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REVIEW ESSAY

Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*. Translated by R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), ISBN: 978-0936756332 & Michel Foucault, *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*. Translated by Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 2000), ISBN: 978-0140259575

Introduction

The question of the place and role of subject in Foucault has given rise to a multitude of new questions and potential uses (and abuses) of his work. In the English-speaking world, Eric Paras' controversial *Foucault 2.0* (2006) is a good example of the positions taken and the resistance that followed. What cannot be taken lightly is that as more of Foucault's work becomes available in English, the more we encounter statements that come to many as a shock. The careful reader, however, will note (and many have) that these "shocking" statements on the subject have been available in English for some time. With all the novelty and excitement of this "new" quandary in Foucault studies, it seems appropriate to return to some of those texts that, at the very least, precede the more recent revelations. Two of these texts are the early translations of Foucault's 1978 interview with the Italian Marxist, Duccio Trombadori.

In this unique interview, we find that Foucault pays special attention not only to the constitution of the subject in general, but also to the constitution of the author through the act of writing. To be more specific, the most notable example he gives is himself. On more than one occasion, he uses the self-referential term "experience," a word that many see as an opening move to a "humanist Foucault." This theme of "the writing of the self"¹ would continue to be of special interest to him, but that is not the only reason why this interview is particularly important to remember.

The production of the interview into an English language text was itself controversial. It appeared first with the title, *Remarks on Marx*, in 1991, and then reappeared in a new translation with the title "An Interview With Michel Foucault"

¹ For a more detailed treatment of this as it relates to education and teaching, see: John Ambrosio, "The Writing of the Self: Ethical Self-Formation and the Undefined Work of Freedom," *Educational Theory*, v. 58, no. 3 (August 2008), 251-267.

in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984* (2000). This peculiar way in which the two translations of the same interview have “become books,” so to speak, is striking when we consider the question within the actual interview about the constitution of books and their authors. So, by looking at the actual production of this text itself we access a unique entry into the deeper question of the central theme of Foucault’s work: the constitution of the subject.

Before doing so, however, I would like to avoid what I see as a mistaken interpretation of Foucault’s affinity for the subject. In order to do so, I would like to go back to the question Foucault asked about this topic a full decade earlier in 1968 and 1969 (in *The Order of Things* and *What is an Author?*) and point out that there need not be a discontinuous reading of Foucault’s supposed polemics on the subject. From that cautionary point of view, this featured interview should not appear as a novel topic for discussion. We might even come to understand Foucault’s thoughts on the production of the subject through writing as a *continuation* of the question he raises in *What is an Author?*

I will then offer a comparative analysis of the two different publications of the 1978 interview and, in doing so, raise the provocative question Foucault brings up in the interview, namely: How are experience books born? The analysis will end with two “identical” passages from the texts that leave the reader to ruminate on their textual (in)difference to each other.

Background

What I hope to do in this first portion of the essay is to clarify my position on the placement of Foucault’s interest in the subject within the chronology of his *oeuvre* by relating his 1978 interview with Duccio Trombadori to his 1969 lecture and essay, *What is an Author?*, published between the appearance of *The Order of Things* and *Archeology of Knowledge*. My main point here is that one need not periodize Foucault to find fruitful engagement with his deep interest in the human subject, particularly the person who writes books (in the case of *What is an Author?*) or the books themselves (in his interview with Trombadori). In other words, unlike many of the polemics surrounding the issue of Foucault’s affinity for the subject that seem to require a certain abandonment or revision of his early and middle work, I do not see such tidy divisions as exegetically necessary or as adding value to a more robust understanding of the work of this particular human subject and author, that is to say, the writer of these particular books: Michel Foucault.

Another, more familiar, way of framing this issue outside the scope of the controversial question of whether Foucault was or became a humanist is by revisiting the question of whether or not he was a structuralist. Of course, these two questions are really one and the same because they cut to the indispensable issue: are we actually studying Michel Foucault—the man? What I mean to suggest here is

that the very question, “Who is Foucault?”—or, to put it another way, the study of Foucault as a historically intelligible person—cannot ignore the inconvenient reality that we call him by name and attach that name to “his” books. And, we use that name, which we assume to be his own, as a name that gives him a real identity for us, because we assume to be speaking about him in the usual way we do with everyone else.

So, from the very outset of our investigation we must agree, at least in practice, that Foucault is someone: a person, an ego and so forth. At the very least he is a *somesuch*, as Butler puts it, meaning that he is at least “something” in the ontological sense. None of this delineates what *kind* of a thing a person is; there is nothing easy about making sense of what we mean by those person-things we so often take for granted, but, in addressing the very idea of authorship, the production of books, and the constitution of the subject through such literary events, I think that whether one considers it a matter of structuralist or humanist orientation, the brute force of Foucault’s selfhood will be difficult to avoid. What is especially exciting to me about this matter is that Foucault himself saw the need to confront this issue during the very heart of what is widely considered to be his “post-human” period.

To make this point I will deal with two texts (*The Order of Things* and *What is an Author?* in the order in which they were published) in order to preface and contextualize Foucault’s 1978 interview with Trombadori. Before I do, however, let me be clear: I do not see Foucault’s late period as discontinuous from his earlier ones. Even though the 1978 interview is a part of this “later” period of work, I do not want to make too much of it. Making my argument in this way should not only bolster the idea that Foucault’s productive relationship with the subject is here to stay in Foucault studies, it should also serve to erode some the interpretations that seem to conveniently divide him into time-exclusive things.

The Order of Things & Phenomenology

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault appears to engage in an all-out offensive against phenomenological humanism and this is usually understood to mean that he is also opposed to the human subject, at least during this period of his work. In his foreword to the English translation, he remarks that while discourse should remain open to “different methods,” there is one method that he rejects outright. This, of course, is phenomenology. He writes:

If there is one approach that I do reject, however, it is that (one might call it, broadly speaking, the phenomenological approach) which gives absolute priority to the observing subject, which attributes a constituent role to act, which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity – which, in short, leads to a transcendental consciousness.²

² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1994), xiv.

What is important to note is that Foucault's opposition in this passage is, primarily (if not exclusively), methodological.

It is true that underpinning these words was the Parisian struggle between the "old school" of Sartre and the emerging "new schools" of structuralist and post-structuralist thought. It is also indisputable that the brunt of Foucault's attack seems to fall on the "observing subject." This polarizing caricature, however, can be misleading. The subject is not the primary victim. It is, rather, a matter of the "absolute priority" given to the "observing subject" in phenomenological method. In other words, Foucault's contention is not that phenomenology is wrong outright. It is instead that the way (or method) by which the phenomenologist approaches things is misguided. Misguided, that is, by the priority of the observing subject and transcendental *ego*, which, conveniently, happens to be the phenomenologist herself.

A critic might respond by citing passages throughout *The Order of Things* where there is evidence to bolster an argument that Foucault is directed against the actual "man" or "subject," not against philosophical method. For example, Foucault ends by writing "...that man would be erased, like a face in the sand."³ We might observe, however, that if this were the case Foucault would have set himself up, so to speak. If his purpose really were to "erase" the subject, then he would have to begin with himself. But, if his point remains methodological, as it was in the beginning, then the subject can retain its face, albeit differently from before.

Insofar as Foucault has a face and hands—a self—that freely thought and wrote and felt and wondered, it seems that he must be offering a much more ironic and different erasure of "the face" than one framed by a simplistic distaste for phenomenology. In the end we can say that Foucault was not necessarily opposed to phenomenological method *in toto*. Instead, we might simply maintain that he rejected any method that prioritizes the subject as supreme knower, the Godhead, *the face*, leading to notions of transcendental consciousness.

In other words, Foucault's opposition to phenomenology was not, so it seems, in order to destroy "man." Similar to misunderstandings of Derrida's deconstruction, that wrongly assign a nihilistic destructiveness to things under erasure, so too with Foucault's erasure of "man" in *The Order of Things*: we find that Foucault is not denying the phenomenological veracity of human existence. He seems only to resent the phenomenological, and exclusive, priority given to her. This interpretation suggests that Foucault—even the Foucault of *The Order of Things*, his most abrasive treatise against phenomenology—is opposing a *rigid* subject, a *true* "man," not phenomenology outright.

Besides Foucault's authorship of *The Order of Things*, what are we to make of the authors he frequently cites? This very question is addressed, and corrected, in *What is an Author?* And it is precisely this notion of authorship that displays

³ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 387.

Foucault, at the height of his “post-human” powers, in harmony with the notion of “an experience book” that he articulates a decade later in his interview with Duccio Trombadori.

What is an Author? & The Literary Subject

Lest one think that Foucault was oblivious of the points I made above, or that I am simply offering a convenient reading of his project, one need only look to his own words in *What is an Author?* In this essay he confronts the problem that “the author” presents to his thesis in *The Order of Things*:

...my objective in *The Order of Things* had been to analyse verbal clusters as discursive layers which fall outside the familiar categories of a book, a work, or an author. But while I considered “natural history,” the “analysis of wealth,” and “political economy” in general terms, I neglected a similar analysis of the author and his works; it is perhaps due to this omission that I employed the names of authors throughout the book in a naïve and often crude fashion.⁴

In other words, Foucault shows himself to be highly sensitive to the problematic of the self as writer. Later on he places this literary sense of subjectivity against the more general question of the subject when he writes:

Is it not possible to reexamine, as a legitimate extension of this kind of analysis, the privileges of the subject? Clearly, in undertaking an internal and architectonic analysis of a work (whether it be a literary text, a philosophical system, or a scientific work) and in delimiting psychological and biographical references, suspicions arise concerning the absolute nature and creative role of the subject. But the subject should not be entirely abandoned. It should be reconsidered, not to restore the theme of originating subject, but to seize its functions, its intervention in discourse, and its system of dependencies.⁵

These two passages make the argument that Foucault was not theorizing against or beyond the subject during this period, however complicating the questions of authorship (and others) are to his desired points. Also, his literary preoccupation with the subject is clearly not to abandon it completely; instead, he proposes what he would later say are the purposes of his work when he wrote:

I would like to say, first of all, what has been the goal of my work during the last twenty years. It has not been to analyze the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis. My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 113.

⁵ Foucault, *Language, Memory, Practice*, 137.

are made subjects... Thus, it is not power, but the subject, that is the general theme of my research.⁶

When we look at how this ties into the notion of an “experience book” that he articulated a decade later in his interview with Duccio Trombadori, I think it is safe to say that, while his thought is developing new layers all the time, there is no such radical break or discontinuity to be found between his earlier and later work; especially considering that if there were to be a time when he would have been entirely against the subject, this would have been it. Instead, we find a Foucault who is deeply interested in the question of constitution from beginning to end. In particular we find a keen interest in the literary aspects of constitution embedded in the questions of authorship and books.

While this is something of a preliminary point in this review, it should make for a more productive analysis of the interview in question. Now we begin to consider the unique, and somewhat controversial, nature of the production of the actual texts of this interview and then move on to how the issue of its production helps to underscore the more general notion of how books constitute their author(s), in this case, Michel Foucault.

The Birth of These Books: *Remarks on Marx* vs. *An Interview with Michel Foucault*

Rather than begin with “these” books, I think that Nietzsche’s insight in the preface to *Genealogy of Morals* is indispensable to the work that lies ahead in this review. It both opens the general theme of the role of literacy (reading and writing) in Nietzsche’s and Foucault’s work and also brings to mind the role of the author. Nietzsche writes:

If this book is incomprehensible to anyone and jars on his ears, the fault, it seems to me, is not necessarily mine. It is clear enough, assuming, as I do assume, that one has first read my earlier writings and has not spared some trouble in doing so: for they are, indeed, not easy to penetrate. Regarding my *Zarathustra*, for example, I do not allow that anyone knows that book who has not at some time been profoundly wounded and at some time profoundly delighted by every word in it; for only then may he enjoy the privilege of reverentially sharing in the halcyon element out of which that book was born and in its sunlight clarity, remoteness, breadth, and certainty. In other cases, people find difficulty with the aphoristic form: this arises from the fact that today this form is *not taken seriously enough*. An aphorism, properly stamped and molded, has not been “deciphered” when it has simply been read; rather, one has then to begin its *exegesis*, for which is required an art of exegesis... To be sure, one thing is necessary above all if one is to practice reading as an *art* in this way, something that has been unlearned most thoroughly nowadays—and therefore it will be some time before my

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954 - 1984* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 326-327.

writings are “readable” — something for which one has almost to be a cow and in any case *not* a “modern man”: *rumination*.⁷

Here we find Nietzsche not only *writing*, but also telling his reader *how to read* his books. This is different from Foucault’s approach in this interview in one way, yet similar in another: Different, in that Foucault focuses on the production of the text through the author, not the reader; similar, in that Foucault demonstrates the same subjectivity as Nietzsche when he talks about “his books,” a subject position not unlike our own when we seek him within the pages he left us.

The imposing, material temporality of books arouses the same curiosity Foucault seems to have had of their authors: What is a book? Under what conditions does it appear? How is it born? It seems altogether inconvenient and distracting— and therefore of great interest to Foucault studies—that books and their authors cannot be ignored entirely.

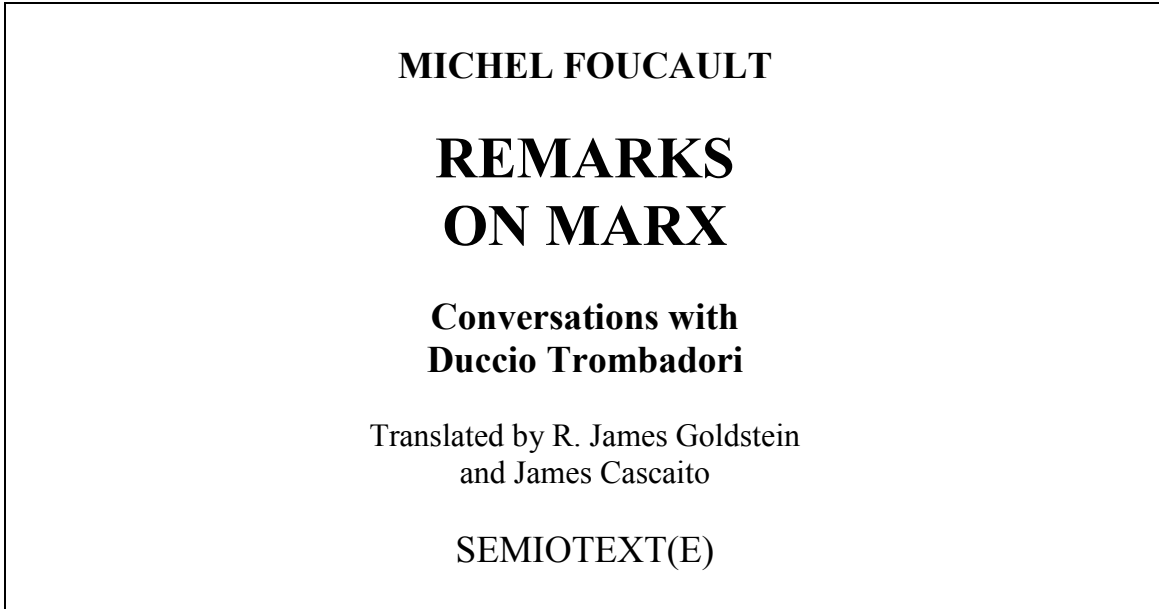
To further confound the matter, I am addressing a particular book that is not a book. It is an interview taken down and produced in print. Not only has it been produced, it has gone through linguistic reproduction: translation. The general issue of translation seems imposing enough, but, in this case, it has been translated twice. We have the 1991 English translation from the Italian translation of the “original” French (or French/Italian) interview done by Semiotext(e), titled: *Remarks on Marx*. And then there is the translation into English from the “original” French version taken from the authoritative *Dits et Ecrits* included in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984* (New Press, 2000): *An Interview with Michel Foucault*.

There are striking variations between the two and, perhaps even more interesting, is the manner in which we seek out the “original” one and what it might mean for a Foucault scholar to embark on such an originalist quest. The situation, it seems to me, is pregnant with meaning and tension. I would like to begin by noting some of the major contrasts between the two publications of the 1978 interview with Duccio Trombadori, and then ask some questions about how these texts further Foucault’s critical evaluation of the “order of things” and the “archaeologies of knowledge” without losing sight of his interest in the production of the subject. In this case, I am interested in something that touches on archeology, anthropology, and immortality: the production of Foucault via the ongoing birth of (his?) books.

The 1991 Semiotext(e) version, *Remarks on Marx*, took a great deal of liberty in transforming the interview into a full-fledged book. It bears: a title; a 1991 preface by R. J. Goldstein (the English-language translator); a note on the Italian-to-English translation; an English-language translation of the 1981 Italian-language introduction by Duccio Trombadori; and six chapters, each neatly titled and divided by subject or theme. Along with this are several promotional advertisements of

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Edited by Walter Kaufman (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 458-459 (italics in original).

various other books published by Semiotext(e). The book cites the first Italian publication of this interview as appearing in 1981, published by “10/17 *cooperativa editrice*,”⁸ under the title, *Colloqui con Foucault*.⁹ The authorship of the book is credited directly to Michel Foucault. The title page appears as follows:



The 2000 New Press version, “An Interview with Michel Foucault,” is not a book really, at least not in the strong sense. It is an interview included in a collection—a bundle of editors’ selections of writings or, in this case, transcribed “speakings”—under a generic title that cites the interviewer (D. Trombadori) in an endnote and, in the same note, claims that the interview was first published in 1980 (a year earlier than the claim made by Semiotext[e]) in the Italian journal, *Il Contributo*. With five editorial endnotes the interview is presented as a single entity, with no chapters or divisions, and a translation that reads quite differently and suggests that it is an entirely separate thing from the Semiotext(e) version. In fact, nowhere in the pages of the book—using the term ‘book’ in the weak sense—does any reference appear to the 1991 publication, not even a critical reference. The silence, of course, says a lot. Clearly, the controversy concerning the *liberty* taken in

⁸ While this title is only the name of the publisher (and bears no important relation to Foucault, as I see it), it may be useful to consider its meaning: I am not sure what the significance of the date, “10/17,” is, but I suspect that it has some political meaning. It also seems that the lowercase lettering is intentional and significant for the title. The English equivalent of the title would be: “the 10/17 editorial cooperative” (my translation).

⁹ The Italian word *colloqui* is, of course, the plural form of the Latin-derived English cognate, *colloquium* (my translation). Semiotext(e) translated it into the more germane *conversations*.

the English publication almost a decade earlier created a need for a *true(r)* version of the interview. The complete omission of *Remarks on Marx* in “An Interview with Michel Foucault” gives the sense that the Semiotext(e) version is justifiably forgotten, quarantined, inferior, and wrong. If we want to find Foucault—the real Foucault—then, for us English-speakers without advanced French reading ability, we ought to look at the legitimate, 2000, version of the 1978 interview.

This basic contrast is perhaps too suggestive. I should note that an interview involves two or more people, of course. Until now, however, we almost get the impression that the only (important) voice is Foucault’s. This is certainly not the case. Especially in this particular interview. Here Trombadori, an Italian, plays a major role. This is not a traditional interview, not the kind we might call “journalism.” In this case, Trombadori, a Marxist journalist and scholar, turns this interview into an interrogation, an agonistic exchange. His questions are not of the generic, information seeking, type; instead, there are frequent Marxist challenges to Foucault’s non/anti-Marxist positions. It is not easy to grasp in-advance or construe this interview under these uniquely agonistic terms, without reading the introduction that Trombadori wrote in 1981 that is included in the Semiotext(e), *Remarks on Marx*, version. I should add that I think that Trombadori’s introduction serves the reader well for the purposes of introducing Trombadori, but I do not find the actual points that Trombadori attempts to argue particularly persuasive, especially considering what Foucault says in the interview.

Nonetheless, lacking that introduction and Semiotext(e)’s of Trombadori’s personal profile that reveals that he was, “born in Rome in 1945, holds a degree in philosophy of law. The author of a study of the political thought of Antonio Gramsci, he has taught at the University of Rome. As a journalist, he has been editor of the cultural page of *L’Unita*. At the time of the publication of *Colloqui con Foucault*, he was political and parliamentary correspondent for the newspaper,”¹⁰ we lack a great deal of context.

Furthermore, the primary English-language translator of the Semiotext(e) edition, R. J. Goldstein, also helps to frame the uniqueness of this interview in his preface that offers insightful commentary. He ends his brief prefatory remarks by writing, “In reply to Marx’s famous thesis that philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world when the real point is to change it, Foucault would no doubt have argued that our constant task must be to keep changing our minds.” This, to me, is—interview aside—remarkably important. It strikes to the very heart of the Foucauldian-Marxist divide. Following Nietzsche, Foucault sees hermeneutics as change, whereas Marx grows impatient and calls for revolution. There is also a less polemical way to put this: *interpretation is revolution*. In other words, the hermeneutic task of changing our minds *is* the revolutionary art of *exegesis* and rumination, from which books are born.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 15.

Considering these mostly external differences, it is hard to decipher which book to accept and which one to reject. I think it is well understood that the literal translation of the Semiotext(e) edition is less suited to the purposes of hearing what Foucault has to say. However, to listen to the Italian Trombadori, it may suit the task just fine. In fact, we may find that Trombadori's questions are "better" posed in the Italian-to-English translation. Yet, we seem to assume that Trombadori's questions are marginal and unimportant. However, this is misleading. Just as it is somewhat misleading for the New Press to present such an austere and cold Trombadori, who, unlike Foucault, requires some introduction to general English-speaking readership.

These speculations are not to suggest which version the reader should choose or which is *really* the "good one" to have or purchase; instead, it is to ask the ironic questions: What does it mean for Foucault scholars to seek him out as though he could be found, as though he were hidden in his books or interviews, or what have you, and/or, what is the alternative? Should his disciples give up hope that Foucault will be resurrected as some kind of Christ? Is Foucault our Zarathustra, our Christ? What do we do when we are left with these words—this controversial canon of synoptic gospels, epistles, and testaments—that drift so far from their origins, from their *true* author?

These questions may be construed as passive-aggressive accusations of ignoring Zarathustra's cutting words to believers. However, as Nietzsche noted in his preface to *Genealogy*, "every word" should profoundly wound *and* delight. We need not let go completely of this bookish quest because, as *exegesis* serves for Nietzsche to transform the inferior modern man into the superior ruminating cow, experimental writing serves Foucault to create experience books: books that (or should I say, *who*) transform the way we think and, subsequently, who we are. In this interview, using a different word than power, the book serves in the same *powerful* way to constitute the subject, or, more specifically, to change, and thereby constitute, Foucault himself, by his own admission.

A Concluding Comparison

To conclude, here are the same passages from the respective translations addressing the claims I have made about Foucault and experience books. The question that haunts them, as I see it, is still the question of the subject and her constitution:

From *Remarks on Marx* (Semiotext(e), 1991):

Many things have certainly been surpassed. I'm perfectly aware of having continuously made shifts both in the things that have interested me and in what I have already thought. In addition, the books I write constitute an experience for me that I'd like to be as rich as possible. An experience is something you come out of changed. If I had to write a book to communicate what I have already thought, I'd never have the courage to begin it. I write precisely because I don't

know yet what to think about a subject that attracts my interest. In doing so, the book transforms me, changes what I think. As a consequence, each new work profoundly changes the terms of thinking which I had reached with the previous work. In this sense I consider myself more an experimenter than a theorist; I don't develop deductive systems to apply uniformly in different fields of research. When I write, I do it above all to change myself and not to think that same thing as before.¹¹

From "An Interview with Michel Foucault" (New Press, 2000):

Many things have been superseded, certainly. I'm perfectly aware of always being on the move in relation both to the things I'm interested in and to what I've already thought. What I think is never quite the same, because for me books are experiences, in a sense, that I would like to be as full as possible. An experience is something that one comes out of transformed. If I had to write a book to communicate what I'm already thinking before I begin to write, I would never have the courage to begin. I write a book only because I still don't know what to think about this thing I want to think about, so that book transforms me and transforms what I think. Each book transforms what I was thinking when I was finishing the previous book. I am an experimenter and not a theorist. I call a theorist someone who constructs a general system, either deductive or analytical, and applies it to different fields in a uniform way. That isn't my case. I'm an experimenter in the sense that I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same thing as before.¹²

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¹¹ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 26-27.

¹² Foucault, *Power*, 239-240.