EXPLORING COMPLEXITY THROUGH LITERATURE: REFRAMING FOUCAULT’S RESEARCH PROJECT WITH HINDSIGHT

MARK OLSSEN
m.olssen@surrey.ac.uk
University of Surrey

ABSTRACT. This article constitutes an extended review essay of Michael Foucault’s *Language, Madness and Desire: On Literature*, Philippe Artières, Jean-François Bert, Mathieu Potte-Bonneville, and Judith Revel (eds.), Robert Bononno (tr.), University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 158 pp. A shorter version of this article was published as a book review in *Notre Dame Philosophical Review*, March 2016, Unique Identification Number 2016.03.28. In performing this review the article seeks to illuminate Foucault’s core ontological and epistemological themes that developed in these early commentaries on literature and that were to inform the philosophical orientation of his social science investigations, including madness, psychiatry, medicine, the prison, sexuality and the care of the self. The article suggests that Foucault’s early works on literature establish a thesis of philosophical materialism which articulates many of the themes of post-quantum complexity science as they affected the social and physical sciences in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Keywords: Foucault; philosophical materialism; post-quantum complexity science

Received 4 April 2016 • Received in revised form 11 April 2016
Accepted 11 April 2016 • Available online 25 April 2016

*Language, Madness and Desire: On Literature*, originally published in French as *La grande étrangère: À propos de literature* in 2013, comprising Foucault’s comments on literature, constitutes a welcome if late addition to the Foucault archive of accessible books. It presents Foucault’s views on literature presented in different contexts and formats over the period 1960–1971. It is based upon typed transcripts of oral presentations given by Foucault in the form of...
radio broadcasts and lectures. The editors have rendered these presentations as literal as possible correcting errors and punctuation for the purposes of improving readability, but being careful to comply with Foucault’s original intentions. The book also includes a valuable assemblage of notes and biographic information about the editors. The first section, “Language and Madness,” comprises two radio broadcasts presented by Foucault in 1963. They were originally part of a series of five talks for a program titled as “The Use of Speech,” broadcast by RTF France III, produced by Jean Doat, a television and theatre actor and writer. The five broadcasts, titled “Celebratory Madness,” were initially presented on a weekly basis. The last two, titled “The Silence of the Mad” and “Mad Language” are reproduced in this book “because of the mirror structure they employ and their focus on literature” (p. 6). The other three focus more directly on madness, or at least the language of the mad, and were left out on this basis. The second section, titled “Literature and Language” reproduces a lecture Foucault presented to the Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis in Brussels by the same title. Here Foucault re-examines the major themes that appeared in his writing on literature from the early 1960s, referring to writers such as Bataille, Blanchot, Sade, Cervantes, Joyce, Jakobson, and others. It is here that Foucault locates the historical emergence of literature in its modern form in the period from the end of the eighteenth to the early nineteenth century. Foucault’s interest here is in the way that language is encoded within the literary form of discourse and what function literature plays in relation to discourse in general. In this lecture, Foucault’s early concern with archaeological investigations concerned as they were with identifying literatures core discursive features becomes apparent as he asks the question, firstly, “What Is Literature?” and secondly, “What Is the Language of Literature?” His excursus proceeds from Gutenberg’s invention of printing to the emergence of the book, where, finally, “literature finds and founds its being” (p. 64):

Although the book existed, and with a very dense reality, for several centuries prior to the invention of literature, it was not, in fact, the site of literature: it was merely a material opportunity for transmitting language....But in fact if literature fulfils its being in the book, it doesn’t placidly welcome the essence of the book (besides, the book, in reality, has no essence, has no essence other than what it contains); that is why literature will always be the simulacrum of the book. It behaves as though it were the book, it pretends to be a series of books (p. 64).

What distinguishes literature is its transgressive language, “a mortal, repetitive, redoubled language, the language of the book itself” (p. 65). In literature, says Foucault, it is the book that speaks. The third section, titled “Lectures on Sade” comprises two lectures given in 1970 at the State University of
New York at Buffalo which illustrates and adds depth to Foucault’s views on literature and which also signal many of the themes that were to emerge in his later book length studies. The first lecture was on Flaubert’s *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, the second on Sade’s *La Nouvelle Justine*, which, as the editors note, Foucault says was written “entirely with an eye to the truth” (p. 95). Foucault’s interest in Sade had developed before and after *The History of Madness*. Sade, as the editors note, represented “countermodernity” as that author concerned with “politics and truth,” as “the transgressor subject to defamatory judgments and censorship,” who “condemned the justice of the ancient regime” (p. 95). In addition, in the fifty-three page manuscript, as the editors continue, for Foucault, Sade represented a “‘sergeant of sex,’ the promoter of a disciplinary eroticism accompanying the implementation of an instrumental rationality” (p. 96). What is important about this book, and these lectures and radio broadcasts, is the indication they present at an early stage of Foucault’s scholarly career, of the way his analysis of literature informs and is informed by the central themes to emerge later on in his major works.

As the editors point out in their excellent and very detailed introduction, it was in his unrestricted reading in the library of the École Normale Supérieure that Foucault “deconstructed an order of discourse” through his close reading of literature. They elicit the support of Daniel Defert in his chronology in *Dits et écrits*, to flesh out the detail of Foucault’s engagement. We are told that Foucault “read Saint-John Perse in 1950, Kafka in 1951, Bataille and Blanchot in 1953, followed by the progress of the nouveau roman (including the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet), discovered Raymond Roussel in the summer of 1957, the authors associated with Tel Quel (Philippe Sollers, Claude Ollier) in 1963, reread Becket in January 1968” (p. viii, summary). During his travels to Uppsala and Warsaw in the 1950s, Foucault both read literature and taught courses, from his favorite poet at the time, René Char, and from Sade to Genet.

The relationship with literature, which this book explores, constitutes a magnificent testimony, claim the editors, to understanding the way Foucault’s philosophical mind-set developed, as simultaneously “critical, complex and strategic.” They point out how many of these literary gestures, insights and motifs are incorporated within Foucault’s great works thus rendering “fiction and poetry as touchstones of the philosophical act” (p. x). While this is by no means original or untypical amongst French philosophers (witness Bachelard, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty), Foucault, they argue, utilizes such literatures (narratives, epics, poetry, comedies, etc.) to demonstrate and inform his archaeological conception of discourse in relation to “both the order of the world and its representations at a given moment” (p. x) in order to reveal “just how much our way of organizing discourse about the world owe[s] to a series of historically determined divisions” (p. x). Literature, they point out, in
Foucault’s hands, becomes “strategic” (p. xi). On the one hand it furthers the archaeological project in order to enquire into the distinctiveness of the literary discourse, and position it in the field of discourses. But, more than that, Foucault seeks to assess the form and function of a literary discourse to reveal the “concerted incertitude of morphology” in the sense of “a rigorous and uncontrollable polyvalence of forms” (Foucault, 1999, p. 27). This ontological thesis of radical linguistic or discursive indeterminacy by which any one translation can always be replaced by another, and which establishes the autonomy of discourse from the real is a thesis shaped by Foucault’s early readings of literature. On its own, of course, as Foucault (1963) made clear in his book on Raymond Roussel, literature has no specificity or strategic centrality. The thesis of the literary then turns out to be the thesis of discourse as autonomous, strategic, and constitutive which as the editors say “escapes the dynasty of representation … which, depending on the situation, can be: inaudible, scandalous, unclassifiable, untranslatable, undecidable, fragmentary, aleatory, inconstant, vertiginous” (p. xii). Finally, literature functions as strategy in that it opposes established and settled meanings “destroying the economy of narrative, which involves the construction of a battlefield against the hegemony of meaning” (p. xii). Literature, thus constitutes, “the establishment of another mode of being of discourse” (p. xii).

The editors note that by the end of the 1960s this “strange relationship to literature seemed to dissipate” (p. xii). They accept here the conventional understanding of Foucault’s oeuvre as passing between distinct modalities each characterized by a different onto-epistemic figure or grounding. The early period is characterized by the priority of the discursive over non-discursive practices. The order of discourse constitutes an historical determined order through which actions and relationships and practices are organized. I doubt myself whether Foucault ever really jettisoned this heuristic although he did seek to reassert the priority of the extra-discursive material practices, or rather he endeavored perhaps to reassert the centrality of non-discursive practices whilst not abandoning the thesis as to the autonomy of the discursive, albeit, an autonomy that was contingently and variously enabled and restricted. Both of these orders – the discursive and the non-discursive – would be needed in order for Foucault to articulate a new model of determination about the world. This displacement of literature is a matter of record, however. As the editors put it: “the gradual abandonment of the field of literature as a ‘duplication’ of Foucault’s own research can be attributed to the desire to extend his enquiry to broader themes – this time presented in terms of power and resistance” (pp. xii–xiii).

This displacement of an obvious concern with the literary at the end of the 1960s and a greater concern with power and resistance, and by extension, the political, which eventually leads to “the transition to a collective dimen-
sion” where it becomes apparent that “the muffled roar of battle is anything but a literary metaphor” (p. xiii). Finally, they note that at the end of the 1960s, Foucault also abandoned the figure of the “outside,” and committed himself to a model of difference inside history, i.e., an “internal history,” giving rise to the question “of how we might, from within a certain epistemic and historical configuration, from within the ‘network of the real’ deployed by a certain economy of discourse and practice at a given moment – in short, from within the grammar of the world as historically determined – unearth and reverse connections, shift lines, move points, hallow out meaning, and reinvent equilibria” (p. xiv). It is this problem they state, “very clearly revealed in his work on literature, that will continue to haunt Foucault: the possible overcoming of historical determination of what we are must be conceived not in terms of a contradiction, but in terms of compossibility” (p. xiv). The extent to which we can from within history “free ourselves of those determinations [that constitute us] and paradoxically establish a space [always internal] of a different speech or a way of life” (p. xiv).

It is this last suggestion that was central to Foucault’s philosophical project as a whole, including the possible overcoming of determination in terms of compossible futures that suggest to me that Foucault’s engagement with literature saw the preparatory development and fine-tuning of what is central to his oeuvre as a whole. If so, there is an important sense in which Foucault’s early engagement with literature continues to haunt even given its visible presence appears displaced by the end of the sixties. Not just parallels between the literary and madness as signifying phenomena whose infinitely flexible sign systems create spaces for secret, marginalized and chaotic discourses, but literature itself attests to the creative power of language to both traverse and transcend the social field. A space of compossibility for divergent or heterogeneous things; the accidental nature of chance occurrences, or “branchings;” these core insights that inhabit the discursive in Foucault, and were developed later in more philosophical terms by Deleuze in his books on Leibniz, Hume, Spinoza, and Bergson, can be clearly seen here in these early lectures and talks on Foucault’s engagement with the literary. In his radio talk, “Mad Language” of 1963, Foucault’s constructivist ontology of language is already clear. “Words, their arbitrary encounter, their confusion, all their protoplasmic transformations are sufficient in themselves to bring into being a world that is both true and fantastic” (p. 28).

The importance of language is highlighted here in these lectures. He has said in his interview with Claude Bonnefoy that “language is what we use to construct an absolutely infinite number of sentences and utterances” (Foucault, 2011, pp. 65–6). Moreover, says Foucault, “the body itself…is like a language node” (p. 26). In “Mad Language,” Foucault invokes Freud, who understood well that “our mind was a wit” (p. 26), “a kind of master craftsman of
metaphors” which “[takes] advantage of all resources, all the richness, all the poverty of our language” (p. 26). Reason therefore can be infinitely transcended for speaking is a form of freedom which allows for madness, and madness is that medium which “permits the unrestricted seepage of language outside itself” (p. xii). In this sense, literature represents both a “crystallization” and “transgression” of language.

In “Why Did Sade Write?” the first part of Foucault’s lectures given at the University of Buffalo in March 1970, Foucault “uses” Sade to analyze amongst other things, the role and function of writing. I will focus on this here because of the role it plays in enunciating Foucault’s developing ontological orientation that resists and escapes previous models of determination and which influences his project overall. For Foucault, writing constitutes a material force that “enables us to push the reality principle as far from the borders of the imagination as possible” (p. 108). The first function of writing, therefore, is to abolish the barrier between reality and imagination” (p. 108). Therefore, says Foucault,

writing is the principle of repeated enjoyment, writing is what delights or enables us to repeat…writing will serve to erase the limitation of time, it will enable the limits of exhaustion, fatigue, old age, and death to be wiped away. Through writing everything will be able to begin again perpetually, indefinitely, fatigue, exhaustion, death will never appear in this world of writing….The second function of writing, therefore, is to erase the limitations of time and free repetition for itself… it is precisely in this world of writing that temporal limits vanish (p. 109).

Here is a new relational holism which is not the classical Hegelian holism of old, but one where subject and object, ideal and actual, discourse and real, are prized apart in a conception of discourse and extra-discourse, where difference is retained within a historical variable and contingent model of unity which now only occurs at the limits of the material; i.e., at the limits necessary for life to sustain itself. Within unity, difference proliferates. Although Foucault does not utilize the concept, “holism,” as such, he does invoke Sade’s concept of “system.” As such this relational holism is articulated with reference to a concept of “system” and a principle of interconnectivity. Writing plays a central role alongside a similar importance for language and speech. For one role of writing “…is not simply to introduce indefinite repetition … it is also to exceed” (p. 109). Foucault’s predilection for a correct ontological orientation causes him to classify himself in Speech Begins after Death as a “diagnostician” (2011, p. 45). In this, he claims to follow Nietzsche for whom “philosophy was above all else a diagnosis … for the disease of culture” (2011, p. 46). Foucault “uses” Sade to elucidate these points. But his interest was no more in the author than it was in mental illness. As he
argued in “What Is an Author?” the author is a “function” of discourse, a conception which by the end of the decade would witness the author’s demise and “death.” Foucault’s own article on the author was originally couched in the context of Roland Barthes essay “La mort de l’auteur,” written in 1967. Barthes asked:

Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story…? Is it the individual Balzac…? Is it Balzac the author…? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing [écriture] is the destruction of every voice, of every origin. Writing is that neutral, that composite, that oblique space where our subject slips away, the [photographic] negative where every identity is lost, starting with the identity of the very body which writes (Barthes, 142).

Foucault’s answer was that “the author’s name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse…. The author’s name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of the discourse within a society and a culture” (p. 211). In this, the author is a subordinate figure: “the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction” (Foucault, p. 221). In every day parlance, says Foucault, we represent the author as a “genius,” an “inventor;” but this is the opposite of what he really is. In this sense, the author as we know him/her is “an ideological product, since we represent him as the opposite of his historically real function” (pp. 221–222). In reality, “the author is … the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” (p. 222). “Perhaps,” says Foucault, “it is time to study discourse not in terms of their expressive value or formal transformations but according to their modes of existence. The modes of circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation of discourses vary with each culture and are modified within each” (p. 220).

The discourse of literature is both transgressive and singular. Through literature, Foucault establishes a new onto-epistemic orientation to space and time as real resulting in perpetual novelty and creativity. With literary figures like Sade, Roussel or Artaud, Foucault argues that their mode of literature emerges from “deep within them,” from their “uniqueness, their particularity, their symptom, their anxiety, and finally their illness” (p. 58).

So, writing constitutes a technology of repetition and multiplication, as that which “exacerbates,” “augments,” and “multiplies without end” (p. 110). It pushes thought and imagination ever outwards: “every time we write we prepare to exceed new limits. Writing exposes and is witness to the opening
up of infinite space before it in which images, pleasures, and excess are multiplied without limit” (p. 110).

It not only opens up space; it constitutes agency and freedom: “It expresses the unlimitedness of pleasure with respect to reality, the unlimitedness of repetition with respect to time, is at the same time the unlimitedness of the image itself; it is the unlimitedness of the limit itself because all limits, one by one, are exceeded. No image is stabilized once and for all…” (p. 110).

So, paradoxically, the “author function” of writing individuates as socially and historically constituted individuals and discourses become differentiated within the culture structured as an open series of possibilities within a network of constraints. Writing, for Foucault, is that material activity which spatializes, individuates and alters, thus is a mechanism for creativity, novelty and uniqueness. It opens up “an infinite space before it in which images, pleasures and excess are multiplied without limit” (p. 110). Finally, says Foucault, anticipating a complexity science which was still embryonic at the time, writing renders reversibility impossible. Through writing, the subject “can no longer turn back.” Writing, like action in general, establishes the agent as absolutely unique. As the post-quantum theorist might say, action within curved space/time differentiates the agent from their social and historical origins of their constitution. While Foucault came, at the end of the 1960s and after, to apply these insights with reference to the social sciences, in this book they are extracted from his analyses of literature and especially from his essay on Sade. It is Sade, we are told, who eliminates limits and introduces irregularity in an uncertain world. It is Sade who “erases the limits between the licit and the illicit, the permitted and the not permitted, of the moral and the immoral” (p. 112). It is through Sade that “writing introduces desire into the space of the indefinitely possible and always unlimited possible” (p. 112). It is Sadean discourse that “unique individuality” is conceptualized. Writing establishes “the illimitability of desire and expression.” Sadean literature establishes its materiality through signs that can be read, corrected and revised indefinitely, says Foucault. Finally, Sade defines four elements (God, Nature, Soul, Law) which form a “network” or what Sade terms a “system” (p. 139) where the elements are “infinitely recombinable,” adaptable “like crystals,” to construct discourse “absolutely specific to a situation or an individual” (p. 139), a process Sade refers to as “the irregularity of individuals” (p. 140): “Every individual is irregular and his own irregularity is manifested, is symbolized, in his system” (p. 140).

The consequential novelty and uniqueness mean that Sade’s characters “cannot be substituted for one another, cannot replace one another, and remain isolated from one another” (p. 140). It is this revised onto-epistemology that overcomes all past determinations that Foucault will project outward in his social science studies, of madness, of medicine, of psychiatry, of sexuality,
of epistemology and of discipline. The great contribution of this little book is that, through Sade, Foucault makes clear a revolutionary reconfiguration of the prevailing order of chance and constraint, or at least in the way it needs to be addressed. He even compares Sade’s logic to that of Russell and Descartes. Constituted within history, individuals – now – no longer are the straight-forward echoes or reflections of their cultural group or class. As Sade teaches us, systems of “infinitely recombinable” elements can generate “perpetual novelty.” “This consists in distinguishing … individuals who cannot be reduced to one another, individuals who are characterized by their system, because the systems differ from individual to individual” (p. 139).

Like Leibniz’s monads, in each system, the whole is refracted differently, like prisms, ensuring, as Foucault writes: “that Sade’s libertines cannot be substituted for one another, cannot replace one another, and remain isolated from one another” (p. 140).

Finally, Foucault ponders as always the issue of madness and its meaning. Although not in this book, he told Claude Bonnefoy at the end of the 1960s: “What astonishes me, what I keep wondering about, is how it is that a work like this which comes from an individual that a society has classified – and consequently excluded as ill, can function, and function in a way that’s absolutely positive within a culture….It is this positive function of the negative that has never ceased to interest me” (Foucault, 2011: 58–59).

Foucault’s Folie et Déraison: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique had occupied his research in the years prior to these lectures and radio broadcasts, and Sade’s madness is broached indirectly and a possible meaning of madness alluded to when Sade rejects all authority – God, Nature, Law, Soul – and has no reason to deny death.

Isn’t this the greatest offence against nature – to give up, to accept death? For nature has created us, but no sooner have we been created that it abandons us, leaving us with nothing more than the need to survive, the only trace, in a way of the gesture it made in creating us. From that moment on, when we renounce the need to survive and turn the need to survive into the need to die, we turn against nature, we scorn nature, we commit against ourselves the greatest crime imaginable, and at that moment, it is obvious that it is also the greatest pleasure (p. 142).

Is this what madness is, then? Is madness the abandonment of a commitment to life? A derailment from what seems immanent to life? Is this what is being expressed in this lecture on Sade? I wish I had read these little gems years ago. It is as though they, belatedly, that is, here and now, answer a nagging question and fill in a piece of the puzzle regarding the Foucault I have been searching for all these years. Here, in literature of all things, written in the early part of Foucault career, Foucault finds an ontology of physics and
the world that he could not find easily in the theory of physics or chemistry or the philosophy of science at the time he was writing. It is “mad” Sade that blazes forth full of insight to explain how things are, and how the world works. It is odd that these small radio talks, and a couple of lectures, one in Brussels and one in New York, fill so many gaps and articulate so much of his oeuvre, and that they have also waited so long to be released in the readily accessible form of the book, making us “work out” the coherence of his program before having these little “summaries” to guide us, as it were, after the event.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Dr. Janet Soler of the Open University for research assistance and discussions regarding the initial planning and writing of this paper.

NOTES

1. Published in English as Death and the Labyrinth (1986).
2. An affinity can be noted in relation to historical determination and compossibility between this position of Foucault as noted by the editors, and Deleuze’s notes in Cinema II, drawing on Jorge Luis Borges, that as Leibniz postulated, contradictions that can co-exist and that “several mutually incompatible worlds do in fact exist” (p. xiv).

REFERENCES