

Spring 6-2015

Translation: "Standing Vigil for the Day to Come" by Michel Foucault

Robert Harvey
SUNY Stony Brook, robert.harvey@stonybrook.edu

Elise Woodward
Reed College, ewoodard@reed.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/cscl-articles>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Harvey, Robert and Woodward, Elise, "Translation: "Standing Vigil for the Day to Come" by Michel Foucault" (2015). *Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature Faculty Publications*. 1.
<http://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/cscl-articles/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at Academic Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Academic Commons. For more information, please contact darren.chase@stonybrook.edu.

Foucault Studies

© Elise Woodard and Robert Harvey 2015

ISSN: 1832-5203

Foucault Studies, No. 19, pp. 217-223, June 2015

TRANSLATION

Standing Vigil for the Day to Come¹

Michel Foucault

ABSTRACT: Michel Foucault's "Standing Vigil for the Day to Come" was a review of Roger Laporte's novel, *La Veille*, published by Gallimard earlier that year. Although Laporte's work never received the wide readership it deserved, Foucault held it in high esteem, praising it in his assessment as one of the "most original" and "most difficult" of his time and, subsequently, urging Derrida to read it. This article is most appropriately situated in the series of literary reviews Foucault composed between 1961 and 1966, in which his marked attempts to understand the relationship between language and thought drew him to the works of Roussel, Klossowski, Hölderlin, Mallarmé, and, of course, Laporte. Foucault finds Laporte's treatment of the subject-matter particularly satisfying because it provides a non-reductive account of thought and its relationship to language; thought is neither identical with nor distinct from language. Foucault sees Laporte as relying on an important Nietzschean insight that thought is both too fundamental and too archaic to be reduced to philosophy or to require a Cartesian ego. In this way *La Veille* is naturally of interest to Foucault because it deals with the relationship of a writer to an anonymous other; it is this other — not the writer — that makes writing possible. With the role of the subject de-emphasized, Foucault finds in Laporte a starting point for talking about language in contemporary literature and thought in post-Cartesian philosophy.

Keywords: vigil, reflection, subjectivity, language, thought, meditation

Descartes meditated for six full days. One could wager that on the seventh he became a physicist again. But what could truly constitute a reflection before the day, before the morning of each day? Calling it a reflection is already going too far; perhaps, rather, an

¹ Translator: This essay was first published as "Guetter le jour qui vient" in *La Nouvelle Revue française* no. 130 (Octobre, 1963), 709-716 as a book review of Roger Laporte's *La Veille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963). It is translated from *Dits et Ecrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), no. 15, vol. I, pp. 289-296. It appears in English for the first time here, with the permission of *Éditions Gallimard*. The article is translated for *Foucault Studies* by Elise Woodard, ewoodard@reed.edu (Reed College, USA) with Robert Harvey, robert.harvey@stonybrook.edu (Stony Brook University, USA).

exercise in thought and in language – in pensive speech, which recedes from the earliest light, advances towards the night from which it comes, and endeavors cautiously to remain in a place without space, where eyes remain open, ears cocked, the entire mind alert, and words mobilized for a movement that they do not yet know? I will not shut my eyes, I will not stop my ears, for I know very well that midday is not here and that it is still far away.

La Veille by Roger Laporte does not narrate an evening meditation, the extension of a task that started long ago and that nightfall lightens – labor with unbound hands that learns to consume itself, to redirect into the dark the powers now disarmed by day, pointing upward – for the record – the knife of a flame that subsists. To keep vigil² for Laporte, means to be not after evening but before morning, without any other “before” this lead that I myself am on all possible days. And in this night, or rather (because the night is thick, closed, opaque; the night partakes of two days, draws limits, lends drama to the sun that it restores, prepares the light that it restrains for a moment) in this “not yet” of morning, which is gray rather than black and as though diaphanous to its own transparency, the neutral word *vigil* gently glistens. *Vigil* evokes, first of all, sleeplessness; it’s the body withdrawn but tense, the mind at attention at its four corners, on watch. It is just as much the anticipation of danger (with its indistinct struggles predawn) as the excitement and stir of light’s promise (with sleep finally granted as day begins); even before this hope and this fear separate down the middle of their original identity, it’s the acute faceless vigilance of *the Watch*. But in fact, nobody keeps vigil on this watch: no consciousness more lucid than that of the sleeping, no subjectivity so singularly worried. It’s the vigil itself that keeps vigil – this intangible form that outlines the next day and which, in turn, takes shape from this day which has not yet come, which will perhaps never come. What says “not yet” to the next day stands vigil: the eve is *the day which precedes*. Or more accurately, it’s that which precedes each day, every possible day, including this day on which I speak, on which I speak because my language traces the rise of the day back to the anticipation of it. The eve is not the other day, the day before; it is today, even now, this simultaneous shortfall and excess that delimits and surpasses the day, and due to which the day inexorably comes and perhaps will never stop having not yet come. It is not me who is on watch in the eve’s vigilance; it’s the recoil of the coming day.

Experience (a word too loaded to denote such an alert self-awareness; but is there an alternative that does not mute this ablative silence?), the experience that Roger Laporte undergoes here is easily distinguished from other exercises in vigilance. One could oppose it directly to the recourse of a soul that finds in God its ‘*mighty fortress*’; that realizes that there is a dungeon over there with a thousand eyes, an excellent guard

² Translator: ‘*Veiller*’ means ‘to watch,’ ‘to stay awake,’ and ‘to keep vigil.’ I have chosen to translate it as ‘to keep vigil’ throughout, since this best captures the scope of its meanings. I have also translated its corresponding noun form, ‘*veille*’ as ‘vigil,’ in order to capture its connotations of ‘watch’ and ‘wakefulness.’ However, when Foucault uses ‘*veille*’ in the sense ‘the day which precedes,’ I have translated it as ‘eve.’ Taking advantage of this meaning of ‘*veille*,’ Foucault also affords ‘*veiller*’ a new sense: ‘to be an eve.’

hidden behind its walls; a soul who awakens only in the certainty that there is an absolute watchman, under whose vigilance it can find rest and fall asleep. One could also oppose such a vigil to that of Saint John of the Cross – to the furtive escape of the soul that eludes the dozing guardian and, climbing the secret ladder up to the crenel of the lookout, exposes himself to the night. In the depth of this shadow is a light which “guides more surely than the light of midday”: it lends infallibly and without detour on the path to the Beloved, to the radiant face before which it bows, now forgetting the trifling worries of the day that is to break.

In reading Laporte’s book, it is necessary to leave aside, at least temporarily, the watchmen and vigils where Western spirituality has often found metaphorical resources. Nevertheless, perhaps one day we should ask ourselves what, in a culture like ours, might signify the prestige of the Vigil, of wide eyes that admit yet ward off the night, of that attentive endurance that makes sleep into sleep, dream into fantasy and stuttering destiny, and truth to glisten in the light. The West doubtlessly drew one of its fundamental limits in the first stirrings of the day, in the vigil that maintains its brightness in the middle of the night over and against the sleep of others. It traced a cleft whence the incessant question, which maintains the space of philosophy open, assails us: What is appearance? It is a division that is almost unthinkable since thinking and speaking are only possible following it. It itself cannot be thought, recognized, or expressed until the day has arrived and night returned to its uncertainty. Such that we can no longer think but this provision – rock of our stupidity: we do *not yet* think.

The text by Roger Laporte unfolds within that distance from thought where we doubtlessly find ourselves from the beginning; the text does not try to reduce this distance, measure it, or even to traverse it; but rather to welcome it, becoming aware of it as the opening that it is, waiting for it in accordance with a desire that completely respects it. It is thus neither a text of philosophy nor even one of reflection because to reflect on this distance would be to re-appropriate it, to lend it meaning from a sovereign subjectivity, to tip it dramatically into the grammatical excessiveness of ‘I.’ How are we to define this discourse, so close and so removed from thought, so freed from reflection and from all fictional ceremony? What can be, in its very essence, such language? We can answer thus: this is one of the most original texts that our time has given to us to read; one of the most difficult yet most transparent, the closest a text can get to this day which, as it constantly reminds us – against so many *oiseaux crieurs*³ – has not yet arrived. Having said that, we know that we have said nothing. So, how does one speak in terms of reflection, about the only language that, outside of reflection, heads endlessly in the direction of thought. We are here before a work that is completely unresolved, a work that has no ground other than this opening, this void that the work itself creates when it arranges the very place that it evades as it advances.

That is why the day before (it is the day itself which, withdrawn from itself,

³ Translator: ‘*Oiseaux crieurs*,’ or ‘crying birds,’ are nocturnal birds in French folklore who nest near marshes. When night falls, they cry out in a human voice in order to attract nighttime stragglers. They then recount various stories to their victims in order to lure them into the swamp and drown them.

keeps vigil, watching, in its vigilance, this day that it itself is, the day that indicates by same sign the irreversible advance) – why the day before does not take refuge in any fortress. In contrast to Lutheran spirituality or Spanish mysticism, the lookout is made in the open countryside. The only walls are those of a transparency that clouds or clears. The bodiless distance merely lays out its twist and turns. The imminence can come from everywhere; the horizon is without relief or recourse. In a sense, everything is visible, because there is no point of view, no lost profile, no perspective that settles in the distance; but nothing, in fact, is visible since what is near is also quite far away in this careful and attentive elimination of any accommodation. That familiar stranger is here, or – what amounts to the same thing – over there. Threatening, yet averted. But what exactly *is* this presence? Something one experiences as danger, is it a weapon or a caress? Threat or consolation, friend or enemy? *It*.⁴

Perhaps it is not necessary to give in to the first temptation and immediately wonder what this “*it*” whose italic emphasis pervades Roger Laporte’s text is. Not that it’s necessary to dismiss this question, even for an instant, nor to attempt to approach it obliquely or through digressions; instead (and this is precisely the point), it is necessary to keep it at a distance and in that distance, to let it come to us with a language that is its own – in writing that is clear, aquatic, almost immobile, and whose transparency allows us to see the details of all the oscillations that animate, or rather, traverse it mortally; in this writing purified of all representation (no doubt so that it itself be the only thing that remains visible, yet never completely naked or defined) is the deep metaphor on which all language rests on its way towards thought: that of distance.

So what is this approach of distance? This approach that gets lost in its profundity, remoteness that gets abolished in the approach? One might call it a history of language in space, or the chronicle of this place. Familiar because native, but strange because one never returns to it completely, a place where words are born and eternally lost. Is it a story that Roger Laporte has written? Quite the contrary, for nothing truly happens in it; yet, once the text is completed, this withholding of any possible event lets loose – more precisely, it is found to already be opened up, forming a fluid and luminous surface that transported the writer to the limit where he fell silent, but which offers itself to him for very soon, like morning about to break or a celebration. Proust guided his story up to the moment where, with the liberation of time returned, that which permits him to tell it begins. Thus the absence of the work, if it is inscribed implicitly throughout the entire text, puts him in charge of what makes the work possible, and

⁴ Translator: ‘*Il*’ could either mean ‘he’ or ‘it’ in French. I have chosen the latter translation, ‘it.’ Although Laporte anthropomorphizes ‘it’ at the beginning of *La Veille*, he repeatedly makes it clear that he does not know ‘its’ nature. Perhaps it could provisionally be understood as a daemon, similar to the inner voice that guided Socrates. However, it is far less benign, acting as a source of uncertainty rather than of reassurance. It is an urge to write, yet it also makes writing impossible by putting crippling pressure on the writer. Its presence can be torturous, but it is also yearned for when absent. The writer’s ambivalence turns into Stockholm Syndrome; despite being a hostage to this urge to write, he eventually learns to love his captor. Foucault continues his meditation on the apparent dual role of ‘it’ in the following paragraphs.

killing it or letting it live at the pure moment of its birth. Here, the very possibility of writing, in its very becoming possible and in the endless questioning of itself, an arduous movement where threat, ruse, endurance, dissimulation, and disguised expectation converge, ultimately only leads uncompromisingly to an absence of work, but an absence rendered so pure, so transparent, so free of any obstacle and of the dullness of words which would diminish its radiance, that it is this absence itself – a limpid void where the absence glistens like the promise of a work: finally almost here, carried forth by the moment to come or perhaps already long present, present long before this word of the Promise, from the moment when it was announced, at the beginning of the text, that “*It disappeared.*”

The configuration of Laporte’s work brings to mind Zarathustra – his initial retreat, his successive approaches to the sun and to men, his retreats from them, the dangers that he either wards off or whose threat he allows to reign, that final morning when dawn brings the imminence of the Sign, illuminates the nearness of the work, commands the flight of doves and announces that the first morning is finally there. But Laporte nevertheless experiences neither return nor eternity, but rather something still more archaic: he lends voice to the repetition of what has not yet taken place, like the oscillation of a time not yet inaugurated. Perhaps Laporte narrates what happens in the ten years of solitude during which, before descending back down towards men and *taking* the floor, Zarathustra waited every morning for the sun to rise. But can one tell the story of what repeatedly takes place before time? of something that appears under no form other than the pure possibility of writing?

In fact, this *It* which is the subject of Laporte’s text is not language realizing its own nature or writing finally becoming possible. It’s through this possibility, like through a grid or a lattice, that *it* glistens, projecting onto the text gray bands of absence or retreat between the white zones of proximity. But *it* is also what holds all writing back through an overly expressive proximity and liberates writing once *it* grows more remote. Thus the most translucent pages are perhaps those where the absence is most obvious and the darkest those where this laboring sun hides closest yet inaccessibly. Writing certainly always has to deal with *it*; *it* both overhangs and undermines writing; *it* is thus a gift to writing, but also the force that conceals it. Writing in the work of Laporte thus does not function to maintain time or to transform the sand of speech into stone; on the contrary, it opens the instability of a distance. Indeed, with writing, the distance from *it* endlessly approaches (one must understand both the distance at the end of which *it* glistens and the distance that constitutes, with its impassable transparency, the being of this *it*); but writing approaches as distance, and rather than disappearing, it opens up and remains so. There, writing appears at a distance without reference point, where, absolutely remote, it is like lost proximity: near since it makes itself known between words and from within each of them. Nothing is more imminent than this distance that envelops and sustains, as closely as possible to me, the entire possible horizon.

With such alternation, the ruses and promises of a dialectic play no role. This is a universe with neither contradiction nor reconciliation, a universe of pure threat. The entire being of this threat consists in approaching, an indefinite approach with a dan-

gerous excessiveness that cannot be borne. And, nevertheless, in that approach no nucleus of danger can be positively located; there is nothing that threatens the very core of this imminence, except for itself and it alone in its perfect void. Such that in its extreme form the danger is nothing but its own remoteness, the retreat into which it takes refuge, making threat shine over the entire distance that the danger opened up, with regard for neither law nor limit, in the absence of distance.

Might one say that this absence, as dangerous as the nearest of threats, would, in the empirical world, be something like death or madness? There is no reason to think that death or madness were more foreign to Laporte than to Nietzsche or Artaud. But perhaps these fixed and familiar figures stand out only to the extent that they derive their threat from that pure danger where *it* looms on the horizon (and, in this sense, it would be to avert them rather than to keep them in their imminence to *it*). Madness and death hover over our language and our time because they suspend ceaselessly on the background of this distance, and because *it* allows, in this “not yet” of its presence, to think of them both as limits and end. This space that Laporte traverses (and in the midst of which language reaches him) is where thought heads indefinitely towards non-thought, which glistens before it, and silently sustains the possibility of thought. Unthought which is not an obscure object to know but rather the opening of thought itself: that in which, immobile, it never ceases expecting itself, remaining on the lookout in the advance on its own day, which one has to call the “eve.” Thence Laporte’s concern – a Greek and Nietzschean concern – to think not “the true” but “the just”: that is to say of keeping thought at a distance from unthought, permitting it to move toward itself, withdraw, come forth, and welcome his threat in brave and pensive anticipation. In an anticipation where writing is possible and fulfills its promise.

When we assign to its nature the opening of thought itself and the language of thoughtful speech, is this not to capture that utterly anonymous *it* in an all too positive a form? Since, as it happens, it keeps threatening thought with language or silencing all speech in the imminence of a thought. Can one not become aware of it shining and hiding in the space between language *and* thought – being neither itself nor this nor that, being neither their unity anymore than their opposition? Can one not see it flickering in the depths of this *and* between thought and language – that pure empty space that separates them, without intervention, that announces their identity and the gap of their difference, which allows it to be said that, ontologically speaking, to think and to speak are *the same thing*. That’s why, in the opening maintained by their identity, something like a Work may come to glisten (the sphere’s golden roundness at Nietzschean *noon*): “absolutely unapparent and a secret to itself, *it* ascends in the purity of its own glory: from the completely solitary work, because it is self-sufficient, I will be granted my leave.”

The general space in which Laporte’s book is situated may now be understood. The rediscovery, since Nietzsche (but perhaps less obviously since Kant) of a *thought* that cannot be reduced to philosophy because, more than philosophy, native and sovereign (*archaic*), the effort to tell the story of this thought, of its imminence and its retreat, of its danger and its promise (it’s Zarathustra, but it’s the experience of Artaud, and almost the entire oeuvre of Blanchot), the effort to shake up the dialectical language that forcefully tries to return thought to philosophy, and the effect of leaving thought to play

a game without reconciliation, an absolutely transgressive game of Sameness and Difference (it's perhaps thus that one must understand Bataille and the last works of Klossowski), the urgency to think, in a language that is not empirical the possibility of a language of thought - all of this marks with stones and signs a path where the solitude of Laporte is that of the Watchman; he is alone in his vigil (who then, could have open eyes in his place?), yet this vigil intersects with other vigilances: that of good lookouts whose increased anticipation traces the still figureless portrait in the shadow of the coming day.

Translated by:

Elise Woodard

Reed College

Oregon, USA

ewoodard@reed.edu

Robert Harvey

Stony Brook University

New York, USA

robert.harvey@stonybrook.edu