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Beneath the Surface of Letters

James Tadd Adcox

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TWENTIETH CENTURY MAN

Michael Joyce

Otis Books
www.otis.edu/books-readers
144 Pages; Print, \$12.95

FOUCAULT, IN WINTER, IN THE LINNAEUS GARDEN

Michael Joyce

Starcherone Books
www.starcherone.com
184 Pages; Print, \$16.00

Gertrude Stein once said that we always see the previous generations as being either children or very old, whereas we inevitably conceive of ourselves and our cohort as young men and women, whatever our age. We, who are so used to doing, can never quite get our heads around what time is doing to us. An epigraph from Ernst Mach at the beginning of Michael Joyce's novel *Twentieth Century Man* says something similar, if slightly more abstract:

The boundaries between things are disappearing, the world and the subject are no longer separate, it seems time stands still.

With this, Joyce is preparing us for, or perhaps warning us, what we're getting into: narrated in the second person, the novel allows no separation between reader and protagonist, and often precious little separation between its elderly protagonist and the world around him.

Cy, a ninety-something professor of linguistics, has come alone to a friend's lake house for reasons that are not quite clear. It's possible that he doesn't know them himself. Sometime shortly before the book's beginning, he has discovered a body in the woods, one he recognizes: the boyfriend of his research assistant—a young woman who has been hired as much to serve as an in-home aide as to research the history of the nearly lost language Cy is studying. The boyfriend's body and Cy's failure to report it to the police come to haunt the book, shading and corrupting nearly every interaction Cy has—whether with the property caretaker who comes to check in on him from time to time, with the local police, or with his daughter, Diedre, who

has her own complicated relationship to the dead boy.

If first-person narrators, with their tendency towards unreliability, can occasionally leave readers feeling trapped, the second-person voice employed here by Joyce can be downright claustrophobic. Sometimes it feels as though we are overhearing Cy's internal monologue, addressing himself; at others the protagonist is elided entirely, and movement is achieved in the space between one perception and the next:

There is a spring-locked and gasketed plastic container of Grapenuts on the counter, the hard brown things like mouse turds but surprisingly sweet and, yes, nut-like. Nonetheless roughage, especially on a throat dry from weeping. A can of low-sodium chicken stock and the can opener where it should be in the drawer where, programmatically, a householder would be expected to put it. But the burners of the stove, a modest—for people in the entertainment industry—Aga Companion four burner in black, fail to whisper, the LP valve turned off at the tank for the season.

The two-quart saucier sits stable upon the embers of the fire although its sides are scorched by the time it comes off.

Such techniques bring to mind Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* (1957), a book that *Twentieth Century Man* recalls in other ways as well. As in *Jealousy*, there is a murder at the heart of the narrative, and there's sufficient ambiguity to make it nearly impossible to know whether this murder really occurred or is a product of the protagonist's imagination. Joyce, however, has a sympathy for

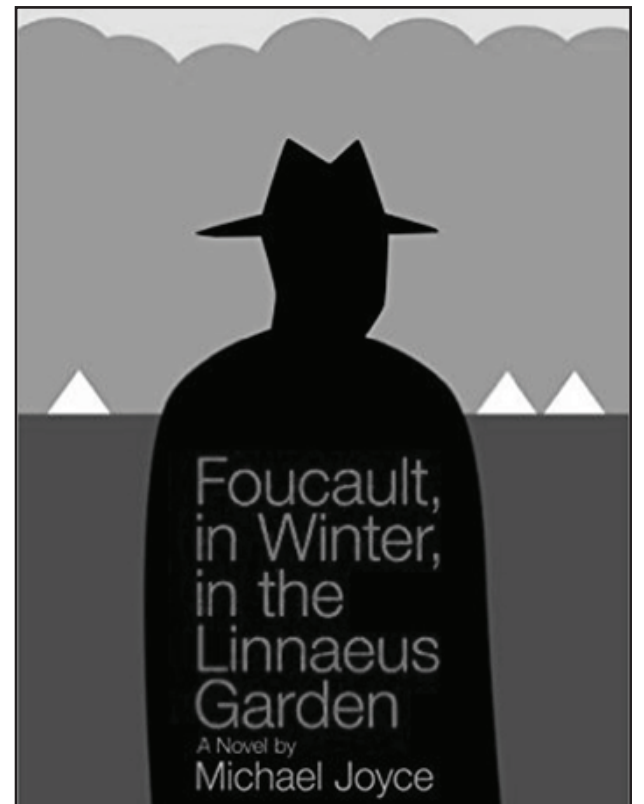
You cannot finally know a thing by making it into yourself.

his protagonist that makes *Twentieth Century Man*, perhaps paradoxically, a more difficult book to read. Cy's refusal, again and again, to simply tell someone about the body, or otherwise get help, is at once maddening and understandable. This, combined with the lack of narrative distance, often makes one feel as though trapped in a body over which one has no control. I found myself needing to put the book down, at times, as if to come up for air.

Joyce's most recent novel, *Foucault, in Winter, in the Linnaeus Garden*, shares a number of concerns with *Twentieth Century Man*: subjectivity, narrative ambiguity, and what is referred to, in academic circles at least, as the "materiality of language." Here we find the philosopher Michel Foucault—a fictitious Michel Foucault, as the author reminds us both in the preface and in an afterword—during his tenure as a cultural ambassador to Sweden in the mid-1950s. The novel is told in a series of letters, some from Foucault, some from a troubled young woman named Gabrielle, some sent, some unsent. Joyce notes in his preface that the story is "doubly fictional": the letters themselves are a retelling, perhaps untrustworthy, of fictional events.

Letters are by nature a lyrical medium. When pushed into the service of narrative, they often come across as stiff, contrived: the letter-writer recording his suspicions of the old Transylvanian count, then a sound in the room behind him, a moment before the letter abruptly ends. Even when describing past events, the form excels when it does so lyrically, rather than narratively. The vocative, longstanding companion of the lyric, is inherent to the epistolary form. The story is never the story but the story's affect.

Foucault, in Winter makes beautiful use of this form. Things happen in the novel, but the events, for the most part, lie beneath the surface



of the letters themselves. And the letters' surfaces are beautiful, if at times frustrating: written in a kaleidoscopic mix of English, French, German, and Swedish, among occasional other languages, they cannot be read as either translated or untranslated originals. At times, in English, a character will refer to switching into English to express a thought more precisely; at other times, a character will note that she is refusing to write in French for fear of embarrassing herself in a foreign language, even though we can safely assume, because of the addressee, that she is not writing the letter in her native Swedish. An "original" language for these letters, in the world of the novel, is impossible to determine.

The effect is intentionally dreamlike. The book is written to be understood by a monolingual audience, though a little knowledge of other languages and an amount of patience with working one's way through them on the page will be a great help. Phrases repeat, changing from one language to another, occasionally taking on new meanings along the way: Foucault refers to Gabrielle, punning on her nickname, as "Ma Elle, my she self, *mon elle-même*;" later, angry with him, Gabrielle refers to Foucault as "*toi, inverti vulnérant*, you hurtful homosexual!" making him, in her occasionally eccentric French, both vulnerable and wounding, her insult at once slur and memento mori.

This dreamlike doubling extends to characters, as well. A certain ambiguity persists throughout the novel as to whether Gabrielle is real or a construction of Foucault's imagination, or even, as Foucault implies at various points, another self. There is, thankfully, no big resolution scene for this mystery, which is as it should be: even if Gabrielle exists in the "real" world of the fiction, she has been rendered fictitious again in Foucault's letters—a fact that Gabrielle herself takes note of and bristles at. Or is it Foucault bristling, self-castigating at his inability to know the other except as an extension of the self? Whose hand are these written in, these letters that Joyce reminds us were never written at all?

And yet, if the Gabrielle, who accuses Foucault of fictionalizing her, is herself fictitious, what she says is nonetheless true. You cannot finally know a thing by making it into yourself. Foucault has the power to make the world into anything he wants in his letters, but the world remains, a meaningless and stubborn thing, beyond their borders.

James Tadd Adcox is the author of a novel, *Does Not Love* (2014), and a book of stories, *The Map of the System of Human Knowledge* (2012). He lives in Chicago.

