

Foucault's Practices of Freedom: Problematization and Political Imagination in Reyberolle's *Dogs*

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In 1972 Foucault wrote "The Force of Flight" to accompany the exhibition *Dogs* by Paul Reyberolle. At the time, the two were working together for prison reform with *Le groupe d'information sur les prisons* (GIP). The collaboration was then published in 1973 as *Derrière le miroir* with ten lithographs and images of the series (translated and published by Stuart Elden and Jeremy Crompton in 2007). This is one of the first texts in which Foucault explicitly addresses power and is the most overtly political of his writings on art.

Art, in Foucault's writings, is one possible practice of freedom and one of the ways in which we might learn to practice freedom as an "art" of "not being governed thus" (1994: 316). In disparate instances, Foucault will engage the question of the imagination, and its capacity and capability for freedom. He maintains a concern with ethics and the history of the present, with contestation and with the possibility of provoking thought.

To put it briefly, Foucault's project is to write critical histories which bring to light transformable singularities that could be changed through the work of thought upon itself. Problematization is one practice of freedom, always inescapably conditioned by power, with respect to its emergence as a capacity and its exercise, but still a practice of freedom, nonetheless.

Art has the capacity to stand in relation (as a form of contestation through problematization) to the capacities whose actualizations form experience. Experience here is both the historically specific, dominant background of feeling, thought and action, and a transformative force that propels us into new relations with ourselves and others through the creative dissolution of the habits that codify a form. The experiences that must be thought are, for Foucault, forms of thinking. This is Foucault's principle of the irreducibility of thought: all forms of experience are also a way of thinking and can thus be analyzed from within a history of thought.

The art of not being governed requires a double gesture. We must refuse what we are, trace and amplify lines of fragility in the present, and imagine, invent, create, and experiment with new forms of subjectivity through new practices of the self (always in relationship to the other).

When art causes a force to pass, it introduces something novel into the cluttered world of already-subjects, already-objects, already-forms; namely, thought. It separates “out from the contingency that has made us what we are, do or think” and forces us to think differently (317). Exercising oneself in thought is “losing one’s way for the subject of knowledge (*l’égarement de celui qui connaît*)”, a losing one’s way as the price of self-transformation” (Foucault, 1986: xxviii).

This thought is neither coterminous with subjects, nor universally enacted by subjects, but is rather the event that renders knowing subjects foreign to themselves. Here ethics is decoupled from epistemology and reconnected to the formation of a political imagination. Foucault describes what is at stake: “how can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?” (Foucault, 1994: 317). Art, it is my contention, provides one possibility of an encounter with, and opportunity for cultivating, our “legitimate strangeness.”¹

As with many of his other occasional essays on art, this one grows out of networks of friendship and activism, and as with those essays there is a doubling in his descriptions of the art with his own “methods” and concerns. The exuberant ekphrasis is a passionate celebration and instantiation of his ethic of discomfort.

The Prisoners are ten multimedia works that combine paint, with straw, dirt, wire mesh, and wooden beams. They are extraordinarily textured works both in terms of their surface and

¹ This is an unattributed citation to a poem by René Char, “*Partage formel*” (in *Seuls demeurent*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945) that Foucault uses to close his 1961 “Preface” to *The History of Madness*, xxxvi.

the brushstrokes that intimate the dogs that form the subject of the series. They are dark, brooding works with a very limited palette. The titles are all simple and descriptive nouns. We start with *The Dungeon*, moving in a rather clear narrative to *the Goal*, *The Prisoners*, *The Condemned*, *Torture*, *The Rabid*, *Fence*, *The Escape*, *The Beautiful*, and finally, where bright blue appears, *The Paths of Freedom*.

This series, Foucault writes, is not about a determinate time or place, instead “it is *about* prison. But prison ... is today a political place, which is to say a place where forces are born or become manifest, a place where history is formed and time surges up” (2007: 169). The ten works form an interruption that cannot be mastered; history appears inside and then passes beyond the limits of the canvas. The canvases pull back from aesthetics onto politics, and force is produced between canvases, less as a question of form and more as a question of energy and intensity. Rebeyrolle has found “in a single movement, the means of bringing out the force of painting in the vibrancy of the painting” (2007: 169). Form is not charged with representing force, rather force moves from painter to canvas, canvas to canvas, and canvas to viewer (enclosed momentarily in the prison) before it moves on.

History appears, writes Foucault, not through the juxtaposition of the canvases, but rather, in the trembling within the canvas that then “breaks free from the canvas, really passes beyond its limits to inscribe itself, to continue itself in the following canvas and make all the canvases shudder with a great movement that ends up escaping them there in front of you” (2007: 169). The series does not recount or represent something that has happened, instead it “gives rise to a force whose history can be recounted as the ripple of its flight and its freedom. Painting has this much in common with discourse: when it gives rise to a force that creates history, it is political” (2007: 169).

The woods across the canvases are power—“obstinate and immobile power”—because in the world of prisons “the vertical is not one of the dimensions of space, it is the dimension of power” (2007: 170). The abolition of the verticals in *The Beautiful* allows everything to take flight in “accordance with rapid horizontals” This is a painting of “pure force” (2007: 170). In the last painting, *The Path to Freedom*, a new space “unfurls” charting transversality:

It is divided by halves between the black fortress of the past and the clouds of a future colour. But across its whole length, the traces of a gallop—‘the sign of an escapee.’ It seems that truth comes softly, in the steps of a dove, Force, too, leaves on the earth the claw-marks, the signature of its flight (2007: 171).

Here dogs are a force of rage, their silhouettes are precise. However, Foucault continues, the contour is not achieved through line,

but by thousands of perpendicular strokes, blades of straw that form a general bristling, a gloomy electric presence in the night. It is less a question of form than of energy; less of a presence than an intensity, less of a movement and a behaviour than an agitation, a trembling contained only with difficulty (2007: 172).

Foucault concludes with this startling connection: “Mistrustful of language, Spinoza feared that in the word ‘dog’ one might confuse ‘barking animal’ and ‘celestial constellation.’” The dog of Reyberolle’s series is, he states, “resolutely both barking animal and terrestrial constellation (2007: 172).

Here the painting of form and the unleashing of force come together. Reyberolle has found “the means of bringing out the force of painting in the vibrancy of painting.” From “trembling dejection” to the “glimmering of hope,” and finally to the leap—“the endless flight of the dog”—who leaves the viewer alone, enclosed in the prison, the dog flies high on the passing of this force and leaves only “the traces of one who ‘saves oneself’” (2007: 172).

The emergence of a space of freedom only occurs at the “decisive moment” when grays, whites, and beiges yield to a canvas luminous with blue. In the canvas where this mutation is affected “an exchange starts and the within, despite itself, begins to open on to the birth of a space” (2007: 172). The wall cracks and the vertical, power, now opens onto a space of liberty. Here form and aesthetics come together with force and politics to create a rupture that cannot be mastered: an energy, an agitation, a trembling is unleashed that leaves us in its wake. *The Prisoners* creates the present (prison, criminality, disciplinary power) as a problem and, for Foucault, this is always where thought can begin, again, differently.

In two essays that address the question of the Enlightenment and Modernity, and two

modes of subjectivation (thought-experience-freedom) found in Kant and Baudelaire, Foucault explores the relations between truth-telling and forms of reflexivity. He ponders how to think about critique as *ethos* and not as an analytic of finitude, how to think the eventuality of truth outside of the conflation of desire and knowledge in representational thinking (apophantic truth) or without re-inscribing a transcendental horizon for thought in immanence.

Thought, as it emerges in these essays is an attitude (to the present), a mode of paying attention (to the archive, to the truth of the other), and an activity. It is affective, mattering, distancing, mobile, partial, persistent, and mutable. It is both historical and ontological. It is both impersonal (that is, it is not “of” the subject, and it is never fully self-inaugurated) and is where the ethical subject emerges. It is both in its practice in the present, but is also, I will argue, in the future perfect tense: thought will have been thought.

Problematization is multivalent, for Foucault: it is what he examines (the “object” of his studies archival and discursive—and the scare quotes point to the fact that his critical thought calls into question each of these cherished categories of analysis). It examines how he approaches the history of thought (his “method” of analysis). And it reveals a practice of subjectivation and thinking otherwise (a political, moral, ethical practice of freedom). It is an historical inquiry and a test of reality, and in this doubled aspect it is a “crossing-over,” a clearing away, a passage (which is how he characterizes Kant’s address to the question of Enlightenment through the concept of *ausgang*).

The term “*problématisation*” first appears in *Discipline and Punish*. Here Foucault starts to address the question of thinking as an activity of both constraint and freedom. He begins to articulate, albeit in a preliminary fashion, the concept of problematization as the interplay “of enabling capacities and constraining powers, of the obligation to limit power but also of modes of inflecting it, gain[ing] a saliency not only as analytics but equally as a perpetual practical (political and ethical) problem” (Rabinow and Rose, 2003: 12). This reframing of thought and of politics, Foucault acknowledges, more directly emerges after “the events” of the publications of *The History of Madness* and *Discipline and Punish*. The “ransom and reward,” he tells Francois Ewald, of all work based on a certain empirical field is that theoretical questions “appear last” (1996: 257). While problematization is found in some form in all his subsequent work, it is only

taken up explicitly in his lectures in Berkeley in 1983 and in the “Preface” of *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2, The Use of Pleasure*.

In both the 1983 lectures, published as *Fearless Speech*, and the “Preface,” Foucault explains that he has, for a long time, been trying to see if it would be possible to describe a “history of thought” as distinct from the “history of ideas” and from a “history of mentalities.” While a history of ideas pursues the analysis of systems of representation (in, for example, the determination of the origin of a concept often via the appearance of a new word, the analysis of its development, and the examination of other ideas which might constitute its context), and a history of mentalities undertakes the analysis of attitudes and types of actions, a history of thought would examine how institutions, practices, habits, and behavior have become a problem for people. In other words, he clarifies, it would analyze “the ways in which an unproblematic field of experience, or set of practices, which were accepted without question, which were familiar and ‘silent’ ... becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions, and induces a crisis in previously silent behaviors, habits, practices and institutions” (2001: 74).

The history of thought then is forged in distinction to the traditional sense in which the history of ideas entails the search for an underlying system of codes/causes that shape a culture’s thought and behavior; following instead from a conception of critique in which the role of critical thought is to disturb the naturalness, the taken for granted character of everyday life by revealing how it is the product of a set of deep, but historically contingent, laws and processes. Like Nietzsche, for Foucault the most profound thought is that which remains on the surface. To analyze problematizations is not to reveal a hidden and suppressed contradiction; rather, it is to address that which has already become problematic.

For a domain of action, or a behavior, to enter the field of thought, it is necessary for a number of factors to have made it uncertain, to have surrounded it with difficulties. These factors are the result of social, economic, and political processes. However, Foucault makes clear, their role is only one of instigation. These factors may exist and perform their actions for a very long time before there is an operative problematization by thought. And when thought does intervene, “it doesn’t assume a unique form that is the direct result or necessary

expression of these difficulties,” it is rather an original or specific response to these difficulties, “which are defined for it by a situation or context, and which hold true as a possible question” (1997: 118). A problematization is, in other words, always a type of creation, but a creation, Foucault argues, only in the sense that, given a specific situation, we cannot infer that this particular kind of problematization will follow. Given a certain problematization, we can only understand why this kind of answer appears as a reply to some concrete aspect of the world: “There is the relation of thought and reality in the process of problematization. And that is the reason why I think it is possible to give an analysis of a specific problematization as the history of an answer—the original, specific, and singular answer of thought—to a certain situation” (2001: 173). These answers are not, Foucault stipulates, collective ones from any sort of “unconscious,” nor are they a representation, or an effect of a historical situation or context. This does not mean, however, that they answer to nothing.

The focus on problematization is not, Foucault responds to his critics, a species of historical idealism because studying the “problematization” of truth, sexuality, or madness, for example, does not deny the reality of such phenomena. “On the contrary,” Foucault contends,

I have tried to show that it was precisely some real existent in the world which was the target of social regulation at a given moment. The question I raise is this one: How and why were very different things in the world gathered together, characterized, analyzed, and treated as, for example, ‘mental illness’? What are the elements which are relevant for a given ‘problematization’? And, even if I won’t say that what is characterized as ‘schizophrenia’ corresponds to something real in the world, this has nothing to do with idealism. For I think there is a relation between the thing which is problematized and the process of problematization. The ‘problematization’ is an ‘answer’ to a concrete situation which is real (2001: 171-2).

As an answer to something that is real, problematization makes “something enter into the play of the true and the false and constitutes it into an object of thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, or political analyses” (1996: 457).

As a method of historical inquiry, problematization “refers to the practical conditions

that make something into an object of knowledge, specifically to the networks of power, institutional mechanisms, and existing forms of knowledge that direct the attention of theorists to specific phenomena and thereby produce new knowledge” (Deacon, 200: 131). Further, as an analysis of historical practices, discursive or non-discursive, that make uncertain or introduce a hitherto unacknowledged element into the field of thought, it is also the exploration of “the historically conditioned emergence of new fields of experience” (Burchell, 1993: 277).

Problematization does not express or manifest difficulties, however, “in connection with them, it develops the conditions in which possible responses can be given; it defines the elements that will constitute the different solutions they attempt to respond to” (1997: 118). The transformation of the given into a question, the development of difficulties into problems to which diverse solutions will respond, is what constitutes the point of problematization. The work “of philosophical and historical reflection is put back *into* the field of the work of thought only on condition that one clearly grasps problematization not as an arrangement of representations but *as* a work of thought” (1997: 119, my emphasis). Thought, for Foucault, is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it meaning, “rather it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question its meaning, its conditions, and its goals” (1997: 118). In this way then, thought” is a freedom in relation to what one does” (1997: 118).

Problematizations arise when something (a behavior, an action, an identity, etc.) has become uncertain, or is surrounded by difficulties that render old practices and ways of thinking outmoded. In this they may provide the basis for the elaboration of new practices and ways of thinking: new objects of knowledge, normative matrices of comportment, and virtual modes of existence for possible subjects. This is where, what Foucault calls the “*foyer d’expérience*”—the venues in which experience takes place—emerges (2010: 5). The historian of thought examines these solutions not to adjudicate between them and reject all except the “valid one,” but to change the way in which a situation is apprehended, “from seeing it as ‘a given’ which generates problems that must be resolved, to seeing it as ‘a question’ whose formation and obviousness must itself be subject to analysis” (Rabinow and Rose, 2003: 13). Posing problems to thinking otherwise about the thought attendant with problematizations, is

not about making the given problematic so much as problematizing how it is possible for something to be given, thereby freeing up possibilities.

The “third aspect” of problematization is a practice of “posing problems to politics” as a modality of “critical thought” to engender disturbances in the real by making it available to thinking otherwise (1997: 114). For Foucault we are displaced from the technologies of our own subjectivity through thought. The capacity for this thought hinges on experiencing points of uncertainty—the emergence of incoherence or an encounter with the incompatible—where the habitual ways of knowing and doing fail. Problematization is not the work of transformation; rather, ““it is a matter of flushing out . . . thought” (1988: 155). It provokes thought by helping to create conditions of difficulty and uncertainty, by “making facile gestures difficult,” by provoking reflection on the virtual fractures of the present (1988: 155). As Foucault notes, transformation without “thought” is merely a “superficial transformation” (1988: 155). But “real” transformation occurs only after the emergence of thought—the moment of disorientation in which the subject is displaced from itself—and the reflection on the present as a problem. Only by creating the present as a problem, a problem that cannot be easily resolved, can the work of thought begin.

In Foucault's history of thought, the work of criticism is severely limited and his vehement rejection of “universal intellectuals” stems from this. The universal intellectual explains Kendall Phillips, “makes the fundamental mistake of completing the circuit connecting critique and transformation. By offering both the critique of the present and proposing its alternative, the crucial moment of displacement is avoided.” By closing the loop, there is no “experience of uncertainty, thought is not engaged, concrete freedom is not provoked, and dissension does not emerge.” Problematization is not the creation of alternatives, “but the provocation of the prior experience that makes such invention both possible and necessary” (2002: 340).

Problematization, insofar as it attempts to return points of fixity and immobilization to mobility and possibility, could be characterized as a “moral” endeavor in a uniquely Foucauldian sense. In an interview with Michael Bess, in San Francisco in 1980, Foucault, somewhat strangely and ironically, asserts that he is a moralist because he follows three principles always:

“refusal, curiosity, innovation” (1988a:1). If power tends to render things immobile and presents them to us “as real, as true, as good,” then a moralist must refuse the self-evident, must enact an acute curiosity for what exists, and must seek out, must imagine, and inaugurate possibility. In making problematic apparently apodictic conditions of possibility, a moralist does not provide theories with justifications, or programs for action, or engage in the “ludicrous” philosophical enterprise of telling others where their truth is or making a case against it (1986: 9). Rather, a moralist gives “density” to what is immediately present, to what is too close and too visible to provoke differential capacities, to flush out thought (2016: 45). And in this, for a moment, the moralist, and her auditor, might imagine how to become again what they never were. The revelation of contingency, of the historicity of the subject is, Foucault asserts in “Sexuality and Solitude,” “politically important” (1994: 177). However, Foucault is always acutely conscious of the fact that an appeal to practices of contestation run the risk that is attendant on any discourse aiming to privilege the part over the whole, namely, “the danger that Hegel can be felt lurking in the background, ready to exercise the pacifying violence of dialectical capacities, wanting to perform the requisite philosophical validation and re-conversion of the practice” (Djaballah, 2008: 294).

In Foucault's engagement with the series *Dogs*, we find an always skeptical but affirmative moment in which the potential for freedom is actualized. The space of freedom afforded us in *Dogs* is one of non-consensus, of incivility, of non-docility. This art of non-positive affirmation, like so much of the art Foucault writes about and is drawn to, works at the limits of conventions, habits, forms, systems of knowledge, and the limits of discursive formations without being drawn back into them. The experiences, the beings of thought, that art, literature, and certain philosophies allow, contest cultural consensus, not through negation but rather through an affirmation of nothing but these limits—experiences that, in the uniquely Foucauldian understanding of experience, is the product of practices, of experimentations, and also the creative dissolution of the habits that codify a form, allowing us to risk other possible forms, in other possible relations.

As Laura Hengehold notes in her exploration the political imagination in Kant and Foucault, experiences in Foucault’s writing about art and literature involve “the revelation of

contingency in a given world or a historical sense, a potential for breakdown accompanied by positive affects toward what may lay outside. ... [T]hey anticipate a new experience of the world as a whole or the failure of sense in such a whole” (2007:207). Experience in this instance would be an ethical practice—as a passage or thoroughfare—that establishes a relationship of foreignness with the self, as well as an attentiveness to otherness; it is a creative dissolution of the habits that codify a form; if only as fragile, uncertain, and transitory events, but always within a wider political context, the politics of norms.

Experience is an extraordinarily difficult, ambiguous, and controversial concept in modern Western philosophy. Experience, in Foucault, is both the historically specific dominant background of feeling, thought and action, and also a transformative force, a practice of freedom (of resistance and counter-conduct, of counter-memory and subjugated knowledges). The relationship between these two senses of experience (between experience as the general form in which being is given to us and experience as that which tears us away from the familiarity of our everyday lives and forces us to enter into a new relation with ourselves and others) is, for Foucault, mutually conditioning. An experience, such as the reading of a certain kind of book, or the encounter with a certain kind of art, “is distinctive in that it intervenes in, and potentially undermines, the general form of experience that is given as its background. It has the power to do this precisely because it constitutes an experience,” and because the background of experience is historically singular and thus transformable (O’Leary, 2005: 550).

The experience that must be thought, that must be problematized is, for Foucault, a form of thinking. This is, again, Foucault's principle of the irreducibility of thought: that all forms of experience are also a way of thinking and can thus be analyzed from within a history of thought. Foucault transfigures the phenomenological insight that meaning is pervasive, to think experience as thought, unburdened by an *a priori* subject-object dualism: “From this standpoint, systematically organized thought, and not immediately available meaning, is invested in everything that can be experienced” (Djaballah, 2008: 16).

As Timothy O’Leary has cogently argued in his writings on ethics and literature in Foucault, experience, as Foucault uses the term, activates and amplifies an aspect of the experimental (which is lost in the translation from the French). In the French, the idea of

experience as an activity of, rather than a happening to, the individual: *'faire une expérience — to make an experience'* is an evident concept. This could also be translated as doing an experiment. For Foucault then, a book or a painting might be capable of engendering an experience of problematization that intervenes into the background experience, and in this art may push us to think towards an imagination of the political otherwise.

The abiding concern of Foucault's ethics, of his thinking-with ethics in art (and later with antiquity in his concern with an art of the self) is "to get free of oneself" (1986: 9). He proposes the task of "tearing" the subject "from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such" (1991: 31). There is no doubt, Foucault writes, "that from a philosophical standpoint the desire to break with the sovereignty of the philosophical subject—to disappear as a subject by way of various forms of subjectless or limit experiences—is completely incoherent." The intention here, he continues, is "not to be a lunatic," but "to conceptualize subjectivity in a new way (1994: 369), to think subjectivity in a way that is not reducible to a relation of identity or to reinsert it in search for plenitude. And it is not a search for formal structures of universal value, or for self-recognition and self-knowledge. Instead, it is to "separate out from the contingency that has made us what we are, do or think" (Ibid: 371). To leap; to follow the dog, breaking walls, and fly towards the blue.

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