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Michael C. Behrent, *Becoming Foucault: The Poitiers Years*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024. 304 pp. Notes and acknowledgements. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1512825145; \$45.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-1512825138.

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Literary and philosophical biographies, perhaps always and inevitably, present a temptation, one that carries with it, just as inevitably, a risk. The temptation, variably pursued or resisted, affirmed or disavowed by either author, reader, or both, is to understand the written work through the lens of the lived life. The concomitant risk, of course, is that the work will then in turn be read reductively as if overdetermined by the empirical facts of that life, its originality of conception, complexity of context, and creative force of invention ignored in the face of the easy interpretations that such facts may afford. It is not the place of this review to offer a history of the biographical form or of biography studies, but it is probably not unreasonable to suggest that the advent of structuralism in the twentieth century and the dissemination of its philosophical and literary-critical legacy may have considerably influenced the manner in which both this temptation and its risk have been negotiated. The death of the author, as proclaimed by Roland Barthes, and more generally the structuralist bracketing of the subject of lived experience in favour of the analysis of language, signifying systems, and cultural discourse cannot leave the biographical form indifferent. It is not surprising then that, for example, a biography of Proust written in 1959 will look very different from one written in 1999.[1] It was Michel Foucault of course who, in the heyday of structuralist anti-humanism in the late 1960s, gave the movement one of its most famous formulations when he proclaimed at the end of *The Order of Things* that the “death of man” was imminent, predicting that “his” figure would soon be “erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea.”[2] One can imagine, then, that a biography of Michel Foucault, if it were to respect the spirit and originality of his writing as well as the specific philosophical contexts within which this writing should be understood, would negotiate both the temptation and risk of the biographical form very carefully indeed.

Michael Behrent's *Becoming Foucault: The Poitier Years*, places the reading of the philosophical work through the lens of the lived life squarely at centre stage, pursuing the temptation of biography systematically and with admirable boldness, whilst at the same time negotiating its risk with considerable caution and conceptual rigour and also with methodological sophistication. In so doing he makes an important contribution to the evaluation and reception of Foucault's philosophy as a whole. Behrent draws extensively and meticulously on the available archive relating to Foucault's family origins and his early life spent in Poitiers before his move to Paris in 1946 as a student of the École Normale Supérieure. He does so in order to argue that

Foucault's formative years in the provincial capital town of the Vienne department of west central France shaped the form and character of his later philosophical preoccupations to a profound degree. What emerges into the foreground in this context is an image of Foucault as a philosopher of experience and not simply or solely as a philosopher of epistemology: of the archaeological method and its genealogical ambition. This Foucauldian method and ambition have most often been associated with the core orientations of structuralism which, as indicated above, bracket off lived experience: the orientations towards system, signification, language, and discourse. So, Behrent reads Foucault's early experiences in order to place experience itself at the core of his thinking. This, in turn, might indicate a concern with something like an 'aesthetics of existence' (also an ethics and a politics) that runs throughout the entirety of the Foucauldian oeuvre rather than being restricted to the final phase of his philosophical project.

The approach taken here is one where the various contexts and events of Foucault's early life are treated as different expressions of what Behrent dubs an "experiential matrix". "Experiential matrices", he notes very helpfully in the introduction, "constitute the nexus between biography, historical context, and intellectual production" (11-12). Drawing on the conception of intellectual biography developed by Jerrold Seigal, Behrent is very careful to specify the methodological orientation of this approach. Following Seigal, the identification of an experiential matrix entails the discernment of recurrent themes and patterns that occur in the written work of philosophers, writers, and artists which can then be shown to "harmonize with and are reinforced by similar patterns in their personal lives" (14). This is clearly a work of interpretative mapping of writing onto life and life onto writing which, through the discernment of resonant and recurrent patterns in both, would seek to avoid the pitfalls of biographical reductionism and the simple causality of empirical fact taken as being determinant of philosophical, literary, or artistic creation. Everything depends then, if reductionism is to be successfully avoided, on how this supposed nexus of the biographical, the historical, and the intellectual is presented, evaluated, and interpreted.

For his part Behrent is very careful to both frame and nuance the claims he makes on the basis of this approach, and this in specific ways that significantly reduce the risk of overinterpretation or the overdetermination of philosophical production by empirical, biographical fact. Such framing entails various instances of discursive hygiene which essentially limit the scope of the claims made. So, for instance, the reader is forewarned that the method pursued is at once "rigorously empirical and boldly speculative" (12) based on an interpretative toing and froing between evidence from the early archive and a broad range of citations from Foucault's published works, interviews, witness sources etc. In the light of this, the overall claims made always remain self-avowedly speculative and therefore also suggestive and partial in relation to the later material that is brought into play. They do not therefore set themselves up in any way as being exhaustive (and therefore reductive) in their explanatory power. In this manner: "The experiential matrices approach...entails its own kind of hermeneutic circle, involving an analytical back-and-forth between Foucault's mature pronouncements and a contextual reconstruction of his early years" (13). The affirmation of a broadly speculative hermeneutical gesture is reinforced in other ways that also simultaneously enable and limit the explanatory weight that empirical biographical fact can carry. For example, the approach is "less psychological than historical" (13) and avoids the temptations of psychoanalytic interpretation (Foucault would surely have approved!). Most importantly, perhaps, Behrent carefully circumscribes the scope of what an experiential matrix

can, in and of itself, provide by way of understanding in relation to the production of philosophical thought. On this he is very clear, noting in the conclusion: “While this book maintains that experience is a major spur for philosophical reflection, it by no means seeks to reduce philosophy to the working out of purely personal concerns.... Experiential matrices are vectors of thought, plotting its course and fixing its interests. But they are only matrices. Without intellectual elaboration they remain embryonic” (232). What the family and cultural inheritance, the sites and events, and the broader historical contexts of Foucault’s early life provide, then, are potential insights into the shaping of his interests and preoccupations, whilst leaving the interpretative terrain open for all the other factors that would normally be engaged with when a philosophical *œuvre* is to be explicated, explored, and further pursued. In this way, Behrent argues, “experiential matrices” and their discernment are “necessary for grasping the kind of thinker [Foucault] was” (234).

The ultimate conclusion to be drawn here, one that offers an invaluable addition and even a corrective to many extant approaches, is that, in the interplay between experience and thought that can be discerned across Foucault’s life, it can be confidently said that he was a “vital thinker, consumed with the need to understand himself and his life” (234). The thematic organization of the four principal chapters that make up *Becoming Foucault* lay the basis for this conclusion with each chapter identifying a distinctive experiential matrix to be analysed. The first chapter, “Doctors,” examines Foucault’s family lineage comprising a long line of medical professionals that runs back deep into the nineteenth century on both the paternal and maternal side. The highlighting of medical orthodoxies, ideas, and practices that informed Foucault’s forefathers, and in particular the practice and outlook of his own father, the renowned Poitevin surgeon Paul Foucault, puts Foucault’s career-long preoccupation with medicine and the medicalisation of marginalised or non-normative people and ways of being into very sharp relief. The second chapter, “Intensities,” delves deep into the family and social-historical context of Foucault’s Poitiers upbringing, building on the perspectives elaborated in the first chapter and developing them in relation to his later concern with the disciplining of bodies, the policing of pleasure and affect, and his critique of discursive normativity that produces and channels desire more than repressing it as such. The third chapter, devoted to the teenage Foucault’s experience of war, German occupation, and the experience of personal and territorial insecurity relates all these to the later philosopher’s preoccupations with power and its distribution, with Sado-masochistic affective, social, and political structures and relations, and with the mapping of political and medical ideology each onto the other (medical Pétainism being the key point of focus here). The final chapter devoted to philosophy examines those influences from Foucault family background (his great-uncle Paulin Malapert was a philosopher) and his schooling (notably the figure of the ascetic philosopher-priest Georges Duret and his possible influence). The very plausible context to be reconstructed here is the neo-Kantian influence that was widespread in France at the time and, in particular, Foucault’s early exposure to Catholic theological and philosophical critiques of modern philosophy after Kant all of which are likely to have set the scene for his future more formal training on philosophy later in Paris from 1946 onwards.

Overall, the patterns and resonances that Behrent discerns are illuminating, compelling, and constitute a significant scholarly contribution to our understanding of the contexts, at once personal and familial, social and historical, educational and cultural, that shaped Foucault’s

formative years. Very occasionally one might quibble or question some of the interpretative moves or claims that Behrent derives from the detail of the experiential matrices he has identified. The very broad scope of a given matrix may make it less singularly determinant in terms of the specificity of the biographical elements that are presented. So, for instance, neo-Kantianism and the theological-philosophical inflections of Catholicism were so widely pervasive in interwar years France as to have been an important horizon for anyone living in that wider context and encountering philosophy for the first time in their teenage years. Likewise, the war, in particular the phenomenon of Fascism, Nazism, and the event of the Holocaust could be said to define, in quite decisive ways, the preoccupations of so many French philosophers and thinkers in the years following the Second World War.[3] Yet the signal strength of Behrent's book is always to give meticulously researched archival detail alongside claims relating to the formation of the philosophy and the philosopher and to do this with a rigour and epistemological modesty that ultimately leaves space for the reader to come to their own judgment and to place the arguments developed alongside any number of other arguments that may be made on the basis of a variety of different considerations. In this way *Becoming Foucault* not only gives many new insights and avenues for understanding the shaping of Foucauldian philosophy. It is also an indispensable resource for future innovative and productive engagements with it.

## NOTES

[1] In his 1959 biography of Proust, George Painter, in an instance of almost hyperbolic overinterpretation, writes: “À *la recherche* turns out to be not only based entirely on [Proust's] own experiences: it is intended to be the symbolic story of his life...it is...a creative autobiography” (*Marcel Proust. A Biography*, vol. 1 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959), xiii). In marked contrast, Jean-Yves Tadié, in his 1999 biography of Proust, offers a far more complex and nuanced picture allowing for numerous other factors as decisive for the creation of the novel. He notes that “Proust made use of everything he experienced or thought about during his life” and that in writing the *Recherche* he blended “truth, half-truth and false”, “actual models with literary ones” and did so in such a way that “a literary model would be combined with actual experience” (Jean Yves Tadié, *Marcel Proust: A Life*, trans. Euan Cameron (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000 [French Edition 1999]), xxii, 10, 278, 309).

[2] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Trans. Done Ihde (New York: Vintage, 1970), 387.

[3] See Ian James, “Sovereignty and Community” in Tilottama Rajan and Daniel Whistler, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of German Idealism and Poststructuralism*, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), 429-46.

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