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MICHEL FOUCAULT
POWER, TRUTH, STRATEGY

Edited by Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton

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This is in no way a history book. The selection that shall be found in it has conformed to nothing more important than my taste, my pleasure, an emotion, laughter, surprise, a certain fright or some other feeling, whose intensity perhaps I would have difficulty in justifying now that the first flush of discovery is past.

This is an anthology of existences. Lives of a few lines or of a few pages, countless misfortunes and adventures, gathered together in a handful of words. Brief lives, chanced upon; these are examples which furnish not so much a contraction of things said in these texts that one does not know through the double reference that it indicates: to the rapidity of the narrative and to the reality of the events related; for such is the contraction of things said in these texts that one does not know whether the intensity which traverses them is due more to the vividness of the words or to the violence of the facts which jostle about in them. Singular lives, those which have become, through I know not what accidents, strange poems: that is what I wanted to gather together in a sort of herbarium.

I rather believe the idea came to me one day in the Bibliothèque Nationale when I was reading an internment register drawn up at the very beginning of the eighteenth century. It even seems that the idea came to me from reading the following two accounts.

Mathurin Milan, sent to the hospital of Charenton, 31 August 1701: "Apostate friar, seditious, capable of the greatest crimes, sodomy, atheism if it were possible; this is a veritable monster of abomination that there would be less inconvenience in suppressing than in letting go free."

I would find it difficult to say exactly what I felt when I read these fragments and many others which were similar to them. Doubtless one of those impressions which one says are "physical" as if it would be possible to have others. And I confess that these "nouvelles", suddenly rising up through two and a half centuries of silence, stirred more fibres in me than what one usually calls literature, without my being able to say even today whether what moved me more was the beauty of this classical style, draped in a few sentences around doubtlessly wretched personages, or the excesses, the mixture of sombre obstinacy and villainy of these lives of which one feels, under words polished like stone, the relentlessness and the ruin.

A long time ago, I utilised similar documents for a book. If I did so then, it is doubtless on account of that vibration which I feel even today when I happen to run across these lowly lives reduced to ashes in the few phrases that have destroyed them. The dream would have been to restore their intensity in an analysis. For want of the necessary talent, I therefore brooded for a long time over analysis alone; I grasped the texts in their barrenness; I sought what had been their raison d'etre, to which institutions or to what political practice they referred; I undertook to know why it had been suddenly so important in a society like ours to "suppress" (as one stifles a cry, smothers a fire or suffocates an animal) a scandalous monk or a fantastic and inconsequential usurer; I sought the reason for which the poor spirits had been so zealously prevented from walking upon unknown paths.

But the primary intensities which had motivated me remained outside. And since there was a risk that they might not pass into the order of reasons, since my discourse was incapable of bearing them as would be proper, wasn't it best to leave them in the same form which had made me experience them?

From there came the idea of this collection, to some extent compiled as opportunity offered. A collection which has been composed without haste and without a clearly defined aim. For a long time I thought of presenting it according to a systematic order, with some rudiments of explanation and in such a way that it might manifest a minimum of historical significance. I gave up this idea, for reasons to which I shall presently return; I resolved quite simply to assemble a certain number of texts, for the sake of the intensity which they appeared to me to have; I accompanied them with some preliminary remarks; and I distributed them in a way to preserve - in my opinion, in the least unsatisfactory way - the effect of each. My inadequacy pledged me to the frugal lyricism of the citation.
Therefore this book will not satisfy historians, even less than did the others. Is this a whimsical and purely subjective book? I would say rather — but this perhaps amounts to the same thing that this is a playful book, a book of convention, of a little idiosyncrasy which has found itself a system. Indeed I believe that the impassioned, fantastic usurer or that of the sodomite friar have served me, from beginning to end, as a model. It is in order to rediscover something like these lightning-existences, like these life-poems, that I imposed on myself a certain number of simple rules:

- that it should be a question of personages having really existed;
- that these existences should have been both obscure and unfortunate;
- that their story should have been told in a few pages or better in a few sentences, as briefly as possible;
- that these narratives not simply constitute strange or pathetic anecdotes, but that in one way or another (because these were complaints, denunciations, orders or reports) they should have really taken part in the miniscule history of these existences, of their misfortune, of their rage or of their uncertain madness; and that in the shock of these words and these lives should be born again for us a certain effect mixed with beauty and fright.

But on the subject of these rules which could appear arbitrary, I must explain myself a little further.

I wanted it to be always a question of real existences; that one should be able to ascribe a place and a date to them; that behind these names which no longer say anything, behind these rapid words which indeed may have been most of the time false, mendacious, unjust, excessive, there should have been men who lived and died, sufferings, wickedness, jealousies, vociferations. Therefore I banished all that which could be imagination or literature: none of the dark heroes which the latter have been able to invent has appeared to me as intense as these cobbiers, these deserting soldiers, these很开心, these soldiers, these vagabond monks, all enraged, scandalous or pitiable; and this doubtless comes from the simple fact that one knows that they existed. In the same way I banished all the texts which could be memoirs, recollections, tableaux, all those which indeed narrated reality but in maintaining from it the distance of observation, memory, curiosity or amusement. I insisted that these texts should always be in a relationship or rather in the greatest number of possible relationships with reality: not only that they refer to it, but that they perform in it; that they should play a part in the dramaturgy of the real, that they constitute the instrument of a revenge, the weapon of a hatred, an episode in a battle, the gesticulation of a despair or of a jealousy, a supplication or an order. I haven't sought to unite texts which would be more faithful to reality than others, which would merit selection for their representative value, but texts which played a role in this real of which they speak, and which in return find themselves, whatever their inexactitude, their turbidity or their hypocrisy may be, traversed by it: fragments of discourse trailing the fragments of a reality in which they take part.

What shall be read here is not a collection of portraits: they are snakes, weapons, cries, gestures, attitudes, ruses, intrigues for which the words have been the instruments. Real lives have been "played out" in these few sentences; I don't mean by that expression that they have been represented there, but that, in fact, their liberty, their misfortune, often their death, in any case their destiny have been, at least partly, therein decided. These discourses have really affected lives; these existences have effectively been risked and lost in these words.

Also I wanted these personages to be obscure themselves; that nothing should have predisposed them to fame or brilliance, that they should not have been endowed with any of those grandeur which are established and recognised — those of birth, fortune, saintliness, heroism or genius; that they should belong to those billions of existences which are destined to pass away without a trace; that there should be in their misfortunes, in their passions, in those loves and in those hatreds, something grey and ordinary beside what is usually estimated as worthy of being recounted; that nevertheless they should have been traversed with a certain ardour, that they should have been animated by a violence, an energy, an excess in the wickedness, the meanness, the baseness, the obstinacy or the bad luck which would give a sort of frightening or pitiable grandeur to them in the eyes of their peers, and in proportion to their very mediocrity. I went in search of those sorts of particles endowed with an energy all the more great as they are themselves small and difficult to discern.

In order that something of this should come across even to us, it was nevertheless necessary that a beam of light should, at least for a moment, illuminate them. A light which comes from somewhere else. What rescues them from the darkness of night where they would, and still should perhaps, have been able to remain, is an encounter with power: without this collision, doubtless there would no longer be a single word to recall their fleeting passage. The power which lay in wait for these lives, which spied on them, which pursued them, which turned its attention, even if only for a moment, to their complaints and to their small tumults, which marked them by a blow of its claws, is also the power which instigated the few words which are left for us of those lives: whether because someone wished to address themselves to power in order to denounce, to complain, to solicit, to beg, or because power desired to intervene, and then judged and sentenced in a few words. All these lives, which were destined to pass beneath all discourse and to disappear without ever being spoken, have only been
able to leave behind traces—brief, incisive, and often enigmatic—at
the point of their instantaneous contact with power. So that it is
doubtless impossible ever to recapture them in themselves, such as
they might have been "in a free state"; they can now only be located
when seized in the declarations, the tactical partialities, the im-
perative falsehoods which the power games and the relations with
power presuppose.

It shall be said to me: that's just like you, always with the same
incapacity to cross the line, to pass over to the other side, to listen to
and make heard the language which comes from elsewhere or from
below; it is always the same choice, for the side of power, for what
power says or of what it causes to be said. Why don't you go and
listen to these lives there where, of themselves, they speak?—But to
begin with, would anything at all remain for us of what they have
been, in their violence or their singular misfortune, if they had not, at
a given moment, collided with power and provoked its forces? After
all, is it not one of the fundamental traits of our society that destiny
takes the form of the relation to power, of the struggle along with or
against it? The most intense point of lives, the one where their energy
is concentrated, is precisely there where they clash with power,
struggle with it, endeavour to utilise its forces or to escape its traps.
The brief and strident words which come and go between power
and the most unessential existences, are doubtless for the latter the sole
monument that has ever been accorded to them; these words are what
gives to them, in order to travel through time, the brief flash of sound
and fury which carries them even to us.

In short, I wanted to collect some rudiments together for a legend
of obscure men, based on the discourses which in misfortune or in
rage they exchanged with power.

I say "legend", because a certain equivocation of the fictitious
and the real occurs there, as in all legends. But the equivocation
occurs for inverse reasons. The legendary, whatever its kernel of
reality, is finally nothing other than the sum of what is said about it.
It is indifferent to the existence or to the non-existence of the one
whose glory it transmits. If such a person existed, the legend covers
him with so many prodigies, it embellishes him with so many im-
possibilities that everything happens or almost happens as if he had
never lived. And if he is purely imaginary, the legend relates so many
insistent narratives to his account that he takes on the historical depth
of someone who would have existed. In the texts which shall be read
further on, the existence of these men and women reduces itself
exactly to what has been said about them: nothing subsists of who
they were or what they did, except in a few sentences. Here it is rarity
and not prolixity, which makes real and fiction equivalent. Having
been nothing in history, not having played any appreciable role in
events or amidst important people, not having left any trace about
them behind which may be referred to, they do not have and will never
ever have any existence except under the precarious shelter of these
words. And thanks to the texts which speak of them, they come into
our hands without bringing any more indices of reality than if they
came from the Golden Legend or from an adventure novel. This pure
verbal existence which turns these wretched men or these scoundrels
into quasi-fictitious beings, is owed by them to their nearly exhaustive
disappearance and to that chance or mischance which has allowed the
survival, through the accident of rediscovered documents, of a few
rare words which speak of them or of what they themselves have
spoken. A dark legend, but above all a gaunt legend, reduced to what
was said one day and which certain improbable encounters have
preserved up until our time.

There lies another trait of this dark legend. The legend hasn't been
transmitted like the one which is gilded with some deep-seated
necessity, following continuous paths. By nature, it has no tradition;
it is only through ruptures, obliteration, omissions, intersections,
reappearances that this legend can reach us. Chance bears it along
right from the beginning. To begin with there must have been a play
of circumstances which, contrary to all expectations, brought down
on the most obscure individual, on his mediocre life, on his ultimately
fairly ordinary shortcomings, the gaze of power and the explosion of
its wrath: a throw of the dice which saw to it that the vigilance of the
authorities or the institutions, doubtless destined to erase all
disturbance, detained this person rather than that person, this scan-
dalous monk, this battered woman, this innkeeper and raging drunkard,
this quarrelsome merchant, and not so many others, beside them,
whose disturbance of the peace was no less great. And next, it has to
take place that, amongst so many lost and dispersed documents, it
should be this one and not some other which came into our
hands and which was rediscovered and read. So that between these
unimportant people and we who have no more importance than they
do, there is no relation of necessity. Nothing made it probable that
they, rather than anybody else, should suddenly loom up from the
shadows with their life and their misfortunes. Let us entertain the
wish, if we so desire, to see a revenge in this: the chance which allows
these absolutely inglorious people to suddenly arise amidst so many
deaths, to gesticulate again, to still manifest their rage, their affliction
or their invincible obstinacy of divagation, perhaps compensates for
the misfortune which had brought down on them, despite their
modesty and their anonymity, the lightning flash of power.

Lives which are as though they hadn't existed, lives which only
survive from the clash with a power whose only wish was to annihilate
or at least to efface them, lives which only return to us through the
effect of multiple chances—these are the infamies whose few remains
I wanted to collect here. A false infamy exists, that enjoyed by those
with a humble and respectful confidence to throw himself at the feet of Your Majesty in order to beseech His justice against the most wicked of all women . . . What hope must not the unfortunate man imagine who, reduced to the last extremity, today has recourse to Your Majesty after having exhausted every avenue of sweetness, remonstrances and consideration in order to bring back to her duty a woman deprived of every feeling of religion, of honour, of probity and even of humanity? Such is the state of the unhappy man, Sire, who dares to make his plaintive voice resound in Your Majesty's ears." Or again, that abandoned wet-nurse who asked for the arrest of her husband in the name of her four children "who perhaps have nothing to look for in their father but a terrible example of the effects of disorderly conduct. Your Royal Highness' Justice shall spare them from such a blighting education, shall spare me, my family from opprobrium and infamy, and take it out of the power of a bad citizen to do harm to the society to whose interests he cannot but be prejudicial." One may laugh perhaps; but we must not overlook this: that rhetoric which is only grandiloquent by the smallness of the things to which it is applied, power responds in terms which appear hardly any more restrained to us; yet with this difference, that in its words pass the lightning flash of its decisions; and their solemnity can be authorised, if not by the importance of what they punish, then at least by the severity of the chastisement they impose. If some stray horoscope caster is confined, it is because "there are few crimes that she has not committed, and none of which she is not capable. So there is no less charity than justice in instantly delivering the public from so dangerous a woman, who has swindled it, duped it and scandalised it with impunity for so many years". Or apropos of a dissolute and scatter-brained youth: "This is a monster of libertinage and impiety . . . Accustomed to every vice: roguish, disobedient, hot-headed, violent, capable of attempting the life of his own father out of malice aforethought . . . always keeps company with women of the lowest prostitution. Every representation made to him concerning his rogueries and profiliages makes no impression upon his heart; he only responds to this by a villainous smile which makes known his hardness of heart and only leads us to apprehend that he is incurable." With the slightest prank, one is already in the abominable, or at least in the discourse of invective and of execration. These immoral women and wild children do not pale beside Nero or Rodogune. The discourse of power in the Classical age, like the discourse which addresses itself to it, engenders monsters. Why this so bombastic theatre of everyday life?

Christianity had organised power's hold over the commonplace of life, for the most part, around the confession: the obligation to have the miniscule world of the everyday, the banal faults, the even imperceptible failings, dissected with language right down to the turbid play

In comparison to the great compilation of infamy, which would gather together the traces from very nearly everywhere and from every time, I quite realise that the following selection is mean, narrow, a little monotonous. It concerns documents which all date from approximately the same one hundred years, 1660-1760, and which come from the same source: archives of confinement, police, petitions to the king and lettres de cachet. Let us assume that this is to be a first volume and that the Life of Infamous Men will be able to extend to other times and other places.

I have chosen this period and this type of text, on account of an old familiarity. But if the taste that I have had for them for some years now has not yet faded and moreover if I revert back to it today, it is because I suspect there is a beginning there; in any case an important event where political mechanisms and discourse-effects have intersected.

These seventeenth- and eighteenth-century texts (especially if one compares them with what is to be, later on, the police and administrative platitudes) have a sparkle, they reveal by the turn of a sentence a splendour, a violence that belies, in our eyes at least, the smallness of the affair or the rather shameful pettiness of the intentions. There the most pitiable lives are described with the imprecations or the accent which seems to suit the most tragic. Doubtless this has a comic effect: there is something ridiculous in convoking all the power of words, and through them the sovereignty of heaven and earth, around insignificant disturbances or such common misfortunes: "Crushed under the weight of the most excessive sorrow, Duchesne, clerk, dares
of thoughts, of intentions and of desires; the ritual of the avowal, where the one who speaks is at the same time the one of whom one speaks; the effacement of the thing said by its very utterance, and equally the annihilation of the avowal itself which must remain secret, and leave behind it no other trace than repentance and the workings of penitence. The Christian West invented this astonishing constraint, which it imposed on everyone, to say everything in order to efface everything, to formulate even the least faults in an uninterrupted, desperate, exhaustive murmuring, from which nothing must escape, but which must not itself survive its own action for one moment. For hundreds of millions of men and for centuries, wrong had to be confessed in the first person, in a fleeting and obligatory whispering.

Now, starting from a time that can be situated at the end of the seventeenth century, this mechanism was surrounded and overwhelmed by another whose functioning was very different. This was an administrative and no longer religious arrangement: a mechanism of registration, and no longer of pardon. The objective aimed at was, however, the same. At least in part: the bringing of everyday life into discourse, the surveying of the infinitesimal universe of unimportant irregularities and disturbances. But here the avowal does not play the eminent role that Christianity had reserved for it. For the imposition of this grid, old, but previously localised procedures were systematically utilised: the denunciation, the indictment, the inquiry, the report, the use of informers, the interrogation. And everything thus said is registered in writing, accumulates and constitutes dossiers and archives. Instantaneous and without trace, the solitary voice of the penitential avowal which effaced transgression in effacing itself is henceforth relayed by multiple voices, which deposit themselves in an enormous documentary mass and thus build up through time as the endlessly growing memory of all the wrongs of the world. The miniscule wrong of misery and misconduct is no longer conveyed to heaven by the scarcely audible confidence of the avowal; it is accumulated on earth in the form of written traces. It is quite a different type of relations which is established between power, discourse and the everyday, quite a different way of regulating the latter and of formulating it. Thus is born, for everyday life, a new mise en scène.

We are acquainted with its first archaic, but already complex, instruments: these are the petitions, the lettres de cachet or the orders from the king, the diverse confinements, the police reports and rulings. I shan’t retrace these things which are already well-known; but only certain aspects which can account for the intensity, strange and with a kind of beauty, which sometimes adorns these fleeting images in which poor beggars, for we who glimpse them from afar, have taken on the visage of infamy. The lettre de cachet, the internment, the generalised presence of the police; all this only evokes, ordinarily, the despotism of an absolute monarch. But we must really understand that this “high-handedness” was a kind of public service. The “orders from the King” only came swooping down unexpectedly, as signs of the monarch’s wrath, from above to below in the rarest cases. Most of the time, they were solicited against someone by their entourage, their father and mother, one of their relatives, their family, their sons or daughters, their neighbours, sometimes the local parish priest, or some person of influence; they were begged for, as if it were a question of some great crime which would have merited the sovereign’s wrath, because of some obscure family trouble: some flouted or beaten spouse, some squandered fortune, some conflict of interests, some disobedient young folk, some roggeries or drunken debaucheries, and all the little disorders of conduct. The lettre de cachet which put itself forward as the specific and express will of the king to confine one of his subjects, outside the channels of regular justice, was only the response to that demand which came from below. But it wasn’t automatically accorded to whoever asked for it; an inquiry was meant to precede it, destined to judge the merits of the demand; it was meant to establish whether this debauchery or that drunkenness, or this violence and that libertinage really deserved an internment, and under what conditions and for what length of time: this was a task for the police, who in order to perform it gathered together testimonies, informer’s tales, and all that questionable murmuring which shrouds everyone in a mist.

The confinement-letter de cachet system was only a fairly brief episode: it lasted for hardly more than a century and was restricted solely to France. Nevertheless it was important in the history of the mechanisms of power. It didn’t ensure the spontaneous eruption of royal arbitrariness in the most everyday element of life. Rather it ensured its distribution along complex circuits, and in a whole play of demands and responses. An abuse of absolutism? Perhaps; yet not in the sense that the monarch purely and simply abused his own power, but in the sense that everyone could make use of the enormity of absolute power for themselves, to their own ends and against others; it was a kind of placing of mechanisms of sovereignty, a given possibility, at the disposal of whoever is clever enough to tap them, to divert its effects to their profit. A certain number of consequences follow on from this: political sovereignty comes to insert itself at the most elementary level of the social body; from subject to subject — and sometimes it is a question of the most humble —, between members of the same family, in neighbourhood relations, relations of commercial interest, of occupation, of rivalry, of hatred and love, one can assert, beyond the traditional weapons of authority and obedience, the resources of a political power that has the form of absolutism: everyone, if they know how to play the game, can become a terrible and lawless monarch for another: homo homini...
a whole political network comes to interface itself with the web of everyday life. But one must first appropriate this power, at least for a moment, channel it, tap it and inflect it in the direction one wants; one must, in order to make use of it for one's profit, 'seduce' it; at one and the same time it becomes the object of covetousness and the object of seduction; therefore it is desirable, and this in the same degree to which it is absolutely redoubtable. The intervention of a limitless political power in the everyday relationship thus becomes not only acceptable and familiar, but profoundly wished for, and not without becoming, by the same token, the theme of a generalised fear. There is nothing astonishing about this tendency which, little by little, opened up the relations of togetherness or dependency traditionally bound up with the family to administrative and political control. Nor is it astonishing that the inordinate power of the king functioning thus in the midst of passions, rages, miseries and villainies was able to become, in defiance of or rather even owing to its usefulness, an object of execration. Those who made use of lettres de cachet, and the king who granted them were trapped by their complicity: more and more the former lost their traditional strength to the profit of an administrative power; for its part, having been mixed up every day with so many hatreds and intrigues, it became hateful. As the duc de Chaulieu said, I believe, in the Mémoires de deux jeunes mariés, in cutting off the head of the king, the French Revolution decapitated every paterfamilias.

From all that I would like to retain, for the moment, this: with that apparatus of petitions, of lettres de cachet, of interment, of police, an infinity of discourses which traverses everyday life in all senses comes into the world and takes in charge, though in an absolutely different mode from the avowal, the miniscule wrongs of unimportant lives. In the nets of power, along fairly complex circuits, came to be caught the disputes between neighbours, the quarrels between parents and children, the domestic misunderstandings, the excesses of wine and sex, the public bickerings and many secret passions. It was as though what happened was an immense and omnipresent summons for the bringing of all these agitations and of each of these little sufferings into discourse. A murmuring that shall know no bounds begins to swell: the one through which the individual variations in conduct, the disgraces and the secrets are offered up through discourse to the clasp of power. The trivial ceases to belong to silence, to passing rumour or to fleeting avowal. All those things which make up the ordinary, the unimportant detail, the obscurity, the day, without glory; the common life, can and must be said, better, written. They have become describable and transcribable, in the same degree to which they are traversed by the mechanisms of a political power. For a long time only the chronicles of the nobles merited being told without ridicule; blood line, birth and the heroic deed, alone, gave one the right to history. And if it sometimes happened that the most humble might have access to a kind of glory, it was through some extraordinary feat, the brilliance of a sainthood or the enormity of a heinous crime. That there might be in the order of the everyday something like a secret to disclose, that the unessential point might be, in a certain way, important, remained out of the question until the unmitigated gaze of power comes to rest upon those minuscule agitations.

Hence the birth of an immense possibility of discourse. A certain knowledge [savoir] of everyday life has at least a part of its origins there and, with this knowledge, a grid of intelligibility that the West undertook to hang on our gestures, on our ways of being and doing. But for that to happen the omnipresence, both real and virtual, of the monarch was necessary; for anyone to undertake to solicit it, it was necessary to imagine him as fairly close to all these miseries, as fairly attentive to the least of those disturbances; it was necessary that he should himself appear as endowed with a kind of physical ubiquity. In its initial form, this discourse on everyday life was quite entirely turned towards the king; it addressed itself to him; it had to creep into the great ceremonial rituals of power; it had to adopt its form and to assume its insigns. The banal could only be said, written, described, observed, graphed and qualified in a power relation which was haunted by the figure of the king, — by his real power and by the fantasm of his potency. From that comes the singular form of this discourse: it exacted a decorative, imprecatory or suppliant language. Every one of those little everyday stories had to be told with the grandiloquence proper to the uncommon events which are worthy of claiming the attention of monarchs; grand rhetoric had to dress up those trifling affairs. Never again afterwards would the gloomy police administration, nor the dossiers of medicine or of psychiatry rediscover such effects of language. Sometimes a sumptuous verbal edifice for recounting an obscure villainy or a petty intrigue; sometimes a few brief sentences which strike down a poor wretch and reimmerse him in the night of his darkness; or again the long account of misfortunes recounted in the mode of supplication and humility: the political discourse of banality could only be solemn. 

But another disparity effect also comes about in these texts. Often it happened that demands for interment were made by people of very low conditions, little or unskilled in letters; with their meagre learning or, in their stead, a more or less capable scribe, they themselves composed as best they could the formulas and turns of phrase that they thought requisite when addressing oneself to the king or to the nobles, and they mixed them up with the maladroit and violent words, the churlish expressions with which they doubtless thought to give to their petitions more force and truth; so that in solemn and disjointed sentences, and alongside unintelligible words, uncouth,
maladroit, ill-sounding phrases pour forth; with the obligatory and ceremonial language are intertwined the expressions of impatience, anger, rage, passion, rancour, rebellion. A resonance and wild intensities upset the rules of this stilted discourse and emerge with their own ways of telling. Thus speaks the wife of Nicolas Bienfait: she "takes the liberty to very humbly point out to His Royal Highness that the said Nicolas Bienfait, livery coachman, is a most wanton man who is beating her to death, and who is selling everything having already caused the death of his two wives the first of which had her child killed inside her body, the second after his having sold and devoured her, he made her waste away to death by his ill treatment, even going as far as wanting to strangle her on the verge of her death... The heart of the third he wants to eat on a spit, not counting all the other murders he has committed, Your Royal Highness, I throw myself at the feet of Your Majesty in order to implore Your Mercy. I hope that you will render me justice from your goodness, for my life being at peril all the time, I shall not stop praying to God for the preservation of your health...".

The documents that I have gathered together here are homogeneous; and they strongly risk appearing monotonous. Yet all function on disparity. A disparity between the things recounted and the way of saying them; a disparity between those who complain and beseech and those who have every power upon them; a disparity between the miniscule order of the problems raised and the enormity of the power set to work; a disparity between the language of ceremony and power and the one of furies or impotences. These are texts which look towards Racine, or Bossuet, or Crébillon; but they carry with them a whole popular agitation, a whole misery and a whole violence, a whole "baseness", as used to be said, which no literature of that era would have been able to welcome. They cause beggars, poor folk, or simply the medici to appear in a strange theatre where they assume poses, declamations, grandiloquencies, where they dress up in bits of drapery which are necessary for them if they want to be paid attention to on the stage of power. Sometimes they remind one of a poor troupe of mountebanks, who would rig themselves out after a fashion in a few tawdry pieces of finery that were sumptuous once upon a time, in order to act before a well-off public who will poke fun at them. Except that in this case they enact their own life, and before the high and mighty who can determine its course. Like characters from Céline wanting to make themselves heard at Versailles.

A day will dawn when that disparity finds itself effaced. The power which will come to exercise itself at the level of everyday life is no longer that of a close and distant monarch, all-mighty and capricious, source of all justice and object of all forms of seduction, both political principle and magical potency; it will be made up of a fine, differentiated, continuous network in which the diverse institutions of justice, of the police, of medicine, of psychiatry relay one another. And the discourse which takes form then will no longer have the old artificial and maladroit theatricality; it will develop in a language claiming to be that of observation and of neutrality. The banal will be analysed according to the efficacious but grey grid of administration, of journalism and of science; except to search for its splendours a little further afield, in literature. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one is in the still rough and barbaric age where all these mediations do not exist; the body of poor wretches is nearly directly confronted to that of the king, their agitation to his ceremonies; neither is there any common language, but a clash between the cries and the rituals, between the disturbances to be told and the rigour of the forms to be followed. From there, for we who look from afar upon that first surfacing of everyday life in the code of the political, come strange fulgurations, something shrill and intense, which will consequently vanish when "affairs", news items or cases shall be made out of these things and out of these men.

An important moment it was when a society loaned words, turns of phrase and constructions, rituals of language to the anonymous mass of people in order that they be able to speak about themselves; to speak publicly of themselves, with the triple condition that this discourse be addressed and put into circulation in a well-defined apparatus of power, that it make the hitherto scarcely perceptible foundation of existences appear, and that starting from this lowly war of passions and of interests it should give power the possibility of a sovereign intervention. The ear of Denys was an elementary small machine indeed if it is compared with this one. How simple and easy it would be, no doubt, to dismantle power, if it only worked to supervise, to spy upon, to sneak up on, to prohibit and to punish; but it incites, instigates, produces; it isn't simply eye and ear; it brings about speech and action.

 Doubtless this machinery has been important for the constitution of new knowledges. Nor is it any stranger to a whole new regime of literature. I don't mean that the lettre de cachet is at the point of origin of hitherto unrecognised literary forms, but that at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the relations of discourse, of power, of everyday life and of truth knitted together in a new mode where literature also happened to find itself engaged.

The fable, according to the sense of the word, is that which merits being told. For a long time, in western society, the life of the everyday could only accede to discourse when traversed and transfigured by the fabulous; it had to be drawn out of itself by heroism, exploit, adventures, providence and grace, possibly, by the heinous crime; it had to be marked with a touch of the impossible. Only then did it become sayable. That which put it out of reach permitted it to
function as lesson and example. The more the narrative departed from the commonplace, the more force it had to cast its spell or to persuade. In this play of the "fabulous-exemplary", indifference to the true and the false was therefore fundamental. And if it happened that one undertook to tell the mediocrity of the real for its own sake, this was just only to provoke a comic effect: the sole fact of speaking about it caused laughter.

Since the seventeenth century, the West has witnessed the birth of a whole "fable" of the obscure life from which the fabulous found itself proscribed. The impossible or the ridiculous have ceased to be the condition under which the commonplace might be recounted. An art of language is born whose task is no longer to sing of the improbable, but to make what doesn't appear — what can't or mustn't appear — appear: to tell of the ultimate, and the most minute, degrees of the real. At the time when an apparatus is placed in position for forcing the telling of the "lowly" "infime", of that which does not tell itself, of that which merits no glory, the "infamous" therefore ["infime"], a new imperative takes shape which acts to constitute what one might call the ethic immanent to the literary discourse of the West: its ceremonial functions will efface themselves little by little; it will no longer have the task of sensibly manifesting the too visible brilliance of force, of grace, of heroism, of strength; but of going to seek what is the most difficult to perceive, the most concealed, the most discomforting to show and tell, finally the most forbidden and the most scandalous. A kind of injunction to flush out the most nocturnal and the most everyday aspect of existence (even while sometimes uncovering there the solemn figures of destiny) acts to draw what is the line of literature's tendency since the seventeenth century, since it commenced to be literature in the modern sense of the word. More than a specific form, more than an essential relation to form, it is this constraint, I was going to say this moral, which characterised it and which conveyed to us its immense movement: the duty to tell the most common of secrets. Literature alone does not summarise this great politics, this great discursive ethic; neither can it be wholly reduced to it; but it has there its place and its conditions of existence.

From this comes its double relation to truth and power. Whereas the fabulous can only function in an indecision between true and false, literature sets itself up in a decision of non-truth: it explicitly puts itself forward as artifice, but while undertaking to produce its effects of truth which are recognisable as such; the importance which was accorded, in the Classical era, to the natural and to imitation is doubtless one of the earliest ways of formulating that "verily" functioning of literature. Fiction has from that time onwards replaced the fabulous, the novel [le roman] throws off the yoke of the romanesque and shall only develop in liberating itself always more completely from it. Therefore literature forms part of that great system of constraint by which the West compelled the everyday to bring itself into discourse; but it occupies a special place there: bent on seeking everyday life beneath itself, on crossing over the limits, on brutally or insidiously disclosing the secrets, on ousting the rules and the codes, on causing the unavowable to be said, it will therefore tend to place itself outside the law or at all events to take upon itself the charge of scandal, of transgression or of rebellion. More than any other form of language, it remains the discourse of "infamy": it remains its task to say the most unsayable — the worst; the most secret, the most intolerable, the shameless. The fascination which psychoanalysis and literature have exercised on each other for many years now is significant on this point. But we must not forget that this singular position of literature is only an effect of a certain apparatus of power which traverses in the West the economy of discourse and the strategies of the true.

At the beginning I said that I wanted these texts to be read as so many "nouvelles". This is no doubt going too far; none of them will ever be the equal of the least important narratives of Chekov, of Maupassant or of James. Neither "quasi-" nor "sub-literature", this is not even the skeleton of a genre; it belongs rather to disorder, noise and sorrow, the working of power on lives and the discourse which is born from it. Manon Lescaut recounts one of the following histories.

Translated by Paul Foss and Meaghan Morris

NOTES


2 [The double reference in nouvelle of which Foucault speaks is to the usual sense of a "piece of news", and to the literary form "short story". This is why "novella" doesn't quite work as a translation here. — Trs]