

“The Sexual Scene Concerns a Single Character”¹

Jean Allouch
École lacanienne de psychanalyse

After thought.

A remark made by my friend Frédéric Gros offered to me the means of formulating what has been my contribution to the Freudian field since the moment when, in 1998, I declared that “Psychoanalysis will be Foucauldian, or will no longer be at all.” Frédéric Gros observed that the last works of Foucault act as a genealogy of psychoanalysis. To draw the relevant consequences for psychoanalysis, current psychoanalysis that is, of Foucault’s impact on the genealogy of psychoanalysis is precisely what I am about.

The title I have given to what follows is a quote drawn from Michel Foucault’s reading of Artemidorus. Nevertheless, I believe that it is also possible to see it as being applicable to the three erotic facets and objects that he singles out for study, that is to say: the boy, women, and the wife. This however, Foucault neither explicitly says nor writes. The broadening of the field of application of this formulation to the whole of the *aphrodisia*, is my doing.

That a member of the Lacanian School of psychoanalysis reads the later writings of Foucault in this way, may be connected to the fact that this statement made by Foucault resonates with that of Lacan: “There is no sexual relation.” Needless to say, it is not the same utterance; they do however present what Wittgenstein termed a “family resemblance.” Is it not strange that

¹ Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1980-1981*, 84.

in the same period Foucault and Lacan, quite probably independently of each other, uttered these two similar statements?

It may be possible that Lacan's words have encouraged me to give Foucault's phrase the aforementioned addendum. However, a comparative study of the two expressions, that of Foucault and that of Lacan, presents little interest if it has not been established, beforehand, that Foucault's does indeed have the general meaning I attribute to it. To demonstrate this would require more space than this publication permits. Thus, I will here limit myself to the relationship to the boy; leaving aside the relationship to women and to the wife, the study of which leads to the same conclusion.

It is as a reader of Foucault that I shall study this connection, or to be more precise this absence of sexual connection. This reading of Foucault's last publications will resemble that of a novel, signed by Michel Foucault and entitled *Aphrodisia*. It is the words and the writing of Foucault that interest me, above and beyond the descriptive and, it is said, the sometimes contentious aspect of his works. Did he not say that with each of his books his aim was also to make himself other than himself? However, there is more. Certainly, the exactitude of knowledge was important to him. Yet, it was not only knowledge but a preoccupation with truth, and furthermore a truth that required courage, therefore a truth in opposition, that drove him to publish. His books were each a means of *intervening* in the present.

Foucault, the university professor, was also a guide, and not only an intellectual guide but also a guide to action (with a few others, he invented novel modes of political action). Only this status can account for the following observation: a significant number of those who count in what is called "thought," have acquired this status only through differentiating themselves

from Foucault. His temperament drove Foucault to action, action in the service of which he placed knowledge, the knowledge he created. This is not knowledge for knowledge's sake, but knowledge for the purpose of action, for the transformation of the self and as an intervention in the city. For him this action has a name: uprising.² Without wishing to push the analogy to far, we could apply to Foucault the words Claude Calame uses for Herodotus: "The truth of the account depends less on its confrontation with an empirical reality, than on the manner of presenting that reality."³

Foucault's *A History of Madness* changed attitudes to madness so decisively, at least for a number of people amongst whom I count myself, that it is in vain that others have picked up on the innumerable errors contained within it. These in no way weaken the impact of that work – the only one, in fact, to which he never ceased to go back.

It is in the same spirit that he invites us to read two of his last books, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, both published in 1984, and to which one should now also add the lectures titled *Subjectivity and Truth*. What is the impact, on the contemporary erotic, of the statement: "the sexual scene has only one character"? What did he wish to impart and change by writing it? What battle was he fighting? It is equally true and insufficient to point out that he rejected the Freudian-Marxist theory that saw sex from the viewpoint of its repression/liberation. Against what was he thus raising a voice likely to reconfigure the erotic?

That the reading of the classics is an intervention in the present, and thus kills two birds with

² Allouch, "Quatre leçons proposées par Foucault à l'analyse."

³ Calame, *Qu'est-ce que la mythologie grecque?*, 266. [Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own. TR]

one stone, is immediately apparent with the – in no way marginal – introduction of a concept that one would seek in vain among the ancients, that of subject. It is only since Kant that the “subject” appears in philosophy.⁴ In his two last books as well as in his 1980-1981 lectures, Foucault does not linger on this introduction of the “subject” of subjectivity among the ancients. Is it acceptable? It would be an understatement to say that his categorical statement according to which “*Bios* is Greek subjectivity”⁵ is a master stroke that will have consequences.

On January 14th 1981 Foucault noted that the Greeks had two verbs for what is termed “life” in English: *zên* refers to natural life, the life of animals, the quality of being alive; and *bioûn* which relates “to the way of living,” to “life with its accidents, its necessities, but also the life one may make oneself.”⁶ Thus, the same day he also opted in favour of translating *tekhnê peri bion* not as “bio-technique” but by “technique of the self.”

As though the question had remained to some degree unanswered, on February 29th when, despite his failing health, Foucault was nevertheless lecturing, the subject of *bios* was considered again more broadly. The juxtaposition of two texts by Plato, the *Alcibiades* and the *Laches*, allowed him to differentiate, while not putting them in complete opposition, the two modalities of the *gnôthi seauton*. In Plato’s thinking, *Psukhê*, the soul, “a reality ontologically distinct from that of the body,” calls for a contemplative order of knowledge (the soul looks upon itself “in the mirror of its own divinity”), for a veridiction where each is called upon to speak the truth of their being. *Bios*, life, is the object of another manner of

⁴ De Libéra, *L’Invention du sujet moderne: Cours au Collège de France, 2013-2014*, lecture given on March 20th, 2014.

⁵ Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1980-1981*, 253.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

veridiction, where each is invited to give an account of themselves no longer in metaphysical terms, but in aesthetic terms.

[...] existence (*bios*) was constituted in Greek thought as an aesthetic object, as an object of aesthetic elaboration and perception: *bios* as a beautiful work.⁷

Foucault noted that this theme was already dominant in both Homer and Pindar. David Halperin's book *How to be Gay*⁸ states in its very title that this aesthetic viewpoint remains current; as well as being in effect a methodological choice.

The aesthetic rather than the metaphysical, *Bios*, and not *psukhê*; this seems hardly surprising in someone who, along with a few others (Heidegger, Canguilhem, Lacan, Granel), voiced opposition to the invasive "psy aspect." Should Lacan not have taken his strategy further when, having introduced the subject to the Freudian field, he stuck with the term "psychoanalysis"? *L'Invention du sujet moderne*⁹ presents a substantial amount of archaeological data to indicate that the two terms, "subject" and "soul," carry with them two incompatible strings of expectations.

With this "self," this *bios*, this non-psychological subject which is the object of a certain kind of concern, comes a specific relationship to death: while the soul offers eternity to whomever

⁷ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-1984*, 162.

⁸ Halperin, *How to Be Gay*.

⁹ De Libéra, *L'Invention du sujet moderne: Cours au Collège de France, 2013-2014*, lecture given on March 20th, 2014.

takes care of it; the *bios*, through the care it manifests in order to make its life beautiful, even in the memory it will leave behind, takes this life to that limit where, according to Lacan, beauty forms a barrier to the second death. *Psukhê* turns its back on the second death, *bios* places it as its horizon. Was it not already life, rather than the soul, that was important for Freud in leading him to invent the death drive? What would it mean to say, “soul drive”? It is in this way that we can understand Foucault’s statement that: “A rigorous language, as it arises from sexuality, will not reveal the secret of man's natural being, nor will it express the serenity of anthropological truths, but rather, it will say that he exists without God.”¹⁰ That truth, that no knowledge will ever either demonstrate or refute, for it is of another order, clearly cannot be without consequence in the case of the *aphrodisia*.

To borrow the title of Kenzaburô Ôe’s gruelling novel, the erotic is “a personal matter,” a stage on which this aesthetic concern with the self (a concern that is all at once aesthetic, ethical and erotic) is especially put under strain. What difficulty(ies) are at stake in the erotic relationship master/boy, according to Foucault? It is specifically these difficulties, clearly not the same for the master as for the boy, that shows that the sexual scene comprises only one character.

The cause of this difficulty is erotic pleasure (both Freud and Lacan concur with that). Pleasure can be “immoderate,” pleasure is “avid”; as Foucault so nicely puts it, it holds within in it a “principle of impetus,” there is a “principle of indefinite pleasure...[which] is the driving force of his behaviour.”¹¹ Now, to an intensifying pleasure such as this the master could only give free rein through losing his mastery. Something that cannot be. Thus, the

¹⁰ Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” 30.

¹¹ Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1980-1981*, 90.

master takes part in sexual activity under the caveat that he may prevent it giving rise to an excess of pleasure. Something he does by introducing an “agonistic” relation to himself.¹²

The master cannot accept that his pleasure be his master – in other words, he cannot accept being passive.¹³

This was something we knew, Paul Veyne had already made the same observation.¹⁴

However, Foucault says more, says it differently, says something else, by introducing his agent – the subject – into his reading of the ancients: “There is pleasure only because there is a subject, but the naturalness of *aphrodisia* implies that the only subject one can recognize, the only pertinent subject, the only subject who is both subject of *aphrodisia* and of a possible morality, is clearly the one who is active.”¹⁵

In this way we need not correct but, on the contrary, give its full import to the statement which I support: “the sexual scene comprises only one character” – the subject of the pleasure who, in no way could come about as subservient to it. Everything that Foucault puts forward regarding the *aphrodisia* would fall apart if one decided to exclude the subject:

Penetration is not a process that takes place between two individuals. It is essentially [this must be stressed because it is crucial] the activity of one subject and the activity of the subject. And it is as the subject’s activity that it constitutes the central and natural kernel of all sexual acts...¹⁶

¹² Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2*, 65.

¹³ Allouch, *Le Sexe du maître*.

¹⁴ Veyne, “La famille et l’amour sous le Haut-Empire romain.”

¹⁵ Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1980-1981*, 87.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 85 (in brackets: an addition made during the conference).

This is not without consequence. Indeed, one might imagine that this activity of a subject and of the subject, calls for the passivity of the erotic partner; in which case this subject would not be as alone as was stated. This is not the case however, and Foucault specifies this:

The naturalness of the sexual act is not a coupling between activity and passivity. Naturalness is activity. And consequently the passive character is quite naturally the correlative, but the correlative at the outer limit of this naturalness. Let's say again that, as objects or as correlatives of the activity of penetration, they belong to naturalness, but as subjects in themselves they fall outside it.¹⁷

What can be said, on the sexual scene, regarding this character – the boy – “at the outer limit” of naturalness, who *as subject*, evades it? For him too, the sexual stage also creates a problem. Foucault calls “antinomy of the boy” the fact that the young man, “recognized as object of pleasure,” “could not and must not identify with that role.”¹⁸ For the master, an agonistic relationship to the self; for the boy an antinomy, wherein he cannot identify with what he is, while nevertheless allowing himself to be party to it.

The boy, that future master, that master in the making, whom one can only call thus from the moment one envisages him as subject (Foucault says this), the boy

¹⁷ Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1980-1981*, 87.

¹⁸ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2*, 221.

becomes, within the sexual activity, *a different representation of mastery, another manner of mastery*. This is that other and strange mastery that consist in presenting oneself as object without in effect being one. To my knowledge this point has never been studied as such. To not identify with that to which one is party is a performance, and not a given. Its very achievement, which presents remarkable subjective difficulties, makes it inconceivable that sexual activity be assimilated to any so-called intersubjectivity.

The boy makes himself absent, and in this, he is active, just as active as the master. Indeed, his absence as an eroticized subject will in effect eventually triumph, with the abandonment of the sexual stage by both parties; “in the fervour of love” Foucault writes “*philia* – friendship – already began to develop.”¹⁹ By extrapolating from this hint, one could go as far as to think that, occasionally, it is through a non-sexual love for the master that the boy succeeds in not making himself an erotic object. *Philia*, which from the offset functions alongside *erôs*, can then all the more easily take over from *erôs*. Does not such a substitution, that puts aside *erôs*, also demonstrate that sexual alterity produces a gap? It is with this gap, rather than with the boy, that the master must contend.

Above and beyond the fight against Freudian-Marxism, a fight that was also Lacan’s, Foucault is engaged in another perhaps more radical struggle: he makes it known and acknowledged that sex is a subjective thing and, *by that very fact*, belongs to an aesthetic. Biology, neurology, a sociology of sex, a Kinsey Report, a study of the sexuality of the French people, none of these will encapsulate this aspect of the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 201.

sexual which Foucault brings to the fore. It is through pure and deceptive homonymy that, here and there, sex is mentioned.

The ancients, followed by Christianity, presented Foucault with the visual panorama that allowed him to propose sexuality as a form of game of diversely modulated veridiction. He finds this initially surprising (his “epistemic astonishment”²⁰) then acknowledges it: sex has been the object of “accompanying discourses.” Accompanying discourses which he also calls “redundant discourse,” not without some irony for, far from being “redundant,” they inform sexual practices. Being in themselves already an experience, they have the effect of a real.

The erotic is a technique of the self. One embarks on it in a relationship of truth of oneself to oneself. Such a relationship can in no way be qualified as “narcissistic” since on the contrary, between the first and the second “self,” the latter is nothing other, following Foucault’s intent (that is: becoming other), than an other than oneself.

²⁰ Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1980-1981*, 237.

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