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The perversions of M. Foucault

by Roger Kimball

On The Passion of Michel Foucault by James Miller.

Since it is difficult, or rather impossible, to represent a man's life as entirely spotless and free from blame, we should use the best chapters in it to build up the most complete picture and regard this as the true likeness. Any errors or crimes, on the other hand, which may tarnish a man's career and may have been committed out of passion or political necessity, we should regard rather as a lapse from a particular virtue than as the products of some innate vice. We must not dwell on them too emphatically in our history, but should rather show indulgence to human nature for its inability to produce a character which is absolutely good and uncompromisingly dedicated to virtue.

—Plutarch, in the life of Cimon

I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order.

—Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*

Looking back on our arrogantly skeptical age, future historians are likely to regard the rebirth of hagiography in the 1980s and 1990s with bemused curiosity. For one thing, these decades witnessed a notable dearth of likely hagioi or saints available for the honor of such commemoration. Then, too, the debunking temper of our times is ill-suited —or so one would have thought—to the task of adulation. Yet James Miller's ambitious new biography of the French historian-philosopher Michel Foucault (né Paul-Michel, after his father) demonstrates that the will to idolize can triumph over many obstacles.

Foucault, who died of aids in June 1984 at the age of fifty-seven, has long been a darling of the same super-chic academic crowd that fell for deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, and other aging French imports. But where the deconstructionists specialize in the fruity idea that language refers only to itself (*il n'y a pas de hors texte*, in Derrida's now-famous phrase), Foucault's focus was Power. He came bearing the bad news in bad prose that every institution, no matter how benign it seems, is "really" a scene of unspeakable domination and subjugation; that efforts at enlightened reform—of

asylums, of prisons, of society at large—have been little more than alibis for extending state power; that human relationships are, underneath it all, deadly struggles for mastery; that truth itself is merely a coefficient of coercion; “Is it surprising,” Foucault asked in *Surveiller et punir* (English translation: *Discipline and Punish*, 1977), “that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?” Such “interrogations” were a terrific hit in the graduate seminar, of course. And Miller may well be right in claiming that by the time of his death Foucault was “perhaps the single most famous intellectual in the world”—famous, at least, in American universities, where hermetic arguments about sex and power are pursued with risible fecklessness by the hirsute and untidy. In all this, Foucault resembled his more talented rival and fellow left-wing activist, Jean-Paul Sartre, whose stunning career Foucault did everything he could to emulate, beginning with a stint in the French Communist Party in the early 1950s. He never quite managed it—he never wrote anything as original or philosophically significant as *Being and Nothingness*, never had the public authority that Sartre, alas, enjoyed in the postwar years. Yet he had eminent and devoted cheerleaders, including such well-known figures as the historian Paul Veyne, his colleague at the Collège de France, who declared Foucault “the most important event in the thought of our century.”

Be that as it may, he remains an unlikely candidate for canonization. But the very title of this new biography—*The Passion of Michel Foucault*¹—puts readers on notice that, in Mr. Miller’s opinion, anyway, his subject presents us with a life of such exemplary, self-

sacrificing virtue that it bears comparison with the Passion of Jesus Christ. (Nor is the reference to the Passion adventitious: Miller makes the connection explicit.) The eager reception of *The Passion of Michel Foucault* suggests that Mr. Miller, a prolific cultural journalist who teaches at the New School for Social Research, is not alone in his estimation. To be sure, there have been a few dissenting voices, mostly from academic homosexual activists who feel that Mr. Miller was insufficiently reverential. But most critics—including such luminaries as Alexander Nehamas, Richard Rorty, and Alasdair MacIntyre—have been falling over themselves to express their admiration and “gratitude” for Mr. Miller’s performance.

What is novel about that performance is Miller’s neglect of Plutarch’s admonition, quoted above, that one ought to concentrate on “the best chapters” of a life and cover over “any crimes or errors” when writing about a great man. While this might be questionable advice for a biographer, for a hagiographer it would seem to be indispensable. Not that anyone familiar with the outlines of Foucault’s life is likely to think him an angel. Miller describes him as a “new type of intellectual,” “modest and without mystifying pretense.” But this is at best disingenuous. True, Foucault occasionally indulged in some ritualistic false modesty before delivering a lecture or when disparaging earlier work in favor of his present enterprises. But as the French journalist Didier Eribon has shown in an earlier biography (and as Miller unwittingly shows in his own), arrogance

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and mystification were two hallmarks of Foucault's character and writing.² Eribon notes that at school, where Goya's horrific etchings of the victims of war decorated his walls, Foucault was "almost universally detested." Schoolmates remember him as brilliant, but also aloof, sarcastic, and cruel. He several times attempted—and more often threatened—suicide. Self-destruction, in fact, was another of Foucault's obsessions, and Miller is right to underscore Foucault's fascination with death. In this, as in so much else, he followed the lead of the Marquis de Sade, who had long been one of his prime intellectual and moral heroes. (Though, as Miller notes, Foucault felt that Sade "had not gone far enough," since, unaccountably, he continued to see the body as "strongly organic.") Foucault came to enjoy imagining "suicide festivals" or "orgies" in which sex and death would mingle in the ultimate anonymous encounter. Those planning suicide, he mused, could look "for partners without names, for occasions to die liberated from every identity."

Miller describes Foucault as "one of the representative men—and outstanding thinkers—of the twentieth century." But his great innovation in this book is to seize what was most vicious and perverted about Foucault—his addiction to sadomasochistic sexual practices—and to glorify it as a courageous new form of virtue—a specifically philosophical virtue, moreover. Note well: Miller does not attempt to excuse or condone or tolerate Foucault's vices; he does not, for instance, claim that they were the human, all-too-human foibles of a man who was nevertheless a great thinker. Such attitudes, after all, carry an implied criticism: we excuse only what requires exculpation; we tolerate only what makes demands upon our patience or broad-mindedness.³ What we fully approve of we certify and celebrate; and celebration of Foucault and all he stood for is at the top of Miller's agenda in this book.

Mr. Miller claims that Foucault's penchant for sadomasochistic sex was itself an indication of admirable ethical adventurousness. Indeed, in his view, we should be grateful to Foucault for his pioneering exploration of hitherto forbidden forms of pleasure and consciousness. In his preface, Miller suggests that Foucault, "in his radical approach to the body and its pleasures, was in fact a kind of visionary; and that in the future, once the threat of aids has receded, men and women, both straight and gay, will renew, without shame or fear, the kind of corporeal experimentation that formed an integral part of his own philosophical quest." In other words, Miller attempts to enroll in the ranks of virtue behavior and attitudes that until fifteen minutes ago were universally condemned as pathological.

Many of his critics have cheerfully followed suit. For example, the prominent Nietzsche scholar Alexander Nehamas, in the course of his long and fulsome review of Miller's book for *The New Republic*, readily agrees that "sadomasochism was a kind of blessing in Foucault's life. It provided the occasion to experience relations of power as a source of delight." Consequently, Nehamas concludes, "Foucault extended the limits of what could count as an admirable human life." Again, Isabelle de Courtivron, head of the department of foreign languages and literatures at MIT, assures readers in a front-page review for *The New York Times Book Review* that Foucault "expanded modern knowledge in profoundly important and original ways." She then commends Miller "for

dismissing cliché-ridden concepts about certain specific erotic practices, and for offering a clear and nonjudgmental (even supportive) analysis of the tools and techniques of what he considers a mutually consensual theater of cruelty.”

A great deal might be said about this effort to welcome sadomasochism as a bracing new “life-style” option. Above all, perhaps, it demonstrates the kind of spiritual and intellectual wreckage that can result, even now — and even for the most educated minds — from the afterwash of the radicalism of the 1960s. Make no mistake: behind Professor de Courtivron’s anodyne commendation of a “nonjudgmental” approach to human sexuality and Miller’s dream of “corporeal experimentation” that proceeds “without shame or fear” stands the vision of polymorphous emancipation that helped turn the 1960s into the moral and political debacle it was. Among the many articulations of false freedom that sprouted in those years, none was more influential than Herbert Marcuse’s Marxist-Freudian tract, *Eros and Civilization* (1966). Eagerly embraced by countercultural enthusiasts who wanted to believe that heating up their sex lives would hasten the demise of capitalism and bring forth the millennium, it outlines a portentous struggle between “the logic of domination” and the “will to gratification,” attacks “the established reality in the name of the pleasure principle,” and fulminates against “the repressive order of procreative sexuality.” Very Foucauldian, all that. As indeed is Marcuse’s splendid idea of “repressive tolerance,” which holds that “what is proclaimed and practiced as tolerance today” — Marcuse was writing in 1965 and had in mind such institutions as freedom of speech and freedom of assembly — “is in many of its most effective manifestations serving the cause of oppression.” In plain Orwellian language: Freedom is tyranny, tyranny is freedom.

The aroma of such Sixties radicalism pervades Mr. Miller’s book and everywhere undergirds his sympathy for Foucault. With this in view, it seems only natural that among Miller’s other credits are *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*, which he edited, and “*Democracy Is in the Streets*”: *From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (1987). I am unfamiliar with the former work, but “*Democracy Is in the Streets*” is a straightforward paean to the New Left and its “collective dream” of “participatory democracy.” In that book, Miller was already memorializing crucial “breakaway experiences” — “during sit-ins, in marches, at violent confrontations” — and the Sixties’ “spirit of ecstatic freedom.” In some ways, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* is a revival of that earlier book, done over with a French theme and plenty of black leather.

Hence it is not surprising that when Miller gets around to *les événements*, the student riots of 1968, his prose waxes dithyrambic as gratified nostalgia fires his imagination. It is as if he were reliving his lost — or maybe not-so-lost — childhood.

The disorder was intoxicating. Billboards were ripped apart, sign posts uprooted, scaffolding and barbed wire pulled down, parked cars tipped over. Piles of debris mounted in the middle of the boulevards. The mood was giddy, the atmosphere festive. “Everyone instantly recognized the reality of their desires,” one participant wrote shortly afterward, summing up the prevailing spirit. “Never had the passion for destruction been shown to be more creative.”

Foucault himself, unfortunately, had to miss out on the first wave of riots, since he was teaching at the University of Tunis. But his lover Daniel Defert was in Paris and kept him abreast of developments by holding a transistor radio up to the telephone receiver for hours on end. Later that year, Foucault was named head of the department of philosophy at the newly created University of Vincennes outside Paris. The forty-three-year-old professor of philosophy then got a chance to abandon himself to the intoxication. In January 1969, a group of five hundred students seized the administration building and amphitheater, ostensibly to signal solidarity with their brave colleagues who had occupied the Sorbonne earlier that day. In fact, as Miller suggests, the real point was “to explore, again, the creative potential of disorder.” Miller is very big on “the creative potential of disorder.” Foucault was one of the few faculty who joined the students. When the police arrived, he followed the recalcitrant core to the roof in order to “resist.” Miller reports proudly that while Foucault “gleefully” hurled stones at the police, he was nonetheless “careful not to dirty his beautiful black velour suit.”

It was shortly after this encouraging episode that Foucault shaved his skull and emerged as a ubiquitous countercultural spokesman. His “politics” were consistently foolish, a combination of solemn chatter about “transgression,” power, and surveillance, leavened by an extraordinary obtuseness about the responsible exercise of power in everyday life. Foucault was dazzled by the thought that the word “subject” (as in “the subject who is reading this”) is cognate with “subjection.” “Both meanings,” he speculated, “suggest a form of power which subjugates or makes subject to.” Foucault posed as a passionate partisan of liberty. At the same time, he never met a revolutionary piety he didn’t like. He championed various extreme forms of Marxism, including Maoism; he supported the Ayatollah Khomeini, even when the Ayatollah’s fundamentalist cadres set about murdering thousands of Iranian citizens. In 1978, looking back to the postwar period, he asked: “What could politics mean when it was a question of choosing between Stalin’s USSR and Truman’s America?” It tells us a great deal that Foucault found this question difficult to answer.

One thing that is refreshing about Foucault’s political follies, however, is that they tend to make otherwise outlandish figures appear comparatively tame. In a debate that aired on Dutch television in the early Seventies, for example, the famous American radical and linguist Noam Chomsky appears as a voice of sanity and moderation in comparison to Foucault. As Miller reports it, while Chomsky insisted “we must act as sensitive and responsible human beings,” Foucault replied that such ideas as responsibility, sensitivity, justice, and law were merely “tokens of ideology” that completely lacked legitimacy. “The proletariat doesn’t wage war against the ruling class because it considers such a war to be just,” he argued. “The proletariat makes war with the ruling class because . . . it wants to take power.”

Although he came of age in the 1940s and 1950s, the “public” Foucault was fundamentally a child of the Sixties: precocious, spoiled, self-absorbed, full of jejune political sentiments, wracked by unfulfillable fantasies of absolute ecstasy. He became expert at straining the narcissistic delusions of the Sixties through the forbidding, cynical argot of contemporary French philosophy. And it is

primarily to this, I believe, that he owes his enormous success as an academic guru. In Foucault's philosophy, the "idealism" of the Sixties was painted a darker hue. But its demand for liberation from "every fixed form," as Miller repeatedly puts it, remained very much in force. In an interview from 1968, Foucault suggested that "the rough outline of a future society is supplied by the recent experiences with drugs, sex, communes, other forms of consciousness and other forms of individuality. If scientific socialism emerged from the *utopias* of the nineteenth century, it is possible that a real socialization will emerge in the 20th century from *experiences*."

Drugs, in fact, were one aid that Foucault freely availed himself of in his search for "experiences." He batted on hashish and marijuana in the Sixties, but it was not until 1975 that he had his first encounter with LSD. Mr. Miller considers it crucial to the philosopher's development, and so apparently did Foucault, who described it in what were clearly his highest words of praise. "The only thing I can compare this experience to in my life," he is reported to have said at the time, "is sex with a stranger. . . . Contact with a strange body affords an experience of the truth similar to what I am experiencing now." "I now understand my sexuality," he concluded. In light of Foucault's fate, it seems grimly significant that this pharmacological fête took place in Death Valley. In any event, so galvanizing was Foucault's first experience with hallucinogens that he set aside drafts of the unpublished volumes of *The History of Sexuality*—what a loss! As Miller notes, there were hundreds of pages "on masturbation, on incest, on hysteria, on perversion, on eugenics": all the important philosophical issues of our time.

As always, Miller presents Foucault's indulgence in sexual torture as if it were a noble existential battle for greater wisdom and political liberation. Thus while sadomasochism is a topic that Miller discusses early and often, his fullest exploration of the subject comes in a chapter called, after the title of one of Foucault's books, "The Will to Know." "Accepting the new level of risk," Miller writes, Foucault

joined again in the orgies of torture, trembling with "the most exquisite agonies," voluntarily effacing himself, exploding the limits of consciousness, letting real, corporeal pain insensibly melt into pleasure through the alchemy of eroticism. . . . Through intoxication, reverie, the Dionysian abandon of the artist, the most punishing of ascetic practices, and an uninhibited exploration of sadomasochistic eroticism, it seemed possible to breach, however briefly, the boundaries separating the conscious and unconscious, reason and unreason, pleasure and pain—and, at the ultimate limit, life and death—thus starkly revealing how distinctions central to the play of true and false are pliable, uncertain, contingent.

Much of the time, Miller appears as a sober investigative journalist. But just mention the word "transcendence" and he goes all gooey. I suspect it's a reflex, acquired from too much Alan Watts and other quasi-mystical confections. Just as Pavlov's dog could not help salivating when he heard the bell ring, so Miller can't help spouting nonsense whenever anyone mentions Dionysus.

Noting sadly that we may "never know" exactly what Foucault did while exploding the limits of consciousness and effacing the boundaries between pleasure and pain, Miller is nevertheless

gruesomely particular in his descriptions of the sadomasochistic underworld that Foucault frequented, a world that featured, among other attractions, “gagging, piercing, cutting, electric-shocking, stretching on racks, imprisoning, branding. . . .” “Depending on the club,” he dutifully reports, “one could savor the illusion of bondage—or experience the most directly physical sorts of self-chosen ‘torture.’” Foucault threw himself into this scene with an enthusiasm that astonished his friends, quickly acquiring an array of leather clothes and, “for play,” a variety of clamps, handcuffs, hoods, gags, whips, paddles, and other “sex toys.”

Mr. Miller’s discussion of sadomasochism is certainly grotesque; it is also comical at times. Despite everything, Miller is a careful and diligent scholar, and so he feels obliged to supply readers with a full list of sources. In his compendious notes, he informs us that his discussion is based on such works as “The

Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole,” *Urban Aboriginals: A Celebration of Leathersexuality*, and *The New Leatherman’s Workbook: A Photo Illustrated Guide to SM Sex Devices*. “For the techniques of gay s/m in these years,” he explains, “I have relied on Larry Townshend, *The Leatherman’s Handbook* 11.” It’s the deadpan delivery that does it.

Unintended comedy aside, however, Miller’s whole depiction of sadomasochism is a maze of contradictions, veering wildly between the worst sort of pop psycho-babble and pompous “philosophical” sermonizing. Addicted to countercultural platitudes about sexual liberation and psychic emancipation, he can’t understand why “s/m is still one of the most widely stigmatized of sexual practices.” Still, after all these years! On the one hand, to help overcome the stigma, he is desperate to de-toxify the subject, to make the perversion seem “generally benign” and normal. On the other hand, he also feels constrained to present the practice of sexual torture as something brave, “exploratory,” and “challenging.” The whips and chains are really just “props”; the encounters are “consensual”; the pain is “often mild”; the devotees of s&m are, “on the whole, . . . as nonviolent and well-adjusted as any other segment of the population.” But even as he is telling us about the the pillows he found in an s&m “dungeon” to make it cozy, he also quotes the expert who, while insisting that “the real trip is mental,” freely acknowledges that “there is certainly pain and sometimes a small amount of blood.” Only a small amount, though.

One of Miller’s frequent explanatory strategies involves a trip down the slippery slope. When was the last time you had a violent impulse? Well, then: aren’t we all closet sadists? “After all,” Miller argues, “s/m on one level merely makes explicit the sadistic and masochistic fantasies implicitly at play in most, perhaps all, human relationships.” Ah yes, “on one level.” It never seems to occur to Miller that, even if it were true that such fantasies were “implicitly” at play in most human relationships (itself a dubious proposition), the difference between “implicit” and “explicit” is exactly the difference upon which the entire world of moral behavior is based. Furthermore, the

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question of “relationships” hardly enters, for as Foucault himself stressed, the anonymity of the encounters formed a large part of their attraction: “You meet men [in the clubs] who are to you as you are to them: nothing but a body with which combinations and productions of pleasure are possible. You cease to be imprisoned in your own face, in your own past, in your own identity.”

Even Miller recognizes—though he doesn’t come right out and say it—that at the center of Foucault’s sexual obsessions was not the longing for philosophical insight but the longing for oblivion. “Complete total pleasure,” Foucault correctly observed, is “related to death.” The unhappy irony is that this apostle of sex and hedonism should have wound up, like the Marquis de Sade before him, exiling pleasure from sex. In one of the innumerable interviews that he gave in later years, Foucault praised sadomasochism as “a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualization of pleasure.” What is pathetically revealing is Foucault’s belief that this was an argument *for* sadomasochism. He continued: “The idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure, and the idea that sexual pleasure is the root of *all* our possible pleasure—I think *that’s* something quite wrong.” Well yes, Michel, there is something quite wrong about that. But who believes that “bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure”? Had a good meal lately? Enjoyed a walk in the sunshine? It is part of the relentless logic of sadomasochism that what begins as a single-minded cultivation of sexual pleasure for its own sake ends by extinguishing the capacity for enjoying pleasure altogether. Indeed, it might be said that the pursuit of ever more extreme sensations of pleasure, which stands at the heart of the sadomasochistic enterprise, drains the pleasure out of pleasure. The desire for oblivion ends up in the oblivion of desire.

Foucault’s sexual adventures in the early 1980s also inevitably raise the question of aids. Did Foucault know he had the disease? Miller engages in a fair amount of hand-wringing over this question. He begins by saying no, Foucault probably didn’t know. But he also quotes Daniel Defert, who thought his friend “had a real knowledge” that he had aids. “When he went to San Francisco for the last time, he took it as a *limit-experience*.” This puts Miller in a tough position. He thinks that “limit experiences” are by definition a good thing. “It is not immoral to be convulsed by singular fantasies and wild impulses,” he writes, summarizing the “ethical” point of Foucault’s book *Madness and Civilization*: “such limit-experiences are to be valued as a way of winning back access to the occluded, Dionysian dimension of being human.” But what if pursuing the limit involves infecting other people with a deadly disease? What if the pursuit of some “limit experiences” implicates one in what amounts to homicidal behavior? In the end, Miller waffles. He is all for allowing those who “think differently” to engage in “potential suicidal acts of passion” with consenting partners. But homicidal acts? It is pretty clear, in any event, what Foucault himself thought. As he put it in Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, “The Faustian pact, whose temptation has been instilled in us by the deployment of sexuality, is now as follows: to exchange life in its entirety for sex itself, for the truth and the sovereignty of sex. Sex is worth dying for.”

Foucault is admired above all for practicing an exemplary suspicion about the topics he investigated. He is supposed to have been a supreme intellectual anatomist, ruthlessly laying

bare the hidden power relations, dark motives, and ideological secrets that infect bourgeois society and that fester unacknowledged in the hearts and minds of everyone. It is curious, though, that Foucault's acolytes bring so little suspicion to the master's own claims. Consider the central Foucauldian contention that objective truth is a "chimera," that truth is always and everywhere a function of power, of "multiple forms of constraint." Some version of this claim is propagated as gospel by academics across the country. But wait: is it *true*? Is it in fact the case that truth is always relative to a "regime of truth," i.e., to politics? If one says: Yes, it is true, then one plunges directly into contradiction—for haven't we just dispensed with this naïve idea of truth?—and the logical cornerstone of Foucault's epistemology crumbles.

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Or consider the proposition that Michel Foucault is a kind of latter-day avatar of Friedrich Nietzsche. It is not so much argued as taken for granted that Foucault, like Nietzsche, was the very epitome of the lonely

but profound philosophical hero, thinking thoughts too deep—and too dangerous—for most of us. (Except of course for Foucault's followers: for *them* it is the work of a moment to dispense with "Western metaphysics," "bourgeois humanism," and a thousand other evils.) Foucault himself assiduously promoted the idea that he was a modern-day Friedrich Nietzsche, and Mr. Miller has elevated the comparison into a central interpretive principle. In his preface, he announces that his book is not so much a biography as an account "of one man's lifelong struggle to honor Nietzsche's gnomic injunction, 'to become what one is.'" Never mind that thirty pages later we find Foucault insisting that "One writes to become someone other than who one is": the Foucault industry thrives on such "paradoxes." Anyway, who has time for such niceties as logic when engaged on a risky "Nietzschean quest," something we find Foucault pursuing in Miller's book every fifty pages or so?

In fact, the comparison between Foucault and Nietzsche is a calumny upon Nietzsche. Admittedly, Nietzsche has a lot to answer for, including the popularity of figures like Foucault. But whatever one thinks of Nietzsche's philosophy and influence, it is difficult not to admire his courage and single-minded commitment to the philosophical life. Wracked by ill-health—migraines, vertigo, severe digestive complaints—Nietzsche had to quit his teaching position at the University of Basel when he was in his mid-thirties. From then on he led an isolated, impoverished, celibate life, subsisting in various cheap *pensioni* in Italy and Switzerland. He had but few friends. His work was almost totally ignored: *Beyond Good and Evil*, one of his most important books, sold a total of 114 copies in a year. Yet he quietly persevered.

And Foucault? After attending the most elite French schools—the lycée Henri IV, the Ecole Normale Supérieure, the Sorbonne—he held a series of academic appointments in France, Poland, Germany, Sweden, and Tunisia. The jobs were low-paying, but the budding philosopher was aided in his program of resistance by generous subsidies from his parents. In the 1950s, when he was a

lowly instructor at the University of Uppsala, he acquired what Didier Eribon calls “a magnificent beige Jaguar” (it is white in Miller’s book) and proceeded to drive “like a madman” around town, shocking staid Uppsalian society. Talk about challenging convention! Eribon reminds us, too, that Foucault was an accomplished academic politician, adept at securing preferment for himself and his friends. This is not to say that he concealed his contempt for narrow, bourgeois scruples, however. Attempting suicide and hurling stones at the police were hardly his only efforts to “transgress” accepted academic protocol. While he was teaching at Clermont-Ferrand in the early 1960s, for example, he gave an assistanceship to his lover, Daniel Defert. In response to a faculty-council query about why he had appointed Defert rather than another applicant, a woman who was older and better qualified, he replied: “Because we don’t like old maids here.” Moreover, Foucault enjoyed the esteem of gullible intellectuals everywhere. His book *Les Mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things* in English) became a best-seller in 1966, catapulting him to international fame. The crowning recognition came in 1970 when, at the unusually young age of forty-four, Foucault was elected to the Collège de France, the very pinnacle of French academic culture. Miller, like most academics who write about Foucault, praises Foucault’s philosophical daring and willingness to put himself at risk for his ideas. “For more than a decade,” Miller writes about Foucault’s reputation at the time of his death, “his elegant shaved skull had been an emblem of political courage—a cynosure of resistance to institutions that would smother the free spirit and stifle the ‘right to be different.’” Ah yes, what resistance to bourgeois society!

But Foucault differed from Nietzsche in more than such outward trappings. The fundamental world outlooks of the two men were radically different. Basically, Foucault was Nietzsche’s ape. He adopted some of Nietzsche’s rhetoric about power and imitated some of his verbal histrionics. But he never achieved anything like Nietzsche’s insight or originality. Nietzsche may have been seriously wrong in his understanding of modernity: he may have mistaken one part of the story—the rise of secularism—for the whole tale; but few men have struggled as honestly with the problem of nihilism as he. Foucault simply flirted with nihilism as one more “experience.” Miller is right to emphasize the importance of “experience,” especially extreme or “limit” experience, in Foucault’s life and work; he is wrong to think that this was a virtue. Foucault was addicted to extremity. He epitomized to perfection a certain type of decadent Romantic, a type that Nietzsche warned against when he spoke of “those who suffer from the impoverishment of life and seek rest, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves through art and knowledge, or intoxication, convulsions, anaesthesia, and madness.” Foucault’s insatiable craving for new, ever more thrilling “experiences” was a sign of weakness, not daring. Here, too, Nietzsche is a far better guide than Foucault. “All men now live through too much and think through too little,” Nietzsche wrote in 1880. “They suffer at the same time from extreme hunger and from colic, and therefore become thinner and thinner, no matter how much they eat.—Whoever says now, ‘I have not lived through anything’—is an ass.”

Mr. Miller is not entirely uncritical. About *Madness and Civilization* (English translation, 1971), for example, he acknowledges that “the author’s own convictions are insinuated more than argued.” About *The Order of Things*, he points out that the writing is “awkward,

disjointed, elliptical to a fault.” But such local criticisms do not go nearly far enough. At the beginning of his book, Miller mentions in passing J. G. Merquior’s incisive critical study, *Foucault* (1985). Readers acquainted with that book know that Merquior, who is identified as “a Brazilian diplomat who studied with Ernest Gellner,” has politely but definitively exploded almost every significant claim that Foucault made. Merquior typically begins each chapter with a ritual nod to Foucault’s brilliance. He then proceeds to show that his arguments rest on shoddy, if extensive, scholarship, distorted history, and untenable generalizations. Whatever “new perspectives” Foucault’s work may have opened up, Merquior concludes, its “conceptual muddles and explanatory weaknesses ... more than outweigh its real contribution.” The truth is, Foucault specialized in providing obfuscating answers to pseudo problems. “We have had sexuality since the eighteenth century, and sex since the nineteenth,” he writes in *The History of Sexuality*. “What we had before that was no doubt flesh.” Yes, and “Sexual intercourse was invented in 1963,” as Philip Larkin memorably put it.

Foucault once described his writing as a “labyrinth.” He was right. The question is, why should we wish to enter it? It may be the case that, as Miller insists, Foucault’s writing expresses “a powerful desire to realize a certain form of life.” But is it a *desirable* form of life? Foucault’s personal perversions involved him in private tragedy. The celebration of his intellectual perversions by academics continues to be a public scandal. The career of this “representative man” of the twentieth century really represents one of the biggest con jobs in recent intellectual history.

1. _ The Passion of Michel Foucault, by James Miller; Simon & Schuster, 491 pages, \$27.50.
2. _ Didier Eribon’s biography, Michel Foucault, was published in France in 1989. An English translation, by Betsy Wing, appeared from Harvard in 1991. See Richard Vine’s review in the *The New Criterion* for January 1992.
3. _ The eclipse of tolerance as a liberal virtue, by the way—the widespread belief that tolerance must now be considered a symptom of reaction—is one of the most insidious by-products of the campaign for political correctness. Among other things, it sharply narrows the space for open debate by requiring allegiance to values or ideas one had hitherto had the luxury of acknowledging without affirmation.

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