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The Secret Subject: Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth*, and the Interview as Genre

Abstract: In a 1983 interview with Charles Ruas, Michel Foucault reflects on his 1963 *Raymond Roussel* (translated *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel*), characterizing the text as both personal and outside the sequence of the rest of his works. While *Death and the Labyrinth* explores Roussel's *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres* (*How I Wrote Certain of My Books*), in which Roussel describes his methods for writing various of his texts, Foucault's interview about *Death and the Labyrinth* participates in a similar gesture, as Foucault describes his own relationship to *Death and the Labyrinth* through the interview. This essay analyzes Foucault's interview with Ruas while examining Foucault's many interviews as a particular body of work. Highlighting complexities of the interview form, the essay argues that Foucault's interview about *Death and the Labyrinth* mirrors the same tensions and nonrevealing revelations that he explores in *Death and the Labyrinth*, with Foucault ultimately pointing to his own subjectivity and aesthetic transformation as a key to the text.*

Keywords: Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth*, Raymond Roussel

My relationship to my book on Roussel, and to Roussel's work, is something very personal.
... I would go so far as to say that it doesn't have a place in the sequence of my books.

—Michel Foucault, "An Interview with Michel Foucault"¹

In this 1983 interview with Charles Ruas, Michel Foucault reflects on his 1963 work *Raymond Roussel* (translated into English as *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel*). While Foucault often uses his interviews to paint

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1 This interview first appeared as "Archéologie d'une passion." Ruas included introductory comments regarding Foucault's appearance, mannerisms, and apartment in the English translation. Foucault intended to edit the interview transcript but passed away before Ruas was able to mail him the manuscript.

trajectories of his thought—even characterizing his interviews as “scaffolding” holding together and plotting a course between his works—in this particular interview he insists on the differences between *Death and the Labyrinth* and the rest of his oeuvre. In *Death and the Labyrinth*—a text that has received a marked lack of critical attention—Foucault examines Roussel’s *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres* (*How I Wrote Certain of My Books*), in which Roussel describes the methods he employed for structuring certain of his works.² Foucault’s efforts to clarify *Death and the Labyrinth* through his interview about the text parallel Roussel’s problematic efforts to explain his texts with *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*. Much as Roussel veils while unveiling in his explanatory text, revealing the presence of an undisclosed “secret,” Foucault clarifies *Death and the Labyrinth* in the interview by pointing to what he does not reveal. He presents *Death and the Labyrinth* as a personal text intricately connected to his private thoughts, desires, and experiences, yet he declines to elaborate on these connections.

This essay analyzes Foucault’s interview about *Death and the Labyrinth* while examining his many interviews themselves as a particular body of work. It explores the processes and practices of the Foucauldian interview while interrogating its disclosures. In the later interviews Foucault responds to questions concerning a turn to the subject—an issue of continued critical debate—by insisting that he has *always* been interested in the subject.³ He recasts earlier works in terms of current preoccupations, painting *Death and the Labyrinth* in light of his later work on aesthetics.⁴ Throughout the interviews he suggests that his texts are intricately tied to his subjectivity, yet in the *Death and the Labyrinth* interview, in particular, he portrays his early text as a concerted, unique work of aesthetic self-fashioning. Much as Foucault analyzes Roussel’s laborious efforts to create beauty in *Death and the Labyrinth*, in the interview about *Death and the Labyrinth*

² An early version of what became Foucault’s first chapter of *Death and the Labyrinth* was published in 1962 in *Lettre ouverte* (see Foucault, “Speaking and Seeing”). For critical work thus far on *Death and the Labyrinth*, see Kaufman *The Delirium of Praise* pp. 64–66, Macherey *The Object of Literature*, and Rajan “The Phenomenological Allegory.”

³ Whereas Eric Paras, for instance, calls Foucault’s 1978–79 Collège de France course “a bold departure into the uncharted territory of subjectivity,” (107) Lynne Huffer argues that Foucault’s late concerns with subjectivity and ethics appear throughout his early works, as well (125). Alexander Nehamas insists that Foucault never denied the existence of the subject, but that he continually worked against widely accepted ideas of the subject as absolute origin. Nehamas acknowledges changes in Foucault’s thought while maintaining the overall continuity of his area of exploration.

⁴ Gary Gutting has observed that Foucault often describes his past works in terms of current projects (71–73).

he claims that his early text incorporates and reveals his own efforts to create a beautiful life. While he puts forth a history of aesthetic practices in many of his later texts, in the *Death and the Labyrinth* interview he points to a personal practice of aestheticism. Mirroring the same tensions and nonrevealing revelations that he examines in *Death and the Labyrinth*, Foucault portrays his own subjectivity and aesthetic transformation as the veiled core and foundation of the early work.

The Foucauldian Interview

Although Foucault's interviews often appear in scholarly analyses, little work has been done on the Foucauldian interview itself.⁵ However, critics, as well as Foucault, assert the significance of the interview in Foucault's body of work. Paul A. Bové observes that "many of Foucault's most telling statements" appear in his interviews, and Gilles Deleuze declares, "*If Foucault's interviews form an integral part of his work*, it is because they extend the historical problematization of each of his books into the construction of the present problem" (115). The interviews work to tie together his earlier and current texts. Foucault himself states of his interviews, "[They] tend to be reflections on a finished book that may help me to define another possible project. They are something like a scaffolding that serves as a link between a work that is coming to an end and another one that's about to begin" ("Interview" 240).

The interviews speak to prominent critical debates about Foucault's thought: while scholars have disputed the methodological soundness of using a biographical lens to interpret Foucault's works (a debate that came to the forefront with James Miller's *The Passion of Michel Foucault*), in his interviews Foucault takes pains to establish and obscure connections between his works and life, seeming

5 Introductions to collections of Foucault's interviews tend to analyze his career in general. The only essay I have found thus far that focuses specifically on the interviews is David Macey's "The Foucault Interviews." Macey has identified roughly one hundred interviews that appear in eighty publications. His essay primarily concerns genre definition: he works to define Foucault's interviews versus Foucault's public conversations, radio broadcasts, et cetera. In this essay, in comparison, I focus more on content than genre. I examine as interviews the texts already defined as such in print. Although a weakness of this approach is that I must rely on others' definitions of an interview, the published interviews have similar components (being organized in question-and-answer formats between Foucault and one or more interlocutors) and provide a solid basis for an analysis of content.

both to encourage and to qualify biographical interpretive methodologies.⁶ Moreover, while scholars have attempted to map trajectories of Foucault's thought and works throughout his career, Foucault grapples directly with these trajectories in his interviews, deliberately painting continuities and discontinuities in his thought while depicting his oeuvre as a whole. His descriptions of his career are often similar to the rough periodizing that appears in much contemporary scholarship.⁷ However, as this essay will detail, he also recasts his earlier works in terms of his current concerns. In the *Death and the Labyrinth* interview this gesture is particularly clear due to the notable length of time that elapsed between the book and the interview.

Research on the interview genre itself has examined the history of the form, its communicative norms (particularly as game or speech event), and its dialogic nature (as both interviewer and interviewee work together to construct a life narrative of the interviewee).⁸ The author interview in particular (a form made famous by the *Paris Review*) invites authors to explain their works in terms of their life experiences and intentions—a methodology discouraged by the now-commonplace biographical and intentional fallacies.⁹ The interview also presupposes the coherent personhood of the interviewee; it seeks to mask the disjunction between past and present (between the current, embodied self and the narrated

6 James Miller's 1993 work, which gained a good amount of attention in the United States and France, was often criticized for drawing connections too closely between Foucault's works and life (and, specifically, his sexual practices). Didier Eribon, author of *Michel Foucault* (1989), was among the most vocal of Miller's critics.

7 Critics often separate his career into three parts: an early period concerned with knowledge, a middle period concerned with power, and a late period concerned with the subject. Foucault presents this three-part characterization of his work in certain of his late interviews. In a 1983 interview, for instance, he describes the areas (or "axes") of genealogy that he has explored during his career as the "truth axis" (with *The Birth of the Clinic*, 1963; and *The Order of Things*, 1966), the "power axis" (with *Discipline and Punish*, 1975), and the "ethical axis" (with *The History of Sexuality*, 1976–84) ("Genealogy of Ethics" 262–63).

8 Michael B. Palmer asserts that the modern interview form began with the *New York Herald* in 1836 (90), and Dorothy E. Speirs observes that interviews appeared in the French press in the 1870s (301). Most scholarship on the interview as genre thus far explores areas of sociolinguistics, media studies, and social research methodology. However, in a more literary vein, Ted Lyon has analyzed the interviews of Jorge Luis Borges, and David Neal Miller has examined those of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Both Lyon and Miller work to draw parallels between the interviews and both authors' literary texts.

9 Bruce Bawer examines the influence of the *Paris Review* interview in "Talk Show: The Rise of the Literary Interview."

self) in order to shape past and present into a unified life narrative, with previous experience contributing to the form or characteristics of the current self.

Attempting to establish a coherent trajectory of thought in his interviews, Foucault depicts his earlier works in terms of his current projects, maintaining in his later interviews that his works have *always* concerned the subject and subjectivity. In a January 1984 interview, when questioned by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, Helmut Becker, and Alfredo Gomez-Müller about a turn to the subject in his later works, Foucault responds:

In actual fact, I have always been interested in this problem, even if I framed it somewhat differently. I have tried to find out how the human subject fits into certain games of truth. [...] This is the theme of my book *The Order of Things* [1966], in which I attempted to see how, in scientific discourses, the human subject defines itself as a speaking, living, working individual. In my courses at the Collège de France, I brought out this problematic in its generality. ("Ethics" 281)

He never rejected the subject, he declares, but an a priori idea of the subject ("What I rejected was the idea of starting out with a theory of the subject [...] and, on the basis of this theory, asking how a given form of knowledge [*connaissance*] was possible") (290). When pressed, Foucault acknowledges that the "games of truth" he has analyzed have shifted from coercive practices to practices of the formation of the self. Indeed, his language about the subject *has* changed in his interviews; he shifts in large part from discussing how the subject is constituted to how the subject works to constitute himself. In a May 1984 interview, he also acknowledges that with *The Use of Pleasure* (1984) he "reintroduc[es] the problem of the subject that [he] had more or less left aside in [his] first studies" ("Return of Morality" 472). Yet, overall, he takes pains in his later interviews to portray the general continuity of his thought; while each book may be different from its predecessor, he claims, it still takes part in a loosely organized exploration of a larger problematic of subjectivity. In the afterword to Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow's *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, he asserts:

I would like to say, first of all, what has been the goal of my work during the last twenty years. It has not been to analyze the phenomenon of power [...]. My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects. [...] Thus it is not power, but the subject, which is the general theme of my research. ("Afterword")

Furthermore, Foucault frames this exploration of subjectivity in terms of aesthetics, or the transformation of the self. His focus on the care of the self in the late interviews turns into an exploration of the self as a work of art—of living in such a way as to create a beautiful existence. He insists that his concept of

aestheticism—which has inspired much critical debate as to its precise definition and ethical implications—has been the impetus for much of his work. In a 1982 interview he states:

For me, intellectual work is related to what you could call “aestheticism,” meaning transforming yourself. [...] You see that’s why I really work like a dog, and I worked like a dog all my life. I am not interested in the academic status of what I am doing because my problem is my own transformation. That’s the reason also why, when people say, “Well, you thought this a few years ago and now you say something else,” my answer is [...] [Laughs] “Well, do you think I have worked like that all those years to say the same thing and not to be changed?” This transformation of one’s self by one’s own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. (“Michel Foucault” 130–31)

Elsewhere in his later interviews he describes *aesthetics* (or the *aesthetic experience*) as “the will to live a beautiful life” (“Genealogy of Ethics” 254). His concept of aesthetics encompasses both the act of working on oneself and the effect of working on oneself.¹⁰

This aesthetic transformation of the self appears, in many of his interviews, as the transformation of *himself*. Foucault avows openly, as in the interview just cited, that he is concerned with his own transformation (declarations that likely contributed to critical accusations of dandyism).¹¹ He claims that his works are experiences through which he changes: “What I think is never quite the same, because for me my books are experiences. [...] An experience is something that one comes out of transformed. [...] I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same thing as before” (“Interview” 239–40). Yet while he

10 Critics have noted the slipperiness of Foucault’s use of “aestheticism” and “aesthetics.” For perceptive analyses of these terms in Foucault’s work, see Kevin Lamb “Foucault’s Aestheticism,” Timothy O’Leary *Foucault: The Art of Ethics*, and Andrew Thacker “Foucault’s Aesthetics of Existence.” At times, Foucault also ties his concept of aestheticism to reputation, linking “the will to live a beautiful life” with the desire to “leave to *others* memories of a beautiful existence.” This concern with reputation is striking, especially as it occurs near the end of his career (“Genealogy of Ethics” 254, emphasis mine).

11 Pierre Hadot notably criticized Foucault’s late focus on aesthetics and the care of the self as tending toward “a new form of Dandyism, late twentieth-century style” (211). Others, responding to Hadot, argued for the ethical basis of Foucault’s project. Todd May and Timothy O’Leary maintained that Foucault’s aim was not to prescribe a beautiful self, but to draw attention to the techniques available for forming the self, making others aware that the process of self-formation was not determined or natural (May 180–82; O’Leary 131). Alexander Nehamas defended Foucault by asserting that public and private were necessarily linked in the lives of public figures; “great individuals” must transform themselves in order to transform the lives of others (180–81).

continually refers to these experiences and aesthetic efforts of self-transformation, he carefully avoids detailing the characteristics and results of these experiences. While emphasizing the very personal aspects of his intellectual work (“I haven’t written a single book that was not inspired, at least in part, by a direct personal experience”), he withholds details as to these personal aspects (244). Ultimately, while claiming that his work concerns subjectivity, and while discussing his work in a genre (the interview) that highlights the speaking subject, he also veils his experience of subjectivity by portraying a continually transforming self that evades analysis. He gestures toward an interiority that he does not reveal—a secret somehow held in his texts. The *Death and the Labyrinth* interview reveals the presence of this secret most directly.

“Clarifying” and Reframing the Text

The *Death and the Labyrinth* interview is unique in that it occurs twenty years after *Death and the Labyrinth* was published; most interviews focusing on only one of Foucault’s texts took place shortly after publication of the text. In his notes on the *Death and the Labyrinth* interview, Ruas observes Foucault’s surprise at recent interest in his obscure text. However, Ruas states that Foucault “readily offered to assist [him] by clarifying any obscurity in his text” (“An Interview” 172). Foucault’s move to clarify and explain his text mirrors Roussel’s effort, with *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, to explain certain of his texts. (Roussel asserts in his text, “I have always been meaning to explain the way in which I came to write certain of my books. [...] It involved a very special method. And it seems to me that it is my duty to reveal this method, since I have the feeling that future writers may perhaps be able to exploit it fruitfully”) (*How I Wrote* 3). With his offer to clarify *Death and the Labyrinth*, Foucault enacts a similar authorial gesture.

The notable amount of time that elapses between Foucault’s early text and his late interview purporting to explain the text provides a revealing glimpse into his later characterizations of his earlier works. By the time of the interview (15 September 1983), he had progressed well into his work on Greek ethics and practices of the self. During an interview in April of the same year he readily talked of his already extensive work on the “aesthetics of existence” (“Genealogy of Ethics” 266). In the *Death and the Labyrinth* interview Foucault portrays his text as an exercise in aesthetic self-transformation. Although any metatextual references to or gestures toward the author are absent in *Death and the Labyrinth* itself, he paints the text as overwhelmingly concerned with the author. One might argue, as Foucault does in a May 1984 interview, that his intellectual endeavors are a

progression; he states, “One always moves backward toward the essential” (“Concern for Truth” 456). Yet the absence in *Death and the Labyrinth* of Foucault’s later language regarding the constitution of the self suggests not that his aesthetic concerns developed out of the text, but that he reframes the text in terms of his later concerns.¹²

Foucault’s offer to explain and clarify his text is also fraught with problems due to the same instability of repetition that he analyzes in *Death and the Labyrinth*. In his early text, he examines Roussel’s process of generating stories in the space between two almost identical sentences, with the second almost repeating the first. He proposes the ultimate impossibility of the second sentence repeating the first due to “a slight gap which causes the same words to mean something else” (*Death* 23). The gap is presumably a result of the unfolding of the text, the language that appears between the first sentence and its purported repetition at the end of the story. A similar gap is present between Foucault’s text and interview; while he attempts to repeat ideas from *Death and the Labyrinth* in order to clarify them, these ideas necessarily change in meaning due to the space (in terms of time, events, changes in Foucault’s thought) between the text and the interview. Foucault cannot clarify his text without modifying his text. Furthermore, Foucault argues that Roussel, by repeating his first sentences at the end of his stories, necessarily adds meaning to the originals. He asserts of *Locus Solus* (1914), “The language of [the] second part of the text has the function of restoring meaning to signs. [...] The narrative returns to the original moment when it started, recovers the image which stood at the beginning like a mute emblem, and now tells what it means” (*Death* 54, emphasis mine). Meaning is added only in the return, suggesting the relative emptiness of the original. Foucault’s arguments about the impossibility of repetition in Roussel’s works effectively suggest his own inability to clarify *Death and the Labyrinth* through his interview. Extrapolating his arguments in the text to the text, we might argue that, in purporting to repeat and clarify his ideas from his original text, Foucault adds meaning and creates a necessarily different text. The interview thus reveals his current concerns; he constructs a narrative of *Death and the Labyrinth* while simultaneously constructing the “I” of the present. This “I” in the interview necessarily eludes complete presence: it highlights impossibilities of repeating the past while negotiating between past and present itself—continuously becoming itself by

¹² Of course, thought, in a sense, is always a progression, with thoughts leading to other thoughts. Yet here what I would like to highlight is the apparent juxtaposition of Foucault’s aesthetic concerns with *Death and the Labyrinth*. These aesthetic concerns appear more as a construct imposed on the text than as an organic development from the text.

constructing itself in the present moment and pushing previous moments into the past. In this way, the interview reveals the ongoing creation of the narrated “I.” Foucault strategically uses this elusive “I” to both point to and mask his own subjectivity.

***Death and the Labyrinth* and the Subject in the Shadows**

Insisting that *Death and the Labyrinth* is entirely unlike any of his other works, Foucault proclaims that the unique text concerns his own aesthetic transformation. While tantalizingly suggesting that the text somehow contains and points to his self, he paints this self only in its negativity, indicating a space of interiority but refusing to detail its contents. The interview ultimately reveals similar lacunae and disjunctions to those Foucault analyzes in Roussel’s works: it reveals and hides, includes and excludes, illuminates and casts shadows.

The *Death and the Labyrinth* interview sheds light on the problematic of subjectivity in Foucault’s oeuvre by painting the authorial self as the irrefutable core of the work. Foucault declares:

I believe that it is better to try to understand that someone who is a writer is not simply doing his work in his books, in what he publishes, but that his major work is, in the end, himself in the process of writing his books. [...] The work is more than the work: the subject who is writing is part of the work. (“An Interview” 186)

In addition to suggesting that the work somehow includes and points to the self, Foucault gestures to a process of self-formation or self-transformation in writing—an aesthetic process. He invokes this aesthetic process, as well, when discussing Roussel’s experience of authorship: “The first text one writes is neither written for others, nor for who one is: one writes to become someone other than who one is. Finally, there is an attempt at modifying one’s way of being through the act of writing” (“An Interview” 184). He emphasizes the aesthetic possibilities of authorship and, by extension, hints to his own aesthetic project. The work, he declares, reveals the authorial self, and in doing so it reveals the author’s efforts to transform and modify his “way of being.”

Throughout the interview, Foucault portrays his writing of *Death and the Labyrinth* and his encounters with Roussel’s work as intensely personal aesthetic experiences. However, when Ruas attempts to pin down Foucault’s particular interest in and relationship to Roussel’s works, Foucault only speculates as to

“what could be said,” preceding his response with an evasive “perhaps” (“An Interview” 178). Although he continually points to his subjectivity in the interview (and although the introductory copy to the original *Magazine littéraire* interview tantalizingly suggests that Foucault reveals his “real self” in the piece), Foucault masks as much as he reveals.¹³ He emphasizes his personal relationship to the text without describing or detailing this relationship; he reveals its presence, but not its form or characteristics. Ruas states to Foucault later in the interview, as Foucault continues to withhold details about his personal connection to the text, “You’ve said that you don’t want to analyze your personal reactions.” Foucault responds, “It is not a question that what I have to say can illuminate Roussel’s text, but that it will eventually reveal the type of interest that a Frenchman of the nineteen sixties could bring to these texts” (“An Interview” 187). Foucault redirects Ruas’s focus from himself to a larger social context, addressing possibilities of thought instead of his personal thoughts and interests.

In fact, throughout the *Death and the Labyrinth* interview, Foucault draws attention to what he does *not* reveal. Just as Roussel in his posthumous text explains only certain works and certain aspects of these works (“I cannot remember anything more relating to *Locus Solus*”) (*How I Wrote* 12), effectively highlighting the negative and unexplained spaces, Foucault explains in the interview what did not interest him in the text and what is absent in *Death and the Labyrinth* (“I have to admit that my research was not extensive precisely because it was not [Roussel’s] psychology that interested me”) (“An Interview” 178). Moreover, just as Foucault delights in examining the texts that are excluded from Roussel’s process, he reveals in the interview that he considers *Death and the Labyrinth* itself to be outside the sequence of his works:

It is by far the book I wrote the most easily, with the greatest pleasure, and most rapidly. [...] In my other books I tried to use a certain type of analysis, and to write in a particular way. [...] My relationship to my book on Roussel, and to Roussel’s work, is something very personal. [...] I would go so far as to say that it doesn’t have a place in the sequence of my books. (“An Interview” 187)¹⁴

¹³ See Foucault “Archéologie d’une passion” (100).

¹⁴ Critics have also asserted that *Death and the Labyrinth* appears to be different from Foucault’s other texts, resting somehow outside his body of work. James Faubion characterizes *Death and the Labyrinth* as the most “axiomatic” of Foucault’s works (xi), while Frances Fortier proclaims it a “rupture totale avec le reste de l’oeuvre” [total rupture with the rest of the oeuvre] (136, translation mine).

Death and the Labyrinth is a personal endeavor excluded from his own process. Indeed, Foucault often refrains in his interviews from listing the text among his works. In a 1968 interview he refers to *The Order of Things* and his “preceding” works, yet he indicates that only two texts preceded *The Order of Things*—presumably *Madness and Civilization* (1961) and *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), though Foucault published *Raymond Roussel* the same year as *The Birth of the Clinic* (“History” 33–34).¹⁵ In a 1969 interview about *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Foucault refers to “the three books that precede this last one—*Madness and Civilization*, *The Order of Things* and *The Birth of the Clinic*” (“Birth of a World” 65).¹⁶ He leaves out *Raymond Roussel*.

By highlighting the place of *Death and the Labyrinth* outside his oeuvre, Foucault draws attention to this negative, excluded space. Thinking with Foucault’s concepts from this text, one might say that *Death and the Labyrinth* is a “negative code” or “negative copy”: it discloses its boundaries where it touches on light, or the positive sequence of Foucault’s works (*Death* 32). In “explaining” *Death and the Labyrinth* in the interview with Ruas, Foucault emphasizes the shadows that surround the work. Yet is *Death and the Labyrinth* simply excluded from Foucault’s oeuvre, existing in a negative, undefined space, or is it a positive presence with its own code? Foucault states of a text excluded from Roussel’s process, “This evidently does not mean that it was structured *without* a process; nothing prevents a strictly logical attempt to uncover *another* process in the texts that he did not explain, the only condition being that it not be the *same* process” (*Death* 103).

In *Death and the Labyrinth*, Foucault delights in the secrecy inherent in Roussel’s *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, observing that Roussel “forces the reader to learn a secret that he had not recognized” by using the visible to highlight the invisible, obscuring and veiling while revealing (*Death* 5). He notes in the *Death and the Labyrinth* interview, “The fact that there is a secret transforms the experience of reading into one of deciphering, a game, a more complex undertaking, more disturbing, more anxious than when one reads a simple text for the pure pleasure of it” (“An Interview” 183). The secret is the unexplained and the obscured in Roussel’s purportedly explanatory text. The simple knowledge that a

¹⁵ I assume Foucault refers to his *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961) and *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1963) here by his repeated references to these two works in other contemporary interviews.

¹⁶ See also Foucault “Interview with Michel Foucault” (240) and “Discourse of History” (23–24). Although, in a 1961 interview, Foucault lists Roussel as an influence, thus far I have not found a specific reference to the text *Raymond Roussel* in an interview until 1975, when Foucault mentions the text to Roger-Pol Droit (Foucault “Madness” 7; “On Literature” 152).

secret is present adds depth and complexity to the experience of reading the text. Foucault imagines that Roussel, in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, attempts to “keep the secret by revealing that it is secret, only giving us the epithet but retaining the substance” (*Death* 7). While Foucault’s comments here concern Roussel’s texts, one must wonder whether Foucault employs a similar gesture in his interview. In other words, does *Death and the Labyrinth* possess a secret, and does Foucault’s interview reveal the presence of this secret?

The secret of *Death and the Labyrinth*, I propose, is Foucault’s subjectivity; he indicates that the text is inextricably connected to his interiority, yet he deliberately declines to elaborate on this connection. His interiority is a positive element in a negative space that reveals itself, in its invisibility, only where it touches on the visible. Of his original interest in Roussel, Foucault declares, “I developed an affection for his work, which remained secret, since I didn’t discuss it” (“An Interview” 174). However, even in finally discussing this personal affection in the interview, Foucault veils as much as he clarifies. As noted in the beginning of this essay, he insists, “My relationship to my book on Roussel, and to Roussel’s work, is something very personal. [...] No one has paid much attention to this book, and I’m glad; it’s my secret affair. You know, he was my love for several summers [...] no one knew it” (“An Interview” 187). Foucault not only points out that there *was* a secret, involving his strong interest in Roussel for several years, but he indicates that there *is* a secret. The interview reveals the presence of a secret in *Death and the Labyrinth* while keeping the secret itself; Foucault’s self is just outside the narrative he wishes to tell. When Ruas asks about the place of *Death and the Labyrinth* in “the perspective of [his] work” and “the development of [his] thinking,” Foucault responds, “Those things that matter to me in a personal way [...] I don’t feel any inclination to analyze” (“An Interview” 184). He points to the secret while, like Roussel, “retaining [its] substance.”

The question remains, though, as to *why* Foucault withholds the substance of the secret. With this interview, he markedly transfers his theoretical explorations of the subject and aestheticism to a more personal space, bringing into play his own interiority. However, he simultaneously obscures this interiority, pointing to its presence while veiling its substance. One potential, yet perhaps rather facile, explanation for Foucault’s withholding is that he attempts, with the interview, to create interest and intrigue through secrecy. As we have seen, he delights in Roussel’s admission of the presence of a secret; Foucault observes that this presence transforms the experience of reading into a game of decoding. We might argue that Foucault is playing a game of his own with Ruas and his readers. Perhaps he both highlights and obscures his subjectivity in order to pique others’ curiosity and interest. Or, perhaps, we might look to the language of Foucault’s

revealing nonrevelations to explain his withholding. He speaks of Roussel as his secret love (“he was my love for several summers [...] no one knew it”), and he describes *Death and the Labyrinth* as his “secret affair.” This interplay of silence, secrecy, and sex brings to mind his repressive hypothesis. However, any reading of his sexuality as the secret of *Death and the Labyrinth* would be problematic.¹⁷ Foucault argues in the interview against interpreting Roussel’s works solely in terms of his sexuality: “The private life of an individual, his sexual preference, and his work are interrelated not because his work translates his sexual life, but because the work includes the whole life as well as the text” (“An Interview” 186). Establishing Foucault’s sexuality as the final explanation of the secret—attempting to prescribe a final truth—would contradict his thought.

Ultimately, I argue, Foucault points to yet obscures his interiority and efforts of aesthetic self-fashioning in order to avoid creating a prescriptive ethics. By describing his aesthetic efforts in detail, he risks creating an unintentional mandate that specifies how to live a beautiful life—an ethical guide, along with a solution or goal. He notes, when he declines to interpret Deleuze’s work in a 1983 interview, “The moment a kind of thought is constituted, fixed, or identified within a cultural tradition, it is quite normal that this cultural tradition should take hold of it, make what it wants of it and have it say what it did not mean” (“Structuralism” 446). In detailing his interiority and attempts to transform himself, he risks becoming an example for others to follow, with his words misinterpreted and/or reified into aesthetic and ethical guidelines. He not only wishes to avoid prescribing ethical behavior but wishes to be free to transform and change himself, as noted earlier. He famously insists in the introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, “Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same”; he proclaims this desire throughout the interviews, as well, praising the intellectual who “incessantly displaces himself” and is “permanently capable of self-detachment” (17).¹⁸ Foucault’s concept of aestheticism is then slippery because the self to whom it refers is purportedly always changing (and, in fact, works to change). As Kevin Lamb has observed, aestheticism, for Foucault, is typically a relational idea, describing the continually changing relation between himself and his works (45–46). Whereas Foucault historicizes and theorizes aesthetic practices in his

¹⁷ Exploring the much-analyzed potential intersections between homosexuality and secrecy would lead us outside the scope of this essay. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick famously examined these intersections with *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), and many valuable studies have followed in the last two decades.

¹⁸ See also Foucault “End of the Monarchy of Sex” (225) and “Concern for Truth” (461). With his “Masked Philosopher” interview, Foucault performs the effort to “have no face” that he describes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

later works, in the *Death and the Labyrinth* interview he finally gestures to his own aesthetic practices. He points to his efforts to explore not only the theory, but also the practice of aestheticism (with “aestheticism” functioning as both process and result—the act and effect of creating a beautiful life). To avoid creating a system of transformative techniques and goals, however, he deliberately does not detail these efforts of self-transformation.

Thus, although Foucault often claims in his interviews that he works to change himself through his texts, only in the *Death and the Labyrinth* interview does he point to the presence of this self in the text. He transfers his theoretical explorations of the subject and aestheticism to a more personal space, bringing into play his own interiority. He reveals the existence of a personal project of aesthetic transformation while concealing details of the project under a veil of secrecy. Much as Roussel provides a key to examining his works with *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, Foucault’s interview about *Death and the Labyrinth* functions as a key to his early text and veiled efforts of aesthetic transformation.

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