

Editors' Introduction

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The editorial team of *Parrhesia* would like to welcome you to the first edition of this journal. The word that we have chosen as our title – ‘parrhesia’ – is taken from some of the final works of Michel Foucault, notably the lecture series presented at the University of California at Berkeley in 1983, the notes of which were published in the small volume *Fearless Speech*.

Foucault's deployment of the term was a part of an effort, legible in the broader movement of his work in the 1980's, to demonstrate an alternative mode of self-relation that runs, however repressed, throughout the history of Western life and thought. The most well known instances of this effort are of course the second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, and the article “What is Enlightenment?” In these texts, Foucault articulates, in relation to Graeco-Roman society and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant respectively, a discourse about the relationship between subjectivity, aesthetics and ethics which has been subordinated to the more traditional emphasis on what he calls the “analytics of truth”. That is, to the side or beneath the dominant metaphysical discourse concerning the relationship between self and society, self and truth, truth and aesthetics, there is another in which the subject itself becomes a malleable figure in relation to the other discourses and practices. In the writings of Plato and Euripides, Galen and Plutarch, Foucault finds and elaborates on various modality of the art of living (*technè tou biou*) which is irreducible to the more well-known Socratic injunction ‘know thyself’ (*gnothi seauton*). In Kant's account of the Enlightenment, Foucault sees the opening of a radical approach to historicity which does not rely on any elective European teleology, nor on a philosopher's *de rigueur* claims of a new foundation for epistemology or the sciences. Rather, Kant's view of modernity is that of a critical relationship with the

present as it stands. Here, Kant's *sapere aude!* ('Dare to know!') is understood less as an epistemological maxim than as *the* mode of critical self-relation, both to oneself and one's time.

The term *parrhesia* is an excellent term to indicate this alternative itinerary of the relation between subjectivity and truth that Foucault presents. Rather than to take truth as a matter of the adequation between one's knowledge and world, it becomes the matter or focal point of the intersection between the *one who knows* and this same world. Thus, the problem of *parrhesia* – direct, frank or fearless speech – is a problem not of objective facts but of subjective disposition. Furthermore, the subjective disposition has its sense only in the relationship of the self with the social context in which they practice this act.

Now, the work of Michel Foucault had, and still has, a way of consistently confounding its critics, just as it can bring together the most unlikely allies. The two most insistent criticisms of all of Foucault's work up to 1976 were that it was vitiated by a "normative confusion" (Nancy Fraser) or "nihilism", matched only by its equally total epistemological relativism (from Habermas, ironically, to the new conservatives of today). If Foucault's own way of proceeding were not enough to allay such anxieties, in his last lectures and texts, he not only devoted himself to an extensive archival studies of the *ethical* practices characteristic of the classical and Christian periods. Foucault's final lecture series, recalling the later Nietzsche's reflections on the virtue of *honesty* for "philosophers of the future" or "free spirits", was devoted to the theme of *parrhesia*: 'truth-telling' or 'fearless speech'. '*Parrhesia*', as Foucault explains it, is a word which comes into prominent use in the democratic moment of the classical age. It is used first extensively by Euripedes in the second half of the fifth century, before it comes to occupy a more central place – and to become a hotly contested issue or possibility – in the political texts of the period ('Fearless Speech', pp. 78-83), and the philosophies of Plato (pp. 83-86, 91-107), Aristotle (pp..86-7), and the later Hellenistic period. (107ff.)

The topic of *parrhesia* which occupies Foucault's last works on *parrhesia*, we would argue, has an incredible 'timeliness' for us today, in a world where our leaders talk about

spreading democracy abroad while, to all appearances, it is increasingly questioned and curtailed at home, hemmed in by both legal changes and the emergence of new forms of populism and what Isocrates would have called *kolakes* ('flatterers'). (p. 82, see pp.13-4) The issues surrounding the *cassus bellum* in Iraq, the unprecedented secrecy of today's US administration or its increasingly public advocacy of torture, and (in Australia) the litany of *causes celebres* from the children overboard to the AWB, have raised the issue of the relation between truth-telling and politics with all the freshness with which it evidently presented itself to Isocrates, Plato, or the pseudo-Xenophon.

We see here a parallel with the work of Walter Benjamin. Like Foucault, Benjamin's body of thought was devoted to the necessity of thinking the past through the crisis of the present. Benjamin was however concerned with the ways in which history consistently obliterated those moments and movements who thought of the possibility of utopian futures. As he stated in one of his earliest published works "The elements of the ultimate condition do not manifest themselves as formless progressive tendencies but are deeply rooted in every present in the form of the most endangered, excoriated and ridiculed ideas and products of the creative mind." For Benjamin true critical thought wasn't the product of the institution, a sanctioned reflection on the present. Excoriated it is thought that is constantly threatened and challenged as it seeks to uncover new truths, emerging out of a specific context, but searching for the possibility of shattering the petrified continuum of the present.

In essence, this journal takes as its aim the elaboration of the many problems that rest upon this self-context relation in the sense that Foucault analyses it. We are not here concerned with 'telling the truth' in the mode of the classical thinker, that is, as the members of our culture whose fortune or birthright it is to claim objectivity in judgement. In fact, as Foucault himself indicated so thoroughly, this position of objectivity is itself a matter for examination – Jacques Rancière's article in this first edition engages with the same concern. We are concerned to examine the forms and problems of the various modalities of relationship. One consequence of this is that aesthetics can no longer be considered a well-demarcated discourse concerned with art narrowly conceived.

Subjectivity, not given but a part of the movement of socio-political contexts, is itself to be composed. In a similar vein, ethics loses its sense as the discourse of inalienable rights, or of moral codes, but must instead express the various modes interaction with oneself and one's context. Again, politics must be understood no longer as the analytic of society, but must be broadened to include the various modes of individuation, subjectivation and counter-subjectivation

The broadest goals of *Parrhesia* are to pursue the various knots which occur between these discourses, the knotting of concerns relating to doctrines of the subject and aesthetics, between aesthetics and politics, politics and ethics, and so on. While this is clearly a very large set of concerns considered together, we are convinced that it is at these points of knotting that active and critical thought is best disposed in our contemporary context.