

# Foucault Studies

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## INTERVIEW

### **Born to Learn<sup>1</sup>**

Denys Foucault

Jean-Luc Terradillos



Photo 1: Michel Foucault and Cyrano, the family donkey, at Vendevre during the Occupation  
(photo credit: Denys Foucault)

*Denys Foucault was born in 1933 in Poitiers, at 10 Arthur-Ranc Street, like his brother Michel. He would become a surgeon like his father and his grandparents and would practice in Paris. Attached, like his brother, to his native region, he returns regularly to his family home in Vendevre, near Poitiers. He recalls for us their life during the war of 1939-1945.*

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<sup>1</sup> The following interview first appeared in *L'Actualité Poitou-Charentes* no. 51 (janv. 2001) under the title "Nés pour apprendre." Some of the photos also appeared in *L'Actualité Poitou-Charentes*, no. 72 (april 2006). We gratefully acknowledge permission from *L'Actualité*, especially its editor-in-chief Jean-Luc Terradillos, to translate and republish the interview along with the photos. The interview was translated by Chloë Taylor with the assistance of Alain Beaulieu.

**L'actualité (Jean-Luc Terradillos):** *Why did your brother leave the Henri IV high school of Poitiers for Saint-Stanislas?*

**Denys Foucault:** I know that in third year, during the 1939-1940 school year, he was quite unhappy because his main teacher had caught the flu. On the other hand, a lot of professors in the public teaching system were prisoners in Germany, which wasn't the case in the private school system.



Photo 2: Denys Foucault on the family property of Vendeuve, near Poitiers (photo credit: Franck Gérard, 2000)

*They were Pétainistes at Saint-Stan...*

Other than the monk Duret, who was a resister and was deported. The institution thus found itself without a philosophy teacher. The prior wanted the course to be conducted by a literature teacher. But my mother, who was a bit wary of private education, protested, saying "It's literature, not philosophy!" Besides, my brother couldn't stand this teacher. My mother succeeded in that a monk from Ligugé, Dom Pierrot, taught philosophy at Saint-Stan. Meanwhile, she had asked Louis Girard, an undergraduate student in philosophy, to give private classes to my brother. My brother also took courses in Latin and Greek with the monk Aigran, who lent him books from his well-furnished library.

*What was Poitiers like at this time?*

I was ten years old and had no point of comparison. I can say that it was a city occupied by a certain tension but without drama. In the beginning, the German soldiers were every-

where, even at Vendevre where they occupied a part of our house right up until the opening of the Eastern front. They must have received strict orders to remain “korrekt.” In the end, there weren’t many Germans left.

*Where were you during the bombing of Poitiers in June 1944?*

We knew that the neighbourhood near the train station would be bombed. So, everyone who lived in the surrounding area was asked to go elsewhere. My parents therefore lived temporarily at the Place de la Liberté, while we, the children, were already on holiday at Vendevre. A bomb destroyed the garage of our house.

*What was the place of education in your home?*

We were born to learn, as much on my father’s side as on my mother’s side. My brother was a brilliant student, but not in all disciplines. Mathematics didn’t interest him and the sciences didn’t much either. We also learned music. My brother played the piano. He gave it up quickly. So did I for that matter.



Photos 3-4: The house where Michel Foucault was born: 10, rue Arthur-Ranc (previously rue de la Visitation) (photo credit: Marc Deneyer, 2006). The house was sold by Mme. Foucault to the post office in 1967. It is now occupied by the office of Penitential Reintegration, Probation and Judicial Youth Protection Services.

*Did he speak to you of his memories of Poitiers?*

He didn't speak of them much because it wasn't the subject of his work. He revealed a few memories from time to time. For instance, he told me that upon his arrival in Paris, when he was in the Henri IV preparatory school, his classmates asked him for the lecture notes of the very distinguished professor of history Gaston Dez which he had attended at the Henri IV preparatory school in Poitiers. Which he did, thus demonstrating a certain fair-play. When he passed the oral entry exam to the École normale supérieure, my father asked him "What would you like?" My brother answered him, to our general surprise, "I want German lessons." In fact, he had taken Latin, Greek, and English but not German. Yet he had found it hard to take the critical comment of the president of the philosophy jury about his poor accent when he risked a citation in this language he didn't know. So he took German lessons with Monsieur Rose, a teacher at the Henri IV high school in Poitiers.

*In an interview, your brother said, "I spent my childhood in a petty bourgeois environment, that of provincial France, and the obligation to speak, to make conversation with visitors was, for me, at the same time something very strange and very tedious. I often asked myself why people felt the need to speak. Silence could be a much more interesting way of relating." Did you never speak about yourselves at home?*

The circle of family relations was very narrow and the polite conversation always turned around the same subjects. But, really, a certain kind of conversation didn't exist: personal conversations. Politics remained the main preoccupation. This is understandable for that time.

*Were there tensions with respect to this subject?*

Yes, as always between different generations, but nothing dramatic. My parents were right-wing. Though... My brother was more to the left. Though... in this he wasn't opposed to my grandmother who, however, went to mass almost every day.

*But was this discretion real?*

In as much as it was unformulated it is difficult to define the degree of its existence. It was how it was. One felt no need to talk about oneself at home. Oneself, it was one's school reports.

*You lived on Arthur-Ranc Street, which is still called Visitation Street, where the scandal of the "sequestered woman of Poitiers"<sup>2</sup> erupted in 1901. Was this a subject of conversation?*

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<sup>2</sup> The scandal of "La séquestrée de Poitiers" was a highly mediatized case of a woman, Blanche Monnier, who, following an anonymous letter to the police, was discovered in 1901 to have been confined for 25

The sequestered woman's house was situated just in front of the post office. Passing by it, we sometimes said: "that's where it happened!" In fact, we didn't talk about it much.

*Can one suppose any connection at all between the proximity of the sequestered woman's house and the fact of writing later on insanity and exclusion?*

I don't think there was any connection. Nevertheless, I remember that we went to see Marthe Huertin, the deaf, dumb and blind woman at the Larnay Institute whom a nun had taught to respond to all kinds of questions through different means. She was presented as a freak. My brother seemed fascinated.



Photo 5: The house where Michel Foucault was born (photo credit: Marc Deneyer, 2000)

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years in a room with locked shutters in her mother's house. Blanche Monnier was deranged, naked, and weighed only 25 kilograms when she was discovered by the police, lying in a bed amidst debris and excrements. Her mother and brother were arrested. Her mother, already ill, died in prison 15 days later. Her brother stood trial, accused of being his mother's accomplice, and was condemned to fifteen months in prison, but was acquitted on appeal. Whether Blanche Monnier's sequestration was forced (following the discovery of her affair with a lawyer) or voluntary (as a consequence of her mental illness) was contested in the course of the trial. Blanche Monnier would live the remainder of her life in a psychiatric hospital in Blois. In 1930, André Gide would publish a book, *La séquestrée de Poitiers*, based on Blanche Monnier's story. [translator's note]



*Did your brother maintain an attachment to his native region?*

He came regularly to Poitiers and spent the month of August at Vendevre. He corrected his manuscripts there. He was very attached to Vendevre, especially to our mother who lived there. He loved everything about this country that was that of his origins, that of his family.



Photos 6-9: Interior of the house where Michel Foucault was born (photo credit: Marc Deneyer, 2000)