CHAPTER FIVE

Arts of Living
Antiquity, Modernity, and the Experience of Self

Once there exists, in a culture, a true discourse on the subject, what experience does the subject have of himself?1

The paramount conceptual innovation of Foucault’s last years was the idea of the tekhnē peri ton bion, or art of living. “Arts of living,” he declared to his audience in 1981, represented a “minor genre” that, while absent today as an autonomous category of writing, was of considerable extent in the ancient world. These arts were a valued type of literature; essentially manuals, they offered cultured readers not a model of behavior to follow, but rather a set of “counsels on existence,” or guidance on how to be.2 Examples of such works included the Onicocrítica of Artemidorus of Daldis, a second-century text that used dreams as a path to fuller living;3 and Xenophon’s Economics, a treatise of the fourth century BC detailing the proper life-conduct of a head of household.4 Foucault worked with these texts and others primarily by citing, interpreting, and commenting upon key passages within them. This hermeneutical approach, which is on display in The Use of Pleasure and The Care of the Self, allowed the philosopher to highlight what he viewed as crucial matters of dispute—or “problematicizations”—as experienced by past societies.5

The conclusions that Foucault reached through the study of the arts of living tended to reinforce the methodological volte-face of 1980’s The Government of the Living. Succinctly, Foucault increasingly believed—and said—that the relationship between the subject and truth was defined by widespread “practices of self”: the kind of practices, that is, that arts of living would have permitted.6 In this sense, his earlier works, in emphasizing the centrality of coercive practices, had been overhasty and potentially misleading.7 By the mid-1980s, Foucault was prepared to travel even farther down this path of apostasy. He noted in 1984 that “We traditionally do the history of human existence starting from its conditions. . . . But it seems to me possible to do the history of existence as art and as style. Existence is the most fragile raw material of the human art; but it is also its most immediate given.”8

To write the history of human existence not in terms of its conditions but as art and style: this was, for Foucault, practically to sever ties with his past. If anything had been a constant in Foucault’s work, it was the determination to treat historical phenomena—be they discourses, objects, or even particular kinds of subjects—in terms of the conditions of their possibility. That effort was now to take a back seat to an analysis that treated the same phenomena as the result of free and creative activity. Lest Foucault leave any doubt as to where he stood on this question, he repeated on innumerable occasions during this period his desire that arts of living experience a renaissance in the present, and that we moderns learn to make an art of our existence.

Nothing would be simpler than to chalk up this change of direction to the influence of Nietzsche. For Nietzsche was, on the subject of life as art, characteristically unambiguous. Under the heading, “One thing needful,” he proclaimed to the readers of The Gay Science, “To ‘give style’ to one’s character—a great and rare art!”9 There is, moreover, at least limited textual evidence to suggest that Foucault placed his interest in arts of living under Nietzsche’s banner.10 Yet to argue—correctly—that Foucault followed Nietzsche in seeking to aestheticize life is nevertheless to offer an historical account of limited value. Nietzsche, as was suggested in Chapter 2, had such an immense impact upon Foucault, and that over the course
of the latter’s entire career, that “Nietzschean influence” will always be a rather poor and imprecise explanation for change in Foucault’s ideas. The question needs to be: Why, at this particular moment, did the (manifestly Nietzschean) concept of an art of life move to the forefront of Foucault’s concerns? And even more importantly: What was the significance of the turning to the arts of living in Foucault’s last years?

Historians have struggled to integrate the theme of the arts of living with Foucault’s other great themes of the early 1980s, which was “Enlightenment.” On a number of occasions during this period, Foucault spoke and wrote on the centrality of the Enlightenment—and specifically on the Kantian tradition of critique—in the formation of the modern mode of philosophical questioning. From Hegel to Habermas, Foucault declared, modern philosophy had been a continuous effort to comprehend the significance of the Enlightenment as an event; it had been that which attempted “to answer the question raised so imprudently two centuries ago: Was ist Aufklärung?” A considerable literature has proliferated around these Enlightenment texts by Foucault. While the best of this scholarship has helped to dispel the myth that Foucault’s interest in the Enlightenment was a kind of “deathbed conversion,” it has been less successful at delineating connections between, on one hand, the historico-critical investigations of modern society that Foucault proposed, and on the other the studies of ancient asceticism in which he was actually engaged.

As this chapter will show with reference to Foucault’s major works, occasional writings, published interviews, and unpublished lecture courses from the Collège de France, Foucault’s enthusiastic embrace of “arts of living” was the flip side of the project that Foucault called “the problem of the other”: namely, carrying forward the post-Kantian philosophical task of questioning the present in order to render it more livable. Arts of living, Foucault wanted to suggest, were entirely possible in the modern world; it was the right of every individual to define the morality of his existence, to choose his way of being and relating to others. To pursue life as an art was, in fact, to tear oneself free from those discourses that would colonize one’s experience of self with the language of truth. Such a position was an index of the centrality of strong subjectivity to the philosopher’s later work. For the dying Foucault, the possibility of societal transformation in the present was linked not simply to the genealogical disassembly of modern configurations of power; it was intimately tied to the creative activity of strong and free individuals intent upon living their lives as works of art.

What, precisely, were arts of living? As Foucault noted in The Use of Pleasure, they were to be understood as a set of practices: practices that, at one time, had enjoyed a considerable importance within Western societies. They could be defined as:

- intentional and voluntary practices by which men not only fix rules of conduct for themselves, but seek to transform themselves, to modify themselves in their singular being, and to make of their life a work that bears certain aesthetic values and responds to certain criteria of style.

This definition, while brief, contains four discrete parts. Firstly, arts of living are described as intentional (réfléchies) and voluntary. They are—and here, Foucault leaves no room for doubt—a matter of choice on the part of their participants. Secondly, they enable men to fix for themselves rules of conduct. Thirdly, they enable men to seek to transform themselves, to change their very being. Finally, they enable men to turn their life into a work: an object that might be judged according to aesthetic and stylistic categories.

Arts of living were discursive. They were embodied in a literature that had enjoyed immense popularity. They were also, Foucault argued, not a retrospective invention of the historian, but rather an actors’ category. For the student who wished to understand ancient morality, he told interviewer François Ewald in 1984, the compilation of a list of prohibitions would miss the essential:

It seems to me more in accord with the domains with which I dealt and the documents of which I disposed to think this morality in the very form in which contemporaries had reflected upon it: that is to say, in the form of an art of existence, or let us rather say of a technique of life.

The moral question as it faced free men of antiquity was not how one might conform one’s actions to a more or less rigid code. Rather, it was how to
govern one's own life so as to give it the most beautiful form possible—be it in the eyes of others, of posterity, or of oneself. In attempting to reconstruct the historical circumstances in which these arts flourished, Foucault's object was thus "the formation and development of a practice of self, the objective of which is the constitution of oneself as the laborer of the beauty of one's own life."27

Arts of living as they existed in the ancient world, Foucault told his audience in January of 1981, were less concerned with teaching one what to do than with teaching one how to be. Rather than providing a model of behavior or choreographing a set of gestures, ancient arts of living aided individuals to modify and model their being itself. Such arts ideally allowed one to acquire a set of qualities. These qualities were neither aptitudes, nor precisely "virtues," but rather attributes of being. Foucault called the aggregate of acquired qualities, "modalities of experience." Tranquility, beatitude, and happiness represented three of the most sought-after modalities of experience.18 An art of living should, in addition, permit the individual to acquire a certain "ontological status." By this, Foucault meant that it should open to the individual a modality of experience qualifiable in terms of, say, tranquility, happiness, or beatitude.

The kinds of procedures through which these arts brought about change in individuals, Foucault said, were three: *mathesis*, *melete*, and *askesis*. Each procedure was situated on a different axis. *Mathesis*, or learning, concerned the relation of the self to others. As it was judged impossible to accede to the arts of living in isolation, the relation of the master to disciple was constitutive. *Melete*, or meditation, concerned the relation of the self to truth. It was necessary not merely to learn, but to interiorize. Hence, teachings must be made into one's own truth through a rigorous process of reading, memorization, and self-interrogation. Finally, *askesis*, or exercise, dealt with the relation of self to self. It was the labor of testing and self-trial, the proof that one was progressing in one's art. Foucault christened these three kinds of procedures "technologies of the self," emphasizing by this choice of words that these were well-developed and systematized practices. As the three elements on the path to wisdom, he asserted, they were present in every art of living.19

If, as we have seen, Foucault felt that he had neglected the study of self-initiated practices in the past, he was determined to make up for lost time.

He now discovered arts of living to be integral not only to his own project, but to those of his contemporaries. Thus, of K. J. Dover's landmark 1978 work *Greek Homosexuality*, he announced, "[Dover] recounts the singular history of a sexual choice which, within a given society, was a mode of life, culture, and art of oneself."20 And while arts of living had lost a great part of their importance and even their autonomy during the course of the Middle Ages, Foucault claimed, they had by no means disappeared. Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, he suggested, had underlined just how vibrant such practices remained on the threshold of modernity.21 Stephen Greenblatt's 1980 *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* had accomplished much the same thing.22

Arts of living were, then, at the center of the investigations that Foucault aimed to conduct in the early 1980s. They would serve as the base material and guiding thread in his 1981 course at the Collège de France, entitled *Subjectivity and Truth*. This, in turn, doubled their importance, as *Subjectivity and Truth* provided essential raw material for both *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*. For it was the case, Foucault told his audience, that the link between subjectivity and "truth," while not visible only in arts of living, was nevertheless on display there in a particularly vivid way. They constituted, as such, an especially rich and interesting body of documentation for the general problem posed by the course.23

If students of Foucault sensed a certain lack of detachment in the philosopher's pursuit of the "arts of living" idea, they would not have been deceived. His comments beyond the auditorium walls—like those he made during a December 1981 interview with German film director Werner Schroeter—were striking: "The art of living is the art of killing psychology, of creating with oneself and with others unnamed individualities, beings, relations, qualities. If one can't manage to do that in one's life, that life is not worth living."

24 The Greeks, Foucault added, had understood that an existence could be a perfect and sublime work (*œuvre*), "while we have completely forgotten it, especially since the Renaissance."25 Uncharacteristic flashes of emotion like this one revealed that this was a matter in which the philosopher was personally invested. For the attention that
Foucault paid to antique arts of living cannot be wholly understood within the context of his early-1980s research itinerary. Rather, it merged almost seamlessly into his contemporary social and personal concerns.

Chief among these concerns—however surprising it seemed—was the search for a modern morality. Foucault, it will be recalled, had argued in *The Order of Things* that modern thought was incapable of generating a coherent morality. He compounded this statement in a spring 1968 interview, stating pithily that, “morality has ceased to exist in the course of the twentieth century.” Yet by the end of the 1970s, Foucault began to show signs of wavering on this point (as on so many others). As early as 1977, the language of ethics began to infiltrate his working vocabulary. In his preface to the English edition of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, he called the book, “the first book of ethics to be written in France in quite a long time.” It was, he wrote, a kind of ethical treatise showing us how to unburden ourselves of the “fascism” that, against our will perhaps, inhabits our words and acts.

More tantalizing, perhaps, was the precise wording that Foucault used. *Anti-Oedipus*, he wrote, was an “art of living counter to all forms of fascism.” Being anti-oedipal had become, for many, “a life style, a way of thinking and living.” These were atypical expressions for the philosopher. Was there a link between Foucault’s reconsideration of the idea of a modern ethics and the notion of arts of living?

For Foucault, apparently, the link was very clear. “Paying a modest tribute to Saint Francis de Sales,” he wrote, “one might say that Anti-Oedipus is an introduction to the non-fascist life.” The reference here was to Francis de Sales’ *1604 Introduction à la vie dévote*, a work that had never once figured in any of Foucault’s studies. Yet de Sales’s *Introduction* would, in 1981, provide the material for the opening vignette of *Subjectivity and Truth*. It was Foucault’s shining exemplar of a modern art of living. Foucault’s reconsideration of the very possibility of an ethics was thus contemporaneous with his discovery of the genre of the art of living.

For Foucault came to believe, with a fervor that only increased during his last years, that arts of living had a valuable contribution to make to the modern world. In particular, he saw the potential for great breakthroughs in the treatment of questions of morality—and particularly sexual morality—via the adoption of the perspective contained within arts of living.

The moral experience of our culture, which derived from Christianity, featured a universal moral subject and a singular moral code to which all were expected to submit. This configuration, said Foucault, was not only unsatisfying but patently catastrophic. And for that very reason, he added, a certain number of questions are posed to us today in the very terms in which they were posed in Antiquity. Research into styles of existence as different from one another as possible seems to me to be one of the points where contemporary research got its start in the efforts of certain erstwhile groups.

To the extent that ethical questions were ones in which what was at stake was the way in which free individuals related to one another, Foucault suggested, the ancient arts of living—while not directly imitable—had the potential to speak to our situation. In rethinking how we might live and how we might live with each other, the ancient way of posing the question was quite fertile.

And yet, he lamented to Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow in 1983, modern individuals live in a way that scarcely recognizes the possibility of free creation. “We have hardly any remnant of the idea in our society,” he told them, “that the principle work of art which one has to take care of, the main area to which one must apply aesthetic values is oneself, one’s life, one’s existence.” If the idea had briefly resurfaced during the Renaissance, and again in the form of nineteenth-century dandyism, these were but epiphenomenal. The concept of fashioning oneself—or by extension, of fashioning original ways to relate to others—remained alien to the modern world.

What did Foucault imagine a modern art of living would look like? He provided valuable hints during an October 1981 interview with a representative of the gay review *Christopher Street*. Deflecting a question about the value of legal changes in the status of homosexual couples, Foucault stated, “rather than arguing that individuals have fundamental and natural rights, we should perhaps try to imagine and create a new right of relations.” A creative effort rather than a defensive one, he argued, might render unnecessary the “relationally impoverishing institutions” that currently prevented multiple kinds of interpersonal relations from existing.
Integrating the practice of homosexual love into preexisting cultural fields was not enough; "it is a matter of creating new cultural forms."36

Foucault expressed himself in similar fashion in the course of a June 1982 interview with The Advocate. Asked whether the homosexual movement was making progress, Foucault replied that there had unquestionably been a genuine process of liberation at the beginning of the 1970s; he noted, however, that the situation had not yet stabilized, and that rather than accepting a status quo based on rights and tolerance, it would be preferable to take an additional step forward. One path to this, he affirmed, would be "the creation of new forms of life, of relations, of friendships, in society, art, and culture: new forms that will be put into practice through our sexual, ethical and political choices."37 It should not be a matter of self-defense, but rather of self-assertion. And that assertion should itself be understood less as the affirmation of an identity than as the propagation of a creative force. We don't need, Foucault explained, to discover that we are homosexuals; "We should instead create a gay way of life."38

Crafting new cultural forms, beautifying life, and creating new kinds of relations: these were, in Foucault's mind, inseparable from the idea of elaborating a modern ethics. Hence, when challenged by Dreyfus and Rabinow as to how an ethics might be built in an age that recognized the historical contingency of all such structures, Foucault replied quite naturally, "But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art?"39 The distance between an existential ethics and an aesthetics of existence had, for Foucault, shrunk to nothing. To constitute ourselves as moral agents through the living of life as an art-object: these were two sides of the same coin.

If Dreyfus and Rabinow were skeptical, it was not because they doubted Foucault's sincerity in posing the question of ethics in this way. Rather, it was because, in the San Francisco Bay Area of the early 1980s, the paradigm that Foucault described seemed anything but foreign. They chided: "Of course, that kind of project is very common in places like Berkeley where people think that everything from the way they eat breakfast, to the way they have sex, to the way they spend their day, should itself be perfected."40

Foucault, unfazed and unpersuaded, clarified his position. There was a critical difference, he explained, between creating oneself and seeking one's truth. The former was an open-ended artistic effort that promised both freedom and beauty; the latter, which defined the "California cult of the self," was indexed to a process of discovery, and to the idea that one's "true self" was determinate and knowable. People who view the elaboration of self in this way, Foucault explained, "think that if they do what they do, if they live as they live, the reason is that they know the truth about desire, life, nature, body, and so on."41 Arts of living were about dispensing with such alleged truths.

DREYFUS AND RABINOW may have been off the mark in their understanding of arts of living. They were nevertheless onto something when they drew connections between Foucault's new conceptual apparatus and Berkeley. Foucault's intellectual evolution in the late 1970s and early 1980s arguably owed more to developments at Berkeley than any other place on the globe, Paris included.

Foucault first visited California in the spring of 1975. He was immediately taken with it. Warm weather, widespread drug use, small communities experimenting with alternative ways of life, and the highly developed gay bathhouse culture of San Francisco: all of these things made California an exceedingly congenial environment for the philosopher, and of this he made no secret.42 The American West Coast was also a welcome retreat from Paris, where, from the beginning of the 1980s onward, Foucault rarely passed more than the four months required by his teaching commitment.

Previous observers have stressed the importance of this permissive California environment in shaping Foucault's trajectory during the last half-decade of his life. The social atmosphere, as Dreyfus and Rabinow had intuited, was unquestionably important. What has been less appreciated is the impact of Foucault's institutional connection with the University of California at Berkeley. As the foregoing chapter noted, Foucault gave numerous lectures at Berkeley during the late 1970s and early 1980s. He also took part in colloquia focused on his own work,43 hosted informal discussions with the representatives of various departments,44 collaborated with Berkeley professors Dreyfus and Rabinow in the authorship of a major study on his thought,45 and even led an extended public lecture series on truth-telling in the ancient world.46 To describe Foucault's routine in the half-decade from 1979 to 1983 as a fall term in Berkeley and a spring term in Paris would not be a gross exaggeration.
There is powerful evidence that Foucault’s Berkeley colleagues—spanning a range of disciplines—were integral to the thought process that went into his final works. Greenblatt, a professor of English, was clearly thinking in the same direction that Foucault was. Dreyfus and Rabinow, a philosopher and an anthropologist respectively, were, for their part, forcing Foucault to clarify his ideas, challenging the coherence of his archaeological vision, and subtly pushing him toward a Heideggerian language that was not his own. But the most significant of these Berkeley associates was Peter Brown, a man whose name was often on Foucault’s lips in the early 1980s. Brown, a respected historian of the late antique and early medieval world, was, during the period of Foucault’s visits, a critical part of the Berkeley Department of History. In his landmark 1978 work *The Making of Late Antiquity*, Brown had set down a simple and compelling account of early-Christian religious transformation. The book provided a visible link between Brown’s longstanding interests and Foucault’s nascent ones.

Yet the sheer amount of overlap between Brown’s work and, for instance, Foucault’s course on *The Government of the Living* should give us pause. Both offered narratives set in the third century of the Christian era; both concerned the shift from pagan to Christian religiosity; both dealt with ancient sexuality; both investigated the emergence of a kind of consciousness that weighed its thoughts and searched itself for evil content. A perusal of the second half of Brown’s work—a book only one hundred pages long in total—reveals practically the entire cast of characters of Foucault’s course: Cyprian, Tertullian, Christian baptism, asceticism, *anachoresis*, even the obscure dream-treatise of Artemidorus. Given that Foucault did all of his lecturing and writing on the ancient world after 1978, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the philosopher owed Brown an even greater amount than he ultimately acknowledged.

Moving beyond mere content, Foucault seems to have latched onto Brown’s core concept: *style*. At least one interlocutor felt this connection at the time, remarking to Foucault in 1984 that not he but Peter Brown was the first to have introduced the notion of style into the study of antiquity. Foucault concurred, saying, “[t]he use that I make of ‘style,’ I have borrowed in large part from Peter Brown.” In *The Making of Late Antiquity*, Brown had defined the shift from pagan religiosity in Late Antique Egypt to a recognizably Christian religiosity in terms of a change of style. “The ‘style’ of religious life of the late second and third centuries,” he wrote, “was that the frontier between the divine and the human had lain tantalizingly open.” Inasmuch as that state of affairs had rapidly changed in the course of a generation, Brown claimed, it was because ascetic monks, “fought against their own past, and they did so by creating a new style of religious life, that was the antithesis of that against which they had rebelled.” Keeping in mind Foucault’s earlier comment about his debt to Brown, it is clear that this notion of a *style*—an assertive and freely chosen life-aesthetic, yet one that had the power to transform the world in its image—was of great utility to the philosopher.

Foucault certainly recognized that, in confronting the question of arts of living, he was operating outside of his traditional hunting grounds. *The Use of Pleasure* contained the philosopher’s acknowledgment that he was “neither Hellenist nor Latinist,” but that he had nevertheless felt it vital to confront ancient texts. If he had succeeded, over a half-decade, in acquiring what he felt to be “a sufficient familiarity” therewith, it was, he declared in 1983, through the assistance of a handful of associates. Three of the scholars so named, unsurprisingly, were Berkeley professors: Brown, whose works, advice, and conversation had been “of enormous assistance”; and Dreyfus and Rabinow, whose questions and reflections had forced Foucault to sharpen his vision and reformulate his methodology. The other two figures who came in for mention were both colleagues of Foucault at the Collège de France, where Paul Veyne held the Collège’s chair in Roman history, and Pierre Hadot studied the history of ancient thought.

Veyne, who was the author of an influential study of Roman civic culture and a highly regarded treatise on historiography, had joined the faculty of the Collège de France in 1976. Foucault considered the historian a valuable resource in his study of ancient societies and cultures, and had frequented his office since early 1978. In that same year, Veyne published an essay entitled, “Foucault Revolutionizes History.” Its argument—that Foucault’s antirealism represented a major theoretical insight for practicing historians—veiled the fact that Veyne was elucidating and magnifying
ideas that Foucault had only half-articulated. When Veyne wrote that the philosopher’s method consisted “of understanding that things are nothing more than the objectifications of determinate practices—of which the determinations must be brought to light,” he expounded the latter’s ideas at once more concisely and more forcefully than Foucault himself had ever done. Foucault’s subsequent public formulations of his antirealist theses bore the stamp of Veyne’s silent elaboration. “His influence upon these pages,” Foucault wrote candidly in the prefatory essay to the 1984 Sexuality volumes, “would be difficult to circumscribe.”

Yet if Veyne contributed to the methodology and factual background of Foucault’s late studies, Pierre Hadot may be said to have given directly to the fund of themes. Hadot spent much of his career at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, writing and lecturing on neoplatonic philosophy during the Hellenistic period. In 1976, Hadot published a piece on the notion of “spiritual exercises” in the ancient world. As Hadot had occasion to note after Foucault’s death, the latter was “particularly interested” in three of the article’s ideas:

the description of ancient philosophy as an art, style, or way of life; the attempt I made to explain how modern philosophy had forgotten this tradition, and had become almost entirely a theoretical discourse; and the idea I sketched out in the article . . . that Christianity had taken over as its own certain techniques of spiritual exercises, as they had already been practiced in antiquity.

Each of these ideas is present in a robust and unmistakable form in Foucault’s 1981 course, 

Subjectivity and Truth. As none of them is discernible in The Government of the Living, we may assume that Foucault acquainted himself with Hadot’s work sometime between April and October of 1980. Arnold L. Davidson relates the passionate enthusiasm that Foucault felt for Hadot’s work in 1982.

However dissatisfied Hadot may have ultimately been with the use to which Foucault put his ideas—he felt the latter to have placed too great an emphasis on the “self” and not enough on the transcendence of self—there is little question that they were a great catalyst for Foucault’s thinking. Transmuted into “practices of the self,” Hadot’s concept of spiritual exercises gave substance and structure to the phenomena that Foucault had treated in The Government of the Living under the rubric of “avowal” (l’aveu), and the “putting-into-discourse of oneself” (mise-en-discours de soi-même), or exagoresis. Even more crucially, Hadot’s concept of a philosophical way of life allowed Foucault to inject into his history of Western subjectivity a moment of genuine freedom.

The Government of the Living, it will be remembered from Chapter 4, had moved directly from the “worldly subjectivity” characteristic of the age of Severus to the “deep subjectivity” characteristic of the age of Augustine. In both cases, the subject was called upon to recognize and proclaim a “truth” about itself: the only difference was that, in the former case, that truth was perceived to come from without; in the latter case, from within. Fortified by Hadot’s concepts, Foucault was emboldened in the 1981 Subjectivity and Truth to present a different narrative. In this version, there was a period several centuries in length in which, for at least a privileged portion of the citizenry, it was possible to craft one’s existence according to principles of beauty. Spiritual exercises in the service of arts of living—arts, as noted above, practiced freely and voluntarily—yielded a conjuncture in which individuals made rather than discovered themselves. “Prediscursive” subjects chose practices that would enable them to acquire particular, and desirable, subjectival modalities. If this conjuncture had come apart with the emergence of a more austere, late-pagan spirituality, it remained the case that it had not been wholly eradicated.

To recap, then: arts of living as they were practiced during Classical antiquity were concerned with crafting one’s being so as to attain a particular and desired ontological status. Such “modalities of being” included beauty, tranquility, gracefulness, and any of a number of other attributes. These were to be obtained by the more or less frequent application of techniques of the self, or what Hadot had called “spiritual exercises.” An art of living was thus a techné in the proper Greek sense of that term: a skill, a savoir-faire. The practitioner was not concerned, as Kant would be two millennia later, to universalize the rule of his actions. On the contrary, he made an ethical subject of himself “by an attitude and by a research
that individualizes his action, modulates it, and can even, by lending it a rational and reflective structure, give it a unique splendor. ⁶⁶

If Subjectivity and Truth had concerned itself with documenting and describing the existence of an historical conjuncture defined by these arts, then Foucault's 1982 course, The Hermeneutics of the Subject, would offer an account of that conjuncture's slow dissolution. The Hermeneutics of the Subject, which formed a considerable part of the groundwork for The Care of the Self, focused its attention on the world of the second century C. E. Like Brown's The Making of Late Antiquity, it emphasized not the breaks but the continuities between the late-pagan and early-Christian periods. It was also, as Foucault announced during his first lecture, an effort to address the question of subjectivity in general terms, rather than through the lens of sexuality as had been the case in Subjectivity and Truth. ⁶⁷

What Foucault sought to demonstrate in the 1982 course was the gradual transformation, within the late-pagan world and prior to the ascendency of the Christian faith, of certain themes that had enjoyed a long existence. In particular, it was a question of the erosion of the concept of the art of living. Foucault claimed that the arts of living had experienced a metamorphosis in the course of the second century. The techniques of the self (which, again, were the subcomponents of all such arts, and intended as a means) increasingly developed a life and a momentum of their own. Spiritual exercises became a significant goal in their own right.

This transformation carried with it a progressively smaller emphasis on the aesthetics of life, a progressively greater emphasis on self-assessment and self-discovery. "At a certain moment," Foucault declared, "the problem of an aesthetics of existence is covered over by the problem of purity." ⁶⁸ The phenomenon of performing a labor upon oneself—of monitoring oneself and maintaining one's purity—increasingly detached itself from the personal stylization that it had been intended to serve. ⁶⁹ Hence, within the arts of living, "the notion of exercising a perfect mastery over oneself soon became the main issue." That these arts were ultimately overshadowed and liquidated by the very techniques of the self that comprised them was, for Foucault, one of the most important evolutions of antiquity. ⁷⁰

The transition from arts of living to the narrower "care of the self" may be viewed as the theme of the latter two Sexuality volumes taken as a whole.

The Use of Pleasure covered the era defined by an aesthetic of existence, while The Care of the Self looked to the ensuing period. But it should be remembered that the full scope of Foucault's intended project never appeared in print. His aim, had he lived, was more ambitious than the positing of a binary historical model. For the thesis that Foucault developed in The Hermeneutics of the Subject held that the evolutionary trend continued. Techniques of the self did not die with the emergence of Christianity; rather, they continued to hypertrophy. The claim was a subtle one. Christianity, Foucault argued, revealed not the termination but the intensification of the late-pagan focus on practices of the self.

The Christian "culture of the self," like the thought of its great pagan predecessors Seneca and Epictetus, was not a function of individualism but of critical attention to interior life. ⁷¹ Like Stoic and Epicurean practitioners of techniques of the self, Christian directors of conscience worked by guiding initiates to survey themselves, to sift their thoughts, and to acknowledge what they discovered there. ⁷² Christianity's interrogation of the self was, however, far more harrowing. From the perspective of the extension of techniques of the self, Christianity carried quantitative change to the point of qualitative difference: "This new Christian self had to be constantly examined because in this self were lodged concupiscence and desires of the flesh. From that moment on, the self was no longer something to be made but something to be renounced and deciphered." ⁷³ Decipherment of one's own inner truth with an eye to self-renunciation: this was precisely what Foucault termed "the hermeneutics of the subject."

And while this hermeneutics was the lineal descendant of the art of living, it was, as Foucault believed he had amply demonstrated, wholly distinct in its approach and in its aims. Far from providing the tools for the construction of one's own mode of being, the hermeneutics of the subject demanded that one solemnly acknowledge the "true" self that one already was—and then only to revile and renounce it.

The historical transformation that substituted the hermeneutics of the subject for the Classical arts of living was, Foucault argued, of profound consequence. For the subjectivity proper to modern Western thought was constituted "the day that bios ceased to be what it had been
for so long in Greek thought, namely the corollary of a tekhnē; when bios
(life) ceased being the corollary of a tekhnē, to become the form of a test
of self." The truly determinant shift, according to Foucault, was thus the one that
had taken place in the second century, within pagan philosophy. The colon-
ization of arts of living by "the care of the self" (epimeleia heautou)—which
is to say, the transformation of life (bios) from the corollary of an art (tekhnē)
into the object of a test (épreuve)—ensured the emergence of the modern
"deep" subject, even if the full elaboration of that type of subjectivity would
require several additional centuries. The sinful Christian self was a mere
subset of this profound, truth-bearing subject.

The crux, for Foucault, was the very notion that the subject possessed a
truth, and that this truth could be attained through a process of introspec-
tion and discovery. If tekhnē had represented an art, creativity, and expres-
sion, then épreuve was the overthrowing of all of these things: it was science,
discovery, and reflection. It was the triumph of the metaphysical concep-
tion of truth in the realm of human existence.

The search begun, it was not difficult to see that the "art versus science"
distinction ran through much of Foucault's recent work—even, arguably,
as a kind of tacit and unacknowledged normativity. Already in the first
volume of The History of Sexuality, Foucault had emphasized the sharp di-
vide between the ars erotica as practiced in numerous Asian civilizations,
and the scientia sexualis that dominated the West. While the book rendered
illegitimate any possible statement of preference for one such structure over
another, it also visibly aligned the ars erotica (in which "truth is extracted
from pleasure itself") with the beneficent "economy of bodies and plea-
sures" in which we were permitted to hope. The scientia sexualis, on the other
hand, was the clear villain of the piece, submitting us to the "austere mon-
archy of sex" and "the infinite task of forcing forth its secret and extorting
from this shadow the truest of confessions."

By the early 1980s, this "art versus science" distinction had, if anything,
become sharper. Foucault increasingly spoke of the creative and the ana-
lytical as distinct, even unrelated categories. Here, morality-as-art was the
test case. "My idea," he declared in 1983, "is that it's not at all necessary to
relate ethical problems to scientific knowledge." Morality could be "a very
strong structure of existence, without any relation with the juridical per se,
with an authoritarian system, with a disciplinary structure."79 The notion
of creation was as positively charged as the notion of discovery was nega-
tively charged. As Peter Dews observes, "Foucault's task, in his late work,
will be to articulate the concepts of subjectivity and freedom in such a way
as to avoid any suggestion that such freedom must take the form of the
recovery of an authentic 'natural' self."80

If Foucault opposed what he termed the contemporary Californian cult
of the self, it was precisely because of its propensity in this direction. "[O]ne
is supposed," he lamented, "to discover one's true self, to separate it from
that which might obscure or alienate it, to decipher its truth thanks to psy-
cological or psychoanalytic science." Such was the bitter fruit of the
second-century transformation that he had studied.81

It is noteworthy that, during this time, when Foucault reiterated his
rejection of the Sartrean conception of subjectivity, he did it not on the
grounds that Sartre had posited a unified subject (for this had ceased to be
a point of contention), but rather on the grounds that the core of Sartre's
subject was authenticity. Authenticity, as adequacy to one's true self, could
never capture the richness and diversity of the possible relations between
an individual and himself.82 Foucault's comments on this point are telling:

I think that the only acceptable practical consequence of what Sartre has
said is to link his theoretical insight to the practice of creativity—and
not of authenticity. From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think
that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves
as a work of art.83

Inasmuch as Sartre's thought remained valuable, it was because it deemed
creativity a worthy problem for philosophy. To carry forward that line of
questioning, Foucault asserted, would be to investigate the ways in
which it was possible not to create works of art, but to create ourselves
as works of art.

A listener hearing these comments in 1983 would rightly have sensed
that Foucault's vision of the autonomous individual had undergone a sub-
stantial rehabilitation. The project of self-creation—"without," as Foucault
had said, "any relation with the juridical per se, with an authoritarian
system, with a disciplinary structure"—sounded not a little like
existentialism. That impression would only be reinforced by the philosopher's contemporary comments on a pivotal concept: experience.

What experience, Foucault asked in the opening lecture of Subjectivity and Truth, does the subject have of himself once a "true discourse" on the subject exists in his culture? From the listener's perspective, this was an eye-opening question, not least in its casual implication that one might speak of a subject prior to the appearance of a discourse that purported to reveal the truth about subjects. But even more immediately striking in Foucault's question was the deployment of the concept of "experience."

Experience was not a new concept in Foucault's thought, but rather a very old one. As the preceding chapter noted, Foucault made ample reference to "experience" in his earliest works, and most notably in Madness and Civilization. There, his stated aim was to recover whatever might be available to us of the experience of madness across the centuries. This project was, as historical inquiry demanded, to be conducted through an empirical examination of the texts of the nascent psychiatric discipline and the records of places of detention. It was not to be imagined, however, that these documents in any way exhausted the lived experience of the mad. On the contrary, Foucault wrote, "madness, as a domain of experience, is never exhausted in the medical or para-medical knowledge of it that one may gain." He was compelled to consult the documentary record, but the experience of madness had been transcribed there in a language not its own.

The category of experience was thus an important one to the early Foucault. And if the philosopher spoke of experience, it was because he, like the existentialist thinkers who had not yet ceded the field in 1961, was concerned with the subject's encounter with the world—with "the lived" (le vécu). An excerpt from a 1964 interview is revealing on this point:

M. Demonbynes: ... May I ask you to what extent, in your opinion, Nietzsche had the experience of madness? ... Have I understood you properly? Because you have unquestionably spoken of this experience of madness. Is this really what you meant?

M. Foucault: Yes.

M. Demonbynes: ... Do you believe that one can really have ... That great spirits like Nietzsche can have "the experience of madness"?

M. Foucault: I would say to you: yes, yes.

Experience was, seemingly, the lived encounter with the world in its many facets—as it accrued to individuals. Any suggestion that such a notion was problematic to Foucault is undercut by the literally hundreds of references to "experience" in Madness and Civilization.

Yet problematic it rapidly became. In Foucault's writings after 1964, the word "experience" virtually disappeared as a term of art. By the time that The Order of Things—with its thesis of the disappearance of man—went to press in 1966, any language tending even remotely of the transcendental had been meticulously purged from his conceptual arsenal. Foucault was conceding past error when he wrote in the preface to The Archaeology of Knowledge:

In a general way, Madness and Civilization gave much too great a role—and an enigmatic role at that—to what found itself designated as an "experience," showing thereby how close I remained to admitting an anonymous and general subject of history.

This kind of self-critique suggests an intimate awareness on Foucault's part of the inextricability of the notion of experience from traditional understandings of subjectivity. Throughout his later career, as such, he would routinely pillory the concept of experience, and ask pardon for having had the poor judgment to employ the term himself.

This is what makes the reemergence of "experience" within Foucault's thought at the beginning of the 1980s so interesting, and such a tangible marker of his evolving attitude toward the subject. Having explicitly associated the concept of experience with Sartrean thought ("an anonymous and general subject of history") and with such "empty" (and patently existentialist) concepts as time and being, Foucault now reclaimed experience for his own—and this precisely within the context of his first overt study of subjectivity. Listeners who sensed Foucault's thought careening toward the path of his old nemesis might have been forgiven their bewilderment.
Foucault was assuredly not postulating a universal consciousness or a subject of history. Yet the idea of experience had newfound appeal to him as a way of describing—just as he might have at the beginning of his career—the individual’s lived encounter with the world. “Experience” was, we may say, directly opposed to “system” in Foucault’s thought. The two could not coexist, and never had coexisted. When one used the language of system, one was looking at the subject from without, as a position or node. Conversely, when one used the language of experience, one was looking at the subject from within, as an actor. Whereas system had been a way of treating the subject as a kind of epiphenomenon, experience represented the acknowledgement that the interior dimension was as valid and necessary as the exterior dimension in the study of ourselves; that “art and style” were as vital as “conditions.” The last four years of Foucault’s life witnessed a dramatic move in the direction of experience; he was, in his final courses at the Collège de France, Professor of the History of Systems of Thought more in name than in fact.

What, then, was the significance of Foucault’s question? Why did he inquire after the experience of the subject in a culture that has generated a “true discourse” about subjects? It was to demonstrate, as Foucault had done in every one of his studies, that such a state of affairs was not “necessary”; that it was instead simply specific. The idea of a “knowable subject” was historically contingent, fragile, and amenable to change. The import of Foucault’s question lay in the twentieth century, not in the second century.

If the experience of the subject, from antiquity to the present day, was one in which the subject was perceived to possess a singular and profound truth, then that was a misfortune—but not a destiny. The experience need not remain as it was. There were other, perhaps better, experiences of one’s own subjectivity. As the study of ancient arts of living showed, there had been other ways of conceptualizing selfhood that were not dependent upon bondage to a “true” self. That alone would be sufficient to demonstrate that other ways could be found in the present.

Here, then, was the intimate bond with Foucault’s writings on the Enlightenment. Since 1978, Foucault had returned again and again—though never in a systematic way—to what he called the philosophical problem of the “present moment.” The essential idea in each of these interventions was that Kant, with his “Was ist Aufklärung?” of 1784, had inaugurated an era in which the central preoccupation of philosophy was the interrogation of the historical present. Hence, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Horkheimer, and Habermas could all be seen as perpetuators of a Kantian project: one that moved the attention of philosophy from the eternal to “what we do today.”

Kant had ushered in what Foucault believed to be the quintessentially “modern” attitude. That attitude was encapsulated in the famous audae sapere. It was a recognition of the surpassing of intellectual minority; it entailed perpetual self-questioning. In this latter sense, it transcended philosophy and flavored all aspects of modern culture. “For the attitude of modernity,” Foucault wrote, “the high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it...otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping what it is.” Modernity put self-knowledge in the service of a transformative effort.

No better exemplar of the post-Kantian attitude could be found, argued Foucault, than Baudelaire. For Baudelaire, the essence of the modern artist was his willingness to transfigure the world, and to do so in a way that was not mere negation of the real, but rather “a difficult interplay between the truth of what is real and the exercise of freedom.” This was equally true of the individual at large:

Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself; his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not “liberate man in his own being”; it compels him to face the task of producing himself.

The attitude of modernity, Foucault noted in carefully chosen language, was tied to “an indispensable asceticism”: one in which, rather than accepting oneself, one “[took] oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration.”

Here, then, were central motifs of the 1981 and 1982 courses—only transferred to “modernity.” The primacy accorded to art (and not science); the indispensability of asceticism; the partisanship for self-production over self-discovery: all of this was directly imported from the study of the arts of...
living and their successors. It was a remarkable, even brazen, act of intellectual legerdemain on Foucault's part. Modernity, which the philosopher had presented throughout his career as an era defined by rationalization (in forms of discourse, in the functioning of power, and elsewhere), was here recast as an attitude: an attitude, moreover, defined by the "ascetic elaboration of self" through art.94

While Habermas and a number of his followers saw "What Is Enlightenment?" as a kind of end-of-the-day concession speech,95 it was in reality something of an argumentative coup for Foucault. Three moves are worth noting. Firstly, by defining the Enlightenment tradition as "the permanent reactivation of an attitude"—one that manifested itself in critique of the historical present—Foucault situated himself squarely within the philosophical tradition that his opponents alleged him to menace. Secondly, by positing a laudable post-Kantian ethos that operated through innovation and not discovery, he provided normative grounding for his (obvious) preference for arts of living over the hermeneutics of the self.96 The latter, in its infinite task of scrutiny, merely took things as they were, while the arts of living—with their imperative to craft one's self in a state of autonomy—manifested a Königsbergian intellectual maturity. Finally, by issuing an ironic echo of Habermas's call to uphold the Enlightenment tradition (which, translated into Foucault's terms, became a call to transfigure ourselves and our historical moment), he made the idea of an art of living something relevant to the present. All three of these moves converged when Foucault wrote of Enlightenment-inspired critique: "I shall thus characterize the philosophical ethos appropriate to the critical ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings."97

to be modern was, thus, to scrutinize and destabilize our present, so that we might, as "free beings," craft ourselves in such a way as to transcend it. Enlightenment meant autonomous subjects living their lives as art.

While Foucault's last works have generally not been read in this way—the temptation being to read them as if the philosopher still clung to his "strong" genealogical views on power and subjectivity—he showed great determination, in his final years of life, to make just this point. Did Foucault actually think of the arts of living and the critical ontology of ourselves as a single issue? Perhaps the most striking piece of evidence in this regard is the philosopher's lecture of January 5, 1983: the two-hour introductory piece to his course of that year, The Government of the Self and of Others. A single oral presentation, this lecture nevertheless contained near-complete versions of both "What Is Enlightenment?" and the introduction to To the Use of Pleasure. Foucault presented, that is to say, his preface to the study of the aesthetics of existence and his account of the Enlightenment ethos as a single thread.98

On the question of individual liberty, Foucault sounded at times during his last years like the risen Sartre. He told one interviewer, "I believe solidly in human liberty."99 In a discussion with Paul Rabinow conducted shortly before his death, he made the profoundly unarchaeological statement: "Thought is liberty in relation to what one does, the movement by which one detaches oneself from it, constitutes it as an object and reflects upon it as a problem."100 In the final interview that he gave, Foucault said that he had undertaken the study of antiquity "in order to see how sexuality was manipulated, lived, and modified by a certain number of actors."101 Choice, freedom, reflection, experience, agency: these were the undisguised hallmarks of Foucault's last philosophical interventions.

In parallel, it is clear that Foucault continued to use not simply positive but hortatory language when speaking about the crafting of life, noting during one interview that rule-based morality was disappearing in the modern world, and that "to this absence of morality responds, or should respond, a research effort which is that of an aesthetic of existence."102 He was emphatic that he lived his own life according to these principles. Asked to what extent he was involved in the homosexual movement in France, he replied that he held himself aloof from movements of sexual liberation; "For me," he added, "sexuality is a matter of one's way of living, it points back to the technique of the self."103

For Foucault, the philosophical advances that had been made in the course of his lifetime—he remained too modest to say made by himself—were major steps on the path to individual freedom. If the Nietzschean dream of life as art was closer today, it was because philosophy had rendered individuals more aware of the fragility of that which constrained
them. From this, the possibility of determining one's own existence followed naturally.104

Had the philosopher been able to keep to path that he himself had blazed? Had he lived life as art? He seemed, at the end, to think so. "My books," he said, "are, in a sense, fragments of autobiography."105 Was there coherence, he was asked, to the struggles in which he had engaged? There was none, he responded, save that of his own life.106

Conclusion

Foucault's Pendulum

For the intellectual historian, it is an inescapable fact that the great bulk of scholarship conducted on Michel Foucault is in the English language. That Foucault himself was exceedingly comfortable speaking and working in the English-speaking world has certainly played a part in this. The centrality to Foucault's work of California—as a site of social experimentation, as an academic hub, and as a place where the philosopher formed close and lasting intellectual partnerships—is clear, and bears, through his interpreters, strongly on his subsequent reception. In his last years, Foucault also gave courses at the University of Vermont, and lectured extensively at universities throughout the American northeast. Foucault's spiritual home was, by the end, unquestionably in North America. An exchange from a 1982 interview is revealing:

Stephen Riggins: You don't match up with the image of the refined Frenchman who practices the art of living well. You're also the only Frenchman I know who's told me that he preferred American cuisine.

Foucault: Yes, that's true! A good club sandwich with a Coca-Cola, there's nothing like it! It's true. With ice cream, of course.1
In another interview conducted the same year, Foucault declared that he had always felt himself poorly integrated into French social and intellectual life, and that, had the possibility occurred to him at a younger age, he would have emigrated to the United States.²

But if it is the case that, since his death in 1984, Foucault has experienced divergent destinies in France and in the English-speaking world, part of that is to be attributed to the intellectual politics of the 1980s, so markedly different on the two sides of the Atlantic. In America, as François Cusset has ably demonstrated, Foucault’s prominence surged as the large-scale appropriation of his ideas, both inside and outside of academia, provided the theoretical grounding for a decade of identity politics.³ In France, on the other hand, Foucault’s reputation as a thinker and public intellectual went into eclipse almost immediately after his death. Here, the temper of the moment was in opposition to the perceived intellectual excesses of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and sympathetic to a liberal critique that, in Paris if not elsewhere, had the air of novelty. As Mark Lilla argues, the 1981 election of François Mitterrand, far from heralding la gauche au pouvoir, marked the rapprochement of the French revolutionary tradition with the liberal institutions of the Fifth Republic. What the ensuing two decades witnessed was “the almost universal abandonment of the Hegelian, Marxist, and structuralist dogmas that nourished intellectual contempt for liberalism after the war.”⁴ In this twilight of idols, the author of The Order of Things and Discipline and Punish was not spared.

The breakthrough work for the emergence of a confident and articulate French liberalism was Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut’s 1985 La pensée 68: Essai sur l’anti-humanisme contemporain.⁵ In this groundbreaking and contentious work, Ferry and Renaut, like Marcel Gauchet, Pierre Manent, and a considerable number of other French thinkers, self-consciously rehabilitated a set of concepts that had seemed irretrievably lost at the end of the 1960s. History, the subject, rights, man himself: in the course of the 1980s and 1990s, all of these returned to the center of philosophical questioning in France.⁶

The achievement of La pensée 68 was to draw a hard line between the vital liberal–republican tradition in France on one side, and the illiberal and pernicious aberration that the thought of the generation of 1968 represented on the other. In this intellectual revolt against the fathers, it was essential for Ferry and Renaut to depict the leading figures of the preceding generation—Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu, and Lacan—as practitioners of a rigorous and consistent antihumanism: as deniers, that is, of man, the subject, and liberty. Likewise, it was necessary to treat “la pensée 68” as a fundamentally static body of thought, incapable of meaningful self-critique. Hence, Ferry and Renaut could, in concluding their analysis of Foucault’s late writings on subjectivity, shrug off the philosopher’s late-career changes of orientation as so much window-dressing. New words, they argued, masked the same old Foucault:

The previous positions are preserved . . . in their entirety, while at the same time benefiting from an effect of language that, in dangling the theme of the search for new subjectivities, allows [Foucault] to jump on the bandwagon of the return to the subject and to mask everything that is so deeply outmoded about his discourse.⁷

The adoption of this new vocabulary and voice, Ferry and Renaut suggested, carried with it the ancillary benefit of camouflaging the contradiction that necessarily existed in criticizing modernity (with its concomitant concepts of humanism and subjectivity) while at the same time embracing the discourse of human rights. Foucault’s seeming “advance” to an ethics of self was thus, as Ferry and Renaut suggested, in reality “a desperate attempt to mask the immense gap that had opened up between him and the evolution of ideas and morals.”⁸

For Ferry and Renaut, as for others within the neoliberal current, Foucault’s “French Nietzscheanism,” like that of his contemporary Jean-François Lyotard, represented a positive threat to human rights and to republican values. As Ferry and Renaut observed:

The antihumanism of the thought of ‘68 opens onto “barbarism,” not in the sense that it would unleash untold torrents of violence, but in that its intended trial of subjectivity destroys any possibility of genuine dialogue between consciousnesses that might be able to think their differences on the basis of identity: once all that remains to each of us is the exacerbation of individual differences, the other becomes the “entirely other,” the “bar-bar-ian.”
The practical consequence of Foucault’s antisubjectivity was—as Ferry and Renaut believed Foucault’s criticisms of Habermas amply demonstrated—a profound mistrust of intersubjectivity, and a belief that any claim thereunto was “utopian.” That such a path of thought was politically corrosive seemed manifest to these authors. If they congratulated Foucault upon any aspect of his philosophical practice, it was that he had “so assiduously cultivated the inconsequence” of his own ideas that he had defended human rights and the Republic in spite of himself.9

Foucault, had he been alive to respond, would doubtless have countered that a “positive” theory never ensures positive political results, and that no theory’s historical appropriation can be foreseen.10 That he was not alive helps to explain how Ferry and Renaut’s work was able to exercise the influence that it did over Foucault’s posthumous reputation in France. While the neoliberal critique of Foucault is incisive on a number of points, what the present volume should have demonstrated is that it nevertheless proceeds from a serious misrepresentation of his work, and particularly the later portion thereof. What Ferry and Renaut offered their readers was a caricature of Foucault’s thought: one that emphasized the profoundly antihumanist sentiments of the 1960s, while ignoring or challenging the sincerity of his subject-centered work of the 1980s.

Part of what this work has attempted to show is that nothing could be more unreasonable than the attempt to flatten down Foucault’s thought into a single, coherent project. What we see over the course of Foucault’s career is not the consistent advocacy of a pointed philosophical message (as, for instance, the dissolution of the subject), but rather a succession of near-independent probings into questions that, for the moment, had captured the philosopher’s imagination. In this sense, Gary Gutting is on much firmer ground than Ferry and Renaut when he argues that:

Foucault’s work is at root ad hoc, fragmentary and incomplete. Each of his books is determined by concerns and approaches specific to it and should not be understood as developing a theory or a method that is a general instrument of intellectual progress.11

In Isaiah Berlin’s terminology, Gutting tells us, Foucault is a fox and not a hedgehog. And while Gutting may put the case a touch strongly, the core assertion that he makes is critical to comprehending Foucault’s work. Foucault never wrote the same book twice. Madness and Civilization, which sought, in a particularly stirring way, to restore the voices of the voiceless, was asking fundamentally different questions from The Archaeology of Knowledge, which proclaimed the essential anonymity of all speech. Neither work is directly comparable to The Use of Pleasure, which found in the voices of the past an exhortation to a richer social world in the present. And what is true of these particular works is true of Foucault’s oeuvre generally.

How are we to understand the changeability, the centerlessness of Foucauldian thought? Manifestly, there is no one simple answer. Yet we move closer to making sense of the philosopher’s trajectory when we recognize that, as a thinker, Foucault was exceedingly permeable. He liked to paint himself as an outsider and as one who worked against the grain of his times, and this self-characterization is not without a bit of truth: he shunned institutional commitments, traveled as much as his work allowed, and steered clear of much that was fashionable. As the foregoing chapters have demonstrated, however, Foucault was at every moment of his career highly attuned both to the prevailing intellectual mood and to the needs and expectations of his audience. It was the nature of his philosophical practice to enter a community, imbibe its concepts, deploy them in a powerful and original way—and then move on when the tides changed.

The first community of thought in which he found a home and welcome was a literary one, defined by Blanchot, Bataille, and the Tel Quel authors. His work of this period, accordingly, bore a distinctly literary stamp, and shared the preoccupations—experience, language, limits—of his fiction-writing colleagues. If the structuralist wave, with which he rapidly affiliated himself, enabled Foucault to speak in a new voice to a new set of listeners, it also virtually required him to abandon certain philosophical positions, like the centrality of experience or the importance of the gaze, that had become inconvenient. This pattern would repeat itself in the wake of May 1968. Where the Foucault of The Order of Things excoriated the modern-day followers of Marx and tentatively praised those of Freud, the radicalized and Deleuze-inspired Foucault of the early 1970s made precisely the opposite choices, adopting Marxian rhetoric and dismissing the “repressive hypothesis.” The wheel turned yet again with the emergence of la nouvelle philosophie in the late 1970s, and several times more before
Foucault's death in 1984. At every point, Foucault's essential openness to the new ideas and currents flowing around him, coupled with his remarkable ability to rapidly master new conceptual languages, drove his thought in new and unforeseen directions.

Naturally, amidst this perpetual self-reinvention, Foucault's position on subjectivity did not remain static. In his earliest writings, including *Madness and Civilization* and many of the shorter pieces that followed in its wake, Foucault showed his commitment to something like a traditional subject: an independent and autonomous locus of experience. That kind of subjectivity not only disappeared from his work during the second half of the 1960s, but actually served as the target of a series of devastating attacks. The concept of experience was, in a succession of works that increasingly bore the stamp of the triumphant structuralist movement, officially banished from Foucault's conceptual vocabulary and consigned (along with "creativity," and all other terms redolent of agency) to the trash-heap. Experience was recognized as subjective and interior—the province of the *for-itself*. Archaeology, like the genealogy that would follow and build upon it, was committed not to experience but to an anonymous systematicity that generated meaning while avoiding the notion of an experience-laden subject. As Foucault could write in 1972, "What counts in the things said by men is not so much what they might have thought behind or beneath them, but that which systematizes them from the outset."  

Foucault's works from the decade spanning 1966 to 1976—*The Order of Things, The Archaeology of Knowledge, Discipline and Punish*, and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*—each, in slightly modulated ways, dissected the notion of the individual subject as agent or patient. The philosopher certainly did not mispeak when he described his thought from this period as the interrogation of system. The logic of these critiques was, while differing in its object, always essentially the same: the phenomena under examination represented some portion of a great system, or what we might call an immanent material totality. This system was self-governing in the sense that it transformed itself over time. It also produced a number of effects—works of philosophy, for instance, or institutions like the prison—that appeared to be the products of conscious and purposeful action, but were in the fact the result of the play of anonymous forces. These systemic "surface effects," whether viewed as discourse-objects or power-objects, succeeded in bearing meaning without meaning's first being imparted to them by any subject. Subjects were not the makers of these objects, but were rather co-produced alongside the objects by the selfsame processes.

Foucault's notoriety as a thinker continues to derive from the positions that he theorized in the works of this fruitful decade. With Foucault's political and philosophical projects of the late 1970s, however, came an increasing interest in questions that refused to be bound by the logic of the immanent material totality. On the political level, his part in the contentious debate over the significance of the *nouveaux philosophes* divided Foucault from the French left—and even from his own recent theses on the disciplinary society—and drove him toward a rights-oriented position in which the treatment of the individual was the ultimate marker of a regime's acceptability. On the philosophical level, his attention began a slow migration away from the social, and toward the experience of religion and of spirituality. Already by 1978, it was clear to Foucault that the study of the history of sexuality upon which he had embarked would be incomplete and misleading if he failed to pause, backtrack, and examine the role of Christian confession in the construction of the modern sexual subject. 14 But the doctrines, institutions and rituals of Christianity quickly proved too narrow to accommodate the breadth of his passion for "spirituality," a term by which he understood the transformation of one's own being with the goal of opening oneself to the discovery of truth.

Taking these shifts into account, Foucault's fascination with the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79 seems a natural development. He saw there, or believed he saw, not only an unarmed population courageously opposing its dictatorial rulers, but also a religious movement that was a kind of "political spirituality." As he would say in an 1979 interview:

In rising up, the Iranians said to themselves (and perhaps this is the soul of uprisings): "we must change, certainly, the regime. . . . But above all, we must change ourselves. Our way of being, our relation to others, to things, to eternity, to God, etc., all must be completely changed, and there won't be any real revolution save on the condition of this radical change in our experience." I think it's there that Islam played a role. . . . religion was for them like the promise and the guarantee of finding something that would radically change their subjectivity.15
The Iranians' hunger for personal freedom was indivisible, in Foucault's eyes, from their desire to live in such a way that their subjectivity was transformed, that their experience was opened up to new dimensions, and that the pathways of their lives gave forth onto truths that modernity itself had blocked and obscured.

In Foucault's analysis of the Iranian events, as in nearly all of the work that he would undertake after 1978, the critical perspective was the reverse of what one had come to expect from him. Rather than starting from an immanent totality and demonstrating the ways in which that totality produced individual subjects as the result of its functioning, Foucault started from the standpoint of the individual. He treated subjects not as the secondary manifestations of a more primary network, but rather as primary entities in themselves. It was not the functioning of power that made Iranians into the vital (and inflamed) subjects that they were; it was the accumulated behavior of Iranian subjects—desirous of effecting their own self-transformation—that stillled and then reconfigured the mechanisms of power. Within a year, Foucault would undertake to study this relationship for its own sake, examining in The Birth of Biopolitics the "liberal governmentality" in which outcomes were generated by the combined actions of individual actors, rather than by the desires of the center or the systematics of the whole.

It is no exaggeration to say that, in Foucault's last works, his commitment to governmentality gave way before his equally significant (but long-dormant) commitment to experience. To treat phenomena in terms of experience was to treat them as lived events. It was to understand them from the position of interiority, rather than from the famous standpoint of "exteriority" that, for its many vicissitudes of meaning, had remained the fixed star of Foucault's thought. As Martin Jay has recently argued:

in his final work, Foucault came to focus his attention on the constitution of the subject in such a way that experience once again began to resist reduction to [its] conditions, whether understood in terms of epistemic discourses or apparatuses of power. In so doing, he returned to his earlier fascination for Bataille's notion of inner experience, while at the same time reproducing some of the unresolved tensions that critics like Habermas had discerned in Bataille's approach to the issue.16

Experience was the province of an active, autonomous, reflective subject. It was that which allowed the Iranian subject to examine his own condition and then act. It was that which permitted the free citizen to craft his selfhood according to the principles of art. Experience was certainly historically dependent, but it is incorrect to imagine that, for the Foucault of the early 1980s, it was constructed by practices; it was, rather, that which made practice possible.

That Foucault did not himself acknowledge a change of direction in his work should not give surprise. As there has been repeated occasion to show, Foucault's intellectual modus operandi was, on the one hand, frequently to assert his right to change his mind; and on the other, always to reinterpret his past achievements in light of his current projects, so as to give the impression of a consistent and coherent oeuvre. This amusing personal contradiction was tremendously empowering for Foucault, because it allowed him to undertake philosophical leaps at which a more fastidious thinker would have balked—without once having to "renounce" the works that, objectively speaking, he had surpassed.17 In this as in most things, Foucault was a great student of Nietzsche, who wrote, "Convictions are prisons. . . . Freedom from convictions of any kind, the capacity for an unconstrained view, pertains to strength."18

Many historians who have not shared the political agenda of Ferry and Renaut have nevertheless echoed the pair's conclusions. That is, they have minimized the significance of Foucault's late espousal of a more robust conception of subjectivity, either because they have lacked the evidence—specifically, the lecture courses from 1979 and after—that would have revealed the enormity of the shift; or else, like Ferry and Renaut, they have simply doubted the sincerity of the philosopher's transformation. The result has been that Foucault's philosophical career has read like a kind of arrow's flight: a straight trajectory, an unwavering determination to deconstruct the subject. Habermas found the archery metaphor valuable enough to title his posthumous analysis of Foucault's project, "Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present."19

As we have seen, the history of Foucault's intellectual project—the term itself is misleading—is far from a straight line. A more accurate depiction might be the swing of a pendulum. Foucault started from a position that admitted the possibility of subjectivity: arguably, it was his awareness that
certain kinds of subjects had been suppressed merely because of the label that one affixed to them—"mad," "demented," "enraged"—that motivated him to write in the first place. He ended, nearly a quarter-century later, at a position that looked not a little like his starting-point: acknowledging the existence of prediscursive subjects, enraptured by literature, politically unaffiliated, and pledged to a kind of experience that pushed the limits of the known. In the period in-between, Foucault created the twentieth century’s most devastating critique of the free subject—and then, in a voice that by the end trembled from pain and debility, liquidated it. For the notion of the end of subjectivity had offered a kind of cold clarity, as well as an immensely thought-provoking lens through which to view the world. But ultimately, only the notion of strong subjectivity proved warm enough to accommodate an overwhelming passion for life and an inextinguishable belief in the primacy of human liberty.

Notes

NOTES FOR THE INTRODUCTION


Foucault 2.0

Beyond Power and Knowledge

ERIC PARAS

Other Press • New York
To Edward and Jenifer
CHAPTER FIVE. ARTS OF LIVING


6. The terms “pratique de soi,” “technique du soi,” and “technologie du soi,” appear nowhere in The Government of the Living, which concluded in March of 1980. While Foucault has clearly, by the end of the course, broached the themes that will later be discussed under these names, he has not as yet found the vocabulary for them. “Techniques of the self” first appears in Foucault’s conceptual arsenal during a lecture given at Berkeley in October of 1980. See Foucault, “Subjectivity and Truth,” typescript in the IMEC archive, Paris, France, document D. 2(1).


8. “[O]n a l’habitude de faire l’histoire de l’existence humaine à partir de ses conditions… Mais il me semble aussi possible de faire l’histoire de l’existence comme art et comme style. L’existence est la matière première la plus fragile de l’art humain; mais c’est aussi sa donnée la plus immédiate.” Foucault, “À propos de la généalogie de l’éthique: un aperçu du travail en cours,” in Dits et écrits, t. II, 1448–1449. Officially, this document represents the transcript of a question-and-answer session conducted by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow in April of 1983. As the original (and first-published) English edition of the interview reveals, however, this particular statement did not figure in the interview; it represents a subsequent modification on Foucault’s part. For comparison, see “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 250–251.

9. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 232. On Nietzsche’s philosophical commitment to self-fashioning, see Alexander Nehamas, Nietzsche: Life as Literature (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). With an eye to what he calls Nietzsche’s “aestheticism,” Nehamas argues that, “Nietzsche exemplifies through his own writings one way in which one individual may have succeeded in fashioning itself” (3–8). Nehamas has devoted an entire study to the notion of the art of living; see Nehamas, The Art of Living (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). In treating Foucault, however, Nehamas is less concerned with the philosopher’s use of formal arts of living than with his appropriation of the Socrates figure.

10. Dreyfus and Rabinow, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of a Work in Progress,” 237. Foucault, told in the course of the interview that his understanding of an art of living seemed to place him close to Nietzsche’s view, agreed that this was the case.


14. The connections with Habermas’s own project are apparent. While the tendency of recent scholarship has been to emphasize the antagonist inherent in the two thinkers’ perspectives (see Kelly, ed., Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate), Foucault in the 1980s seemed to feel that he was working on a parallel track to that of his Frankfurt School contemporary. He was suggesting as much when he said, in 1984, “Je m’intéresse bien là à ce que fait Habermas, je sais qu’il n’est pas du tout d’accord avec ce que je dis—mais je suis un peu plus d’accord avec ce qu’il dit.” “Face aux gouvernements, les droits de l’homme,” Libération 967, June 30, 1984–July 1, 1984, 22; reprinted in Dits et écrits, t. II, 1545.

15. “des pratiques réfléchies et volontaires par lesquelles les hommes, non seulement se fixent des règles de conduite, mais cherchent à se transformer eux-mêmes, à se modifier dans leur être singulier, et à faire de leur vie une oeuvre qui porte certaines valeurs esthétiques et répondre à certains critères de style.” Foucault, Histoire de la sexualité II: L’usage des plaisirs, 18.


17. “la formation et le développement d’une pratique de soi qui a pour objectif de se constituer soi-même comme l’ouvrier de la beauté de sa propre vie.” Ibid.

19. "technologies du soi"; Foucault's use of "technique" and "technologie" suggests that he considered them to be synonyms. Ibid.


25. "alors que nous l'avons complètement oublié, surtout depuis la Renaissance." Ibid.

26. Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 378–379. Foucault writes, "la pensée moderne n'a jamais pu, à dire vrai, proposer une morale. . . . Pour la pensée moderne, il n'y a pas de morale possible; car depuis la XIXe siècle la pensée est déjà 'sortie' d'elle-même en son être propre, elle n'est plus théorie; dès qu'elle pense, elle blesse ou réconcilie, elle rapproche ou éloigne, elle rompt, elle dissocie, elle noue ou renoue; elle ne peut s'empêcher de libérer et d'asservir. Avant même de prescrire, d'esquisser un futur, de dire ce qu'il faut faire, avant même d'exhorter ou seulement d'alerter, la pensée, au ras de son existence, dès sa forme la plus matinale, est en elle-même une action,—un acte périlleux."


29. Ibid., xiii (135); italics mine. Foucault here defines fascism as that thing "that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us."


32. The reasons why Foucault was in possession of the Francs de Sales material—yet did not make use of it prior to 1981—would make for an entire study in themselves. He notes in a 1983 interview, "I have more than a draft of a book about sexual ethics in the sixteenth century, in which also the problem of the techniques of the self, self-examination, the cure of souls is very important, both in the Protestant and Catholic churches. ('On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of a Work in Progress,' 231). From comments made during the interview and elsewhere, it seems likely that this draft was *Les Aveux de la chair*, which Foucault intended to publish as the second volume of *The History of Sexuality* (with *L'Usage des plaisirs* as the first). The content of the early lectures of Foucault's 1978 course at the Collège de France—*Territory, Security, Population*—show that Foucault had initiated research on confession and Christian sexuality almost immediately after the 1976 publication of *La volonté de savoir*. Yet this project proved abortive, as Foucault was sidetracked first by the investigation of reason of state, later by the study of liberalism, and finally by the acknowledgment that he would have to study the ancient world first in order to make sense of Christianity. One result was that de Sales's *Introduction* (1604) remained essentially in Foucault's back pocket until the philosopher was too ill to make proper use of the draft material. *Les Aveux de la chair* was never completed, and *Le Souci de soi*, which was never intended to form part of the *Sexuality series*—it has very little to do with sex—was published as its third volume. For additional background on the birthing pains of *The History of Sexuality*, see Arnold I. Davidson, "Ethics as ascetics: Foucault, the history of ideas, and ancient thought," in Gary Gutting, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 117.

33. "un certain nombre de questions se posent à nous dans les termes mêmes où elles se posaient dans l'Antiquité. La recherche de styles d'existence aussi différents que possibles les uns des autres me paraît l'un des points par lesquels la recherche contemporaine a pu s'inaugurer autrefois dans des groupes singuliers." Foucault, "La retour de la morale," *Les nouvelles littéraires* 2637, June 28–July 5, 1984, 36; reprinted in *Dits et écrits*, t. II, 1525.


36. "[Il]uté de faire valoir que les individus ont des droits fondamentaux et naturels, nous devrions essayer d'imaginer et de créer un nouveau droit relacional"; "institutions relationnellement appauvrissantes"; "il s'agit de créer des formes

37. “la création de nouvelles formes de vie, de rapports, d’amitiés, dans la société, l’art, la culture, de nouvelles formes qui s’instaureront à travers nos choix sexuels, éthiques et politiques.” “Michel Foucault, an Interview: Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity,” *The Advocate* 400, August 7, 1984, 26–30, 58; republished as “Michel Foucault, une interview: sexe, pouvoir et la politique de l’identité,” in *Dits et écrits*, t. II, 1554–1565.

38. “Nous devons plutôt créer un mode de vie gay.” Ibid.


40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., 236–245.

42. On Foucault’s Californian exploits, see James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Anchor, 1994). Miller’s journalistic account, while providing a wealth of background information, is, as David Halperin has ably shown, extremely suspect in its interpretive methodology (see David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

43. In the spring of 1975, Leo Bersani invited Foucault to Berkeley on behalf of the French Department. He gave two talks, “Discourse and Repression,” and “Infantile Sexuality Before Freud,” both of which continue to exist in unedited form. See “Chronologie,” in *Dits et écrits*, t. l, 63.


45. In addition to Dreyfus and Rabinow’s *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, see “Discussion about Books,” audio cassette available in the IMEC archive, Paris, France, document C. 18.


47. See, for example, Foucault, *Subjetivité et vérité*, lecture of January 14, 1981, where Foucault explicitly acknowledges Brown’s question to be his own: “Comment établir ce partage, comment faire la cartographie de ce partage des eaux, comme disait Peter Brown, entre ce qu’on appelle le christianisme et ce qu’on appelle le paganisme?”


50. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, 58–59; it is also worth noting the image that Brown conjures in the concluding passages of the work. He writes: “The Christians looked to the earth alone. They claimed power from heaven; but they had made that heaven remote and they kept its power to themselves, to build up new separate institutions among upstart heroes on earth.... To these human institutions a new generation of Christians was prepared to transfer that sense of solemn delight which men of the old religion still sought in the clustering stars. The ‘stars’ that held the attention of a fourth-century Christian were the tombs of the martyrs, scattered like the Milky Way throughout the Mediterranean. The lives of human heroes, the spiritual struggles of the individual, and the fate of the traditions of doctrine passed from one human intermediary to the other in highly self-conscious, inward-looking institutions, came to hold the attention of men to the exclusion of those old problems whose solution had lain in placing man correctly against the overwhelming backdrop of the cosmos” (100). What is remarkable in the comparison that Brown establishes is not simply that it highlights (as would Foucault) the emergence of “the spiritual struggles of the individual.” It is the fact that it contrasts Christian inwardness with a pagan exteriority represented by man set against the stars. It will be remembered from Chapter 4 that Foucault employed precisely this image—Septimus Severus in his starry chamber—to emphasize this difference.

51. “L’usage que je fais du ‘style,’ je l’emprunte en grande partie à Peter Brown.” “La retour de la morale,” 1517.

52. Ibid., 91–92; italics mine.


56. See, for instance, Foucault, *Subjetivité et vérité*, lecture of April 1, 1981, in which social-historical background from Veyne’s works provides the setup for the course’s concluding section.


58. “à comprendre que les choses ne sont que les objectivations de pratiques déterminées, dont il faut mettre au jour les déterminations.” Paul Veyne, “Foucault
69. Again, the affinities between Foucault's position and Habermas's contemporary account of the colonization of the life-world by "system" are manifest.
74. "le jour, où le bios a cessé d'être ce qu'il avait été si longtemps pour la pensée grecque, à savoir la corrélatif d'une tékhné; lorsque le bios (la vie) a cessé d'être le corrélatif d'une tékhné, pour devenir la forme d'un épreuve de soi." Foucault, L'herméneutique du sujet, lecture of March 24, 1982, second hour, 466.
75. Épreuve, the critical term in this passage, holds a unique and important place in Foucault's vocabulary of concepts. Prior to its use in The Hermeneutics of the Subject and the two lecture courses that followed it, the word "épreuve"—which does not merit a listing in the terminological index of the Discourse et écrits—had made only one significant appearance in twenty years. During the 1973 conference entitled "La vérité et les formes juridiques," Foucault argued that Western history could be characterized in terms of a limited number of "juridical forms." He labeled these forms inquest (enquête), examination (examen), and test (épreuve). While the first two were characteristic of successive stages of modernity, the last occurred variously in archaic Greece and in the Middle Ages.

The essence of the épreuve, and that which set it apart from the other two juridical forms, was that the truth emerged as the result of a challenge and a physical ordeal. There was no need for the patient mobilization of evidence, of witnesses, of a vast machinery intended to reconstruct the misdeed; to find truth in such a way was the province of the inquest, which demanded the resources of the administrative monarchies. The épreuve, in contrast, was a literal "trial" in which the truth was revealed. ("La vérité et les formes juridiques," Discourse et écrits, t. I, 1442-1452). The echo of this definition is still present in the term épreuve as Foucault uses it in 1982. Invoking Epictetus, he declares: "Philosopher, c'est se préparer; philosophe, c'est donc par conséquent se mettre dans une disposition telle que l'on va considérer l'ensemble de la vie comme une épreuve. Et l'ascétique, l'ensemble des exercices qui sont à notre disposition, ont pour sens de nous permettre de nous préparer en permanence à cette vie qui ne sera jamais, et jusqu'au bout, qu'une vie d'épreuve, [au sens] où ce sera une vie qui sera une épreuve... Je crois qu'on a là le moment où cette fameuse épiméthée beautou, ce souci de soi, qui apparaissait à l'intérieur du principe général, du thème général qu'on doit se donner une tékhné
(un art de vivre), a occupé en quelque sorte toute la place définie par la tekhné tou bion. Ce que les Grecs cherchaient dans ces techniques de vie, sous des formes très différentes depuis tant de siècles, depuis le début de l’âge classique, cette tekhné tou bion, elle est maintenant, dans ce genre-là de pensée, occupée entièrement par le principe qu’il faut se soucier de soi, que se soucier de soi, c’est s’équiper pour une série d’événements imprévus, mais pour lesquels on va pratiquer un certain nombre d’exercices qui les actualisent dans une nécessité inévitable, où on les dépouillera de tout ce qu’ils peuvent avoir de réalité imaginaire, pour les réduire au strict minimum de leur existence. Et ce sont dans ces exercices, c’est par le jeu de ces exercices que l’on pourra tout au long de sa vie vivre son existence comme une épreuve.” (L’hémonétique du sujet, lecture of March 24, 1982, second hour, 464-465).

In this remarkably rich passage, Foucault suggests three things: firstly, that the period he has just examined—the second century C.E.—is the moment in which arts of living are overtaken from within by the care of the self; secondly, that from this period onward, life will be lived not expressively as art, but reflexively as épreuve; and thirdly, that this shift represents a radical diminution both of life’s events (“on les dépouillera de tout ce qu’ils peuvent avoir de réalité imaginaire”) and of life’s substance (which will henceforth be lived “dans ces exercices . . . par le jeu de ces exercices”). (Ibid., 465) Life, now lived in and through a filtering set of discursive practices, is flattened down to the “true” words that one must perpetually speak about it.

It is through this incomprehension of this use of épreuve that Thomas R. Flynn, whose studies of the late Foucault are otherwise so astute, veers astray in his analysis of the place of subjectivity. Flynn argues that, in Foucault’s last lectures at the Collège de France, the philosopher, “drew a distinction between the Socratic-Platonic care of the soul (epimeleia), which was intellectualist and ontological, and the experience of life (épreuve de la vie), which was aesthetic and ‘ethical’ in his sense.” (Thomas R. Flynn, “Truth and Subjectivation in the Later Foucault,” The Journal of Philosophy 82, no. 10, October 1985, 537). As the previously cited texts show, Foucault’s use of épreuve describes a phenomenon that is diametrically opposed to what Flynn holds him to mean: namely, the experience of life in all its richness. Flynn’s commitment to the false opposites epimeleia/épreuve short-circuits the central historical conflict (tekhné/épreuve) that Foucault seeks to establish. The damage to his interpretation of Foucauldian subjectivity is correspondingly great.

76. Foucault, L’histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir, 76–78.
77. “La vérité est extraite du plaisir lui-même”; “économie des corps et des plaisirs”; “austère monarchie du sexe”; “la tâche indéfinie de forcer son secret et d’extorquer à cette ombre les aveux les plus vrais.” Ibid., 77, 211.
79. Ibid., 235.
82. The relation of the individual to himself is, as was noted in the preceding chapter, the definition given by Foucault in 1980 to the term “subjectivity.”
84. Foucault, Subjectivité et vérité, lecture of January 7, 1981.
85. “Jamais la folie, comme domaine d’expérience, ne s’epuisait dans la connaissance médicale ou para-médicale qu’on pouvait en prendre.” Foucault, Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 133.
87. Foucault naturally continued to use it frequently in its colloquial sense. In 1971, for instance, speaking of the G.I.P.’s investigation into the living conditions of prisoners, he noted, “Il faut que l’information rebondisse; il faut transformer l’expérience individuelle en savoir collectif.” (“Enquête sur les prisons: brissons les barreaux du silence,” Politique-Hebdo 24, March 18, 1971, 4-6; reprinted in Dits et écrits, t. I, 1046.)
89. In a 1971 interview, Foucault described the project of Madness and Civilization in the language of his current archaeological concerns, claiming that what he had really been observing in that work were practices and discourse. “Et c’est cet ensemble de ‘pratiques et discours’ qui a constitué ce que j’ai appelé l’expérience de la folie, mauvais mot d’ailleurs, car ce n’est pas en réalité une expérience.” (“Un problème m’intéresse depuis longtemps, c’est celui du système pénal,” La Presse de Tunisie August 12, 1971, 3; reprinted in Dits et écrits, t. I, 1975.)
80. Asked by an interviewer in 1974 why he always chose to express his philosophy through the study of something (rather than directly), Foucault lectured: “Il


92. Ibid., 41.

93. Ibid., 41–42.

94. Ibid., 42.

95. See Jürgen Habermas, “Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present,” in Kelly, ed., Critique and Power, 149–156. “What Is Enlightenment?” should be read, however, not in parallel with Habermas’s critique of Foucault from The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (as it appears in Critique and Power), but rather in dialogue with his 1980 Modernity: An Unfinished Project. The latter text, with its notion that the enlightenment legacy must be retained or abandoned in toto, is directly targeted by Foucault.

96. It will be remembered that, when Foucault wrote the first volume of The History of Sexuality, there was as yet no legitimate basis upon which he might express a preference for the ars erotica over the scientia sexualis. The reader was left to surmise such a preference from context and language. This absence was among the first things noted by concerned liberal critics. See Nancy Fraser, “Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions,” Praxis International 1, 1981, 283; and Richard J. Bernstein, The New Constellation: The Ethical Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992). See endnote 77 above.


100. “La pensée, c’est la liberté par rapport à ce qu’on fait, le mouvement par lequel on s’en détache, on le constitue comme objet et on le relie comme problème.” “Poetics, Politics and Problematisations,” in Rabinow, ed., The Foucault Reader, 381–390; reprinted as “Polémique, politique et problématisations,” in Dits et écrits, t. II, 1416.

101. “pour voir comment la sexualité a été manipulée, vécue et modifiée par un certain nombre d’acteurs.” “Le retour de la morale,” 1524; italics mine.


103. “Pour moi,” he added, “la sexualité est une affaire de mode de vie, elle renvoie à la technique du soi.” “Interview met Michel Foucault,” Krisis, Tijdschrift voor filosofie, March 1984, 47–58; reprinted as “Interview de Michel Foucault,” in Dits et écrits, t. II, 1482.


106. “Interview de Michel Foucault,” 1486.

CONCLUSION: FOUCALU’S PENDULUM

1. “Stephen Riggins: Vous ne correspondez pas à l’image du Français raffiné qui pratique l’art du bien vivre. Vous êtes aussi le seul Français que je connaisse qui m’ait dit qu’il préférait la cuisine américaine. / Foucault: Oui, c’est vrai! Un bon club sandwich avec un Coca-Cola! Il n’y a rien de tel! C’est vrai. Avec une crème glacée, bien sûr.” “Michel Foucault, An Interview with Stephen Riggins,” Ethos 2, Fall 1983, 4–9; republished as “Une interview de Michel Foucault par Stephen Riggins,” in Dits et écrits, t. II, 1352.


7. “On conserve . . . dans leur intégralité, les positions antérieures, tout en bénéficiant d’un effet de langage qui, faisant apparaître le thème de la recherche de nouvelles subjectivités, permet de prendre en marche le mouvement de retour au sujet et de masquer ce qu’a de profondément suranné le discours que l’on tient.” Ferry and Renaut, La pensée 68: Essai sur l’anti-humanisme contemporain, 152–153.

8. “une tentative désespérée pour masquer l’invraisemblable longueur de retard accumulée sur le devenir des idées et sur les mœurs.” Ibid.

9. “L’anti-humanisme de la pensée 68 ouvre sur la ‘barbarie,’ non pas au sens où il conduirait à libérer on ne sait quels déchaînements de la violence, mais en tant que le procès intenté à la subjectivité détruit ici toute possibilité d’un véritable dialogue entre des consciences qui seraient susceptibles de percer leurs différences sur fond d’identité: lorsque ne subsiste que l’exaspération des différences individuelles, l’autre devient pour chacun le ‘tout autre,’ le ‘bar-bare.’” “si ardemment cultivé l’inconscience.” Ibid., 165–164; italics mine.


13. It is not simply works like Habermas’s Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (1985) that suggest that the theorization of power was the farthest that Foucault ever progressed on his path of thought. Treatments as recent as Sara Mills’s 2003 Foucault continue to depict a Foucault for whom the genealogical perspective evidenced in the first volume of The History of Sexuality is, in some sense, the final word. Sara Mills, Foucault (London: Routledge, 2003). See also Tilottama Rajan, Deconstruction and the Reminders of Phenomenology: Sartre, Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).


16. Martin Jay, Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 394–395. Jay cites the critique of Bataille put forth by Habermas in The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: “the knowing subject would—paradoxically—have to surrender his own identity and yet retrieve those experiences to which he was exposed in ecstasy—to catch them like fish from the decremented ocean of emotions. In spite of this paradox, Bataille stubbornly makes a claim to objectivity of knowledge and impersonality of method—even for this science ‘from within,’ for the grasp of ‘inner experience,’” 395.

17. Foucault’s capacity to reinterpret his body of work in terms of his current preoccupations was boundless. At various times throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, the philosopher described his work as “toute une série d’analyses du pouvoir” (“Kenryoku to chi,” Umi December 1977, 240–256; republished as “Pouvoir et Savoir” in Dits et écrits, t. II, 402); affirmed that, “mon problème, c’est de savoir comment les hommes se gouvernent (eux-mêmes et les autres) à travers la production de la vérité” (“Table ronde du 20 mai 1978,” in Michelle Perrot, ed., L’impossible Prison. Recherches sur le système pénitentiaire au XIXe siècle [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980], 40–56; reprinted in Dits et écrits, t. II, 846); claimed that his guiding question had always been, “À quel prix le sujet peut-il dire la vérité sur lui-même?” (“Structuralism and Post-structuralism,” Telos 55, Spring 1983, 195–211; republished as “Structuralisme et poststructuralisme” in Dits et écrits, t. II, 1261); claimed that, “[i]a notion qui sert de forme commune aux études que j’ai


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Primary Sources

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