

Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*. Edited by Joseph Pearson. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 183 pages.

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In a 1986 conversation with Robert Maggiori (published in English in *Negotiations*, Columbia University Press, 1995), the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze cautioned against regarding Michel Foucault as a sort of “intellectual guru.” Instead, in defiance of a trend whose momentum has yet ceased to abate, he insists on situating Foucault in a larger conversation—with the theorists that were his contemporaries, with the problems in his work, and with himself. A Foucault lecture, then, is seen to resemble less a sermon than it does a concert—the performance of “a soloist ‘accompanied’ by everyone else.” In spite of that caveat, Deleuze concludes, simply, that “Foucault gave wonderful lectures.”

This assertion of Foucault’s oratorical acumen will surprise few who have read, for example, his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1970 (“The Order of Discourse”). Even less surprising is that some of his lectures prove better than others. As we are reminded by the editor of Semiotext(e)’s *Fearless Speech* (a collection of talks delivered as part of a 1983 Berkeley seminar entitled “Discourse and Truth”) these transcribed lectures do not reflect Foucault’s notes or intentions, and, being published after his death, lack his imprimatur. And while this may partially account for their occasional flatness, they are further hindered by having to stand on their own, without the contextualization necessary to animate their themes. *Fearless Speech* can, however, come alive, if regarded as an index of a crucial turning point in the development of Foucault’s thought. For, after the publication of the introductory volume of the landmark *History of Sexuality*, Foucault found himself hemmed in by his relentless analysis of power and knowledge, in which the two themes seemed to intersect in a structural gridlock. It took Foucault eight years to rethink that

stalemate, as he sought out a third dimension that would revive the machinery of this thought. *Fearless Speech* is evidence of that fruitful process of negotiation.

The lectures that make up *Fearless Speech* take as their central concern the question of the relation of speakers to truth, and specifically antiquity's concept of *parrhesia* (for which Foucault suggests "free speech" as a possible translation). Traditionally, the practice of *parrhesia* implied criticism of authority from a standpoint where belief and truth coincided; it fulfilled an obligation toward truth in spite of the risks such critique engenders. *Parrhesia* thus implied a series of relationships not only to truth and to the others against whom critique was levied, but also to the self—as the entity that risks danger by the expression of belief.

Foucault is intent to identify the point at which *parrhesia* becomes problematic, where the relation between speech and truth begins to provoke concern; he locates that point in Euripedes' differing treatment of the phenomenon in *Ion* and *Orestes*. In the former—the most crucial parrhesiastic play—Euripedes stresses the human agency implied by *parrhesia*. In *Ion*, Apollo conceals the truth and thereby calls into question its Delphic origin: "truth is no longer disclosed by the gods to human beings (as at Delphi), but is disclosed to human beings by human beings through Athenian *parrhesia*" (38). Yet by the time of *Orestes*, *parrhesia* comes into crisis. Political misgivings undermine its critical function, and the compatibility of such truth with democracy is questioned.

As a negative connotation of *parrhesia* emerges in *Orestes*, "there is a new problematization of the relations between verbal activity, education, freedom, power, and the existing political institutions which marks a crisis in the way freedom of speech is understood in Athens" (73-4). Euripedes here acknowledges that *parrhesia* and democracy may very well be at odds: if truth is disclosed by the parrhesiastic activities of citizens, what is to prevent the proliferation of those various beliefs into mere chatter, with the outcome of political chaos? Foucault diagnoses other instances of this concern in the texts of Isocrates and the Pseudo-Xenophon known as the "Old Oligarch," which depict *parrhesia* as the domain of vulgar persons and flatterers. The connection between parrhesiastic freedom of speech and choice of lifestyle

likewise becomes an issue for Plato in *The Republic*, and this relation reaches its greatest intensity in Socratic *parrhesia*: Socrates serves as the interlocutor whose function is to test the relationship between what citizens say and how they live. The original parrhesiastic negotiation—embodied in the vertical relation between critic and king—is displaced onto the basic horizontal encounter between two human beings.

Thus are the initial epistemological and political grounds of *parrhesia*—the stability of belief and the impact of that belief on the organization of the community—complemented by a third, ethical, dimension. In the process that Foucault called *subjectification*, the apparently seamless reciprocity of knowledge and power is potentially ruptured by the subject's capacity to bring force to bear on itself. Elsewhere, Foucault more thoroughly depicts various "clinical techniques" through which the subject develops a relation to itself through self-evaluation and self-testing. *Parrhesia* is just such a technique: it constitutes the subject not by mere renunciation, but rather through this sovereign and positive process that generates the subject's ethical machinery. One needn't "take up a position or role towards oneself as that of a judge pronouncing a verdict. One can comport oneself towards oneself in the role of a technician, or a craftsman, of an artist, who from time to time stops working, examines what he is doing, reminds himself of the rules of his art, and compares these rules with what he has achieved thus far" (166). In this possibility Foucault seeks relief from the apparently totalitarian knowledge-power nexus he depicted in such works as *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality, Volume One*, overcoming the structural and instrumental limitations of those analyses through a shift to the ethical plane.

While the densest and most enriching passages of *Fearless Speech* allude to the profound intervention the study of subjectification promised to make, they nonetheless fall far short of the greatness attained by the other works for which Foucault is adored—the swashbuckling and revealing interviews, for example, or the shimmering bravado passages that pronounced the overcoming of man (at the close of the *Order of Things*) or that inverted our most basic ideas about the relationship between sex and sexuality ("Right of Death and Power Over Life"). While the

self-assuredness of those texts can be exhilarating, *Fearless Speech* offers a very different Foucault—one who, puzzling through an enormous problem that is at once intellectual and personal, steps methodically, even cautiously, through an argument that is necessarily part of an exploratory mission. *Fearless Speech* is not exactly timid, but it has to content itself with pointing toward the robustness of a project that far exceeds this modest but slickly packaged volume. Its title thus better describes its theme than its content. For in these lectures Foucault is not fearless, but, rather, guardedly optimistic about the potential—to this day, awaiting its full realization by his accompanists—of this radical redirection of his thought.