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ARTICLE

'Foucault's Ironies and the Important Earnestness of Theory'

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ABSTRACT: Foucault's *History of Sexuality* 1 cannot be understood without sustained attention to its ironies, which are written into every level from diction to structure. The little book does not intend to deliver a theory, queer or otherwise. It means rather to display and then to frustrate the desire for theory—especially when it comes to sexuality.

Keywords: Foucault, sexuality, irony, theory.

When Foucault's *History of Sexuality* 1 appeared in English in 1978, it arrived out of sequence among his works and in an inattentive translation. It also entered a context prepared to regard Foucault as someone ready to accomplish specific theoretical feats.¹ So, in English, Foucault's little book became a liberationist manifesto. It was first required to authorize some empowering gay history, as if Foucault had written a history of sex; then to provide axioms for queer theory, as if he had delivered solid knowledge about sexuality, when he had in fact done everything to show its insubstantiality, its spectral mystifications. This political appropriation colluded with the personal investments of sexual liberation, with a lived 'experience' of the absolute importance of a sex parceled out into identities, with the urgent certitude of identity-politics.

Such conditions of reception cannot be overcome simply by more 'accurate' translation or by helpful side-bars on Foucault's authorial career and cultural contexts. The conditions are not the result of ignorance so much as of desire—of the pious investments that constitute a political reader. These investments led many to the newly translated book, but could not prepare for its ironies.² The readers most likely to be interested in *History of Sexuality* 1 were

¹ Recall, for example, the political tones in the introduction to Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), especially 17 (transgressive history), 18 (counter-culture, the sixties), 21 (the sixties), 25 (the relation of theory to practice).

² Foucault's irony in this book has been emphasized by some readers—and notably in relation to queer theory by Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), perhaps especially at 127-134. Dan Beer undertakes a sustained reading of Foucault's rhetorical and linguistic devices, but then falls back into claims about Foucault's own theory of power. See Beer, *Michel Foucault: Form and Power* (Oxford: Legenda/EHRC, University of Oxford, 2002), for

those least likely to receive it as ironic—much less, as mocking. Yet the book begins not by denouncing the churches and their anathemas on sex, not by decrying hypocritical rulers and their prudery-police, not by urging revolt against the complicity of courts and expert psychiatric witnesses, and not by dismissing Freud or socially compulsory psychoanalysis. The little book begins by mocking Foucault's political allies—the proponents of sexual liberation and, indeed, of gay liberation. It begins by mocking its most earnest readers.

The mockery of the opening pages recurs whenever the topic is the revolutionary assertion of true sexual selves. The tone in these passages is not subtle. Foucault lets himself go when he paraphrases the fervent faith in sexual liberation. He mimics its portentous tones, its hortatory cadences, its resort to theological hyperbole—to the extravagance of scriptural speech. Sex has become, he remarks at one point, “the secret, the omnipotent cause, the hidden meaning, the fear without respite” —all attributes of some versions of the Christian God and His (!) revealed Word.³ Foucault's ironic tone reaches a crescendo during the concluding peroration, in which the charge of irony is turned explicitly against the regime—our own—that endows sexuality with such awful powers. “Irony of this disposition (*dispositif*): it makes us believe that it concerns our liberation.”⁴ Irony is the book's final lesson, but also its constant manner.

The effects of irony in *History of Sexuality 1* are aided by two other devices that resist earnest readers who come in search of a caucus platform or a handy plan of action. The book is an abstract or schematic text, curiously undocumented and barely annotated. It seems to presume acquaintance with its cases and sources—or else to suppose that their details don't really matter, because it offers them only as types or examples rather than as evidence. The book provides nothing like the detailed reading of individual cases: its most extensive illustration, the case of Jouy, is reduced to a bare outline—and reported with a casualness likely to give offense.⁵ The book's section on method lists “propositions” that are specifically anti-revolutionary, and its “rules” are labeled as (anti-Cartesian) “prescriptions for prudence.”⁶ So this first volume proves nothing and passes on no easy method.

An ironic book. An abstract book. A book that relies on teasing to demand more attentive reading—from anyone who wants really to read rather than to acquire another theory.

* * *

example at 80 (“a comprehensive theory”), 85 (theory in contrast with examples), 90, 95, 97, 101-102, 116. A similar slip from emphasizing irony to desiring useful analyses occurs in Lisa Dowling, *The Cambridge Introduction to Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 87, 91-92, but then 95.

³ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1: *La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 105.

⁴ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, 211.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 43-45. The more detailed discussion of the case is in *Les anormaux: Cours au Collège de France, 1974-75*, edited by François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, Valerio Marchetti, Antonella Salomoni (Paris: Gallimard/Le Seuil, 1999), 275-290. For a detailed reading of the complex narrative rhetoric even of the passage in *HS 1*, see Beer, *Michel Foucault*, 103-111.

⁶ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, 123-129 (propositions), 129 (rules as prescriptions).

The book's irony is signaled by the first chapter's title, which is a pun on the title of another book. As Foucault will shortly explain, *Other Victorians* is a study by Stephen Marcus of figures not ordinarily included in our common myths about that period: "the prostitute, her client and pimp, the psychiatrist and his hysteric."⁷ Foucault plays on Marcus's title, expanding it and re-punctuating it as "We others, Victorians."⁸ This means several things. We others, who count ourselves as still trapped by Victorian repression. We others, who imagine that we are rising up from the margins of society to protest repression—like prostitutes and hysterics in revolt. But also, most ironically, We new 'other Victorians,' compelled still to tell our stories—just as they were—for moral edification and public health.

The play on words is carried forward into Foucault's opening pages, which retell the common story of Victorian repression and present liberation—and which offer only a few cues that the story is not one that Foucault endorses. The first cue comes in the third sentence: "Still at the start of the seventeenth century, it is said (*dit-on*), a certain frankness was current."⁹ We are reading not historical fact, but the repetition of a familiar story. It is a story about the relation of words to sex. In that imagined era of free speech, there was no need for secrecy: "words were said without excessive reticence, and things without too much disguising." For us, by contrast, sexuality is (said to be) "mute" and "hypocritical." "The decency of words bleaches [our] discourses."¹⁰

Foucault parrots a story about a disconnection between words and things—a story about muteness and hypocrisy. His irony dislocates the story, altering its assumed relation to the facts of history and our present self-understanding. Then Foucault steps back to consider what makes this story about silence so easy to speak. The text gives no typographical cue for his transition. There is only an invisible shift of voice, itself a lesson about silence and speech. Foucault begins to explain that the story is attractive because it conforms to our favorite schemes of analysis while representing us as not only perceptive, but courageous. We have seen through the great repression and can now speak it! The 'we' here is particular: its members are versed in leftist economic analyses, in dialectical criticism, and in the prophetic rhetoric of revolution. Foucault has sprung a trap on his likeliest readers. He has further suggested that speeches around sexuality ought not to be offered as earnest political critique or urgent revolutionary manifesto. Talk about sexuality ought to be more like the speeches of—but which models does Foucault's ironic writing actually commend?

The first word of this chapter—of the book's body (as we say)—is one of the most famous opening words in contemporary French letters: *Longtemps*, For a long time. In case we should miss the significance, Foucault repeats the word at the opening of the last chapter. *Longtemps*: the first word of Marcel Proust's torrent of a novel-chronicle, his pouring into words the memories of a life, of life, including—of course and famously—of human desires, their silences, and their fulfillments. In the opening section of the volume entitled *Sodom and Gomorrah*, Proust registers the relatively recent appearance of the category 'homosexual' in

⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁸ The interest of the punctuation is lost in Hurley's English, which reads "We Other Victorians."

⁹ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., 10 (for the last quotation), 9 (for those just before).

French by juxtaposing it with much older vocabularies—biblical, racial, horticultural. The evocation of Proust in Foucault's text is not only a gesture towards a famous effort at self-writing, but a reminder of the salience of struggles to speak sex in 'our' literature. Scientifically tutored politics is not the only available rhetoric for talking sex.

The figure of Proust, writing and rewriting 'nameless' desire, is paired in Foucault with another figure of unrestrained writing—the anonymous author of the Victorian erotic memoir, *My Secret Life*.¹¹ The endless pages of that work—eleven octavo volumes in the original edition—show not only the impulse to keep on writing over years, but a fascination with the naming of sex. The memoir is, Foucault writes in another introduction to it, “an immense verbal cloth,” “a tapestry” of words about a sex-life.¹² Foucault knows Gershom Legman's argument that the anonymous author was in fact Harold Ashbee, collector of erotica and compiler (under a Latin pseudonym) of a taxonomic bibliography. But Foucault suggests in the introduction that he views *My Secret Life* less as a bibliophile's *hommage* than as an experiment with the application of language to sexual life. He compares *My Secret Life* to Protestant practices of keeping a spiritual journal. For the anonymous memoirist, language has a function that is “instrumental, physiological, exciting, strictly corporeal.”¹³ Prepared beforehand, inhaled during the act, words remain in memory afterwards as a perfume. The memoirist uses language, Foucault suggests, the way “we” use amyl nitrate—that is, presumably, as a vapor that acts on the body to intensify pleasure. A reference to gay sex in the 1970s, but also, in its emphasis on remembering, an application of Proust.

In *History of Sexuality 1*, Foucault offers the loquacity of *My Secret Life* as a better emblem of our Victorianism than the supposed silence of the widowed British Queen. We have not been forced into silence; we have been compelled to speak. The contrast between the memoir's loquacious author and the tight-lipped Queen serves Foucault well, but so does the implied association between that author and Proust—or the contrast, elsewhere, between that author and Freud. The “immense verbal cloth” of *My Secret Life* is not clinical speech. It is produced under another impulse than therapeutic reporting—an impulse akin to the force behind Proust's writing. When he urges his readers to notice how much of our supposed repression consists of talking, Foucault also urges us to hear his speech as something other than political declaration or positivist historiography.

Later in the book, Foucault will recall the story of Diderot's *The Indiscreet Jewels* (that is, *Genitals*) [*Les bijoux indiscrets*]. In the story, as Foucault abbreviates it, the “good genie” Cucufa delivers to the young “sultan” Mangogul a forgotten silver ring that enables—or compels—women's genitals to speak. It ‘liberates’ them. The story has more layers than Foucault's brief summary can describe. It too is an anonymous work, supplied with a title page that elaborates its Orientalist conceit. It offers a thinly veiled satire of the French royal court—hence a risky irony. But Foucault takes from Diderot just the conceit of talking genitals. The point of the studies Foucault is about to undertake is nothing other than “to transcribe into history (*en*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹² Foucault makes these remarks in his preface to a French collection of excerpts from *My Secret Life* published the year after *HS 1* and reprinted in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 3, 131-132.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 132.

histoire) the fable of the *Indiscreet Jewels*.”¹⁴ What does it mean, to transcribe ‘into history’ a fable in which magic compels bodies to speak through and about their sexes?

Apply that question to the title of Foucault’s book—to the famously misleading and disappointing title. *History of Sexuality*, we say in English, and then (if we have been well taught) quickly point out that sexuality is not sex. This is indeed *not* a history of *sex*, as so many frustrated readers have discovered after handing over money in pursuit of titillation. But they might have been just as frustrated by the implicit promises of ‘history’ in ordinary English. In French, *histoire* means both history and story. Diderot’s tale of the talking genitals, for example, calls itself on many pages an *histoire*. If Foucault writes an *histoire* of sexuality, it is history that is inseparable from story-telling. Proust, the author of *My Secret Life*, and the masked Diderot are more important guides for Foucault’s writing than either clinicians of sexual syndromes or statistical historians of sexual acts. Foucault is not interested in counting and classifying copulations over an interval of European time. He scrutinizes instead the sciences that have been built around the category imposed on those acts. He dreams as well the play of alternate languages over sexed bodies in ecstasy—as they anticipate, enact, and remember.

The play of language fascinates, but so does the collusion of language with the projects of knowledge, that is, of power. The sub-title of this book (in French, if not in English) is “the will to know.” This was the title of Foucault’s first lecture series at the Collège de France.¹⁵ It is obviously a Nietzschean phrase—or, rather, a condensation of a whole series of Nietzschean phrases, of Nietzsche’s investigations into the wills, the desires, the physiologies that stand behind the pale, placid claims of scholarly or scientific or philosophical knowing. Foucault uses some of Nietzsche’s other formulations (such as “will to truth”),¹⁶ but for the sub-title he chooses “will to know.”

The obvious reference would seem to be to *scientia sexualis*, the sexual science or knowledge that constitutes sexuality as its object and our sexualized selves as its subject. On this reading, the sub-title suggests that the central task of this little book will be to acquaint us with the operation of the will to sexual knowledge in its several forms—behind the scrim of Victorian ‘repression,’ but also within our earnest claims to sexual liberation. Does Foucault allege a difference between the will to sexual knowledge and the will to knowledge *about* sexual knowledge? Which will motivates the writing of *History of Sexuality 1* if not a will to knowledge? Is *History of Sexuality 1* an analysis of the will to knowledge or an exhibition of that will?

I don’t pretend to catch Foucault out in a simple contradiction. On the contrary, I think he chose the sub-title precisely for its double meaning. He means to analyze sexual knowledge by eliciting it in his readers and performing it himself.¹⁷ Foucault will use our will to

¹⁴ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, 101, with the summary of Diderot’s plot on 104.

¹⁵ In the lectures, Foucault uses some of Nietzsche’s remarks from *Gay Science* to construct a picture of interested knowledge. But a better parallel for the sub-title to *HS 1* is found in Foucault’s “Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire” (1971), as in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2, 136-156, at 152-156.

¹⁶ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, 104-105: “the *histoire* of this will to truth.”

¹⁷ I would urge that Foucault is quite deliberate in displaying specific configurations of the will to know, and so I would resist the claim that he is haplessly overpowered by them. Compare Beer, *Michel Foucault*, 87, who elsewhere defends Foucault against charges of self-contradiction from Baudrillard and Derrida.

sexual knowledge in order to lure us into reading, which will then show us something about that will. Foucault also deliberately indulges his own will to knowledge about sex to exhibit for our sakes its necessary transformations. He gives in to writing sex—even as he writes it ironically. The book's schematic structure is both an image and an undoing of the will to know through writing. So are a number of the section headings, especially in the fourth chapter: Objective, Method, Domain, Periodization. Foucault parodies the elements of a sociological study, because he shows in each case that the term must be reversed. In each case, the reader's expectations for knowledge are deliberately frustrated. Why, then, keep on reading? Everything depends on how the text can redirect the desires for knowing that it activates. Foucault's language must hold us in place while our wills are turned. With Proust, *My Secret Life*, and *The Indiscreet Jewels* as his anti-pornographic models, Foucault elicits his reader's desires by language that refuses to sate them as quickly as possible.

* * *

Foucault is not writing a memory-novel, or scribbling out a record of his sex life, or confecting an Orientalist fable. He offers a text that gives knowledge about our knowledge, that introduces or surveys the knowledge that it elicits and enacts. For him, this means that it cannot convey a theory. Foucault disowns both the word and the project. "The stake of the inquiries that will follow is to advance less towards a 'theory' (*théorie*) than towards an 'analytic' (*analytique*) of power: I mean to say towards the definition of the specific domain that the relations of power form and the determination of the instruments that permit its analysis."¹⁸ A few years later, further along in recounting sexuality's *histoires*, he will be more emphatic—and more teasing. He will remind his auditors at the Collège de France that he is not going to give them "a general Theory of Power (with all the caps) or explications by Domination in general."¹⁹ In other contexts, Foucault mocks "our" need for such theory.²⁰

Instead of theory, Foucault offers an "analytic." The obvious question is what he means. There are many possibilities in the philosophic tradition—from Aristotle through Kant to Bachelard. Let me suggest another antecedent, most immediate: Foucault may be using "analytics" in relation to something like what Roland Barthes means by *textual* analysis—say, in the opening pages of *S/Z*, when Barthes justifies his method of breaking the text apart, line

¹⁸ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, 109. On other pages, Foucault uses the term 'theory' to describe medico-scientific formulations he means to resist, such as the "theory of repression" (170) or "the armature of a general theory of sex." (204)

¹⁹ Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres: Cours au Collège de France, 1982-83*, edited by François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, Frédérique Gros (Paris: Gallimard/Le Seuil, 2008), 41. Compare Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population: Cours au Collège de France, 1977-78*, edited by François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, Michel Senellart (Paris: Gallimard/Le Seuil, 2004), 1: "the analysis of these mechanisms of power is not in any way a general theory of what power is." The refusal is reinforced in the whole prologue to this set of lectures, 1-6.

²⁰ For example, in his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1977), as in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 3, 133-136, especially at 133-134. Compare the interview from the same year, "Le jeu de Michel Foucault," in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 3, 298-329, at 302, in reply to a question from Grosrichard.

by line, according to its different “codes.”²¹ Foucault is also fond of the word ‘code’. It appears frequently in *History of Sexuality 1*, especially with regard to power—and even when related words, like ‘law’, are explicitly set aside.²² In *History of Sexuality 1*, if not in the later volumes, ‘code’ refers to encoding, to signifying, rather than to codification (as in a system of laws).²³ Indeed, power and resistance to it are matters of coding: “it is doubtless the strategic coding (*le codage stratégique*) of these points of resistance that renders a revolution possible, a little like the way that the State rests on the institutional integration of relations of power.”²⁴ Because both power and resistance are everywhere, networks of power depend on the encoding of multiple points within larger strategies. But one may also say the reverse: relations of power come to be ‘power’ by strategic encoding—as quite ordinary words come to be a narrative by being arranged according to decipherable narrative codes. On this reading, after Barthes, the analytics of power would be a study of how power writes itself, how it produces a coherent and compelling text—a text capable of scripting subjects. An analytics of power would disclose or depict power’s narrative production on, in, and through bodies.

Foucault speaks the contrast between theory and analytics, but he implies in it and throughout the contrast between theory and literature or *scientia* and *ars*. This Latin couplet renders two Greek pairings: *theoria* and *praxis*, *theoria* and *technê*. The first pairing recalls centuries of debate over the status or scope of certain discourses—of philosophy itself, but also of medicine and theology. The second pairing adds to the debates what we still call the arts, from craft through poetry. When he refuses a theory of the power that runs through sexuality, Foucault suggests that his own writing wants to be practical, but even more artistic in the widest sense. We are reading artifact-language. If it is not the language of *ars erotica* in the ordinary sense, it is perhaps a first essay in the (hybrid or paradoxical) “*ars erotica, ars theoretica, ars politica*” that might resist the very scientific prose of sexuality.²⁵

In *History of Sexuality 1*, as in earlier texts, there are lyrical evocations of power. They have the rhythm of ritual speech, and—in the manner of ‘negative theology’ or apophasis—they often list what power cannot be said to be.²⁶ Sometimes, Foucault attempts more positive descriptions, though these too are often lists of different and not necessarily coordinate terms. (Negative theologies can multiply the names of God.) For example, at the beginning of the section entitled “Method,” Foucault urges—in a single, Proustian sentence—that power be understood as a multiplicity of relations, their transforming play or interplay, their mutual support, their gaps or oppositions, and the strategies that organize them (with the implied bodily metaphor) into States, Laws, or “social hegemonies.”²⁷ This is not a *definition* of power

²¹ Recall, as one obvious example, the first twelve sections of Barthes, *S/Z*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, edited by Éric Marty (rev. ed., Paris: Seuil, 2002), 121-135.

²² Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, 119.

²³ In *History of Sexuality*, vol. 2 and 3, “code” will almost always appear in connection with law and, indeed, with Christianity.

²⁴ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, 127.

²⁵ Foucault applies this triplet to Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1977), as in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 3, 133-136, at 134.

²⁶ Consider the long series of negations at Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, 110-112.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 121-122.

in any ordinary sense. It is not even a description of power. It is a set of instructions about where to look for what we so reductively call 'power.' The instructions begin by breaking apart the false unity of the single word.

Apply the instructions now to sexuality, the correlative object projected by a particular kind of power. Why is sexuality so important to us? Not because it is always and intrinsically important in human cultures. Most human cultures have gotten along quite well without the category or its equivalent. Sexuality is important because it is "a particularly dense crossing point for the relations of power... In the relations of power, sexuality is... endowed with the greatest instrumentality: usable for the greatest number of maneuvers, and able to serve as a base of operations, a crossroads for the most varied strategies."²⁸ The concept 'sexuality'—like 'instinct' in the lectures on abnormals—serves as a coordinating concept.²⁹ Its flexibility, its blurry comprehensiveness, its unbounded multiplication—these are not defects, but virtues. It is so useful to an emerging form of power precisely because it seems so mystifyingly applicable to everyone, in so many relations. In this regard, the category of sexuality generalizes the useful confusion of the much older category, sodomy. If no one could be quite sure which acts were included under sodomy, neither can anyone now know how far sexuality extends. The invention of sexuality, like the invention of sodomy, is an achievement in the consolidation of power over human bodies by irresponsible naming.

In the middle of these final remarks on the usefulness of sexuality to power, Foucault imagines an objection, which he divides into two questions. They are important illustrations of likely misreadings under the impulse of theory.

The first question asks whether the analysis of sexuality as the production of a disposition of power doesn't elide the body—doesn't somehow deny the body's reality. As if the objector were saying, But there really are bodies there! To which Foucault replies that he is not trying to contrast the biological with the historical, but to study their increasingly complex interactions. "The aim of the present investigation is rather to show how the dispositions of power articulate themselves directly on the body—on bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, pleasures." More pointedly, he says that he is not writing a history of mentalities, but a "'history of bodies' and of the manner in which one has invested what is most material, most living in them."³⁰

But, the objector insists in a second question, isn't this materiality precisely sex? Isn't there really a sex out there onto which the power that flows through sexuality must impose itself? To which Foucault replies: It's this very *idea of sex*, of sex as the permanent anchor of sexuality, that must be traced historically.

I don't know whether the objector is convinced—or, indeed, is presented as one who could be convinced. The objector appears here rather as a concrete illustration of the persistence of certain desires for theory expressed as a robust allegiance to reality. The objector—the reader—wants to hold on to some piece of the sexuality that has been written into the body, that has made late modern power over the body tolerable. So Foucault's reiterated re-

²⁸ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, 136.

²⁹ For example, Foucault, *Les anormaux*, 128-129

³⁰ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, 200.

ply denies the form of the question. We cannot oppose a history of concepts to a timeless body as if we had access to a body beyond all concepts, outside of all times. As if our experience of embodiment hadn't been deeply shaped, effectively organized by concepts imposed on our earliest experience of our bodies. As if the words of the right theory would deliver our bodies to us, intact, unblemished. Theory, the last promise of direct experience, relic of the language of Eden.

* * *

The little book's last section begins with a quotation from D. H. Lawrence that ends with an Edenic call to action: "Now our business is to realize sex. Today the full conscious realization of sex is even more important than the act itself."³¹

This is, of course, not Foucault's view. It is the reverse of Foucault's view. Foucault quotes Lawrence ironically, if not mockingly. The book's end echoes the tone and rhetorical structure of its beginning. Foucault understands Lawrence to put knowledge of sex in place of sex, and so unwittingly to proclaim the ultimate triumph of *scientia sexualis*. Sex as an object of knowledge has replaced sex as an act of bodies. From this quotation, Foucault proceeds to wonder aloud how our pious regime of sexuality will look from some unspecified future—how it will be remembered, not in Proustian reactivation, but in astonished retrospect. Foucault begins to imagine future astonishment at our sense of where we stand in the *longue durée* of the category of sexuality.

Foucault distinguishes two groups among us that pass retrospective judgments on Freud. The first group consists of those who charge Freud with "pansexualism," which here means seeing sex underneath everything.³² We tend to dismiss the members of this group as unthinking prudes, but in fact they were guilty only of a chronological mistake. What they think started with Freud was in fact much older: it was the millennial elaboration of the disposition of sexuality in "our society." The second group (which Foucault implies includes most of his readers) consists of those who think that Freud restored to sex the rightful importance that had long been denied it. Theirs is a much worse mistake, because they misunderstand not the dating, but the whole process. Freud in fact only re-launched, with a more-than-ecclesiastical efficiency, the "epochal injunction" to put sex into speech. Freud is not a new beginning. He is the intensifying continuation of an epoch.

What we take as the repressive Christian denial of sex is in fact the beginning of the construction of *scientia sexualis*, which tricks us into speaking sex as a way to discover its truth. That whole game, that ruse, should astonish us. Then comes the famous sentence: "And we should consider that one day, perhaps, in another economy of bodies and pleasures, one will no longer understand very well how the ruses of sexuality, and of the power that supports its disposition, succeeded in submitting us to the austere monarchy of sex, to the point of vowing

³¹ From D. H. Lawrence, "A propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover," as in *Lady Chatterley's Lover: The Unexpurgated 1928 Orioli Edition* (New York: Bantam, Dell, 2007 [1929]), 338.

³² Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, 209. Compare 103, sex as the explanation (*raison*) for everything.

us to the indefinite task of forcing its secret and of extorting from this ghost (*ombre*) the truest avowals."

The "austere monarchy of sex": In *Discipline and Punish*, modern prisons were described by Foucault (following Baltard) as "complete and austere institutions."³³ Here too "austere" refers not to a scheme of sexual renunciation, though it is that, but to the streamlined efficiency of disciplinary control. Yet it is an "austere monarchy." One immediate reference is back to the book's beginning, to the revaluation of the reign of Queen Victoria, who was supposed to be the emblem of our repression. Foucault had suggested, of course, that a better emblem would be the anonymous author of the endless documentation of *My Secret Life*. He is our true monarch. We may thus suspect that 'monarchy' is satirical. Indeed, it refers as well to the other monarchy Foucault has mentioned—the "kingdom" of Prince Mangogul, lucky owner of the ring that makes genitals talk so amusingly.³⁴ And that Prince may well put the reader in mind of still another royal satire—of Jarry's King Ubu, a recurring figure in Foucault's characterization of 19th-century forensic psychiatry of sex.³⁵ We live in the "austere" and grotesquely comic monarchy first proclaimed in the Ubu-esque power of forensic psychiatrists, who could spout nonsense while taking lives.

Under this "austere monarchy," our endless task is to force the secrets and to secure the truest avowals of sexuality. There will come a time when the now reigning sexuality, the fetishized category of our inmost truth, will seem a ghost, as insubstantial as a shadow, but still capable of haunting—of mesmerizing and terrifying. That time will follow on "another economy of bodies and pleasures." This might mean different purposes for having sex, say as non-procreative, as pure play. Or it might mean different ways of having sex, of producing pleasure. Indeed, some readers link this to Foucault's remarks elsewhere on how certain gay communities—say, in the leather bars of San Francisco's SoMa district before its gentrification—invent new forms of bodily pleasure, designating new organs or new sensations as erotic.³⁶

I wish that these readings convinced me, but I fear that they fail to understand what is required to escape the economy of *scientia sexualis*. Both the Christian confessional and the 19th-century courtroom are acquainted with an enormous range of sexual motives and activities. Remember the list of what Foucault calls the species of "little perverts" that follows the famous contrast between the homosexual and the sodomite.³⁷ Foucault properly likens these perversions to "heresies"; they correspond in fact to the proliferation of types of sexual sin in the Christian confessional—indeed, to 17th- and 18th-century sub-divisions of the sin of sodomy. Finding new ways to have sex—even assuming that we could discover something that

³³ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 233 (in the title), 238 (with the reference to Baltard).

³⁴ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, 101 ("the kingdom of Prince Mangogul").

³⁵ Foucault, *Les anormaux*, 12-15, 300.

³⁶ Recall Foucault's interview with J. O'Higgins, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," *Salmagundi* nos. 58-59 (Autumn-Winter 1982), 10-24, at 20; with the corresponding French text in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 4, 320-335, at 331-332.

³⁷ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, 60.

the Jesuits had overlooked—is not going to get us out from the present economy of bodies and pleasure, the regime of *scientia sexualis*.

What is needed is an epistemic shift that removes bodies and pleasures from the purview of *scientia sexualis* by treating them as something other than objects of scientific knowledge.³⁸ We need to undo the doubling of sexual acts with scientifically invented sexual characters. Can this be accomplished by reversing the pathological valuation—by proclaiming that the pathology was really normal all along? The very language indicates Foucault's answer: the normal and the pathological are central categories for forensic psychiatry, for bio-power. Reversing them leaves the epistemic project intact. What is required, rather, is to overturn the epistemic project. Hence Foucault's critique of gay liberation conceived as the proud assertion of gay identity. The problem with "gay pride" is not the pride, but the identity implicit in 'gay.'³⁹

How to overturn the epistemic project? One step forward would be to give up the desire for a theory. Queer theory, as a teachable academic commodity, as an earnest representation of the truth about sexuality—uncovered at last in our clever and courageous present—is simply a continuation of the project of *scientia sexualis*. Whenever it puts on academic pretensions, but above all whenever it stops being ironic about itself, it agrees with scientific claims about the kind of language appropriate to sex. To say this differently: Foucault re-told as queer theory is Foucault traduced into the tones of *scientia sexualis*.

* * *

The preoccupation with the application of language to deviant or extreme bodies runs from the beginning of Foucault's authorship forward. It is explicit in a number of his works from the 1960s, including the neglected 'literary' essays on Bataille, Klossowski, and Blanchot. Indeed, if I had to look for Foucault's most striking contribution to queer thinking—and queer writing—I might look to his essay, "The Prose of Actaeon." There he follows, as a desiring reader, Klossowski's meditation on the rupture of language at the extremity of dis-identified desire, at once animal and divine.

Klossowski meditates on a Greek myth. In its simplest version, it tells how the hunter Actaeon stumbles upon the goddess Diana bathing in the woods. As punishment for the defiling intrusion, he is turned into a stag and then devoured by his own hounds. Foucault writes into Klossowski's rewriting of this myth along several paths. For the last of them, he distinguishes a "linguistic" understanding of sign from a "religious" one (where "linguistic" seems to mean Structuralist and "religious," Christian). The linguistic sign designates a meaning or a thing by its position in the play of other signs. In the religious domain, some signs have

³⁸ Ibid., 120, where Foucault remarks on conceiving "sex without the law, and power without the king." The challenge—or resistance—in each case is the same, and getting past it requires the same sort of imaginative reversal.

³⁹ Here I leave aside the question whether Foucault is being fair to liberationist discourse, which, for all its ideological simplifications, was well aware of the clinical baggage carried by the term 'homosexual' and committed to overturning psychiatric power over queer lives. Indeed, it is important to remember that the retrieval of the term 'gay,' an old slang term like 'queer,' was an effort to find a non-clinical term.

another function: they say what they mean by consecrating a relation to a privileged original. They become the transitory double of their one Original. Every tree in Christian scriptures points forward or back to the Cross; the description of the event of the Cross changes the meaning of trees in every other passage. The tree in the Garden of Eden, the tree of human-kind's fall, "becomes one day what it always was," the Tree of Redemption.⁴⁰ This kind of religious sign is at once prophetic and ironic; it points to an origin that has not yet been revealed while already refracting it into the present. Not so much sign in the ordinary sense as Klossowskian simulacrum, it offers an image of a retreating truth while mirroring what it wants to become.

On Foucault's reading, Klossowski recovers this structure of religious sign, this simulacrum, from repressed depths of Christian experience, but also from Nietzsche's staging of Dionysus in relation to Christ—that is, from Christian theology's never completed contest with Greco-Roman religious letters.⁴¹ Klossowski then applies the sign-structure to human beings; he treats them as (pagan) epiphanies. Human bodies become semaphores of gods, "simulacra more dizzying than the painted faces of divinities."⁴²

In the final section of his essay, Foucault rehearses the logic of Klossowski's theater of human-simulacra. He describes the rules of Klossowski's novels, but he is more interested in using them to characterize "our" cultural space, the desert we inhabit since the disappearance of Christian theology. "We" are no longer either Catholics who scrutinize signs or Calvinists who refuse to trust them while clinging to divine sovereignty. On this empty, silent sand, we no longer possess either theology or myth. Yet Klossowski still tries to speak, through our linguistic poverty, the "lost but insistent order of simulacra."⁴³ He is like Actaeon at the end of the old myth: he struggles to say what he has glimpsed of the naked goddess even as his face stretches into the muzzle of a speechless stag. Klossowski's writing *is* the prose of Actaeon: it is a language about the traces of divinity that disturbs our desert silence. It mirrors the lost languages of ancient myth and heretical theology, the lost spaces in which Christians were enchanted by their demons or pagans stumbled upon their fleshy divinities. Only the spaces are not completely closed: they have opened into the region of language we call literature, which is the only (virtual) space left for saying such things.

Foucault moved on from writing appreciations of critic-novelists to writing his own sort of literature—his ironic historical stories, his untimely essays in philosophic curiosity.⁴⁴ But he hardly disavowed a preoccupation with the struggle to write against the impoverishment of life through flattened speech. The sustained irony of *History of Sexuality* 1 is an effort (not unlike Klossowski's) to open a space in which it might be possible to write sexed bodies against *scientia sexualis*. The book's end is not a call to found a queer utopia through

⁴⁰ Foucault, "La prose d'Actéon," (1964) as in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, 326-337, at 330.

⁴¹ For Klossowski elsewhere, Christianity's early encounter with the linguistic possibilities of myth remain embedded in it as problematic. See, for example, the discussions of the young Augustine in Klossowski, *Origines cultuelles et mythiques d'un certain comportement des dames romaines* (Ste-Croix-de-Quintillargues, France: Fata Morgana, 1968), 12 and in the appended note.

⁴² Foucault, "La prose d'Actéon," 332.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 335.

⁴⁴ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 2, 15.

properly theorized political action. Much less is it the founding act of a theory. It is the dream of a heterotopic language—perhaps already spoken elsewhere, perhaps possible even here.

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