

Alternatives to Confession: Foucault's "Fragments of an Autobiography"

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According to Hervé Guibert's roman à clef, *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, when his friend Michel Foucault died in the Hôpital de la Salpêtrière, his family as well as his companion of twenty-three years, Daniel Defert, were stunned to see AIDS as the cause of death on his death certificate. Defert felt personally deceived by Foucault, but also recognized the missed political opportunity. He would later defend his companion's silence, however, on the grounds of the latter's philosophical convictions regarding confession. Defert founded Association AIDES and two years after Foucault's death allowed the cause of death to be publicized—too late, however, for the gay community not to resent the delay. A year later, when French historian Jean-Paul Aron announced that he was dying of AIDS, he denounced Foucault's failure to do so, claiming the philosopher was "ashamed" of his homosexuality and that his was "the silence of shame, not the silence of an intellectual" (Miller, 25). Defert replied in the French left-wing newspaper, *Libération*: "In his work, Michel Foucault inserted the practice of confession within a problematic of power. He never valued confession as such, he always showed the policing process at work in it" (cited in Miller, 25).

Defert's defense of his partner's silence clearly refers to Foucault's account of confession as a strategy of disciplinary power in *La volonté de savoir*. This work has been widely accepted as Foucault's final word on confession, and as the explanation for his own silence regarding his sexuality and illness. Read as excuse or explanation for his own failure to confess, this work has had a posthumous life that can be compared to that of "Excuses (*Confessions*)" in the case of Paul de Man, in which, likewise, silence seems to be offered as the only strategy that remained to the author for escaping discursive traps which he had himself so meticulously described. As with de Man, Foucault's silence was not entire, however, as he did give late interviews on homosexuality and S/M. Moreover, while Derrida claims we may read all of de Man's academic writings as autobiographical, Foucault himself suggested in his final, deathbed interview that each of his scholarly books could be read "as a fragment of an autobiography," which requires at least as complex a reading as in the case of de Man. Such a reading, one that would explain this enigmatic claim, is among the goals of this essay, which will explore Foucault's views on confessional and other self-reflective discourses, first through the well-known analysis found in *La volonté de savoir*, and second in some of his lesser known writings.

'Une société singulièrement avouante'

A crucial thesis of Foucault's *La volonté de savoir* is that modern subjectivity is characterized by an historically novel, diffuse, eroticized, and unsatisfiable compulsion to confess. "L'aveu," he writes, "est devenu, en Occident, une des techniques les plus hautement valorisées pour produire le vrai. Nous sommes devenus, depuis lors, une société singulièrement avouante" (79). A bit later he writes: "L'homme, en Occident, est devenue une bête d'aveu" (80). This beast convinces itself "par un étrange scrupule" that it has never said enough: "que nous sommes trop timides et peureux, que nous nous cachons l'aveuglante évidence par inertie et par soumission et que l'essentiel nous échappe toujours, qu'il faut encore partir à sa recherche" (46). The list of manners in which we confess, which Foucault goes on to produce, is dizzying but familiar:

... dans la justice, dans la médecine, dans la pédagogie, dans les rapports familiaux, dans les relations amoureuses, dans l'ordre le plus quotidien, et dans les rites les plus solennels; on avoue ses crimes, on avoue ses péchés, on avoue ses pensées et ses désirs, on avoue son passé et ses rêves, on avoue son enfance; on avoue ses maladies et ses misères; on s'emploie avec la plus grande exactitude à dire ce qu'il y a de plus difficile à dire; on avoue en public et en privé, à ses parents, à ses éducateurs, à ceux qu'on aime; on se fait à soi-même, dans le plaisir et la peine, des aveux impossibles à tout autre, et dont on fait des livres (46).

Lest we thought this might be merely an interesting but harmless predilection of modern "man," Foucault immediately reminds us of confession's most obvious dark side:

On avoue—ou on est forcé d'avouer. Quand il n'est pas spontané, ou imposé par quelque impératif intérieur, l'aveu est extorqué; on le débusque dans l'âme ou on l'arrache au corps. Depuis le Moyen Age, la torture l'accompagne comme une ombre, et le soutient quand il se dérobe: noirs jumeaux. Comme la tendresse la plus désarmée, les plus sanglants des pouvoirs ont besoin de confession (80).

For Foucault, confession is a privileged strategy within networks of disciplinary power, and if overt torturings of the body to extract confession have ceased to be common in the occidental world, internalized, psychological methods for their extraction have been developed.

In Foucault's account, the roots of the modern inclination to confess

are found, unsurprisingly, in the Catholic sacrament, particularly from the time of the Council of Trent. This mode of avowal is quickly diversified, however, in "scandalous literature" (30) and the sciences of sex, to take but two directly related examples. Foucault attends to the changing forms of discourse that the Church sought to extract in the confessional between the Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation: while medieval writers of confessional manuals insisted on detail—in confessing sexual trespasses, for instance, the priest was obliged to inquire into the "position respective des partenaires, attitudes prises, gestes, attouchements, moment exact du plaisir" (26)—Counter-Reformation doctrine developed an increasing discretion. If language became restricted, confession itself was extended, its frequency accelerated, its penitential significance amplified, and its focus on sex narrowed. As Foucault summarizes: "Un impératif est posé: non pas seulement confesser les actes, contraires à la loi, mais chercher à faire de son désir, de tout son désir, discours. Rien, s'il est possible, ne doit échapper à cette formulation, quand bien même les mots qu'elle emploie ont à être soigneusement neutralisés" (29–30).

This "neutralization" of words, combined with the ever-narrower focus on sex, functions less significantly to repress sex, Foucault insists, than to eroticize discourse, while the story we tell of repression functions as but an added incentive for more speech. This manipulation of language, its increased strategy and control, moreover serves to specialize methods of interrogation on the part of authorities. The confession manuals of priests bleed into scientific discourses on sexuality, likewise based on first-person accounts produced within a hierarchical relation of power in neutralized language. Sex becomes more and more an object of expertise as its language is specialized, to be offered up to the scrutiny of experts, the deliverance, the reception, the power relation entailed transforming into reciprocal spirals of pleasure and power between confessor and confessant, analyst and analysand, the mutual but imbalanced "plaisir d'analyse" (95). While most other societies have invented an *ars erotica*, Foucault shows that what the modern West has come up with is a *scientia sexualis*, and yet this *scientia sexualis*, unexpectedly, has become another erotic art, a highly specialized form of pleasure in discursive exposure.

The end of confession for Foucault was to extract truth for purposes of unilateral power and control, to manipulate souls, and yet among the spiraling, uncontrollable and unpredictable consequences of these efforts were born new forms of desire for the confessant, new means of producing familiar pleasures. Foucault writes of the author of the confessional text, *My Secret Life*:

comme Sade, il écrivait, au sens fort de l'expression, 'pour son

seul plaisir'; il mêlait soigneusement la rédaction et la relecture de son texte à des scènes érotiques dont elles étaient à la fois la répétition, le prolongement et le stimulant. Mais après tout, la pastorale chrétienne, elle aussi, cherchait à produire des effets spécifiques sur le désir, par le seul fait de la mettre, intégralement et avec application, en discours ... effet physique de bienheureuse douleur à sentir dans son corps les morsures de la tentation et l'amour qui lui résiste (32–3).

The production of pleasure in the confessant is paradoxical in the Catholic tradition, but not entirely counterproductive: it at least serves a strategic function in producing ever more confession, even if this effect, as Les W. Smith has pointed out, could become excessive, exhausting clerics and leading to a worry as early as the Middle Ages that confessants were magnifying or inventing sins for the sheer, meticulous, and self-tormenting pleasure of telling them (31). A less predictable result still, even if the confessant spoke "pour son seul plaisir," confession also produces desire in the confessor—in Breuer as he listens to Anna O., in Freud as he dreams that Dora has projected her supposed father-love onto him, through transference and counter-transference, counter-transference that longs for and projects transference—whose position of power is thus destabilized, as erotically implicated in what he hears as the speaker in what she says.

What are the consequences of all this pleasure? Why would it worry Foucault? "Il se peut," Foucault writes, "que l'Occident n'ait pas été capable d'inventer des plaisirs nouveaux, et sans doute n'a-t-il pas découvert de vices inédits. Mais il a défini de nouvelles règles au jeu des pouvoirs et des plaisirs: le visage figé des perversions s'y est dessiné" (66). The mise-en-discours of sex is thus not qualified as a new pleasure, but as a new method of playing the game, and the result is that with confession as *ars erotica* pleasures become perversions caught up with identity as never before. The point is not far from de Man's warning in "Autobiography as De-facement" that autobiography will create life rather than life creating autobiographies: "We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of its medium" (69)? In one example Foucault provides, sodomy as act, desire, or pleasure, already existed before people engaged in it became compelled and enticed to talk about it, but now that they confess, pressured libidinally, psychologically, and politically to "come out of the closet" and affirm who they *are* by means of this speech, the act becomes *the* defining trait of their be-

ing: "Le sodomite était un relapse, l'homosexuel est maintenant une espèce" (59). Replacing early modern forms of identity based on family, allegiance, or bloodline, "L'aveu de la vérité s'est inscrit au coeur des procédures d'individualisation par le pouvoir" (79). Such an identity, a specieshood, provides the subject thus produced with a position and a community to speak from politically, as Foucaultians such as Judith Butler have emphasized, thus attending to the positive and productive (and not merely negative and repressive) aspect of power and subjectification which Foucault theoretically insists upon but does not usually draw out in his own examples. Staying with Foucault, however, the compulsion to confess, which results in the fixation of identity in sexuality rather than blood, is primarily explored as constraining, a deprivation of the freedom to be otherwise than discursively constructed within networks of power, a disciplining of the subject into a "confessing beast."

The Nineteenth-Century Memoirs

In his introduction to "*Moi, Pierre Rivière, ayant égorgé ma mère, ma soeur et mon frère ...*" Foucault considers the documents surrounding a young French peasant who killed half of his family in the expectation of execution, and would eventually hang himself in prison under a life sentence, having been refused the execution he desired. Capital punishment was denied Rivière because he was deemed mad, despite the fact that he had produced a surprisingly articulate forty-page written account of the lives of his mother and father as context for his triple murder, as well as a description of his own character, deeds, and intentions, precisely in order to demonstrate that he was sane and could thus be killed. Despite the ultimate judicial decision, Rivière's contemporaries were amazed by the intellectual capacities which the text demonstrated in a youth who had long been considered the "village idiot" and "madman," and Foucault is equally "astonished," seduced by what he repeatedly calls the text's "beauty," describing himself as under Rivière's "spell" ("*I, Pierre Rivière ...*" x, xiii).

As he remained silent about the end of his own life, Foucault also chose to remain (virtually) silent about Rivière. In his Preface to "*I, Pierre Rivière ...*" Foucault says he has decided to say nothing about Rivière's memoir because to interpret it "should have brought it within the power relation whose reductive effect we wished to show, and we ourselves should have fallen into the trap it set" (xiii). Here, the implication seems to be that the only way to avoid the "trap" of "power relations" is to remain silent. That power is seen here as necessarily "reductive" or negative, and as avoidable through the simple stance of silence, is somewhat at odds with Foucault's more in-depth accounts of disciplin-

ary power in *La volonté de savoir* and *Surveiller et punir*. Here, power is seen as always reciprocal and productive, as well as dominating and negative, and moreover as pervasive. In *La volonté de savoir* Foucault writes that "le silence et le secret abritent le pouvoir, ancrent ses interdits; mais ils desserrent aussi ses prises et ménagent des tolérances plus ou moins obscures" (133). Foucault writes of "choses dites et choses cachées" (133) indiscriminantly, of speech and secrets as equally products and points of resistance to networks of power. Although, like speech, silence can oppose power, the idea that silence can in itself set one outside of networks of power therefore seems under-complex, as does the suggestion that the answer to the role of discipline in confession would necessarily be simply to guard one's secrets rather than to discover new and subversive forms of discourse. Arguably, Foucault tried elsewhere to find such alternative discourses and saw Rivière's own memoir as such a text which negotiates and confounds disciplinary power. Despite his purported decision to be silent, Foucault goes on to say something about the text after all, claiming for instance that it is "neither confession nor defense, but rather a factor in the crime," refusing any separation of text and act, the two continually switching orders (201). Rivière is called the "author" of both his act and his text, rather than the text being authored by disciplinary discourse and in turn authoring him, as we might have expected of Foucault. Though Foucault says little, and precisely because he considers his own reticence as a mark of respect towards the work, he certainly admires it, and does not view it as a mere concession to disciplinary power.

According to Foucault's introduction to the other nineteenth-century memoir he published, *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B.* (translated under the more elaborate English title: *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*), the author of which, like Rivière, ended her life in suicide, what Foucault deems admirable and worthy of publication (with, once more, little commentary) is the author's refusal to "fix" her subjectivity, to claim a "truth" of her identity and sex, or to say who she "really" is. Elsewhere, Foucault has written that freedom is precisely such a remaining "undefined" ("What is Enlightenment?" in *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*, 316), and thus it is perhaps Barbin's achievement of freedom, in her text as well as in her life-death, that Foucault esteems. It is thus possible after all to say something about oneself, one's past, without fixing oneself as such, obliterating any possibility of ambiguity. Rivière does not present any such ambiguity or indefiniteness of identity in his writing, however, and sets out to tell the truth of his crime, of his intentions, and most importantly of his character. Foucault's praise for this text, however, is far more lavish than that for *Herculine Barbin*'s which, with its romantic sentimental-

ity, only barely escapes being "banal" or merely reflective of contemporary discourses. This less qualified admiration expressed for Rivière is thus not grounded in an insistence in the latter on the ambiguity of identity, but rather in the greater boldness of the text, which does not excuse or confess or defend itself, but functions as an act in itself, authored by Rivière and indissociable from the act of murder, and thus, for Foucault, escapes acting upon the subject but is rather acted by him, and claimed as such.

What the two nineteenth-century texts have in common is that, in their different ways, they evade and refuse the disciplinary discourses which surrounded them through textual strategies—and Foucault publishes the memoirs alongside the legal, medical, and judicial documents which archived the lives, acts, and bodies of the two authors, to make precisely this point—much as in life Barbin and Rivière managed to reject these same disciplinary constraints, even, when no other means remained, through suicide. Textual strategies exist, therefore, and may be invented, which maintain ambivalence of identity or which function as acts rather than subjections to discipline. It nevertheless remains that Foucault seems to have sought no alternative discourse for himself unless, returning to his final interview, we make sense of his claim that each of his books may be read as "a kind of fragment of an autobiography," a statement to which I will return below.

The Turn Towards Subjectivity

In the last two volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, *L'usage des plaisirs* and *Le souci de soi*, published just days before their author's death, and in his seminar lectures and other shorter writings from this period, Foucault seeks to develop a theory of subjecthood which he had until this point seemed to deny. More precisely, he explores ancient aesthetics of self-governance as a possible resource for discovering models of self-constitution to contrast with the subjectification that occurs under disciplinary power. Many Foucaultians have regretted these final works as a failing or denial of the structuralist and poststructuralist Foucault whom they admire for his writings on the death of the author and of "man" as an historical notion. Other readers, however, have seen these last writings as working towards the resolution of what they see as a problem in Foucault's former writings, precisely the impossibility of political agency which these works seem to assume, and the absence within them of a positive notion of subjecthood. "L'écriture de soi" is characteristic of Foucault's final turn towards subjectivity in that without offering any explicit evaluations he describes forms of self-writing in the practices of the ancients which could be viewed as alternate practices of subject-making

which we may compare with those of the early modern and modern confessional practices described in *La volonté de savoir*—some as precursors, others as alternatives.

In this article, Foucault describes three kinds of writing which, along with meditation, reading, listening to others, control of diet, exercise, and so forth, appear among the various ancient “arts de soi-même” (*Dits et écrits II*, 1234). The latest to emerge historically, but the first that Foucault discusses, is a diary-like recording of one’s actions and thoughts of that day. The idea is that just as one would not commit sinful acts in the presence of others, or say sinful thoughts aloud for others to hear, if obliged to write down all of one’s deeds and thoughts occurring in private, one will protect oneself from sin. A person is less likely to commit sinful acts or pursue sinful thoughts if she must record them, and writing can thus function as a witness, replacing the surveillance of another in moments of solitude, or in the privacy of one’s own thoughts, where one cannot depend on others to produce the requisite sense of self-consciousness and shame. The example Foucault provides is the *Vita Antonii* of Saint Anthase, and is clearly rooted in the Christian tradition. Although he does not pursue the parallel, and seems content in this article simply to describe, the panopticon-like function of the ascetic’s diary is clear to any reader of Foucault, and his description of it as a transformation of truth into ethos (*Dits et écrits II*, 1237) marks it as a predecessor to confession.

Foucault goes on to contrast this form of writing to two pre-Christian uses of writing as self-governance, the *hupomnēmata* and correspondance. The correspondance which interests Foucault is the practice of daily exchanges of letters between ancients in which all of one’s activities and thoughts are once more recorded, the only difference being that they are now given up to another’s gaze. Although Foucault sets this form of self-writing apart from the diary-like books just described, particularly in terms of the replacement of a virtual other with an actual reader, for present purposes it seems to be but an earlier and pagan form of surveillance, real or imagined, to be internalized through habituation into self-surveillance, and thus once more prone to the analysis of the panopticism of *Surveiller et punir*.

Though buried between his accounts of the ascetic’s diary and correspondance, the most interesting of the three types of self-governing writing is clearly the *hupomnēmata*. The *hupomnēmata* is a “livre de vie” in which one collects citations, fragments of works one has read, impressions of actions one has witnessed or read about, and reflections of one’s own or which one has heard. Such books were ways of remembering bits of wisdom, which one could later meditate upon, and which one could also share with others. Foucault describes a case in which Fundanus asks

Plutarch for advice on “agitations of the soul,” and Plutarch, not having time to respond by writing an original treatise on the subject, simply sends Fundanus his *hupomnēmata* to reflect on, which contained Plutarch’s collection of reflections and citations on the subject of the tranquil spirit. Such books—one’s own and those of others—were meant to be read and reread, reflected and meditated upon repeatedly, as exercises for the soul, ways of working on one’s life, of cultivating the sort of subjecthood one desired to have, and the life one wanted to live. These are not, Foucault stresses, “*des journaux intimes*,” nor are they places to record one’s personal experiences and spiritual struggles à la Saint Augustine. One does not describe oneself or one’s experiences here, but collects fragments of observations by others or of one’s own of the external world. One does not seek to reveal in these books a selfhood which pre-exists them but remains “hidden”—as in confession and contemporary confessional autobiographies—but rather, through meditated selection of citations and reflection on them, actively and self-consciously constitutes oneself as in process. The de Manian and Foucaultian point that writing constitutes life rather than being constituted by it is taken up, but does not now result in a flight into silence, but into an active appropriation of that writing as self-aware and self-constitutive practice. It is possible for the author of “L’écriture de soi,” therefore, that a self is formed through acts of rational will, rather than being denied altogether (as seems to be the case—other than as historical notion—in the archaeological period, as in the famous conclusion to *Les mots et les choses*) or constituted through discipline (as in the apparently dark view of agency of the genealogical writings, *Surveiller et punir* and *La volonté de savoir*). Instead, as Foucault writes, the *hupomnēmata* “s’agissait de se constituer soi-même comme sujet d’action rationnelle par l’appropriation, l’unification et la subjectivation, d’un déjà-dit fragmentaire et choisi” (*Dits et écrits II*, 1249).

This notion of a self-writing that constitutes the subject through rationally chosen and fragmentary citation of the historically given or *déjà-dit* (as opposed to revelations of the supposedly *non-dit*) arguably brings us back to Foucault’s statement that each of his books could be read as “a kind of fragment of an autobiography,” or, along similar lines, his claim that “I believe that ... someone who is a writer is not simply doing his work in his books, but that his major work is, in the end, himself in the process of writing his books” (*Raymond Roussel*, 184). In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault would later write: “More than one person, doubtless like me, writes in order to have no face” (17). Foucault thus sees writing as a process of self-making in which no fixed face is revealed. Like the *hupomnēmata*, Foucault’s books are not intimate journals in which he speaks of himself, but are organized collections of cita-

tions chosen from archives, subjectively selected "histories," and Foucault's reflections on them according to themes—themes which, it has been remarked, held a certain resonance with Foucault's own experiences (of madness, medical institutionalization, learning, desire in restraint, so-called sexual perversion). Foucault himself said that he chose to write simultaneously in the early 1960s on the topics of the history of madness and the mad and homosexual writer Raymond Roussel, not due to the two books' relation to each other, but because both related to his own "perversion" and "psychopathology" (*Raymond Roussel*, 178). In his studies of subjects that were not therefore disinterested, Foucault does not try to reveal his true face, who he "is," but rather brings together fragments of others' voices and his meditations on them. If we are to read these as "autobiography" in a very loose sense, it is in the sense of *hupomnēmata*, a means of working on himself and the themes that preoccupied him in a way which remained chosen, fragmentary, active, and always "in process"—not, then, the revelation of a true or pre-existing self, but an always unfinished constitution of a self through citation and reasoned thought.

These works are offered to his readers, like the *hupomnēmata* of Plutarch given to Fundanus, but not to tell us who he is, nor really to tell us about history either—that they are not very good books of "history," precisely because so subjectively selective (which, then again, all histories are), has been frequently noted, and many scandalized "old-school" historians have "corrected" Foucault's writings, particularly on madness. Rather, as with Plutarch's *hupomnēmata*, these are offered as philosophical resources that may be used as part of our own philosophical and political thought, our methodology of thinking and living, our aesthetics of self. We may cite fragments of Foucault's books in our own *hupomnēmata* therefore as attempts to work on and change our lives and selves, reading, rereading and writing philosophy to cure the anxieties of our souls with greater success than we may have found in confessional discourses. While for Foucault such writings are involved in an aesthetics of the self, it is crucial that they do not turn inwards or assume any pre-existing interior self to turn in upon, but listen to others, reflect on what they say, read them, record them, respond to them, and offer something back to them. Foucault's last writings—the histories of sexuality and the lectures from that period, the analysis of confession and that of the *hupomnēmata*—arguably tell us that things get better for ourselves when we stop confessing to those selves and start doing something that we may offer to others instead, something that may nevertheless remain rooted in personal experience but does more than reflect on its particularity, whether this alternative be direct political engagement or the writing and speaking of something other than confes-

sions.

La volonté de savoir, read as explanation for Foucault's own infamous silence, seems to suggest that withdrawal from all self-reflective discourse is a possible means (and the *only* possible means) of avoiding the workings of disciplinary power and the policing effects of subjectification. Such a reading is used by Daniel Defert to explain his lover's silence with respect to his cause of death, and seems to be confirmed by Foucault's explanation of his refusal to analyze the memoir of Pierre Rivière, but at the same time seems to reflect a curiously simple and even un-Foucaultian understanding of the workings of power. By looking at what Foucault goes on to say about Rivière, despite his decision to say nothing, and about the memoir of Herculine Barbin, I have suggested that Foucault did after all look for possible textual strategies for self-writing as act rather than subjection, acts which may maintain an indefinition of identity and thus keep open the possibility of freedom. It remains, however, that, despite some candid interviews, Foucault undertook no such directly self-referential writings himself, and I thus make sense of his claim that all of his writings are nevertheless autobiographical by examining his interest in ancient practices of self-care and self-governance, and particularly of the writing of *hupomnēmata*. Drawing on Foucault's brief discussion of this ancient genre, I argue that the writing of philosophy, and of histories, as in Foucault's own works, may be read as *livres de vie* or arts of the self which nevertheless turn outwards towards others, constituting a self through responses to the given world and to the wisdom of other people, rather than through revelations of what one thinks is hidden within one and one's very own secret and true self. As with Foucault's praise for the memoirs of Rivière and Barbin, the advantage that I think that he saw in such writings is that they are active as well as fragmented or forever incomplete, constituting a subject which is likewise in process or undefined. As Foucault said, "to become other than what one is—that too is philosophy."

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