

# Discontinuity and Continuity: Literary History According to Foucault

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**Abstract** The paper is focused on detailed reading of Foucault's chief methodological work *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Analysis show that Foucault never prioritizes discontinuity over continuity, but rather thinks of the conditions from which they both arise. This approach is called quasi-transcendental since it eludes any binary oppositions. For example, what Foucault calls *episteme* is in fact historical *a priori* of an epoch (which can be, then, thought of either as necessary historical unity or as partial social construct). Structurally, it can be demonstrated that this reasoning, although somewhat paradoxically, has affinity with Heidegger and other phenomenological and hermeneutic oriented philosophers of history.

Such a philosophy of history breaks neither with continuity nor teleology: what it breaks with is merely the romantic illusion that the final subject may be positioned in the place of the absolute subject. The lesson for contemporary literary history is that it should be written from fundamental hermeneutic and ethical perspective: literary historian is led to an understanding of his own position and to opening up the space of freedom, to conceiving his ever new unstable subjectivations. And, moreover, literary history should not be subordinated to cultural history (or any other histories). The history of literature *qua* literature should advocate that it is literature that somehow produces culture and not the other way around. Or, as Walter Benjamin lucidly put it: literature should be an "organon of history" and not its mere material.

**Key words** literary history; discontinuity; teleology; episteme

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Traditional literary history relied on the Hegelian *Geistesgeschichte* model, which is said to favour unproblematic linearity, continuity and teleology. However, proliferating voices in recent literary scholarship have clamoured for a revision of this (supposedly) outdated model, since the logic of continuity and teleology is allegedly not only unjust to the amorphous mass of historical material but even presupposes imperialist, racist, sexist, homophobic, counter-ecological and similar intentions.<sup>1</sup> Therefore — the argument goes — the teleology and continuities of literary history, both theory and practice, should be pitted against discontinuities, dispersion of events, heterogeneity, contingency, difference — in other words, against contemporary academic concepts. A glaring feature of such claims is their banal generalisation. As accurately pointed out by Tomo Virk, such appeals are in most cases guilty of “a schematic oversimplification for the sake of rhetorical effect and faster argumentation” (“Aporije” 814).

The leading “prophet” of this “new,” “postmodern” paradigm of both literary and general history is Michel Foucault. What is usually adduced are “discontinuities,” “breaks,” “ruptures,” “cuts” and “nodes” or “nodal points,”<sup>2</sup> concepts found particularly in Foucault’s seminal methodological work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (*L’Archéologie du savoir*, 1969). This complex and intellectually demanding work, which defies any simplifying appropriation, of course contains a number of sentences or passages which can be isolated and inflated into a thesis, a catchword — a practice rampant not only in literary science but throughout academic scholarship. Based on a close reading of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, this paper seeks to demonstrate that Foucault in fact never refers to any simple advantages of discontinuity over continuity. Moreover, his concept of the dispositive of power, appealed to (explicitly or implicitly) by moralising accusations levelled at traditional literary history for resting on imperialist, sexist and similar presuppositions, leads to no such oversimplified ruminations at all. On the contrary, Foucault’s “method” seeks to break free of the vulgar logic of

1 Exhaustively discussed in Virk, *Primerjalna književnost [Comparative literature]* 145-72.

2 The concept of the node or nodal point has no real basis in Foucault’s thought. Occasionally employed as an *ad hoc* metaphor, it is assigned no serious theoretical weight by Foucault himself. Nevertheless it found its way into the comparative history of the literary cultures of East-Central Europe edited by Cornis-Pope and Neubauer. In the preface, the node is presented as a “new” concept of comparativist periodisation, “a rich metaphorical alternative to the traditional metaphors of organicism” (Valdés xiv). Cf. also the typical (pseudo)Foucauldian statement in the introduction (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer 18): “We are using nodes to disperse and complicate rather than unify.”

reduction to binary oppositions. As the paper seeks to prove, his “historical method” is methodologically not as innovative as it is generally considered, for it may be formally placed in a major 20<sup>th</sup>-century current of the philosophy of history, which I shall term “quasi-transcendental history.” This quasi-transcendental history is the common denominator of various attempts made in 20<sup>th</sup>-century discourses, or theoretical traditions, at both (post)structuralist and phenomenological-hermeneutic levels.

Let us now examine Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge* more closely. From the perspective of philosophy of history, the basic problem for Foucault — as, indeed, for most poststructuralists — is *henology* in its most general sense, that is, henology as the discourse which discusses the one/One (*tò hén*) and at the same time performs what it discusses: “performative” discourse which has to speak in such a way that everything discussed unites into a single concept or conception. If this henology discourses on history, the former must inevitably envisage the latter as a direct and synthetic unity, as a totality, be it the Hegelian *Geist* or the collective consciousness (or the unconscious). The problem with this henology is perceived in its presupposition of the “metaphysical” henology familiar from (Neo)Platonism — the henology which breaks out in a new *Geistesgeschichte* garb in the German idealism. That is why practically all “poststructuralist” philosophies of history (Althusser’s, Deleuze’s, Foucault’s and others) have sought to make a fundamental break with Hegelian absolute knowledge, which continues to inform, albeit covertly, even the more recent *Geistesgeschichte*. In short, Hegelian absolute knowledge in its most general sense infiltrates any history which seeks a deeper, meaningful story — coherent, synthesised, unified — behind the bewildering sedimentation of facts. In the final analysis, such stories are always an infantile acceptance of the metaphysical illusion of oneness/the One. All of this is, as Foucault playfully puts it, “these are harmless enough amusements for historians who refuse to grow up” (*Archaeology* 160).

According to Foucault, it is therefore necessary to question all the homogeneous entities which are normally presupposed and implemented quite uncritically, such as — to limit ourselves to literary history — continuity, the unity of a given period, author or work. It does not follow, however, that these unities should be challenged by the chaos of radical discontinuity, breaks, dispersion; rather, “all these syntheses that are accepted without question must remain in suspense” (28). According to Foucault we should accept all the unities, with the aim of finding out whether they can be legitimately reassembled; in other words, all the material at our disposal should be examined in “in its raw, neutral state” (29). This

in its turn presupposes a horizon of new unity — this unity is inescapable, of which Foucault is fully aware — which is conceived by a pure description of discursive events. It is the withdrawal into a supposedly neutral, non-committed sojourn in the quasi-transcendental analysis of the discursive field, in which “we must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes” (30). The issue at stake, then, is an analysis or description — rather than interpretation — of the conditions applying to statements as singularities of events (not as linguistic units) and to the relations between them, in which the traditional unities, totalities and syntheses of historiography and various philosophies of history are suspended. The new unities postulated by Foucault are the result of his essentially *quasi*-transcendental treatment of historicity. What exactly does that mean? Not transcendental conditions, as is the case in Kant — conditions finally leading to the constitution of transcendental apperception, or, to put it simply, of a unified and stable subject; on the contrary, what is meant is the conditions of *actual* — and always partial — statements, events, discourses or, if you will, experiences, where (to adopt Deleuzian terms) the conditions may never be “greater” or more general than what is conditioned. This paves the way for typical poststructuralist ontology which seeks to think the transitions from one singularity to another, without ever being able to synthesise from that “rhizomatic” multiplicity any actual unity, totality, etc. The main reason for this is that such synthesis would lead to an illusory unity of the subject, who would then envisage such unities arbitrarily and narcissistically, enjoying the (supposed) unity and stability of its own subjectivity. At bottom this means settling an account, not with subjectivity as such but with the metaphysical, Cartesian Ego, which is allegedly present in the background of all “great stories” invented by traditional (literary) history. Therefore I have dubbed this turn a *quasi*-transcendental turn, inasmuch as it represents an attempt at thinking which would radicalise the Kantian transcendentalism while avoiding the traps of idealism.<sup>1</sup> Towards the close of his life, when Foucault consciously begins to revisit Kant, he defines his thought in retrospect as new Neo-Kantian criticism. Foucault’s essay “What is Enlightenment?” (“Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?”) explains:

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1 I do not propose to address the question to what extent this project is feasible at all. Even Foucault admitted once that such a position might be untenable: “Je ne peux pas éliminer la possibilité de me trouver, un jour, face à un résidu non négligeable qui sera le transcendental” (*Dits et écrits I* 1241).

In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method. Archaeological — and not transcendental — in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge [*connaissance*] or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events. And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think. It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom. (315-16)

Let us examine the following passage from *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, which hints at Foucault's "quasi-transcendental turn" in several places:

The third purpose of such a description of the facts of discourse is that by freeing them of all the groupings that purport to be natural, immediate, universal unities, one is able to describe *other unities*, but this time by means of a group of controlled decisions. Providing one defines the *conditions* clearly, it might be legitimate to constitute, on the basis of correctly described relations, discursive groups that are not arbitrary, and yet remain invisible. (32; italics by A. Š.)

The unities required by Foucault are always unities at a quasi-transcendental level. While this term is not used by Foucault himself, he certainly implies an invisible, vertical level: "if there really is a unity, it does not lie in the visible, horizontal coherence of the elements formed; it resides, well anterior to their formation, in the system that makes possible and governs that formation" (80).

Of course the new unities are much more fragile and weak than the traditional ones, representing as they do a transversal systemisation of statements which defy all final unification or hierarchy. Moreover, they are liable to fall apart and rearrange themselves differently in accordance with other rules. The ceaseless degrouping and regrouping of statements into "weak" discursive unities is, for Foucault, the only way to escape the domination of the identity subject.

The problem of (quasi)transcendence is further suggested by Foucault's

assertions that “things,” their presence, are to be renounced, “de-presentified.” This renunciation implies renouncing the temptation to interpret as well: there is nothing left behind either phenomena or things that would call for interpretation, explanation or unification:

To substitute for the enigmatic treasure of “things” anterior to discourse, the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse. To define these *objects* without reference to the ground, the *foundation of things*, but by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance. (52-53)

“The conditions of their historical appearance” is the key phrase here because Foucault is not interested in analysing a historiographical story but in its conditions, that is, in what makes a given history or historiography at all possible. The whole point of Foucault’s theorising is to convince the reader that there is no metaposition involved after all. By itself, the historical *a priori* is neither unhistorical nor suprahistorical but inevitably historical, as it is defined “as the group of rules that characterize a discursive practice: but these rules are not imposed from the outside on the elements that they relate together; they are caught up in the very things that they connect” (144). Thus Foucault arrives at his concept of the archive, which enables the break with all causalism (causes in the thing itself, the author’s intention, etc.). This is a shift to describing a system of discourses which sets up the quasi-transcendental conditions of statements as singular events, that is, conditions of reality which defy synthesis by any final subject. The archive itself as “the general system of the formation and transformation of statements” (146) cannot be totalised: “The archive cannot be described in its totality” (147). This notion of the archive, as well as the other key concepts in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, of course presupposes the concepts of subjectivity and history, as has been noted earlier in the paper: the archive “deprives us of our continuities; it dissipates that temporal identity in which we are pleased to look at ourselves when we wish to exorcise the discontinuities of history ... It establishes that we are difference, that our reason is the difference of discourses, our history the difference of times, our selves the difference of masks” (147). The issue discussed is the ontology of a typical poststructuralist philosophy of difference. The difference, the dispersion, is ourselves, and it is we who produce it: the illusive mind, the folding-of-surface effect, is in fact the cause of all the differences perceived by this same mind. In

dispersion, the mind perceives its own dispersion.

Foucault's archaeology is thus a theoretical strategy designed to ensure a perfectly disinterested description, a withdrawal into a supposedly quasi-transcendental perspective which observes phenomena from the inside. It never delves for anything potentially hidden behind a discourse, for there is nothing behind — we may recall the poststructuralist saying that depth is but an effect of the surface. All that needs to be done is “to define those discourses themselves, those discourses as practices obeying certain rules” (155). And insofar as archaeology is no mere discourse analysis but also (and perhaps predominantly) a description of the relations obtaining between discourses themselves, or, more accurately, a description of interdiscursive formations, the (Foucauldian) archaeologist has to describe the pure immanence of the (inter)discourse<sup>1</sup> which functions according to the (para)logic of difference and is described by the “differential analysis of the modalities of discourse” (156).

Of course Foucault noticed early enough that such a neutral and emphatically non-hermeneutic position was untenable. Therefore, his *Archaeology of Knowledge* was immediately followed by the so-called genealogical turn. This means that discourse analysis as such is essentially inconsistent, and Foucault was the first to admit it. In this connection, we shall consider the (much) later objection by Paul Ricoeur, which — partly based on Michel de Certeau's criticism — brilliantly illustrates the problem of any position that refuses to be hermeneutic. Ricoeur describes Foucault's theoretical standpoint in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* as “intellectual asceticism” (202), because he sees Foucault as intellectually limiting himself to the (supposed) neutrality<sup>2</sup> of stating without a statement-maker. In

1 It is noteworthy that interdiscursive analysis can only be comparative in character. Accordingly Foucault's methodological thought, named “archaeology” by the author (its subject cannot be a culture, mentality or idea: in this respect it is incomparably less ambitious, as far as it remains at the level of interdiscursivity or interpositivity), is defined as a comparative description: “Archaeology is a comparative analysis that is not intended to reduce the diversity of discourses, and to outline the unity that must totalize them, but is intended to divide up their diversity into different figures. Archaeological comparison does not have a unifying, but a diversifying, effect” (*Archaeology* 177).

2 Michel de Certeau was among the first to attack Foucault's supposed neutrality with the question “Where are you speaking from?” (*D'ou tu parle?*), which was a topical issue in the France of 1968. In de Certeau's view, any historiography concealing its social place of utterance is necessarily ideological, and as such untheoretical: “Denial of the specificity of the place being the very principle of ideology, all theory is excluded. Even more, by moving discourse into a non-place, ideology forbids history from speaking of society and of death—in other words, from being history” (*The Writing* 69).

Ricoeur's opinion, historiography, including literary history, attempts to think its own "place of statement," the relation between representations and social practices, and as such it has to abandon the neutrality of statements and their relations, if it is to describe the relations between discursive and non-discursive formations. Foucault himself refers to non-discursive domains which should be considered by archaeological research in the light of discursive practices — domains such as institutions, political events, economic practices and processes (202) — in which "language itself resists any reduction to a statement" (202). Like Foucault, Ricoeur spots a problem in the relations between discursive and non-discursive practices (or events), but unlike Foucault he believes that they cannot be thought without a speaking subject after all. This in its turn implies that there is no (quasi) transcendental relation to be established between, for example, a political event and medical practices.

Let us return to our point of departure. Does Foucault, then, want to introduce discontinuity instead of continuity? As demonstrated by the present paper, certainly not. Indeed, his *Archaeology of Knowledge* explicitly warns against the temptation of such levelling:

And to those who might be tempted to criticize archaeology for concerning itself primarily with the analysis of the discontinuous, to all those agoraphobics of history and time, to all those who confuse rupture and irrationality, I will reply: "It is you who devalue the continuous by the use that you make of it. You treat it as the support-element to which everything else must be related; you treat it as the primary law, the essential weight of any discursive practice; you would like to analyse every modification in the field of this inertia, as one analyses every movement in the gravitational field. But in according this status to continuity, you are merely neutralizing it, driving it out to the outer limit of time, towards an original passivity. Archaeology proposes to invert this arrangement, or rather (for our aim is not to accord to the discontinuous the role formerly accorded to the continuous) to play one off against the other; to show how the continuous is formed in accordance with the same conditions and the same rules as dispersion; and how it enters — neither more nor less than differences, inventions, innovations or deviations — the field of discursive practice." (*Archaeology* 192-93)

The above passage clearly states that both continuity and discontinuity are subjected to the same rules, which originate in the relations between statements. Only from

that vantage point is it at all possible to consider how they are conceived. In Kantian terms, this is an inquiry into the (quasi)transcendental conditions of both continuity and discontinuity, that is, an operation which *per se* precedes any historiography and in fact enables it.

This reading is further corroborated by Giorgio Agamben, one of the most eminent contemporary “Foucauldians.” Far from being “a manifesto of historiographical discontinuity” (Agamben 15), Foucault’s archaeology in Agamben’s interpretation remains outside all dichotomies between the “archaic” and “contemporary,” seeking to think an undecidability “in regards to diachrony and synchrony, unicity and multiplicity” (29).<sup>1</sup>

An analogous reading is to be applied to the concept of *episteme*, which is used by Foucault to replace “periods” or “epochs.” But *episteme* is not the same as an epoch: it is a quasi-transcendental epoch, a discursive condition, the historical *a priori* of what is always erroneously postulated (from the perspective of the spirit’s narcissistic self-reflectivity, the collective consciousness, the subject etc.) as the synthetic unity of a given epoch. The concept of *episteme* thus operates at the minimised level of the prehistorical (inter)discourse field. Nonetheless *episteme* is a unity, a totality — and this is not, in fact cannot be, eschewed by Foucault: “The episteme is not a form of knowledge [connaissance] or type of rationality which, crossing the boundaries of the most varied sciences, manifest the sovereign unity of a subject, a spirit, or a period; it is the totality of relations that can be discovered, for a given period, between the sciences when one analyses them at the level of discursive regularities” (*Archaeology* 211).

Deleuze arrives at a similar conclusion, claiming that each *episteme* constitutes a new field of visibility and utterability — that which enables a history of ideas,

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1 According to Agamben, Foucault’s quasi-transcendental method, termed by the author himself a “paradigm” (hence his name “paradigmology” for archaeology), may be traced to Plato and to all later giants of western philosophy: Foucault’s distinction lies simply in having given it the most meaning-laden theoretical expression. Interestingly, Foucault considers even hermeneutic thought to be paradigmatic, although the thought itself lacks such awareness. The hermeneutic circle, to quote an instance, is paradigmatic rather than hermeneutic: “There is no duality here between “single phenomenon” and “the whole” as there was in Ast and Schleiermacher: the whole only results from the paradigmatic exposition of individual cases. And there is no circularity, as in Heidegger, between a “before” and an “after,” between pre-understanding and interpretation. In the paradigm, intelligibility does not precede the phenomenon; it stands, so to speak, “beside” it (*para*)” (27).

concepts, mentalities in the first place (Deleuze 56).<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, Deleuze, too, has had to admit that Foucault's approach is a type of Neo-Kantianism (67).<sup>2</sup>

What, then, is the philosophy of history underlying Foucault's archaeology of knowledge? It is hard to shake off the impression that it is simply "teleology" projected onto a quasi-transcendental "objectivity," or that it has an evident affinity with Heidegger's *Geschichte des Seins*.<sup>3</sup> The latter is suggested especially by the concept of *episteme* as an inappropriable epoch-making "foundation" of history, one that is accessible only through detailed analysis. Therefore I find persuasive the judgment of Manfred Frank, who compares Foucault's *episteme* to Heidegger's Being, *Sein*, with its ever unpredictable "sendings" (*Schickungen*), which is an equally invisible, unfathomable and epoch-making motor of the history of metaphysics (Frank 196). There is a further affinity with the so-called phenomenological concepts of history, as those found in Hans Blumenberg or Jan Patočka. Such a philosophy of history breaks neither with continuity nor teleology: what it breaks with is merely the romantic illusion that the final subject may be positioned in the place of the absolute subject, the Spirit, which might totalise the entire movement of history, insofar as it encompasses the *telos* of history. Thus the discussion shifts to a (quasi)transcendental level, at which the subject is precluded by the — never fully accessible — discontinuities from construing an unbroken continuum of history's flow. Still, we should not be misled by the discontinuities between discourses or epochs, keeping in mind de Certeau's insight that "the ruptures within and between language systems are in the end bridged by the lucidity of his [Foucault's] own universal gaze" (*Heterologies* 183). It makes no difference, after all, if the force at play is an accidental game of regrouping statements or the telic force of history; in both cases, insofar as there in fact occurs a transition from one epoch (*episteme*) to another, this transition can be envisaged on the basis of the most general and fundamental continuity, even teleology. The very refusal to perceive any *telos* in history implies a certain interpretation of its beginning and end. And as there is no archaeology without eschatology, there is no a-teleology

1 Later Foucault will replace *episteme* with the more fundamental concept of the dispositive. The weakness of *episteme* is its limitation to the (inter)discursive level, while the dispositive traverses both discursive and transdiscursive levels.

2 This is admitted in Foucault's own statement about Cassirer, who is considered the founder of Neo-Kantian transcendental history: "... nous sommes tous néo-kantiens" (*Dits et écrits I* 574).

3 Similarly Tomo Virk in his *Duhovna zgodovina* (22): "The idea of *episteme* presented in Michel Foucault's vision of history shows certain affinities with the *Geistesgeschichte*." Cf. the same work on the teleological nature of Heidegger's history of being (24-26).

without teleology. Referring to Heidegger's lecture on western metaphysics, we may say that the Jewish-Christian linearism cannot be fully overcome.

Moreover, Foucault's later thought on history and, most of all, his actual historiographical practice (which never resembled an anarchic patchwork of discontinuities) display an analysis which has moved at a similar (quasi) transcendental level ever since the beginning of his work, that is, since *The History of Madness* (*L'histoire de la folie*). Later, however, Foucault rarely employs the term "discontinuities," which went out of fashion in the 1980s. His own history writing, too, which is represented as a paradigm especially in the second part of *The History of Sexuality* (*L'Histoire de la sexualité*), reveals an unexpected double transfer of his historiographical practice. Firstly, Foucault takes up antiquity and early Christianity, a completely new theme for an author who had so far limited his historical studies to the Modern Age. Secondly, he no longer seeks a watershed moment between antiquity and Christianity. In fact, his historical study resembles a history *long durée*, with the obvious difference that the historical treatment in *The History of Sexuality* is in a way pre-historical: pre-historical in that it seeks to examine the factors which enabled real historical phenomena, rather than to describe these phenomena in their historical sequence — and this treatment is (quasi) transcendental. If Foucault is writing a history of morality, he is not necessarily describing historical forms of moral life: his interest lies in the history of ethics, as far as every form of morality presupposes the technologies of subjectivity. What he finds is that the shifts between antiquity and Christianity are both continuous and discontinuous. At this stage, he dubs his practice "the history of thought." Contrary to what the term might seem to suggest, it is not a history of ideas or mentalities, of forms of thinking: rather, it is a history of problematizations, which seek "to define the conditions in which human beings "problematize" what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live" (*The History* 10). It is "not a history that would be concerned with what might be true in the fields of learning, but an analysis of the 'games of truth,' the games of truth and error through which being is historically constituted as experience; that is, as something that can and must be thought" (6-7). This history of thought, which explores the conditions of thinking in each period, unfolds along a triple axis: the axis of truth, of power and of ethics. Combining the archaeological and genealogical descriptions, it examines all possible relations between these aspects: "... this project, whose goal is a history of truth. It was a matter of analyzing, not behaviors or ideas, nor societies and their "ideologies," but the problematizations through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought- and the practices on the basis of which these problematizations are formed. The

archaeological dimension of the analysis made it possible to examine the forms themselves; its genealogical dimension enabled me to analyze their formation out of the practices and the modifications undergone by the latter” (11-2). Foucault’s point emerges still more clearly in the above-mentioned essay “What is Enlightenment”:

But we have three axes whose specificity and whose interconnections have to be analyzed: the axis of knowledge, the axis of power, the axis of ethics. In other words, the historical ontology of ourselves must answer an open series of questions; it must make an indefinite number of inquiries [...] but which will all address the questions systematized as follows: How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions? (318)

From this point on, Foucault’s is a hermeneutic and ethical (quasi)transcendental history. In its light, the archaeological and genealogical method finally leads to an understanding of one’s own position and to opening up the space of freedom, to conceiving ever new (unstable) subjectivations.<sup>1</sup>

### **Conclusion**

As it has been hopefully made clear by this somewhat more detailed, although still oversimplified discussion of certain fundamental foci of Foucault’s thought, most concepts circulating today under his name in literary science and the humanities in general have little to do with Foucault himself. Instead, such concepts are largely mere pseudo-Foucauldian “phantom” concepts, crumbling in the face of serious reflection.

But if Foucault himself was asked how exactly to write literary history, what might his answer be? Not a simple or direct one, so much is certain. And yet there is a tangible suggestion. With regard to Roland Barthes, Foucault claims that structuralism — contrary to the prevalent opinion that it has abolished all history — has in fact introduced a new concept of literary history. By adopting the concept of *écriture*, Roland Barthes has, according to Foucault, discovered a specific vantage point which enables the conception of a history of literature different from the

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<sup>1</sup> “Mon problème est de faire moi-même, et d’inviter les autres à faire avec moi, à travers un contenu historique determine, une experience de ce que nous sommes, de ce qui est non seulement notre passé mais aussi notre present, une expérience de notre modernité telle que nous en sortions transformé” (*Dits et écrits II* 863).

one practised until now. Literature used to be “read” as a global, general history, which embraced the totality of the collective consciousness of a period or of an individual’s life. Barthes’s concept of *écriture*, by contrast, has introduced the history of literature *qua* literature (Foucault, *Dits et écrits I* 1138), that is, the history of literature as a partial history which traverses collective as well as individual consciousness, showing that both collective and individual consciousness are parts of *écriture* itself. Literature is thus not perceived as a product of human culture, of humans as autonomous subjects, but as the place of birth and death of these supposedly enduring subjects. To sum it up: it is not man who makes literature but literature that makes man. Therefore literary history should not be subordinated to cultural history, as is often done today in Foucault’s name: research should not be limited to the question how literature mirrors the collective consciousness or collective (cultural) memory of a civilisation, which is all the rage in today’s cultural studies. Instead, an exploration of literature as the place of all other cultural products should be followed by inquiry into all historical transformations of such problematisations. This kind of literary history is advocated by Walter Benjamin as well:

What is at stake is not to portray literary works in the context of their age, but to represent the age that perceives them — our age — in the age during which they arose. It is this that makes literature into an organon of history; and to achieve this, and not to reduce literature to the material of history, is the task of the literary historian. (464)

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