

## REVIEW

**Herculine Barbin, *Mes souvenirs. Histoire d'Alexina/Abel B.* (Paris: La cause des Livres, 2008), ISBN: 978-2917336014**

A century and a half after being written, the journal of Alexina/Abel Barbin continues to glow. Composed in the months before committing suicide (1868), the journal was first published in 1874 as an appendix to a medical study on hermaphroditism,<sup>1</sup> fuelling a heated debate in the scientific community and public opinion of the time. After a long period of oblivion, the text was rediscovered and put into print by Michel Foucault in 1978.<sup>2</sup> Despite the overtly political and critical slant of this edition, the theoretical stakes of the document remained unexplored. The diaries appeared without any commentary, accompanied only by a number of archival materials (medical reports, news article, private letters) documenting the cultural and scientific resonance of the story in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: a clinical gaze deliberately leaving an interrogative mark over the ambiguity of the text. The following English translation<sup>3</sup> partially cleared up this haziness. Foucault added an introduction to the text, while including in the appendix a short story by the German novelist Oscar Panizza, *A scandal at the convent*, explicitly inspired by Herculine Barbin's biography. In this sense, the new French edition under review, published in 2008 by *La Cause des Livres*, presents a limited expansion to the pre-existing ones. The appendix includes fewer documents; Foucault's introduction is missing, and so is Panizza's novel. Apart from the copy of some of the original archival materials, a short essay on scholastic laws in 19<sup>th</sup> century France and some of the first scientific photographs of hermaphrodites—a test for the observer, caught between a voyeuristic 'will to know' and a truthful imagination of the impossible—the book has little new to offer. The merit of this republication, then, is above all that of recalling how Herculine's words have not yet exhausted their acerbic force.

Declared a female at birth, Alexina was by all means destined to a virtually normal life. A studious yet lively and passionate character, she spent the first part of her life in an exclusively feminine and profoundly religious environment, surrounded by a sincere and general

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<sup>1</sup> Ambroise Tardieu, *Question Médico-légale de l'Identité dans ses Rapports avec les Vices de Conformation des Organes Sexuels - Contenant les Souvenirs et Impressions d'un Individu dont le Sexe Avait Été Méconnu* (Paris: Baillière, 1874).

<sup>2</sup> Herculine Barbin, *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B (présente par Michel Foucault)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Herculine Barbin, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-century French Hermaphrodite*, introduction by Michel Foucault, translation by Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

affection. A warm childhood destined, however, to give way to the disquiet caused by the first hints of abnormality: nightmares and pleasures rapidly flourished in the uniqueness of her adolescence, split between a hallucinatory, intensely experienced desire for girls and the embarrassment for her less than feminine aspect. Hence, the nearly inescapable ending to her growing turmoil: the unbearable strain of her sexuality forced Herculine to a sort of self-confession; an appeal to the law's pacifying powers. Alexina became Abel. A note (dated 1860, when she was 20) on the margin of her birth certificate thus established that Herculine will henceforth be "designated to be of masculine sex." (107) A far less luminous future followed the verdict: Abel spent the last decade of his life in a solitary and resentful state, interrupted only by his suicide.

It is without a doubt tempting, and rightly so, to read the journal as the illustration of a struggle fought within the meshes of power, its purely dramatic substance. A drama which, extraordinary as any tragedy is, seems to directly gesture at the banality of evil—the lethal arm of biopolitics, its most mundane and aseptic of exercises, the white, ferociously indifferent eye of bureaucracy. By the same token, one would find at play in the diaries the necessary underside of any social force, the resistance of desire to codification: in short, all those themes with which we have generally come to identify Foucault's oeuvre.

And yet, the diaries insistently prompt questions beyond this framework. The frictions produced by Barbin's diverse existences, the intensity with which the different axes of the narration meet—the encounter between the different genres/genders of her/his life—saturate the plurivocity of the text. Foucault himself hinted at this aporia when he described, on the back cover of the first French edition, Alexina/Abel's existence as a 'parallel life,' a life "so parallel that nothing can bring [it] back together"—an existence invested by a sort of unspeakability. We would hardly find a place from whence the meaning of Herculine's journey could be enlightened or evened out. What dissipated her/his life? What made her/his love impermeable to the temptations of a straight existence? What made resistance and redemption unliveable? It would certainly be possible to reduce these issues to a stack of psychological/physiological explanations: this is, after all, what made Herculine's life so intriguing to its contemporaries. However, different sorts of questions, concerning the nature of this unspeakability and the aporia it embodies, seem to press us today—a domain which, exceeding the problems of gender politics, appears to largely overlap with our understanding of subjectivity.

Hence, a story running parallel to the straight line leading from unruliness to normalization: the tortuous conduits of love and desires thrusting Herculine's life astray. If, as Foucault and others (e.g. Butler) have noted, one cannot appeal to a pre-discursive, pre-subjective essence as a source of resistance to power, but only to the unpredictable channels opened up by the very processes of subjection, the question remains of *how* and *on what conditions* these might be redirected within the circuits of power, without being preemptively disciplined at the moment of their appearance. Alexina/Abel's desire for girls, prohibited inasmuch as 'she' was a girl, became unliveable precisely when sanctioned by officially becoming male. ("I would be a detestable husband," 95) Queerly, her/his desires could find expression and be lived out only in a liminal situation, within the strain produced by their being sheltered (knowingly or not) from the eyes of society. As if such concealment—the abyss in which

her/his pleasures were forcedly thrown—established, at one and the same time, the condition of possibility of desire and the ground of its imminent annihilation.

Alexina and most of the people around her could not fully comprehend—understandably so—how a definitive decision concerning her gender would not only sanction an unruly situation, but would also cut the spiral thread of her existence. Apart from the one confessor who compassionately advised her to never again “renew the avowal” of her secrets, (57) only another person seemed to recognize the extent to which Herculine’s existence was beset on all sides: Madame P., mother of Alexina’s lover (Sara), and directress of the institution she was teaching in. A sort of hidden wisdom, or recklessness, blinded her to what was happening inside her institution, to the point where she seemed to voluntarily ignore the medical diagnosis of Alexina’s hermaphroditism. (63) Whereas this could plausibly be seen, as Alexina does, as a case of pathological denial, (67) it was impossible to tell—given Madam P.’s intelligence and experience—whether her ingenuity was ‘real or faked.’ (73) As if a recondite instinct was urging her to preserve the quasi-invisibility of the limbo she, Alexina and Sara were in, as its sole condition of reality: there was no way to look straight into the eye of the night, without the night swallowing what was there to be seen.

It might be true that the case of the hermaphrodite Barbin is too exceptional to be held as paradigmatic and that, moreover, our society has since produced far more flexible mechanisms to deal with ‘abnormal selves.’ This is undeniable. On the other hand, any form of subjectivity, however dystopian or unruly it might be, is still compelled to tacitly—but insistent-ly—produce its self-justification. This process—by means of which the individual declares the legitimacy of her/his existence—is precisely what reproduces and proliferates, often in extremely equivocal ways, the violence of subjection. This seems to be the yoke of even the most cautious emancipatory-critical projects. We, who have abandoned the reverie of a foundational subjectivity, struggle to name an experience which would free us—from within the constraints set by power—of the very desire for subjection. We could hardly imagine that middle point, in which some existences fall, where neither the infamy of being counted nor the dread of being dis-counted can be endured—the ‘indispensable necessity’ (95) of Alexina/Abel’s life. Somehow, we already belong to her/his in-humanity.

Andrea Rossi  
Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion  
Lancaster University  
LA1 4YD Lancaster  
UK  
[a.rossi@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:a.rossi@lancaster.ac.uk)