MICHEL FOUCAULT

THE PASSION OF

JAMES MILLER

AUTHOR OF "DEMOCRACY IS IN THE STREETS"

The

PASSION
of
MICHEL FOUCAULT

James Miller

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Printed in the United States of America

First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 2000

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

ISBN 0-674-00157-5

CONTENTS

PREFACE

This book is not a biography, though in outline it follows the chronology of Michel Foucault's life; nor is it a comprehensive survey of his works, although it does offer an interpretation of a great many of his texts. It is, rather, a narrative account of one man's lifelong struggle to honor Nietzsche's gnomic injunction, "to become what one is."

Through a blend of anecdote and exegesis, I have approached Foucault's writing as if it expressed a powerful desire to realize a certain form of life; and his life as if it embodied a sustained and partially successful effort to turn this desire into a reality. In the spirit of an investigative journalist, I have gathered information about various aspects of Foucault's life that have been hitherto undocumented and, therefore, largely unexamined. In the spirit of an intellectual historian, I have sketched the broader cultural and social context within which this life unfolded. And in the spirit of a literary critic, I have highlighted a handful of recurrent fantasies and imaginative obsessions that gave a characteristic color and mood to both Foucault's composed texts and everyday life. My aim has been to conjure up "neither the pure grammatical subject nor the deep psychological subject," as Foucault himself once put it, "but rather the one who says 'I' in the works, the letters, the drafts, the sketches, the personal secrets."[1]

When I started to work on this book in 1987, three years after Foucault died, I was warned by one expert that my time would be wasted. His papers were inaccessible; his friends would not talk; my inquiry would prove futile.

Since then, one useful biography of Foucault, by Didier Eribon, has already appeared, and still another, by David Macey, was being prepared as I wrote. To my own surprise, I was able to talk to a great many of Foucault's friends; I have learned a good deal about his life, and been able

to consult more than one rare document. I do not feel my time has been wasted.[2]

Still, in one sense, the expert who warned me was right. The time is not ripe for a definitive biography. Too many witnesses have yet to share all that they know. Even worse, too many documents remain unpublished.

Before his death in 1984, Foucault destroyed a great many of his personal papers; in his will, he prohibited the posthumous publication of any papers he might have overlooked; and so far, Foucault has yet to find his Max Brod. Though a center for researchers has been established in Paris, its holdings are incomplete. At the time I was writing, his various essays and interviews were widely scattered in a number of different languages in publications that were sometimes hard to locate. The promised French publication of Foucault's complete shorter works and interviews in chronological order will eventually transform the understanding of his work. But even then, more material will remain to be studied. His longtime companion, Daniel Defert, has Foucault's notebooks and journals, and also his personal library. At least one person has a partial manuscript of the volume on perversion that Foucault drafted for the original version of his History of Sexuality; but he has not shown it to me for the good reason that Foucault explicitly asked him to promise never to show it to anyone. And there is more: every year that I was at work, I discovered new documents, some of them illicit and unauthorized. I know of no other contemporary philosopher whose work has prompted such a flourishing black market in bootleg tape recordings and freelance transcriptions of public lectures, many hoarded jealously by collectors.

The secondary literature on Foucault is, by contrast, altogether too *extensive. Anyone tempted to master it would doubtless soon give up, out of a combination of boredom and fatigue altogether at odds with the impact left by Foucault's work itself. In order to move forward, I found it useful to adopt a kind of studied ignorance. I was inclined to approach the lifework as naively as possible, deliberately withholding judgment and taking nothing for granted.*

There were a number of other obstacles and potential pitfalls, which it is just as well to point out. Consider, for example, the dilemma of trying to write a narrative account of someone who questioned, repeatedly and systematically, the value of old-fashioned ideas about the "author"; someone who raised the gravest of doubts about the character of personal identity as such; someone who, as a matter of temperament, distrusted prying questions and naked honesty; someone, finally, who was nevertheless inclined to see his own work as, on some level, autobiographical.

A preface is not the place to grapple with the many complex issues raised by Foucault's views on such matters. It is enough to say that, in the end, I was forced to ascribe to Foucault a persistent and purposeful self, inhabiting one and the same body throughout his mortal life, more or less consistently accounting for his actions and attitudes to others as well as to himself, and understanding his life as a teleologically structured quest (or, in French, recherche*).*

It may be that telling Foucault's story in this way betrays his deepest teachings; it may be, as the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre recently argued, that the apparent need to approach even Foucault by ascribing to him a persistent and purposeful self, behind all his masks and outward changes of belief and behavior, reveals a crucial limitation of his philosophy; or it may be—as I believe—that Foucault himself never held the ultimately incoherent kind of views about the death of the author and the disappearance of the self that MacIntyre rightly rejects.[3]

The issue of personal identity does not, alas, exhaust the methodological conundrums facing anyone who writes about this most unyielding of modern skeptics. For Foucault also called into question the concept of "truth" itself, suggesting that all of his own historical studies were, in some sense, works of "fiction."[4]

This, again, is not the place to address the many interesting and perhaps intractable issues posed by Foucault's own approach to historiography. But it is wise to state explicitly what "game of truth," to borrow Foucault's phrase, I think I am playing.

In what follows, I have adhered to the conventions of modern scholarship, checking my hunches and leaps of imagination against the available evidence. I have included an extensive apparatus of endnotes, documenting the source of every citation and every anecdote, exploring uncertainties and elaborating qualifications where appropriate. At every step, I have prized simplicity and struggled to achieve clarity of expression, even though I am often dealing with complex ideas and sometimes hermetic practices. Above all, I have tried to tell the truth.[5]

The truth, indeed, has presented me with my most difficult problems. As readers will soon enough discover, the crux of what is most original and challenging about Foucault's way of thinking, as I see it, is his unrelenting, deeply ambiguous and profoundly problematic preoccupation with death, which he explored not only in the exoteric form of his writing, but also, and I believe critically, in the esoteric form of sado-masochistic eroticism. Though Foucault himself spoke frankly about this aspect of his life, I sometimes had to wonder, while I was writing my book, whether I

was behaving like some not-so-Grand Inquisitor. As an American critic has acutely remarked, "in a culture that without ever ceasing to proliferate homosexual meaning knows how to confine it, as well in collectivities as individuals, to a kind of false unconscious, there is hardly a procedure for bringing out this meaning that doesn't look or feel like just more police entrapment."[6]

And that was not the end of the problems raised by telling the truth. To make matters worse, AIDS entered into the story, casting a pall over every page I wrote, giving this life a twist that was not at all the twist that I would have hoped for. The fact that my book was written, and will at first be read, in the shadow of a plague, makes it all too easy to discount the possibility that Foucault, in his radical approach to the body and its pleasures, was in fact a kind of visionary; and that in the future, once the threat of AIDS has receded, men and women, both straight and gay, will renew, without shame or fear, the kind of corporeal experimentation that formed an integral part of his own philosophical quest.

Still, no profession of good faith can defuse what is volatile and perhaps tragic in the life that follows. Yet despite the many dangers, of scandal and reductionism, of unconscious stereotyping and prurient sensationalism—and last but not least, of offering fresh ammunition to critics hostile to everything Foucault fought for—I have gone ahead, and tried to tell the whole truth, as best I could.

Part of my purpose is old-fashioned: telling the truth is what writers of history are supposed to do.

Another part is equally straightforward, though a little harder to justify—the justification in many ways is the book as a whole. For better or worse, Michel Foucault is one of the representative men—and outstanding thinkers—of the twentieth century. His life and the texts he wrote are intricately intertwined in ways that prove mutually illuminating. Therefore, a recounting of his life in all *of its philosophical dimensions, however shocking some of these may seem, is not only warranted, but essential.*

Still another part of the reason for this book is more personal. I am someone who holds the not entirely happy conviction that there is no Aristotelean mean, no Platonic idea of the good, no moral compass implicit in our ability to reason, and no regulative ideal of consensus that could help us to smooth away the rough edges of competing forms of life and enable us to reconcile their incommensurable claims. Therefore, Nietzsche's philosophy has always been for me a puzzle and a provocation, if only because, in terms of its inner logic, which I have yet to see refuted,

I can find no easy way to rule out the sort of cruel and murderous practices embraced by some of his followers.

What it might mean, after Auschwitz, to live a life thoughtfully "beyond good and evil" is, in short, worth finding out. And what better way than to study the life of the most revolutionary—and deeply serious—of post-war Nietzscheans?

This, of course, is by no means the only way to approach Foucault's work. His books long ago made their way into the world, coming into contact with other fields of experience, other types of intelligence, to flourish or fall in the clash of ideas. As is true of any fashionable figure, a great deal of nonsense has been said, and done, in his name. But he equally deserves some measure of credit for informing, if nothing else, an impressive variety of pathbreaking historico-philosophical studies: for example, Peter Brown's great reexamination of sexual renunciation in early Christianity, The Body and Society*; Paul Veyne's account of classical Roman institutions in* Bread and Circuses*; Ian Hacking's history of statistical styles of reasoning,* The Taming of Chance*; François Ewald's study of workman's compensation and health insurance in nineteenth-century France,* The Provident State. *And this is just the beginning of a long and growing list.*

But such studies, despite demonstrating the power of Foucault's texts to inspire exciting and original scholarship, do not, finally, put us in touch with what is most singular—and perhaps most disquieting—about the philosopher's work as he himself, at the end of his life, invited us to understand it.

"At every moment, step by step," he remarked in 1983, "one must confront what one is thinking and saying with what one is doing, what what one is." And this requires examining the fusion, or perhaps confusion, of concept and existence, of dream and reality, just as Foucault himself suggested: "The key to the personal poetic attitude of a philosopher is not to be sought in his ideas, as if it could be deduced from them, but rather in his philosophy-as-life, in his philosophical life, his ethos."[7]

This book, then, is a "philosophical life"—dedicated to the memory of Michel Foucault.

Certain beings have a meaning that eludes us. Who are they? Their secret resides in the depths of the very secret of life. They approach it. Life kills them. But the future which they have thus awakened with a murmer, divines them, creates them. Oh labyrinth of extreme love!

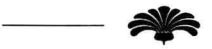
– RENÉ CHAR

No one converses with me beside myself and my voice reaches me as the voice of one dying. With thee, beloved voice, with thee, the last remembered breath of all human happiness, let me discourse, even if it is only for another hour. Because of thee, I delude myself as to my solitude and lie my way back to multiplicity and love, for my heart shies away from believing love is dead. It cannot bear the icy shivers of loneliest solitude. It compels me to speak as though I were Two.

– FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

1

THE DEATH *of* THE AUTHOR



AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH on June 25, 1984, at the age of fifty-seven, Michel Foucault was perhaps the single most famous intellectual in the world. His books, essays, and interviews had been translated into sixteen languages. Social critics treated his work as a touchstone. In a variety of academic fields, scholars were grappling with the implications of his empirical research and pondering the abstract questions that he had raised: about the reach of power and the limits of knowledge, about the origins of moral responsibility and the foundations of modern government, about the character of historical inquiry and the nature of personal identity. For more than a decade, his elegant shaved skull had been an emblem of political courage—a cynosure of resistance to institutions that would smother the free spirit and stifle "the right to be different." In the eyes of his admirers, he had replaced Jean-Paul Sartre as the personification of what an intellectual ought to be: quick to condemn, determined to expose abuses of power, unafraid to echo Émile Zola's old battle cry, "*J'accuse!*"[1]

His death came as a shock. He had collapsed in his Paris apartment earlier in June, but was widely assumed to be on the road to recovery. He was in the prime of life, at the peak of his powers. Just days before he died, two more volumes of his eagerly awaited History of Sexuality had appeared.

In France, he was regarded as a kind of national treasure. After his death, the prime minister issued a memorial tribute. *Le Monde, Libération,* and *Le Figaro* all bannered the news on page one. For its weekend edition, *Libération* rushed out a special twelve-page supplement detailing the great man's life and works. From all corners of the country, eulogies flooded the media.

In the newsweekly *Le Nouvel Observateur,* editor Jean Daniel celebrated

"the breadth, the vastness, the insolent force of his intelligence," "the sometimes cruel strictness of his judgment." Paul Veyne, the renowned classicist, proclaimed his work to be "the most important event in the thought of our century." Fernand Braudel, perhaps France's most eminent living historian, stiffly saluted "one of the most dazzling minds of his era." And so the testimonials went, from scholars and artists, cabinet ministers and aging ex-Maoists, trade union leaders and former prisoners, sincere and patently false, the sheer range of the tributes striking evidence of Foucault's impact on his own society.[2]

His fame, as the obituaries recalled, began with the work that he produced in the 1960s. In *Madness and Civilization,* published in 1961, he argued that the perception of insanity had changed dramatically after 1500: in the Middle Ages, the mad had roamed free and been viewed with respect, while in our own day they were confined to asylums and treated as sick, in a triumph of "misguided philanthropy." What seemed like an enlightened and humane application of scientific knowledge turned out, in Foucault's view, to be a subtle and insidious new form of social control. The broader implications of this argument only became clear to the general public several years later, when Foucault's book emerged as a key text for a group of "anti-psychiatrists" that included R. D. Laing, David Cooper, and Thomas Szasz. Yet even in 1961, a number of prominent French critics and scholars—among them Fernand Braudel, Roland Barthes, and the philosopher Gaston Bachelard—expressed their admiration for the boldness of Foucault's thesis, the quality of his research, and the beauty of his language. His reputation began to grow in France. And with the appearance of *Madness and Civilization* in English in 1965, that reputation began to grow abroad as well.[3]

The following year, in 1966, *The Order of Things,* Foucault's second major book, became a surprise bestseller in France. In this work, he undertook an audacious comparative study of the development of economics, the natural sciences, and linguistics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Though often difficult, the writing sparkled with flashy neologisms and striking formulations. Of these, none was more famous than the book's last sentence, wagering that "man" will soon disappear, "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea." It was the controversy over this passage, heralding the death of man as Nietzsche a century before had trumpeted the death of God, that made Foucault, for the first time, a figure to be reckoned with.[4]

But it was only after the events of May '68 that Foucault's ascendancy was complete. In the wake of the global student revolt of that year, he developed an abiding passion for politics. For the rest of his life, he routinely commented on current affairs, signed petitions, and participated in demonstrations, always ready to protest the plight of the wretched and powerless: French prisoners, Algerian immigrants, Polish trade unionists, Vietnamese refugees. At the same time, he rose to a new pinnacle of academic prestige: following in the footsteps of Henri Bergson, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and his own mentor, Jean Hyppolite, he was elected in 1970 to the Collège de France, the nation's most eminent institution of research and learning.

In these later years, perhaps the most widely remarked aspect of Foucault's work was his idea of "power." Like Nietzsche, his avowed model and precursor, he understood power not as a fixed quantity of physical force, but rather as a stream of energy flowing through every living organism and every human society, its formless flux harnessed in various patterns of behavior, habits of introspection, and systems of knowledge, in addition to different types of political, social, and military organization.

In *Discipline and Punish*, perhaps the most influential of his works, published in France in 1975, he applied this notion of power in recounting the rise of the modern prison. Though his reading of the historical evidence was, as always, richly textured, his overarching thesis was once again startling. The effort to introduce "more kindness, more respect, more 'humanity' " into the prison system was a trap: through its very success in softening the often harsh edges of corporal punishment, the modern prison epitomized an unobtrusive, essentially painless type of coercion typical of the modern world generally. From schools and the professions to the army and the prison, the central institutions of our society, charged Foucault, strove with sinister efficiency to supervise the individual, "to neutralize his dangerous states," and to alter his conduct by inculcating numbing codes of discipline. The inevitable result was "docile bodies" and obedient souls, drained of creative energy.[5]

Though Foucault first explicitly addressed the issue of power in this book, it had always been one of his preoccupations. All of his work, from *Madness and Civilization* on, pivots around asymmetrical relationships in which power is exercised, sometimes thoughtfully, often wantonly. The figures haunting his pages enact an allegory of endless domination, from the hangman torturing the murderer to the doctor locking up the deviant.

Could society, as socialists from Marx to Sartre had dreamed, ever be freed from the cruel grip of power? It is hard to see how, if we take at all

seriously Foucault's sweeping (and unfinished) History of Sexuality. In the controversial first volume of this work, published in 1976, Foucault disputed the common view that modern culture is sexually repressive, only to replace it with an even more disquieting view: the pleasure in exercising power, driven out of "docile bodies," must inevitably reappear, transmogrified, in sexual fantasies, erupting in "*perpetual spirals* of power and pleasure," fueling an uncontrollable growth of new, polymorphous perversions, sometimes vitalizing, sometimes virulent.[6]

No wonder Foucault regarded death as the only form of grace vouchsafed to a human being. Indeed, to die from "diseases of love," he declared in 1963, in a typically gnomic aside, was to experience "the Passion." It was to give to a cursedly singular life "a face that cannot be exchanged." In an implicit inversion of the apotheosis of Christ on the cross, the man martyred for his erotic practices reveals not the eternal glory of God in heaven, but the "lyrical core of man, his invisible truth, his visible secret."[7]

That the philosopher, like some improbable character in a Borges story, should have thus offered a commentary in advance on the possible implications of his own death exemplifies the uncanniness that marks all of Foucault's writing.

Here was a style of thought—learned, unmistakably original, with an air of mystery and a whiff of danger—that postwar France turned into a major export industry. For many readers, Foucault will doubtless always be linked with the other Parisian savants who first came to international prominence in the sixties. This generation included many of his mentors, friends, and rivals: Louis Althusser, the doyen of a rigorously scientific Marxism; Jacques Lacan, the daunting Freudian gnostic; Roland Barthes, theorist of signs, connoisseur of contemporary myth, champion of the "new novel"; and Jacques Derrida, anti-philosopher and enemy of metaphysics.

As a group, these men first achieved fame as critics of humanism. Skeptical of rationalist and personalist philosophies, critical of teleological treatments of history as a story with a happy ending, they were wary of liberalism and (with the exception of Althusser) impatient with Marxism. And though Foucault, for one, would eventually aim to be a new kind of intellectual, modest and without mystifying pretense, he, like the others, was universally regarded as *un maître à penser*—a master of thought, the affectionate phrase the French use for the handful of Olympian figures they invest with sovereign authority.