Untimely Meditations:
Periodising Recent French Thought

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ABSTRACT: Most accounts of recent French intellectual history are organized around a fundamental rupture, which divides thought and thinkers into two eras: 'modern' and 'postmodern'. But the attempts to identify the features which characterise these eras seem, at best, inconclusive. In this paper, I examine this rupture, by way of a comparison of two thinkers representative of the divide. Sartre seems as uncontroversially modern (and therefore out of date) as any twentieth-century can be, while Foucault's work is often taken to be definitive of postmodern thought. In addition, the two engaged in a brief polemic which concerned, precisely, each other's relevance to our times. Each attacks the other's work as untimely, as out of step with today. In the end, however, it is precisely this very aspect of their work — the fact that it is untimely — which constitutes its strongest claim to being postmodern. If this is the case, however, then the attempt to locate a point of rupture in intellectual history, before which thinkers are irrelevant and after which they speak to us, must fail.

RÉSUMÉ: L'histoire du mouvement intellectuel français des dernières années est organisée autour d'une rupture qui sépare la pensée et les penseurs en deux catégories: 'moderne' et 'postmoderne'. Or les tentatives d'identification des traits qui caractérisent ces catégories demeurent peu concluantes. Dans cet article, j'examine cette rupture en comparant deux penseurs représentatifs de cette ligne de partage. Sartre semble aussi moderne (et donc obsolète) que faire se peut, alors qu'on rapproche communément l'œuvre de Foucault à la pensée postmoderne. Par ailleurs, les deux se sont engagés dans un débat qui portait précisément sur leur pertinence respective pour notre temps. Chacun accuse l'autre d'être intempestif, c'est-à-dire de ne pas être actuel. Cependant, il ressortira à la fin que c'est précisément cet aspect de leur pensée qui justifie de la façon la plus décisive leur prétention à la postmodernité. Si tel est le cas, par contre, la tentative de localiser un point de rupture dans l'histoire intellectuelle à partir duquel un penseur devient pertinent doit échouer.

All attempts to define, and to periodise, postmodernity seem fated to run into a number of unresolvable paradoxes, arising from the attempt to locate a period which, etymologically at least, is 'after now'. Such paradoxes contribute to making postmodernity the most untimely, the most anachronistic

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of epochs. I do not wish to rehearse these conceptual issues yet again, but to attempt to illustrate the difficulties which arise in practice, when ‘postmodernists’ attempt to assert the originality of their project, the extent to which it breaks with the past. The case which I will examine involves two thinkers: the temporal classification of whom is relatively uncontroversial, and who, moreover, present us with one of the few examples of an explicit and mutual querelle. The debate between Michel Foucault and Jean-Paul Sartre conducted in the literary press of 1960s France is a minor skirmish in the annals of cultural history, but perhaps it can help clarify the issues at stake in asserting that a thought locates itself after the now of modernity.

Les temps (post) modernes

The Foucault/Sartre confrontation is such a gift to the intellectual historian because here the divisions are so clear. On the one hand, Sartre presents us with the archetypical engaged intellectual; on the other, Foucault with the proclamation of the era of the specific intellectual. One the one hand we have the philosopher of freedom, on the other the archaeologist of limits, the one insistent that “Existentialism is a Humanism”, the other declaring that “it is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man’s disappearance”, the ontologist versus the historian, the Marxist versus the postmodernist. From the very beginning of the confrontation between these two heavyweights of French philosophy, in the mid to late 1960s, the stakes were already well articulated. In the rise to prominence of the archaeological Foucault, the French press were quick to observe a sea-change in the direction of thought: “Only twenty-three years separate the philosophical charter of existentialism from The Order of Things, and yet one feels vaguely that what separates Sartre and Foucault is not simply an existential option, but a different conception of the very essence of philosophy”.

Rather than continue in the tradition of Sartre, of revealing “what is essential concerning the world and life, morality and others, concerning God, politics and history”, Foucault has taken on a “much more modest task: a sort of diagnosis of the present”. Modern hubris versus postmodern humility: already the difference which for many marks the passage, not only between two thinkers, but between two incommensurable modes of thought, had been articulated.

In heralding the advent of the thinker of a new epoch, the journalists were echoing Foucault’s own assessment of his relation to Sartre. Though he suppressed the pages on Sartre which, Raymond Bellour tells us, were originally included in The Order of Things, that book’s antipathy to the older man was clear, and developed by Foucault in the interviews he gave following its publication. These, more or less vitriolic, attacks upon Sartre
constitute the greater part of the 'Foucault/Sartre debate' I am here describing. Here, the modern Sartre/postmodern Foucault topos is already well developed. Around 1950, Foucault suggested, he and his generation had become postmodern — or, if not postmodern, then at least post *Les temps modernes*: “Very suddenly, and for no apparent reason, we became aware, about fifteen years ago, that we were very far from Sartre’s and Merleau-Ponty’s generation — the generation of *Les temps modernes*, which had been our law for thought and our model for existence”. The notion that Sartre represents a passé modernism is even more forcefully expressed in another interview published just two months later, albeit this time with a differently dated break between the modern and the postmodern: “*La critique de la raison dialectique* is the magnificent and pathetic effort of a nineteenth-century man to conceive of the twentieth century. In this sense, Sartre is the last Hegelian, and even, I would say, the last Marxist”. In the words of his interlocutor in another interview, dating from 1969, “Sartre would simply be one of the end points of this transcendental philosophy that is falling apart”; to which Foucault simply responded “That’s right”. At his most generous, Foucault allows that Sartre’s texts, and even his political activities, “will mark an epoch”, but we “today work in an other direction”. Sartre’s generation had a passion for life, for politics and existence, but “we have found ourselves another passion: the passion for the concept and for what I will call the ‘system’”. In short, whatever the value and intrinsic interest of Sartre’s work, “we” have left it behind.

**When was Postmodernity?**

Let us leave the detail of this increasingly bitter debate behind. I wish here only to examine the problems and paradoxes of periodisation as they arise in these texts. For the stakes of this dispute revolve around the question of history. Sartre’s thought, Foucault contends, for all its protests that structuralism cannot explain change, is essentially closed to the new. In Sartre’s phenomenology, the for-itself, which Sartre rarely distinguishes very rigorously from the empirical individual, gives meaning to the world it encounters. Thus, he “placed the bare event before or to the side of meaning — the rock of facticity, the mute inertia of occurrence — and then submitted it to the active process of meaning, to its digging or elaboration”. In other words, Sartre’s words, the for-itself gives meaning to the in-itself. Foucault criticises this aspect of Sartre’s thought for its idealist tendencies: phenomenology, at least conceived of in this way, cannot “grasp the event” because its meaning is not inherent in it, but, on the contrary, comes to it from outside, from consciousness. The for-itself can never be surprised by events outside it, for their meanings are always projected onto them.
It is in this capacity to “grasp the event”, to be open to the new and therefore to be surprised, that Foucault sees the superiority of archaeology. By questioning history at a more archaic level than Sartre was ever capable of attempting, by suspending “the theme that succession is an absolute”\textsuperscript{14}, Foucault hopes to capture the event of change in itself, in a singularity that “no teleology would reduce in advance”\textsuperscript{15}.

But if it is in this openness to the event, to the irreducibly new, that the superiority of postmodern to modern historiography lies, we will need to take seriously Sartre’s accusation in return that \textit{The Order of Things} was itself to be expected: “The success of his book is proof enough that it was anticipated. But true original thought is never expected. Foucault gives the people what they needed: an eclectic synthesis in which Robbe-Grillet, structuralism, linguistics, Lacan, and \textit{Tel Quel} are systematically utilised to demonstrate the impossibility of historical reflection”.\textsuperscript{16} If Sartre is right, if Foucault was merely fulfilling a pre-existing demand, the consequences go to the heart of the postmodern enterprise. Despite the enigmatic presence of Nietzsche, then, in \textit{The Order of Things}, despite Foucault’s attempt to break away from a modern thought “doomed to Time, to its flux and its returns, because it is trapped in the mode of being of History”\textsuperscript{17}, Foucault’s work, Sartre contends, is \textit{timely}. And postmodernity, the thought of the after now, the thought which exists in the space of “the paradox of the future (post) anterior (modo)”\textsuperscript{18} wilts and dies at the touch of the timely.

But \textit{The Order of Things} is not the only thing which Sartre was thus to describe as timely. There was, for instance, the “providential” influence upon him of Heidegger. He had read “What is Metaphysics?” (in what Derrida calls Corbin’s “monstrous translation”\textsuperscript{19}) “without understanding it”, in the journal \textit{Bifur}. Sartre gives the date of this initial encounter as 1930. It was in fact 1931, and the experience was not entirely fortuitous: the journal also contained a portion of one of Sartre’s earliest works, “La légende de la vérité”\textsuperscript{21}. This 1931 essay was, then, doubly untimely, untimely because Sartre was not yet ready for Heidegger (nor was he to be in 1934, when he attempted for a second time to read the German), and untimely because misplaced in time: Sartre has the date wrong.

In 1938, however, at a time when history “surrounded and gripped” Sartre, a French translation of selections from Heidegger appeared, also under the title \textit{Qu’est-ce-que la métaphysique?}, and including the 1931 translation of the essay of the same name. This translation appeared “just when it was needed”, when Sartre “was ready to understand Heidegger”\textsuperscript{22}. Moreover, its intervention was, once again, not entirely fortuitous: the translation was expected. Corbin’s translation was in response to growth in “curiosity” concerning Heidegger (which curiosity, presumably, was much chastened by a reading of \textit{Sein und Zeit}, since the latter purports to show that curiosity is
one of the structures of das Man — despite which Sartre feels able to cite “an article on ‘das Man’ in Heidegger” precisely as a manifestation of French curiosity about the German philosopher\(^2\)). Thus *Qu’est-ce-que la métaphysique?* (the book, not the untimely article):

arrived just at the *right moment*. I have explained how I was vaguely waiting for it — longing for somebody to provide me with tools to understand History and my destiny. But precisely, there were many of us who had those longings — and who had them at *that particular moment*. It was we who dictated that choice [i.e., of a translation of Heidegger rather than of Husserl]\(^2\).

Heidegger, it seems, no less than Foucault, was “anticipated”. He gave the people “what they needed”. Like a good entrepreneur, he, or his translator, had seen a niche in the market and moved to fill it. The intervention of “the prophet of the postmodern”\(^2\) was a timely one. But, as we know, “true original thought is never expected”.

It is tempting to conclude from this minor episode that Derrida is right in his assessment of Sartre in “The Ends of Man”; he had never understood Heidegger, for he had never read him on his own terms. Perhaps, then, we should follow Derrida, and consign Sartre to the scrap-heap of metaphysical, modern, humanism, ranking him among those who performed a useful and necessary function once, but now no longer speak to us. On this reading, Sartre would serve as a transition point between anthropological French thought and Heidegger *an sich*. Thus, Sartre’s adoption of Corbin’s “monstrous translation”, while being “philosophically very risky”, had its own necessity: “we doubt neither the historic necessity of this *risk*, nor the function of awakening whose price it was, within a conjuncture that is no longer ours. All this merits recognition. Awakening and time have been necessary”.\(^2\)

Sartre’s translation, while objectively ‘wrong’, was nevertheless appropriate for the time. It served to awaken French thought from its anthropological slumber, to ready it for the encounter with Heidegger and the entry into a post-humanist postmodernism. Sartre’s work served as a timely bridge, but now it is *passé*, or even *dépassé*. It is now high time that we encountered the untimely *as such*. And by this criterion, Sartre, by his own admission, is a “has-been”\(^2\).

Let us leave Sartre behind, then, and return to Foucault. His first encounter with Nietzsche, like Sartre’s with Heidegger, was also *untimely*. He had, he tells us, “tried to reach Nietzsche in the fifties but Nietzsche alone did not appeal to me”\(^2\)\(^8\). Just as Sartre needed his way to Heidegger prepared by reading Husserl (and French thought had needed the way beyond humanism
cleared by Sartre), so Foucault had needed Heidegger to reach Nietzsche. Here, of course, the process is different: instead of the first named philosopher being the ladder to the second, which ladder is then largely (in the case of Husserl) or completely (in the case of Sartre) expendable, it is the combination of Nietzsche and Heidegger which for Foucault provided access to both. “Nietzsche and Heidegger: that was a philosophical shock!”29 A shock, by definition, cannot be expected, at least not in the shocking form it takes. A paradox, then: Nietzsche alone came along at the wrong time for Foucault, or at least in the wrong order or combination; he had tried to read Nietzsche at an inopportune, unseasonal, untimely time. Yet Nietzsche and Heidegger together were exactly the shock Foucault had been waiting for:

I was surprised when two of my friends in Berkeley wrote something about me and said that Heidegger was influential. Of course it was quite true, but no one in France has ever perceived it. When I was a student in the 1950s, I read Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty. When you feel an overwhelming influence, you try to open a window30.

Heidegger (and Nietzsche, who here goes unmentioned) thus came along at exactly the right moment for Foucault; they represented a window for him, a way out, an Ausgang, from immaturity perhaps. If it was not exactly they who were expected, then at least Foucault (and with him, perhaps, Derrida and his entire generation) was looking for something to free themselves from Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. When it came, it was a shock, but a not entirely unexpected shock.

What Foucault found in Nietzsche, what was missing from Sartre and allowed Foucault to escape from his overwhelming influence, was a notion of history, and more especially a history of truth: “My relation to Nietzsche, or what I owe Nietzsche, derives mostly from the texts of around 1880, where the question of truth, the history of truth and the will to truth were central to his work”.31

These texts, presumably, do not include “The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” (1874), or any of the other Untimely Meditations. Nevertheless, it is to this text that Heidegger — the thinker who provided Foucault with access to Nietzsche, at the same time as Nietzsche provided access to him — is referring when he attempts to show us the essential use of history for “a critique of the ‘Present’”, which critique “becomes a way of painfully detaching oneself from the falling publicness of the ‘today’”32. Nietzsche and Heidegger had long ago, at a time when the world was not yet ready to hear them, already shown us how the “authentic” attitude to adopt before history is that of openness to the future, that which detaches itself from
the ‘today’, which is “interpreted in terms of understanding a possibility of existence [...] an understanding which is repetitive in a futural manner” in order to see, in the light of this future, what it will have been.

It is, presumably, this history that is missing from Sartre. Derrida complains that Sartre lacks “a history of concepts”, particularly of that concept known as ‘man’. Without such a history, the reflection on ‘today’ is not possible, if what was true for Nietzsche is true for everyone: “it is only to the extent that I am a pupil of earlier times [...] that though a child of the present time I was able to acquire such untimely experiences”. Sartre, thus lacking an “authentic” history, or suffering from its abuse, was unable to have such untimely experiences, was unable to act counter to his time and thus “for the benefit of a time to come”. As much as his work and his actions might “mark an epoch”, it is an epoch that is past. At best, Sartre might himself have participated in the movement which led to his surpassing, for the rupture took place “around 1950-55, at a time, moreover, when Sartre himself renounced, I believe, what one could call philosophical speculation properly speaking, and when finally he invested his own philosophical activity in behaviour that was political”.

Nevertheless, if Sartre was present at the time when he himself became untimely, was an all too timely factor in making himself a has-been (at a time [1953] when Foucault, fortuitously, was reading the Untimely Meditations), he served as a bridge to the post-Sartrean world, that which asks the question of today:

philosophy from Hegel to Sartre has essentially been a totalising enterprise, if not of the world or of knowledge, at least of human experience. I would say that perhaps if there is now an autonomous philosophical activity [...] then one could define it as a diagnostic activity. To diagnose the present is to say what the present is, and how our present is absolutely different from all that is not it, that is to say, from our past.

Yet perhaps the division between “philosophy from Hegel to Sartre” and diagnostic philosophy is harder to mark than Foucault appears to believe. In the interview entitled “Replies to Structuralism”, Sartre accuses Foucault’s timely work of being “the latest barrier that the bourgeoisie once again can erect against Marx”. Foucault reacted with “amused astonishment” to this comment:

I was in the Communist Party some time ago for a few months, or a little more than a few months, and at that time
Sartre was defined for us as the last rampart of bourgeois imperialism, the last stone of the edifice, etc. So it is with amused astonishment that I find this phrase coming from Sartre’s pen now, fifteen years later. Let’s say that he and I have turned around the same axis.

In their revolutions around the same axis, in their exchanging of places in which each keeps the same relative position, had Foucault moved from being timely to being untimely, and Sartre conversely? Or has it been the other way around? At which point in their revolution has each adopted a more critical, a more revolutionary, position? And at which point, which timely or untimely time, was each at their most unmodern?

This was not to be the only point upon which Foucault and Sartre “turned around the same axis”. In the 1983 interview quoted above Foucault replied to a question about Nietzsche with a question of his own:

Did know that Sartre’s first text — written when he was a young student — was Nietzschan? “The History of Truth,” a little paper first published in a Lycee review around 1925. He began with the same problem. And it is very odd that his approach should have shifted from the history of truth to phenomenology, while for the next generation — ours — the reverse was true.

This time, it is not just Foucault and Sartre who have revolved around the same axis, but Sartre and Foucault’s entire generation. Foucault’s work, perhaps, was not so untimely, for it was caught up in a generational shift. In thus shifting perspective, he was simply a child of his time. And now it is Sartre who appears untimely — because it is not his generation which travelled from Nietzsche to phenomenology, but him alone, because his starting point, which, as a good dialectician, he must have to some degree conserved, was Nietzschan — and finally because “The History of Truth” is a mythical work. In fact, it does not exist, at least not in the form in which Foucault suggests. The work he has in mind can be none other than “La légende de la vérité”, published, not in 1925, but in 1931, in the same issue of Bifur in which Corbin’s Qu’est-ce-que la métaphysique? appeared. Foucault was wrong. History was not Sartre’s starting point: it was myth.

If nothing else, this series of contretemps illustrates the difficulty of applying the concept of the untimely, of that which must be awaited as the unexpected. If Sartre’s philosophy is no longer appropriate to our time, does this make it more or less fitting for a postmodernity which must be thought of as the untimely? If Sartre is indeed wholly and irretrievably in the past —
a has-been — does this not make the confrontation with his thought all the more pressing? For such studies of the past are “untimely”: “that is to say, acting counter to our time, and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come”44.

If Foucault is right, if Sartre is out of date, “a nineteenth-century man”, does this make him more or less relevant to an age in which “time is out of joint”45? Sartre himself concurred in Foucault’s judgement, that he was a nineteenth century man trying to think in the twentieth. As a legacy of his grandfather’s having educated him, he grew up in the atmosphere of the bourgeoisie under Louis Philippe: “I started of with a handicap of eighty years”46. But in this, the most untimely of times, Sartre’s assessment of the possible advantages of such an anachronistic education are more timely than ever: “Ought I to complain? I don’t know: in our bustling societies, delays [les retards] sometimes give a head start”47.

Where, then, is Sartre: ahead of us, or behind? Perhaps the surpassing of his thought by the structuralists and post-structuralists brought us closer to him, rather than further away. The possibility of such an inversion is entertained by Foucault himself, in an as yet unpublished interview he gave Didier Eribon in September 1981, on the death of Lacan. In it, Foucault retells the by-now familiar story, according to which Sartre is well and truly dépasse, left behind by a younger generation inspired by the more progressive, more up to date, thought of Lacan and of structural linguistics. In all those years of writing and thought, Sartre had, it seems, made up only five years of the initial handicap with which he had started: “The first pages of Sartre’s Flaubert are unreadable, due to five or ten pages on language which are seventy-five years out-of-date [de retard], ignorant of what linguistics has discovered in the meantime”.48

But Sartre’s retard might have given him a head start over Lacan, despite the obsolescence of his theoretical apparatus. For, as Foucault continues:

It so happened that the people who had been caught up in the question of the subject, for the most part, were involved in the movement of agitation and of ‘mobilisation’ of the 1960s. They were all Lacanians and found themselves converging with Sartre while Lacan remained on his couch49.

Sartre’s theoretical retard, it seems, did not prevent him from being in the avant-garde in practice.
Sartre Vivant

The inversions and paradoxes associated with the break between modernity and postmodernity appear to be more than theoretical issues, arising from an ill-chosen name or the free play of language. They are problems which arise practically, whenever we attempt to start anew. We must at least entertain the thought, then, that the advent of the untimely makes it impossible to pronounce, once and for all, that any thought is simply passé, that it has moved entirely into the past, and correlatively to acclaim the arrival of a thought which is entirely new. If we are still to be able to think, to have philosophy in this most untimely of ages, when philosophy has “if not vanished has at least been dispersed”\textsuperscript{50}, a philosophy, that is, after philosophy, such a philosophy cannot dispense with its own history by asserting that it represents a radically new beginning. To start all over again is not to be open to the new, but to condemn oneself to inevitable repetition.

Foucault himself, despite modulating his initial vituperative assessment of Sartre’s work, would never countenance the suggestion that they might, philosophically, have something in common: “I owe him nothing”\textsuperscript{51}. Moreover, despite the tentative reassessment of Sartre’s place in history expressed in the interview with Eribon quoted above, in other places Foucault continued to repeat that his work belonged to another, past, era. From the interviews of the 1960s to one of Foucault’s last texts, the pseudonymous article on himself for the \textit{Dictionnaire des philosophes}, the passage from Sartre to Foucault is a rupture with the past:

It is doubtless too early to assess the break introduced by Michel Foucault [...] in a philosophic landscape previously dominated by Sartre and by what Sartre called the unsurpassable philosophy of our time, Marxism. From the outset, starting with \textit{The History of Madness} (1961), Michel Foucault situates himself elsewhere\textsuperscript{52}. Foucault always endorsed the rhetoric of ruptures and of generational shifts, which would situate Sartre in the untimely era we have left behind, while Foucault’s work, presumably, would represent the new “unsurpassable philosophy of our time”. Foucault, we might want to say, should exercise more restraint in his assessment of what is contemporary with us — particularly since he himself is, by his own admission, if not obsolete than at least out of date: “What are we calling post-modernity? I’m not up to date”\textsuperscript{53}.

Being up to date is, precisely, the question. Even if neither Sartre nor, in the end, Foucault were up to date, abreast of their time, writing for their age — and they have now been dead sixteen and twelve years respectively —
their significance to us, today, might be all the greater. Perhaps, then, Sartre was wrong, in his assessment of what it meant to write for one’s time:

> for a little while longer the dead act as if they were living. A little while — one year, ten years, maybe even fifty, but in any case a finite period — and then they’re buried a second time [...]. [A]s long his books provoke anger, embarrassment, shame, hatred, love — even if he is no longer anything but a shade — he shall live! Afterward, the deluge.⁵⁴

Perhaps it is only after a writer is buried a second time that his or her work, entering into new conjunctions and combinations unforeseeable by the author, takes on its greatest relevance. As Foucault himself noted, in the interview he gave Eribon on Lacan’s death, “Sartre died the contemporary of those who had modelled themselves on a thought formed in rupture with him”⁵⁵. Perhaps, then, Sartre died, and lived, our contemporary.
Notes


2 For Ozouf, the essential difference marked by the passage “from Sartre to Foucault” concerns not just totalisation or humanism, but also a new problematisation, if not rejection, of the “watchword that for so long served us as a talisman: revolution” (Mona Ozouf, ‘Préface’, to Nicole Muchnik, N (ed.), *De Sartre à Foucault: Vingt ans de grands entretiens dans Le Nouvel Observateur* (Hachette, 1984). My translation.


4 *Ibid*.


8 Michel Foucault, “The Archaeology of Knowledge”, in *Foucault Live*, John Johnston et. al. (trans.), Semiotext(e), 1989, p. 50.


10 Michel Foucault, “Entretien”. My translation.

11 I have examined the philosophical aspects of this confrontation, and attempted to trace a number of affinities between Foucault and Sartre, in *Being Up to Date: Foucault, Sartre and Postmodernity*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Monash University.


17 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 220.


21 I owe this bibliographical information, as well as important aspects of my general approach to historiography, to Robert Denoon Cumming, *Phenomenology and Deconstruction I: The Dream is Over* (The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 115 and 218n21.


23 Ibid.

24 Ibid. 186.


29 Ibid.


31 Michel Foucault, “Critical Theory/Intellectual History”, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 32.


33 Ibid.


36 Michel Foucault, “Foucault Responds to Sartre”, in *Foucault Live*, 36.
Macey adds that Foucault’s reading at this time was explicitly “‘against’ Sartre and Hegel”.


Sartre, “Replies To Structuralism”. 110.

Foucault, “Foucault Responds to Sartre”, p. 40. In a much later interview, Foucault treated Sartre’s comment with the seriousness it deserved: “Poor bourgeoisie: if it had needed me as ‘bulwark,’ it would have lost power long ago” (Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori, R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (trans.), (Semiotext(e), 1991), 85).


To be fair to Foucault, the interview in which he calls “La légende de la vérité” “The History of Truth” is available to me only in an English translation from the original German publication — itself presumably a translation from the French. So the deformation of the title of Sartre’s article may be due as much to repeated translations as to any error of Foucault’s.

As Derrida notes, Sartre did not have to wait for an epochal shift in order to become untimely. He was out-of-step with his time from the start, for he “rejected or misunderstood so many theoretical and literary events of his time” — Derrida lists psychoanalysis, Marxism, structuralism, Joyce, Artaud, Bataille, Blanchot (“Derrida l’insoumis”, in Muchnik, (ed.), De Sartre a Foucault, 371; my translation). For Hollier too our age, which “will no doubt have defined itself as an epoch […] by evolving under the sign of the sign” is nevertheless “dominated by that immense exercise in untimeliness, the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, whose will to modernity […] issues on this specific point in an unprecedented anachronism” (Denis Hollier, The Politics 0/ Prose: Essay on Sartre, trans. J. Mehlman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 59). Now that Sartre has been “essentially relegated to the past”, Hollier adds, he is doubly untimely, and with him all who still write about him (92).

Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations, 60. Deleuze notes that, “[i]f Foucault is a great philosopher, this is because he used history for the sake of something beyond it: as Nietzsche said, acting against time, and thus on time, for the sake of a time one hopes will come” (Gilles Deleuze, “What is a dispositif?”, in Armstrong, Michel Foucault Philosopher, 164-5).


47 Ibid.
49 Ibid. 263.
50 Foucault, “Foucault Responds to Sartre”, 35.