SYLVÈRE LOTRINGER

“The idea of reversibility is theory’s knife.”

—Cioran

In December 1976, Jean Baudrillard sent the prestigious French intellectual journal Critique a long essay reviewing Michel Foucault’s History of Sexuality, which had been published earlier that year, and Discipline and Punish, which had been published the year before. The essay wasn’t just a critique, but a challenge to Foucault’s oeuvre. For a while Foucault considered responding, but then he changed his mind. Baudrillard had to publish his essay elsewhere, as a pamphlet titled Forget Foucault. It created a furor in French intellectual circles.¹

Monstrosities in Criticism

It was not like Foucault to remain silent when challenged. In fact, he was known to reply rather acerbically to criticism. In 1971, five years earlier, the editor of Diacritics had drawn Foucault’s attention to two recent articles criticizing his 1961 Madness and Civilization and asked if he cared to react. Foucault had obliged, dashing off a response on the spot.² These two lesser critics were a French academic named J. M. Pelorson and the well-known British polymath George Steiner, whom Foucault had never heard of, let alone met in person.³ Without further ado, the French philosopher denounced the “monstrosities” that both men, each in his own way, had performed on his work. “There is criticism to which one responds, other criticism to which one replies [retorts], wrongly perhaps,” he wrote, admitting that it might be more appropriate to “lend an equally attentive ear to incomprehension, triviality, ignorance, or bad faith.” The attenuation was hardly a compliment: “The impostures within the critical space are like monsters within

the realm of the living: nevertheless coherent possibilities.” Furbishing his metaphor for a “Saint-Georges” to come, he added, “There should be a reason for the sloping brow, the crooked legs, and the veering eye” of these petits textes, but also “for their misshapenness, their lameness, their sightless eyes, their long ears.” Baudrillard’s Forget Foucault obviously did not belong to this grotesque exhibition: it was very well-proportioned, actually a mirror of Foucault’s own splendid spiraling discourse. It didn’t deserve a retort; it called for a response. Foucault at first was tempted to do just that. What finally decided him against it remains debatable, a point I intend to investigate and clarify.

Re pitying to J.M. Pelorson was easy enough: the French critic, Foucault decided, had simply criticized a book that wasn’t his. Whenever Pelorson referred to something in his book, one could be sure that it wasn’t there; and what he accused the philosopher of having omitted was glaringly there for all to see. If only Mr. Pelorson “had read my book,” Foucault dropped. “The critic maintained that one can immediately tell a fool from an insane person,” he went on, and “for once I am not far from thinking like Mr. Pelorson: there are some fools, face-to-face, with whom one knows that they are not insane, but very simply fools.” Foucault’s riposte was done “execution style,” as befits minor or unworthy adversaries, the kind one is all too pleased to dispatch with a flourish and forget forthrightly, without any second thoughts. Others turned out to be more difficult to forget, especially those who had tried very hard to “forget” you.

Turning his thunder against the second minor critic, Foucault maintained that George Steiner, in his New York Times Book Review article, had changed The Order of Things into “a sort of monster of incoherence that only a furious man, and by only the most improbable of chances, could have imagined.” Not only did Steiner invent works that Foucault never wrote, but he invented as well “that to which he objects.” Steiner immediately replied, and protested vehemently that, unlike his adversary, he had been “respectful and courteous throughout” to Foucault. A cursory glance at the critic’s original review, though, doesn’t support his claim. In reality, in his best English manner, Steiner had been smug and condescending towards the Continental philosopher—to whom he disparagingly referred as “the Mandarin of the Hour”—enough, in any case, to deserve Foucault’s thorough dressing-down. Steiner didn’t just defend himself, he shot back at Foucault that his manners were “defective,” even calling him “an enraged prima donna.” And he made a point of volunteering that “a number of scholars in the natural sciences, in philosophy and in linguistics regard him in that light.” The English critic was obviously begging for trouble, and it finally came crashing down. “Mr. Steiner deserves our sympathy,” Foucault quietly retorted in the same

5. Ibid., p. 58.
journal, pointing out that “whether he is trying to understand or respond, he is unfailing luckless: inaccuracies keep dogging him . . . It is a shame for Mr. Steiner that Borges, who has genius, has already invented criticism-fiction.”

No one doubted Foucault’s ability to respond mightily to an attack. This made his silence after Forget Foucault all the more surprising. Yet, it was not entirely unprecedented. In 1963, Jacques Derrida was invited by Jean Wahl, his new mentor, to give his “maiden lecture” at the Collège Philosophique on his interpretation of Descartes’ Cogito and its treatment in Foucault’s Madness and Civilization. Derrida’s introduction was ambiguously enticing. He paid his respects to both his mentors at once by wearing the mask of Hegel (Wahl had been the first philosopher to introduce Hegelian thought to France in 1929 with his book Unhappy Consciousness; and Foucault had advised Derrida on his master’s thesis on Hegel). Cleverly, Derrida reversed the position of master and disciple in both Hegel and Kierkegaard (Wahl had also written on Kierkegaard’s and Socrates’s irony) while assuring Foucault that he “retained the consciousness of an admiring and grateful disciple.” It was a brilliant conceit that allowed him to dismiss both men at the same time. “This interminable unhappiness of the disciple,” Derrida concluded, “perhaps stems from the fact that he does not yet know—or is still concealing from himself—that the master, like real life, may always be absent.”

Derrida had been Foucault’s student and disciple at the École Normale Supérieure, and also his friend, but it soon became painfully obvious to everyone present, including Foucault, that the time had come for the young disciple to “break the glass, or better the mirror, the reflection, his infinite speculation on the master. And start to speak.” And so he did, tearing his master’s interpretation of the Cogito apart. Ostensibly, the disciple was challenging only “a few allusive and enigmatic pages” in the entire book, but he made sure that it engaged the totality of his master’s project “as regards both its intention and feasibility.” Descartes, Derrida maintained, had not committed an “act of force” that opened the way to the great internment of madness. On the contrary, he had integrated it into rationality, at the expense of reason itself. Madness was only a “hyperbolic exaggeration” of dreams. Descartes was not interested in madness per se, he concluded; Foucault’s reading of the Meditations had been rather “naive.” There was no history of madness.

Absented in his presence, Foucault didn’t say anything. He also remained similarly silent when the text was published a few months later in Jean Wahl’s philosophical journal. Four years later, in 1967, Derrida included it in his Writing and Difference, and Foucault didn’t react publicly then either. That same year,
Derrida also published *Of Grammatology*, which made him instantly famous. The situation was rapidly changing. The disciple was becoming a credible challenger. Foucault sent him a friendly acknowledgment after he received a copy of his book.

That same year, Derrida was invited to join the editorial board of *Critique*, to which Foucault already belonged. The two men seem to have coexisted peacefully until the board received a review by philosopher Gérard Granel of Derrida’s *Writing and Difference*. It praised Derrida but was hostile to Foucault. In the debate that followed, Foucault voted against the piece, and Derrida remained neutral, alleging that he was in no position to decide; in the end, the board decided to publish the review. In his 1989 biography of Foucault, Didier Eribon has suggested that it was this incident that triggered Foucault’s eventual response to Derrida, though of course nothing proves this. It came four years later, in 1971, the very year he retorted to his lesser critics, and just a few months after delivering his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France. Foucault’s vehicle was the professional philosophical journal *Paideia*. In his response, he condemned Derrida’s conflation of dreaming and madness (the mad, Foucault wrote, cannot reason, let alone doubt) and reasserted that reason (the Cogito) had excluded madness even during classical times, similar to the way it had contained madness physically in old leprosies. Foucault was repaying Derrida’s denial of history back in Derrida’s own coin, reasserting that philosophical arguments, like madness, can be “historically well-determined.” This was the case, Foucault concluded, with Derrida’s “petite pedagogy,” which unduly claimed that there was nothing anterior or exterior to the text—a direct hit on his rival’s unwarranted influence in the United States. When this response, “My Body, This Paper, This Fire,” was finally published as an appendix to the reissue of his *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault sent Derrida a signed copy with these words: “Please forgive me for answering so late.” It had taken him eight years to respond.

Delaying and postponing reaction, Nietzsche asserted in his posthumous *The Will to Power*, is the strength of a noble nature. Foucault certainly demonstrated this strength of will in relation to Derrida. He knew when, and for how long, to practice an “active indifference,” and when to shatter his adversary’s argument with a single shove like a Sumo wrestler. He certainly outdid himself in relation to Baudrillard—he did nothing. Was it really a choice on his part, and if so, how did it come about? Doing nothing, in some cases, may still be too much.

Baudrillard wasn’t in the same league as Foucault and Derrida, but he did know when and how to use the knife. He hadn’t attended, as they did, the École Normale Supérieure in rue d’Ulm—part of the elitist school system, the “Grande Écoles,” that provides a royal entry to the higher spheres of the French Republic—and entered the profession by the back door. In 1966, he was singled out by liberal Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre while still teaching German in a lycée.

Lefebvre took him as his teaching assistant at the Université de Nanterre and directed his master’s thesis, *The System of Objects* (it was published in 1968). At that time, Baudrillard was known as a self-taught sociologist drawn to Situationist ideas, the author of several seminal essays unraveling both the logic of consumer society and of Marxist analyses of capital. *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), the most sweeping exposition of his theses to date, but the least noticed of his books, was published just a few months before Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* were. Although Baudrillard managed to incorporate in extremis (in two long footnotes) a rebuttal of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s libidinal theories of flows (their *Anti-Oedipus* was published in 1972), it was too late for him to address their impact on Foucault’s most recent books.15 *Forget Foucault*, which he wrote a few months later, took care of that.

Unlike Derrida, Baudrillard had no problem with historical determinations. Actually, he had readily adopted Foucault’s genealogical approach in his own “order of simulacra” and made the exclusion of madness paradigmatic to every confinement to come, “a folklore of terror . . . on the basis of an increasingly racist definition of the ‘normal human.’” [S.E.D. 126] Baudrillard was indebted to Foucault, and yet, contrary to appearances, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* was unlike anything else being published at the time. Despite being hyper-Structuralist in its approach, or perhaps because of it, the book harked back to visionary writers and philosophers of the 1930s and ’40s, such as Georges Bataille and Antonin Artaud, not to mention Alfred Jarry. Alone among contemporary French philosophers, Baudrillard managed to bridge “high modernism” and “postmodernism.”

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault recognized that the model of the “Grand Confinement” ceased to apply to contemporary societies. With “the end of production,” as Baudrillard called it in *Symbolic Exchange*, the entire society was being turned into a diffuse factory. All the sites of enclosure and concentration were spilling outside, leaving behind empty shells. “There will always be factories to hide the death of labor,” Baudrillard concluded, but “there is nothing with which to fight capital today in *determinate* forms.” [S.E.D. 19] The passage from determination to general indetermination made any form of liberation impossible. When confinements become mere simulations of themselves, inverting them can only lead to neutralization. Dismissing the antics of “revolutionary dialectics,” Baudrillard concluded in his preface: “Strictly speaking, nothing remains for us to base anything on.” [S.E.D. 5]

Like most French intellectuals of the period, Baudrillard belonged to the far Left. In May ’68, Marxist rhetoric in politics finally bottomed out, and they all scrambled for revolutionary alternatives. Their traditional allies failing them, they turned to capitalism, eager to extract from its decoded flows the subversive energy no longer found in class struggles. Baudrillard’s analysis was pretty much in keeping

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with the theses developed by Deleuze and Guattari, except in one major respect: he was convinced that their efforts were bound to fail. Linear, cumulative, irreversible, but also inhuman, the deterritorialized flows of capital were gradually gnawing away at every singularity, including theories that attempted to salvage them. Freed from the real, signs were being caught in a boundless speculation orchestrated by the code. In the process, he realized, everything would be exterminated, reduced to the same. And this was true of any production, including “productive” theories. “Theoretical production, like material production, loses its determinacy and begins to turn around itself, slipping en abyme towards a reality that cannot be found. This is where we are today: indeterminacy, the era of floating theories, as much as floating money . . .” [S.E.D. 44] At this point, Baudrillard wrote, all these theories do is “serve as signs for one another . . . . This merely signifies that any theory from now on can be exchanged against any other according to variable exchange rates, but without any longer being invested anywhere, unless it is the mirror of their writing.” [S.E.D. 44] Theory itself had entered what Deleuze once called “the vertigo of the simulacrum.”¹⁶ This self-mirroring of theory spurred the superb opening of Forget Foucault.

Floating Theories

While he was writing Symbolic Exchange and Death, Baudrillard had no idea that Foucault was veering away from his genealogical approach and would be embracing in his last two books, as a model for his own technologies of power, the “floating theories” put forward by Deleuze and Guattari. Unknowingly, Baudrillard had pre-empted Foucault’s turn. All that was left for him to do was negotiate the exchange rate between them all. No wonder he got excited and immediately used proper channels to inform the editor of Critique, Jean Piel, that he would be willing to review Foucault’s new titles. Not too long after, Piel received a typescript, untitled, which he quickly passed on to Foucault, probably expecting him to be incensed. But he wasn’t, and this requires some explanation.

Coming just one year after his masterful Discipline and Punish, Foucault’s History of Sexuality (its French title translates to The Will to Knowledge) hadn’t been received by the public as he had expected. And the stakes were very high. He had conceived this book as a mere introduction to his ambitious project on sexuality, spanning the next five years. He had already announced the publication of the next five volumes, one per year, but the reception in France was rather mixed, and Foucault had to scrap all these grandiose plans. It was the first time that, in his stellar trajectory to fame, one of his books had failed. His thesis was forceful but paradoxical, polemical in intent, and he had misjudged the capacity of his audience to follow his argument. Foucault denied that sexuality was repressed,

maintaining instead that everyone was being forced to express it everywhere and
on all occasions. Now he found himself accused of disregarding the “sexual mis-
ery” still prevalent in France. In the United States—the book was published in
English two years later—some critics went as far as condemning his puritanism.
Foucault, whose mental make-up was extremely volatile, didn’t take all this lightly.

Ironically, Baudrillard was one of the few who congratulated Foucault for
offering, at last, an analytical discourse on sex “freed from the pathos of sex.” He
also praised his writing, “perfect in that the very movement of the text gives an
admirable account of what it proposes . . . . It flows, it invests and saturates the
entire space it opens.”17 It was too perfect to be true, Baudrillard quickly added,
and this perfection was deeply disturbing. It could only have come from an era
now in the process of collapsing (Foucault was, he quipped, “the last dinosaur” of
the classical age). The same held true for “power.” Borrowing Foucault’s spiral of
power, Baudrillard sent it spinning into outer space until it contracted “from a
star of first magnitude to a red dwarf, and then to a black hole.”18 Foucault spoke
so well of power “only because power is dead.”19 It was the same for sexuality: liber-
ating it was a prelude to its final disappearance. Agreeing with Foucault all the way
was freeing him from his own concepts. Why would Foucault have minded it? It
was not a critique of his work, so much as a cosmogonic theory heading to God
knows where.

Exclusions

Foucault had never met Baudrillard. He only knew of him through the sociolo-
gist Jacques Donzelot, a common friend.20 He invited his reviewer to pay him a visit.
The two men met for a few hours in his apartment, but, Baudrillard recalled, “it all
remained kind of vague. Actually, nothing happened.”21 They didn’t broach the
review at all. Baudrillard, as usual, was deceptively mild and unassuming. He hardly
looked like a threat. “I will respond to your article,” Foucault finally declared, walking
him courteously to the door. He suggested simply that, for the time being, his visitor
should withdraw his essay. Both texts would be published side by side in a month.

Piel circulated the essay among the editorial committee and related intellec-
tual authorities. Their reaction was unanimously negative. Deleuze, a close friend of
Foucault’s at the time, was the most adamant. It was easy to see that Baudrillard was
using Foucault for self-promotion—something Baudrillard candidly admitted to me
later on. Symbolic Exchange and Death had just been published in the same select
Gallimard series (Bibliothèque des Sciences Humaines) as Foucault’s Archeology of

18. Ibid., p. 59.
19. Ibid., p. 31.
20. Jacques Donzelot and Baudrillard taught classes in sociology together at Vincennes.
21. In conversation with author, October 14, 2006. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from
Baudrillard are from this conversation.
Knowledge (1969). It was not in Foucault’s best interest to write a response. It is probable that the philosopher started looking at Baudrillard’s essay differently. Actually, rumors soon started circulating around town that Baudrillard was offering to withdraw his pamphlet in exchange for a chair at the Collège de France. A preposterous idea, granted, and one that he readily laughed about at the time, but he wasn’t entirely displeased, either, since it put him all the way up there with the great philosopher. Who was Baudrillard compared to Foucault? He was “next to nothing,” he admitted. “Still I had some audience, I was some kind of reference, otherwise no one would have felt threatened.” His earlier books on consumerism had been well received, but they were no match, of course, for Foucault’s. And yet he couldn’t help feeling that with Symbolic Exchange he had made a kind of breakthrough. He was still reeling from it at the time, floating in a strange kind of way. He felt disconnected from everything. But he also felt that the odds were on his side. “Maybe it was pride. I felt that I was up against someone who had the upper hand over everything, that Foucault was the number one enemy.” Actually, he always had a lot of admiration for Foucault, and no special hostility. Baudrillard’s friend and sometime publisher Leo Sheer was telling him, he recalled, “Go for it, there’s only you and him.” It was tempting, of course. So he went for it. He wrote the essay.

Three weeks passed after his talk with Foucault, and Baudrillard had not still heard anything. He finally contacted the great philosopher, who said that he wouldn’t write a response after all. He gave no reason, simply stating that Baudrillard was free to do whatever he wanted with his text. There was no mention of the possibility of Baudrillard’s still publishing it in Critique if he wanted to. The message was clear: he was on his own. He had been duped.

Symbolic Exchange and Death isn’t a polished product the way Foucault’s books are: it is thick, dense, rambling, a workshop for all the ideas that Baudrillard would develop in years to come. But publishing it in this uninhibited way had given him a new sense of conviction. It was as if he suddenly realized that he had mapped out the future of mankind. This feeling of exaltation surfaces at the beginning of the book, presumably written last. And Symbolic Exchange certainly was a leap. Baudrillard was giving up the critical approach to contemporary society he had adopted until then. He had finally found a way to escape the law of value (the exchangeability of capital) by resorting to a model of social relations that harked back to primitive formations. He was now convinced that it was emerging “at every level of contemporary society; this intoxicating revolt no longer has anything to do with the laws of history, nor even—but we will have to wait for a later stage for this to appear, since it is a recent phantasm—with the ‘liberation of desire.’” [S.E.D. 1] Playing Marx against Marx, Freud against Freud, and taking even Ferdinand de Saussure and Marcel Mauss against the grain—Saussure and Mauss’s theories had become in his eyes events of cardinal importance—Baudrillard was fast moving beyond the “reality principle.” He predicted that it would be possible to reverse the linearity of time, language,
economic exchange, and the accumulation of power “at the price of paradox and theoretical violence.” [S.E.D. 2] The models he had devised for this vast enterprise were rather startling:

[A]nagrams or gift-exchanges were not merely transitory phases within the disciplines of linguistics and anthropology, nor are they inferior forms compared to the vast machinations of the unconscious and the revolution. Here one predominant form emerges, from which Marxism and psychoanalysis, though they may not be aware of it, derive. This form is equally dismissive of political and libidinal economy, outlining instead a beyond of value, a beyond of the law, a beyond of repression and a beyond of the unconscious. [S.E.D. 1]

And “this,” he exclaimed excitedly, “is taking place here and now.”

_Foucault’s paradigm of exclusion had ceased to apply—except on one count, far less perceptible, but all the more powerful in its effects: the exclusion of death. In the new culture of capital, Baudrillard asserted, to die was no longer considered normal: “The cemetery no longer exists because modern cities have entirely taken over their function: they are ghost towns, cities of death.” [S.E.D. 126–27] Baudrillard had upheld the gesture of exclusion by inverting it, revealing that, just like madness, it wasn’t death anymore that was being confined, but society itself. Life had become “slow death.” This was the expression Raoul Vaneigem had used to describe the effects produced by the “society of the spectacle.” While the Situationists sought to reclaim life collectively through experiential drifts, Baudrillard was turning to death itself as the ultimate ally. Rereading Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, he had realized that, like the slave unable to free himself from the master’s gift of life, the worker remained someone whose life had been spared. Only by risking death could he reclaim his own life. This provided Baudrillard with a crucial insight: “My hypothesis is that there has never been a genuine class struggle, except on the grounds of this discrimination: sub-humans struggle against their status as beasts.” [S.E.D. 29]

Bataille and Simone Weil had reached the same conclusion in the late 1930s. And so, paradoxically, had Foucault in the last part of his History of Sexuality, reminding his readers that, in ancient cultures, the right to kill was an asymmetrical one. The sovereign power had the right to decide life and death. Its absolute privilege over life included his right to kill. Only by killing or refraining from killing was the sovereign’s right of life fully substantiated. In reality, Foucault pointed out, this privilege was “the right to _take_ life or _let_ live.”²³ He was talking about the ancient and

“absolute form” death assumed at the time when the sovereign exercised the right to kill as a way to ensure his own survival. In contemporary societies, he admitted, this symbolic right subsisted, but only in a “relative and limited” form. The mechanisms of power had dramatically changed. Instead of destroying life, they were managing it in all sorts of ways. As a result, to “let live” was replaced by a power to “foster life,” thereby disallowing death and the rituals that accompanied it. “Now it is over life, through its unfolding, that power establishes its dominion; death is power’s limit, the moment that escapes it; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence, the most ‘private.’”

It wasn’t entirely coincidental that Foucault and Baudrillard would have shared the same analysis. Both had given Bataille’s and Artaud’s excess and madness a special place in their work. Foucault’s fascination with Bataille had been a way of taking his distance from Marx and Sartre. And it was Bataille who led him to Nietzsche, and Nietzsche to Deleuze. Foucault went on to explore what “to seize hold of life” really meant in terms of the administration of bodies and lives. What became pivotal to Baudrillard’s thinking, on the other hand, was death as a limit, as the “only absolute weapon.” Could these disciplined bodies, these lives modulated by a creative “bio-power,” Baudrillard wondered, still be called lives? In The History of Sexuality, Foucault briefly (and notoriously) envisaged the possibility of a “resistance” to this new form of power, but he never elaborated on its eventual nature or conditions. Baudrillard did. Building on the fact that power today still consists of the “unilateral giving (of life in particular),” [S.E.D. 40, 42] he envisaged the possibility that life pushed to the limit, to moments that escape the system of equivalence, would have the capacity to render power powerless. Although Foucault still paid homage to the “subversive” influence of Sade and Bataille, to which he once had subscribed, he made clear that, “in the last analysis,” he now considered symbolic rights (death, blood, sovereignty) “a historical ‘retroversion.’” [S.E.D. 150] Baudrillard’s challenge was not really addressed to Foucault, but to the possibility of reclaiming them on the basis of the contemporary techniques of power that Foucault had outlined in his History of Sexuality—and, “in the last analysis,” beyond “power” itself.

_Gift and Counter-Gift_

“Since [power] thrives on my slow death, I will oppose it with my violent death,” Baudrillard wrote excitedly as a conclusion to his first chapter. (He was thinking of May ’68). “And it is because we are living with slow death that we dream of a violent death. Even this dream is unbearable to power.” [S.E.D. 43] _Giving one’s life away_ is the only present that can’t be reciprocated. Mauss rediscovered traces of this agonistic reciprocity in a radical custom—“potlatch”—practiced among tribes of the American Northwest.25 Potlatch is the sumptuary destruction of accumulated

wealth. Whoever is ready to sacrifice everything carries the day. This organizing principle of primitive economies was a “symbolic exchange,” and Baudrillard assumed, like Foucault, that its ghost was still discreetly haunting contemporary society (in a “limited” form). Now that the principle of equivalence was winning out over contemporary societies, it dawned on him that the system was beginning to reverse itself. “A more radical truth is dawning, however, and the system’s victory allows us to glimpse this fundamental stake. It is even possible to analyze the whole of political economy as having nothing to do with production, as having stakes of life and death. A symbolic stake. Every stake is symbolic. There has only ever been symbolic stakes.” [S.E.D. 39] Wasn’t boundless exchangeability a rationalized version of this symbolic violence? “Giving back” symbolically, without any pretense of rationality or utility—could well prove to be the only way to challenge the capitalist system.

It was at this point that Baudrillard had a sudden insight: “Things must be pushed to the limit, where quite naturally they collapse and are inverted.” [S.E.D. 4] It wasn’t Mauss anymore, it was Alfred Jarry. “Every system that approaches perfect operationality simultaneously approaches its downfall . . . it approaches absolute power and total absurdity; that is, immediate and probable subversion. We know the potential of tautology when it reinforces the system’s claim to perfect sphericity (Ubu Roi’s belly).” [S.E.D. 4] A gentle push in the right place, Baudrillard assured us, would be enough to bring it crashing down. But where would this push come from? Not from someone in particular. More likely it would come from the system itself whenever symbolic exchange offered something the system couldn’t absorb without self-destructing. “An infinitesimal injection of death would immediately create such excess and ambivalence that the circulation of value and the principle of equivalence would completely collapse.” [S.E.D. 154] Baudrillard’s concept of symbolic exchange wasn’t just potlatch, expenditure, excess; it was reversibility—a challenge to death by means of death. But death as a form, a specific ritual and protocol, and not as content, or as an individual experience. Only this form, perhaps, could belong to a higher order than the code.

Reversibility

The year he published Symbolic Exchange and Death, Baudrillard paid homage to Bataille’s principle of expenditure in La Quinzaine Littéraire, opposing it to the “slave dialectics” of Marx’s critique of capital. What he approved of in Bataille was his aristocratic point of view, “that of a master confronting his own death.” Yet he took exception with him on one account: the “excess of energy” wasn’t coming from the sun (from nature), but from a continuous escalation of exchange. Unilateral gifts didn’t exist, nor did the romantic concept of pure expenditure merely meant to offset the notion of utility. Bataille, who wrote so well on Aztec sacrifices, “should have known like them that the sun doesn’t give anything. You have to
keep feeding it human blood for it to radiate.” Simple expenditure is not at the root of sacrifice and general economy, only “an endless process of challenge.” You have to keep upping the ante in order to establish “an aleatory order of value.”

26 Why aleatory? Because it relies on chance, and one never knows in advance where it would lead, when it would stop, or what its consequences would be. “You can’t fight the aleatory by imposing finalities.” The proof was in the escalation, and in nothing else. It was what had happened in May of ’68: a continuous escalation. “Power always gives more so as to subjugate better, and an entire society or a few individuals can go to great lengths, even their own destruction, to put an end to it. This is the only absolute weapon, and the mere collective threat can make power collapse. Power, faced with this symbolic 'blackmail’ (the barricades of ’68, hostage-taking), loses its footing.” [S.E.D. 43] In May ’68, continuous escalation occurred by systematically upping the ante regardless of any teleology. It was revolution in the march, surviving through its eventual deflation. At once the apotheosis, and the end, of the social.

Forget Baudrillard

In A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish three different lines in people’s lives that run parallel or overlap each other in various compositions: the hard line, the soft line, and the line of flight.27 What I have mostly followed until now is the hard line: clearly segmented, identifiable in terms of meaning or utility, and liable to reterritorializations of all kinds (profession, reputation, blackmail), each of them involving binary oppositions imposed from the outside. It was the hard line that was widely perceived and mobilized around the time of the Forget Foucault affair. Would Foucault respond or remain silent—would he gain or lose by responding to his adversaries? Was he going to let Baudrillard in, or keep him out?

Foucault was not thinking in these terms when he first decided to respond. He was on another line, more supple and open-ended, and liable to go in various directions. Baudrillard didn’t seem to be a threat. He didn’t fit anywhere. It was obvious that he admired Foucault’s work, although he certainly pushed his praise a bit too far. Foucault may have been amused by that; in any case, he was interested. He had adopted this kind of strategy himself on certain occasions, using the opponent’s maneuver to his own advantage.28 And maybe he recognized in Baudrillard’s “excessive” approach and his fascination with death something that had attracted him to Bataille in the first place, and this overruled other considerations. Or it may

28. “As in judo, the best answer to the opponent’s maneuver [is] to re-use it to your advantage as a base for the next phase . . . ” In David Halperin, Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 11.
be that he was seduced into responding in ways that had been mapped out in advance by the pamphlet he had just read: “Only challenge,” Baudrillard had written, “can arouse such a passion for responding to it, such a frenzied assent to play the game in return, and thus raise every resistance. This, moreover, remains a mystery: why does one respond to...such an arbitrary injunction?”

Baudrillard was always at his best when challenging an adversary. Or seducing him into picking up the challenge, as he did here. The essence of his strategy was polemical (from polemos, “war”). His goal was not to engage the adversary in a dialogue, but to create a “nondialectic, ineluctable space” in which both partners would find themselves locked in a close fight. All that would count, then, was the immediacy of the challenge, everything else would become irrelevant. Seduction, in that sense, was polemical too. It was the black magic of diversion (détournement): it diverted power from its own goal, which was to administrate, and dared it to exercise its power to the limit, daring power to be power, to the point of reversing itself and revealing its impossibility. “And so it is in facing this unanswerable challenge that power starts to break up.” [S.E.D. 61] This is what Baudrillard did with Foucault’s power, and what he was hoping to do to Foucault.

Foucault’s main theses in his History of Sexuality are that one was forced to speak about sex, and also that power was exerted from below. What Baudrillard suggested is that neither sex nor power was repressed or repressive; they were only “produced” (rendered visible) in order to hide the fact that society had already moved to a further stage. In other words, Foucault’s inversion of power and sex, however admirable, didn’t apply anymore. Upping the ante on Foucault’s genealogical approach to culture, Baudrillard questioned whether power could still function as power, being disseminated throughout society, and whether sexuality still existed when imposed everywhere. Sexuality, like power (sexuality is a recent construct), was in the process of disappearing. But far from canceling the spiral that preceded it, each new twist upward resurrected it artificially along the lines of a phantom reference (like a phantom limb), a self-generated simulation. The newly ambiguous status of sex and power placed them on the same “floating” basis as capital itself. Liberating sex, diffracting power, these greatly improved on previous conceptions, but they came one day too late, like Kafka’s Messiah. They had already been superseded.

Power and Desire

The tepid reception of his History of Sexuality had deeply affected Foucault. In support of his book, Gilles Deleuze wrote his friend a personal ten-page memo that was only published much later, after Foucault’s death. In it, Deleuze couldn’t help wondering whether Foucault wasn’t simply miniaturizing the state in his micro-political arrangements. “Is the notion of power still applicable at this level?”

29. Baudrillard, Forget Foucault, p. 66.
he asked. “Is it not also a miniaturization of a global concept?” And he added: “I am not sure that micro-arrangements can be described in terms of power.”

These were exactly the questions Baudrillard had raised in the review that was to become Forget Foucault, provoking such an outrage among those who had read it first, especially Deleuze. “But what if Foucault spoke so well to us of power,” Baudrillard asked, “only because power is dead? Not merely impossible to locate because of dissemination, but dissolved purely and simply in a manner that still escapes us.”

Foucault’s inversion of power hadn’t changed anything; the power principle had remained the same. It was, Baudrillard concluded, a masterful, but obsolete, theory.

Suspicious of the word “desire” because of its Lacanian implications (desire, a condition dependent on lack), Foucault had substituted the word “pleasure,” which he found less tainted, “a virgin territory, almost devoid of meaning.”

Baudrillard saw no real difference between the two, any more than he saw a difference between “repression” of sex and the “induced mode of speaking” that, Foucault claimed, had replaced it. As far as Baudrillard was concerned, the exchange rate between Deleuze’s desire and Foucault’s pleasure remained pretty low. “Foucault doesn’t want to talk about repression: but what else is that slow, brutal infection of the mind through sex, whose only equivalent in the past was the infection through the soul,” Baudrillard asked.

He was giving Foucault a lesson in Nietzscheism.

Paradoxically, Foucault himself had already shown Baudrillard the way when he praised Deleuze’s own reversal of platonism. Deleuze was practicing philosophy, Foucault said, “not as thought, but as theater.”
kind of dramatization, he continued, was meant to “displace oneself insidiously within it, to descend a notch, to descend to its smallest gestures.” Baudrillard did the same thing, but in reverse. He escalated Foucault’s discourse up a notch, to its biggest gestures—“into a wider spiral . . . the only true spiral, that of its own power.” Displacing himself within it, approving his adversary’s hypotheses without reservation, had been a far more formidable challenge than simply criticizing him.

The Duel

Baudrillard was demonized for taking on Foucault, yet no one ever reproached Deleuze for raising many of the very same questions. Deleuze criticized Foucault’s hypotheses in a friendly dialogue, but hadn’t Deleuze himself said that dialogues were useless, because either both people agreed, making dialoguing pointless, or else they disagreed, in which case nothing could be expected from an exchange of ideas? Deleuze had forgotten another form of dual relation, far more intense than friendship and more ineluctable: the duel. This was the kind of relation that Baudrillard had been trying to initiate with Foucault by writing this essay. Not a dialectical relation (Deleuze was right to refuse it) but an agonistic one. Baudrillard wasn’t yet “forgetting Foucault”—the title came later on—but seducing him. He was making him “an unwanted child from the back,” as Deleuze claimed to have done to all the philosophers he had written about, but in other ways. Not subtracting the aspects that didn’t interest him, as Deleuze did (subtracting God, in Spinoza’s case), but adding a slight dose of reversibility to the irreversible process, “secretly ruining and dismantling it while simultaneously insuring the minimum continuum of pleasure moving across it and without which it would be nothing.” There must indeed have been a modicum of pleasure at the start for Foucault to sign a tacit pact with Baudrillard. Foucault was right, at first, not to take offense at the essay he had just read, let alone at the ritual provocation (“Foucault-dinosaur”) that came with it. There was nothing personal about it. Baudrillard’s challenge was a game, a game of truth or a game with truth (but not with its history). There was nothing sly about it, although it might sound a bit perverse: he was telling Foucault in advance where he was leading him to if he was game: it would be “a circular and reversible process of challenge, one-upmanship, and death.”

Someone with the kind of mind-set that Foucault had could have been seduced by it. The stakes of history are linear and negotiable, but challenge acts “without objective, without duration, and without future.” It requires an immediate response. And Foucault agreed to respond.

Why does one respond to a challenge, Baudrillard asked. He might also have

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38. Ibid., p. 55.
39. Ibid.
wondered (but didn’t) why one would refuse to respond. Or why one would accept, and then refuse—and what happens in that case. Because this is actually what happened. Foucault went back on his word. He didn’t deliver on his promise. Why? What could have made him drop out of the game?

Any challenge implies the existence of a pact, a dual relation. The mere fact that Foucault would have invited Baudrillard to his apartment to discuss the matter with him was some kind of commitment. Would he have invited him at all if he had no intention of responding? “Nothing came out of it,” Baudrillard said. “It was a visit of complaisance.” The term, in French, implies something unsubstantial, fictitious, or meaningless. The visit was a formality, empty, but necessary. But hadn’t Foucault’s gesture already preempted everything? Nothing needed to be said, except what the next step would be. This is what they did when they shook hands at the door, sealing the deal. What mattered most is that they had met face to face, and that no one else was involved. This was the prerequisite for any duel as Baudrillard understood it. A duel excludes the intervention of any third party. But it was preposterous to believe that Foucault could remain alone for very long. It took no time before his friends moved to his side, as if they realized that he had to be protected from himself and from the possibility that he would want to answer the dare. They didn’t have to convince him of anything. The mere presence of outsiders brought the duel—and the “mental drama”—to an end. (The duel was an updated version of Artaud’s theater of cruelty). It was the beginning of something else, fuzzy as well as cruel, but in a different way. As Baudrillard said later: “There was no one left to play.”

A rule is different from a law, which can always be “transgressed.” Bataille worked very hard to ground the law anew in violence and death. But there is nothing to enforce a rule—it can’t be exceeded, only disregarded. And this disregard reinstates the law of the “real world” and its finalities. It reintroduces hard segments and individual determination. It was not in Foucault’s interest to respond, so he closed the door. Three years later, Baudrillard came out with another book, Seduction, which provided a partial answer to this missed confrontation. The cheater cheats, he wrote, in order to escape from seduction. He cheats out of fear of being seduced. What he didn’t mention is that the seducer may end up paying dearly for it.

Symbolic Exchange

Coming right after Symbolic Exchange, Baudrillard’s essay on Foucault was the first attempt he made—and the last—to initiate a symbolic exchange in life, and not simply theorize about it. This episode therefore takes on a special theoretical importance. Baudrillard didn’t know in advance where it would lead him. He hadn’t fully realized the risk he would be taking by escalating the stakes not just
in private, but publicly. He was challenging someone who had become the most important philosopher in France since Sartre, and was holding a scepter handed from one century to the next, from Voltaire to Zola to Gide. In spite of its claims to the contrary, the French Republic had never totally relinquished the privileges of sovereign power, the right to seize hold of life. Foucault had been handed down this right to *take* life or *let* live. And he took Baudrillard’s life. As everyone in Parisian circles realized, the potential for the sort of aggravated intellectual antagonism that Sartre had unleashed against Camus and Merleau-Ponty wasn’t entirely lost. Foucault’s abrupt turnaround had been the first warning. Baudrillard should have known better. He was heading for a rough ride.

As soon as Foucault broke their agreement, Baudrillard contacted historian Pierre Nora, his editor at Éditions Gallimard, hoping to publish the essay on Foucault in *Les Temps Modernes*, to which he had often contributed. Nora was the one who had approached Piel, editor of *Critique*, on his behalf in the first place, floating the idea of a review-essay. In that way, if Piel had turned it down, there would have been no harm done, or egos bruised. But now it was Nora’s turn to be put on the spot, and he refused, fearing Foucault’s reaction. Baudrillard’s previous books had been published by Gallimard, so he had nowhere else to turn. The typescript probably would have ended up at the bottom of a drawer, as his adversaries may have wished, had he not run into luck. He happened to meet Michel Delorme, the owner of Editions Galilée, whom he already knew, and Delorme offered on the spot to publish his essay as a little book. Baudrillard hadn’t yet given his text a title. Now that he had nothing more to lose, he boosted it somewhat. “Forget Foucault” said it all, and more. Two weeks later, Baudrillard’s pamphlet could be seen in the store-windows at La Hune and in every Latin Quarter bookstore in Paris, side by side with Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*—an eerie reenactment of the killed *Critique* project. And this is what Baudrillard’s essay became: not a pamphlet on Foucault’s theory, but *Forget Foucault*, an attack on Foucault’s intellectual power. The title had turned their failed duel into an open challenge. It justified a posteriori the intervention of the philosopher’s entourage. And it was ironic in that respect: it became truer than truth. It was a duel with Foucault, but without him. It upped the stakes further, turning a banal strategy into a fatal strategy.

Foucault, reportedly, was wounded and furious. “Instantly,” Baudrillard later recalled, “I became the target of denunciations, hatred—real hatred.” It was reported that Foucault’s friends were going around the Latin Quarter, urging bookstores to withdraw the injurious pamphlet from their windows. Baudrillard recollected: “They all did their best to erase me from the map, forget me, forget the affair. Yes, forget Baudrillard. The pamphlet was not mentioned in any of the Foucault retrospectives, or anniversaries. I really experienced then what power was about. Intellectual power. The real Reason, the power of Reason, of a constructive
intelligence. And I still believe that something capital was at stake. I learned what it was, once and for all. That there’s nothing you can do. If you don’t have your own *squadra* to back you up, you can’t get anywhere. Of course, you may go on as if nothing had happened, but it was a crucial episode.”

It took Foucault’s reaction against him for Baudrillard to acknowledge that, contrary to what he had brilliantly demonstrated in *Forget Foucault*, power—intellectual power—still existed. And it was still being exerted top down. “I was put into a sort of quarantine,” Baudrillard admitted thirty years later, “and I am still suffering the consequences.”

The Great Confinement had come and gone, but the small confinement was the order of the day.

In 1983, just a few months before he died, Foucault delivered six lectures at UC Berkeley on “Discourse and Truth,” devoted to the study of the Greek notion *parrhesia*, or “frankness in speaking the truth.” The *parrhesiastes* is someone who risks death to tell the truth, the kind of truth that would hurt or anger an *interlocutor*. In this book, *Fearless Speech*, Foucault signaled that the courage to address someone more powerful and tell the truth at your own risk is a strong indication that you are a *parrhesiastes*. How can we recognize someone as the rightful *parrhesiastes* and not just a false pretender? What kind of training should she or he have had to assume rightfully that role? But these questions may be far less important for the city than the kind of problematization she or he manages to bring out, “in the sense that, given a certain situation, you cannot infer that this kind of problematization will follow.”

The *parrhesiastes* is always the odd one. The kind of truth she or he proffers is always untimely. And it may take time for this “truth” to be recognized for what it is.

In his essay on overturning platonism, Deleuze invoked the “evil power of the false pretender” who uses ruses or subversion to challenge the legitimate one. It is the aim of platonism, he asserted, to bring about the triumph of the good pretender over the false pretender, “of icons over simulacra.” But Plato himself, he remarked, discovered “in the flash of an instant” that the simulacrum wasn’t a false copy, but a copy of copy, which made the distinction between copy and model impossible. The simulacrum introduces a kind of madness that few may be willing to acknowledge for what it is: a madness that would dispel everyone’s comfortable illusions about truth and reality. The *parrhesiastes* is someone whom everyone would need for that, but not everyone is ready or willing to listen, especially if this *parrhesiastes* happens to take the overturning of Plato-Socrates to the limit. Deleuze probably regretted praising the simulacrum after Baudrillard used it to cancel every difference between the real and the referential, turning the entire system into Disneyland, a world-size simulacrum.

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denounce this kind of fearless escalation as false pretense, sophistry, perversion, or treachery. Being a traitor himself, Deleuze celebrated the power of treason, of the traitor as experimenter, thief, warrior, creator. “There is always betrayal in a line of flight,” he wrote.\footnote{Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, \textit{Dialogues}, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 40.} But traitors can toe different lines across hard segments, doing it actively or reactively. Artaud never stopped moving back and forth across the line, and never kept a steady course. Baudrillard wasn’t mad enough to be taken seriously. Ultimately, every \textit{parrhesiastes} is a traitor capable of providing a singular answer to unrecognized concrete and specific aspects of the world. “And I think,” Foucault concluded in \textit{Fearless Speech}, “that it is possible to give an analysis of a specific problematization as the history of an answer . . . ”\footnote{Deleuze, \textit{Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975–1995}, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2007), p. 141.} Baudrillard’s problematization of the principle of equivalence in capitalism through challenge and reversibility is part of that history, another specific response meant to get out of an impossible situation. In his aborted game with Foucault (as well as with his skeptical contemporaries), Baudrillard brought out a singular truth that Foucault eventually failed to face, because it could well have been his own. What is Foucault’s “bio-power”—evolving populations themselves, simultaneously monitoring life and reinventing it to suit its administration—except the extermination of power in its apparent assumption?

One year later, the irruption of the “Nouveaux Philosophes” realigned Baudrillard’s fate to his own theory. The Nouveaux Philosophes—Bernard-Henri Levy, André Glucksmann, Jean-Paul Dollé, et al.—were no \textit{parrhesiastes}. They had their seats prepared for them. All they had to do was occupy them with the proper dose of liberal humanitarianism. Instead of extending Marx at the cost of some creative tinkering, they simply finished him off, accusing Marxism and the entire history of thought for having laid the ground for systems of oppression. They didn’t create concepts, but were created by them, becoming the new “conceptors” for the public at large increasingly marshaled by the press. Intellectual power as it existed until then suddenly collapsed, replaced by “philosophical marketing.” Deleuze had been right to say that “the media no longer needs intellectuals” and had replaced them by journalists.\footnote{Foucault, \textit{Fearless Speech}, p. 173.} Intellectual power was doomed, dissolved by the derealizing power of the mass media, as Baudrillard had anticipated. Foucault was the end of the line. He would be the last dinosaur. And Baudrillard would be the last to forget him in the proper manner. And yet, intellectual power didn’t disappear for all that; it was simply resurrected along the lines of what had preceded it, minus the intellect. And so Baudrillard thereafter remained subjected to a phantom of exclusion, as indeterminate as the system itself had become, but no less effective for that.

It could be said that nothing had happened. Baudrillard made his gift to
Foucault, whom he was indebted to, freeing himself from his influence. He valued Foucault’s work too much to owe him anything, or to become just another Foucauldian. “To forget Foucault was to do him a service,” Baudrillard said later. “To adulate him was to do him a disservice.” No one understood what it meant, but it was right on target. Baudrillard probably was our last Foucauldian.

Coda

Things escalated in unpredictable ways. Baudrillard’s wings got clipped, and Foucault went through what his biographers decided to call “a crisis.” The History of Sexuality, paradoxically, sold very well, but “Foucault remained bitter. He had the feeling that he had been misread, misunderstood. Unloved, maybe . . . . Personal crisis, intellectual crisis.” He left Paris in disarray, cursing his country for snubbing his last project. For a while he became a journalist for the Corriere della Sera, hailing the fundamentalist revolution in Iran. For a while he rode another line, a deterriorialized line, just as Baudrillard had done before he grounded his theory on an ancient ritual, and himself in the process. Neither philosopher would be the same after that. Baudrillard’s career in France was shot, and he would have to discover his America elsewhere. Foucault started his analysis of sexuality from an entirely different angle, leaving power out. Even his writing, which Baudrillard had justly celebrated, changed noticeably. It became something else, more factual and neutral, less flamboyant. Something had happened, a secret which may never be unraveled. Or maybe there was no secret at all, which would make it even more elusive. In between all these moves, all duly registered, something had cracked up in unexpected ways, as in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s short story analyzed by Deleuze and Guattari in A Thousand Plateaus. Different kinds of lines cross people’s lives, often unrecognized for what they are, capable of triggering irrevocable ruptures and transformations. Something happened that was never forgotten afterward, but what? Or whom? All we can ask is: Whatever could have happened for things to have come to this?

47. Macey, The Lives of Michel Foucault, p. 160.
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