic generality.” By not dealing with the experience of colonialism and its history of oppression, Foucault inadvertently opens up a new temporality, which excludes those “others” of history who do not fit: women, the colonized, the enslaved.
Foucault’s reading of the rupture, according to Bhabha, a rupture which would disrupt any call for completeness or conclusion, is structured upon a regime of knowledge that has itself excluded these others.

We could cite other critics of Foucault, and numerous others who have deftly and surgically lifted convenient passages to justify their position, yet I wish to stop here with Bhabha’s assertion of the “other” excluded by Foucault to suggest how “otherness” does play a role in Foucault, and how, if we respect this other, we can locate a particular dimension in his work as a whole that brings us back to our initial concern with relevance.

II. Art and the Other

Bhabha’s analysis of Foucault’s exclusion of post-colonial “others” from his text omits the importance of otherness in Foucault’s own work. Deleuze, in his seminal work *Foucault* (1988), insinuates that in all of Foucault, something resists the markings and extensive deployment of power, something on the margin, on the “fold.” Bhabha’s argument, while ostensibly representing a “real” displacement of “real” people (slaves, women, etc.), seeks to explain, not simply an omission, but a theoretical mistake. Yet, while we may not deny the absence of such figures, we can discuss the role of the “other” in the sense that it is used in Foucault’s work.³

I disagree with Bhabha’s conclusion that Foucault ignores or elides the other, and will demonstrate this by looking at Foucault’s treatment of the 19th-century memoir *I Pierre Riviere*. *I Pierre Riviere* contains, among other things, an autobiography written by Pierre Riviere, a 19th-Century murderer of his family, a set of corollary legal and medical documents by medical doctors, psychologists, and lawyers, and finally, a group

³ I cannot help but note the tendency in cultural studies, not Bhabha per se, to denigrate the perceived dissolving of clear groups, races, physical entities into abstract formations. While such reification, particularly in certain ways of theorizing the “Jew,” is questionable, we should not endorse the current tendency to decry all abstract, all theoretical involvement whatsoever in favor of a grimly non theory-based ideology. Such a tendency tends to assume, wrongly, that one can escape the need for theoretical frameworks altogether. We might too recall Foucault’s debt to the *Annales*, or *Mentalities*, School, which attempts to locate the role of phenomena within history.
of essays written by Foucault and his students. It is the memoir itself, written after the fact and describing, in grisly detail the circumstances of the murder, that attracts most of Foucault’s attention. There are obvious reasons why Foucault would be interested in this case. The issue of madness is crucial, particularly the ability of the defendant to write a lengthy account of his murders, and yet to be considered insane when he committed them. Foucault’s first major work, published as *Madness and Civilization* (1965), develops a model of insanity based on new models of knowledge. At the intersection of competing discourses, Riviere’s memoir is used, depending on its accuser, to either corroborate or refute the claim of madness advanced by his attorney. In insightful essays at the end of the work, Foucault’s students discuss historical accounts of parricide in the 19th-century, the contemporary fascination with “true crime” accounts, and the origins of psychiatry. With this case, we are clearly at the nexus of power and knowledge.

And yet in his Foreword to the book, Foucault states that “it was simply the beauty of Riviere’s memoir” that attracted him to the documents. For this reason, he does not want to submit the memoir as a whole to a critical interpretation or “commentary.” I agree that it would be all too easy to deconstruct the work, yet as a foil to the various discourses that would dissect and analyze Riviere, isolate his symptoms, determine motive and, if a motive can be found, hang the accused, Riviere does, in a way, foil the investigators who have power over him. At the intersection between discourses, his account cannot be reduced to any of them. For modern day investigators, like Foucault and his students, it refuses to be incorporated into a peasant ethnography or “real” account, even as it details the specific conditions of peasant life and the unrelieved pressures which led to the murder. One can almost admire, as Foucault admires, the elusory freedom of the memoir.

Twice more (again in the Foreword and another time in the contributory essay) Foucault praises this quality, first as evidence of a certain kind of madness: “a text in whose beauty some were to see a proof of rationality […] and others a sign of madness” (xi). And, “its beauty alone is sufficient justification for [the memoir] today” (199). We appreciate the banality of the events described by Riviere, sympathize with
his need to end the lives of his tormentors and yet too, we are led, in a Poe-like manner, to dwell minutely on every slight Riviere was forced to endure. Riviere’s encyclopedic enumeration of irritating incidents and misdeeds only reinforces the charge of insanity, and yet such events, pedestrian as many of them are by themselves, are meant to support and justify a calculated and carefully meditated crime. And, perhaps more importantly, does Riviere write the memoir to convince us of his sanity or to disprove it? In short, do we read the narrative naively or with sly psychological cunning?

The effect of medical, legal, and narrative discourses as they overlap and conflict is precisely what interests Foucault. On one level, we could argue that the memoir, written in a futile effort to explain the reasons for committing a crime, evidences sanity, as a crazy man could never lucidly contemplate the reasons for his actions. However, one could argue that the sum of his wounds could not equal the crime and that Riviere, in his tendency to dwell at length on every slight he suffered, is manically obsessed. On the other hand, the writer, Riviere, in a seemingly coarse and “naïve” account may in fact be skillfully manipulating details and structure deliberately to fool his captors, making him by all accounts sane. The work would thus represent a masterful pretense as opposed to an untutored or naïve memoir. The argument for and against momentary insanity (what in women would be seen as hysteria) was an argument used on behalf of the defense to explain the evident incongruity between the fit of rage which led to the attacks and the apparently sober reflections which followed. The basic issue is whether Riviere’s ability to document the motives and circumstances that actuated his grisly deed evidences circumspection, and therefore proves that the defendant was sane.

Then there is the question of Riviere’s motive in writing the memoir. In a section of the work containing expert testimony, Dr. Vastel, who holds a relatively enlightened medical view in comparison with local (country) interests, argues that the defendant is not sane, but suffering from extreme “mental alienation” (125). Vastel suggests a kind of divided consciousness that caused Riviere to first commit the act, then to dwell on it at length until he realized the true gravity of what he had done:

[I]t appeared to him at length as what it actually was, an act of madness. He Then recalled other tales of madmen he had read, decided to express the feelings which really guided
him as if he still felt them, in order to pass for insane if he was finally arrested, and when
he was, he indeed attempted this and sustained the role for several days before the
examining judge. But he could not make up his mind to go on with it for long; he came to
see it as a culpable pretense, confessed all his real feelings and, at the judge’s request,
wrote a long memoir. (133)

In order to serve the defendant, Vastel needs to invent a kind of shifting insanity
defense, in which his client, due to long term mental instability, finally committed an
atrocious act. As such, Riviere is—or actually was—insane, yet his memoir undeniably
explains in rational terms the act itself. Thus, Riviere who was mad, then feigned
madness, is finally persuaded to give up the pretense and present a true account of his
actions. The memoir, while undeniably an act of sanity, does not mitigate the previous
barbarity or convince us that he was sane when he committed the horrible acts.

Vastel resorts to casuistry in order to circumvent the conventional idea—which he
too accepts—that a written text is the product of a rational mind. One cannot calmly
present one’s ideas on paper without being at once calm and reflective. Thus, Vastel is
forced to conjure up a moment of revelation following the acts that laid his actions bare
and stunned him into sanity: “No sooner had he done the deed than the scales fell from
his eyes, and all of a sudden he became saner than he had ever been before” (132). This
“shock” upon the nervous system explains, in physiological and moral terms (as a
medical doctor, Vastel would have conceived of madness in terms of biology or
chemistry), Riviere’s reversal. Here, the moral and psychological states are united, in
that Riviere’s whole moral being reacted violently to his actions against nature.

Vastel also has to defend his client against the charge that the work was craftily
conceived. Here the doctor argues for the work’s sloppy execution. Rather than a
skillful treatise, the memoir relies upon sheer memory, and not a vast knowledge or
education. Vastel is aware that sympathy for his client is based on the ability to see him
as a poor, ill-educated and abused peasant, and thus he must argue that the memoir is a
low form of writing, rather than a superb work of craftsmanship. In other words,
Vastel’s defense concedes the powerful rhetorical force of writing and its ability to
render unpalatable and immoral actions sensible and just. The belief in the edifying
powers of education would suggest that it could rehabilitate those who have done
wrong. We find this sentiment expressed in a letter to the Gazette des Tribunaux in
1835: “I have come to know as a matter of observation that books and isolation had already effected an appreciable improvement in Riviere’s heart and mind. Who knows but that this unfortunate man, corrected by good education, may not some day repay the preservation of his life by some great service to mankind” (159). If Riviere’s memoir is more than an imperfectly realized piece of scribble, it risks undermining the idea that education inevitably leads to moral improvement.

Thus the memoir stands betwixt and between madness and sanity, education and illiteracy. Many letters to the editor of newspapers and gazettes often emphasized Riviere’s class and wretched social background as exculpation, and yet this in itself could not fully explain the situation. One letter writer to the *Pilote du Calvados* suggests that “because his species of insanity was unknown and novel, because there was no word in the language to express this imperfection of nature and this deplorable singularity, he was classified as a monster […].” (152).

Thus we return to Foucault’s own statement that the memoir exhibits a certain beauty. This would suggest that the memoir may be seen as a species of literature and that beauty, and by extension the aesthetic, escapes by definition any discourse that would seek to constrain it. We cannot admire the memoir for its formal narrative structure or use of language. On the contrary, we are told that the memoir lacks those attributes normally associated with an exemplary work of fiction; it reveals native intelligence, some verbal facility, but no obvious literary gifts. Such baldness further complicates our efforts to “place” the document.

Foucault himself never refers to the memoir as a work of art—perhaps deliberately, yet the emphasis he places on beauty does suggest something about how he conceives of the function of art. In an interview entitled “On Literature,” Foucault makes the case for two historical ways of thinking about literature: (1) as a kind of writing sacralized over time by an authority to produce a canon; (2) as a kind of writing (and here Foucault refers to Blanchot) which pierces philosophy at intermediate points, both unsettling its epistemological sediment and challenging its claim to truth. Both normative operations are evident in the West. Western society has traditionally inculcated the notion that great works of art are important rites of passage into the
culture. Yet the competing claim has been that art is subversive of cultural norms, and challenges dominant authority and control by creating a space for the individual (however imaginary) that is not located within the typical structures of power. Writing which questions the dominant structure of thought and truth reaches the threshold, revealing an immeasurable excess of truth. This is precisely what we have in the memoir: an excess of truth, a plurality of signification, which places every normative truth under suspicion. It parodies the rationalist narratives of law, masks itself as a crime narrative, and thereby challenges its foundational premises.

In *Paraesthetics* (1987), David Carroll questions whether Foucault retreats into a fetishization of the art-object. Carroll suggests that Foucault’s reverence for the memoir and unwillingness to challenge it as a text is a way to elude the various traps which enclose the narratives surrounding Riviere. Carroll surmises:

> The cruel beauty of transgressive literature could be considered both a critical opening and the literary aesthetic trap from which Foucault has not escaped, precisely inasmuch as a certain literature is treated by him as an escape. I would argue that no discourse, no matter how disruptive it is claimed to be, can ever ensure in advance such an escape from history and the traps that history lays for all of us. (128)

It would be all too easy to charge that Foucault falls prey to a romantic *Kunstlust*, and his early work, particularly *Madness and Civilization*, tends to reinforce this idea. Yet Foucault is careful not to make broad claims about Riviere’s narrative. The memoir (thought not Riviere himself, who was given a life sentence and sent to prison where he eventually killed himself) does not escape its own historical time and place. Carroll’s aesthetic verdict thus dooms Foucault to repeating the traditional error of aesthetics (error as seen by more recent commentators): its attempt to overcome or escape the limitations of the historical moment. What Carroll implies is that a refusal to interpret the text leads to a rear-door exit from history into the transcendental.

The overall issue of art in Foucault’s work is fascinating and complex and will not admit of an immediate solution. I would suggest that Carroll’s critique too quickly shuts the door on the kinds of historical and discursive issues Foucault raises and all too quickly puts aesthetic beauty on the side of transcendence without questioning the
epistemological stakes in Foucault. While I would agree that Foucault’s commentary can be interpreted as a romantic document of escape, we can also read it as a heuristic document that disrupts, through its over-articulation of discourses, the posturing positionalities of the medical and legal professionals who took over the case. Deleuze writes how Foucault’s interest in infamy revolves around: “insignificant, obscure, simple men, who are spotlighted only for a moment by police reports and complaints” (143). Riviere is one such character who emerges from a space that cannot speak for itself otherwise. Foucault, while conscious of his own interpretative role in the investigation, is aware of the obsfucatory function of the memoir as a whole.

**III. Romancing the Other**

Reading Foucault along the fault-lines of his thought, attempting to work within the interstices linking history and knowledge—these do not ultimately yield a readily applicable system. In another context, a discussion of Lyotard’s *Discours, Figure*, Mary Lydon makes the point that a study of this work is difficult and unrewarding to those who expect “the kind of return that French ‘theory’ all too readily afforded some of its early initiates” (10). Reading Foucault, we should not simply attempt to derive a foundational system or, as Lydon suggests of Lyotard, a “useful set of ‘interpretative tools’.” What we see instead is what Baudrillard has referred to as a “‘veering away’ in Foucault’s writing [that] occurs progressively since *Discipline and Punish*” (36). It is a movement away from genealogy, away from systematization, away from reason. “Terms lose their meaning at the limits of the text” (38). And, more closely allied with Baudrillard’s entire project: “When one talks so much about power, it’s because it can no longer be found anywhere” (60). What has lain hidden from our view resists conceptualization, and thus does not lend itself to the economies of logic. It is not even an issue of dogmatism, but of what can and cannot be spoken.

Thus Foucault’s work resonates with the thought of the unspoken, the Heideggerian *unthought*, perhaps, but this thought of what cannot be thought pushes against the very coherence and systematic integrity it so unflinchingly and rigorously
presents. In a discussion of Deleuze’s reading of Foucault, Ronald Bogue theorizes, “The Outside is the unthought-of thought, and when the thinking subject discovers this unthought the subject problematizes itself” (19). And speaking of the early *Madness and Civilization*, Bogue writes, “though the world of reason could establish no relation with unreason, since the mad refused to speak the language of reason, the asylum functioned as a foundational non-relation between reason and unreason that made possible the delineation of reason through the expulsion and forgetting of the other, the Outside”(20). This Other of the asylum finds itself written in Riviere’s text, a memoir which escapes discourse and thereby impinges upon the limits of sanity, of art, of thought itself.

Nietzsche writes in the second of his *Untimely Observations, On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life* (1980), “only that which has no history is definable.” If Nietzsche is correct, than any attempt to understand, clarify, classify, or define Riviere would necessarily strip him of his history, something the medical and legal professionals attempt, but fail to do. Foucault does not escape history, but rather defines it as a condition of the memoir itself, and situates it as an autobiographical history which eludes its interpreters. Nietzsche also writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*: “Und nur wenn die Historie es ertraeget, zum Kunstwerk umgebildet, also reines Kunstgebilde zu werden, kann Sie vielleicht Instincte erhalten oder sogar wecken.” (“In such effects, art is opposed to history: and only if history can bear being transformed into a work of art, that is to become a pure art form, may it perhaps preserve instincts or even rouse them.”)

Foucault’s reading of history through Pierre Riviere, the history of disciplinary formation, suggests the opposite of what Nietzsche states. If the beauty in Riviere’s work resists its own fulfillment in aesthetic terms, it defines itself by resistance, resistance to the life which organizes and produces knowledge, defines man’s social relationship to the world, and occupies a space which is necessarily violent. In his much earlier "Preface to Transgression” (1963), Foucault writes by way of reflections on Bataille: “We do not experience the end of philosophy, but a philosophy which regains its speech and finds itself again only in the marginal region which borders its limits”
(41). All of Foucault’s work is an attempt to recover this speech.

**Works Cited**


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**About the Author**

Douglas Scott Berman is Assistant Professor at National Taiwan Normal University and is author of “The ‘Other’ Wordsworth: Philosophy, Art, and the Pursuit of the ‘Real’ in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads.” *Concentric* 27.1 (2001): 111-28. Among other projects, Dr. Berman is working on a book-length manuscript of Wordsworth and the reception to Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Other interests include the role of the “ass” in Wordsworth and Coleridge (donkey poems) and related parodies. Dr. Berman has also recently finished two projects, the first looking at the role of personal writing in composition courses, and the other dealing with the classroom as theater. Other research and teaching interests include vulgarity, autobiography, eco-criticism, Judeo-Christian motifs in English literature, horror films, Marxist theory, rhetorical theory, post-structuralism, animality, and New Historicism.

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