

On Foucault
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The Passion of Michel Foucault by James Miller, a biography of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, was published by Simon & Schuster in 1993. I believe I first read it around 1995, and I have revisited it regularly since, once or twice a year, reading a chapter or two or three and browsing sections here and there before setting it back on my library shelf. I don't commonly re-read books, but this one hit home with me and I have been drawn back to it time and again.

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) taught at the Collège de France and other universities, including in the United States. He authored critical studies of social institutions, including psychiatry, medicine, and the prison system. He also wrote about the history of sexuality and the relationship between power, knowledge, and human discourse. He was often described as post-modernist or post-structuralist in his outlook, and for a time in the 1960s seemed to be aligned with the structuralist movement. Foucault rejected all of these labels, however, and personally I was interested in his take on the things I cared about and didn't try to slot him into a philosophical category.

This last time I pulled the book off the shelf—in 2007—I noted the phrases and sentences, sometimes a paragraph, I had underlined, I suppose ten or twelve years ago. In this writing, I will reproduce these underlines and offer my comments on each of them and see what that adds up to. Since I am a decade and more down the road in life, I presume my comments are different than they would have been if I had written them at the time of the underlines. But perhaps what I offer here will give a sense of the impact this book has had on me, including my writing, this past decade, and get across something of what I am like in 2007.

Most of all, however, I hope readers will profit from going through this material with me, that it raises good questions for them, prompts them to reflect on all of the dimensions of their lives, and encourages them to look into Foucault as well as the other philosophers mentioned in the following pages.

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes in the excerpts are by Foucault and all other writing is by the biographer James Miller.

Unless otherwise indicated, “he” and “his,” and the like, refer to Foucault. The excerpts are in the order in which they appear in the book, and the number at the end of each excerpt is the page it is on. To make it easier to distinguish the excerpts from my comments, the excerpts are set in on both sides and the type size is smaller.

The excerpts and my comments:

...understanding his life as a teleological quest. 7

I took “teleological quest” to mean Foucault’s attempt to find, or ascribe, meaning and purpose to his life. What does my life mean? What is my purpose? Foucault asked these questions from a very early age. I wish I had done that. But I’m asking, and answering, these questions now, and trying to live accordingly.

...his unrelenting, deeply ambiguous and profoundly problematic preoccupation with death. 7

The title of my 2005 education book, *While There’s Time*, refers to mortality—the time each of us has between now and our death. “Far more than I did before,” I wrote in that book, “I live with a virtually constant awareness of my own finiteness, and rather than it bringing me down as some might suppose it has sensitized me and enriched my life . . . I appreciate the moments more now. I honor them more now. I throw fewer moments away than I did before.” In my 2006 book, *Living White*, I wrote: “More than ever before, I am aware of the need to do what is truly important and lasting in whatever time I have left on this earth. . . . More than ever, I am committed to live publicly and fully as the person I really am.”

. . . corporeal experimentation what formed an integral part of his own philosophical quest. 8

When I was younger I was involved in sport and dance, but I didn’t consciously and thoughtfully and rigorously explore, enhance, and manifest the physical dimension of my being. My life has been too much about words, abstractions, observing, analyzing, assessing, talking, writing, and not enough about health and physicality and immediate, felt sensation. Foucault was all but unique as a

philosopher, as an academic, in underscoring the importance of the body.

“At every moment, step,” he remarked in 1983, “one must confront what one is thinking and saying with what one is doing, what one is.” 9

The issue of personal integrity: the alignment of what I think and believe with what I do and with my inherent nature.

“The key to the personal poetic attitude of a philosopher is not to be sought in his ideas, as if it could be deduced from them, but rather in his philosophy-as-life, in his philosophical life, his ethos.” 9

The challenge to *be* your philosophy. The idea of making your life the embodiment of your most cherished principles and ideals. Go beyond words, professions, advocacy. It is not just what you say that counts, it is not just believing the right thing--it is what you *are* that most matters. After spending a lifetime in the field of education, which is so much about words, the idea of shutting up and letting my life speak for itself is enticing, and at the same time challenging and scary.

. . . resistance to institutions that would smother the free spirit and stifle “the right to be different.” 13

Particularly in *While There's Time* and in writings since the publication of *Living White*, there has been a concern for the way the collective and its ideological rationale co-op, subordinate, and condition individuals, bring them into the fold. That concern applies to both the left and the right, both totalitarian and free societies, and to all brands of religion. They all have the propensity to say to people, “We’ve got it all figured out: here’s where you fit and here’s what you do, and here’s who you defer to and serve (me and my kind).”

The last sentence of Foucault’s book, *The Order of Things*, wagers that man will soon disappear “like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.” 14

If the current birth rate among my kind, white people, continues, in a few hundred years for all practical purposes we will cease to exist on this planet. I'm taken by how effectively whites have been conditioned to give no concern to their preservation as a race.

From schools and the professions to the army and prison, the central institutions of our society, charged Foucault, strove with sinister efficiency to supervise the individual "to neutralize his dangerous states" and alter his conduct by inculcating numbing codes of discipline. The inevitable result was "docile bodies" and obedient souls, drained of creative energy. 15

What makes this process particularly insidious is that those doing this are convinced that they are doing the right thing, and the people to whom it is happening don't realize what is going on.

"Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same."
19

This is a quote, or part of it, that has stayed with me from the first reading of the book. The part I took to heart was "do not ask me to remain the same." I don't want to feel I have to "keep it going," whether it is doing a job in a certain way or writing on certain things in a certain way or whatever else. Reading this quote this last time, I picked up on the part about not asking who I am. I'm OK with being asked who I am, and I'm trying to answer that question, at least in part, through this writing about Foucault.

Foucault was the kind of thinker who enacts his ideas through his own personal odyssey, in his writing, of course, but also in his life. 19

Increasingly this past decade, I've brought myself into my writing, and tried to incorporate my thinking into the way I conducted my own life.

"I believe that . . . someone who is a writer is not simply doing his work in his books," he remarked in 1983, "but that his major work is, in the end, himself in the process of writing his books. The private life of an individual, his sexual preference,

and his work are interrelated, not because his work translates his sexual life, but because the work includes the whole life as well as the text.” 19

I picked up on the idea that, at heart, my project, to call it that, is living my life, and writing is part of that. The reference to sexuality (Foucault was a homosexual, and had a predilection for S/M) and its connection to one’s work prompted me to think about the sexual dimension of my own life. Beyond what that means for the quality of my life, it raises there is question of what impact my sexuality—I’m heterosexual—has had on my writing, and conversely, whether focusing so much on writing—I have been writing constantly this past decade—has deadened or distracted me from the sexual dimension of my being. Sex is part of everything, affects everything, even scholarship.

Foucault perceived death as the constant companion of life, its “white brightness” always lurking in “the black coffer of the body.”²⁰

At 67 as I write this, the prospect of death is always present at some level of my awareness. But still, it is hard to imagine oblivion for eternity as a reality; I don’t have a belief in an afterlife or reincarnation, any of that. I don’t want to die. Life is finally getting good. I’m finally becoming what I am. I think I have about fifteen years left, although I’ve read that everybody, no matter how old they are, think they have fifteen years left. But then there is the moment, and most likely it is short of fifteen years, when it truly is the end and they ask themselves, “Is this all life is?” and the answer comes back, “Yes, that’s all it is.”

In an unusually revealing 1981 interview, he described in some detail the appeal to him of certain extreme forms of Passion, implicitly linking a shattering type of “suffering pleasure,” the lifelong preparation for suicide—and the ability, thanks to potentially self-destructive yet mysteriously revealing states of intense dissociation, to see the world “completely differently.” Through intoxication, reverie, the Dionysian abandon of the artist, the most punishing of ascetic practices, and an uninhibited exploration of sado-masochistic 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.
30

How lacking my life has been in intense experience of any kind. From earliest childhood I've felt unwanted and threatened and afraid. Perhaps that has led me to hunker down, go emotionally dead, live my life in survival mode, wait it out, rather than truly live.

“Each time I have attempted to do theoretical work,” wrote Foucault, “it has been on the basis of elements from my own experience.”. . . each of his books is “a fragment of an autobiography.” 31

Indeed, all of my books since the 1998 book *Sports in the Lives of Children and Adolescents* have been autobiographical. I remember only one reviewer who realized that *The Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds* was my story as well as William Pierce's. The voice speaking to the reader at the end of that book is not the same as the voice at the beginning of it.

“One writes to become someone other than who one is.”³³

I think I'm the opposite of this. My writing has been part of a quest to become the person I am.

He had written these books [his last two], he explained, in an effort to “get free of oneself,” to let go of oneself, or, more idiomatically still (the French phrase is “*se déprendre de soi-même*”), to lose one's fondness for one's self. 34

Passages like this one underscore that we don't all face the same challenges in life. I've been alienated, detached from myself, and want to connect with myself, not become free of myself. And I want to find fondness for myself, not lose it.

Sex is worth dying for. 34

He did die for it; he was one of the first known victims of AIDS. And he knew of the AIDS danger and nevertheless persisted in his sexual practices, so it seems he really did believe sex was worth dying for. Is it possible to live a life where sex seems to be worth nothing? Or is that a distortion of life, a false life, a sell-out, acceptance of defeat?

“As for the motive that compelled me, it was very simple. ... It was curiosity . . . the kind that permits me to get free of oneself.” 35

I want to get free of my conditioned self, the person I have been taught that I am, that I have trained to be. I want to find my true self.

. . . undertaking how, and up to what limit, it would be possible to think differently. 36

I find it remarkable how my thinking has changed in the last fifteen years, especially around race. I remember how certain I used to be about everything, including race, and how that has turned around. If it happened once it could happen again. The challenge is to keep my eyes open.

Sartre’s [Jean-Paul Sartre, French philosopher prominent in the WWII period] stern call to uphold freedom and accept responsibility, even in a world bereft of redeeming significance, hit home. As Foucault later remarked, “Given the absurdity of wars, slaughters and despotism, it seemed to be up to the individual subject to give meaning to his existential choices.”³⁸

What I pick up from this excerpt is the emphasis on affirming and defending human freedom, and on accepting personal responsibility for defining one’s life, giving it significance, through the choices we make and the actions we take moment-to-moment, day-to-day. No matter what bears in on us, holds us down, makes things difficult, we are free and we are responsible for what we do with our lives, what we make out of them. No excuses.

Whether “transcendence” was understood properly or not—and with an esoteric writer like [Martin] Heidegger it is always hard to know—this idea was implicitly the starting point for all of the dominant French

philosophers of the post-war period, from Sartre and [Maurice] Merleau-Ponty to Foucault and Jacques Derrida. A distinctly human capacity (though most human beings, Heidegger thought, failed to grasp its significance), “transcendence” gave to every single person the power to start over, to begin anew—to take up, reshape, and transform the world. Like modern philosophers from [Immanuel] Kant [eighteenth-century philosopher] to Sartre, Heidegger sometimes called this power “freedom”; that it was a *power* he had learned from [Friedrich] Nietzsche [late-nineteenth-century philosopher], who spoke of the same capacity as “will to power.” 48

At any moment in time, at any point in our lives, no matter what has gone on before, we can begin anew, start over, go in a different direction, make good things happen for others and ourselves. This was a central theme in a review of a Brigitte Bardot biography I published recently (*American Renaissance*, January 2007), and it has been an important theme in my own life.

. . . it is helpful to recall the moral aim of Sartre’s philosophy. This he once summed up, in a word, as “authenticity.” This meant “having a true and lucid consciousness of [a] situation . . . [and] assuming the responsibilities and risks it involves.” That these criteria will not be met by most people, most of the time, Sartre makes plain. It is our fate, in effect, to be constantly guilty. Hence, the pregnancy of Sartre’s slogan: man is *condemned* to be free.⁵²

The challenge is to be awake and aware, to see things as they are rather than how we have been conditioned to see them or want to see them or have an interest in seeing them, and then to do the true and right thing regardless of negative consequences that might result. I don’t know that man is *condemned* to be free—it’s fully possible to live the life of a lemming. I prefer to think that it is *possible* to be free, and I believe that freedom has to be sought and achieved.

But it was not a novel or a play or a piece of new music that captured Foucault’s imagination: it was rather an eighty-year old collection of essays—Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*. 66

I made a note to read these essays, which I still haven’t done.

Plagued by an endless series of somatic problems—stomach ailments, acute myopia, nervous disorders—Nietzsche felt increasingly isolated, uncertain as never before about where he was going and what he would make of himself. “It is the *free man’s* task to live for himself, without regard to others,” he wrote in one of his notebooks from this period. “Most men are obviously in the world *by accident*: no higher necessity is visible in them.” By trying to conform to the expectations of others, “men reveal a pathetic *modesty* . . . When each man finds his own goal in someone else, then *nobody has any purpose of his own in existing.*” 67-68

Our physical state is so important in determining the direction and quality of our lives. I’ve made a commitment to get as physically healthy as I can in the next months. I wouldn’t say that man’s task is to live for himself, without regard for others. Rather, I would say that man is not obliged to live solely for others, he does not have to be sacrificial to others. There is nothing and no one inherently more important than he. I believe he should choose how to live from a sense of both his and others’ importance, and with regard for both himself and others. I agree that one has to find his own purpose and goal and not simply accept others’ conception of who he is and what he is obligated to do.

[Nietzsche in his book, *Schopenhauer as Educator*.] They [man] are all afraid. They hide behind custom and opinions. Basically, every man knows quite well that, being unique, he is on this earth only once, and that no accident, however unusual, could ever again combine that wonderful diversity into the unity that he is. He knows this, but hides it like bad conscious.” 68

Some are afraid, but I don’t think all, or even most, men are afraid, and I don’t think they consciously (if that is what Nietzsche means) hide behind custom and opinion. They aren’t hiding behind anything—rather, they simply have bought into the acceptable ways to think and behave. Most people are herd animals: they follow the flock, and they want to do that. And I don’t think people fully realize that this time around is it. Nietzsche gives people more credit than I do.

[Nietzsche] “Be yourself! You are none of the things you now do, think, desire.” 69

This is an injunction I have accepted.

[Nietzsche] “True, there are countless paths and demigods that would like to carry you across the river, but only at the price of your self; you would pledge your self, and lose it. In this world, there is one unique path which no one but you may walk. Where does it lead? Do not ask, take it.” 70

This resonates with me. I think all of us are one of a kind, and that we have a unique path to take in life, and that we need to get on with it. I spent a lot of my life trying to be someone other than me. There was Mickey Mantle the baseball player; and Mike Rockler, my dynamic, idolized-by-students supervisor during my high school practice teaching; and I got into theater and tried to be Tom Hanks, leading actor. When I was married, my wife told me I should square my hairline off in the back like a friend of ours and I tried that. I finally figured out to just do me in the world and let the chips fall where they may. I am never going to win any academy awards doing that, but I think I’m playing my part in life’s movie sitting in front of this computer screen typing up these notes on the Foucault book, and I’ve decided it’s the best thing I can do with my time.

[Nietzsche] rejected the Christian stigmatization of the demonic aspect of the human being. If becoming “what one is” unleashes a compulsion to malignancy, so be it: “Man needs what is most evil in him for what is best in him.” If acting in harmony with a particularly cursed demon brings disaster, so be it: “The secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is—to *live dangerously!*” For better or worse, the human being who would find (and not renounce) itself had no choice. “There is no drearier and more repulsive creature,” comments Nietzsche, “than the man who has evaded his genius.” Call it genius or consider it one’s unique *daimon* [higher presence]—here is Nietzsche’s own key for unlocking “the riddle which man must solve,” the riddle “he can only solve in being, in being what he is and not something else.” 71

The idea of “living dangerously” is appealing. I wish I had thought about this earlier. At 67, I’m just trying to get through this writing session and then take a nap. It’s all about time: we are at a station

where a particular train (like the “living dangerously” train) only comes once (when we are young and have energy), and if we don’t know about it or miss it, that’s it, no second chances. Another trains are coming (like the “peace and quiet” and “honest expression” trains)—I hope, anyway--but not the one I missed.

[Foucault as a teacher] “I consider myself more of an artisan doing a piece of work and offering it for consumption than a master making his slaves work.” . . . If his students had a question, he would answer it; if they needed help, he would try to provide it. Otherwise, he preferred simply to let them go their own way, offering himself as an example, rather than trying to impose doctrinal conformity. 181

When teaching works for me, that is how I go at it.

“Humanism is everything in Western civilization that restricts the desire for power.” Nietzsche’s central concept—power—here, finally, claimed its rightful place as a central term in Foucault’s own vocabulary: his political goal as he now explained it, was “a ‘desubjectification’ of the will to power.” To reach this goal required “revolutionary action”—a “simultaneous agitation of consciousness and institutions.” 199

Foucault was an activist during the 1968 student and worker strikes in France. I was in my twenties during the Viet Nam war and opposed the war, yet I never for a moment saw it as appropriate or possible for me to become an anti-war activist (or active since about some other issue). The world has always seemed “over there” to me: I observed it, and increasingly as the years went by, analyzed and assessed it. But I never thought it was my place to engage the world directly. And it seems others have agreed with me on this: no one has ever asked me to do anything, lead anything, be on the board of anything, or run for anything. A couple of times I have been asked to speak, but the invitations have never been repeated. I think they saw me shifty-eyed and blinking up in front of an audience and realized they had made a mistake.

[On a television program], [American linguist, philosopher, and political activist Noam] Chomsky defended the idea of a

“biologically given, unchangeable” foundation to human nature, and Foucault raised some doubts. 201

Until this last decade, and without really thinking about it, I had accepted the notion that had come at me from every source that had my ear and eye that people were all the same and that what made us different is our circumstance in life. In particular, I assumed that the only thing that distinguishes the races is skin color. These days, I am much better at separating reality from palatable rhetoric and far more amenable to the idea of a “biologically given, unchangeable foundation to human nature.”

[Foucault on the idea of a fixed sexual identity—speaking to a gay audience] “The relationships we have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather they must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation. To be the same is really boring.” 256

By identity, I assume he means the category we get placed in: in my case, white male, university professor, old, divorced, writer on race, Vermonter. The relationship with myself I want to is with this unique human being sitting here on a Sunday afternoon in front of his computer screen, this living entity, the child my mother brought into the world who is now an adult, me. I want to be that, live that, express that, and be true to that each moment I am alive. I am not a category, I am not what you decide I am or want or need me to be, I am not what I was yesterday, I will be different tomorrow, and one day I will die; that is the reality, the base, from which I want to live the rest of my life.

[Foucault’s belief] Faced with any form of government, be it liberal or totalitarian, it was the vocation of the intellectual to exercise a “decisive will not to be governed.” 316

I cherish human freedom. I don’t want to be governed by anything or anybody: not by my personal relationships, my work setting, or by the government. I see America as an experiment in personal and political freedom, and I note that in the name of equality and justice and fairness our freedoms are being chipped away. I recommend an essay I wrote in my education book *While There’s Time* called “The Libertarianian Impulse in Education.” In that essay I argued that the

government, and especially the federal government, is the most highly organized and relentless aggressor against the individual.

“. . . it doesn't matter all that much what form the government happens to take—dictatorship, democracy, they are more alike than different. They all want to manage people's lives and subordinate individuals to what they have going, and over time they all have the marked tendency to want to do more and more of it.” And keep in mind it isn't just bosses and interest groups and politicians and bureaucrats that govern us. There are also the commercial interests marketing their wares--want it, buy it, consume it, be it. The biggest mistake in my life was spending much of my time and energy as a youngster trying to become a professional baseball player. I'm realizing now how much that ambition and preoccupation resulted from commercial sport interests—the Red Sox and people in the coaching business and the rest—selling their products.

The great Nietzschean questions: “Why am I alive? What lesson am I to learn from life? How did I become what I am, and why do I suffer from being what I am?” 319

Good questions as long as they are accompanied by action. Life is about doing things and getting results for yourself and the world. Navel gazing divorced from action is a ticket to nowhere. It is not *think and then do*; it is *think and do at the same time*. There is always some good thing right in front of you to do—do that while you're resolving the great Nietzschean questions.

“The nearer a man draws to God, the more he sees himself a sinner.” Unlike Stoicism, which had been oriented to autarky and self-reliance, the Christian culture of the self thus stressed the need for a relentlessly suspicious form of self-examination, conducted under the watchful gaze of a spiritual guide. 323

I haven't studied Stoicism and will—autarky (self-sufficiency) and self-reliance are attractive ideals to me now. I don't plan on engaging in any more self-denigration if I can help it, and to the degree I can, I am going to go deaf to the judges and guides that throughout my life have taken it upon themselves to put me in my place. That includes those who don't like my recent writings on

race. Just let them go, make them disappear; they don't exist, they are none of my business; give them no energy, no explanations, no justifications; no trying to reason with them, no nice-guying it, no placating—and if they get in my way, it's war.

. . . the Christian thus had to sacrifice a part of who one was: and Foucault went out of his way to stress, “we have to understand this sacrifice not only as a radical change in the way of life, but as the consequence of a formula. One renounces being the subject of one's will,” in part by learning, and following, the will of God—and in part by disengaging from the lures and traps of this world through “the symbolic staging of one's own death.” In his view, the Christian techniques of “unconditional obedience, interminable examination, and exhaustive confession” formed a kind of unholy trinity. Self-mortification was not his style. 323-324

Self-mortification has been my style. I'm trying to change that.

As Foucault remarked in a 1983 lecture, one had to be ready to convert one's self and one's whole way of seeing the world through “a kind of turning round on the spot.” In order to pave the way for such “a rupture with one's self, with one's past, with the world, and with all previous life,” it was necessary to jettison false opinions, evil masters, and old habits. And this entailed not only a kind of ongoing “critique,” examining and evaluating every facet of experience, but also an ongoing combat and struggle in which the outcome was ambiguous, reversible, and always uncertain. 325

The past decade for me has been a jettisoning of this sort. And it has involved a self-critique and an inclusive, integrative look at my life and personal history, and it has been a struggle, albeit a gratifying one; and it's true, nothing is ever clear, permanent, or certain—all I can do, all you can do, is whatever seems to be the wisest thing to do at this time and see what happens.

“The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning.” 328

The way I'd put it is that I am trying to become the best possible version of the person I was at the beginning, at birth. That involves expelling all the conditioning—from schools, the media, my work settings, and personal relationships—that has shaped me into someone other than who I am.

“Foucault was always very much alone,” recalls one of his close associates. 328

I have always felt very much alone, although I have never felt lonely.

[The “dandy”] . . . making of his body, his behavior, his feelings, his passions, his very existence, a work of art, “struggling, in this way, to get free of himself—and then to “invent himself.” 334

The dandy idea fascinates me. It contrasts with the idea of an authentic self that has directed my own life. The dandy consciously erects a mask, a persona, invents himself, chooses to be someone other than he was born to be, sees life as a performance art. I wonder if it wouldn't have been better for me when I was young to have been guided by the dandy ideal, and I wonder whether it wouldn't be better for me now, although it is probably too late in life for that now.

[In Foucault's essay “The Scripting of the Self, he discusses Stoicism in terms of] getting rid of “the Other, the Enemy, who hides behind seeming likenesses of oneself. 341

I see the Other, the Enemy, as the residue of all the negative conditioning I have had in my life. I see myself as having spent much of my life in the hands of the enemy, as it were, people and forces that injected me with a lot of poison I have to disgorge.

[Foucault on Stoic ethics:] “. . . the *will* to live a beautiful life”—the positive side, as it were, of the decisive will not to be governed. The aim, he went on, was “to leave to others memories of a beautiful existence.” 346

I think a beautiful existence is beyond my capability at this time in my life. Perhaps if I had known to seek to create it at 20 or 25 I could have gotten close to it, but not now. Now I hope for a reasonably honest and peaceful existence. I do have the will not to be governed. Again, it's all about time: there's a time when things are possible, and then it passes and it's too late, the train has left the station.

“What will come next? I am going to take care of myself.”³⁴⁷

I have survived, but until recently I haven't taken care of myself. I didn't value myself enough to do that.

That he felt moved to exercise care at all was due neither to a divine law, nor a natural law, nor a rational rule, but rather to a passion for beauty, which led him to try to give his existence . . . “the most beautiful form possible.” By approaching one's life in such frankly aesthetic terms, one might turn one's self into a kind of existential artwork—a “work” . . . that might enable the artist to transform “a part of himself from which he feels free, and from which the work has contributed to freeing him.”³⁴⁷

The dandy ideal again, making one's being a work of art. While I have been far from a dandy this past decade, my writing has been much closer to an artistic, esthetic expression than an attempt to inform or persuade. I paint my “pictures” as honestly and purely as I can and hang them on the wall, and then I paint whatever pictures are inside telling me to paint them next. I am in service to the pictures. If and when there are no pictures telling me to paint them, I will stop painting.

The means by which Foucault expressed this aesthetic style of caring for himself was on one level relatively traditional. By understanding an “analytics of truth,” he had devoted his life to the discipline of critique, scripting his self in the historico-philosophical works that he wrote, trying to understand who he was, and at the same time making an effort to renew “the living body of philosophy, at least if the latter is still what it once was, namely an ‘asceticism,’ an exercise of the self in thought.” But thinking and writing were not the only ways in which he tried to take care of himself: for at the same time, he

had pursued a “critical ontology,” trying to transform and transfigure his self, by experimenting, sacrificing himself, putting his body and soul to the test directly, through an occult kind of asceticism, centered on the *daimonic* ordeals of S/M. 348

Foucault’s example prompts an exploration of the place of sexuality in everything we do, including analysis and criticism. I ask myself how my sexuality, deadened as it is, suppressed as it is, shapes my work, and whether it is not too late to become a sexual being and reflect that in my writing.

[The Stoic Seneca] “Scorn poverty” . . . “scorn pain,” “scorn death”—and finally, “scorn fate,” for “I have given her no weapon with which she may strike your soul. Above all, I have taken pains that nothing should keep you here against your will; the way lies open. 350

How hopeful. I didn’t know to read the Stoics when I was young. It’s late; the sand is just about to the bottom of the hourglass. But I will press on. For some reason, I can’t do anything else.

Freedom can be found, he said—but always in a context. Power puts into play a dynamic of constant struggle. There is no escaping it. But there is freedom in knowing the game is yours to play. Don’t look to authorities: the truth is in your self. Don’t be scared. Trust your self. Don’t be afraid of living. And don’t be afraid of dying. Have courage. Do what you feel you must: desire, create, transcend—you can win the game. 352

I don’t know that it is truth that is in myself, and I wish it weren’t such a struggle, and I’m scared, but I’ll do what I must nevertheless. I think I can win the game by playing it as long as I can.

“Don’t cry for me if I die.” 353

I hope someone cries for me when I die.

Foucault, in effect, was conceding his own inability, when all was said and done, to escape the duty to tell the truth—above all, the truth about who he was and what he had become. 358

I have felt compelled to tell the truth about who I am and what I have become. I don't really know where this press comes from. Perhaps it is an artistic impulse. I know that my sense of myself is as an artist and not as a writer or intellectual or scholar.

He described how Socrates exercised care (*souci*) by putting others to the question and his soul to the test, refining a new kind of art, of not being governed, exhibiting an admirable and unwavering kind of courage in his willingness to reason without direction from another. 359

I fall far short of this ideal, but I do use it to direct and assess my public life.

[Socrates] The philosopher should be governed not by popular opinion but rather by the convictions he had forged for himself during his own search for truth. 359

I'm not worthy of being called a philosopher, but this standard guides me.

Foucault devoted what turned out to be the last five lectures of his life to this topic [Diogenes and the Cynics]. . . . He talked not just about the Cynics as a group of pagan philosophers, but also about Cynicism as a neglected current in the history of Western thought; about Diogenes as the greatest hero in Cynicism; and implicitly, about what he, Foucault, had in fact become—a kind of archetypal modern Cynic, following in the traces of Diogenes and those who came after. He began by defining the classic tradition of pagan Cynicism as it flourished from roughly the end of the first century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. As philosophical schools go, it was very loosely organized, not around treatises and texts, but rather around the study of exemplars, figures the Cynics admired and treated as standards—for example Heracles, Odysseus, and also Diogenes. Such heroes illustrated “a person is nothing else but his relation to truth” [and that] truth “takes shape or is given form” *only* in a person's life. The true life can only be embodied. . . . Viewing life as an adventure to be lived in the spirit of Odysseus, the Cynics supposed that each might find his natural home, but only by resisting the blandishments of slavery, setting sail—

and then drawing the line, stubbornly staying the course,
ignoring the Song of the Sirens. 360

I have paintings, by different artists, of Odysseus and the Sirens on
my living room and basement walls.

Diogenes approached philosophy as a field of limit-
experience, pushing through to its breaking point—just like
Michel Foucault. Putting truth to the test, he mocked,
shocked, and provoked—just like Michel Foucault. Above all,
by living a life of bodily freedom, he issued a challenge to the
society he criticized and rejected. In Foucault's words: "The
bios philosophicos is the animality of being human, renewed
as a challenge, practiced as an exercise—and thrown in the
face of others as a scandal." 363

We must keep going the best we can for as long as we can.