

## FOUCAULT'S ASCETIC ANCIENTS

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"The idea of the *bios* as a material for an aesthetic piece of art . . . is something which fascinates me"  
Foucault

SELF-FASHIONING IS THE CONTEMPORARY AND ATTRACTIVE IDEA, largely inspired by Michel Foucault, that subjects are not found in the world but are invented, that they can take possession of their fabricated lives by becoming their own authors, which is to say by applying their own agency to themselves and by giving shape to their lives, thus affirming their (fictive, constructed, self-fashioned) selves through what is, in essence, an aesthetic practice of self-making and sublimation. The body is one of the basic loci of this art of self-construction; the will to change is its instrument. And on the Foucauldian theory, the way forward to a new, daring, and postmodern form of subjectivity is by way of a return to what is held to be the classical model of self-production, the Greek and then Roman "art of life" (*techné tou biou*), which is the art of "exercising a perfect mastery over oneself"—in other words (which are Foucault's), an "aesthetics [and 'ascetics'] of existence," freely constructed within a system of relations of power that are enabling and constraining at one and the same time.

As this brief encapsulation ought to make plain, the promissory note of self-fashioning is a tall order indeed. It is also (I believe) a barely coherent concept that probably tries to explain too much all at once: pagan and postmodern subjectivities; the contingency of all of history; historical change, conceived as rupture (by claiming that contingency somehow releases subjects from necessity); the artfulness of identity (which leaves wide open the question of how to decide *which kind or genre of art* identity is meant to embody); the history of sexuality *and* the history of subjectivity (while often leaving uncertain which of these two histories is in focus at any given moment); and so on. I want to expose some of the vagaries of Foucault by making three points.

First, Foucault's project of reclaiming subjecthood is ironically indebted in various ways to the classical ideals of the modern Enlightenment, which advocated its own form of self-fashioning or self-cultivation (*Bildung* and *Selbstbildung*) modeled on an equally unfocused and—let's be frank—*aestheticized* notion of "the Greeks."<sup>1</sup> Second, Foucault's self-advertised and much celebrated alignment with Nietzsche (the French title of Volume One contains an overtly Nietzschean echo: *La volonté de savoir*, while subsequent essays and interviews bring out the connection even more explicitly)<sup>2</sup> is paradoxical. Nietzsche would have been at

<sup>1</sup> Foucault (2001: 46) is unafraid to render "*culture de soi*" with "*Selbstbildung*," the motto of the German tradition: see Porter 2006.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Foucault 1983: 237, and the whole of that essay ("On the Genealogy of Ethics"); and Foucault 1988b: 250–251: "I am fundamentally Nietzschean."

the very least thoroughly ambivalent towards, if not sharply critical of, Foucault's theoretical tendency to treat self-making as the product of self-denial, in other words, of ascesis—in Foucault's terms, the product of "techniques of the self" (which in pagan antiquity were carried out through "harsh" yet "subtly" articulated regimes of rigor, abstention, austerity, renunciation, etc.).<sup>3</sup> Third, the effect of Foucault's history is to render classical antiquity a latent form of Christian asceticism.

My questions, then, are these: (1) is Foucault practicing a form of *classical idealism*? (2) can his project be said to be Nietzschean? (3) is his theory even coherent? In order to assess these questions, I will begin by narrating Foucault's history in its ideal lineaments (the story he wants to tell). Then I will consider the story that Foucault actually tells. This essay is conceived as part of a larger reassessment of the role of the classical ideal in contemporary views of the classical world (a project to be entitled *What is "Classical" about Classical Antiquity?*).<sup>4</sup> But I hope it can also stand on its own as an attempt to trace the genealogy of the ideal of self-fashioning and to help put in a clearer light some of the implications of this genealogy for Foucault and for others in his wake.

When Foucault declared the (imminent) death of man,<sup>5</sup> no one could have predicted "man's" resurrection in a theory of the cultivated self in the West. My interest is not in the self-refuting claim that the Subject is, or is about to be, dead, but in the obsessiveness with which Foucault's later writings, consistent with his earlier ones, pursue the study of the Subject's birth, formation, and transformation. To help Foucault rhyme with himself, we might say that his writings trace nothing but the prolonged "death" of the Subject, or rather its mortification—ambivalently, to be sure, and with all the power of a riveting fascination. On the other hand, the Subject, for Foucault, is born of a mortification—of the flesh, of desire, of its capacity to act freely without constraints of any kind (even if these things—the body, desire, freedom—are produced just in order to be constrained). And so his claim about the death of man is quite literally paradoxical. His final writings, especially his three-volume and never completed *History of Sexuality*, are proof of this. And the recently released Collège de France lectures, *L'hermèneutique du sujet* (2001), confirm this reading.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Foucault 1985: 25 and 253.

<sup>4</sup>For a preview, see Porter 2005a.

<sup>5</sup>Foucault 1966: esp. 398. The concept "man," a recent invention (since the late eighteenth century), is born of a positive finitude—virtually still-born. Foucault's whole construction of "humanism" here would repay closer scrutiny. See below, n. 6.

<sup>6</sup>In this passage from man (*l'homme*) to Subject (*sujet*) by way of self (*soi*), Foucault is not enacting an indifference: he remains hostile to the modern project of humanism and its attendant subjectivities. But because his later writings are so attentive to the origins of the subject's rise, and his language is so suffused with terms like "subject" and "self," and indeed provides a kind of "humanistic image of ancient thought" (Cambiano 1988: 144), and because "subject" (*sujet*) in itself carries both pejorative (modern) and positive (ancient) meanings, being (as I will be arguing in this essay) in effect *the genealogical vehicle, and hinge, for both entities*, an odd dissonance can be felt in Foucault's final project. On the unresolved discomfort of Foucault's generational

Listen to some of Foucault's most influential readers and you will hear a different story. *The History of Sexuality* has given credence, if not the full impetus, to a trend in scholarship that has celebrated the unqualified powers of self-making, self-fashioning, and self-performance. This "affirmationist" tendency celebrates the vital processes of the production of subjectivities ("subjectivation"), while eschewing its negative downsides ("subjection"). Its main exponents in philosophy are Judith Butler (1993 and 1997), Richard Rorty (1989), and Alexander Nehamas (1985 and 1998). In literary studies it is the New Historicists, starting with Greenblatt (1980). In history and anthropology, the examples are too numerous to name, but in classical circles Paul Veyne and David Halperin come to mind.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to these powerful interpreters of Foucault, the contemporary academy has given rise to a "Foucault-effect" that has taken on a life of its own—in different flavors, to be sure, but more or less reducible to the proposition, "subjects/sexuality are culturally constructed, not naturally given," but with the additional historical nuance, which shows that for Foucault cultural construction is (perhaps surprisingly) itself a *modern* construct, but by no means an inevitable one: "the modern subject is culturally constructed, while the ancient subject is self-constructed."

Foucault's genealogy of the modern self has more than a historical dimension: it also has a moral dimension. The contingency of sexual norms bespeaks vast freedoms, a kind of unheard of malleability and plasticity of subjectivity, if not a complete emancipation from normativity. This line of approach is known among classicists as a mode of existence "before sexuality," when sexual behaviors were fluid, not essence-defining and not yet divided by desire and its repression, and among postmodern exponents as an emancipatory "self-fashioning," in which identities are contingent, fluid, "per/formative," and seemingly convertible at will (again). Outside of classics, we find statements like the following, some "sexed" and others not, about how identities can be signified not only through the conscious "marking" of performative boundaries (through "citation," theatrical miming, and "rendering hyperbolic"), but also through "the resignification of norms," by "*establishing* a position where there was none" before (Butler);<sup>8</sup> how "every human life [is] a poem" and a matter of "self-creation" (Rorty);<sup>9</sup> how "life is literature" and autobiographies are (optimally) a work of art representing "an art of living" (Nehamas);<sup>10</sup> or, how subjects need to explore "the forms of ascesis, the

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peers with all of these terms, see further the contribution by Miriam Leonard in this same issue (133–142).

<sup>7</sup> See Veyne 1988a; 1988b; 1997; also Halperin 1990 and Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Butler 1993: 7, 115, 232, and 237. Cf. Butler 1997: 28–29, where despite the acknowledgment that "the subject is compelled to repeat the norms by which it is produced," Butler nonetheless wonders: "how might we begin to imagine the contingency of that organization [life in its current shape], and performatively reconfigure the contours of the conditions of life?" By holding that "repetition establishes a domain of risk," viz., of a failure to repeat (28), Butler enrolls herself in a kind of "risk society" comparable to Beck's (see below, 124).

<sup>9</sup> Rorty 1989: 35.

<sup>10</sup> Nehamas 1985 and 1998: 168, aligning Socrates with "self-fashioners who create new possibilities for life," and 179, on Nietzsche's "new art of living" (cf. 183). Nehamas's argument runs into trouble

spiritual exercises of ethical self-fashioning, by which modern subjects can achieve transcendence" (Halperin);<sup>11</sup> or finally, how the *Risiko-Gesellschaft*, or risk society, named and embraced by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, is redefining the very conditions of existence, with its heady vision of a global "post-work society" and its new subjective identities, whereby individuals are *Lebensästheten*, "artists of and in their own life . . . who shape and stage themselves and their life as an aesthetic product" with a view to (indeed, tailored in response to) the new market dimensions—no longer mass-markets but "niche- or mini-markets."<sup>12</sup> Here, self-realization is unabashedly (and frighteningly) a question of "self-exploitation." Beck's vision gives a political contour to the Foucauldian dynamic, and possibly helps place it in a larger, global context, well beyond that of an academic fashion. Or else it marks the final global pretension of that postmodern fashion.<sup>13</sup>

But surely there is something wrong with these extensions of the theory on its own criteria, whatever other attractions and virtues they may have to offer. Foucault, after all, was the first to decry the "liberationist" theology of the Subject. Volume One of *The History of Sexuality* stridently warns against all such illusions, as do the parting words of that book: "The irony of th[e] deployment [of the modern regime of sexuality, with its "austere monarchy of sex"] is in having us believe that our 'liberation' is in the balance" (1.159).<sup>14</sup> The absolution from certain sexual normativities, Foucault seems to be saying, is pursued and paid for by forgetting about the concomitance of other enabling normativities—as if (it too often is made to appear) the absence of a code of sex in antiquity wasn't

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in deciding (or decreeing) what is to count as an instance of life produced as an art of living: either all lives just are the result of this kind of productivity, in which case the thesis is trivially true, or only select (exemplary) lives are this. Holding that the purpose of the art of living is to produce the self as "unique," "different from all others," "inimitable," and "unforgettable" (1998: 142–143, 179) just begs the same question all over again: what life is not unique in this very way? For a critique of this thesis, but on different grounds (chiefly on grounds of moral repugnancy), see Nussbaum 1999. Can we imagine the art of living differently as the art of recognizing what is unique in all individuals, rather than as an art of producing one's self as a unique (let alone exceptionally unique) individual? The question is in part meant to point to some of the ways in which Nehamas's view diverges not only from Foucault's, but from Nietzsche's too; and in part to open up ways to an alternative conception of living as an art. Here, Nietzsche surprisingly leads the way—but that is another story. (For a different reading of Nietzsche's Socrates, see Porter 2005b.)

<sup>11</sup> Halperin 1995: 102. Halperin's other point in this same study, which is specifically about gay liberation, or rather protest, may be better founded: here, asceticism (e.g., gay practices of body-*Bildung* and masochism) makes a campy, counter-cultural statement with an immediate political value. A bonus is that this view also provides a plausible political reading of Foucault's thesis about ancient self-fashioning—that is, of its motivation in terms of contemporary gay politics (see Halperin 1995: 118). Is Foucault's *History of Sexuality* possibly a campy counter-history of sexuality?

<sup>12</sup> Beck: 248–249.

<sup>13</sup> Conversely, Hadot's fears about Foucault's hyper-aestheticism seem rather misplaced: "I fear that this may be a new form of Dandyism, late twentieth-century style" (Hadot 1995: 211 [trans. adapted], possibly alluding to Foucault 1984: 41–42).

<sup>14</sup> References in the body of the text are to the English translation of Foucault's three-volume *History of Sexuality*.

bought at the cost of a host of other constraints, codifications, regulations, and encumbrances that may have been, in their own way, just as dear or deplorable. To overlook these is to fall prey to historical blindness. It is also to fail to read Foucault, who later added, "and then I discovered . . . that this pagan ethics was not at all as liberal, tolerant, and so on, as it was supposed to be."<sup>15</sup> Subjects aren't freed by self-fashioning; they are subjected to severe and austere constraints, which are the conditions of their birth and existence as subjects.

It is true that on the surface and at times Foucault seems to point in the same direction as Butler, Rorty, Nehamas, and others go. Nevertheless, there are deep continuities between the first and the last two volumes, which is to say between the ancient and modern regimes of subjectivity that not even Foucault can deny. In the roughest of terms, Foucault is tracing the emergence of the western Subject ("the genealogy of the subject"). What he would like to demonstrate is the existence of two distinct historical forms of subjection and "subjectivation" (*assujettissement*): modern prohibitory economies of behavioral norms contrast with ancient modes of "problematization," of "moral solicitude," that is, with a regulation (distribution, usage) of pleasures and anxieties: the Christian (and later) hermeneutics of the self (designed to locate the truth of desire, of a desiring self) contrasts with an organization of loosely-knit practices and behaviors (of which desire is just one element). In a word, modern subjection contrasts with ancient self-subjection (2.5, 10, 15–20, 26). And yet despite all, there is a tragic, teleological impetus to this history. The roots of anxieties in antiquity are not yet formed as prohibitions, as history assures us they eventually will be; meanwhile, adding to the melancholy of this history is the fact that the anxieties seem to be fundamentally of the same nature as their later counterparts. It remains to decide whether the tragedy consists in the formation of a sexual Subject, or whether it consists in the formation of a Subject of prohibitions *simpliciter*, of which the sexual Subject is but the most spectacular example.

The trouble is that Foucault's history, which would trace ruptures, in fact traces continuities.<sup>16</sup> On Foucault's vision classical antiquity does not merely lay the ground for the Christian ascetic Subject but anticipates it almost completely—in an ascetics of the self that gives birth to the modern Subject. In the place of a lacunose history of seemingly random epistemes, what Foucault's history reveals instead is an inexorable "intensification," a continuity, a logic, and a "destined" necessity. And in the place of a history of sexuality, it reveals the history of the emergence of the ascetic, self-disciplining Subject, a Subject that results from the (self-)imposition of a "style," one that entails tremendous constraints, abnegations, denials, and abstentions, what Foucault calls "techniques of the self." The self models itself—through practices of self-observation and self-surveillance, inner conversation, conversion, but also through abstinences of all kinds, literally

<sup>15</sup> Foucault 1983: 230.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Foucault 1983: 244: "We are not talking about a moral rupture."

worrying itself into new existence, most intensively of all in the Roman imperial era: "Fear of excess, economy of regimen, being on the alert for disturbances, detailed attention given to dysfunction, the taking into account of all the factors (season, climate, diet, mode of living) that can disturb the body and, through it, the soul" (3.57). We are in the realm of psychic hypochondriacs, or if you like, hysterics of the soul.<sup>17</sup> Neurosis, but also psychomachia, are the traits of the new and ever intensifying psychic life of power in antiquity: the agonism of public display becomes an agonism of virtue, and ultimately a private battle within; life is a tortuous *askesis*, an ongoing struggle for self-purification (e.g., 3.136–137); sovereignty over the self is won at great cost, even if the goal is permanent, and autarkic, serenity. The Subject is born of a permanent and ongoing "crisis," and may ultimately be nothing but a name for this crisis (3.95).

If pagan antiquity reveals "harsh" yet "subtly" articulated regimes of rigor, abstention, austerity, and renunciation, it simultaneously reveals "the harshest [of such regimes] known to the West," monasticism included.<sup>18</sup> And so, against all of Foucault's best expectations, his history turns out to be fatally linear: "[c]ontinuities can be identified," he writes in the third volume (3.143), practically bewildered at what he has discovered—or else produced. He goes on to resist his own tentative conclusion, insisting upon the "fundamental differences" between the two cultures, pagan and Christian. One avenue of difference is to attribute a positivity to pagan asceticism and a negativity to the Christian and modern forms of the same.<sup>19</sup> But that is arguably to misread the productivity of abstention in its later forms.<sup>20</sup> A second escape is the tactic of bait and switch, as Foucault's history vacillates between a history of subjectivity and a history of sexuality (leaving the reader ever uncertain as to which of these two histories is in focus at any given moment). Nonetheless, as if by divine (or methodological) decree, sexuality must, in the end, prove to be definitory of the Subject, the mark of its final subjection (*passim*).

But this is strange and counterintuitive. It presents a logical bind for Foucault, who is in effect repeating the reductive sexualization of the subject that is abhorred in *History of Sexuality* 1. And he does so on two different levels. He insists on sexuality (its presence or its absence), not only as an epochal marker, but as fully determinative of "the forms of integration of [the] precepts [about sex] in the subject's experience of himself" even in antiquity. And the last two volumes

<sup>17</sup> After using the term "hypochondriac," I discovered that Foucault uses it himself: "In Pliny and Seneca there is great hypochondria" (Foucault 1988a: 29).

<sup>18</sup> "Sans doute les plus austères, les plus rigoureuses, les plus restrictives que l'Occident ait connues, et . . . qu'il ne faut pas les attribuer au christianisme," etc. (Foucault 2001: 14).

<sup>19</sup> As in Foucault 2001: 15.

<sup>20</sup> And it is to underread the negativity of the Platonic view of self-fashioning, which at least in the *Phaedo* is geared not so much to producing a positive ethical substance through the use of pleasures as to approximating death in life as far as possible: "to train [oneself] in life to live in a state as close to death as possible" (*Phaedo* 67d–e; cf. 81a; hence, 115b: "tak[e] good care of your own selves"), at least on a superficial reading of this dialogue.

of his *History* are drenched in sexual discourse—however much Foucault may claim to find that “sex is boring,” not to say “disgusting” (his interest lies solely in *techniques*).<sup>21</sup> Indeed, at the end of Foucault’s account it turns out that the ascesis and techniques of the self that so intensify in the first two centuries of our era, this sexual “austerity” and its attendant anxieties, have been a permanent feature of his *History* from the fourth century B.C.E. on, presciently forecasting (“announcing”) “a future morality”: “We have encountered in Greek thought of the fourth century B.C. formulations [“principles of sexual austerity”] that were not much less demanding”—indeed, they are “the harshest [such regimes] known to the West,” as we saw earlier; the sexual act was long considered “dangerous, difficult to master, and costly” (3.237); and so on. It is hard not to conclude that what Foucault has been narrating all along is not the alternative ethical substance of the classical period, but the rise of Christian asceticism in Greece and Rome.

Now, there are a few ways we can deal with this dilemma, the first being to concede that it is a problem that exists on any interpretation of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. The usual perception is that Foucault imagines a break to exist in the techniques of the self that accompany the division between classical antiquity and the Christian era, and that this break would have been elaborated in the unpublished continuation of the series, volume four, *Les aveux de la chair*. The problem is that continuities cannot be denied even on these accounts.<sup>22</sup> Part of the problem is that Foucault is simply inconsistent about where he stands on the issue. In places, it is convenient for him to stress the proximities of modern and Christian subjectivities. Elsewhere (e.g., Foucault 2001), he asserts the overwhelming continuities between classical and Christian formations of the self (11–12; final italics added):

[T]his notion of the care of the self (*souci de soi-même*), which one can see emerging in a very explicit and very clear fashion from the time of the figure of Socrates, ran the full course of ancient philosophy down to the threshold of Christianity—and indeed you find this notion of *epimeleia* (care) again in Christianity, or rather in what constituted, up to a certain point, its context and preparation . . . . You find this notion of *epimeleia* once again and above all in Christian asceticism: in Methodius of Olympus, in Basil of Caesarea—and in Gregory of Nyssa: in *The Life of Moses*, in the text on *The Song of Songs*, in the treatise *On the Beatitudes* . . . . Given that for Gregory of Nyssa emancipation from marriage (celibacy) is very much the first form, the initial inflection, of the ascetic life, this assimilation of the first form of the care of one’s self to the emancipation from marriage shows us how the care of the self has become a kind of matrix of Christian asceticism. *From the figure of Socrates calling upon the youth to take care of themselves down to Christian asceticism, which makes the ascetic life begin with the care of the self—you see that we have here a very long history of the notion of epimeleia heautou (care of the self).*

<sup>21</sup> Foucault 1983: 229 and 233 (the latter phrase [“disgusting”] pertains only to ancient Greek sexual practices).

<sup>22</sup> For example, Black 1998: 52–54.

While Foucault goes on to add in the next breath that over the course of this “history” of self-care the notion of *epimeleia* “enlarged,” he does not say that it fundamentally changed or underwent ruptures, or that the character of its bearers, the ancient Subjects, did so either. It would be absurd to deny that he is offering a firmly continuist picture of the underlying concept of his history of sexuality, and indeed it is hard to imagine any other way of stating the continuities than in the way he does here.

That said, I would argue that Foucault’s notion of self-fashioning, his *reading and translation* of care of the self,<sup>23</sup> is a specifically modern construct, one that is very different from the ancient versions found in the materials covered in, say, Peter Brown’s *The Body and Society* or in Elizabeth Clark’s *Reading Renunciation*, and still different from the asceticism of the Cynics or the Pythagoreans or any of its other pagan forms, *pace* Foucault.<sup>24</sup> A similar suspicion, on slightly different grounds, has been mooted by Pierre Hadot, as is well known.<sup>25</sup> To consider the Christian case first: Christian views towards austerity were more subtly differentiated than Foucault seems willing to admit. First of all, in the formative stages, through the sixth century, there was no consensus at all as to what constituted Christian practice: attitudes were being negotiated rather than decreed; and the exponents of radical austerity were in the minority (stemming from the radical Encratite Syrian traditions, the Manichees and Messalians).<sup>26</sup> Augustine, who followed this radical tradition, was rebutted by a desert father, John Cassian, and the debate, detailed by Brown (1988), is eye-opening. Where Augustine declared war against *concupiscentia carnis* (desire of the flesh), Cassian replied, tellingly, that sexual desire is not the point: at most it could serve as a useful intermittent index; the real concerns of a monk “lay deeper in his identity than did sexual desire. Sexuality was a mere epiphenomenon,” registering “like signals on a screen” processes that went on “out of sight, in the depths of the self,” and thus warning of the presence of deeper foes.<sup>27</sup> Pressed, Augustine would only agree. “The *concupiscentia carnis*, indeed, was such a peculiarly tragic affliction to Augustine precisely because it had so little to do with the body. It originated in a lasting distortion of the soul itself.” That is, sex was not the primary symptom or

<sup>23</sup> The two terms—“self-fashioning” and “care of the self”—can, moreover, be interchangeable in his writings, one implying the other, as in the long passage just quoted, to the extent that both imply *un travail de soi sur soi*, a working on the self by the self (2001: 17). Put differently, “self-fashioning” is one *clue* to the modern sources of Foucault’s theory, inasmuch as *culture de soi* serves as a *translation* for *epimeleia heautou*, by way of *Selbstbildung* (see above, n. 1).

<sup>24</sup> Brown 1988; Clark 1999. Some of Foucault’s difficulties can be put down to an essentialist approach to the past: see Kennedy 1993: 24–45. Others have to do with the expectation that the past obediently follows rules.

<sup>25</sup> Hadot 1995: 206–213.

<sup>26</sup> Brown 1988: 414.

<sup>27</sup> Brown 1988: 420–422; cf. 421: “Sexuality” for Cassian, “was not what it has become in the lay imagination of a post-Freudian age. It was not the basic instinctual drive, of which all others were secondary refractions. It was the other way around.”



index of *concupiscentia carnis*, because *concupiscentia carnis* was not "sexual desire": it was simply fleshly desire, and "*sexual desire was no more tainted with this tragic, faceless concupiscence than was any other form of human activity.*"<sup>28</sup> Confusing, as it were, subjective and objective genitives, Foucault's analysis of Augustine on "desire of the flesh" is reductive when it takes sexual desire to be a primary criterion of Christian asceticism; his reading of Cassian solely in terms of sexual chastity likewise misses the mark.<sup>29</sup>

Similar nuances could be insisted upon in the cases of earlier pagan practices of austerity. The Cynics, for example, insofar as one can generalize across this heterogeneous collection, are prototypes of moral asceticism, but also of its perversion. Their flaunting of improvisation, their experimentation with roles adapted to changing circumstances, and their sheer impudence show that already in antiquity there was an awareness, and even a prescient critique, of the utopic ideal of fashioning a self. For how stable is the self thus fashioned? And if "aesthetics" is the criterion for judging its success, what happens when the sage/actor chooses to play the part not of an Agamemnon but of a Thersites? As R. Bracht Branham has well shown, Diogenes the Cynic was an inscrutable actor whose rapid assortment of roles created a terrifying, "radical uncertainty" about his identity and—dare we add?—his ethical substance. As for Diogenes' austerity, which is undeniable (living in a wine jar in the *agora*, deprived of worldly goods, and so on), unpredictability is the rule here too: "When asked if wise men eat cakes, he replies cheerily: 'Yes, all kinds, just like everyone else' (DL 6.56). When reproached for drinking in a tavern he responds punningly: 'Of course—and I get barbered in a barber shop! (DL 6.66). When reproached for eating in the *agora* he retorts pointedly: 'I got hungry in the *agora*!' (DL 6.58). So much for Diogenes' 'asceticism'."<sup>30</sup> Different reservations could be raised about Pythagoreans, and the list could go on.

My point in this essay is not to challenge Foucault on historicist grounds, although I do feel his picture stands in need of several corrections. What I have been interested in doing is to redescribe what I take to be the underlying trajectory of his project, its too often neglected continuist dimensions, and its teleologies. If I were to advance an explanation for why Foucault presents things as he does, it would have to do with the anachronistic sources of his inspiration, which I believe lie in the tradition of the modern European Enlightenment, its tradition of classical *Bildung*, and its image of the classical Greco-Roman subject.<sup>31</sup> Ironically, historical determination penetrates a theory at the very moment when that theory claims to have found the key to transcending the past: self-fashioning, as Foucault conceives it, which is to say conceived as an exotic possibility, is itself plainly a *modern* cultural construct. This is why Foucault's Greeks are so often cast as

<sup>28</sup> Brown 1988: 418; italics added.

<sup>29</sup> See Foucault, "The Battle for Chastity," a 1982 study on Cassian, in Foucault 1988b: 229–241.

<sup>30</sup> Branham 1996: 92.

<sup>31</sup> See Porter 2006.

familiar figures with whom one can readily identify or in whose existence one can take solace, comfort, or hope for a less encumbered future.

Coming to terms with Foucault's dilemma raises a more general problem for anyone involved in the reception of classical culture, namely the difficulty of "objectifying our objectifications" (Bourdieu), of determining to what extent the criteria we apply to social description are themselves conditioned by our own frames of reference.<sup>32</sup> The very exoticism that antiquity can present to us is just as often a reflex of our conditioned preconceptions of "the exotic." Here, paradoxically, the very proof of "objectivity" may have the best chances of lying not in the realms of the strange or of the familiar, but in the shimmering moments of the *uncanny*: those moments when, to speak with Freud, we look into a reflective medium, catch an alienated glimpse of ourselves, and discover that we "are not at all pleased" with what we find there.<sup>33</sup> One of the methodological advantages of this kind of investigation into the uncanny is that it is not clear how it can be cultivated as a method, although as a criterion of experience it is something at which investigations can be aimed or by which they can be judged successful. For an approach like this represents a coming into contact with *unwanted identifications*. The truly exotic, on this model, may turn out to be not exotic at all, and not even uncannily similar, but merely banal, other (with a small "o"), incalculably different, or incalculably similar—inciting, or else resulting from, a narcissism of small differences. Antiquity (our "other" in the present case) can prove most alien when it alienates us from the models of comprehension by which we seek to grasp it. And that, in the end, may be Foucault's final achievement.

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<sup>32</sup> See Bourdieu 1990: esp. 30–41. As Duncan Kennedy's trenchant commentary on this collection shows, the language of intentionality would certainly have to be a part of this analysis. It would be worth examining this same language in Foucault's project of recuperating the ideal of self-cultivation, which (as a longer version of this essay seeks to show) is far removed from another conception of the self, according to which selves emerge as *unintended by-products* of practices rather than as their goal and *raison d'être*. The classical concept of the self, to which Foucault subscribes in his *History of Sexuality*, is the subject of its own intentionalities: there is no room here for a notion of driving unconscious forces, or of an elusive core or Real (in Lacan's language) around which the self comes, willy-nilly, to be organized—yet another reason to contrast Foucault's voluntarist notion of the self with Nietzsche's competing notion of unwilling and often unwanted activity (unconscious agency) at the heart of all volitional acts (on which, see Porter 1998).

<sup>33</sup> Freud 1953–74: 17.248, n. 1.

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