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MA THESIS

*A normatív hatalommal szembeni ellenállás:
Foucault, Herculine Barbin és az ellenemlékezet*

*Resisting Normative Power:
Foucault, Herculine Barbin and Counter-memory*

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Abstract

This thesis of literary theory presents the findings of research concerning counter-memory, which is a highly important aspect of Michel Foucault's theory of power and resistance. Based on primary sources and critical analyses of counter-memory, and also through a specific example of publishing the alternative account of a member of a marginalized social group, the aim of the thesis was to define the meaning and to describe the importance of counter-memory as a tool for emancipatory struggles, in a Foucauldian framework of power relationships.

The first part of the thesis provides an in-depth analysis of what resistance and counter-memory mean for Foucault. The basic questions are if Foucault's theory might be useful on a more practical level and if his ideas can be converted into efficient political action, which numerous critics have argued about since the publication of Foucault's works that deal with the theory of power and resistance. Even though some critics blame Foucault for not providing specific tactics of resistance, and they therefore claim that his oeuvre is incomplete and remain useless for oppressed groups, the argument presented in the first part of the thesis concludes that even if Foucault's declared aim was not to give a specific political agenda (as it would be as prescriptive as normalizing categories enforced by powerful discourses), but to help active political action in other ways. One of the ways that emancipatory efforts might utilize is the production of counter-histories: in Foucault's definition, this means collecting accounts of experiences by previously suppressed voices, which were silenced by ruling discourses in their attempt to eliminate the threat that alternative points of view would pose to their normalizing categories. Foucault's genealogies and the practice of counter-

memory reveal that alternative experiences do exist, which helps noticing both the inessential nature of normative categories, and also the heterogeneous character of reality, as opposed to the image that power intends to convey.

The second part of the paper introduces a specific example of insurrecting a piece of previously silenced and disqualified knowledge. The memoirs of Herculine Barbin, a nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite were found and published by Foucault, together with contemporary medical, legal and literary documents. Herculine, a schoolteacher who describes an intimate and affectionate relationship with another woman, suffered from unidentifiable pains for a long time. Based on medical examinations that revealed both male and female physical characteristics, and also on her confessions about her emotions, Herculine was reclassified as a man at the age of twenty-two, and committed suicide soon after a new life as Abel Barbin began. As the medical documents point out, Herculine's case was regarded as an error of sexual classification, and by finding her "real sex" as a man, justified primarily by the dominance of male sexual organs, this mistake was successfully rectified. Similarly, the literary source that Foucault's edition contains, the short story "A Scandal at the Convent" by Oscar Panizza treats Herculine's case as an unfortunate mistake that caused uproar in the village, but which was eventually solved by assigning her a "true sex".

The analysis of the memoirs and other documents of the edition in the third part of the thesis explores why it was important for powerful discourses to establish an unambiguous sex for Herculine, and how the workings of power affected her life. The medicalization of sexuality and increasing social control of the nineteenth century

meant that ambiguous sexualities were not tolerated: everyone was to have a “true sex”, based on the norms of compulsory heterosexuality. Medical examinations and the practice of confession, which both promised liberation to Herculine from her burdens, in fact collected information about her emotions and anatomy to be able to normalize her sexuality and to fit her into the binary system of masculinity and femininity. Since, however, Herculine could never fully enter the prescriptive role of either of the sexes, she posed a serious threat to the discourse of power – therefore, her voice was silenced, her experiences were disqualified. The publication of the memoirs means the resurrection of her suppressed voice, and although Herculine herself failed to successfully resist normalization, her alternative account weakens the discourse of power. This way, counter-memory is a useful tool to oppose normative power, and together with certain methods on the personal level, for instance the practice of self-writing outside normative categories, resistance becomes possible. The final conclusion is, therefore, that even though Foucault does not provide a political agenda for emancipatory struggles, his theoretical concepts, especially that of counter-memory supported by the specific example of Herculine’s memoirs, do indeed help the finding of possibilities for resisting normative power.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	2
INTRODUCTION.....	6
FOUCAULT’S POWER AND POSSIBILITIES OF RESISTANCE	8
Genealogies as sketches of resistance	8
Counter-memory: the insurrection of subjugated knowledges.....	10
Buried historical contents as counter-memory	12
Disqualified knowledges as counter-memory	13
The importance of counter-remembering.....	14
Critics’ response to Foucault’s counter-memory	16
Destabilizing regimes of truth	16
Plurality of voices as political force	18
Resistance by the ability to speak	19
HERCULINE BARBIN: BEING THE RECENTY DISCOVERED MEMOIRS OF A NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH HERMAPHRODITE.....	21
My Memoirs by Herculine Barbin	22
The Dossier	27
Auguste Tardieu’s introduction.....	28
Dr. Chestnet’s report	29
E. Goujon’s report.....	30
“A Scandal at the Convent” by Oscar Panizza.....	33
HERCULINE BARBIN, NORMATIVE POWER, AND COUNTER-MEMORY..	36
Nineteenth-century “true sex”	37
The workings of power on Herculine Barbin	39
Getting to know the “truth”	39
The results achieved by normative power	41
Suppressing Herculine’s threatening voice in Panizza.....	44
Herculine Barbin as counter-memory.....	46
Counterattack and counter-memory	46
Resistance by self-writing	49
CONCLUSION	51
REFERENCES.....	53

RESISTING NORMATIVE POWER: FOUCAULT, HERCULINE BARBIN AND COUNTER- MEMORY

Introduction

Michel Foucault is probably impossible to avoid in research of modern literary theory, especially if questions of power, oppression and resistance are discussed. His major works dealing with the nature of power and subjection continue to be influential even on the thirtieth anniversary of his death, and they still generate fierce debates both on a theoretical level among scholars, as well on a more practical and political level concerning the possibilities of a post-Foucauldian resistance. Since according to Foucault, taking up an identity and relying on certain norms to fight oppression result in only the reinforcement of subjection, a considerable amount of criticism by feminist and by other marginalized groups focus on questioning the usefulness of Foucault's works for emancipatory struggles. This thesis aims to demonstrate that even in a seemingly restrictive Foucauldian framework, resistance and counterattack to power are in fact possible by exploiting certain possibilities of subverting normative categories, while not being trapped by their discourse.

One of these possibilities for resistance, as the thesis is going to discuss, is counter-memory, or the resurrection of subjugated knowledges. In the first part of the paper, after a brief introduction to Foucault's theory of power and resistance, the concepts of counter-memory and counter-history are going to be introduced. On the one hand, based on primarily a lecture series that Foucault gave at the Collège de France, it

will be explored what he means by the term counter-memory, and also why he considers it highly important in relation to resisting normative power. On the other hand, the critical reception of this concept will be discussed in order to see how critics' interpreted and responded to Foucault's theory from a more practical, political point of view. Secondly, as an example for counter-memory, a lesser-known publication edited by Foucault will be discussed in detail: the memoirs of a nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite, Herculine Barbin, together with contemporary medicolegal and literary documents based on her case. The significantly different nature of Herculine's narrative from other discourses of the age, as well as her relation to power as a marginalized individual will, in the final part of the thesis, lead to the critical evaluation of the memoirs and Foucault's publication as a counter-memorial attempt to oppose normative power. From the theoretical principle, through a specific example of the insurrection of a subjugated voice, my research and analysis intend to point out that counter-memory is indeed a useful tool of resistance in a practical sense, in the present day, too.

Foucault's power and possibilities of resistance

Genealogies as sketches of resistance

Although a considerable part of Michel Foucault's work was dedicated to the oppression of marginalized groups in society and to the exploration of the nature of power that regulates them, he is often criticized for not providing tactics and methods of resistance explicitly. David Couzens Hoy, among others, raises the question if it is possible to progress from the contemplative nature of Foucault's genealogies to actively advocating social change, given the fact that Foucault refuses to specify any prescriptions for the social illnesses that he discusses in his works (1986: 7), for example the normalization of sexuality or the treatment of the mentally ill.

First, it is important to provide a definition of what genealogies mean in Foucault's works: according to Margaret A. McLaren, they are oriented towards practices and discourses, and they provide the critical redescriptions of dominant descriptions, focusing on discontinuity, and on the unessential development of certain practices (3-4). In *The History of Sexuality vol 1.*, for instance, Foucault replaces the dominant and generally accepted description of homosexual individuals as a distinct type of people by critically re-examining the category of homosexuality as a defining characteristic of one's whole person. As Foucault famously claims, "Nothing that went into [the homosexual's] total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. ... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (1990: 43). An important shift happened, according to *The History of Sexuality*, from seeing individual acts of same-sex relationships to seeing homosexuals as being completely

defined by their identity; this is an example where Foucault's genealogical redescription shows that a dominant discourse is in fact not an essential development in history, but a discontinuous creation of certain forces of power. In other words, according to Ian Hacking, Foucault reveals that every way in which one thinks of oneself as a person and as an agent has been constituted historically (36), therefore what genealogies achieve by exploring the construction of discourses of power is the destruction of ahistorically existing categories of identity.

However, Foucault's genealogies, as Hoy also remarks, are often criticized for the lack of specific guidelines for resistance, which oppressed and marginalized social groups could employ to resist normative power. Like Hoy, Max H. Kirsch also highlights the need for specific strategies for social change that, ideally, should be provided together with theories (100). In an interview, Judith Butler expresses her own reaction to such criticism, which, according to her, is also what Foucault answered when he was attacked for not providing specific guidelines for political action:

I actually believe that politics has a character of contingency and context to it that cannot be predicted at the level of theory. And that when theory starts becoming programmatic, such as "here are my five prescriptions", and I set up my typology, and my final chapter is called "What is to be Done?", it pre-empts the whole problem of context and contingency, and I do think that political decisions [...] can't be predicted from the level of theory – they can be sketched, they can be schematized, they can be prepared for, but I suppose I'm with Foucault on this. I'm willing to withstand the same criticisms he withstood. (Bell 166-167)

In this interview, Butler claims that theories are not meant to provide specific ways of political resistance, but they do “sketch” some methods in more general terms, which might be utilized by groups or individuals who are involved in their own struggles against normative power. This, in my opinion, is also a possible response to Foucault’s critics, because I believe that although Foucault does not describe a specific political agenda, he does in fact create a helpful basis for emancipatory struggles, for example in his genealogies. According to Barry Smart, Foucault’s aim was not to produce a higher and more powerful theory, but to reactivate subjugated forms of knowledge, and to provide tools for analysis; however, at the same time, he leaves specific tactics and goals to those involved in the given struggles (167). In this sense, the helpful nature of Foucault’s genealogies is easy to notice: by showing the historical emergence and development of concepts that are usually taken for granted and accepted as ahistorically and eternally true (for instance homosexuality as the essence of one’s whole personality and behaviour), such concepts and value judgements lose their unquestionability. Furthermore, as a result of the recognition that these are not naturally existing phenomena, but socially and culturally created categories that came into existence with normalizing purposes, it becomes possible to oppose them.

Counter-memory: the insurrection of subjugated knowledges

One of the possible ways of resistance, as Smart also mentions, is the reactivation of subjugated knowledges; this is also the most important aspect of counter-memory, which is the major focus of this thesis. Foucault talked extensively about counter-memory in his 1975-76 lecture series at the Collège de France (the transcripts

of the lectures were published in the volume *“Society Must Be Defended.” Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*), which I would like to rely on in this section of the paper to have an in-depth insight of what Foucault means by the concepts of counter-memory, counter-remembering and counter-history.

In the opening lecture, Foucault provides a definition of counter-memory as “returns of knowledge”, or in other words, as the insurrection of subjugated knowledges. This, according to Foucault, has two separate forms: on the one hand, the return of “historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematizations”, and on the other hand, that of “knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity” (2003: 7). What unites these two forms of returns of knowledges is the fact that they both provide a basis for genealogical works, which, in Foucault’s words, are precisely “about the insurrection of knowledges” against centralizing power-effects (2003: 9). It is important to note that at this point, Foucault creates an explicit link between the setting free of previously subjugated knowledges, which provide the basis for genealogical investigations, and resistance against power structures. The connection becomes even more emphatic when he adds that unitary theories tend to avoid the genealogy of knowledges either with caution or with silence (2003: 10), probably as an effort to protect their discourses from the subversive effect of genealogies. It is claimed that there exists a tension between, on the one hand, unified, linearly expressed theories that Foucault destabilizes in his genealogies when he shows that they are cultural or political constructs rather than naturally occurring phenomena, and, on the other hand, the genealogy of knowledges

helped by the counter-memorial return of suppressed voices and experiences. Counter-memory, or the resurrection of subjugated knowledges, appears in Foucault's works as a starting point for resistance. In order to better understand why and how counter-memorial efforts might be used to resist normative power, however, first it is essential to study the two separate forms of the insurrection of knowledges that Foucault introduces in his lectures.

Buried historical contents as counter-memory

The first form of the insurrection of knowledges, defined as “historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematizations” includes, according to Foucault's own examples, “blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked” (2003: 7). In my understanding, the “functional and systematic ensembles” refer to theories, principles and practices that appeared as a result of the efforts of power to produce a normalizing, unified system of rules to govern society. An example for such principles is the idea examined by Foucault in *Madness and Civilization*, that a certain group of people, labelled as “mad” have to be confined in places specifically designed to treat them. This practice is generally accepted as “natural”, primarily as a result of the efforts made by power structures to show it as a unified theory of treating the mad. Following Foucault's definition of the insurrection of knowledges, it is possible to find evidence for disagreement in the form of buried scholarly knowledges, which, however, have been silenced by normative power in an attempt to prove the universal and unified nature of a theory, or of a practice of social control. Scholarly work enables us to unearth voices which, even though they are examples of “historical, meticulous, precise,

technical expertise” (Foucault 2003: 8), became suppressed, since they opposed the particular theory that power structures intended to show to be universally accepted. Even if, for instance, scientific or scholarly works opposing the confinement of the mad existed either at the time of the large-scale introduction of confinement or later, these works were probably silenced and hidden by “functional coherences”, by the effort to produce a systematic, unified theory.

Disqualified knowledges as counter-memory

The second form of knowledges that need to be found and resurrected as part of counter-memory is defined by Foucault as “knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity” (2003: 7). Examples for such local, specific knowledges include “the knowledge of the psychiatrized, the patient, the nurse, the doctor, that is parallel to, marginal to, medical knowledge (Foucault 2003: 7). The examples that Foucault provides for this type of knowledges are fundamentally similar to the previous category in that they are also silenced and suppressed by the ruling power. Both cases of disagreement with the normative and standardizing structures jeopardize the efforts of creating a coherent system of theory and practices: scholarly, therefore prestigious discourses that oppose what is shown by power to be the universal “truth”, as well as alternative experiences by individuals who occupy a conflicting position with the unified normative system, are buried, their existence is denied. As a result, the official discourse introduced by normative power structures gets solidified, it remains seemingly unquestioned and unopposed. Nevertheless, in my view, the latter type of

suppressed voices, those “naive and hierarchically inferior” knowledges can be silenced to a significantly greater extent, because the official rationale for their exclusion is different from, and I would claim, strategically more powerful than the previous category of scholarly knowledges. Given their stigmatized position as knowledges that are not scientific enough, these local voices can immediately be disqualified and disregarded, in a more powerful way than in the case of more prestigious, scholarly discourses. What is more, I also believe that once local voices of opposition are silenced and once they are excluded for not being elaborate enough, they are also a lot more difficult to find and resurrect later, since it seems to be less likely for a piece of local, marginalized knowledge of a socially outcast and discredited person to be recorded in the way scholarly discourse is.

The importance of counter-remembering

In an attempt to strengthen the position of their seemingly coherent theories, ruling power structures make every effort to silence, bury and discredit voices and experiences that oppose these theories and practices. If, however, such subjugated knowledges are found and resurrected, they have a very powerful effect in destabilizing institutions and discourses that were previously taken for granted. The function of the insurrection of the two different types of subjugated knowledges described above is, therefore, the same: by revealing the “memory of combats, the very memory that had until then been confined to the margins” (Foucault 2003: 8), the workings of power in purposefully creating an apparently unified theory are brought to people’s attention. The fact that subjugated knowledges reveal the memory of “combats” is highly important for Foucault: he claims that “a battlefield runs through the whole of society,

continuously and permanently, and it is this battlefield that puts us all on one side or the other. There is no such thing as a neutral subject. We are all inevitable someone's adversary" (2003: 51). Battles and disagreements are always present in society, contrary to the false image that power attempts to create by masking or disqualifying opposing discourses, and the main function of the two forms of counter-memory is to reveal such hidden combats, to enable the understanding of the creation of unifying theories and practices.

The real importance of the insurrection of subjugated knowledges by counter-memory and by genealogical works is, however, not exclusively the discovery of the workings of normative power, but the emerging possibility of critique. When discussing buried scholarly knowledges, and, as José Medina claims, "[b]y resurrecting these buried and masked blocks of historical knowledge, the critique of institutions, discourses, and hegemonic histories becomes possible" (17); similarly, disqualified local knowledges have the same function, since they make "social critique possible by calling into question official and hegemonic knowledges and interrogating the exclusions that they rest on" (Medina 18). Giving voice to previously suppressed voices, therefore, makes it possible to create an alternative image of history and society, where not only the official discourse of the ruling forces of power are perceived, but also the other party of the social battle, the oppressed, marginalized groups can finally be heard. This process has eventually, according to Foucault, an important relevance for contemporary social struggles, too: "this coupling together of scholarly erudition and local memories ... allows us to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics" (2003: 8). Ultimately, counter-memory appears as a method of resistance, a tactic for today's political action – even

though Foucault does not provide a detailed agenda for marginalized groups, he specifies counter-memory (and the creation of counter-histories by the collection of counter-memories) as not only useful for the theoretical understanding of the workings of normative power, but also as something that can actively resist this power in practice.

Critics' response to Foucault's counter-memory

After having defined what counter-memory and the production of counter-histories mean for Foucault both on a theoretical and on a practical level, in the following sections I will present several critics' views on the theoretical meaning and on the more practical, political importance of the resurrection of subjugated knowledges and of counter-memory, to identify their position in relation to what Foucault conveys about these processes and tactics.

Destabilizing regimes of truth

In analyzing Foucault's concepts of power and discipline, Michael Walzer raises a problematic point in connection with the validity of Foucault's works on power and resistance. As Walzer suggests, Foucault's genealogies can be taken to be "a past for some future present": they are fictions waiting to be realized by political action later. However, this interpretation shows a problematic issue, according to Walzer: the validity of Foucault's theory about resisting normative power can only be judged based on the future success or failure of resistance, which is claimed to be inappropriate (65). In my understanding, however, this critical point does not seem to be completely valid if Foucault's theories of counter-memory and resistance are analyzed along the lines

that his point of view of power emphasized. As Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner claim, “Foucault’s remarks on political tactics are highly vague and tentative, and nothing like a ‘Foucauldian politics’ – which would entail the very systematic theory that he rejects – ever emerges” (55). Foucault probably did not intend to provide any specific political tactics for resistance, since that would have meant creating a “regime of truth” that he wanted to destabilize in the first place, for instance by the general method of counter-remembering. Therefore, I would rather claim that the validity of Foucault’s theory should be evaluated based on a different standard, and not on the eventual success of resistance, which Walzer finds inappropriate. By looking at what Gary Gutting understands as the aim of genealogical and counter-memorial works – using an understanding of the past to understand an intolerable practice in the present, and also the fact that present practices were not inevitable (10) –, one dimension of assessing the validity of Foucault’s principles could be the level of understanding that is gained with the help of genealogies and counter-memory about the contingency of norms that are generally taken for granted. In this respect, Foucault is definitely successful: counter-history provides an alternative account of facts and practices, which Thomas Flynn, based on Foucault’s “L’Impossible Prison”, defines as “a preconceptual, anonymous, socially sanctioned body of rules that governs one’s manner of perceiving, judging, imagining and acting” (30). With the insurrection of the origin of these practices, as well as the previously suppressed, alternative accounts of social struggles, a better understanding of social “truths” and a plurality of discourses will inevitably replace the one-sided account that is conveyed by ruling regimes of truth.

Plurality of voices as political force

The multiplicity of accounts about the history of social struggles and oppression is a very important aspect of counter-memory. According to Flynn, the appearance of alternative histories “radicalizes our sense of the contingency of our dearest biases”, therefore social critique becomes possible (32). Lois McNay also claims that oppositional truths, which can be voiced using the same vocabulary to oppose power that power itself created to oppress them, hinder the domination of truth by those who govern, hence they have a strategically resistant value (39, 137). It seems, therefore, that the insurrection of subjugated knowledges by counter-memory not only provides an alternative point of view or a better understanding of social oppositions, but it also makes actual social critique possible by empowering marginalized groups of people with a way to speak for themselves.

Most importantly, however, the appearance of alternative private and local points of view have to be mentioned, which carry political strength. Honi Fern Haber claims that Foucault’s most important contribution to oppositional discourse is that he rendered the difference between the public and the private meaningless, since both are the effect of power, therefore both are politically relevant; this way, previously silenced groups, such as women and delinquents, who were kept hidden and silent by the private/public distinction, are now able to gain their voices, too (86-87). This point is very similar to what Foucault defined as the second form of counter-memory: the insurrection of local knowledges that were considered to occupy a lower position in the hierarchy of discourses, therefore they were dismissed as inferior and “insufficiently elaborated”. If, nevertheless, such local and disqualified counter-memories (such as the

memoirs of Herculine Barbin, which is going to be discussed in the second part of this thesis) are found and published as alternative accounts of social battles, they finally get their own voices that were previously denied from them, and they also acquire political force in resisting normative power by the emergence of opposing discourses. This is probably the reason why Faber states that Foucault's analysis "paves the way for the multiplicity of yet-to-be-specified "we's" necessary for poststructuralist and oppositional politics" (89). Contrary to what Foucault's critics claim, his theoretical principles about counter-memory are in fact able to lead to possibilities for political resistance in practice, too, for instance by giving voice to marginalized individuals – these insurrected voices will automatically become part of the politically relevant discourse of power struggles, originating from their very nature as alternative accounts of what had previously been seen as the "official truth".

Resistance by the ability to speak

When discussing Foucault's analysis of normative discourses, Butler turns to the idea of the creation of possibilities for resistance, which Foucault also emphasises in his works: "disciplinary discourse does not unilaterally constitute a subject [but] it *simultaneously* constitutes the condition for the subject's de-constitution (1997: 99). Since counter-histories are produced by previously suppressed voices, whose alternative reality, as it has been discussed earlier, carries a resistant force, it can be accepted that resistance was indeed made possible by their original marginalization by normative power. Following this analysis, Jonathan Dollimore's claim that the outsider of counter-histories may be said to be always already inside (255), is also reasonable; by excluding sexually deviant people from official discourses, for instance, power simultaneously

creates the possibility for their resistance, as it will be seen in the case of Herculine Barbin, too.

Resistance, however, is not easily achievable for oppressed and marginalized groups. According to Ladelle McWhorter, counter-remembering is in fact a practice of self-overcoming, when the individual has to develop strength that will make the emergence of something new possible (209). In my understanding, the main issue of self-overcoming is the strength needed to break free from normative and oppressive categories that were imposed on marginalized individuals by disciplinary discourses. In other words, as Foucault claims, suppressed voices have to “confiscate, at least temporarily, the power to speak” (1977: 214). Because of the individuals’ perception of the dominant discourse, and since they probably also see themselves according to the internalized categories produced by normative power, counter-remembering indeed requires a considerable amount of overcoming the self. The memoirs of Herculine Barbin, as it will be shown in the next part of this thesis, serve as an example for a severely marginalized and suppressed voice “confiscating the power to speak”, as s/he provides an own point of view of her oppression in society.

Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered

Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French

Hermaphrodite

In the following section of the thesis, a specific example for counter-remembering and the insurrection of subjugated knowledges will be discussed in detail. The book entitled *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, which was discovered, edited and published by Foucault himself, contains the memoirs of a truly marginalized individual, Adélaïde / Abel Barbin, who, based on medical evidence, was officially reclassified from being a woman to a man at the age of twenty-two. First, the memoirs themselves are going to be introduced to provide an overview of both the character, the biography and the narration of Adélaïde / Abel (commonly referred to as Herculine) Barbin. Secondly, several authentic documents that Foucault included in the edition of the memoirs are also going to be described, since these medical texts, as well as a short story that is based on Herculine's life, represent the official discourse, the counterpoint of Herculine's marginalized voice. Thirdly, the interpretation of the importance of the birth and of the publication of the memoirs, as well as their assessment as a piece of counter-memory, will be discussed, based on Foucault's introduction, on the comparison of Herculine's own text and contemporary medical and literary documents, and finally on several influential critics' analysis of the memoirs as counter-memorial attempts of resistance.

My Memoirs by *Herculine Barbin*

“I am twenty-five years old, and, although I am still young, I am beyond doubt approaching the hour of my death. I have suffered much, and I have suffered alone! Alone! Forsaken by everyone! My place was not marked out in this world” (3) – the opening lines of Herculine Barbin’s account of her life immediately create the image of an unhappy and severely marginalized person, but the reasons for such painful exclusion from society are not revealed at the beginning of the narrative. The first part of the autobiographical account, in fact, points to a relatively stable and affectionate childhood: Herculine spent most of her childhood and youth “in the delicious calm of religious houses ... that were truly pious” (3). At the age of seven, for instance, she is received into a convent where motherless girls are brought up; even though some other young girls make her feel that she is different from the rest (Herculine’s mother was still alive, but she fell into poverty after the death of her husband), “no serious incident saddened” (6) this part of her life, which passes among the caring and affectionate emotions that she receives from the mothers in the convent.

Herculine experiences the feeling of becoming an accepted member of a community when she is transferred into another convent, where all the other, much richer girls are fond of her, in spite of the considerable social difference that exists between them. Herculine meets love for the first time in her life in this institution: at the age of twelve, she feels a strong attraction to a sickly, seventeen-year-old girl called Lea. Their relationship is described in almost erotic details: Herculine “wept for joy when [she] saw her lower ... those long, perfectly formed eyelashes, with an expression as soft as a caress” (10). On several occasions she sneaks into Lea’s room at night, which is

eventually discovered, but not punished by the mothers. Lea soon dies of consumption, which Herculine comments as “the first attachment of my life” being broken (15), and at which point her life enters into a new phase, where the joys and happiness of childhood are lost forever.

Herculine returns to her mother and starts working as a lady’s maid. She silently admires her mistress, whose “whiteness of ... skin had no equal” (16), and whose marriage shakes her with an “indefinable sensation” (20). Meanwhile, Herculine’s poor health, which she suffered from already in her childhood in the convent, does not improve in her teens, either. At the age of seventeen, her doctor realizes that “the most promising remedies were ineffective”; Herculine, however, is “not at all frightened” (19). It is at this point in her life when upon her master’s suggestion, and despite her antipathy towards teaching, Herculine agrees to learn to be a teacher, and she is admitted to the appropriate school.

At the school convent, Herculine’s life gets dominated by unease and shame, mainly because she becomes aware of her unconventional bodily features compared to the other girls: “I was instinctively ashamed of the enormous distance that separated me from them, physically speaking” (26). It is her body that is the major source of embarrassment for her: her features “had a certain hardness that one could not help noticing” (26), and her body is covered with hair, which becomes ever more noticeable and thick by razoring; finally, she “carefully avoided exposing [her] arms, even in the warmest weather” (27), because she senses that all these unusual features strikes others’ eyes day by day. She is endlessly self-conscious and reserved, because she feels that her body would “offend the eyes of those who called me their friend, their sister” (39). Even

though she is well-liked by everyone, what is more, she develops a very close emotional, and, by kissing each other on the lips, physical relationship with a girl one year older than her, she feels confused and afraid of the future. She starts blaming herself for “*sensations* that had been awakened” in her (33), and she is “bent beneath the weight of a sadness, ... devoured by the terrible sickness of the *unknown*” (34). This is the reason why, amidst her growing uncertainties about her strikingly different bodily features, as well as about her emotions, she finds it very difficult to leave school and start working as an assistant teacher in a boarding school, where she does not know what will wait for her.

In the school, under the watchful eye of the schoolmistress Madame A. (“Everything, down to my slightest gesture, was subjected to her examination” (42)), Herculine develops a very intimate and passionate relationship with Sara, Madame A’s younger sister. Not only does Herculine become the warm-hearted Sara’s “confidante and her first girlfriend” (44), but they also share more and more intimate moments together that point beyond friendship, for example carefully undressing each other before going to bed; as Herculine describes their relationship: “What I felt for Sara was not friendship; it was real passion” (48). This passionate feeling culminates when Sara and Herculine finally share the same bed in a way lovers do: “It would be impossible to express the happiness I felt from her presence at my side! ... We talked for a long time before going to sleep, I with my arms encircling her waist, she with her face resting near my own!” (51). This seemingly happily fulfilled relationship, however, is clouded by Herculine’s own feelings of, on the one hand, the instinct to hide their emotions (“Destined to live in the perpetual intimacy of two sisters, we now had to conceal from everybody the terrifying secret that *bound* us to each other!!!” (51)), and, on the other

hand, her belief that “a gross mistake had assigned [her] a place in the world that should not have been [hers]” (54), that she was “usurping a place, a title, that human and divine laws forbade me” (52).

Although Herculine and Sara continue their emotional and physical relationship, which brings them a lot of happy moments, and even if they naively plan to get married, Herculine’s faith and conscience makes her confess her feelings to her confessor, who felt and expressed “vindictive horror” (55) at hearing Herculine’s confession, instead of pity and understanding. Later, Herculine seeks the help of another confessor, one who does not know her, and again speaks honestly about her feelings. The abbé concludes that Herculine is “entitled to call [herself] a man in society”, but since legally this can only happen at “the price of the greatest scandals”, and as her present situation “is so full of danger” (62), she is advised to withdraw from the world and to become a nun. Nevertheless, the abbé discourages her from repeating her confession, because that would mean her exclusion from convents. Herculine, however, does not want to live a monastic life at all, as she feels that her emotions bind her to stay where she presently lives; her resolution is to “await events” (63) in the present state of affairs.

Herculine and Sara continue their relationship and confirm their plan of marrying each other, when Herculine’s pains return more and more intensively and frequently, therefore she is forced to do what she previously refused: to consult a doctor. Herculine’s body is examined in great detail, which results in the shocked doctor’s disbelief: “My God? Is it possible?” (68). Sara’s mother, for reasons that Herculine does not understand, tries to disregard the results of the examination, probably since she, as

Herculine points out repeatedly, sees Herculine as her daughter's girlfriend, while in fact they were lovers.

During her vacation, the physically exhausted Herculine, who is also suffering from serious doubts about her future, confesses again, this time to a bishop. The confessor promises to ask for a doctor's advice, who examines Herculine thoroughly the next day, both in the physical and in the confessional sense, since, as the doctor claims, "I must not only see for myself, I must also know everything you can tell me" (78). The verdict changes Herculine's life forever: her sex is reclassified as male, she is renamed and becomes Abel Barbin. Her doubts and insecure prospects about the future are, however, only made more serious by this reclassification, since she does not know what reaction she can expect from society. Even more tragic is the fact that she, having been "rectified" as a man, must leave her job as a schoolmistress, therefore she has to say farewell to Sara, too.

At this point in the narrative, Herculine (now Abel) states that his existence as a girl "were the fine days of a life that was henceforth doomed to abandonment, to cold isolation" (87). He becomes isolated, and even though people are generally not hostile towards him, some rumours about Sara being dishonored do spread. The continuous reproduction of the manuscript is interrupted when Abel moves to Paris, where he does not get permanent jobs, since he is too weak and looks too delicate for male positions, to work for instance as a railroad employee or a valet. He has not got any hope of getting married, either, since he would make a "detestable husband" because of the fact that he has an "intimate, deep understanding" of women's character (107). He lives a miserable, lonely life, and eventually commits suicide at the age of twenty-nine. Death,

as he wrote previously, became “the hour of deliverance [and] the end of the most frightful of all torments” (93).

The Dossier

Foucault’s edition of Herculine Barbin’s memoirs includes not only the text produced by Herculine herself, but also a set of contemporary documents. Most importantly, Foucault found and published the medical reports which were compiled based on the examinations, and which served as the basis for Herculine’s gender reclassification. These documents provide valuable information not only about the specific case of Herculine Barbin, but also about the nature of normative power as well. Since medical and legal documents represent the official discourse of the age, it is possible to examine the point of view of power regarding the gender reclassification case described by the person in question herself, therefore the attitude of ruling discourses and practices towards marginalized individuals might also be revealed in more general terms, based on the reports written in this specific case. In the following section of the thesis, first the content of the documents compiled by Foucault will be described, including a literary piece as well: “A Scandal at the Convent” written by Oscar Panizza, a short story based on the life of Herculine Barbin. Secondly, the aims and the points of view that appear in the documents are going to be analysed in order to determine how official discourses regarded Herculine Barbin, and what they intended to do to deal with her situation as a person of ambiguous sex. Thirdly, I am going to draw some conclusions about the nature of power as outlined by the official documents produced in connection with Herculine Barbin’s case, which will also show that paying

attention to Herculine's voice is in fact an example of counter-remembering: it is the insurrection of a subjugated knowledge which opposes normative discourses.

Auguste Tardieu's introduction

Auguste Tardieu, who, according to Foucault's introduction, received the manuscript of the memoirs and published it in 1874 in his *Question médico-légale de l'identité dans ses rapports avec les vices de conformation des organes sexuels*, presents the first interpretation of Herculine Barbin's recollections. According to his introduction to the work mentioned above, Herculine's story is a "painful example of the fatal consequences that can proceed from an error committed at the time of birth in the establishment of civil status" (122). Herculine Barbin, who is "the victim" and a "poor wretch", had to spend twenty years "in the clothing of a sex that was not his own" (122); when, however, his senses and passions made this error clear, he "had his true sex recognized and at the same time became really aware of his physical disability" (122), which made him want to end his life in suicide. Speaking of this true (male) sex, Tardieu adds that even though feminine features were very characteristic in the case of Herculine's body, the rectification of the error committed at birth by the allocation of the wrong sex had to happen: "both science and the law were nevertheless obliged to recognize the error and to recognize the true sex of this young man" (123). The publication of the memoirs, according to Tardieu, have an important lesson, and it is worth studying the recollections not only because they describe a situation that is "not surpassed in interest by any romantic novel": Tardieu intends to highlight the message that the "erroneous declaration of the sex of a newborn child", and also "the

malformation of the sexual organs” (123) have severe consequences regarding both the individual’s emotional and psychological health, and their position and role in society.

Dr. Chestnet’s report

The report produced by Dr. Chestnet is one of the key medical documents based on which Herculine Barbin’s sex got reallocated. The report begins by providing the physiological background information about Herculine that are in accordance with what she herself described in the memoirs: the sharp pain that she started to feel in her left groin, which was followed by several consultations with both doctors and clergymen. The document concentrates on Herculine’s physical features, and Dr. Chestnet provides a detailed description of her body according to the detailed examinations that he carried out with the aim of “giving [his] opinion concerning her true sex” (125), which happened primarily by the examination of the physical characteristics that he goes on to describe.

Herculine’s features, according to Dr. Chestnet, “have nothing that is very distinctive and remain sexually indeterminate” (125); similarly, her voice is usually that of a woman, but is occasionally carries masculine tones. Physical features that are rather characteristic of the male sex include some beard hairs, a flat chest, masculine and hairy upper limbs, a manly pelvis and hips, and also the fact that Herculine has never experienced menstruation. The most detailed description, however, happens in the case of sexual organs, and as it is revealed by Dr. Chestnet’s scrupulous examination, it is this part of Herculine’s anatomy that hold the most contradictions, with male and female biological features both present. In spite of the fact that Herculine possesses

female sexual organs, such as a vagina (“True, it is very short, very narrow; but after all, what is it if it is not a vagina?” (127)), Dr. Chestnet concludes that these characteristics are dominated by more masculine features. Herculine does not menstruate, she has no womb, what is more, her “tastes, her inclinations, draw her toward women” (127). The deciding feature, finally, is the presence of “ovoid bodies and spermatic cords ... in a divided scrotum. These are the real proofs of sex” (128). Although Dr. Chestnet’s examination of Herculine’s body revealed contradictions and the simultaneous presence of both masculine and feminine characteristics, he concludes that Herculine is in fact a man, therefore the rectification of her civil status is necessary: “We can now conclude and say: Alexina is a man, hermaphroditic, no doubt, but with an obvious predominance of masculine sexual characteristics” (128).

E. Goujon’s report

The report written by E. Goujon describes the results of the second autopsy that was performed on Herculine’s/Abel’s body. After the corpse was discovered, a post-mortem examination was carried out by Dr. Régnier, who, based on the extreme “mixture of the two sexes” (129), arrived at the same conclusion of masculine hermaphroditism. Upon hearing about the case, however, Goujon “regretted ... that science was going to lose the opportunity to make a study of it [the extraordinary specimen of Herculine’s hermaphroditic body]” (129), therefore he obtained permission to perform another autopsy. The results described in the report, according to him, constitute “one of the most complete [observation] that science possesses of this kind” for two reasons: on the one hand, Herculine’s life “could be followed ... from his birth

until his death”, partly based on the memoirs, and on the other hand, because “the examination of his corpse, as well as the autopsy, could be performed with all the care to be desired” (129-130).

The report provides a very detailed description of the results of the autopsy, with its almost exclusive focus on the corpse’s sexual organs. The most important conclusion that Goujon makes is that “the exactness of the diagnosis that in the end had assigned him to his true place in society” is confirmed by the findings of the post-mortem examination (131). The main reason for this is that, despite Herculine’s initial classification among women based on the “superficial examination of his external genital organs”, the “physical modifications that ... forced him [Herculine/Abel] to request a rectification of his civil status” (130) did indeed point to the fact that Herculine was a male. In spite of the fact that Goujon accepts that, though infertile in both cases, Herculine was able to play either a masculine or a feminine role sexually, a thorough examination of the genitals did indeed prove that Herculine had to be classified as a man. In the later sections of the report, Goujon provides a detailed medical explanation for the appearance of the anomalies that were present in Herculine’s sexual organs, primarily with reference to embryogeny, the anatomy of development.

Since Herculine’s case is not unique, which is shown by several other examples of hermaphrodites that are mentioned in the report, Goujon explains the importance of his examination and of the collection of its results. According to him, it would be “profitable to science if all the documents that it possesses on this question were brought together in a collective work, which would become a precious guide for doctors

who are called on to give their opinion and pronounce a judgement concerning people who have been stricken with this kind of anomaly” (138). If science collects the results of examinations of people whose “true sex” can only be identified at more advanced ages, when not only their physicality, but also their inclinations and habits point convincingly to one of the two sexes, it becomes much easier to later rectify errors of sex assignment which happened at birth by having the possibility to follow a procedure that has been determined based on a group of similar cases. What is more, if the “true sex” of every individual could be identified by relying on the scientific knowledge that would be collected, this would also “show clearly – if it was still necessary to demonstrate it – the fact that hermaphroditism does not exist in man and the higher animals” (139), and that everybody is clearly either a male or a female.

Goujon mentions a specific field of questions, the fitness for marriage and reproduction, which would be easier to make decisions about once the “true sex” of the individual has been determined. According to him, “one would be sufficiently authorized, after a serious examination of the genital organs, to decide negatively in either the one case or the other” (143). If doctors follow the guidelines described by the collected documents about the examinations of anomalous sexual organs, their thorough investigation would also enable them to decide about the subject’s possibility to get married and have children. In Herculine’s case, Goujon claims that the biological inability to father children, which his microscopic examination indicated, might well have been temporary, and since the subject “possessed the organs that are characteristic of his sex and whose functions he exercised” (143), Herculine would have been able to demonstrate the ability to reproduce as a man. This, therefore, together with the results

of the examinations of Herculine's anatomical features, proves that his "true sex" was rightfully identified as a man.

"A Scandal at the Convent" by Oscar Panizza

Oscar Panizza's short story, which, as the only literary piece, closes Foucault's edition of the memoirs, was written in 1893, and it is based on the life of Herculine Barbin. The story is set in a secularized convent in Normandy, and it begins with the introduction of the main characters: Monsieur l'Abbé, the only man in the convent; the Mother Superior, the head of the institute, a proud and powerful lady; her niece, Henriette de Bujac, a pretty and lively lady of seventeen, who was much hated by the teaching nuns, who "could teach her nothing about feminine wiles, and from whom she had no wish to learn the customary studies and disciplines" (159); the Head Sister, the shrewd principal teacher, whose ambition is to get the Mother Superior's position in the institute; and finally, Alexina Besnard. Alexina is "the most diligent and accomplished girl in the school, its chief ornament, and for many families the model of all that could be accomplished" (159). As a contrast to her excellent study skills, her appearance is certainly "odd and different" (160): she is tall and slender with a long stride, her voice is surprisingly deep and her clothes hide her figure, which, however, is probably not very feminine.

The plot of the short story covers one day in the life of the convent, which begins with the detailed description of Monsieur l'Abbé's room, and also his and the Mother Superior's morning routine. This peaceful morning is soon disrupted, however, when some girls discover Alexina and Henriette, who immediately became intimate

friends when they got to know each other, in bed together, “asleep, their hands and bodies intertwined ... Then somebody yanked the covers off; and what they saw was horrible” (167). The girls inform the Abbé of the disgraceful sight, while the Mother Superior and the Head Sister each would like to use the opportunity to blame and dismiss the other.

Since Monsieur l’Abbé is very much interested in the moral aspect of the events, he starts interrogating the Mother Superior if “these friendships between young girls always take so sensual a form” (171). He then learns a lot about the “peculiar goings-on” (173) between Alexina and Henriette from other students: it is usual that the two girls hide in dark corners together, where they whisper and kiss each other. The girls at the convent also noticed that when Henriette and Alexina sleep together, Alexina’s hairy legs, “like the Devil” (174) are often exposed – this makes a lot of pupils shout “The Devil and his bride!” (177) at the two girls at lunch that day. The Abbé questions the Head Sister as well, since he considers that this is “a case of the greatest scientific and moral-theological significance” (179), with the main question being if Alexina and Henriette are drawn to each other by “diabolic sensuality” (181), or they are merely expressing their friendship in a quite intimate way.

Although Alexina confesses to the Abbé that she admires Henriette’s body, she denies having improper feelings in her soul, and she passionately claims that her love for Henriette is “pure as the snows of Mount Hebron” (183). Later in the afternoon, some of Alexina’s letters are found, which show a different angle of their relationship: “Do you intend to throw yourself into the bestial arms of a man? ... Aren’t I your husband?” (185). The Abbé learns that villagers, who already know about the

happenings, speak about the diabolic nature of Alexina, even more so since one of the men in the village previously discovered Alexina and Henriette lying on top of each other deep inside the thicket, with their dresses pulled up. Soon, villagers armed with axes gather at the convent gates because of their belief that the Devil is hidden in Alexina. To solve the situation, the Mother Superior suggests an examination by a doctor to reveal if Alexina has “well-known marks and stigmata of diabolic possession” (191) on her body.

The examination reveals the truth not only to the Abbé and the convent, but also to Alexina herself.

Now she was a whimpering creature, mortally wounded. Her most intimate secrets were about to be exposed to all the world by a doctor. ... This evening, when the doctor was with her, she had realized that something out of the ordinary was indeed the matter with her. ... She had known, of course, that she was made somewhat differently from the other girls, ... but she had never given it much thought. (196).

The next morning, the Abbé receives the doctor’s report, which concludes that based on her masculine physical features, and especially on her sexual organs, “Alexina must be regarded as a male hermaphrodite. Alexina is, in fact, a *man*, and indeed a man capable of procreation” (199). The same day, Alexina is sent back to her parents from the convent, and she is not mentioned again in the narrative. The short story ends with the note that the Mother Superior also leaves the institute, and she is “succeeded as Mother Superior by the former Head Sister” (199).

Herculine Barbin, normative power, and counter-memory

To understand the importance of the memoirs written by Herculine Barbin, together with several contemporary documents, and also with Oscar Panizza's short story, it is the date of the publication of the book which provides a starting point for the interpretation of Barbin's story. The original French publication of the memoirs appeared in 1978: three years after Foucault first mentioned counter-memory and the insurrection of subjugated knowledges in his lecture series at the Collège de France, and two years after the publication of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. This marks out the place the memoirs occupy in Foucault's oeuvre: on the one hand, Herculine Barbin's story serves as an example, a case study that illustrates not only the workings of normative power, which was always a central area of interest and analysis for Foucault, but more specifically the workings of normative power on sexuality, the field that Foucault researched and wrote about in the last years of his life with the three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. On the other hand, I believe that the publication of the memoirs and other documents is also an attempt to introduce the possibility of resistance to normative power on a more practical level, which helps to better understand the theoretical principles that Foucault introduced in both the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* in connection with sexual normalization and sexual truth, as well as in the Collège de France lectures related to resistance through counter-memory. In this final part of the thesis, therefore, I am going to provide a critical interpretation of the story of Herculine Barbin along these two lines of analysis: firstly, as a collection of contemporary documents that highlight some major characteristics of normative power

and that exemplify what Foucault described in his previous works, and secondly as an instance of the insurrection of a subjugated voice, as an example of counter-memory, which can provide a way of resistance to normative power, and which might also be an answer to Foucault's critics who miss the more practical and politically useful aspect of his works.

Nineteenth-century "true sex"

First of all, Foucault himself provides some important points of analysis of the importance of Herculine Barbin's story in his introduction to the publication of the memoirs. As he claims, he would "be tempted to call the story banal were it not for two or three things that give it a particular intensity" (1980: xi), the major one of these being the time it comes from. Foucault repeats what he described in *The History of Sexuality*: in the 1860s and 1870s "investigations of sexual identity were carried out with the most intensity in an attempt to ... identify, classify, and characterize the different types of perversions" (1980: xi-xii). The most important Foucauldian key words that describe the normative practices of the second half of the nineteenth century are essential in Herculine Barbin's life as well: perversions, deviations from the officially accepted and prescribed form of sexual behaviour were scientifically investigated, analysed and classified; an ever-growing knowledge base was collected about the characteristics of people like Herculine, who deviated from the norm established by medical discourse. There was an attempt to collect as many pieces of information about such people as possible, which happened in the case of several thorough investigations of Herculine's body, too. On the surface level, the necessity of these investigations was explained by the need to produce a detailed scientific guide for medical professionals who were asked

to give their opinion about similar cases (Goujon's report, for instance, highlights the need to collect all pieces of knowledge that science possesses about hermaphrodites to aid doctors in the future). However, as I am going to describe in connection with the workings of power based on Herculine's case, scientific investigations proved to serve normalizing purposes, since based on the description of deviant sexualities, it became possible to control and to rectify them more easily, to make them fit into normative categories prescribed by official discourses.

In his introduction, Foucault describes the specific case of hermaphrodites (or intersex people, as they are referred to today), whose situation changed dramatically in the course of nineteenth century normalization. Previously, hermaphrodites, which designation was given to individuals "in whom the two sexes were juxtaposed, in proportions that might be variable" (1980: vii), were assigned a sex at baptism by their father. This decision, however, could be changed by the person himself/herself if they wished to continue their lives as members of the other sex, with the only criterion being that this decision about the change of sexes had to happen before getting married. In the nineteenth century, however, the necessity of a "true sex" appeared in the case of hermaphrodites: as Foucault claims, "[b]iological theories of sexuality, juridical conceptions of the individual, forms of administrative control in modern nations" led to the rejection of the idea of the juxtaposition of two sexes (1980: viii). As it is in the case of Herculine Barbin, one had to go through examinations to medically establish their "true sex"; doctors were called on to decipher the true sex of the individual that "was hidden beneath ambiguous appearances" (Foucault 1980: viii). An unambiguous decision had to be made about Herculine Barbin, too, in whose case the examination of the body, with an overwhelming attention to sexual organs, showed the prevalence of

male characteristics, with the female features disregarded and deemed accidental. Foucault also emphasizes that this change of practices regarding the assignment of sex to hermaphrodites meant the complete disappearance of free will from a legal point of view (1980: ix). The story of Herculine Barbin indeed shows the total lack of the freedom of choice, as she had absolutely no right to make any decisions once investigations started to establish a true and unambiguous sex for her; she became the passive object of analysis, whose civil status, which marked out the way of life she was obliged to follow as a member of the male sex, was peremptorily assigned by power structures from above.

The workings of power on Herculine Barbin

Getting to know the “truth”

With reference to the first volume of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, Joseph Rouse claims that elicitation, documentation and surveillance practices constrain behaviour by making it more thoroughly knowable (96); authorities collect information using different techniques of power to be able to control and regulate society based on a more in-depth knowledge about its members, especially about ones deviating from accepted norms. In the case of elicitation, confessional practices have to be highlighted, which largely contributed to the subjugation of Herculine Barbin, too. According to Foucault, confession always takes place within a power relationship, “for one does not confess without the presence ... of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (1990: 61-62). Besides the religious confessor, doctors also became authorities who required the revelation of

“truth”; what is more, in the Herculine Barbin story, it is the medical professional who decides about the future of the individual, based on their own confession. This is why Foucault highlights that with confessional practices, “the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing” (1990: 62); this also means that by confessing her most private feelings, Herculine also contributed to her own subjugation and normalization. Although, as Nathaniel Wing claims, Herculine’s confession was not induced by guilt, but by the confusion felt over not fitting into the rigid heterosexual categories of society (114-115), and even if the act of confession promised liberation from her burdens, this in fact made it possible for normative power structures to attempt to assimilate her into unambiguous, officially accepted categories.

As a further step of constraining individuals, the practices of documentation and medicalization have to be mentioned. As Foucault claims in *The History of Sexuality*, the “obtaining of the confession and its effects were recodified as therapeutic operations” (67). The methods of medicine were used after the confession was uttered to define the individual’s position as compared to the “norm”, and this medical analysis provided the basis for the rectification of the “abnormal” situation. In the case of Herculine Barbin, the rectification in fact is an attempt to forcefully fit the individual into an unambiguous sexual category, mainly by denying the existence of contradictions in her body, and by medically concluding that male characteristics are more prevalent, therefore they define Herculine’s sexuality. The medicalization of her ambiguous sexuality suggests that this is an illness which has to be cured and rectified based on medical analyses, and this seemingly scientific approach results in a normalizing effect.

The third way of getting to know the true nature of an individual, as mentioned by Rouse, is surveillance. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes Bentham's *Panopticon*, the place where inmates (for example prisoners) are conscious of their permanent visibility without ever seeing their observer, and he claims that being observed is a highly efficient technique of power. "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (202-203). Similarly to confession, the awareness of being observed is also a way of both collecting information about the individual, and also of forcing them to internalize norms prescribed by normative power, therefore participating in their own subjugation. The sense of being looked at, for instance, made Herculine Barbin self-conscious of her physical characteristics different from others, therefore her anxiety about being an outsider became stronger and stronger. This resulted in her hiding her body from the other girls in the convent, and also participated in her desperate eagerness to be liberated from tensions caused by not fitting what she perceived as "normal" by seeking professional help. However, instead of providing ease for her, this only meant power could force its normative categories on her more easily.

The results achieved by normative power

The aim of normative power in the case of Herculine Barbin was, as it has been mentioned, to deny the existence of ambiguities in her sexuality which would pose a threat to the official discourse of the separate and clearly distinguishable male and female sexes. As Dollimore claims, the fact that a profound connection between truth

and sex emerged meant that sexual deviations were seen as deviations from the truth, which had to be rectified (69). Herculine Barbin's ambiguous bodily features certainly contradict the idea of two separate sexes, therefore the solution of her case by making her fit the strictly binary categories was crucial to be able to defend the ruling discourse. Masculinity and femininity here, in McLaren's words, are "prescriptive categories", therefore there is no room for ambiguity (131-132). The question is, however, how successful this attempt to normalize her body and sexuality were by disregarding her female characteristics and by declaring that in spite of certain "tricks" of nature, she is in fact a man like any other; did Herculine become an unambiguously male Abel as a result of the workings of power?

According to the majority of critics, normalizing and regulative attempts failed in assigning an unambiguous sexuality to Herculine Barbin, which would fit the prescriptive categories of the male/female distinction. Firstly, McLaren claims that Herculine fell short of normative requirements of femininity when she was read as a woman, but fell short of masculine requirements when read as a man as well (133). Before the sexual reassignment, Herculine was not accepted as a woman by her peers and by adults: her unfeminine body with coarse and hairy limbs or her uncharacteristically deep voice always drew attention to her difference from other girls, and this was one of the reasons for her feelings of discomfort and shame. As Judith Butler points out in *Gender Trouble*, even before the force of the law appears, Herculine's difference from other girls causes anxiety, as a form of "tacit knowledge" (132) – everybody, including Herculine herself, interprets her sexuality based on the male/female distinction, where she can never fit into the category of a female. On the other hand, however, she could not occupy a male position in society as Abel either, as

she was judged too delicate to fulfil jobs that would require strong male bodies. This is why Wing suggests that Herculine never enters fully into an unambivalent place in dyadic heterosexuality, and that she poses an exceptional threat to official discourses and established norms because she diverges from heterosexual norms in both forms (108-109).

The importance of Herculine never entering an unambivalent place regarding the male/female binary system is a clear indication of the failure of power in trying to reveal the individual's "true sex". Foucault points out in his introduction to the memoirs that the voice we hear is "not a man ... trying to recall his sensations and his life as they were at the time when he was not yet 'himself'", but for Herculine/Abel, s/he is still without a definite sex (xiii). McWhorter expresses a similar idea by claiming that since Herculine deviates from both sets of norms, her voice escapes categorization by speaking from an emptiness between prescribed masculinity and femininity (205), and this is why Herculine becomes "the figure of valorized indeterminacy" for Wing (105). The rigid binary system of male/female sexes could not accommodate Herculine's intersexuality, even if medical and administrative power structures officially made an unambiguous declaration about Abel's masculinity.

In spite of seeing Herculine as an example from someone weakening normative discourses by her ambiguities and by not occupying any one of the two binary sexes marked out for everyone, it is important to point out that the view of a separate male and a separate female sex that normative power intended to protect by all means did in fact break her, both before and after the sexual reassignment. As Butler claims, "the journals report a sense of perpetual crisis", therefore "the temptation to romanticize

Herculine's sexuality as the utopian play of pleasure prior to the imposition and restrictions of 'sex' surely ought to be refused" (1990: 133). This is a direct response to Foucault, who uses the term of the "happy limbo of non-identity" (1980: xiii) for Herculine's life prior to being assigned the male sex. Agreeing with Butler, I would also argue that normative power did not only wretch Herculine's life after she had to become Abel, whose male role she was unable to fulfil, which eventually led to her suicide. The implicit knowledge of the requirement to conform to gender norms of exclusive masculinity or femininity caused an insuperable distress in Herculine even before formal investigations and procedures started to operate to establish her "true sex". Normative power weighed down Herculine and Abel, from the background and at its explicit manifestation, too.

Suppressing Herculine's threatening voice in Panizza

Since normative power did not fully achieve its aim in assigning a definitive and defining sex to Herculine Barbin while she was alive, power structures and normative discourses continued to deal with her in a way that intended to promote the official point of view of the unambiguous, dyadic structure of sexuality. A perfect example for such an attempt to retrospectively interpret Herculine's life as fitting the mutually exclusive categories of masculinity or femininity is Oscar Panizza's "A Scandal at the Convent", whose content has already been discussed in this thesis. After reading Herculine's memoirs, the short story presents a remarkably different image, which is more appropriate within the system of the male/female duality than the account written by an intersexual person. As McWhorter points out, sexual ambiguity is not present in Panizza's story, since Alexina is clearly a boy who is somehow mistaken for a girl (202);

she also adds that by reinforcing binary sexual categories, “A Scandal at the Convent” neutralizes Herculine’s resistance (206), therefore the short story essentially supports the workings of normative power. The motto given by Panizza is a clear indication of reinforcing the official normative discourse as well: the short story is introduced by the following verses taken from Genesis “... male and female created he them. ... and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply. ...” (Foucault 1980: 155). This motto highlights two ideas that normativity intended to defend by all means in its treatment of Herculine. Besides the existence of two separate, clearly defined sexes, the importance of reproduction and fertility appears as well, which, as the contemporary reports published by Foucault show, was considered to be the decisive factor when assigning the male sex to Herculine. Wing claims that the doctors’ decisions hinge on fertility, as “sexuality is defined by reproductive fertility, which is naturalized as the purpose of the heterosexual family” (127). The point of view presented by Panizza in the short story and its motto express the same idea: as Alexina desires women, and as her anatomy makes it possible to reproduce by fathering children as a man, she must in fact belong to the male sex.

A further aspect of the short story which serves the purposes of normativity is the annihilation of Herculine’s voice, and also her whole existence. In Foucault’s words, “Panizza presents her only in the fleeting profiles which the others see”, as “[s]ister, mistress, disturbing schoolgirl, strayed cherub, male and female lover, faun running in the forest, incubus stealing into the warm dormitories, hairy-legged satyr, exorcized demon” (1980: xvi). Apart from her confession (which, as it has been discussed, is always a problematic issue with Foucault, as it contributes to the subject’s own subjugation), Alexina does not have a voice in the short story. In “Lives of Infamous

Men”, Foucault claims that the discourse of power creates monsters out of the quotidian and the petty (165), which is exactly what happens with Herculine in Panizza’s narrative: the reader does not see a human being with emotions, but a disturbing character whose status needs to be clarified. What is more, Herculine disappears tracelessly after the rectification of her sex: Foucault highlights the fact that Panizza denies her the experience of death, too (1980: xvi). The reason for this is similar to what Butler claims about the deaths of certain groups of people who are seen as inferior to the norm established by power, such as gays or Palestinians: according to the official hierarchy of grief, they are not regarded as humans when they die. Their deaths vanish as they are not publicly grievable, since they never existed as respected human beings (2004: 32-35). As the existence of ambiguous sexualities is forcefully denied by normative power, such characters are not treated as humans and they simply disappear without being mourned. The conflict that seems to be more important than Alexina, the power struggle between the Mother Superior and the Head Sister is resolved by the end of the short story, while Alexina, whose sexuality still poses a threat to the male/female duality, simply vanishes.

Herculine Barbin as counter-memory

Counterattack and counter-memory

In her analysis of Herculine Barbin’s memoirs and Oscar Panizza’s short story, McWhorter points out that “Foucault’s juxtaposition of their texts allows us to see the tremendous effort that had to be made in order for nineteenth-century sexual discourses to enforce their binary model of human sexual development” (208). The logical

question is if the writing, and later the publication of the memoirs can serve as resistance to such efforts of normative power, and if counter-memory indeed helps marginalized groups of society, apart from casting light on the workings of power in a theoretical way. According to McWhorter, commentators often consider the edition of the memoirs of Herculine Barbin as a minor work in Foucault's oeuvre, because they see it as the description *of* a counterattack, while in fact it is a piece of counter-memory that can contribute to counterattack (200). Indeed, if seen as an effort to stand up against normativity, Herculine's life is undoubtedly a failure: she is still labelled male in the system of the two sexes that enforce compulsory heterosexuality. Tasmin Spargo points out that people generally perceive their sexual identity within the set options that are determined by the cultural network of discourses (52) – this is what happened with Herculine, too, which led to her not being able to step outside of the male/female dualism. Therefore, as a description of a strategy to resist normative power, the life of Herculine Barbin is certainly not successful.

Nevertheless, agreeing with McWhorter, I strongly believe that as an example of counter-memory, the publication of the memoirs is in fact highly important and useful as a counterattack against the workings of power. As it has been described earlier in the thesis, the aim of the collection of previously suppressed voices is to build up an alternative counter-history, which helps, on the one hand, to understand the inessential nature of categories that socially marginalized groups of people were forced to occupy, and on the other hand, promotes the weakening of the falsely homogeneous reality that normativity intends to convey. These two aims are certainly realized by publishing the memoirs, and for this reason it is indeed a valuable work. The contrast between Herculine's memoirs (which represent the local, disqualified, naive knowledge) and the

Panizza short story (part of the official discourse) shows “the way Barbin’s life was manipulated to fit the categories of nineteenth-century sexual discourses” (McWhorter 202). She did not comfortably belong among either men or women, but normativity forced unambiguous masculinity on her by denying the existence of intersexuality (or as it was called then, hermaphroditism). By reading about Herculine’s own experiences and personal development, it becomes clear that people with ambiguous anatomies do not necessarily possess a “true sex” that is disguised by the tricks of nature, but this concept is only the product of powerful, normalizing discourses. As Butler claims in *Gender Trouble*, “Herculine is ... the sexual impossibility of an identity” (32), and her intersexed body implicitly refutes the regulative categories of binary categorization (130). Regimes of truth are destabilized by the appearance of an alternative voice that proves by its very existence that binary categories cannot include every individual in a homogeneous way, as it is suggested by powerful discourses.

As Foucault explains in *Lives of Infamous Men*, “the most intense point of a life [is] where it comes up against power”, when ordinary lives are snatched from darkness as a result of an encounter with normative power (161-162). Paradoxically, Herculine’s alternative perspective and voice of opposition became valuable because power intended to annihilate her ambiguity; power indeed creates the possibility for its own resistance. Herculine’s inherent resistance against power is not only an intense point of her life, but also an example for the possibility of finding a fault line on the seemingly homogeneous structure of truth transmitted by ruling discourses. Counter-remembering, according to McWhorter, means noticing the effort towards the erasure of Herculine’s voice (207), but it is also an example for the attempt of attacking regimes of truth by the appearance of alternative accounts. Even if Herculine’s life itself was not a successful

counterattack, the resurrection of her subjugated voice by counter-memory is an important step towards the conscious destabilization of normative categories.

Resistance by self-writing

Returning to the question of the practical use of Foucault's theory and counter-memory, I would finally argue that Foucault's treatment of Herculine Barbin's life is in fact highly valuable for emancipatory struggles even today – even if he never intended to provide specific tactics for political resistance, it is possible to see the opportunity for resistance based on the Foucauldian theory of power, and on the counter-memorial attempt of resurrecting Herculine's lost voice. According to Foucault, as it has already been discussed, confession has to be treated with caution: it aids the interests of social control and domination by providing information about oneself to powerful authorities, which will use the confession to categorize and normalize the individual. In Herculine's case, confession to religious and medical authorities promised liberation from her anxieties, while in fact revealing her emotions led to her complete subjugation. What happened with Herculine is exactly what McLaren emphasizes: if confession takes place within normative institutions, it reinforces one's domination (146).

McLaren goes on to explain, however, that there are non-normalizing ways of confessing as well, such as self-writing – writing truthfully about oneself contributes to the self's active constitution, contrary to case histories in normalizing discourses (147-149). What I consider important to add, nevertheless, is that writing about the self is probably only successful in resisting normative power if it happens outside normative categories; this is the reason why even if Herculine did practise self-writing, she failed

to resist efficiently, as she could not help interpreting her experiences within the male/female distinction. If, however, as Butler claims, subjectivation happens in a way “that exceeds the normalizing aims by which it is mobilized” (1997: 93), subversion and resistance becomes possible. The aim of self-writing for intersex people, for instance, should by no means be identical to the objective set out by ruling discourses, i.e. to define an unambiguous sex from among the prescriptive categories of male or female, or to accept such a normalizing categorization from medical, legal or other authorities. I believe that by accepting ambiguities, avoiding a self-definition according to the strict boundaries of existence prescribed by powerful discourses, and by escaping being categorized based on one’s “true self” that is unearthed by normative practices, resistance to normative power can happen, even in a Foucauldian framework.

The relevance of presenting the story of Herculine Barbin, who died more than 150 years ago, and of counter-memory in general, is explained by Foucault in his introduction to the memoirs. He claims that even though medicine has improved, the idea of “true sex” has not disappeared: we still believe that “sex hides the most secret parts of the individual: the structure of his fantasies, the roots of his ego, the forms of his relationship to reality”, and we also continue to believe that there is something like an “error” in what people who do not conform to the norms defined by normative power, like homosexuals, do (x-xi). Although Foucault wrote these lines in 1980, I believe that the relevance of his ideas is still valid. There are and always will be marginalized groups in every society, who continually fight for their acceptance as valuable citizens, and counter-memory is an important resource they might utilize in their struggles to oppose normativity and oppression.

Conclusion

Dealing with the life, oppression and resistance of Herculine Barbin, as my analysis intended to point out, has considerable relevance for marginalized groups in the present day. Even though a lot of time has passed since power attempted to normalize Herculine according to binary categories, and to disqualify her experiences, Foucault's message with resurrecting her voice seems to be clear: powerful discourses operate using relatively unchanged techniques to normalize and oppress individuals who cannot comfortably fit into prescriptive categories set out for them. For this reason, as I highlighted, counter-memory and the collection of alternative, subjugated experiences and accounts are valuable tools even today, not only to understand the workings of power, but also to be better able to resist its normalizing aims. Foucault's theory of power and subjection, as well as the insurrection of alternative knowledges like that of Herculine Barbin, might be utilized by marginalized individuals both on a theoretical and on a practical-political level in their efforts to resist and counter-attack.

As Foucault highlights in his introduction to the edition of the memoirs, medicine has developed considerably since Herculine was examined by her doctors, whose investigations and decisions radically changed her life. It is true that today, intersex people like Herculine generally do not have to accept being reclassified as male or female against their will, as passive individuals without any agency. They are, however, still interpreted along the binary and prescriptive categories of masculinity and femininity, and so are other sexual minorities who do not conform to compulsory heterosexuality in any way. In more general terms, normative power operates using the same techniques as in the past: for example by the collection of information about

individuals who do not fit prescribed categories, therefore pose a threat to the homogeneous narrative presented by official discourses. Confession, similarly to Herculine's case, continues to exist as well, in the presence of authoritative figures, such as teachers or medical professionals, and social groups marginalized by ruling discourses still struggle to find their own voice that is able to resist normalization without the danger of reinforcing their own subjugation within the oppressing system. This is the reason why I strongly believe that Foucault's theory of power, normalization and resistance, together with studying Herculine Barbin's story, as well as other instances of previously silenced voices now gaining importance as a form of counter-remembering do provide valuable resources for political struggles in the present, too.

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