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On Nietzsche

Interview with Jacqueline Piatier

Translated by Philipp Kender¹

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Michel Foucault granted this interview to the editor of the cultural pages of the daily *Le Monde* on May 24, 1967, following the publication of the complete works of Nietzsche in France, edited by Foucault and Gilles Deleuze.

Jacqueline Piatier: For how long has it been deemed necessary to re-publish a French translation of Nietzsche's complete works?

Michel Foucault: In fact, currently only one book is questionable: namely the last, *The Will to Power*. It was published while Nietzsche was still alive, but after illness had deprived him of his intellectual faculties. His sister, Mrs. Förster, took it upon herself to publish an accumulation of notes Nietzsche had made for a future book on which he placed considerable importance. She thus 'composed' the text known today as *The Will to Power*, claiming to have found it in outline form. She probably did not invent any of the material she published, but:

1. She undoubtedly cut up existing texts in such a way that their meaning could have been changed;
2. In choosing among these unpublished fragments, she omitted some that were essential;
3. She presented these fragments in an order for which she alone is responsible, but claimed to provide an image of the book that Nietzsche would have liked to write. We find ourselves facing the same problem that accompanied the publication of Pascal's *Pensées*. Before 1889, Nietzsche certainly had not made up his mind about the architecture of his book. His sister chose an outline that had been roughly sketched out in Nietzsche's hand, but it is one of several such drafts, and nothing proves that Nietzsche would finally have chosen this particular one.

¹ With sincere thanks to Anita Conrade for her comments and suggestions on a previous draft of this translation.

The Return to the Manuscripts

M.F.: The fact that the Nazis used Nietzsche's work for political ends imposed the idea that his thought had been systematically distorted by his sister. For this reason, a return to the manuscripts became more and more desirable, even necessary.

J.P.: Did the orientation Mrs. Förster gave to *The Will to Power* warrant this use?

M.F.: Nietzsche's sister was married to one of the founders of the first anti-Semitic movement in Germany. In his letters, Nietzsche underscored his disagreement with his brother-in-law several times. In the published work, of course, there is no trace of this divergence. Note that because the unpublished material from this period has not yet been fully inventoried, we do not know what it is going to reveal. Karl Schlechta began to review the material after the war. But he was not able to make a complete analysis.

J.P.: What becomes of *The Will to Power* in the new edition?

M.F.: Well, this false work disappears! It returns to its nascent state, the state in which Nietzsche left it for us. In its place there will be nothing but the posthumous fragments, which make up at least two volumes in the present edition.

J.P.: Will the text of Nietzsche's other works remain untouched?

M.F.: To form a homogeneous whole, Claude Gallimard has commissioned a new translation from a small number of specialists. Pierre Klossowski, who today will publish *The Gay Science* and all the hitherto unpublished writings of Nietzsche from around the time he composed this book, is also going to translate Nietzsche's later works. Rovini will be in charge of *Human, All Too Human* and *Zarathustra*, along with the corresponding unpublished texts. M. de Gandillac will be busy with Nietzsche's early writings, which have been somewhat neglected and misunderstood until now. With a small team of no more than six or seven translators at work, the finished set should read smoothly, despite the enormous mass of texts to translate.

J.P.: What can we expect all these unpublished works to reveal? Will they change the image we have of Nietzsche?

M.F.: They will certainly make things clearer by highlighting certain traits which move Nietzsche curiously closer to the concerns of contemporary philosophy.

1. His early writings are above all devoted to Greek philology. Nietzsche began his philosophical experience with considerations on language. However, in the nineteenth century, and even since Descartes, Western philosophy has thrived on a reflection on science, essentially physics and mathematics. Spinoza is an exception, because he, too, came to philosophy through Hebrew philology and his Biblical commentary. The most Greek and the most Hebrew of philosophers are alike in their shared interest for the written word. And that's not all, for it turns out that Nietzsche is relevant to research in modern philosophy and its considerations on language.

J.P.: Can the attention that contemporary philosophy pays to language be attributed Nietzsche's influence?

M.F.: Not at all. What we notice today is a coincidence. The orientation of contemporary thought has been determined by the enquiries of Bertrand Russell, mathematician and logician; by the works of Husserl in Germany; by the attention Freud gave to the discourse of the unconscious; and by Saussurean linguistics. Now we discover that Nietzsche, too, called language into question. And he did so not only as a good philologist, to find the rigorous form and the exact meaning of what was written; and not only as a good exegete, to bring out its hidden meanings. He did so to interrogate our existence and the very mode of being of the world on the basis of what we say; to discover who is speaking [pour savoir qui parle] in all that is said.

2. All the unpublished pieces that were composed at the same time as works that were eventually published throw a strange light on the latter. When a writer composes continuous discourse, the drafts he leaves behind constitute a more or less distant approach to the definitive text. In the case of aphoristic writing, the abandoned fragments constitute other texts. Their publication will not reveal the slow genesis of a unity. On the contrary, their publication multiplies and increases the aphoristic dispersal. Under the cloud of the texts published by the author, a whole cluster [tout un semis] of other possible texts appears — texts which are radically other, even if they are almost identical. Surrounded by the unpublished material cast off into the shadows, the book once again becomes like a world of isolated events, which are nonetheless connected to one another by way of an enigmatic network of repetitions, contradictions, exclusions, and transformations. The discourse is delivered as a cloud of events, outside any syntactical or rhetorical linkage. The thought that ‘arrives’, the speech that ‘produces itself’, the irruption of discourse — these are problems and forms that belong to both Nietzsche and his contemporary, Mallarmé. And today, we, too, are obsessed with them.

J.P.: Would the aphoristic form thus lead us to the ‘theoretical’ centre of Nietzsche's work?

M.F.: At the heart of Nietzsche's thought there is, sure enough, the problem of becoming and of the eternal return, or, in other words, the problem of the other and the same. That which is absolutely other is becoming — the explosion, the Dionysian tearing of time that produces the ‘bursting out’ of thought. But for Nietzsche it is nevertheless always the same thing that becomes. That which is other is at the same time the same, whence the eternal return, or rather the eternal return of the same. The aphorism as well, which stands in a relation of total difference to that which surrounds it, is at once the ‘same thing’ as that which it excludes. The central problem is thus found to be reproduced in the very form of Nietzsche's discourse.

J.P.: Are becoming and the eternal return the two axes of this kind of thought?

M.F.: Yes. Becoming appears mainly in the early texts, particularly in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The eternal return appears in *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*. To the early Nietzsche, the experience of becoming is essentially a tragic experience: in becoming, individuality is lost, in much the same way as individuality is lost in the Will.

Discourse and history

M.F.:

3. At last, there is the contribution of the unpublished works of Nietzsche's final period. The book that Nietzsche was preparing was to become, in his eyes, an event that would shake the world to its foundations. We witness in Nietzsche the appearance of the idea that philosophy is neither speculation nor the theory of a practice. It is an activity directly engaged with the world. Language and discourse do not reflect the world; they are part of the world. But, on the other hand, the backbone of the world is [le monde ... a pour nervure] what is said in language and discourse. So for Nietzsche, this last work, which was supposed to radically shake up philosophical discourse, was also destined to change the world.

J.P.: Do we have an idea of the new orientation Nietzsche had in mind?

M. F.: In fact, he says nothing about it, at least not in the texts collected in *The Will to Power*. Will the unpublished works be more explicit? I doubt it. He apprehended this radical change from afar, without knowing what it would consist of. To this unsuspected figure, which was to drive man out of his temporary enlightenment [qui devait chasser l'homme de sa lumière provisoire], Nietzsche would give the name 'Übermensch' [surhomme].

Article published in Le Monde on May 24, 1967.

The Beaufret — Foucault Exchange

On June 7, Le Monde published a clarification by the philosopher Jean Beaufret, an acquaintance of Heidegger, and Foucault's answer to this clarification.

Clarifications from Jean Beaufret

Following Michel Foucault's interview on the publication of Nietzsche's complete works, we have published several 'unpublished fragments' that accompany the new edition of *The Gay Science*.

In relation to these unpublished fragments, Mr. Jean Beaufret writes us the following:

"Allow me to point out that the first of these unpublished fragments can be found in the Kröner edition, the so-called 'Grossoktavausgabe': Volume XII, Part 1, § 342. It has even been translated into French by Mrs. Geneviève Blanquis (*The Will to Power*, Gallimard, Volume II, p. 189). The second, translated by H.-J. Bolle at the Mercure de France (*Nietzsche, œuvres posthumes*, 1934, p. 91), appears in the same volume (XII) of the same edition (Kröner), and so does the third one (first part, § 354)."

Answer by Michel Foucault

Mr. Michel Foucault has sent us the following letter in response:

"Mr. J. Beaufret justly reminds us that many of Nietzsche's fragments cited in our article from May 24 have already been published. To give an idea of the restoration undertaken by us, we intentionally chose among the posthumous works contemporary with *The Gay Science* texts that are still unknown, and other, already very well-known texts, which

previous editors had carefully brought together in various collections. The purpose of the current edition is to reproduce, in their original form, and according to their original order and date, the entire ensemble of texts (unpublished or not) from the Nietzsche archives. We thank Mr. Jean Beaufret for his clarifications.”

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