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## Foucault, *Aufklärung*, and the historical ‘scene’

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No philosopher can go without examining his own participation in this *us* precisely because it is this *us* which is becoming the object of the philosopher’s own reflection.

Michel Foucault, ‘What Is Revolution?’

What does it take to imagine another world? First, perhaps, to take stock of this one: to view it, as at the theatre, as a scene – not a static, but a vibrant one, embedded in the worrying task of querying (and quarrying) one’s own situation within the scene, one’s always awkwardly vacillating standpoint at the edge, at the centre, in the wings of a scene – the scene of history, the scene within which something like the ‘present’ takes place. In a lecture given at the University of California at Berkeley 12 April, 1983 – weeks after then President of the United States Ronald Reagan first formally used the term ‘evil empire’ to describe the Soviet Union, in a notorious address widely now known as the ‘evil empire’ speech, likened to his quips about Star Wars – Michel Foucault rolled back the clock to ancient Rome.<sup>1</sup> In particular, Foucault set out a scene drawn from Lucian who, he remarks, ‘presents to us a certain Hermotime, mumbling in the street’. The scene unfolds, and we learn that this Hermotime was off to meet his teacher (or master) (*maître*), a man named Lycinus, and that these two were engaged in the task of philosophy. What they were doing Foucault then pins to an act – a frame of mind, a stance – articulated some sixteen hundred years later, around 1784, when Immanuel Kant wrote a piece in response to a question posed by the Berlin-based newspaper, the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, and to which the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn had also, two months prior, replied. Kant’s text was ‘*Was ist Aufklärung?*’ (‘What Is Enlightenment?’), and while Foucault saw this text as being aligned with a moment in German philosophy defined among others by the Jewish Enlightenment or *Haskala*, by Mendelssohn, and others, he also saw it as offering not so much a rupture, or novelty, or a departure, but an opening. Where previous attitudes rested on a querying of the present moment in relationship to the past, or offered tentative prognostics for the future, what Kant did so deftly (and radically), Foucault noted, was to ask the very question of contemporaneity. This question had no time for chronology; it did not seek to speculate about whether the present was better or worse than the past; whether the present moment was in decline, or whether the past had been less ‘enlightened’. Rather, in posing the question of *Aufklärung*, Kant, for Foucault, asked what it meant to be within a present moment and thus to draw a ‘historical ontology of ourselves’.<sup>2</sup>

In California, a ‘culture of the self’ was blossoming, it seemed; but as Foucault noted, his own interest in the ‘culture of the self’ (*La culture de soi*, the title of this talk at Berkeley) was not driven by ego, self-promotion, self-perfection, or image – it was not cinematic – but rather involved a contrary movement, which he described as the work of unlearning oneself (*désapprendre*, in Latin *de-discere*).<sup>3</sup> This work involved writing (keeping notebooks, the *hupomnêmata*), and it involved dialoguing with a master, practicing arts (and crafts) of the self so as truthfully, frankly to be bared – to grant for oneself (and for others) the chance to learn anew. Truth in this vision was not contained in the past – not something to recover, as in the Platonic conception of knowledge – but rather to fashion. Yet this work of fashioning, of unlearning, takes place – for Foucault as for others – not only in the elaborate labour of a

mythical enclosure or hermetic soul-searching but more radically in contemplating *others* – proximate or distant – viewing oneself thus at a juncture, on a historical stage. As Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson note in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islam* (2005), Foucault had gone to Iran in 1978-1979 ‘to be there’, as he put it in an article for the Milanese *Corriere della sera* in November 1978, ‘at the birth of ideas, the bursting outward of their force: not in books expressing them, but in events manifesting this force, in struggles carried on around ideas, for or against them’.<sup>4</sup> He had recently travelled to Japan – a trip I will return to later – and had encountered there a Zen temple, after which he reflected that this was ‘the end of the era of Western philosophy’.<sup>5</sup> What interested him was the relationship between Europe and the rest of the world; in philosophical terms, this encounter between eastern and western paradigms provided an opportunity for thinking at the history of philosophy’s edge. But whereas Afary and Anderson emphasize Foucault’s much slanted enthusiasm for the anti-Western Islamist uprising, I will focus here on the performative paradoxes and para-temporal affordances of a *critical* attitude to contemporaneity – an after-*Aufklärung* or after-Enlightenment stance – that positions the work of philosophical (and historiographical) writing at a diaphanous, shimmering rim – a far more elusive relationship to contemporaneity (and to historicity) that troubles the 1960s discourse on ‘rupture’ or revolt that Foucault saw, notably, in his contemporary Jean Daniel’s celebration of radical change, and which we may suggest characterizes the impasse in public discourse on change today.<sup>6</sup>

### **Occupations of ‘history’**

Writing in the wake of the surge of uprisings in the Arab world in 2010, as well as the Occupy movement and populist demonstrations among Pegida (European Patriots Against the Islamicization of the West) in 2015, among others, Judith Butler reflected on what it means for ‘the people’ to ‘appear’ in public space. Not only does ‘the people’ appear, but this very ‘appearance’, she argues, designates at once ‘visual presence’ and ‘networked representation and silence’. The crowd is not tantamount to ‘the people’ (as there are many people who are not, we may note, for reasons of mobility, sequestration, or the rest able to appear), but yet the act of concerted appearance enables us to imagine a ‘visual frame’, one that simultaneously ‘seeks to capture’ ‘the people’ and yet which this ‘people’, being complex, spilling out of the frame, nonetheless wrecks: ‘the frame partially wrecks itself’. Indeed ‘the people’ is never entirely present, never speaks in a coherent voice; never becomes, or performs, the chorus. Though a phrase such as ‘we the people’ may invoke relative unicity in the face of racialized police violence or corporate manslaughter, for example, ‘we the people’ remain ‘dispersed’.<sup>7</sup> Yet for Butler, the Foucauldian injunction to perform critique, to query the structures and institutions of knowledge, means troubling even the method by which we come to know knowledge; to be, as we might imagine, within or beside it. As she implies, the act of appearing on a theatrical – a public – ‘stage’ remains firmly entrenched in our ideas of democracy: ideas that posit the possibility of appearing – of taking up public space, of asserting public and corporeal co-presence – as fundamentally constitutive of a right to be a people that may be represented by a nation, a government, or what have you. For Butler and Athena Athanasiou, writing in the wake of the Greek uprisings against pan-European austerity measures in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013), appearing together fundamentally shapes the political sphere, as one that is enacted through performative co-presence. The challenge of such acts of performative solidarity, I add, require us to ask what it means not only to be in the moment of an uprising, to surge with the crowd in an instant of political ‘change’, but also to view this uprising from afar. What is the measure of this distance? How do we reckon with – let alone write – the complex entanglement of co-presence, bodily or otherwise, of contemporaneity, and historical sense?

Every day we negotiate distance and proximity; we are entangled in the whirling circulation of political affect, in the very experience of contemporaneity – and its other half, historicity – that the public theatre of the political ‘event’ occasions. We are, as it seems, continuously at the cusp of (or embedded within) some historical moment – one in which we are more or less participants, more or less spectators. More or less complicit actors or victims, agents or agitators; yet these roles are in themselves ambiguous and changing. To be ‘in’ ‘history’, or to witness history happening, is also to participate in a theatre of emergence which stages the fiction of this separation. Alain Badiou proclaimed in *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* (2011 [original French publ. 2010]) that ‘history’ had come back into motion. After the triumphantly proclaimed ‘end of history’ following the dominance of American-style neoliberalism fêted most prominently at the close of the Cold War by conservative critic Frances Fukuyama, ‘History’, Badiou suggested, is ‘[riotously] reawakening’.<sup>8</sup> The dramatic tenor of such a statement is plain: if all those who have had no voice – no public presence – are ‘*uprising*’, from Cairo to Libya, then ‘History’ is performing a theatrical ‘*emergence*’.<sup>9</sup> More than this, ‘History’ emerges in the terms Badiou sets forth as a theatrical event viewed from the sidelines. While for Butler and Athanasiou, political demonstrations require the visibilization of public co-presence among bodies standing, singing, chanting together (or at least the possibility of this visible co-presence), for Badiou the event of history is theatrical.

Badiou’s stance draws from a long line of thinking articulated forty years earlier by Jean-François Lyotard, immersed in Paris at the time in the student and worker uprisings of May 1968 – an immersion which, Lyotard at the time reflected, recalled in turn the events of the French Revolution, described in their own time by Immanuel Kant. Being within the ‘hall of history’ (*la salle de l’histoire*), for Lyotard, was fundamentally different from yet comparable to being within the ‘historical scene’ (*la scène de l’histoire*). In the one case, one observes historical events from afar, as if they were unfolding on a stage. One is, Lyotard notes, reading Kant’s reading of French revolutionary events, moved – perhaps enthused to the point of madness (*WahnSinn*) – yet one is moved as a spectator is moved. On the other hand, if one is on the historical scene, one is oneself immersed, carried by the movement of history’s forward march: its riotous outpouring, to reprise Badiou’s language again.<sup>10</sup>

The distinction between these two terms – the hall and the scene – is contentious, and indeed we may surmise that to experience historicity affectively is to situate oneself on one or the other side of the dramatic scrim, the historical stage. If one is, as Lyotard suggests, after Kant, watching events unfold, moved by the drama of revolution taking place elsewhere, one may become contagioned by this enthusiasm, and in turn revolt. On the other hand, one may merely become mad, carried by the sublime experience of historicity just as one might be carried away watching an especially passionate or a fraught love affair in a theatrical performance. One’s affective experience in the moment of watching is not necessarily translatable into political – or any other – action. In fact, the sublime emotion one might feel at watching others whose pain and emotion moves us can be detrimental to acting on our own ground. Michel Leiris, writing in 1950 for the newly-formed UNESCO, cautioned his fellow ethnographers against the self-congratulatory affective outpouring that could come from the act of viewing the ‘theatre’ or ‘spectacle’ (*spectacle*) of pain and the ‘aesthetic emotion’ or even ‘poetry’ of a people whose beauty, pathos, etc., moved one as one is moved at the theatre. Colonialism informs ethnography, he cautioned, and the ‘scientific curiosity’ that drove ethnographic research tipped quickly into aesthetic pleasure; rather, Leiris forcefully and presciently argued, ethnographers had to fight political battles on their home turf.<sup>11</sup> Political struggles were not merely taking shape *over there*. They were present too;

ethnographers had to reverse the gaze. Colonial men and women were not merely matter for poetic emotion; nor, we may add, scientific scrutiny. Writing in 1970 of historical method, Michel de Certeau similarly described the task of diagnosis as theatrical, in cases of ‘demonic possession’ at Loudun. In the seventeenth century, de Certeau noted, physicians called upon to decide whether ‘possessed’ nuns were ill or feigning possession had to ‘see and to visit’ them as at a theatre, determining the part ‘truth’ played in their act.<sup>12</sup> These scenes of reading participate in an intensely theatrical experience of historicity (and contemporaneity), heir to Enlightenment writings whose performative afterlives in the French philosophical moment of the 1950s and 1960s has in turn informed contemporary political philosophy across the Anglo-American and francophone spectrum. If performativity broadly defines Butler’s concept of the political as co-presence and theatricality broadly informs Badiou’s – as well as Jacques Rancière’s – concept of ‘the people’ appearing on the scene of history then the dramaturgy of these acts of appearance (and solidarity) compels us not only to reimagine how we talk about history ‘taking place’ but also how it can be ‘occupied’, inhabited and shaped.

### ***Aufklärung* as scene**

The Enlightenment may seem an awkward, certainly a fraught, moment to return to in a political context dominated by renewals of populist nationalism. After all, the Enlightenment gave rise among other problems to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s dubiously racialized notions of national becoming: a vision of domestic bonding rooted in dreams of popular sovereignty – against the tyranny of hereditary rule – uniting a ‘people’ by virtue of felt commonalities, even civic love, often at the cost of excluding others. At a moment, today, when the politics of migration and displacement have risen to the top of public debate, concepts of filial nationhood seem complicated, at best. Yet just as notions of political and social bodies were forming – against monarchical structures and the old court-based hierarchies – broader notions of governance were queried. As Foucault argues of Kant’s concept of *Aufklärung*, the work of enlightened thinking was at its core to become *less* governed, and this is the lesson to return to. In Foucault’s terms, *Aufklärung* invites us to question authority, to perform the task of *critique*. To be not only within or beside a scene but, in this conception (perhaps, I am suggesting, we may term it after-*Aufklärung*) to embody an authority that unmask itself; one is authorial, without authorship. This passionate stance is complex: neither merely emotional nor merely rational; it is a self-distanciation that compels radical self-doubt. There is no object created or judged, no ‘other’ one is completely distant from, no ‘self’ that is stable. Arguably, Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi notes in *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (2016), Foucault’s final articulation of the notion of critique, of care of the self, was born from his first-hand encounter with Iran, and the politics of public acrimony – he was accused of having been prey to misjudgement – that followed. Yet far from aligning himself with or against Islamism, Western-style ‘modernism’, or what have you, Foucault, immersed in a scene of desubjugation, discovering perhaps later that even this scene was not all that it had appeared – not a progression from tyranny to liberation, for example – experienced and expressed the radical uncertainty of political thought, replacing this with a politico-ethical (and aesthetic) injunction to continue always and again to unmask oneself: to peel away one’s own layers, one’s own strata, one’s prejudices, one’s certainties. Refusing one or another political or intellectual orthodoxy or convention, Foucault sought to ask more urgently in the last years of his life what it meant to be attuned to the unthinkable.<sup>13</sup>

Speaking at the Sorbonne before the Société française de Philosophie 27 May, 1978, about a decade after giving, before the same group, a talk that would transform French and soon Anglo-American philosophical thought, in ‘*Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?*’ (‘What Is an Author?’),

Foucault set out in *‘Qu’est-ce que la critique?’* (‘What Is Critique?’) to untangle the implications of ‘enlightenment’ thinking for the work he broadly, and tentatively, suggested constituted the para-disciplinary terrain of critical thinking that would enable a movement towards, as he put it, ‘not being governed’ or, as he soon rectified, ‘not being governed so much’.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, as his interlocutor, Henri Gouhier, noted Foucault had just returned from a visit to Japan, where – importantly for the argument here – Foucault had met with the Japanese literary and dramatic critic Moriaki Watanabe. In an interview published in July 1978, based on the 22 April 1978 interview, as *‘Tetsugaku no butai’* (*‘La scène de la philosophie’*) (‘The Scene of Philosophy’), Watanabe queries Foucault’s dramaturgical thinking – the way scenography seems again and again to shape not only the manner in which Foucault’s thought is deployed in his writing, but also the very philosophical concerns Foucault articulates. Foucault concedes this happily, noting that what interests him is the ‘theatre of the world’ (*‘le spectacle du monde’*), the way thinkers – broadly, in the West – have seen things; Foucault is keen to describe how they have set up, ‘by the play of their gaze’ (*‘par le jeu de leur regard’*) ‘the theatre of the world’. He wants, as he argues, to know how illness, madness, crime, for example, have been *staged* (*‘je voudrais savoir comment on a mis en scène la maladie, comment on a mis en scène la folie, comment on a mis en scène le crime, par exemple, c’est-à-dire comment on l’a perçu, comment on l’a reçu, quelle valeur on a donné à la folie, au crime, à la maladie, quel rôle on leur a fait jouer’*). He wants to know what *role* madness, crime, illness were made to play on the theatrical stage of philosophical thought – or of thought more generally. And then he adds, ‘I would like to do a history of the *stage* [*‘la scène’*] on which one then tried to distinguish true from false, but it is not that distinction that interests me, it is the constitution of the scene [or stage] [*‘la scène’*] and of the theatre [*‘théâtre’*] of truth that I would like to describe. It is well and truly the theatre of truth that I would like to describe. How the West built for itself a scene of truth, a scene for this rationality that has now become as if a mark of the imperialism of Western man’ (*‘je voudrais faire une histoire de la scène sur laquelle on a ensuite essayé de distinguer le vrai et le faux, mais ce n’est pas cette distinction qui m’intéresse, c’est la constitution de la scène et du théâtre. C’est bien le théâtre de la vérité que je voudrais décrire. Comment l’Occident s’est bâti un théâtre de la vérité, une scène de la vérité, une scène pour cette rationalité qui est devenue maintenant comme une marque de l’impérialisme des hommes de l’Occident’*).<sup>15</sup>

Within months, Foucault encountered the uprisings of the Iranian revolution, which from September 1978 to February 1979 engaged massive popular demonstrations and soon the removal of the authoritarian, economically ‘modernising’ and progressivist Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi from power. Foucault, stationed in Iran as a journalist, controversially threw his weight – like many of his leftist intellectual contemporaries – behind a dissident movement that would ultimately lead to the Islamist regime of the Shah Ayatollah Khomeini, soon quite widely understood to be oppressive to women and intolerant of homosexuality.<sup>16</sup> With this movement, as Edward W. Said points out, Foucault for the first time directly encountered an upsurge of collective enthusiasm such as constituted popular revolutionary movements<sup>17</sup> – and simultaneously, we may add, the sort of sublime enthusiasm that Kant had described of (typically remote) spectators of the French Revolution in its time. Yet as Ghamari-Tabrizi notes in *Foucault in Iran*, the often misconstrued pre- and post-Islamic revolutionary Foucault was neither hagiographic nor merely derogatory about Kant’s concept of *Aufklärung*, broadly translated as ‘enlightenment’ though Foucault himself typically left the term untranslated (*Les Lumières*, in contrast, refers to a distinct period of European philosophical history distinguishable from this period’s critical and performative afterlife). Instead, Ghamari-Tabrizi remarks, Foucault posited a vibrant and carefully ambivalent notion of enlightenment that went beyond Kant’s emphasis on reason; for Foucault, Kant enclosed

enlightenment in a 'tribunal of Reason', but what was needed was a displacement and transformation of this concept towards, as Gamari-Tabrizi puts it, critique as a *praxis*, defined by courage: the courage to know as well as to act.<sup>18</sup> Acting for acting's sake was not tantamount to critique, nor was speaking for the sake of speaking. Foucault sought in the notion of *Aufklärung* a manner of being, a disposition towards oneself and others – towards life – that dug perpetually deeper into the recesses of knowledge; that scraped at the edges of received disciplines, modes of governmentality, speech, writing, and the rest. That sought to carve out a relentless space of reflection within which what was at stake was nothing less than a perpetual decentring, or a recentring, a perpetual movement simultaneously away from and towards an axis that had, as Kant had remarked in his time, become all too dependent on others for approval, for validation – and, ultimately, the court of social and critical judgment. Instead, critique operated in Foucault's articulation as 'movement', as the 'movement that made the critical attitude vacillate ('*basculer*')', teeter off its axis, shift ('*décaler*') a manner of knowing; thus *Aufklärung* itself is perpetually subject to a performative afterlife, in Foucault's work; to a manner of being reiterated, transformed, translated – shifted – and in this iteration turned into a dramaturgical act of 'eventisation' ('*événementialisation*').<sup>19</sup>

Foucault's writing on Gilles Deleuze's philosophical dramaturgy in *Différence et répétition* and *Logique du sens*, articulated in Foucault's review article, 'Theatrum Philosophicum' (1970), suggests that the theatrical character of philosophical thought may be described as a discursive event; that the theatre, the 'play' ('*jeu*') of critique – of desubjectivation or desubjugation ('*désassujettissement*') – is to engage in the 'movement' of questioning – one that stages 'truth' and can thus show it to be contingent, reiterative; show that there is another, and another.<sup>20</sup> This is not so much an infinite recess as a radical form of enquiry that does not stop even at 'reason'. It is moreover not so much an experience of presentness, pastness or futurity, but a state of being in emergence, simultaneously exiting the scene of the present moment and entering onto a scene, the next scene, in a performative recursion. The ontological subject is conceptualized as rooted, Foucault notes; yet this very rooting is subject always and again to uprooting. Every root can be pulled, recirculated. This is not a philosophy of history, Foucault argues, nor historical analysis, but a fragile play of being in a field of singularities, each reconstituted, again and again – performatively redeployed.<sup>21</sup>

The work of *critique*, then, was simultaneously – and paradoxically – to articulate a scene of historico-critical emergence – a manner of seeing and saying what it is that we are, today, in the present moment (what Foucault saw as '*l'actualité*', denoting at once contemporaneity and newsworthiness) and drawing out from this scene strands of thinking that would enable a way of being just a little bit less governed – more free. Of course, in the moment of seeing and saying a 'scene', one is caught in the spectatorial situation: that which is at the same time moved with enthusiasm (potentially bordering, in Kant's view, on madness) and distanced, in a way that – detractors could argue – may prevent one from seeing clearly all the implications of the moment within and about which one is writing. For Foucault to be simultaneously 'in' the Iranian revolution and standing in its sidelines, as an intellectual and a journalist (not to mention a French man), meant that he could only be writing a scene that was partial. It showed a present moment – one that would necessarily, he would argue, be superseded by the next. Understanding is always embryonic; and the scenes that capture instants have to be understood to have been fleeting, too. This dramaturgical equivalent to what Foucault would describe in response to his critics as the function of the 'philosopher's mask' (in 'The Masked Philosopher') suggests that we may posit the work of philosophy – and most broadly, most urgently, of critique – to constitute at the same time a scenography of 'truth' and a manner of conducting oneself (a performance) that eludes the fixity of representation. It eludes the

stable philosophical ‘subject’, the intransient and politically intransigent ‘I’. Butler, reading Foucault, suggests that self-fashioning is indissociable from the task of critique. ‘Self-making and desubjugation happen simultaneously when a mode of existence is risked which is unsupported by what [Foucault] calls the regime of truth’, she writes. As a practice of ‘heteronomy’, critique for Foucault, Butler argues, operates by continuously decentring, dismantling the fixities that structure knowledge; instead, ‘poiesis’ or making (and self-making) constitute a space of differentiation and variation that is not just ‘aesthetic’ but fundamentally – politically and ethically – engaged in the work of rearticulating what it means to act and to know. Inhabiting a space of ‘incoherence or entire realms of unspeakability’ is of course impossible except paradoxically by working with speech, language; yet the edges of thought, worked with in this critical labour, produce a ‘tear in the fabric of our epistemological web’, such that ‘reigning discourses’ arrive at an impasse – or rather, as Butler implies, are shown to have already arrived at (or produced) an impasse.<sup>22</sup> To stop at the impasse – in the case of Iran, succumbing to the popular yet arguably morally aporetic stance that suggests, retrospectively, that support for a regime that would soon prove repressive was already suspect at the time of support – means stopping short of engaging truthfully with the work of contemporaneity. It means stopping short of being on the scene of ‘history’.

The paradoxes multiply. What philosopher – or what historian – can be simultaneously on the scene of ‘history’ and writing it, with sufficient distance to perform *critique*? Yet the work of writing – of being in and of the present moment – is the work of engaging ‘artfully’, as Butler suggests, with the aim of being governed not quite so much; of exposing oneself to contradiction and self-contradiction, to reversals, even arguably to speculative performativity – to philosophical role play. Critique, Butler suggests, consists of engaging in ‘the very practice that exposes the limits of [the] [...] epistemological horizon’. ‘[W]hat emerges at the limits of what one can know’, she notes, is ‘liberty’: in Foucault’s terms, articulated as a perpetually mobile, fragile interplay of ‘power and knowledge that gives rise to the field of intelligible things’. The work of critique is to take stock of how we have arrived *to here* – and that includes a ‘here’ that comprises the fixity of stances, of moral rectitude, etc.<sup>23</sup> This does not mean that all stances are equal; rather, once we have become able – every day a little bit more – to conceptualize the act of perpetual arrival at a moral, ethical, etc. stance (or at an emergence that is never-ending), we may be able better to conceive of another world, a future world, that arises out of this one without requiring its (impossible) destruction or elimination. This politicality is I am arguing scenographic: it compels the performative afterlife of a position that is already subject to its own obsolescence. It is a performative labour of repetition with difference, what Foucault in ‘*Theatrum Philosophicum*’ described as a reversal of Platonism, a translation of the regime of ‘appearance’ into a regime of ‘becoming’ – which is not to say continuous deferral, but rather eliminating the fantasy of the simulacrum, the copy, so that the notion of an ‘event’ is itself continuously displaced, never fixed.<sup>24</sup> What ‘event’ then is the French or the Iranian revolution, Occupy or the Arab Spring? It is one that does not produce the reemergence of ‘History’ (as Badiou contends) but rather shows a set of scenes – scenes of performance and theatricality – imbricated and overlapping, and within which philosophers, demonstrators, ‘foreigners’ and ‘nationals’ are mutually co-constituted in the work of acting *as if* to make ‘History’ resume a forward march. The appearance of ‘History’ on the scene of political theatre – of demonstrative performativity – is the event that takes place. ‘History’ is not only a set of discourses, a myth of originality and forward progression (a forward march), but also a desire, a sense of *transport*. *Ursprung* is for Nietzsche, whose writing unequivocally moved Foucault’s, not only (not merely) an origin, a point of departure, but a momentous moment of emergence – ‘it is the dissension of other



things', Foucault writes. 'It is disparity'. In the same way, *Entstehung*, Foucault notes, another term Nietzsche employed among many to designate, always elusively, the feeling of historicity and ahistoricity, the embodied sense of priority or pastness, suggests 'emergence, the moment of arising. It stands as the principle and the singular law of apparition'.<sup>25</sup>

Participants in this theatrical moment of being-together, as history is felt to move, are at once contemporaneous with one another – they are, in Athanasiou's terms, passionately plural, affectively mobilized in their expressions of 'apprehension, outrage, despair, and occasionally hope' – and they are in this engaged in a non-sentimental<sup>26</sup> outpouring of political passion cognizant of being together in what may be described as a critical, collective arrival *to-here*, a state of being at the scene of the present, in emergence, again. The theatricality of this scene of revolt or revolution does not make it factitious or double, but allows it to be seen – for participants to appear to one another – and so to become present to itself (to its participants), to observers, to remote onlookers, as a dramatic moment, a whirl of intensities. Perhaps the philosopher's 'mask', if we reprise Foucault's figure of thought, performs the temporary stability of a perspective, a form of judgment, on the whole affair; but it is itself a phantasm. Foucault wrote: 'in our societies, characters dominate our perceptions. Our attention tends to be arrested by the activities of faces that come and go, emerge and disappear'. His request for anonymity, in an interview with philosopher Christian Delacampagne given for the French daily *Le Monde* 6-7 April 1980 ('The Masked Philosopher') was as he put it born '[o]ut of nostalgia for a time when, being quite unknown, what I said had some chance of being heard. [...] A name makes reading too easy.'<sup>27</sup>

The scenography of the philosophical act requires ('in our societies') a character, a pre-existing narrative; yet these, Foucault underlines, make the movement of thought impossible. Thought comes then to be already fixed, rigidified into an expression of a singular character – the author – thought to be known, thought to adhere to himself – to a prior self. Everything spoken after a certain point of notoriety becomes merely repetition. This is not repetition with difference – not the vibrant becoming-matter of thought, but a stultifying sort of drama without risk. This sort of deadly philosophy is an exact contradiction to the masked theatre of ideas Foucault suggests must be proper to the work of critique, of present-ness. In the same interview, Foucault muses: 'What is philosophy if not a way of reflecting, not so much on what is true and what is false, as on our relationship to truth?' And he adds, 'The movement by which, not without effort and uncertainty, dreams and illusions, one detaches oneself from what is accepted as true and seeks other rules – that is philosophy. The displacement and transformation of frameworks of thinking, the changing of received values and all the work that has been done to think otherwise, to do something else, to become other than what one is – that, too, is philosophy.'<sup>28</sup> In alluding to the 'displacement and transformation of frameworks', he is heralding back to the work of his teacher and mentor Georges Canguilhem, whose introduction to a collection of essays published under the rubric *The Normal and the Pathological* Foucault wrote, arguing further that the history of ideas is not that of successive refinement but of the 'displacement and transformation' of successive rules – nearly grammatical rules, rules of usage, of language. Manners in which thoughts are articulated, staged perhaps, deployed in a normative and normalizing public sphere that may however be disturbed, shifted, when the language itself, usage itself, is unsettled.<sup>29</sup>

### **The public sphere: artful truth**

In a recent volume titled *The Theatrical Public Sphere*, Christopher Balme points to Foucault's deployment of the ancient Greek concepts of *isêgoria* and *parrhêsia*, denoting on

the one hand the right to speak, and on the other truthful or frank (fearless) speech – two elements of Athenian democracy translated, Balme notes, into the dramaturgical purview of publicness in the broadly modern and contemporary moments. What Balme calls the ‘theatrical public sphere’ articulates a manner of being – and especially of speaking – in public that theatricalises the utterance of ‘truth’, one of the prime exemplars of this being the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in 1995 to deal – publically, theatrically, ‘truthfully’ – with the systemic violence of apartheid.<sup>30</sup> But what Balme is also pointing to is a performative afterlife: that of the very concepts of *isêgoria* and *parrhêsia* (as well as a further concept Foucault dwells upon, and which Balme sets aside here, that of *alêthourgia*, the – arguably dramaturgical – appearance of truth<sup>31</sup>). These fundamentally theatrical concepts – furthering Foucault’s already self-avowedly dramaturgical manner of thinking (alluded to earlier, with regard to his interview with Watanabe) – articulate a way of doing critique that dwells within a present moment already engaged in ‘displacement and transformation’. ‘Truth’, as that which comes to light, or that which is spoken, in the right contexts, in the right moments, carefully, but fearlessly – in the manner of *parrhêsia* – and with the certainty, the knowledge of *isêgoria* – enacts a public sphere that is at once theatrical and utterly non-theatrical, utterly non-mimetic, if ‘theatricality’ is to be understood as that which copies, falsifies. Instead, the work of thinking – of performing critique – is of speaking truthfully, fearlessly, in a ‘public’ space, and thus setting one’s present moment of address in relationship to prior structures that allow for speaking to take place, when the grounds for this speaking is enacted as the possibility of a rupture – a disruption. What is said truthfully is what must be heard but what one – as a listener, an auditor – may not want to hear. The conditions of speech are thus conditions of change: the right to speak is the right to create a tear in the fabric of the status quo, paradoxically perhaps by alluding to it, grounding oneself in it. The status quo is – in this philosophical, political conception – the right to disrepair.

This right – nominally enshrined in the United States as the First Amendment – is however in Foucault’s conception after the Greeks (fittingly, Foucault drew his analysis of *parrhêsia* from Euripides’ tragic drama, *Ion* in particular) not merely a right but a duty, and more fundamentally a role. The one who speaks truthfully is a *parrhêsias*, a teacher for example who has as her moral and professional responsibility to do this speaking out, this fearless speech, performed with care and with craft. As Butler notes in her reading of Foucault’s concept of critique, the ‘arts of existence’ which Foucault examined so deeply in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but arguably define his whole *œuvre*, enact the work of subject formation, ‘both crafted and crafting’: self-making then becomes a negotiation, a re-centring, again and again, looping into social norms, taking cognizance of them, pulling away to reshape a self that is one’s own. Yet this self is not wholly separate from social normativity, from contemporaneity; rather it is the work of re-forming, the aesthetics or arts of existence, that allow differentiation to make the present anew. Every one of us can, must, become a ‘self’ that ‘forms itself within a set of formative practices that are characterized as modes of subjectivations’ – modes that can, if subject formation contravenes (‘[disobeys]’) ‘the principles by which one is formed’ become acts of ‘desubjugation’ – acts of resistance. The riskiness of this stance, in Butler’s terms, constitutes a vital and defiant aspect of life-forming that is, ethically, also a manner of ‘[breaking] the habits of judgment’ – of making, of life, art.<sup>32</sup>

Art, then, and politics, and ethics, are not sides of a coin but continuously, chafingly, entangled. For Ghamari-Tabrizi, Foucault’s latest writings, from his lectures at the Collège de France on *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (1981-1982) to his work on the ‘care of the self’ and discussion of the ‘critical ontology of ourselves’, suggest ‘a distinct emphasis on the

historical significance of the subject', which, Ghamari-Tabrizi argues, 'is a reflection on the Iranian Revolution in his later writings'.<sup>33</sup> For Foucault, Ghamari-Tabrizi underlines, the work of enlightenment – which is to consciously, unwaveringly *not* obey, to de-subjugate oneself, to claim, with Kant, and against Frederick II, ruler at the time of Kant's writing, that enlightenment is 'release from [...] self-incurred tutelage', the Iranian revolution signalled not only a conscious uprising against state rule but also, Foucault maintained in his 'masked' interview for *Le monde*, a conscious decision not to adhere to intellectual or political orthodoxies of any kind. Although Foucault's critics rallied to compel him to recant his writings, to apologise for errors of judgment, to rescind his earlier enthusiasms, Foucault, masked, dreams of a form of critique sidestepping the often bitter and petty work of perpetual criticism characteristic of the army of red thinkers or the conformist orthodoxies of institutionalised public intellectual life.<sup>34</sup> Thus critique is not only an art, but poetry, *poiesis*. As Ghamari-Tabrizi notes of Foucault's writing in 'The Masked Philosopher', the tone is lyrical, nearly Walt Whitman-esque, a plea to imagine critique as that which might eschew the destructiveness of perpetual finger-pointing and may rather 'light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence. ... Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination'. It would, indeed, 'bear the lightning of possible storms'.<sup>35</sup> Foucault's rather more lyrical language gestured towards an ineffable 'madness', a 'murmur', around which medical and governmental discourses would be shaped, in the initial preface to *Histoire de la folie* (1961), later rescinded after a dispute with Jacques Derrida, and replaced with the far more (though never entirely) prosaic language that would render his work nearly social scientific, nearly historiographical, spurring further controversy as to what sort of history of ideas this might be.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, for Foucault, the work of critique is indissociable from the work of writing; and as I have been arguing, from the dramaturgical work of masking and unmasking; following gazes; setting scenes; and ultimately finding on the 'scene' of history a moment within which to self-make.

### **Afterlife: again**

It will be no surprise that Ghamari-Tabrizi reveals, at the close of his book on *Foucault in Iran*, that much of the inspiration for it coming from his encounter with Susan Buck-Morss's defining 'Hegel and Haiti', an article first published in *Critical Inquiry* in summer 2000 and subsequently as a book, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2009).<sup>37</sup> Buck-Morss's observation, aligned with that of the little-read (among Hegel scholars) Pierre-Franklin Tavarès, was that G. W. F. Hegel derived his concept of the master-slave relationship not merely from a consideration of Greek philosophy, or previous European thinkers, but directly, and immediately, from his very own contemporaneity: his presence on the (remote) scene of actual revolutionary history. Hegel, Buck-Morss remarks, made a point of reading *Minerva* every morning, nearly ritually; this periodical, as all others at the time, copiously reported on the 'slave revolt' taking place in Haiti, a revolution that echoed, via Toussaint L'Ouverture and other black leaders, the French Revolution of 1789. In Haiti in 1791-1804, and for Hegel reading of these events in Jena, real slaves were overthrowing real masters. The 'scene' of philosophical thinking – and the dramatic (the dramaturgical) reversal enacted in this enlightenment scene – compel not just a translation and transformation (a displacement) of concepts, or concepts out of events, but a complex and entangled discursive relation: one in which, as Ghamari-Tabrizi remarks of Foucault's writing on (and after) Iran, does not just copy a moment into a theory, but more profoundly transforms the thinker/writer in the process. Critique is not description; rather, critique, at least as Foucault performed – and wrote – it invites a genre of thinking that presupposes that all thought will be subject to

revision. There are no final bases on which thought may comfortably lie, at bottom. Thus while, Buck-Morss notes of Hegel, a slave revolt may give rise to thinking the master-slave dialectic – the way masters are made up of their slaves, and slaves their masters – for Foucault something else, Ghamari-Tabrizi argues, is at play. The Iranian revolution, and his own – largely misplaced – virtual lynching in its wake suggested a manner of approaching the work of thinking and the event of history becoming present, transforming the present within which one stands. Indeed, for Foucault, it is nonsense to speak of the faults of ‘history’ (the ‘errors’ of the past); events cannot be pinned to universalism, tradition, secularism, religion, or in Iran ‘political spirituality’, a term Afary and Anderson see as foundational to what they claim was his contentious anti-modernism. Rather, for Foucault the ethical care of the self, the everyday work of desubjugation, of being a little bit less governed or governable, compel the work of standing one’s ground on shaky ground, on changing ground; of querying even the dearest political and intellectual truths of one’s moment. It is to perform, we might say, one’s own afterlife; not retrospectively, as if judging oneself from the hindsight of history, but rather becoming already that which one had never imagined one might be. It is reaching, teetering, risking also. The depth of this fearless, this courageous, work of searching is unfathomable. There is not an *end* to this work, nor a beginning. If there is an ‘event’, there is also a series of infinitesimally small changes within this, so that the theatre of *eventalisation* itself is movemented, stormy, as he imagines – as he wishes for critique to be.

Foucault did not leave easy answers, or comfortable closures, though his critics, Ghamari-Tabrizi notes, wagged fingers in his direction, wishing in their turn to find some flaw, a misplaced liberalism, or universalism, neither of which Foucault for a moment conceded to.<sup>38</sup> If Hegel was contemporaneous with Haiti – if Buck-Morss could link, provocatively, the two with an ‘and’, Foucault was, Ghamari-Tabrizi underlines, ‘in’ Iran, and at the same time he was we may add in its sidelines, writing, as a philosopher-journalist, performing the work of ‘philosophical journalism’, as Kant had, in Foucault’s terms, asking the pressing question: ‘who are we in the present moment? What is this moment, so fragile, and from which we cannot detach our identity and which will take this identity with it?’<sup>39</sup> More than this, how might we arrive at – or indeed cultivate – a ‘type of act by which the subject, speaking the truth, *manifests* him or herself’ – in the terms I have been describing, performs the *appearance* of truth on a public stage: not as pretence, but as the actual making-manifest of a moment?<sup>40</sup> Foucault throughout his lectures displaced his own thinking, returning to earlier points, adhering not even to the titles of his own lecture courses, his thinking about knowledge, about the present moment, unceasingly mobile. If the second preface to *Histoire de la folie* [*History of Madness*] (1972) suggested that a new preface had to come at the cost of eliminating the one that had come before – that that moment of writing had been an event, not in the sense of a momentous happening, but in the sense of a fragile inhabitation – or we may say occupation – of time, of contemporaneity, then similarly the ‘historical ontology of ourselves’ is never a closed book; it is always theatrical, always a recurrence, a difference – a wavering, also. To ‘play the role’ of the *parrhêsias* is to accept the *parrhêsic* pact: it is to agree to enter into a relationship with oneself and with others that risks ire, and receives blame.<sup>41</sup> This is a practice (a *praxis*) and a philosophical relation, a scene, we might say, played by two people, or an orator and an audience, or in the ‘theatrical public sphere’ – a proliferating set of stages and events each of which contributes to the work of unravelling the ‘truth’.

Writing from within Occupy encampments, with colleagues involved in the anti-austerity uprisings in Athens, and at the time of the Arab Spring, Butler inhabits – occupies – positions that perform activism and at the same time give rise to new manners of imagining precarity,

collectivity. This standing within and beside ‘history’, this moving it, hearing it, shaping it, requires however that even that ‘it’ be understood as theatrical, performative: there is no ontological stability to the present moment or its critique. With Foucault, Butler positions critique as a self-fashioning and a refashioning ethically engaged in the perpetual possibility of disobedience. The scene of thinking – the philosophical dramaturgy of what I have tentatively called Foucault’s ‘after-Enlightenment’ thought – rearticulates, via the Greeks, via Kant, via Iran, a proliferation of moments, of identification and disidentification, masking and unmasking; watersheds, storms, ripple, surges. Critique is a corollary of genealogy, which Foucault wrote after Nietzsche is itself composed of fits and fainting spells; it is not critical (prey to petty criticism), monumental, or antiquarian.<sup>42</sup> Rather, most powerfully, genealogical critique enables one to arrive again and again at the question of what it means to be *now* and *here*, and to conceptualise this now as a *here*, as a present moment, a ‘here’ that is always fragile; but in its delicateness, its fragility, also lies a deep practice of aesthetics and ethics. For it is in the fragility of this ‘moment’ that we may ask of ourselves who this ‘we’ is within which we are entangled, and thus what care we may practice at untidying it.

Where would Foucault have gone in his thinking next? Rather, we might ask, what scene of thinking – after Iran, the Black Panthers, after Paris and the prisons – would he have set out to query, to quarry, and to uproot? Perhaps the very performativity and theatricality of the scene, the ways in which theatricality is itself performed as a game of masking and unmasking – like a laughing and dancing Zarathustra, a joker in disguise – suggest that the ‘gaze’, the *mise en scène* of our thought, of our structures of knowing, can only be current – *in* a current. This is our *actualité*: to be swept up in a tide looking provisionally for shelter. Look, Professor Foucault, there is no stage left, they say. There is no ‘truth’ in the public arena, only its faltering copy; this figure of contemporaneity calls for critique, and beyond that, renewed care of the self, poiesis, self-making – a fearless standing still, a fearless reaching forward, arriving towards an afterlife: not the next life, but this one. It is here. The proliferating scenes of ‘revolution’ within which we stand shoot off in all directions, surge overhead and yes, ‘murmur’. Foucault hands us a rudder, but the raft is, fittingly, in disrepair.

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- <sup>1</sup> Foucault, 'La culture de soi', in *Qu'est-ce que la critique?*, 81-109.
- <sup>2</sup> Foucault, 'La culture de soi', 81-84.
- <sup>3</sup> Foucault, 'La culture de soi', 93. On Foucault's explicit distancing of his rearticulation of the Greco-Roman *epimeleia heautou* or care of the self, and what an interlocutor called Californian-style hedonism, see e.g. 'Débat au département de français de l'université de Californie à Berkeley', in *Qu'est-ce que la critique?*, 153-187.
- <sup>4</sup> Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 2.
- <sup>6</sup> Foucault discusses Jean Daniel's *L'Ère des ruptures* (1979) in 'For an Ethics of Discomfort', trans. Lysa Hochroth, in *The Politics of Truth*, 121-128.
- <sup>7</sup> Butler, *Notes*, 164-166.
- <sup>8</sup> Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 54.
- <sup>9</sup> See Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 56, 60.
- <sup>10</sup> Lyotard, *L'enthousiasme*, 57-67.
- <sup>11</sup> Leiris, 'L'ethnographe', 84, 95, 112
- <sup>12</sup> De Certeau, *La possession*, 216.
- <sup>13</sup> Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran*, 183.
- <sup>14</sup> Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce que la critique?', in *Qu'est-ce que la critique?*, 33-80, pp. 33, 36-37.
- <sup>15</sup> Foucault, 'La scène de la philosophie', 571-572.
- <sup>16</sup> See Afary and Anderson, 'Revisiting Foucault and the Iranian Revolution'.
- <sup>17</sup> Said, 'Michel Foucault'.
- <sup>18</sup> Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran*, 174.
- <sup>19</sup> Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce que la critique?', 51, 57-58.
- <sup>20</sup> Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce que la critique?', 39.
- <sup>21</sup> Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce que la critique?', 54, 57.
- <sup>22</sup> Butler, 'What is Critique?'
- <sup>23</sup> Butler, 'What is Critique?' See Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce que la critique?'
- <sup>24</sup> Foucault, 'Theatrum Philosophicum'.
- <sup>25</sup> Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', 372, 376.
- <sup>26</sup> Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 177.
- <sup>27</sup> Foucault, 'The Masked Philosopher', 321.
- <sup>28</sup> Foucault, 'The Masked Philosopher', 327.
- <sup>29</sup> Foucault, *L'archéologie*, 11.
- <sup>30</sup> Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere*, 32-36.
- <sup>31</sup> Gotman, 'Foucault, Oedipus, Négritude'.
- <sup>32</sup> Butler 'What Is Critique?'
- <sup>33</sup> Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran*, 163.
- <sup>34</sup> Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran*, 159-162.
- <sup>35</sup> Foucault, 'The Masked Philosopher', qtd. in Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran*, 162.
- <sup>36</sup> See Foucault, *History of Madness*, xxxiii, xxxvii-xxxix.
- <sup>37</sup> Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran*, 187.
- <sup>38</sup> Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran*, 188-192.
- <sup>39</sup> Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce que la critique?', 73-74n12.
- <sup>40</sup> Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité*, 4-5.
- <sup>41</sup> Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité*, 14.
- <sup>42</sup> Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', 373.