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Szeman

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Imre Szeman

Certainly one will never prove *philosophically* that *one has* to transform a given situation and proceed to an effective deconstruction in order to leave irreversible marks. In the name of what and of whom in effect? And why not permit the dictation of the norm and the rule of law *a naïve* (viz. the tympanotribe)? If the displacement of forces does not effectively transform the situation, why deprive oneself of the pleasure, and specifically of the laughter, which are never without a certain repetition? This hypothesis is not secondary. With what is one to *authorize oneself*, in the last analysis, if not once more with philosophy, in order to disqualify naïveté, incompetence, or misconstrual, in order to be concerned with passivity or to limit pleasure? And if the value of authority remained fundamentally, like the value of the critique itself, the most naïve? One can analyze or transform the desire for impertinence, but one cannot, within discourse, make it understand pertinence, and that one must (know how to) destroy what one destroys.

Jacques Derrida, "Tympan"

Are we not in danger of ourselves constructing, with our own hands, that unitary discourse to which we are invited, perhaps to lure us into a trap, by those who say to us: "All this is fine, but where are you heading?"

Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures"

Why Genealogy?

One aspect of the various epistemological dislocations that have characterized contemporary critical discourse has been marked by the silent replacement of history by-- borrowing in particular from Michel Foucault's recent formulation of this concept--genealogy. If this shift from history to genealogy is not one that has always been carried out in name--for, of course, history remains an important object of contemporary interest and concern--then it has at least been enacted in spirit: "history" may remain, but it has come to designate a history turned genealogical rather than history proper. The effect of this shift from one term to another, from a science of history to a history of sciences (of which history is but one example) is understood to be ultimately political: what history effaces in an attempt to constitute a coherent body of knowledge, genealogy rediscovers and preserves in its difference and immutability. It is in this sense and for this reason that recent accounts of women's "history," reconstructed narratives of lost moments in the "history" of race, sex, class, etc., have taken the form of genealogies (and here, often explicitly in name) rather than histories. By means of this connection with what are perceived to be politically progressive endeavours, genealogy has thus become not only the name for a rendering of the past in opposition to the totality of history, but has come to stand as a cipher for a refigured political community as well. The shift from history to genealogy thus marks a monumental political as well as epistemological shift, even if one cannot help entirely contain the suspicion that too much is accomplished by what seems at times to be nothing more than the simple transposition of two terms...

But what is genealogy? More specifically, what is Michel Foucault's concept of genealogy? What specifically does genealogy accomplish that history, to which it is opposed, does not? Is genealogy able to simply replace history (and if so, what would be simple about this replacement?) The answers to these questions are by no means

clear. Part of the difficulty in addressing these questions lies in the attempt to confront them without invoking the epistemological framework of history. Rather than asking what genealogy is or what it does, questions that might suggest an interest in essences or origins (the terrain of history), what needs to be asked of Foucault's concept of genealogy are questions which are themselves properly suited to genealogy, that is, questions that are themselves genealogical. With this in mind, I will ask here the following questions: "What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?" (Foucault, 1977b: 138). I take the primary focus of this interrogation to be the question of why genealogy, whose emergence (Entstehung) can be treated as simply another "accident" of history--here understood to mean "the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells" (Foucault, 1977a: 154)--presumes to speak of history with more validity than that scholarly practice which since the nineteenth century has become known as "history"? Or to put it another way: "Why genealogy?"

Two Modalities of Genealogy

Foucault explicitly takes up the task of explicating the characteristics and functions of genealogy in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1977a, [hereafter "a"]) and, to a lesser extent, in "Two Lectures" (1980b, [hereafter "b"]). The various explanations and explications offered in these essays, however, present far from a clear or coherent picture of genealogy. I will proceed in my interrogation of genealogy, then, by first attempting to unravel the various threads which have been woven into the concept of genealogy, threads which express over and over again the warning: "Do not do history."

Foucault begins "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" by describing genealogy as "grey, meticulous and patiently documentary", a practice that operates on documents that

"have been scratched over and recopied many times." Genealogy "demands relentless erudition", it "requires patience and knowledge of details and it depends on a vast accumulation of source material" (a: 139-140). Genealogy, then, does not differentiate itself from history through the triumphant discovery of historical material hidden or unavailable to the historian: genealogy and history occupy the same ground or field of "erudite knowledge" (b: 83). While there is a sense that persists throughout Foucault's discussion of genealogy that it is a more careful, more rigidly scholarly practice than history, it is not this care with source material that is distinctive of genealogy. Rather, what distinguishes genealogy from history on the common ground of erudite knowledge is genealogy's opposition to "the search for 'origins'" (a: 140). The practice of history is taken to be characterized by just such a search. History subjects historical source material to the logics of origin, progression, development and evolution. Genealogy, on the other hand, opposes this "meta-historical deployment of ideal signification and indefinite teleologies," (ibid.) by recording "the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality" (a: 139). Genealogy is a practice characterized by "an insurrection of subjugated knowledges," the return of historical knowledge that has been "buried and disguised in a functional coherence of formal systematisation" (b: 81-82). In an attempt to allow history to "speak" outside of the formal straightjacket of objective, metaphysical or scientific systematisation, genealogy hopes to reconstruct historical source material along different axes than those suggested by traditional history, or attempts to avoid the positing of axes of reconstruction at all. By maintaining "passing events in their proper dispersion," (a: 146) the genealogist is able to use historical source material:

to identify the accidents, the minute derivations--or conversely, the complete reversals--the errors, the false appraisals, the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that have value for us, (ibid.).

rather than seeing these things as having an origin and development which it is history's task to trace and identify.

Genealogy proceeds in its examination of source material not by attempting to recover the Ursprung (origin) of "those things that have value for us," but rather by examining their Herkunft and Entstehung. Though these words also suggest "origin," Foucault wishes to recover their "proper use" in order to challenge the historical pursuit of Ursprung. Herkunft may be thought of as "descent," "the ancient affiliation to a group, sustained by bonds of blood, tradition, or social class". It is the examination of Herkunft which allows the genealogist to "maintain passing events in their proper dispersion." The examination of descent, as opposed to the search for origins, allows the genealogist to see the "numberless beginnings" (a: 145-146) of the objects of historical research. As such, "it disturbs what was previously thought immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself" (a: 147).

On the other hand, the examination of Entstehung, or "emergence," permits the genealogist to stress that there is no "final term of an historical development," but rather that all developments are always only "current episodes in a series of subjugations." Whereas the historian, by "placing present needs at the origin," would want to "convince us of an obscure purpose that seeks its realization at the moment it arises," (a: 146) the examination of emergence, this "moment of arising", allows the genealogist to see that "humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination" (a: 151). Emergence is the place (or rather, "non-place," since this suggests that "no one is responsible for an emergence" [a: 150]) of confrontation between forces, where only a "single-drama" is ever staged: "the endlessly repeated play of dominations" (a: 150). Isolating "points of emergence" permits the genealogist to avoid conformity to "successive

configurations of an identical meaning" (a: 151) and to see history "properly" as just such an endless struggle of dominations without a decisive victor. The examination of *Herkunft* and *Entstehung* enables the genealogist to avoid the search for "that which was already there," the image of a primordial truth fully adequate to its nature" (a: 142). By listening closely to history in this way, the genealogist finds "behind things," "not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms" (a: 142).

Genealogy is thus described by Foucault, following Nietzsche, as *wirkliche Historie* (effective history), or characterized as "historical sense" (a: 152). The historian's history introduces a "suprahistorical perspective: a history whose function is to compose the finally reduced diversity of time into a totality fully closed upon itself" (a: 152); it "finds its support outside of time and pretends to base its judgments on an apocalyptic objectivity" (a: 154). Effective history, however, "deals with events in terms of their most unique characteristics, their most acute manifestations" (a: 154). Both history and genealogy are characterized by historical sense. The historian's historical sense, however, has been mystified by being "mastered by a suprahistorical perspective," a mystification that allows it to be aligned with the "demands of objective science" (a: 152). The historical sense that is able to evade such metaphysical mastery, however, corresponds to the acuity of a glance that distinguishes, separates, and disperses, that is capable of liberating divergence and marginal elements--the kind of disassociating view that is capable of decomposing itself, capable of shattering the unity of man's being through which it was thought that he could extend his sovereignty to the events of the past (a: 153).

Such an unmystified historical sense enables the genealogist to "place within a process of development everything considered immortal in man." Historical sense, then, introduces into history a radical contingency. It admits no constants in history: "nothing in man--not even his own

body--is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men" (ibid.). Genealogy as *wirkliche Historie* is thus the practice which first truly historicizes history, which introduces into the historical meta-narratives of order and continuity the "iron hand of necessity shaking the dice-box of chance" (a: 155).

In "Two Lectures," Foucault adds to genealogy's concern with recasting "erudite knowledge" a concern with "disqualified, popular knowledges" (b: 83). Whereas genealogy's concern with erudite knowledge takes place on the same field of source material as that of history, disqualified, popular knowledges are those knowledges:

that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity (b: 82).

Due to the demands of forms of historical systematisation, popular knowledges have failed to appear in historical source material at all, and are thus not recoverable through the meticulous, patient, documentary examination which genealogy makes of the source material of erudite knowledge.

In the case of popular knowledges, genealogy must actually shift ground to a terrain untouched by history. The genealogical examination of erudite knowledge and popular knowledge are nonetheless connected, since both challenge:

the claims of a unitary body of true knowledge which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects (b: 83).

At the same time, the introduction of a concern with popular knowledge also appears to introduce into genealogy what can only be described as an "emancipatory" interest. The genealogist who deals with only erudite knowledge did not, at least explicitly, appear to have such interests in mind: historical source material was to be re-examined only in order to

challenge the ruling narratives which had been composed around it. Genealogy as the “union of erudite knowledge and local memories,” (b: 83) however, is a much more militant practice.

The genealogist examines both erudite and disqualified popular knowledges in order to “establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today” (b: 83, my emphasis). Genealogy thus:

should be seen as a kind of attempt to *emancipate* historical knowledges from that *subjection* [to science], to render them, that is, capable of *opposition* and of *struggle* against the *coercion* of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse (b: 85, my emphasis).

The language of genealogy now begins to approximate that of ideological critique (Ideologiekritik). The “methodology of the analysis of local discursivities” (b: 85) now becomes identified as archaeology; genealogy, on the other hand, becomes the “tactics” by which the subjected knowledges released by archaeology are “brought into play” (b: 85).

In “Two Lectures” genealogy thus becomes more than an opposition to a history systematised around the search for origins and continuities. It now more directly intervenes in the hostile arena of conflict in order to claim a space for itself, or rather, to claim a space for those subjugated knowledges it has insurrected against the totality and “power of a discourse that is considered to be scientific” (b: 84). If the examination of *Herkunft* and *Entstehung* remains a part of this genealogy, such an examination would still no doubt be undertaken to challenge scientific or metaphysical systematisation. However, it is likely that *Herkunft* and *Entstehung* would become, as well, possible axes along which history could in fact be reconstructed, or would become parts of a tactical apparatus by which the aspirations “to the kind of power that is presumed to accompany such a science” (b: 84) are questioned in order to allow subjugated knowledges room to “speak.”

To summarize, there appear to be two modalities of the practice that Foucault identifies as genealogy. The first

opposes itself to the historian’s construction of history around a metaphysics of origins and continuity. It does this in order to allow the dis-order and dis-continuity, the radical contingency by which “those things that have value for us” came to be (or rather, not to be, but to emerge), to be seen in its full chaotic splendour. The grand and high history of progression and noble birth is, in this manner, humbled and humiliated. This use of genealogy may be characterized (without wishing to invoke definitions, but only resonances) as deconstructive. The second modality of genealogy may be said to be reconstructive. The deconstructive challenging of erudite knowledge becomes in this modality an attempt to rediscover the history of rupture and struggle within historical contents. This is done in an effort to free such contents to form new “histories”, though histories not accompanied by the power ascribed to a science. The added interest in popular knowledges--a field separate from and unthematized by history--reinforces this element of rediscovery: what was lost and forgotten is retrieved and used against that which has denied it a place. The reconstructive moment of genealogy suggests the possibility of a proliferation of historical voices; it runs the risk, as well, of creating histories that might themselves acquire “the power of a science” as they become institutionalized. The deconstructive moment, on the other hand, would appear to want to put into question precisely the possibility that there is anything like a voice which is “historical.” It is in the gap between these apparently irreconcilable modalities that both the extent of genealogy’s failures and its positive possibilities contre history can be found.

Deconstruction and/or Reconstruction: Three Possibilities

It is likely the case that I have overstated the degree to which genealogy’s deconstructive and reconstructive moments are distinctly articulated by Foucault in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” and “Two Lectures” respectively; deconstructive genealogy is likely more reconstructive than I

have suggested, and reconstructive genealogy more deconstructive. This fact does nothing, however, to help establish what genealogy is or what it does. For while it is easy enough to posit genealogy as existing at the intersection of these two modalities, it would nonetheless seem that, for Foucault, genealogy can be, or should be, only deconstructive: a genealogy that was reconstructive, in whatever sense, could not hope to avoid adopting another framework of systematisation (the axes of reconstruction) and thus also another metaphysics (however vague and ill-defined) of the sort it opposes under the name of "history." The question to ask is whether genealogy's reconstructive modality represents a difficulty generated only by Foucault's apparent need to articulate a specific genealogical project, a project embroiled within Foucault's own particular set of political beliefs, or whether in fact this modality reveals what is always hidden in the supposed ideological purity of genealogy's deconstructive moment--that no deconstruction can proceed in the absence of a reconstructive intent. In the first case, Foucault's particular axes of reconstruction could be simply jettisoned and the concept of genealogy retained; if, however, the second case proves to be true, it raises problems for the concept of genealogy as a whole. For to return to the set of distinctions posed at the outset, if both genealogy and history are equally ideological, equally metaphysical, and if there is no way for genealogy to evade metaphysics, then why genealogy?

There are three ways--even if two modalities of genealogy presented above might suggest a dialectical encounter between these terms--in which the tension between the reconstructive and deconstructive modalities present in genealogy might be played out. In "Two Lectures," genealogy is presented as the tactical means by which subjugated knowledges--which include both erudite knowledge and popular knowledges--are given expression outside of the totality of scientific thought. This is undertaken in order to oppose the "effects of the centralising powers which are linked to the institution and functioning of an organised scientific discourse within a society such as ours" (b: 84). This project

may be understood in one of two ways. First, the genealogical insurrection of subjugated knowledges may be undertaken in an effort to preserve the authenticity of historical voices outside of the formal schemas of metaphysics and science. In the case of erudite knowledge, this is done by somehow trying to allow historical contents to "stand on their own", outside of "functionalist coherence or formal systematisation" (b: 81). Historical contents are thus allowed to be, or allowed to be presented, as they (in some sense) "really" are. On the other hand, popular knowledges, which remain outside of historical science, must be recovered and made historical, though in such a way as to suggest that their omission from history was due to the fact that their authentic nature either did not permit systematisation (through opposition) or was for some reason unsuitable for systematisation (through the presence of some unmodifiable "difference"). Such a reading of genealogy makes history, science, and metaphysics, into ideological forces that have mystified historical source material, either through systematisation or through exclusion. Genealogy would then represent the "tactics" or method by which this ideological, mystified history could be demystified, thus permitting either an unmediated "vision" of history and the social to be achieved, or a mediated view of history within a new ideology. This first way of understanding genealogy would make it akin to "ideological critique," and would make Foucault's criticisms of history's scientism similar in character (though admittedly with a very different position for the subject) to the repressive models of history and the self-articulated models of Marx and Freud--models from which he has sought to distance himself. It would also suggest the occupation by genealogy of a certain metaphysical position, in so far as the discovery of "truth"--the unmediated objectivity of history and the social--remains an active, and indeed essential, possibility.

A second way of looking at the genealogical insurrection of subjugated knowledges may be to understand the tactical manoeuvre of genealogy against the "subjection" and "coercion" of totalizing theories as a means by which a greater

diversity of voices may be allowed to speak without any particular recourse to truth-claims. Scientific discourse is opposed by genealogy only because it attempts to subject all voices to its own logic: it creates the totalizing matrix of truth and falsity to which everything must conform. Against a scientific history, genealogy suggests that erudite knowledge may be systematized in different ways than those suggested by traditional history--if it is to be systematized at all--and that popular knowledges can exist alongside scientific and metaphysical discourses with equal validity. This second way of reading genealogy is to understand it as opening up a form of relativism. I take this second reading of genealogy to mean that since:

the whole history of a thing, an organ, a custom, becomes a continuous chain of reinterpretations and rearrangements, which need not be causally connected among themselves, which may simply follow one another (Nietzsche, 1956: 210),

...that because "underneath it all everything is already interpretation," (Foucault, as cited in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 107), then the ground of interpretation should be cleared to allow a proliferation of interpretations. If there is only interpretation all the way down, if there is no authentic place or voice to be rediscovered, then there is no interpretation which should be allowed to provide the rules of validity for interpretation in general. This second reading of genealogy would appear to be explicitly anti-metaphysical.

There is yet a third possible reading of genealogy. Unlike the previous two possibilities, this third possibility borrows little from genealogy's reconstructive aim. As presented in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," genealogy is to be a practice that attempts to reduce the levelling effect of a suprahistorical perspective by using the materials of history to "dispel the chimeras of origins" (a: 144) that are characteristic of traditional historical practice. In this sense, the examination of *Herkunft* and *Entstehung* are not so much attempts at reconstruction--axes along which a "truth" which has been lost through the functionalist or systematizing thought of

history may be recovered--but rather, axes along which the source material of history may be used against itself deconstructively, i.e., literally to de-structure history.

This is most clearly suggested in the last section of "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in which Foucault discusses the three uses of historical sense that "oppose and correspond to the three Platonic modalities of history." These uses of history are identified as parodic, disassociative and sacrificial. The parodic use of historical sense is "directed against reality, and opposes the theme of history as reminiscence or recognition" (a: 160). The genealogist uses historical sense in this way to push the "masquerade" of history to its limits, and so to "prepare the great carnival of time where masks are constantly reappearing" (a: 161). The disassociative use is "directed against identity, and opposes history as continuity or representation of a tradition" (a: 160). This opposition to identity directs historical sense to see that the "purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of identity but to commit itself to its dissipation" (a: 162). The final use of historical sense, the sacrificial use, "is directed against truth, and opposes history as knowledge" (a: 160). The historian may believe that historical consciousness is neutral, and thus that it discovers the "truth" of history, but historical sense shows that the "forms and transformations" (a: 162) of historical consciousness "are aspects of the will to knowledge: instinct, passion, the inquisitor's devotion, cruel subtlety, and malice" (a: 162).

These uses of history suggest not a reconstruction of memory, not the substitution of one memory for another, but implies:

a use of history that severs its connection to memory, its metaphysical and anthropological model, and constructs a *counter-memory*--a transformation into a *totally different form of time* (a: 160; my emphasis).

Genealogy, as the parodic, disassociative and sacrificial use of historical sense posits nothing, introduces no new truth, but suggests rather that:

traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled (a: 152).

Which reading of genealogy should be taken as “valid”? By asking this I do not mean to bring these various readings into agreement; nor do I necessarily mean to choose one amongst those I have suggested. However, the posing of this question will allow a determination to be made of whether genealogy occupies a place outside of and against metaphysics and history, or whether it inevitably plays a part in the same game. It will also thus answer the question of why we might, or might not, choose genealogy over history.

Genealogy as Ideology, as Epistemology.

Foucault would oppose the first reading of genealogy offered, that is, genealogy as a form of ideological critique. In “Truth and Power”, and elsewhere, Foucault explicitly criticizes the notion of ideology. Foucault finds the notion of ideology “difficult to make use of” for three reasons: ideology always stands in opposition to something that is to “count as truth”; it refers to “something of the order of the subject”; and it “stands in a secondary position relative to something which functions as its infrastructure” (Foucault, 1980a: 118). Genealogy, which reveals the secret that things “have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms” (a: 142) would appear to resist being characterized as a means by which something that would “count as truth” is uncovered. For Foucault, genealogies are “not positivistic returns to a more careful or exact form of science” as might be suggested by genealogy as ideological critique. They are, rather, “precisely anti-sciences” (b: 83), and so to understand genealogy in this first manner is to do violence to the concept as a whole.

The third, “deconstructive” reading of genealogy that I have suggested would accord with Richard Rorty’s under-

standing of the concept. Rorty sees genealogy not as providing a “sketch” for a new epistemology, that is, a new science or ideology, but rather as providing “purely negative maxims” which neither “spring from a theory nor constitute a method” (Rorty, 1986: 47). These “maxims” serve as “hints” on how to avoid the assumptions which accompany traditional history. Genealogy acts as a proviso or a reminder that we should write history “in the light of the possibility that the Peircian idea of convergence of the Habermasian idea of an ‘ideal speech community’ may be a fake” (Rorty, 1986: 48). This proviso can be seen as deconstructive in the sense that if we “took seriously the notion that we only know the world and ourselves under a description”, as would be suggested by the genealogical discovery that there are no essences “behind things”, the “urge to tell stories of progress, maturation and synthesis” might be overcome all together (Rorty, 1986: 48). Taking seriously what genealogy suggests, “that we just happened on that description--that it was not the description which nature evolved us to apply,” would mean “a culture which lacked not only a theory of knowledge, not only a sense of progress, but any source of what Nietzsche called ‘metaphysical comfort’” (ibid.). The culture absent of “metaphysical comfort” would be one that existed outside of the historical space of memory. It is perhaps in the role of offering “purely negative maxims” that genealogy--if not in fact effecting a transformation of memory to counter-memory--holds out the promise of something other than the levelling violence of history’s affiliation to the metaphysics of memory.

This third reading of genealogy may seem to place itself above and beyond metaphysics. Yet in rejecting history on the basis of a perceived inadequacy--its dependence on history--genealogy understood in this manner shows itself to be committed to an epistemology of its own devising. What, after all, allows the genealogist to identify history’s inadequacy? The answer: the genealogist, unlike the historian, is able to see the fundamental dis-order and discontinuity of history: her historical sense has evaded

metaphysical mastery. The unmastered historical sense was said to have that “acuity of a glance” that is “capable of liberating divergence and marginal elements” (a: 153). The genealogist is thus in a position of epistemic privilege, able to see that the order and continuity suggested by traditional history somehow fails to correctly “mirror” the chaotic nature of things. History is inadequate, in other words, because it is epistemologically deficient, and so cannot help but present a false ontology of the world. How else to understand Foucault’s suggestion that “the world we know is not this ultimately simple configuration where events are reduced to accentuate their essential traits, their final meaning, or their initial and final value. On the contrary, it is a profusion of entangled events.” (a: 155; my emphasis). Does this not say, as Nietzsche (the first genealogist) says, that:

the contrast between [the] truth of nature and the pretentious lie of civilization is quite similar to that between the eternal core of things and the entire phenomenal world? (Nietzsche, 1956: 53).

If so, is genealogy’s critique of history, rather than being deconstructive, not in fact an ideological critique, dealing as it does with misplaced identities (to which a real identity may be opposed) and a sickened epistemology (whose place genealogy, as a “curative science”, [a: 156] presumes to take)? To the metaphysics of history does genealogy not in fact offer another metaphysics which it is genealogy’s task to construct? The distinction between the deconstructive and reconstructive possibilities of genealogy here collapse into one another, the former becoming subsumed in the latter.

To talk of “mirroring” with respect to genealogy may appear as both misdirected and misleading. There is, however, ample evidence to suggest that genealogy does in fact constitute a kind of epistemology with—as with every modern epistemology—mirroring at its centre. Genealogy is continually presented by Foucault as a practice able to pierce to the core of things in ways in which history cannot. The meticulous, scholarly approach that genealogy takes in its

examination of source material allows the genealogist to see through history’s focus on origins and continuities (a: 139-140); the exploration of the “local” as a site uncontaminated by totalizing theories permits the genealogist to see that which has been excluded by those theories of totality that theorize “above” the level of the local (b: 96-100); and the emphasis on the “specific” as opposed to the “universal” intellectual in Foucault’s work all suggests the limited sphere in which one’s knowledge may be sufficient to, in fact, act with knowledge (Foucault, 1980a: 126-133).

That genealogy does form an epistemology can be seen most clearly, however, in Foucault’s discussion of the relationship between proximity and distance (a: 155-156)—a discussion to which little critical attention has thus far been paid. Traditional history, in its dependence on metaphysics, “is given to the contemplation of distances and heights: the noblest periods, the highest forms, the most abstract ideas, the purest individualities”: it examines things from a distance, rather than examining them proximately. Effective history (genealogy), however, “shortens its vision to those things nearest to it—the body, the nervous system, nutrition, digestion and energies” (a: 155). It thus “inverts the surreptitious practice of historians, their pretension to examine things furthest from themselves” (a: 156). This inversion of the assumed relationship between proximity and distance does not, however, make genealogy short sighted. Proximity does not blind the genealogist; it is rather distance, or more correctly, the type of distance adopted by history, which disables the acuity of historical sense. History studies what is furthest from itself “by getting as near as possible, placing itself at the foot of its mountain peaks, at the risk of adopting the famous perspective of frogs” (a: 155). Genealogy avoids such a limiting perspective by looking at what is closest, “but in an abrupt dispossession, so as to seize it at a distance” (a: 156).

There is, then, in genealogy a suggestion of a proper means of study, that is, a correct epistemology: a proper closeness and a proper distance. Genealogy peers at the

objects of history not through distant totalities, but “close-up”. It encounters its objects (as if in the present), examining them as they are in themselves, as opposed to examining them only as they are connected to a larger historical whole. This prevents it from interpreting objects “violently.” At the same time, the object of examination never fills the genealogist’s field of vision in such a way that it would obliterate all else. The peripheries of the genealogist’s vision extend to the horizons, ultimately circling completely around to provide--at the moment of its closest proximity--a view of the distance as well. In this inversion of proximity and distance, we have already an epistemology full-blown. This epistemology opposes the blindness of the epistemologies of history, by showing them to possess cataracts of origin and continuity, cataracts grown thick and immobile with age, which enable it to see the truth of things only through a vision which is deeply clouded. Against this clouded vision, genealogy appears as a curative force which--having seen the nature of things with the eyes of youth--hopes to restore the vision of youth, and thus also of “truth”, to history as well.

There is nothing particularly wrong with introducing a new epistemological practice--genealogy--which unearths a revised ontology. Indeed, such revisions form the very “stuff” of philosophy. Nor does the fact that a practice may be a form of ideological critique condemn it immediately to insignificance. However, in the case of genealogy, a practice which seeks to deconstruct not only the metaphysical presuppositions of history, but those of metaphysics in general, the fact that it itself appears to be yet another metaphysics means that genealogy places itself under suspicion, both from within and without. We may be convinced of the violence of totalizing, metaphysical systems of thought. However, if the means by which their violence is exhibited are metaphysical as well, certain questions inevitably begin to arise. If genealogy remains within metaphysics, why is it necessary to replace the metaphysics of history by the metaphysics of genealogy, especially if the issue is to try to avoid metaphysics altogether? Are breaks in metaphysics “always,

and fatally, reinscribed in an old cloth that must continually, interminably be undone?” (Derrida, 1981: 24).

The Leak in the System

There is one possible reading of genealogy that I have not as yet discussed. This is the second reading of genealogy, which would see genealogy as a type of relativism. Such a reading would not seem to require the positing of a new metaphysics. Genealogy, once it opens up the possibility of a proliferation of voices, would itself disappear as just one of these voices. Whether one “takes up,” or thematizes genealogy, as opposed to some other voice, would be a matter of choice. Metaphysics would thus appear to dissolve in the assertion of “preference.” Foucault does suggest that an important trait of genealogy is its “affirmation of knowledge as perspective” (a: 156). Historians take “unusual pains to erase the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place” (a: 156). The historical sense of genealogy, on the other hand, is:

explicit in its perspective and acknowledges its system of injustice. Its perception is slanted, being a deliberate appraisal, affirmation, or negation; it reaches the lingering poisonous trace in order to prescribe the best antidote (a: 157).

The same problems that have plagued genealogy thus far nonetheless arise again. If genealogy is but one voice among others, why choose it in particular? Why not, for example, history? And should we not in fact be more suspicious of a practice which would draw attention to the fact that it is “slanted”? Should we not be wary of granting such a practice a type of absolution due to the “truth” it tells of itself, the confession to which it subjects itself? And is genealogy really simply another voice? Or is it not, in fact, the meta-voice behind the proliferation of voices, one that would hope to establish criteria of validity for such a proliferation?

In the sixth section of “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault presents a genealogy of history and the historian

which suggests the contingency of historical practice. History, like all things, is “fabricated piecemeal from alien forms” (a: 142). But just as this is the case with history, it is true of genealogy as well. Genealogy’s *Herkunft* is common with that of history; its *Entstehung* occurs at the moment it seizes history to turn it “against its birth.” Genealogy is itself, then, not:

the unavoidable conclusion of a long preparation, but a scene where forces are risked in the chance of confrontations, where they emerge triumphant, where they can also be confiscated (a: 159).

If genealogy is a method with a specific *Entstehung*, should we not avoid making it into a meta-voice, a new metaphysics which evades the acknowledgement of the contingency of its own *Entstehung*, and which once again decides on the validity of various positions? Even genealogy’s relativism invokes a metaphysics in which genealogy emerges (and here, not in the sense of *Entstehung*) as the founding matrix from which all perspectives emerge.

I am now faced with the question with which I began. What is genealogy? Is it merely another metaphysics which would seek to violently take the place of the metaphysics of history? I suspect that I have failed to approach genealogy enough from within, failed, that is, to interrogate it by its own logic. Is it for this reason that I still do not have a sense of what genealogy is? Yet how could I have hoped to succeed? How is one to ever undertake an investigation of “the kind of view which is capable of decomposing itself?” (a: 153) Genealogy, by introducing contingency into history, threatens history’s aspirations to objectivity. If genealogy is not to be somehow outside interpretation, however, its introduction of contingency into history threatens its own existence at the very moment at which such contingency is introduced: genealogy becomes purely immanent, and so somehow ineffectual, weightless, insubstantial, susceptible to the slightest breeze of history’s chaotic unfolding. Its critique can only be short-lived, perhaps even as short-lived as the

very moment of its birth, dying at the moment it proclaims itself to be “genealogy.”

Genealogy instructs us to understand itself thus: genealogy has emerged, without reason; it is not the culmination of a higher truth towards which we have been progressing. Just as it has emerged, it will soon pass, as the struggle of forces continues and brings about further emergences. These new emergences will look upon history with new eyes, eyes which no doubt will perceive the “truth” or “un-truth” of things. But is this positing of the continuation of critique not itself historical, suggesting as it does that critique will always take the form that it does now? Perhaps critique will continue in some completely other form, emerging in alien ways. Or will critique emerge at all? With the eclipse of genealogy comes the eclipse, as well, of the idea of recasting origin in terms of descent and emergence. So the problem becomes: how to theorize something which consumes itself in the moment it is posited? How to understand something which attacks itself on its own grounds?

Perhaps this is the question that should in fact be examined when attempting to understand what genealogy is: genealogy as the crisis in the moment of interpretation. In examining genealogy, it does not seem to be possible to theorize the direction one can take, since all directions are equally cast into doubt, a doubt originating both from within and from outside of genealogy. In discussing interpretation, Foucault suggests that:

If interpretation were the slow exposure of the meaning hidden in an origin, then only metaphysics could interpret the development of humanity. But if interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations (a: 151-152).

Genealogy indicates the imposition of direction behind every interpretation. It also, however, participates, itself, in this

imposition of direction at the moment it suggests what interpretation might be. Which leads one to ask: might not interpretation be something "other" altogether? Might it not involve the imposition of direction, the bending of rules, at all? In bringing about such suspicions, genealogy threatens every interpretation it puts forth, perhaps threatening the possibility of interpretation or understanding altogether. This possibility is reminiscent of Paul de Man's discussion of irony (and the work of de Man more generally) as presented in Charles Baudelaire's essay "L'essence du rire":

(I)rony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse within the inauthentic. It can know this inauthenticity but can never overcome it. It can only restate and repeat it on an increasingly conscious level, but it remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world. It dissolves in the narrowing spiral of a linguistic sign that becomes more and more remote from its meaning, and it can find no escape from this spiral (de Man, 1983: 222).

Genealogy finds itself caught in the logic of the same, inescapable spiral as irony. It identifies a past of "pure mystification," that of history, but in the very act of doing so risks a "relapse within the inauthentic" by proposing another metaphysics, a new mystification which would render the distinction between a mystified past and an authentic future impossible. The past would continue unchanged into the future, its mystification never corrected, never altered. Genealogy seeks to make its knowledge "applicable to the empirical world." However, as de Man speaks of irony:

at the very moment that irony [genealogy] is thought of as knowledge able to cure the world, the source of its invention runs dry. The instant it construes the fall of the self as an event that could somehow benefit the self, it discovers that it has in fact substituted death for madness (de Man, 1983: 218).

Genealogy becomes--at its limits--an aporia to interpretation. It constitutes not an ideological critique, a relativism, or a new epistemology, but a mute helplessness in testament to the impossibility of interpretation outside of metaphysics, of the impossibility of deconstruction without reconstruction. Genealogy is, however, unable to avoid the impulse to make its knowledge applicable to the empirical world. So where others might choose madness, genealogy always chooses the path of death. Foucault ends "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," by having (ironically) already written the epitaph that will appear on every tombstone of genealogy, an epitaph he had in fact intended for history: "the critique of the injustices of the past by a truth held by men in the present becomes the destruction of the man [Foucault, genealogy] who maintains knowledge by the injustice proper to the will to knowledge" (a: 164). This tomb, "this stone--provided that one knows how to decipher its inscription--is not far from announcing the death of a tyrant" (Derrida, 1982a: 4).

I Don't Want to Make You Come

What can one do with "the kind of disassociating view that is capable of decomposing itself" (Foucault 'Genealogy' 153)? Do we heed genealogy because--unlike history--it warns us of the power that even it, itself, aspires to? Or should this warning make us more suspicious of some game, some movement of which we are unaware? Should we risk becoming a cuckold by giving into the disarming charm of that which speaks against itself?

Perhaps genealogy is best left alone, undiscovered, untheorized. For in the end, "Foucault's discourse is a mirror of the powers it describes. It is there that its strength and its seduction lie, and not at all in its 'truth index,' which is only its leitmotif: these procedures of truth are of no importance, for Foucault's discourse is no truer than any other" (Baudrillard, 1984: 10). In the end, the questions that we ask of the historian still need to be asked of the genealogist:

problématique

Which effects do those nice prophets or eloquent visionaries want to achieve? For which immediate or postponed benefits? What do they do, what do we do by saying that? To seduce or subjugate whom, to intimidate whom, to give an orgasm to whom? (Derrida, as cited in Bois, 1987: 29).

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