

## The Masked Philosopher

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*Between 1979 and 1984 the newspaper Le Monde published a weekly series of interviews with leading European intellectuals. On April 6–7, 1980 an interview between Christian Delacampagne and Michel Foucault was published in which the latter opted for the mask of anonymity — the philosopher declined to reveal his name — in order to demystify the power society ascribes to the “name” of the intellectual. Foucault sets out to liberate the consumer of culture from a critical discourse that is overdetermined by the characters that dominate our perceptions. This interview was reprinted in *Entretiens avec Le Monde, I, Philosophies* (Paris: La Découverte, 1984), 21–30. The translation is by Alan Sheridan.*

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C.D. Allow me to ask you first why you have chosen anonymity?

FOUCAULT You know the story of the psychologists who went to make a little film-test in a village in darkest Africa. They then asked the spectators to tell the story in their own words. Well, only one thing interested them in this story involving three characters: the movement of the light and shadow through the trees.

In our societies, characters dominate our perceptions. Our attention tends to be arrested by the activities of faces that come and go, emerge and disappear.

Why did I suggest that we use anonymity? Out of nostalgia for a time when, being quite unknown, what I said had some chance of being heard. With the potential reader, the surface of contact was unrippled. The effects of the book

might land in unexpected places and form shapes that I had never thought of. A name makes reading too easy.

I shall propose a game: that of the “year without a name.” For a year books would be published without their authors’ names. The critics would have to cope with a mass of entirely anonymous books. But, now I come to think of it, it’s possible they would have nothing to do: all the authors would wait until the following year before publishing their books . . .

C.D. Do you think intellectuals today talk too much? That they encumber what they say with a lot of stuff, much of it irrelevant to what they really have to say?

FOUCAULT The word *intellectual* strikes me as odd. Personally, I’ve never met any intellectuals. I’ve met people who write novels, others who treat the sick. People who work in economics and others who write electronic music. I’ve met people who teach, people who paint, and people of whom I have never really understood what they do. But intellectuals, never.

On the other hand, I’ve met a lot of people who talk about “the intellectual.” And, listening to them, I’ve got some idea of what such an animal could be. It’s not difficult — he’s quite personified. He’s guilty about pretty well everything: about speaking out and about keeping silent, about doing nothing and about getting involved in everything . . . In short, the intellectual is raw material for a verdict, a sentence, a condemnation, an exclusion . . .

I don’t find that intellectuals talk too much, since for me they don’t exist. But I do find that more and more is being said about intellectuals, and I don’t find it very reassuring.

I have an unfortunate habit. When people speak about this or that, I try to imagine what the result would be if translated into reality. When they “criticize” someone, when they “denounce” his ideas, when they “condemn” what he writes, I imagine them in the ideal situation in which they would have complete power over him. I take the words they use — *demolish*, *destroy*, *reduce to silence*, *bury* — and see what the effect would be if they were taken literally. And I catch a glimpse of the radiant city in which the intellectual would be in prison or, if he were also a theoretician, hanged, of course. We don’t, it’s true, live under a regime in which intellectuals

are sent to the ricefields. But have you heard of a certain Toni Negri?<sup>1</sup> Isn't he in prison simply for being an intellectual?

C.D. So what has led you to hide behind anonymity? Is it the way in which philosophers, nowadays, exploit the publicity surrounding their names?

FOUCAULT That doesn't shock me in the least. In the corridors of my old lycée I used to see plaster busts of great men. And now at the bottom of the front pages of newspapers I see the photograph of some thinker or other. I don't know whether things have improved, from an aesthetic point of view. Economic rationality certainly . . .

I'm very moved by a letter that Kant wrote when he was already very old: he was in a hurry, he says, against old age and declining sight, and confused ideas, to finish one of his books for the Leipzig Fair. I mention this to show that it isn't of the slightest importance. With or without publicity, with or without a fair, a book is something quite special. I shall never be convinced that a book is bad because its author has been seen on television. But, of course, it isn't good for that reason alone either.

If I have chosen anonymity, it is not, therefore, to criticize this or that individual, which I never do. It's a way of addressing the potential reader, the only individual here who is of interest to me, more directly: "Since you don't know who I am, you will be more inclined to find out why I say what you read; just allow yourself to say, quite simply, it's true, it's false. I like it or I don't like it. Period."

C.D. But doesn't the public expect the critic to provide him with precise assessments as to the value of a work?

FOUCAULT I don't know whether the public does or does not expect the critic to judge works or authors. Judges were there, I think, before he was able to say what he wanted.

It seems that Coubert had a friend who used to wake up

1. Italian philosopher, ex-professor at the University of Padua; a leading intellectual influence in the extreme-left movement, Workers' Autonomy. Underwent four years and three months preventative detention for armed insurrection against the state, subversive association, and the formation of armed gangs. Was freed on July 8, 1983, after being elected a Radical deputy during his imprisonment. His parliamentary immunity was lifted by the Chamber of Deputies, new warrants for his arrest were issued, and he took refuge in France.

in the night yelling: "I want to judge, I want to judge." It's amazing how people like judging. Judgment is being passed everywhere, all the time. Perhaps it's one of the simplest things mankind has been given to do. And you know very well that the last man, when radiation has finally reduced his last enemy to ashes, will sit down behind some rickety table and begin the trial of the individual responsible.

I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would not try to judge, but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea-foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply, not judgments, but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes — all the better. All the better. Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms.

C.D. So there are so many things to tell people about, so much interesting work being done, that the mass media ought to talk about philosophy all the time . . .

FOUCAULT It's true that there is a traditional discomfort between the "critics" and those who write books. The first feel misunderstood and the second think the first are trying to bring them to heel. But that's the game.

It seems to me that today the situation is rather special. We have institutions administering shortages, whereas we are in a situation of superabundance.

Everybody has noticed the over-excitement that often accompanies the publication (or reprinting) of some work that may in fact be quite interesting. But it is never presented as being anything less than the "subversion of all the codes," the "antithesis of contemporary culture," the "radical questioning of all our ways of thinking." One would be justified in thinking that its author must be some unknown fellow living on the fringes of society.

On the other hand, others must be banished into total oblivion, from which they must never be allowed to reemerge; they were only the froth of "mere fashion," a mere product of the cultural institution, and so forth.

A superficial, very Parisian phenomenon, it will be said. I see it rather as the effect of a deep-seated anxiety. The feeling of "no room," "him or me," "it's my turn now." We have to walk in line because of the extreme narrowness of the place where one can listen and make oneself heard.

Hence a sort of anxiety that finds expression in innumerable symptoms, some funny, some less so. Hence, too, on the part of those who write, a sense of impotence when confronted by the mass media, which they criticize for running the world of books and creating or destroying reputations at will. Hence, too, the feeling among the critics that they will not be heard unless they shout louder and pull a rabbit out of the hat each week. Hence, too, a pseudo-politicization, which masks, beneath the need to wage an "ideological struggle" or to root out "dangerous thoughts," a deep-seated anxiety that one will not be heard or read. Hence, too, the fantastic phobia for power: anybody who writes exerts a disturbing power upon which one must try to place limitations, if not actually to put an end to it. Hence, too, the declaration, repeated over and over, that everything nowadays is empty, desolate, uninteresting, unimportant: a declaration that obviously comes from those who, not doing anything themselves, consider that there are too many others who are.

C.D. But don't you think that our period is really lacking in great writers and in minds capable of dealing with its problems?

FOUCAULT No, I don't subscribe to the notion of a decadence, of a lack of writers, of the sterility of thought, of a gloomy future, lacking in prospects.

On the contrary, I believe that there is a plethora. What we are suffering from is not a void, but inadequate means for thinking about everything that is happening. There is an overabundance of things to be known: fundamental, terrible, wonderful, funny, insignificant, and crucial at the same time. And there is an enormous curiosity, a need, a desire to know. People are always complaining that the mass media stuff one's head with people. There is a certain misanthropy in this idea. On the contrary, I believe that people react; the more one convinces them, the more they question things. The mind

isn't made of soft wax. It's a reactive substance. And the desire to know more, and to know it more deeply and to know other things increases as one tries to stuff peoples' heads.

If you accept that and if you add that there's a whole host of people being trained in the universities and elsewhere who could act as intermediaries between this mass of things and this thirst for knowledge, you will soon come to the conclusion that student unemployment is the most absurd thing imaginable. The problem is to multiply the channels, the bridges, the means of information, the radio and television networks, the newspapers.

Curiosity is a vice that has been stigmatized in turn by Christianity, by philosophy, and even by a certain conception of science. Curiosity is seen as futility. However, I like the word; it suggests something quite different to me. It evokes "care"; it evokes the care one takes of what exists and what might exist; a sharpened sense of reality, but one that is never immobilized before it; a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way; a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is disappearing; a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental.

I dream of a new age of curiosity. We have the technical means; the desire is there; there is an infinity of things to know; the people capable of doing such work exist. So what is our problem? Too little: channels of communication that are too narrow, almost monopolistic, inadequate. We mustn't adopt a protectionist attitude, to stop "bad" information from invading and stifling the "good." We must rather increase the possibility for movement backwards and forwards. This would not lead, as people often fear, to uniformity and levelling down, but, on the contrary, to the simultaneous existence and differentiation of these various networks.

C.D. I imagine that at this level the mass media and the universities, instead of continuing to oppose one another, might play complementary roles.

FOUCAULT You remember Sylvain Lévi's wonderful saying: when you have one listener, it's teaching; when you have

two, it's popularization. Books, universities, learned journals are also information media. One should refrain from calling a mass medium every channel of information to which one cannot or does not wish to gain access. The problem is to know how to exploit the differences, whether we ought to set up a reserve, a "cultural park," for delicate species of scholars threatened by the rapacious inroads of mass information, while the rest of the space would be a huge market for shoddy products. Such a division does not seem to me to correspond to reality. What's more, it isn't at all desirable. If useful differentiations are to be brought into play, there must not be any such division.

C.D. Let's risk a few concrete propositions. If everything is going badly, where do we make a start?

FOUCAULT But everything *isn't* going badly. In any case, I believe we shouldn't confuse useful criticism of things with repetitive jeremiads against people. As for concrete propositions, they can't just make an appearance like gadgets, unless certain general principles are accepted first. And the first of such general principles should be that the right to knowledge must not be reserved to a particular age-group or to certain categories of people, but that one must be able to exercise it constantly and in many different ways.

C.D. Isn't this desire for knowledge somewhat ambiguous? What, in fact, are people to do with all that knowledge that they are going to acquire? What use will it be to them?

FOUCAULT One of the main functions of teaching was that the training of the individual should be accompanied by his being situated in society. We should now see teaching in such a way that it allows the individual to change at will, which is possible only on condition that teaching is a possibility always being offered.

C.D. Are you in fact for a society of scholars?

FOUCAULT I'm saying that people must be constantly able to plug into culture and in as many ways as possible. There ought not to be, on the one hand, this education to which one is subjected and, on the other, this information one is fed.

C.D. What becomes of the eternal questions of philosophy in this learned society? . . . Do we still need them, these

unanswerable questions, these silences before the unknowable?

**FOUCAULT** What is philosophy if not a way of reflecting, not so much on what is true and what is false, as on our relationship to truth? People sometimes complain that there is no dominant philosophy in France. So much the better for that! There is no sovereign philosophy, it's true, but a philosophy or rather philosophy in activity. The movement by which, not without effort and uncertainty, dreams and illusions, one detaches oneself from what is accepted as true and seeks other rules — that is philosophy. The displacement and transformation of frameworks of thinking, the changing of received values and all the work that has been done to think otherwise, to do something else, to become other than what one is — that, too, is philosophy. From this point of view, the last thirty years or so have been a period of intense philosophical activity. The interaction between analysis, research, "learned" or "theoretical" criticism, and changes in behavior, in people's real conduct, their way of being, their relation to themselves and to others has been constant and considerable.

I was saying just now that philosophy was a way of reflecting on our relationship to truth. It should also be added that it is a way of interrogating ourselves: if this is the relationship that we have with truth, how must we behave? I believe that a considerable and varied amount of work has been done and is still being done that alters both our relation to truth and our way of behaving. And this has taken place in a complex situation, between a whole series of investigations and a whole set of social movements. It's the very life of philosophy.

It is understandable that some people should weep over the present void and hanker instead, in the world of ideas, after a little monarchy. But those who, for once in their lives, have found a new tone, a new way of looking, a new way of doing, those people, I believe, will never feel the need to lament that the world is error, that history is filled with people of no consequence, and that it is time for others to keep quiet so that at last the sound of their disapproval may be heard . . .